

Is the subjective well-being of children worth studying?

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Genuine question

- ◆ Since asking a similar question in Seoul with colleagues I have
 - ◆ Contributed to two more Children's Society *Good Childhood Reports* on England;
 - ◆ Analysed the first subjective well-being data collected in the eleven year old sweep of the UK *Millennium Cohort Survey* (paper at this conference);
 - ◆ Obtained access to the micro data of the HBSC and undertaken a multi-level analysis (Klocke at this conference) of subjective well-being to complement the macro country level analysis we did as part of Innocenti RC11;
 - ◆ Contributed to the analysis of the Children's Worlds survey (papers at this conference).

There were very good reasons for being interested in child subjective well-being:

- ◆ It gave children a voice in the way that research on objective well-being, or research asking parents about their children did not;
- ◆ Happiness is important and valued. Indeed the pursuit of happiness is arguably the purpose of living. We want children to be happy and we want to know why they are unhappy and whether we, parents, teachers, policy makers can do anything about it.
- ◆ Not much work on child subjective well-being had been done when I published my first paper on the subject in 2000.
- ◆ Research on adults' subjective well-being was producing positive results. For example Helliwell, Layard and Sachs (2015) explained 74% of the variation in life satisfaction (Cantril's ladder) using GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity and perceptions of corruption.

Similar analysis of variations in child subjective well-being at a country level have not been so successful.

- ◆ In the work for RC11 we find that subjective well-being correlates fairly strongly with the other objective domains of well-being

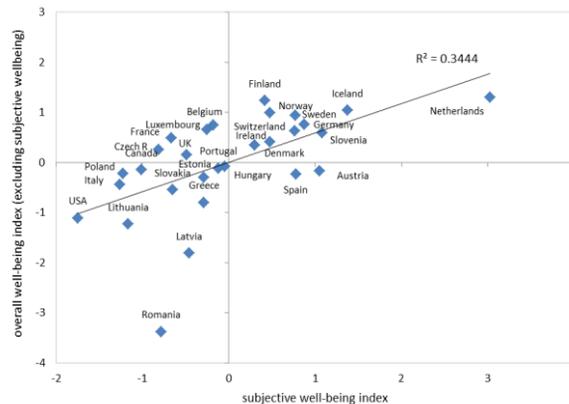
Figure 1: UNICEF RC11: all domains of objective well-being strongly correlated with subjective well-being

	Overall subjective well-being
Material well-being domain	.677**
Health and safety domain	.542**
Education domain	.474**
Behaviour domain	.534**
Housing and environment domain	.610**
Overall (exc subjective)	.666**

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- ◆ In the work for RC11 we find that subjective well-being correlates fairly strongly with the other objective domains of well-being
- ◆ But an index based on those other domains explains only 34% of the variation in SWB.

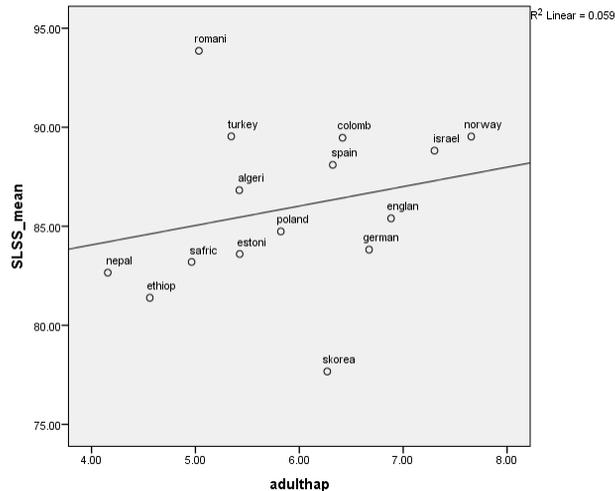
Figure 2: RC11 subjective well-being vs objective well-being (excluding subjective)



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- ◆ But an index based on those other domains explains only 34% of the variation in SWB.
- ◆ In similar work on the Children's Worlds countries (reported at this conference), I took over 100 indicators from World Bank economic indicators, UNDP WDIs and UNICEF SOWC and then crunched the associations with SWB. Only one significant correlation that was perverse. Countries with higher rates of inflation had higher child subjective well-being!
- ◆ None of the things you might hypothesise would matter do: adult life satisfaction, GDP per capita, spending on schools, female employment, inequality, youth unemployment.

Figure 3: Child well-being versus adult happiness (Gallup) 2010/12



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- ◆ None of the things you might hypothesise would matter do: adult life satisfaction, GDP per capita, spending on schools, female employment, inequality, youth unemployment.
- ◆ Possibly Children's Worlds has too few countries and they are too diverse.
- ◆ In OECD countries we have found fairly weak correlations between the gini coefficient and child poverty and subjective well-being.

But the real problems emerge when you use the micro data

- ◆ Large national school samples in England - *Good Childhood Reports*,
- ◆ the huge and rich UK *Millennium cohort study* (reported at this conference),
- ◆ the *Understanding Society* panel survey in the UK,
- ◆ the *HBSC* with regular data on 40 countries and (reported at this conference), now,
- ◆ the *Children's Worlds* surveys focussing especially on SWB (reported at this conference).

Conclusions from that

- ◆ Children are generally happy;
- ◆ there is variation in happiness – the mean varies a bit and the proportion in the tail varies a bit, between and within countries;
- ◆ some characteristics of the child explain some of this variation - age and gender sometimes;
- ◆ some family characteristics explain a bit - family structure, recent moves, material deprivation reported by children;
- ◆ some others factors explain a bit – friendships, bullying, school;
- ◆ and these factors vary a bit between countries
- ◆ But together they explain very little – typically a maximum of 10%.

We can increase that

- ◆ By adding what children say about different aspect of their lives.
- ◆ Thus satisfaction with talking to mothers explains 5% of variation with life satisfaction in HBSC.
- ◆ But satisfaction with family relationships is not independent of life satisfaction.
- ◆ Personality type also explains quite a lot of the variation, but personality type is also not independent.

What would I say?

- ◆ If a (UK) policy maker asked the question **How can we make our children happier?**
 - ◆ reduce bullying;
 - ◆ help girls feel happier about their bodies (how?);
 - ◆ gave children more choice (how?);
 - ◆ improved the lives and outcomes of children in care;
 - ◆ make schools friendlier places;
 - ◆ reduce maternal depression (how?);
 - ◆ reduce deprivation;
 - ◆ encouraged marriage/cohabitation.

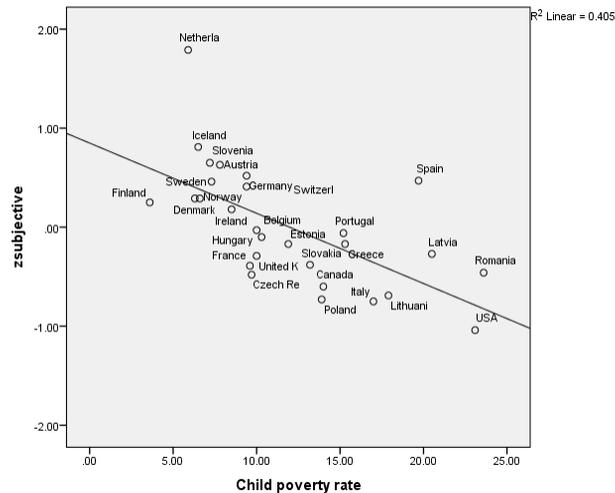
But

- ◆ A. I doubt that we know how to do most of these things and
- ◆ B. I doubt that our interventions would actually improve subjective well-being by measurable amounts – especially as it deteriorates with age.

So

- ◆ I may be giving up on subjective well-being.
- ◆ I am going to focus more on poverty and deprivation
 - ◆ much easier to explain,
 - ◆ much easier to do something about it, and,
 - ◆ helpfully, if only at the macro level, it is fairly strongly associated with SWB (in OECD countries).

Figure 4: RC 11 relative at risk of child poverty rate by subjective well-being



This may be premature

- ◆ 1. We need to improve our measures of SWB. Much is being achieved here through the work of Gwyther Rees and Ferran Casas using *Children's Worlds* data.
- ◆ 2. Someone needs to try and replicate the Helliwell et al's results on adults on children.
- ◆ 3. Maybe we will find some stronger associations with longitudinal data than we have found with cross-sectional data.
- ◆ 4. Maybe with more countries in *Children's Worlds* we might improve the explanatory power of our models.

Comments please!

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