

BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Money: The Social Roots of Health and Well-Being

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Depicting Non-Material Drivers of Subjective Wellbeing

Scholars concerned with cultural post-modernization tend to agree upon several basic assertions. At least one is relevant for the debates around wellbeing and quality of life. With the social and economic change, people focus on better life expressed in non-material way. Socialized in more abundant environments (Beck & Beck-Gershanyi, 2001; Inglehart, 1997), they are used to having their basic needs fulfilled and to giving priority to superior desires, such as self-expressing and self-fulfillment. The process also changed the way in which social science analyses well-being, or at least on how it does it in more developed societies. In the sixties, poverty and wealth were on the top of the agenda. Even then, the idea that "poverty, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder" (Orshansky, 1969: 37) started to be widely accepted. In the 1970s, relativity was embedded in almost any approach to poverty and deprivation, and considered societal definitions of the two (Mack & Lansley, 1986; Townsend, 1979). Consensual and subjective poverty thresholds (Piachaud, 1987; Viet-Wilson, 1987) were developed to better reflect the extent to which people manage to meet the needs set up by societal standards. Some implied a simpler approach to measurement, other made use of more sophisticated methodologies (Voicu, 2006). Beyond the search for reliable indicators, the focus switched to themes that interfered with behavioral sciences. Life satisfaction and happiness became common to economics and sociology. Medical research added its interest to the topic, seen as important outcome for the patient treatment but also as a risk factor in epidemiology (Wilkinson and Prickett, 2009).

In the past three decades the field of quality of life studies attracted more and more scientists, practitioners, and resources, set up as a well-established domain. The impact factor of journals like *Journal of Happiness Studies* and *Social Indicators Research* places today these outlets among the authoritative ones in social science. Every year numerous books addressing subjective wellbeing are published. They provide more or less comprehensive analyses of the field, or focus on one of its aspects. Large dictionaries and encyclopedias are issued every year (e.g. Kirkwood & Cooper, eds. 2014; Michalos, ed. 2014; etc.). They indicate that demand for such products, and the resources devoted to the topic, and the interest for it go far beyond the academic community.

This is the context in which the edited book by Sarracino and Mikucka adds a brick to the existing knowledge. From the very beginning, the volume announces its interdisciplinary perspective. The introductory chapter leads the reader to the world of quality of life studies, in general, and to subjective wellbeing in particular, using references from behavioral sciences, economics, and sociology. It addresses life satisfaction and happiness, sees them as interrelated, although different, and warn about their covariances with things such as blood pressure, probability to catch a cold, religiosity, extraversion, unemployment, sociability.

The two editors, one economist and the other sociologist by formation, designate social relations as the red line of the collective book. This implies a rather loose definition of social relations, seen as a byproduct of various set-ups in one's life, including family, workplace, and even identity formation. Human beings are

therefore seen as social creatures, and the context is the factor to be addressed by the book, in order to have a clearer picture over the way in which subjective wellbeing is shaped.

The editors did not opt to organize the collection by themes, but according to the moment in the life cycle that the chapters uses for exemplification. Therefore, the reader is actually invited to be part of a kind of journey through significant moments in one's life, and to understand how one maintains or changes one's level of satisfaction and happiness depending on various contextual and personal factors.

On the other hand, the perspectives come from various disciplines, including psychology, sociology and economics. Such variation leads to a complex puzzle, in which subjective wellbeing and quality of life are addressed in an eclectic manner. In fact, each chapter focuses on its own approach, but the book as a whole offers an almost encyclopedic view over the topic. The idea is reinforced by the alternation of papers with respect to the use of empirical data. Most of the chapters make use of quantitative analysis and test their arguments by referring to empirical findings. However, from time to time, literature reviews and conceptual papers play the role to mark the passage to a new topic, or, in fact, to a new stage in the life cycle to be addressed by the book.

A very brief look through the volume is instructive in order to learn about how the editors imagine subjective wellbeing and its non-material determinants.

The first part of the book collects papers that stress the role of belonging to increasing life satisfaction. Abubacar and her colleagues approach ethnicity as driver to motivate and catalyst relationship, and to maintain them. Therefore, it is argued, it should help to increasing life-satisfaction. The empirical testing of ethnic identification as mediator for the impact of the socio-economic status on life satisfaction is somehow disappointing, but the paper has the merit to discuss the conceptualization of ethnicity as belonging and exploration. The first is shown to have a positive impact on life satisfaction, while the second determines mental health as well.

The role of religiousness is also briefly reviewed. Radosveta Dimitrova considers religiosity as a two-stage construct and discovers a surprising negative relation between the second level religiousness factor and life satisfaction. The empirical testing is not convincing, but the question addressed by the paper remains important: which is the role played by religiosity to predict life satisfaction in newer cohorts. Is it the same as it used to be? Are there differences induced by the context (e.g. is religiosity triggering the same type of reaction in the levels of life satisfaction in both more religious and more secular countries?) And even more important: since religiousness is multilayered, are all components equally likely to determine changes in life satisfaction? Such questions directly raise from the paper. Even if not actually tested, they increase the reader's awareness that they are important to be considered when assessing the triggers for subjective wellbeing.

Relations are defined by behaviors and actions that people do together. Health risk behaviors are part of the story and the chapter by Robert Valois and his colleagues opens the debate in this direction. The chapter keeps the focus on younger ages, in particular referring to adolescents. The conceptual argument lies on the self-determination theory from psychology. Starting from it, the authors review existing literature that connects life satisfaction to various health risk behaviors, including drug and alcohol abuse. The negative relation is emphasized, living the floor open for the direction of causality.

It is the next chapter to go further and to use panel data to shed light on causality. Sangiorgio and his colleagues show that risky behaviors, including alcohol and drug abuse, under-eating, etc., hamper life satisfaction, but low life satisfaction does not trigger such behaviors. Several other predictors are controlled for, including indicators for self-structure, to show how subjective wellbeing varies depending on own life-style and is influenced over time by changes in own actions, that might be relational by their nature.

The paper by Brereton, Clinch and Ferreira switches the focus onto another moment in the life course: family and childrearing. The case that is brought into light is the single-parent family. While a well-established literature already discussed the lower happiness of single parents, particularly women, Brereton and his colleagues employ data from an Irish survey to shed light on the role of an additional adult in the household, typically a parent. Again, the argument is about relations, and how an additional adult would help the single parents. Sharing house chores and child-rearing duties is said to be important in such a case. The empirical findings show that this hold water particularly in the case of those single parents that were never married. For those who experienced divorce or separation, the dissolution of their previous couple seem to leave a strong imprint to reflect into lower life satisfaction even when another adult joins the household. Keeping in mind the caution that cross-sectional data were used for testing (panel data would have reduced the self-selection risk that those who leave with an additional parent were from the very beginning more satisfied), one may look for the extension the finding to a broader perspective. This might focus on the presence of a rich network of (mutual) support relations. Taking into account the internal and international migration status might be a future research direction for this topic.

Karabchuk and her colleagues offer a different account for life satisfaction during adult life. This time is about work and type of employment. It turns out that job security is one of the drivers of life satisfaction and happiness. The more one is sure that being employed is a durable state, the more satisfied one is. Temporary and informal contracts are proven to be harmful to subjective wellbeing.

I was a little surprised to find the chapter by Hubler and Sherblom included between analyses of work-related and health-related factors. The study refers to work conditions and how to promote an organizational work culture that may contribute to personal and organizational wellbeing. A practical set of actions is proposed, with this explicit aim in mind. However, the main merit of the chapter is to propose an integrated view over life satisfaction, seen as embedded into identity construction. It remains the task of the reader to draw the bridges to the account on the impact of ethnicity construction, to be found in the beginning of the book.

Cristina Calvi's paper on obesity is not only leading to a different perspective, but also introduces a different methodology. Qualitative methods are employed this time. The social relations are present here in a more subtle way, since obesity is not treated as a given, but as it is constructed through social interaction, at different ages. Then, in a policy oriented paper, Miele and his colleagues draw upon the role of institutional arrangements in elderly health care provision. Employing verbatim to illustrate the arguments, the chapter perfectly fits into the encyclopedic image conceived by the entire collection.

Gørriil Haugan continues the section devoted to health-related aspects with a study of nurse-patient relations. The interest to draw conclusions for potential training (of nurses) to increase quality of life and self-transcendence (in patients) puts this chapter close to the one on organizational work culture by Hubler and Sherblom. Methodologically, by the use of structural equations modelling, Haugan's study is closer to the ones in the beginning of the book. Although originated in the health studies, the chapter also refers issues from public administration, sociology, psychology and social work. Again, it can be used as the perfect exemplification that methods can be equally used in various fields when researching quality of life, and that his field is interdisciplinary by its mere essence.

With the paper by Galiardi and her colleagues, the book goes into the realm of comparative quantitative analyses, and, in the same time, addresses the elderly, pointing to another moment in the life cycle. The story here is thorough: the more active one is, in terms of social relations, and -broader- social capital, the better in terms of subjective health. To add more to the already existing diversity of methodological approaches, multilevel modeling is employed to predict the dichotomous outcome.

Referring to social capital is leading the reader to the final chapter, written by the editors. This last study, somehow surprisingly, does not address subjective wellbeing. It describes only the trends in social capital, understood in its sociological meaning, in the past two decades, across Europe. Large-scale survey data

provided by the European Value Study and the World Values Survey is used to describe the changes experience by almost 50 European societies since the 1980s.

I did not use this summary of the chapters to present them, or with the purpose to merely describe what it is inside. My aim was rather to stress the invisible links that connect the collective book, going beyond the announced analysis of social relations and subjective wellbeing. My argument is that the encyclopedic approach of the book is probably among the most adequate ones given the nature of the field that it addresses. A variety of methods contributes to setting up a complex picture, with inputs from various disciplines. This is, in my view, the main message of the book: wellbeing is complex, multifaceted, and goes far beyond money. The message itself and the collection as a whole can be seen as definitively embedded in the current social thinking. Sarracino's & Mikucka's edited volume provides therefore the reader with a good introduction, an overview of the field, inviting to further research and reflection.

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