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BOOK REVIEW

Arthur A. Stone and Christopher Mackie (eds.) 2013, **Subjective Well-Being: Measuring Happiness, Suffering, and Other Dimensions of Experience. Panel on Measuring Subjective Well-Being in a Policy-Relevant Framework**; Committee on National Statistics, National Research Council. The National Academies Press. Washington, D.C.

by **Włodzimierz Okrasa**

One of the recently released by the US National Academies of Press reports brings the much awaited (by research community at large, and particularly by statisticians in public statistics offices) product of the CNSTAT-organized Panel on Measuring Subjective Well-Being in a Policy-Relevant Framework¹, entitled **Subjective Well-Being: Measuring Happiness, Suffering, and Other Dimensions of Experience** (edited by Stone and Mackie). It accords with systematically growing interest from various sides, including policy analysts and policy makers and practitioners, in extending the measurement of objective aspects of economic achievements of countries and populations - with GDP as their most celebrated indicator - through accounting also for people's experiences, feelings and perceptions of how their lives are going. Or, in the Panel's nomenclature, subjective well-being (SWB) that "refers to how people *experience* and *evaluate* their lives and specific domains and activities in their lives" (p. 15).

It should be mentioned that the Panel's project was sponsored by the National Institute on Aging (NIA) of the National Institutes of Health, and by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

The recent impetus to reorient a long-term concern in social science literature about people's welfare (with primary focus on income) into interest in essentially psychological constructs, such as individual happiness and satisfaction (cf. Eid and Larsen, 2008) - sparked by the so-called *Stiglitz Report* (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi, 2009) - has already flourished in variety of studies conducted at the national and international levels (e.g. Gallup, World Values Survey, etc.), creating at the same time a demand for methodologically coherent and operationally useful framework that could underpin the measurement and evaluation works being conducted not only by research agencies but by official statistics government

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institutions as well, providing also a needed yardstick for comparison of the appropriate indices cross-culturally.

The complexity of the issue has already been recognized and addressed by the OECD in its well-received by the international research community and national statistical offices *Guidelines on the Measurement of Subjective Well-being* (2013). Envisaged as a part of the system of measures of societal progress, subjective well-being has clearly been recognized as only telling part of a person's story, which need to be complemented by information about more objective aspects of well-being to provide a full and rounded picture of how life is (p. 3). The CNSTAT Panel members admitted helpfulness of several conceptual and methodological advancements proposed in the *Guidelines*, especially as regards its recommendations for drafting appropriate questionnaires and scaling the respective categories in government surveys, as well as how to present the results correctly. Some prototype survey modules on subjective well-being developed as its part are currently under 'field' testing by several national and international agencies, including projects being organized under the auspice of the EUROSTAT with a SWB module proposed for the European Social Survey System (in EU member countries). However, indicators for 'quality of life and well-being' are proposed along with 'comprehensive environmental index' under the joint heading 'indicators complementing GDP' (De Smedt, 2014). Several national offices for statistics have already included SWB scales in their surveys (prominently, in the UK, France, Germany, Canada and others). The topic of measuring SWB was also discussed extensively during the last, 59th World Statistics Congress, held in Hong Kong (August 24-30, 2013) - mainly from data collection and measurement point of view (e.g. session on *Subjective Indicators and Their Role in Measuring Countries' Progress and Wellbeing: Definition, Construction and Analysis*), but also from analytical point of view (e.g. Okrasa, 2013).

On general, several sector-oriented international agencies have also been engaged, some for decades, in collecting data on well-being, but on limited scope only. For example, the World Health Organization's long-run system of quality of life indicators covers essentially evaluative, as opposed to experienced, aspect of SWB. On the contrary, the latter - experienced subjective well-being, ExWB - is of main focus of the Panel, concerned about people's emotions associated with a recent time period and the activities that occurred during that period. Reflecting pragmatic reason for its work - i.e., whether or not to continue collecting data on a SWB module within the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics - the Panel's original interest was in 'hedonic' or experienced dimension of well-being ["directly related to the environment or context in which people live—the quality of their jobs, their immediate state of health, the nature of their commute to work, and the nature of their social networks—and is reflected in positive and negative affective states", Panel..., 2013, p.6]. Other aspects of SWB were deliberately neglected by the Panelists - in addition to evaluative also eudaimonic well-being - also due to their conviction that they are already more advanced for research purposes, in terms of both measurement and analytical approaches.

In spite of richness of the existing and newly created reports and manual-type publications devoted to subjective well-being, the above mentioned significance, usability and timeliness of the CNSTAT Panel's product remain unquestionable. Rather contrary, it may make the originality of its overall approach and the relevance of its recommendations even more salient and praiseworthy. Especially by experts engaged in collecting data in the US institutional context of public statistics, since agencies collecting (or planning to do it) self-reported well-being information are assumed to be the major target audience of the Panel's report, And by researchers interested in fundamental issues that arise at each stage of the process of measuring subjective well-being (from 'dimensionalization' through 'operationalization' to 'utilization'), as well as by all those who share the view that subjective well-being is "much more nuanced and difficult to measure than can be understood simply by asking people if they are happy" (p. 26).

The structure of the report reflects its conceptual and methodological orientations framed on distinguishing between three underlying dimensions or types of SWB - evaluative Well-Being, Experienced Well-Being (ExWB), and Eudaimonic Well-Being. While concentrating on the ExWB - on both positive and negative emotions - the Panelists recognize its mutual intertwining with each other. Especially with *eudaimonic* well-being, which refers to person's perceptions of meaningfulness, sense of purpose, and the value of life (p.3). Accordingly, the report addresses all the fundamental issues of conducting the appropriate research as a task of government statistical office. From recommendations on how to conceptualize it - starting from ideal type definition of all key notions through their operationalization for the data collection purposes, including how to measure it by phrasing the proper items of the questionnaires and combining them in scales - to recommendations on collecting good quality data while using some of the existing surveys.

Admitting that the American Time Use Survey's module (and method) called Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) is the most valuable source of information on ExSWB, the Panelists suggest to use multiple sources (different surveys and administrative data) to generate information on ExWB. Practically, each of the major surveys with subject-matter relevance could have included ExWB module - with primary candidates being: the Survey of Income and Program Participation (administered by the U.S. Census Bureau and providing data on income, program participation and care-giver links); Health and Retirement Study (health work transition, and health links); the American Housing Survey (Neighborhood Social Capital module - community amenities and social connectedness links); the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (care-giving arrangements, connectedness, and health links); the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (patterns of obesity); and the National Health Interview Survey.

The high richness of data on SWB in terms of domains covered makes them more relevant for better informed policy, but only as far as it refers to targeted rather than universal policy objectives. The Panel expressed clear skepticism about possibility to construct and use an aggregate type of measure for assessing a population level quantity. Moreover, the panelists emphasize the necessity to complement data on ExWB by data on evaluative well-being due to a risk of

misinterpretation of people's behavior and subsequent misadvising on policy decisions.

Although few if any questions related to the SWB - though within a domain limited to ExWB - may be found unanswered by the Panel report, some important issues remain beyond the scope of its consideration. One relates to the relation between SWB and community well-being (CWB), Not only in the sense indicated as important in the latest version of the report by Stiglitz et al. (2012) - i.e., how strongly is SWB linked to community characteristics, connectedness and resilience (what panelists suggest as possible to be explored using the Neighborhood Social Capital Module of the American Housing Survey, p. 107). Given that simple aggregation of individual-level measures of SWB is not recommendable, even more interesting would seem to have systematized knowledge and recommendations on needed standard procedures allowing to account for residents' SWB while measuring community well-being as a quality in itself - as attempted, for example, in Canada (Stemeroff et al., 2009), Scotland (Project Report, 2003), and United Kingdom (Steuer and Marks, 2007) - to mention just few works along this line. Hopefully, this may inspire another group of first-rate experts to synthesize the conceptual and methodological advancements in a forward look type of report for directing new wave of research devoted to community well-being.

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