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How People Perceive and Appraise the Quality of Their Lives: Recent Advances in the Study of Happiness and Wellbeing

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Author

Shin, Doh Chull

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CSD Center for the Study of Democracy

An Organized Research Unit
University of California, Irvine
www.democ.uci.edu

“Good government obtains when those who are near are made happy,
and those who are far are attracted.”

Confucius (*Analects* 13:16)

“The end of the state is not mere life; it is, rather, a good quality of life.”

Aristotle (*Politics*: Book 3, chap. 9)

Throughout the globe, the quality of life, which people experience in both their private and public lives, has recently become a subject of increasingly serious concern in scholarly research as well as in policymaking.¹ Researchers from a variety of disciplines within the academic community, ranging from economics and psychology to gerontology and medical science, have recently made concerted efforts to study this highly nebulous phenomenon more scientifically than before.² To assist individuals in pursuing a meaningful and fulfilling life, for example, psychologists and neuroscientists have created a new field of study known as positive psychology or subjective wellbeing.³ Economists and other social scientists have, furthermore, developed the two new interdisciplines of hedonomics and happiology to study the age-old ideas of happiness and its current practices.⁴

In policy circles, a growing number of national and international government agencies have embraced the enhancement of citizens' quality of life as an ultimate goal of their policymaking.⁵ One of the main issues in doing so, however, has been whether quality of life can be measured accurately in terms of GNP and other indicators of life conditions. Recognizing these indicators as inadequate instruments in measuring and assessing a nation's social progress and the wellbeing of its citizens,⁶ many national and international government agencies, research institutes, and individual scholars conduct public opinion surveys across different countries and regions.⁷ The Bhutanese government, for example, declared “gross national happiness” (GNH) as its explicit policy goal and developed its metric to measure the quality of life in more holistic terms rather than the gross national product (GNP) and other economic and social indicators.⁸

The United Kingdom and a number of other countries, including Canada, China, France, Japan, Germany, Italy, South Korea, and the United States, are also currently working to develop and use measures of subjective wellbeing in policymaking.⁹

In France, President Nicolas Sarkozy formed in 2008 an international commission chaired by two Nobel Laureates, Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen to examine the problems of measuring social progress in terms of GNP and explore its alternatives. This Commission produced a 291-page report titled *The Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*.¹⁰ The most notable recommendation presented in the report is that “Measures of subjective well-being provides key information about people’s quality of life. Statistical Offices should incorporate questions to capture people’s life evaluations, hedonic experiences, and priorities in their own surveys.” (p. 58). Following this recommendation, the United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (ONS) launched a program measuring national wellbeing on an annual basis in 2010.¹¹

To further this international movement measuring and improving people’s quality of life, the United Nations General Assembly formally approved on July 19, 2011 a Bhutan sponsored resolution (65/309) entitled “Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development.” In this resolution, the UN formally recognized the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental human goal, and that GDP was an inaccurate and incomplete measure of people’s happiness and wellbeing. In addition, the Assembly declared March 20 of each year as International Happiness Day, and commissioned the World Happiness Report project to monitor and compare levels and sources of avowed happiness across its member countries on a yearly basis.

This paper seeks to review these research endeavors, and highlight recent advances in studying the quality of life primarily from the perspective and experiences of ordinary citizens. To this end, the paper first critically examines the objective and subjective approaches to its study as an alternative research paradigm, and highlights the theoretical and other reasons as to why the latter is indispensable for its meaningful appraisal. Then the paper examines divergent conceptions of human wellbeing, which are influenced by the hedonic and *eudaimonic* philosophical perspectives, and identifies its three key components— affective, cognitive, and *eudaimonic*— for such an appraisal. In the next two sections, it introduces and reviews various scales and methods proposed to measure each of those components. Following this discussion of methodological issues, it examines theoretical issues concerning the sources of subjective wellbeing and its economic, social, and political determinants. Finally, the paper highlights the most notable of findings from recent empirical research, and explore why East Asia remains a region in which happiness remain underdeveloped.

Two Approaches: Objective and Subjective

Much of the research on quality of life to date has been approached from two contrasting perspectives.¹² The objective approach focuses on the socioeconomic conditions and physical environments in which people live, and the goods and services they can access either individually or collectively. Assuming that such life conditions and accessibility to those goods and services contribute to the “general requirements for happiness,”¹³ this approach measures the quality of life through those indicators capable of tapping frequencies or occurrences of observable and veritable phenomena, which government agencies regularly report. Because *objective indicators* usually carry normative connotations, i.e., the more of a measured condition,

the better (or vice versa) it is, they are often used to determine whether a country is becoming a better place to live and whether the citizens are living a happier life than before.

More specifically, it is inferred that people's quality of life becomes greater when they are more educated and informed, live longer, and consume more goods and services. It is also inferred that the quality of life enhances as the level of education rises, the adequacy and availability of medical care improves, the amount of substandard housing reduces, and the purity of the air increases. In this manner, indicators of objectively observable and veritable life conditions become equated with measures tapping the levels of wellbeing people experience in their daily lives. The quality of life, in this view, lies in the desirable conditions of life that are known to be conducive to the achievement of a happy or good life.¹⁴

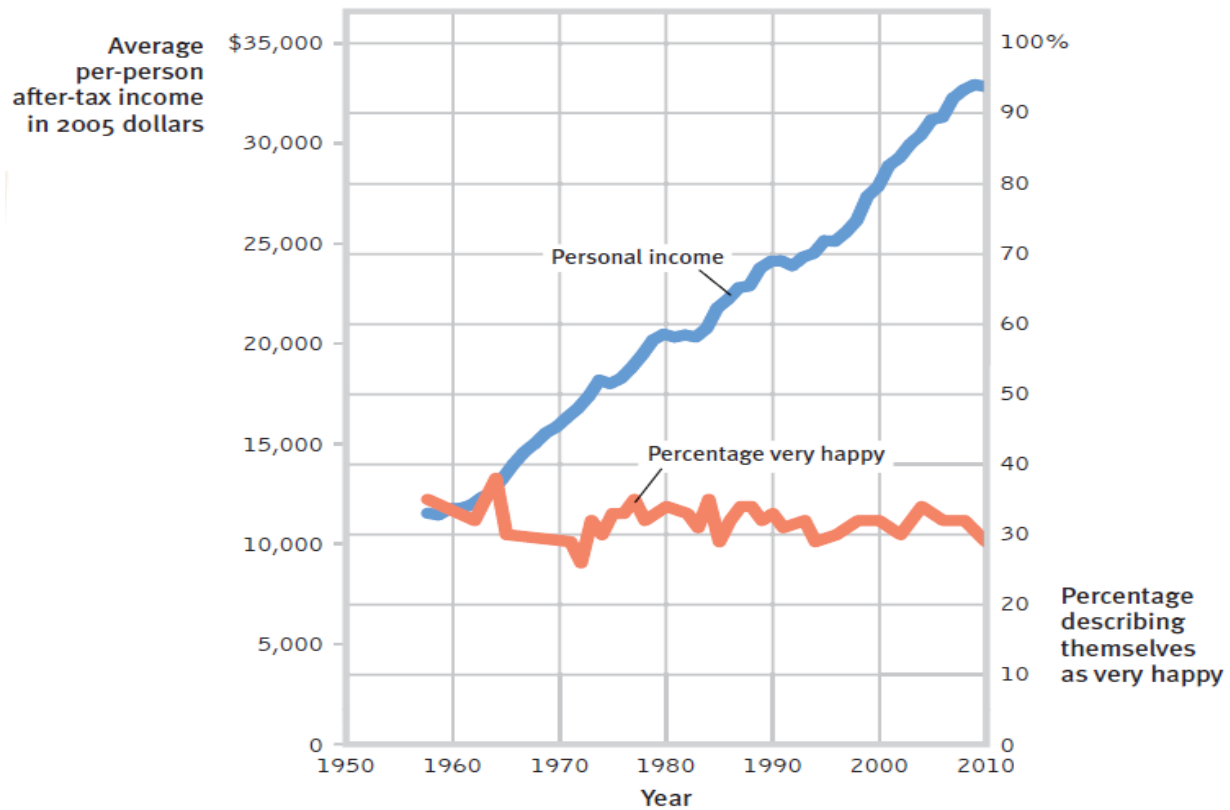
In the modern world, there is broad agreement on the particular categories of life conditions, and particular sorts of goods and services that can contribute to and detract from human wellbeing.¹⁵ While polluted air and water reduce the quality of life, access to cultural and medical services contribute to it. These objective indicators, however, merely describe the presence or absence of a variety of factors capable of affecting the quality of life people experience. These objective indicators say nothing directly about how those factors actually affect it. Therefore, they are nothing more than its proxies. For this reason, there is growing recognition that objective indicators are *not sufficient* for a meaningful measurement of quality of life, and such a measurement requires subjective indicators directly tapping people's evaluations of their own life experiences.¹⁶

Why is it necessary to include subjective indicators for a more complete and accurate measurement of life quality? In employing objective indicators, the environment in which people live and the resources they command are assumed to affect quality of life *directly* by offering things beneficial or harmful to human existence. To a greater extent, however, such objective conditions of life affect its quality *indirectly* through the mediation of beliefs and values, which establish individual needs and aspirations. Theoretically, therefore, it is widely known that people with various needs and aspirations evaluate the same resources in a different manner.¹⁷

Empirically, people evaluate their life experiences either positively or negatively according to their own conception of what is good and right in life. They often evaluate those experiences by comparing themselves with other people. As a result, there are many people who react very similarly to the conditions of life that vary a great deal. There are also equally many who react very differently to those conditions that vary little. Especially in societies undergoing a great deal of cultural and structural changes, happiness may be just as prevalent among the poor as the rich, and unhappiness may be as common among the rich as the poor.

In the world in which people live, moreover, the production of more material goods and services do not necessarily enhance people's quality of life.¹⁸ Although up to a certain point greater production of such material resources generally does have a favorable impact upon people's lives; beyond that point, however, more production can actually detract from the overall quality of life by causing congestion, pollution, and dehumanization. During the final quarter of the last millennium, it became widely known that substantial increases in material resources and technological advances failed to bring corresponding changes in experiencing well-being in the United States and other developed countries (see Figure 1).¹⁹ Evidently there is no definite relationship between the objective circumstances in which people live and people's sense of well-being.²⁰

Figure 1 Rising Income and Happiness in the United States



Source: David Myers, *op. cit.*

Subjective experiences of wellbeing and ill-being, therefore, cannot be inferred accurately by objective indicators of life conditions. They can be measured accurately only from asking people directly to what extent they find those conditions pleasant or unpleasant, and/or fulfilling or disappointing. This is the reason why the United Kingdom Office ONS conducts an annual survey to measure the quality of life its citizens cherish and experience.²¹ This is also the reason why the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, the European Social Survey, the Gallup World Poll, Gallup-Healthways, Pew Research Center, and the World Values Survey regularly monitor and compare citizen wellbeing across countries and regions.

Strategically, unlike objective indicators, subjective indicators enable citizens to improve the political process by offering them an opportunity to voice their concerns and reveal their preferences through the process.²² Without expressing and weighing those concerns, it is difficult to identify the specific policy that can address those concerns, and choose the method that can implement the policy most effectively. For these theoretical, empirical, and normative reasons, there is an emerging consensus that subjective indicators are *indispensable* for the meaningful assessments and prescriptions of quality of life.²³

Premises Underlying the Subjective Approach

For the past two decades, a great deal of research effort has been made to directly tap people's quality of life by subjective indicators. This *subjective approach*, unlike its objective counterpart, does not infer a connection between life conditions and personal well-being or ill-being. And yet there are a number of notable premises underlying this approach, which is often called a phenomenological approach to studying quality of life.²⁴ What are these premises underlying the subjective approach to the study of quality of life? How tenable are they theoretically or empirically? For an informed understanding of the approach, we need to address these questions in light of theoretical insights and empirical evidence, which are known in the current literature.

Underlying the *subjective approach* are two complementary theories of human welfare.²⁵ The first is the preference satisfaction theory, which holds that a person's life goes well or becomes better for the person only when it offers what he or she desires or favors. The second is the hedonist theory where life experiences promote a person's welfare when the person holds some specific positive attitudes to them, such as enjoyment, happiness, and satisfaction. According to these welfare theories, the quality of life is *inherently subjective*; therefore, it lies in the eye of the beholder, who can evaluate what is good or right in life. To Angus Campbell, Ed Diener, Martin Seligman, and many others, therefore, the quality of life refers to a person's sense of well-being featuring such feelings of fulfillment, joys, happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction.

The *subjective approach* is also predicated on the notion that human values vary considerably in their preference and priority across space and time. Because people from diverse segments are not only socialized into different lifestyles but also command various kinds and amounts of resources, they do not always cherish the same things for themselves and for their country. Even when they value the same things, they often prioritize them differently, and shift the priorities of what they value from one stage to another stage of life. As Inglehart²⁶ and Welzel²⁷ document, the great valuation on the acquisition of personal wealth and achievement over the past three decades has been slowly giving way to freedom, equality, and accommodation to nature.

Empirically there are a number of assumptions underlying the *subjective approach*, which stresses the indispensability of measuring people's quality of life through their own evaluations of what they experience. Ordinary citizens are, for example, assumed to have adequate information and knowledge about what constitutes and contributes to a good life. They are also assumed to be cognitively capable of evaluating what is good and right in life, and behaviorally willing to report their evaluations sincerely. In short, their reports on the sense of wellbeing or ill-being are assumed to be reliable and valid.²⁸

In the real world people usually do not have enough information for an accurate evaluation of all their life experiences. Even with an abundant amount of relevant information, they may lack the cognitive capacity to reason appropriately on the basis of it. It is, therefore, highly unrealistic to assume that ordinary people are *always* in the best position to evaluate all or most of their own life experiences. It is also highly unrealistic to assume that all the life experiences can be evaluated accurately only through subjective indicators tapping those experiences. In a nutshell, the *subjective approach*, which relies on those indicators, can be considered indispensable and necessary for the meaningful measurement of life quality. But this approach should not be deemed sufficient for it.²⁹

To date, researchers have employed either objective or subjective indicators in studying quality of life. Neither of these two approaches is entirely satisfactory. The approach based on the former could be arbitrary because the quality of life is established by researchers completely independent of the person in question. The approach based on the latter, meanwhile, cannot be

always accurate because it is oftentimes based on insufficient information; it is also peripheral and transitory because it focuses solely upon positive human feelings without any consideration of the personal capacity to sustain such feelings. A third, combined approach would seem the most preferable, in which objective and subjective indicators are employed to study both the desirability of life conditions and the nature of life experience.³⁰ In this approach, the quality of life is viewed as a two-dimensional phenomenon, which comprises not merely a subjective state of wellbeing but also an objective state of viability.³¹

Conceptualization: Constituents of Subjective Wellbeing

As discussed above, the subjective approach or perspective on quality of life assumes that each individual human being is the best judge of his or her own lot, and thus it focuses on how the person chooses and judges his or her own life experiences. Of the various experiences, what sorts are selected as key components of subjective wellbeing? Why are those experiences chosen for research on this subject, which is increasingly recognized in the empirical and theoretical literature as an integral dimension of quality of life? What particular concepts have developed to delineate each chosen category of life experiences? By addressing these questions, this section seeks to highlight divergent conceptions of subjective wellbeing, and examine their theoretical underpinnings.

What sort of life should we humans live? What constitutes a good life? What should we do in order to live what would be considered a good or well-lived life? To describe and prescribe various components of “the good life” or great quality of life, many philosophers and social scientists in the East and West have long debated these questions. From millennia of these debates have emerged two broad paradigms or traditions, which are relatively distinct and yet complementary to each other.³² The first of these traditions is known as *hedonism*, and it comes from the ancient Greek word “*hedone*”, which means pleasure. The second tradition is known as *eudaimonism*, and it also comes from another ancient Greek word of *eudemonia*, which means fulfillment or thriving.

Hedonism

In the West, the hedonic tradition goes back to the fourth century BC when Greek philosopher Aristippus of Cyrenne, a student of Socrates, declared pleasure as the highest good of human life.³³ In the third century BC, Epicurus advocated the core principle of hedonism that the Chief Good is to decrease pain and increase pleasure.³⁴ Since then, many others have followed this conception of wellbeing, including Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, both of whom are known as hedonistic utilitarians. Bentham viewed happiness as a preponderance of pleasure over pain, and advocated the principle of maximizing happiness for the building of a nation of wellbeing.³⁵ While Bentham was concerned primarily with the amount of the pleasure, Mill differentiated it into lower and higher categories. For a rounded account of happiness, he emphasized the importance of the higher category of mental or spiritual pleasures more heavily than the lower category of bodily or physical pleasures.³⁶ In philosophy, hedonism has been expressed in a variety of forms.

In psychology, hedonism is viewed more broadly than what is generally known in the hedonic philosophical literature, which endorses all pleasurable life experiences as intrinsically good.³⁷ In this literature, such life experiences are treated mostly as a unidimensional phenomena taking place exclusively in emotion. As an emotional phenomenon, they are viewed to entail positive or negative affect or feelings. In psychological hedonism, however, they are often viewed as multidimensional phenomena taking place in the processes of both emotion and cognition. Although there are numerous life experiences to judge from, there is a general agreement among hedonic psychologists on the specific elements that comprise subjective wellbeing.³⁸

According to Diener³⁹, subjective wellbeing is an umbrella term for the *cognitive* and *affective* judgments people make regarding their lives, including the events happening to them, their bodies and minds, and the circumstances in which they live. These judgments are *subjective* because they are internally or personally experienced. And they refer to the sense of wellbeing because they depend upon the experience of what the individual cherishes or desires for her or his own life. In this conception, subjective wellbeing is a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of *cognitive* and *affective* responses to what happens to such physical and spiritual life.

The *cognitive* dimension of wellbeing deals with reflective reactions to a person's life experiences either as a whole or some specific aspects of it. Those reactions are usually expressed in terms of the notion of satisfaction or contentment. According to Campbell⁴⁰, a sense of satisfaction, like that of happiness, carries with it a strong element of pleasure. Yet it does not have "the spontaneous lift-of-the-spirits quality" from which happiness originates. It is an act of comparison of what people currently have to what they expect to have. It can be a comparison of what they think they deserve in view of what they had in the past or what their friends or peers have. Life satisfaction is, therefore, an information-based evaluation, and thus reflects the perceived distance between what is experienced and what is expected as a better life or envisioned as an ideal life.

Unlike *cognitive wellbeing* that derives from a conscious judgment based on some standard, *affective wellbeing* refers to particular feelings or emotional states, which reflects *spontaneous reactions* to events in the individual's immediate experience. Affect is considered positive when those psychological experiences are pleasant or positively toned. Affect is considered negative when those experiences are unpleasant or negatively toned. While positive affect consists of pleasant experiences, such as affection, contentment, joy, and happiness, negative affect consists of such unpleasant experiences as anxiety, fear, sadness, and shame. The difference between these two types of experiences represents the individual's affect balance. The preponderance of the positive over the negative feelings is considered positive affect balance, while that of the latter over the former is considered negative affect balance.⁴¹

In hedonism, which aims to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, therefore, higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect balance lead to greater levels of subjective wellbeing. Accordingly, a person who is satisfied with his or her own life and who experiences a greater positive affect and little or less negative affect are believed to experience a high level of subjective wellbeing. Conversely, a person who is neither satisfied nor pleased with his or her own lot is deemed to experience a low level of subjective wellbeing.

Eudaimonism

Despite the high currency of the hedonic view on wellbeing across time and space, many philosophers and religious thinkers from both the East and West have continued to ask whether pleasure is sufficient for the good life people should pursue. What should we really desire out of life? Can we live well without knowing the real meaning of the life we want to live? Can we also live truly well without developing and exercising the intellectual power to reason and without fulfilling the human capacity to commiserate? These are the intellectual and ethical questions that are completely overlooked in the hedonic conceptions of wellbeing. These questions undergird the *eudaimonic* perspective on wellbeing, which has been rapidly gaining traction over the past two decades.⁴²

In ancient China, which dates back to the 6th century BC, Daoist philosophers Lao-Tzu recognized desires for pleasure as the greatest evil of all crimes and misfortunes, and strongly admonished against the pursuit for pleasure: “There is no crime greater than having too many desires; There is no misfortune greater than being covetous.”⁴³ For the same reason, Confucius, a younger contemporary of Lao-Tsu, emphasized the importance of engaging in self-reflection (修身) and practicing the virtue of *ren* (仁). By identifying a virtuous life as the ultimate source of happiness, he and his followers advocated *dao* (道), an East Asian notion of *eudaimonic* wellbeing, which holds that human flourishing would be possible only in an ethical environment.⁴⁴ To Confucians, therefore, “Wealth and rank attained through *immoral means* are nothing but drifting clouds,”⁴⁵ and “Without goodness, one cannot remain constant in adversity and enjoy enduring happiness.”⁴⁶

In ancient Greece in the 4th century BC, Aristotle concurred with the *Daoist* notion of pleasure: “The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals.”⁴⁷ Believing that pleasure is a vulgar idea that would not produce wellness, he explicated the notion of *eudaimonia*, and established the *eudaimonic* tradition of studying wellbeing.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*,⁴⁸ Aristotle further propounded *eudaimonia* as the greatest of all goods, and equated it with *eu zên* (“living well”). On the basis of the premise that all humans, unlike other species, have the power to become potentialities, he argued that they should strive for the fulfillment of those potentialities both intellectually and ethically. The notion of *eudaimonic* wellbeing, therefore, involves far more than the hedonic ideas of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. It embodies the ideas of understanding the true meaning of life, and striving for the fulfillment of a meaningful life.⁴⁹

Recently a growing number of humanistic psychologists have sought to reframe Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia*, a Greek word combining the two separate words “*eu*” (“good”) and “*daimōn*” (“divinity” or “spirit”).⁵⁰ By redefining this term as human “flourishing” or “thriving”, they proposed complementary models of *eudaimonia* by, for example, distinguishing between the needs or desires of those whose satisfaction leads to momentary pleasure and those whose realization leads to human growth and produces *eudaimonia*, a life truly well-lived.⁵¹ Rogers further explicated it as a fully *functioning* life, and identified its content in terms of autonomy, competency, and relationship with others.⁵²

As an alternative to these models of *eudaimonia*, Ryan and Deci proposed a new theory of self-determination.⁵³ The theory posits that for people to live truly well, they have to meet all the human needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The fulfillment of each of these human needs does not contribute to a life of both hedonic and *eudaimonic* wellbeing, but instead, contributes only to a life of either hedonic or eudemonic wellbeing. For example, achieving

personal competence contributes only to hedonic wellbeing, while gaining personal autonomy leads only to *eudaimonic* wellbeing. This finding confirms that pleasure and fulfillment constitute two distinct dimensions of subjective wellbeing.

Most recently, in his influential book titled *Flourish*, Seligman proposed a five-component model of *edudaimonic* wellbeing.⁵⁴ This model is widely known as the PERMA model, and it consists of the five essential elements for a life of flourishing and lasting wellbeing. They are: (1) positive emotions such as gratitude, satisfaction, pleasure, hope, curiosity, or love; (2) engagement in a situation, activity, or project; (3) positive relationships with others; (4) meaning in our lives; and (5) accomplishment and achievement in our quest for life goals and skills.

To sum up, there are two distinct philosophical approaches to wellbeing, which contrast sharply with each other in the scope and depth of its conception. The *hedonic approach* is concerned exclusively with emotional and cognitive responses, and focuses on having positive feelings and evaluations, such as enjoyment and satisfaction.⁵⁵ The *eudaimonic approach*, on the other hand, is concerned broadly with the intrinsic meaning of human life and its external practices as a whole, and deals, behaviorally as well as spiritually, with the fulfillment of one's own potentialities and social obligations.⁵⁶ While the former emphasizes *positive feelings* about own life, the latter emphasizes *positive functioning*, that is, doing certain things that would bring lasting pleasure and fulfillment to the self and other fellow human beings.⁵⁷ Of these two approaches, therefore, *eudaimonism* is increasingly recognized as capable of offering a more comprehensive and policy-relevant account of subjective wellbeing.

Happiness

In recent years, a variety of conceptual tools have been proposed for the study of subjective wellbeing. They include affect, contentment, fulfillment, enjoyment, flourishing, pleasure, and satisfaction. Of these concepts, however, none is more prominent than the term "happiness". Happiness is also the term ordinary citizens most often use to evaluate and express the status of their own wellbeing. Nonetheless, there is little agreement on what it consists in and what exactly means.⁵⁸ To clarify the substance of this popular concept and establish grounds for its proper use in scholarly research, we need to explore these questions. A review of the philosophical and empirical literature reveals the three main uses of the term "happiness".⁵⁹

The first use of "feeling happy" originally appeared in the works of Homer and Herodotus.⁶⁰ It refers to positive feelings of short duration, which usually result from physical pleasure. Since the core of such feelings is short-term moods of elation and gaiety, Seligman characterizes those as *ephemeral happiness* and distinguishes them from the experience of *authentic happiness*.⁶¹ As such, this usage of happiness refers merely to an affective state of mind, which is fundamentally different from the core meaning of satisfaction or contentment.⁶² Viewed from this perspective of experiencing pleasure, happiness is nothing more than a hedonic concept.

The second use of this term is when a person is "happy with" or "happy about" something. These expressions portray "being satisfied with" or "being content with" the state of one's living. They do not merely imply the presence or absence of any particular affective feeling, such as joy or pleasure. Instead, they refer to positive outcomes of cognitive evaluations or comparisons that usually involve certain standards. When the term is used in this way, it

involves more than emotional pleasantries, and describes the welfare aspect of a life experience.⁶³ Specifically, it refers to achieving what a person has set for a particular domain of his or her life.

Third, the term “happy” is often used to characterize the quality of life as a whole rather than making a statement about a particular aspect of it, as in the case of the second use. In this sense, when a person avows “being happy”, it means that he or she means living a happy life; one in which all the important aspects of the person’s life experiences form a harmonious and satisfying whole.⁶⁴ This broad view was expressed in the Confucian notion of *dao* (道) and the Aristotelian notion of *eudemonia*.⁶⁵ It is, therefore, important to distinguish the hedonic and *eudaimonic* conceptions of happiness (*hedonia* vs. *eudaimonia*). It is also important to distinguish between *feeling* happy and *being* happy.

In summary, happiness is an umbrella term referring to both the hedonic and *eudaimonic* dimensions of wellbeing. As Seligman suggests,⁶⁶ it is also a term capable of unraveling its qualitative transformation from the hedonic to *eudaimonic* dimension. According to his theory of authentic happiness, it is a developmental phenomenon consisting of three key phases each of which needs to be cultivated: *the Pleasant Life* (pleasures), *the Good Life* (engagement), and *the Meaningful Life* (flourishing). From the first stage of the Pleasant Life, we cultivate our strengths and virtues to undertake actions that have meaning to the self and others, and move to the final stage of authentic happiness, which is marked by not only pleasure but also engagement and meaning.⁶⁷ Conceptually, he makes a clear distinction between *ephemeral happiness* and *authentic happiness*.

Measurement: Scales

Empirical studies on subjective wellbeing to date have confirmed that its three components, cognitive, affective, and *eudaimonic*, are virtually independent of each other, and they need to be measured separately.⁶⁸ To separately measure each of these three components, psychologists have developed a variety of survey response scales and different methods of conducting surveys. This section will introduce the verbal and other scales that have been most often used in national and multinational surveys.

Life Satisfaction

To measure cognitive or reflective assessments of life experiences as a whole and its domains, teams of psychologists in the United States and other countries have proposed a variety of a single-item global scale and multi-item domain scales. An example of this can be seen from more than four decades ago when a team of University of Michigan psychologists first proposed a 7-point verbal scale. This scale allows respondents to evaluate their life experiences in terms of 7 verbal response categories, ranging from “completely dissatisfied” to “completely satisfied”.⁶⁹ In the European Quality of Life surveys recently conducted in 27 EU member countries,⁷⁰ the 7-point verbal scale was stretched into a 10-point Likert scale where scores of 1 and 10 were, respectively, “completely dissatisfied” and “completely satisfied”. On this 10-point scale, Europeans were asked to rate satisfaction with their life as a whole and the seven domains of family, education, health, housing, social life, job, and living standard. The World Values Surveys also regularly uses this 10-point numeric scale to measure overall life satisfaction.⁷¹

Cantril's self-anchoring ladder scale maintains even more popularity than the 10-point scale.⁷² This scale first asks respondents to imagine a ladder with rungs from 0 to 10 where 0 means "the worst possible life" and 10 is "the best possible life". Then it asks them to indicate on the scale how they would evaluate their current lives. To monitor the dynamics of their wellbeing, it often asks them to evaluate where they believe they stood five years ago, and where they will be in the next five years on the same scale. The Gallup World Poll used this scale as the primary measure of cognitive wellbeing in the latest round of its annual surveys conducted in 155 countries.⁷³

Numerous efforts have been made to construct multi-item scales of cognitive wellbeing more recently in order to overcome the problems of limited reliability often associated with a single-item scale. Diener and his associates, for example, proposed a *Satisfaction With Life Scale* with five items each of which aims to rate one's life from a different global perspective on a 7-point Likert scale one's.⁷⁴ Similarly, the OECD recommends using 9 items, including 4 questions framed on an 11-point Cantril ladder scale, and 5 questions framed on a 7-point Likert scale. The OECD further recommends 10 specific life domains to be evaluated on an 11-point scale in which scores of 0 and 10 mean, respectively, "completely dissatisfied" and "completely satisfied."⁷⁵

Positive and Negative Affect

Affect is widely recognized as a construct with positive and negative characters or valences. Therefore, all wellbeing researchers draw a distinction between these two characters, and measure each of them in terms of multiple items. Items tapping the positive character capture pleasant emotions, such as the experience of joy and excitement, while items tapping the negative character capture unpleasant emotions, such as sadness and anxiety. Because these two types of emotions often occur independently of each other,⁷⁶ researchers measure an overall level of affective wellbeing in terms of the preponderance of positive over negative emotions (positive affect minus negative affect). This measure is known as an affective balance scale.⁷⁷

To measure affective wellbeing, the third European Quality of Life surveys conducted in 2011 and 2012 asked two pairs of questions. The first pair tapped positive affect in terms of the frequency of feeling "cheerful and in good spirits" and "calm and relaxed", while the second pair tapped negative affect in terms of feeling "particularly tense" and "downhearted and depressed". By subtracting the sum of affirmative responses to the former from the sum of those to the latter, a 5-point affect balance scale, which ranges from a low of -2 to a high of +2, is constructed to measure the overall level of affective wellbeing.⁷⁸

The Gallup World Poll asks more than a dozen of questions to tap a variety of positive and negative affectivities.⁷⁹ Of these items, two separate sets of three questions are often selected to measure positive and negative affect, respectively. Specifically, the overall level of positive affect is measured in terms of the sum of affirmative responses to the questions on being "treated with respect", and experiencing "smile or laugh a lot", and "enjoyment". The negative affect level is, on the other hand, measured in terms of the sum of such responses to the questions on experiencing "worry", "sadness", and "depression". By subtracting the latter from the former, a 7-point affect balance scale is constructed.

Diener and many other psychologists have proposed multi-item affect balance scales, such as SPANE (scale of positive and negative experience)⁸⁰, which include six pairs of positive

and negative items, and PANAS (positive and negative affect schedule) comprised of 20 items.⁸¹ Most of these scales are usually too long for practical use in general household surveys. Most of them are also known to be biased toward negative affect.⁸² Considering these limitations, the *OECD Guidelines for Measuring Subjective Wellbeing* recommends 10 Likert type-scale questions, which can be answered in a couple of minutes.⁸³ Like many other scales, the guidelines are biased toward negative affect with six on such affect (worried, sadness, depressed, anger, stress, and tired) and four on positive affect (enjoyment, calm, happy, and smiling).

Eudaimonia

In both the empirical and theoretical literature, there is a general agreement on the importance of studying *eudaimonic* wellbeing, which requires more than evaluating the experience of affective or cognitive wellbeing. Yet there is little agreement over its conceptual structure, and what constitutes it. Is *eudaimonic* wellbeing a unidimensional phenomenon like life satisfaction? Or is it multidimensional like affect? If it is multidimensional, what are its central components? How should those components be measured? Should they be measured cognitively or affectively? Although these questions are yet to be fully unanswered, psychologists have proposed a variety of measures to address these questions.⁸⁴

Waterman and his colleagues, for example, proposed a 21-item questionnaire called “The Questionnaire for *Eudaimonic* Well-Being” (QEWB).⁸⁵ These items are intended to tap self-discovery, perceived development of one’s best potentials, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, intense involvement in activities, investment of significant effort, and personal enjoyment of activities. Diener and his colleagues recently proposed a much simpler scale called “The Flourishing Scale”.⁸⁶ This scale consists of 8 items describing important aspects of human functioning, ranging from rewarding relationships and interesting activities to living a meaningful life and contributing to the happiness of others.

The recent questions national and multinational surveys asked also differ a great deal in number and type. The UK Office for National Statistics, for example, asked a single item, “To what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?”⁸⁷ The Gallup World Poll also asked a single question, “Do you feel your life has an important purpose?”⁸⁸ The European Social Survey⁸⁹ asked 6 questions on the basis of Hupert and So’s multidimensional conception of flourishing.⁹⁰ In contrast, the European Quality of Life Survey⁹¹ asked as many as 15 items tapping the experience of autonomy, fulfillment, loneliness, vitality, connectedness, respect, recognition, competence, social exclusion, time pressure, optimism, engagement, and worthiness.

After reviewing these items, the OECD⁹² recommends 9 separate questions. Three of these questions ask about what happened during the past week. The rest of six questions ask about current experiences at the time of the survey. Regardless of differing time frames, all the nine questions ask people to express their responses on an 11-point Likert scale. Of these nine, six range from “completely disagree” to “complete agree”, while three range from “none at all” to “all the time.”

Happiness

Like other components of wellbeing, this concept has been measured in a number of different ways. Its measures vary in terms of the number of questions asked, the type of scales, the length of their scale point, and the time frame chosen. The most typical of these measures are single-item questions with three or four verbal response categories. One example is a question with three verbal response categories, which the U.S. General Social Survey⁹³ asks: “Taken all together, how would you say things are? Would you say you are “not too happy”, “pretty happy” or “very happy”?” Another example is a question with four response categories, which the World Values Survey⁹⁴ asks: “Taking all the things together, would you say you are “very happy”, “quite happy”, “not too happy”, or “not at all happy”? Regardless of the number of response categories, these questions deal with the experience of happiness in real time, that is, the time of the survey. In contrast, the European Social Survey⁹⁵ asks about what happened in the past: “How much of the time during the past week were you happy—none or almost none of the time, some of the time, most of the time, or all or almost all of the time?”

As an alternative to these verbal scales, other national and international surveys have recently experimented with a number of questions whose response categories are labeled both verbally and numerically. Their extreme categories, known as anchors, are labeled verbally and numerically (0=very unhappy; 10=very happy), while others in the middle are labeled only numerically. The European Quality of Life Survey,⁹⁶ for example, asked: “Taking all things together on a scale of 1 to 10, how happy are you? Here 1 means you are *very unhappy* and 10 means you are *very happy*.” Similarly the European Social Survey⁹⁷ asked: “Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are? Please use this card where 0 means *extreme unhappy* and 10 means *extreme happy*?” The UK Office for Statistics⁹⁸ also asked: “How happy did you feel yesterday on a scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*completely*)? Of these three verbal numeric scales, the first two represent a bipolar type whose questions encompass the extremes of unhappiness and happiness. The third one, on the other hand, is a unipolar scale whose question deals exclusively with happiness.

As an alternative to these single-item scales, Lyubomirsky and Lepper proposed a 4-item unipolar happiness scale with verbal and numeric response categories.⁹⁹ Unlike the other happiness scales discussed above, this 4-item scale asks respondent to judge their own happiness on a 7-point scale from both absolute and relative perspectives. From the absolute perspective, respondents are first asked to place themselves on a scale ranging from “not a very happy person” to “very happy person.” Then they are asked to compare themselves with most of their peers on a scale ranging from “less happy” and “more happy”. In addition, they are asked to compare themselves with people who they think are “generally very happy” and “generally not very happy” on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “a great deal”.

After reviewing responses to these and other questions tapping happiness, the *OECD Guidelines for Measuring Subjective Wellbeing* recommends use of two unipolar questions.¹⁰⁰ Each of these two questions asks respondents to rate the experience of happiness on an 11-point scale in which scores of 0 and 10 mean, respectively, “not at all” and “all of the time.” Taking two different points of time into consideration, with one on the present and the other on the past (yesterday), allows for analyzing the durability and dynamics of happiness experiences. To date, three different perspectives—absolute, relative, and dynamic— have been employed to measure happiness.

Overall Subjective Wellbeing

A number of scales have been proposed to measure subjective wellbeing holistically by blending components of hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing rather than by measuring each distinct dimension of wellbeing. These overall subjective wellbeing scales include the 8-item Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWB) designed by Diener and his associates,¹⁰¹ the 9-item Concise Measure of Subjective Wellbeing Scale (COMOSW) by Eunkoo Suh and Jaisun Koo,¹⁰² Hupert and So's 10-item Flourishing Scale,¹⁰³ the 25-item BBC-Subjective Wellbeing Scale,¹⁰⁴ and the 54-item Scale of Psychological Wellbeing Scale by Carole Ryff (1998)¹⁰⁵. These scales show a great deal of variation in terms of the dimensions covered and questions asked, although they all aim to combine hedonic (*feeling*) and *eudaimonic* wellbeing (*functioning*).

The most ambitious of overall subjective wellbeing measures to date is the Gallup-Healthways Global Well-Being Index (GWBI).¹⁰⁶ The GWBI is unlike other wellbeing indexes, including those described above. While others focus on a few of its dimensions, such as positive affect and life satisfaction, the GWBI aims to capture perceptions of physical, psychological and three other important dimensions of human well-being. Specifically this five-dimensional index consists of (1) purpose wellbeing; (2) social wellbeing; (3) financial wellbeing; (4) community wellbeing; and (5) physical well-being.

Purpose well-being focuses on how much we enjoy our daily activities and whether we are motivated to achieve our life goals. Social well-being deals with the support, love, and encouragement we receive from family, friends, colleagues, and others. Financial well-being concerns the effective management of our economic life to reduce stress and increase security. Community well-being focuses on the likeability, safety and pride of the community where we live. Physical well-being includes having good health and the energy to get things done daily.

For each of these five wellbeing components, the GWBI project asks a pair of questions. Answers to the questions tapping each component are first considered together to determine whether respondents are *thriving*, *struggling*, or *suffering* in that particular component. Then such qualitative ratings of all five components are considered together to determine their overall status of wellbeing. The inclusion of these five components of human wellbeing distinguishes the GWBI from other existing measures of wellbeing. Fielding questions tapping these components globally across 135 countries makes it the most ambitious of all the endeavors that have been undertaken to study citizen wellbeing.

Measurement: Methods of Data Collection

Responses to survey questions tapping subjective wellbeing are measured primarily through self-reports on life experiences, but the reports are sometimes gathered through informant reports from family and friends. Survey respondents' self reports can be divided into two broad categories, real-time reports and retrospective reports.¹⁰⁷ The former, which is based on actual experience, require respondents to judge the experience of wellbeing on-the-spot. The latter, in contrast, is based on recollected or remembered experiences, and requires respondents to recollect what they experienced in the past and summarize that experience over some period of time. Obviously, there is an "experience-memory" gap between life as what is actually experienced and what is remembered. This has become an issue of ongoing debate among proponents of different methods.

This debate has prompted methodologists to develop alternative methods for acquiring self-reports on subjective well-being.¹⁰⁸ Of these methods, including those known as “end-of-day” and “global-yesterday” methods,¹⁰⁹ two are widely recognized as the most promising alternative methods for acquiring self-reports. One is known as the Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) or the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), which Larson and Csikszentmihalyi created in 1983.¹¹⁰ The other is the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), which Kahneman and his colleagues developed later in 2004.¹¹¹

EMA is a class of quasi-naturalistic methods for measuring immediate and frequent reports in *natural settings*, which permits researchers to overcome the methodological limitations of standard self-report procedures, such as those of reliance on memory and artificial settings.¹¹² Usually this method asks respondents to wear an electronic device for a period of time, which prompts the wearer at various times throughout the day to respond to a brief survey. Soliciting repeated measurements over time in different contexts, EMA enables researcher to unravel the dynamics or patterns of experiencing wellbeing, which unfolds within each respondent over a short period of time. Moreover, it allows for generalizing the discovered patterns to the other groups who are situated in similar natural settings. For this reason, it is regarded as “the gold standard for capturing experiential states”.¹¹³ Yet it is known to be impractical for general population surveys because it interrupts respondents from daily activities and requires them to make multiple reports over the course of a day.

The Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) is often called a diary method. It has recently become increasingly popular as a recall-based method for measuring subjective wellbeing.¹¹⁴ It first asks respondents to construct a diary of all the activities they engaged in on the previous day, following a structured format that divides the day into specific episodes or events. Then it asks them to record the amount of time they spend on each of those activities and evaluate those activities on a numeric scale.

DRM combines the features of time budget measurement and experience sampling. It is, therefore, considered capable of representing actual experiences more accurately, efficiently, and meaningfully than traditional recall-based methods. Since this method is self-administered and can be completed in a single session, it is less burdensome on participants and less costly for researchers to field than the EMA methods.

According to Seligman,¹¹⁵ DRM can “add a valuable dimension to the understanding of what constitutes a good life. It captures all three parts of this life, including mood, engagement; and meaning. Despite these potentials, this method has a number of its own shortcomings, including the requirement of considerable time (as much as an hour to complete a diary), and accuracy and difficulty in memorizing the activities or events, which need to be entered into a diary.¹¹⁶ For this reason, the OECD recommends the use of this method only for experimental purpose.¹¹⁷

Theorization

What makes people happy and satisfied with their lives? How are people encouraged to fulfill their potentials and live a meaningful life? Why do some people pursue such a life while others do not? Why are some people unhappier even with more income and education? For the past two decades, social scientists working especially in the new fields of happiness and hedonomics have proposed a number of interesting theories to address various questions concerning key

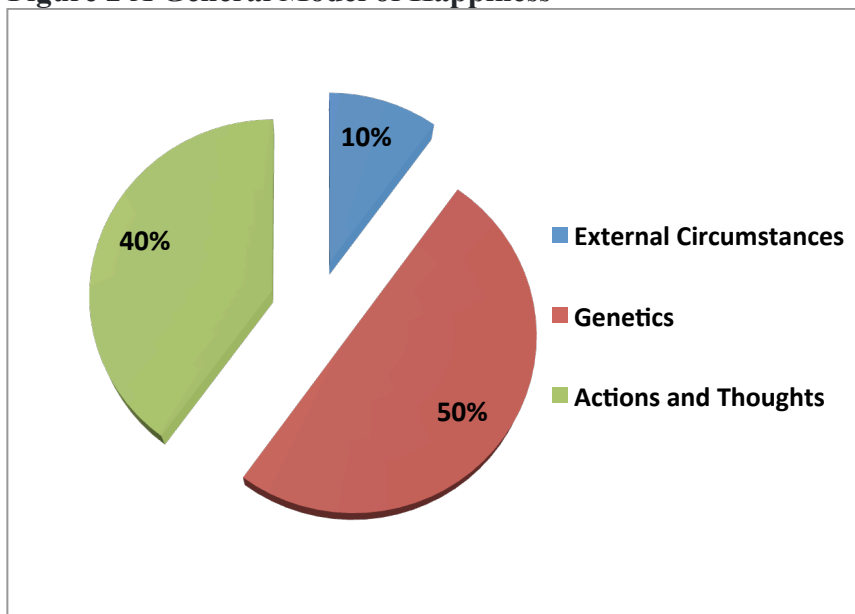
determinants of subjective wellbeing. Of these theories, three—one general and two specific—are chosen to highlight their core claims. While a general theory or model takes into account all types of important factors, a specific theory focuses on one particular type of those factors.

General Theory

A number of positive psychologists have recently proposed general models of happiness or subjective wellbeing, including psychologist Lyubomirsky.¹¹⁸ Her model holds that the levels of happiness people experience depend upon three broad categories of factors. It is symbolized as $H = f(G, C, A)$ in which the first category “G” refers to *genes* inherited from parents. The second category “C” refers to the *circumstances* in which people live individually and jointly with others. The third category “A” refers to behavioral and cognitive *activities*. Of these three categories, the most influential is the first consisting of *genes*, which is followed by the third category of *activities* and the second category of living *circumstances*. According to this model, our genes and activities shape, respectively, as much as 50 and 40 percent of the variance in happiness, respectively, while our personal and environmental resources do as little as 10 percent (see Figure 2).

Psychologist Seligman has proposed a similar model of happiness, $H = S + C + V$.¹¹⁹ His model, which is called a formula for achieving lasting happiness, also consists of the same three categories: S for a biological *set point* or range, C for *conditions* of living, and V for *voluntary control*. Like Lyubomirsky, Seligman claims that the genetic factor of personality or temperament constitutes the most powerful of the three categories, followed by voluntary activities and living conditions in that order. A recent meta analysis of 603 studies from 69 countries confirms their core claim that the genetic factor affects subjective wellbeing more powerfully than demographic and environmental factors.¹²⁰

Figure 2 A General Model of Happiness



Source: Sonja Lyubomirsky 2007, *op. cit.*, 39.

Set Point Theory

This theory elaborates on the role of the genetic factor beyond what is specified in the aforementioned general models of subjective wellbeing. It focuses on the genes which we inherit from parents and their influence on our personalities. It claims that inherited genes set our happiness level at a certain point, and that our happiness level moves temporarily either upward or downward from one time to another in response to what happens to us both internally and externally.¹²¹ Although we can experience extreme joy or sadness for a limited period of time, our genes allow us to *adapt* quickly even to extreme changes in our life conditions, and reverse our level of happiness to the set point or baseline.¹²² As a result, our happiness levels swing merely around the biologically predetermined set point, although the conditions of our lives constantly change.¹²³

To study the impact of genes on subjective wellbeing, Tellegen and his associates compared the average levels of subjective wellbeing among two different types of identical and fraternal twins.¹²⁴ Identical twins, who share all the same genes, were found to experience similar levels of wellbeing, while they were raised separately in different homes. Fraternal twins, on the other hand share 50 percent of their genes on average, and did not display similar levels of wellbeing, even when being raised in the same home. This study estimated that the genes accounted for 48 percent in the variance in overall subjective wellbeing. Other research findings confirmed that more than 40 percent of individual differences in wellbeing are due to genetic variability.¹²⁵

According to this theory, the genes are largely immune to change, and they form stable personality traits, such as extroversion and neuroticism. These traits, in turn, predispose us to behave in a certain predetermined way. Specifically, extroverts are predisposed to experience greater wellbeing by magnifying the impact of positive events, while neurotics are predisposed to experience lesser wellbeing by weighing negative events more heavily than positive events.¹²⁶ By attributing adaptability or habituation to genes, the set point theory is viewed to offer an answer to the Easterlin Paradox,¹²⁷ which refers to the failure of rising affluence in the U.S. and other countries to enhance the average levels of happiness among their citizenries.

Are we humans living on a “hedonic treadmill,” as the set point theory suggests? Are our efforts to increase happiness also doomed to failure because we quickly *adapt* to those efforts? Contrary to what the treadmill model of wellbeing suggests, many people are found to experience significant changes in their happiness in response to a variety of factors, such as illness, marriage, and unemployment.¹²⁸ More notably, they are also found to hold multiple set points, and change those set points under different conditions.¹²⁹ By identifying and establishing those conditions, individuals can play a more active role in promoting their happiness than what the treadmill model suggests. Similarly their government can play a role in the processes of building a nation of wellbeing.

Multiple Discrepancy Theory

Multiple discrepancy theory focuses exclusively on cognitive behavior. It claims that a sense of life satisfaction depends upon the perceived discrepancy between the standards people choose and what they achieve in the characteristics those standards refer to. It also claims that the

magnitude and direction of shifts in the perceived discrepancy determine the dynamics of life satisfaction, or subjective wellbeing over time.¹³⁰

Specifically, a discrepancy that results from a standard relatively higher than achievement leads to a decrease in satisfaction, while a discrepancy that results from the opposite of a relatively lower standard leads to an increase in it. The greater the extent to which the level of the chosen standard exceeds that of achievement, the lower the level of satisfaction is. The greater the extent to which the latter exceeds the former, the higher the level of satisfaction is.

What are the standards people choose to compare with what they achieve in a particular domain? The standards they choose include what they themselves desire, expect, or aspire to achieve, what they experienced in the past, and what other people currently have. Of the various discrepancies shaped by these standards, the discrepancy that results from what one desires is found to affect the experience of satisfaction most powerfully.¹³¹ This discrepancy is also found to mediate those resulting from intra-personal longitudinal comparisons with one's own past as well as interpersonal simultaneous comparisons with other people. In short, the theory suggests that people with realistic desires are more satisfied than those with unrealistic desires.

Substantively and analytically, there are notable differences between these two specific theories of subjective well being. While the set point theory focuses on the impact of the biologically predetermined adaptability on happiness, the discrepancy theory focuses on cognitive activities on satisfaction. The former aims to account for the stability of happiness, while the latter, in contrast, seeks to explain the dynamics of satisfaction.

Key External Determinants: Economic, Social, and Political

The finding in which genetic dispositions and habituation are the most powerful influence on subjective wellbeing does not rule out the significant roles of external factors that play in the process of shaping it. Half or more of its variance is attributable to differences in non-genetic factors, including demographic and environmental factors. Of the non-genetic factors, we have chosen the three— economic, social, and political—which have been the subjects of vigorous on-going debate in the scholarly community and media circles for decades.

Income

Does money buy happiness? This is the constantly discussed question among ordinary people. This is also the question scholars have been debating for ages. Despite decades of ongoing debates and extensive empirical research, there is little consensus on the exact nature of the relationship between income and happiness. While some aspects of their relationship are known to be positive, others are found to be negative, curvilinear, and even null.¹³²

Four decades ago economist Easterlin reported a seminal study examining the cross-sectional and longitudinal relationships between income and happiness.¹³³ According to this study, within a given country, richer people are happier than poorer people. Contrary to what is expected from this positive relationship, however, rising incomes do not make them any happier. Instead, rising income is often accompanied by declines in the average level of happiness. The failure of rising income to enhance happiness is known as the “Easterlin Paradox”. While some recent cross-national studies reveal the persistence of the paradoxical relationship between the

two variables,¹³⁴ others report the absence of such a relationship.¹³⁵ Haegerty and Veenhoven,¹³⁶ and Stevenson and Wolfers,¹³⁷ for example, found that increases in absolute income contribute to greater happiness for individual citizens as well as their nations as a whole.

Despite the on-going controversy about the nature of their relationship, a careful review of the recent empirical literature reveals five areas of broad agreement. First, income matters relatively little in comparison with other resources, such as family life, social engagement, and religiousness.¹³⁸ Second, it affects cognitive wellbeing more strongly than affective wellbeing.¹³⁹ Third, income is more strongly correlated with negative affect than positive affect.¹⁴⁰ Fourth, more than money itself, the desire for it influences happiness. People who strongly pursue money and wealth as important life goals are much less happy than those who do not.¹⁴¹ Finally, how people spend money matters more than how much they have.¹⁴²

Social Relationships

Ancient philosophers of both hedonic and *eudaimonic* stripes in the East and West emphasized the importance of the family and friends as the key factor in living a happy life. Confucius, for example, extolled a harmonious family life and “a circle of many friends with superior character” as the foundation of individual happiness and social wellbeing.¹⁴³ Likewise, Aristotle also recognized friendships among members of a civic community as one of the most important virtues in achieving *eudaimonic* wellbeing.¹⁴⁴

Are a person’s social connections essential to her or his wellbeing, as ancient philosophers have advocated? All the recent empirical studies have established solid evidence confirming their points.¹⁴⁵ In every country, the quantity and quality of social relationships are found to be a key to a greater sense of wellbeing.¹⁴⁶ Of the various forms of social relationships, however, marriage and friends are the most important to wellbeing.¹⁴⁷

In national and cross-national studies, married people reported greater happiness than those who were never married, divorced, separated, or widowed. In a study of 100,000 Americans and Britons, Blanchflower and Oswald found that married people and those whose parents did not divorce were among those who expressed the highest level of wellbeing.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, they estimated that marriage has an equivalent effect as much as \$100,000 in income annually. Between the two genders, however, marriage benefits are known to vary considerably. According to Diener et al.,¹⁴⁹ marriage offers greater benefits for men than for women.

Friendships are found to affect wellbeing both directly and indirectly. According to a recent study of 6,500 Britons,¹⁵⁰ people with many friends are far more likely to be happy than those with a few. While those with five or fewer friends are likely to be unhappy than happy, those with ten or more are likely to be happy than unhappy. According to another recent study, not everyone we are connected with is contributing to our subjective wellbeing. Friends in real life, rather than cyber friends met through on-line networks, contribute to greater happiness.¹⁵¹ Evidently, it is the quality of relationships, not their quantity, which matters most.

What also matters is geographic proximity between friends. According to a recent study by Christakis and Fowler,¹⁵² a person is 42 percent more likely to be happy if his close friend lives within half a mile. The same friend will not make any discernible impact if the person lives more than two miles away. They also found an indirect relationship between one’s happiness and the happiness of a second-degree contact. A second-degree contact, such as the spouse of a

friend, increases the likelihood to be happy by 10 percent, while the happiness of a third-degree contact—the friend of a friend of a friend—can increase happiness by 6 percent.

Numerous empirical studies to date show that, of all factors, good relationships with other people are the most critical determinant of how people experience a variety of subjective wellbeing on a daily basis.¹⁵³ Good relations are more powerful than other personal and circumstantial factors, and they help us to live well affectively, cognitively, and even *eudaimonically*. They also enable us to live well throughout our lives. There is little doubt about the centrality of good interpersonal relations in the human lot. In all interpersonal relationships, however, it should be noted that giving help to others contribute to greater wellbeing than receiving it from them.¹⁵⁴

Democracy

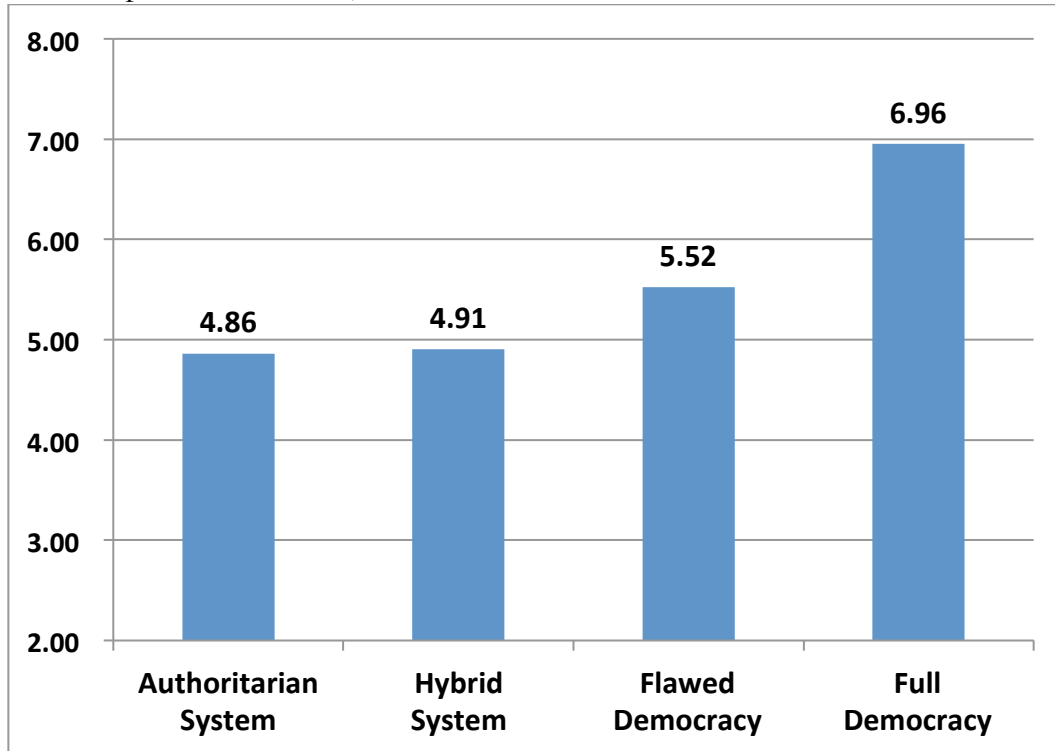
Many political theorists have long touted democracy as the system of government that can help to build a nation of wellbeing. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracy has universally become the most preferred system of government. What makes democracy preferable to its alternatives? Do citizens of democracies actually enjoy a greater quality of life than those of autocracies? Has the democratic regime change made it possible for citizens of former autocracies to live in greater happiness? These are the three important questions most often addressed in the theoretical and empirical literature examining their relationship.¹⁵⁵

The theoretical literature offers two arguments linking democracy to the quality of life people experience. The first concerns its procedure of policymaking, while the second deals with its substantive outcomes. Procedurally, democracy allows citizens to participate and voice what they prefer in the political process. Substantively, it formulates public policy in response to their preferences. The various opportunities for them to express their political preferences, and policy outcomes reflecting those preferences serve to enhance their subjective wellbeing. Of the various types of democracy, therefore, direct and consensus types are theorized to offer the highest level of citizen wellbeing.¹⁵⁶

In the world of politics, the theoretically hypothesized linkage between democracy and subjective wellbeing is yet to be fully established. In all empirical studies, citizens of democracies were found to be much happier than those of non-democracies.¹⁵⁷ As shown in Figure 3 (below), the more democratic the countries in which people live, the higher the average levels of their happiness and life satisfaction are. When economic development and other factors are taken into account, however, the strength of their remarkably high positive relationship becomes much weaker.

Despite their positive linkage, democratization, that is, a transition to democracy from authoritarian rule, has not always produced a higher level of citizen happiness. In ex-communist countries like Hungary and Romania, for example, democratization has led to a lower level of happiness. In other countries like Mexico and Argentina, on the other hand, it entailed higher levels of happiness.¹⁵⁸ These conflicting findings suggest that the impact of democratic politics on subjective wellbeing may not be as powerful as theorists have argued. They also suggest that its positive impact depends on how long countries are governed democratically and economically, and how their cultural and political legacies affect the process of democratic governance. These are the important questions to be addressed in future research.

Figure 3 Levels of Citizens' Subjective Wellbeing by Regime Types
(on Cantril's 11-point ladder scale)



Sources: The Economist Intelligence Unit, “2013 Democracy Index” available from http://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=Democracy0814; and Helliwell *et al.*, *The World Happiness Report 2013*, 23-25.

Objective Benefits

Are happy people better off than their unhappy peers? Since our mindsets determine how we perceive and react to shifting realities, positive cognitions and emotions are often found to entail positive outcomes in many areas of life. According to a comprehensive review of 225 relevant studies on 275,000 people, subjective wellbeing benefits not only individuals and their own families but also the communities in which they live.¹⁵⁹

The known personal and communal benefits of subjective wellbeing have been on the rise.¹⁶⁰ They include higher income and superior work outcomes (e.g., greater productivity and higher quality of work), larger social rewards (e.g., more satisfying and longer marriages, less divorces, more friends, stronger social support, and richer social interactions), altruism and generosity, more activity and greater energy and flow, better mental health (less depression, suicide, and paranoia), greater self-control and coping abilities, and better physical health (e.g., a stronger immune system, lowered stress levels, and less pain), and even longer life spans.¹⁶¹

Physically, happiness is found to make people live longer and healthier lives. According to a longitudinal study of 678 nuns who lived a simple lifestyle—of similar diets and housing—in the same environment, happy nuns were found to live as much as 10 years longer than others.¹⁶² A cross-sectional study on medical patients also found that happy patients had two times more of chance to survive and remain functionally independent than their unhappy

counterparts.¹⁶³ Positive affect is also known to lead to faster cardio-vascular recovery from stress.¹⁶⁴

Economically, happiness in the early years of life is found to lead to higher income in the later years, even after controlling for all other relevant factors including genetic predispositions. According to a recent study of 90,000 people,¹⁶⁵ those who scored a one-point higher on a 5-point life satisfaction scale at the age of 22 led to earning as much as \$2,000 more annually by the age of 29. Happier people are found more likely to save more and consume less than others. They are also more likely to become forward thinkers and pursue long-term goals, while ignoring the necessary short-term costs.

Socially, those with high subjective wellbeing tend to see other fellow citizens more inclusively and sympathetically. As a result, they are more likely to get married later and less likely to get divorced or widowed. They are more likely to interact with other people and participate in voluntary associations. They are also more likely to contribute to charity and worthy causes in terms of both time and money.¹⁶⁶

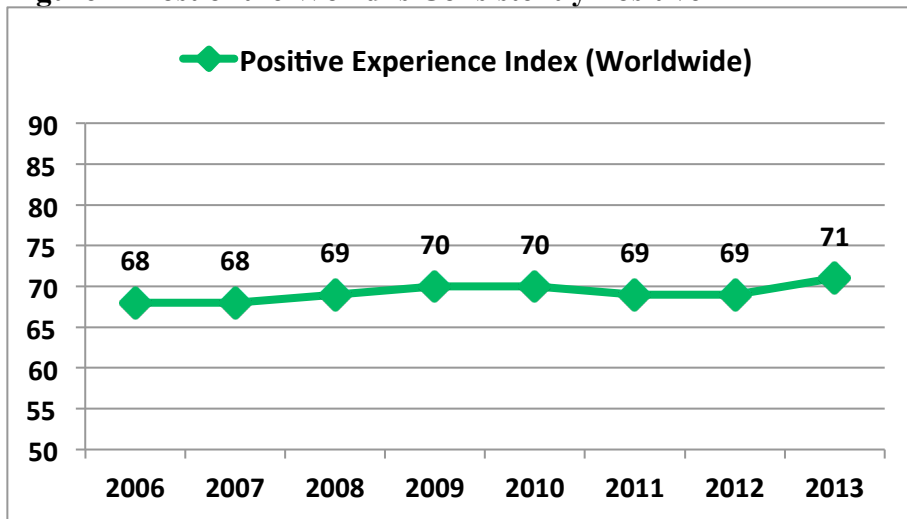
Overall in all life situations, we become motivated to see the world in a brighter light and react to it more positively and more proactively when we experience happiness and other components of wellbeing. This plays into why we should learn how to live happily and thereby enrich ourselves with greater amounts of intellectual, social and physical resources.

What Has Been Found So Far

Of all the empirical research projects on subjective wellbeing, the Gallup World Poll (GWP) represents the most ambitious project, covering the largest number of countries and the highest proportion of the world population. Beginning in 2005, the Poll has annually conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews with a representative sample of 1,000 in 160 countries in more than 140 different languages, and monitored and compared the levels and distribution of affective and cognitive wellbeing among more than 98 percent of the world population. This section highlights the two most noteworthy findings from this research project, which has been the primary source of *the World Happiness Report* commissioned by the UN General Assembly.

The first of these findings encompasses the entire globe. Contemporary global publics, when considered as a whole, tend to evaluate their life experiences more positively than negatively on a continuing basis. According to the GWP's Positive Experience Index measured over the period of 2006-2013,¹⁶⁷ more than two-thirds reported experiencing more positive affect than negative affect every year (see Figure 4). In every year of this period, large majorities of over two-thirds reported experiencing "lots of enjoyment", "laughing or smiling a lot", "feeling well-rested", and "being treated with respect" besides "learning or doing something interesting the day before". On an 11-point Cantril ladder scale, which taps satisfaction with life as a whole, more people judge the quality of their lives positively than negatively (42.5% vs. 30.9% with 26.2% choosing a score of 5, which indicates neither dissatisfaction nor satisfaction on this scale).¹⁶⁸ Those who report living well, however, are not equally distributed thorough the world; they are concentrated among socioeconomically developed and politically democratized countries in the West.

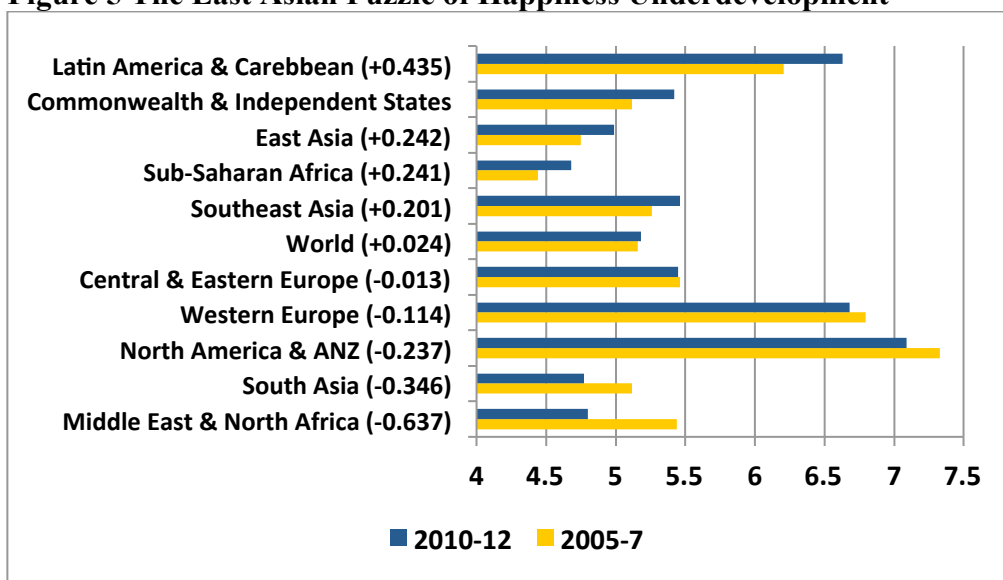
Figure 4 Most of the World is Consistently Positive



Source: Gallup World Poll, “People Worldwide Report a lot of Positive Emotions,” accessed on November 14, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/169322/people-worldwide-reporting-lot-positive-emotions.aspx>

The second finding concerns the current state of wellbeing in East Asia, a region blessed with the fastest rate of socioeconomic modernization in human history. Among the 11 regions listed in the latest *World Happiness Report 2013*, East Asia was listed as one of the four least happy regions with the others being the most undeveloped regions of South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Middle East/North Africa (see Figure 5). In this region, more people were found to rate their lives negatively than positively on Cantril’s 11 point scale (35.6% vs. 33.9%).¹⁶⁹ According to the Gallup-Healthways Global Wellbeing Index discussed above,¹⁷⁰ moreover, Asia ranks lower than any other region in the world on the domain of purpose wellbeing only with 13 percent positive ratings.

Figure 5 The East Asian Puzzle of Happiness Underdevelopment



Source: Helliwell *et al.*, *World Happiness Report 2013*, 25.

Despite decades of rapid and sustained socioeconomic development, why has East Asia failed to become a region of wellbeing? Why do so many affluent Japanese and Koreans remain reluctant to describe themselves as happy, while their less fortunate peers in Africa and other regions do? Why do the Chinese refuse to evaluate their lot more positively when they are blessed with increased wealth? These are the questions at the heart of the East Asian puzzle of happiness underdevelopment.¹⁷¹

The keys to this East Asian puzzle appear to lie in the region's cultural legacies.¹⁷² In Confucian culture, humans are not viewed as autonomous and independent individuals, but instead as social beings in relationship with others. Accordingly, Confucius cautioned them to “establish themselves by establishing others”.¹⁷³ Mencius also admonished their ruler to “rejoice in the joy of his people”, and “enjoy music in the company of others”.¹⁷⁴ This Confucian legacy of conceiving the self as an interdependent and cooperative being appears to motivate East Asians to seek a communal form of happiness instead of personal happiness, which depends exclusively upon personal desires and interests.

In the Daoist *yin-yang* philosophy of cosmology (陰- 陽), the universe is viewed to be in a constant process of transformation through the interaction of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) forces. One type of force cannot exist without the other, and they are constantly playing against and with each other. “In a state of high *yin* (陰), all is cold and severe; in a state of high *yang* (陽), all is turbulent and agitated.... When they both intermingle and join, all things come forth.”¹⁷⁵ Similarly, “Misery!—happiness is to be found by its side! Happiness—misery lurks beneath it! Who knows when either will come to in the end.”¹⁷⁶ The philosophical legacy of Daoist dialectism appears to lead East Asians to view happiness and unhappiness as two sides of the same coin, and define the former as having dialectical relations with the latter.¹⁷⁷

In East Asia, as in other regions, culture shapes how people conceive of happiness and how they actually experience it in the real world. Being imbued with the legacies of Confucianism and Daoism, people still remain motivated to view the good life from the perspectives of communalism and dialectism. Such communal and dialectical conceptions of wellbeing encourage them to take into account ups and downs in both personal and social life. This, in turn, motivates them to seek a balance between the states of positivity and negativity, and avow a relatively lower level of happiness.

Concluding Remarks

The past two decades have witnessed the dawning of a new age for the scientific study of people's quality of life. For the first time in its history, both scholars from a variety of disciplines and policymakers from national and international government agencies have partnered to develop a new paradigm, and establish new interdisciplines aiming to appraise and prescribe the quality of life from the perspectives of the people who experience it. This paper sought to review major advances made in these interdisciplines called happiology, hedonomics, and positive psychology.

Over this relatively short period of two decades, a number of significant advances have been made on all fronts of this research on subjective wellbeing, including conceptualization, measurement, theorization, and data collection and analysis. The most notable of these advances concerns a fundamental shift in the paradigm that can serve as a blueprint guiding its basic and

applied research for many decades to come. In the old standard paradigm, quality of life was equated with the desirability of the objective environment in which people live. In particular, it was paralleled to the amount of the economic and other resources people command individually and collectively. Ultimately a larger consumption of goods and services was assumed to bring people a greater quality of life. This paradigm, which was once called *philistinism*, led the movement to use economic and other indicators of objective life conditions as those of personal and national wellbeing.

A newly emerging paradigm rejects this core principle of *philistinism*. In its stead, this new paradigm embraces the philosophical *subjectivism* that quality, like beauty, lies in the eye or mind of the beholder, and that subjective wellbeing constitutes the integral component of the quality of life.¹⁷⁸ Such a shift in paradigm from the objectivist notion to the subjectivist notion of life quality has led an increasing number of national and international government agencies to prioritize the enhancement of subjective wellbeing as an ultimate goal of policymaking, regularly measuring it as an indicator of social progress.

An equally significant shift has occurred in the conception of subjective wellbeing itself. The old and new paradigms differ significantly in philosophical perspectives on the question of what constitutes happiness and wellbeing. The old paradigm approaches the question primarily from the individualist and unidimensional perspective of hedonism. Thus it treats subjective wellbeing as *feeling well*, that is, experiencing pleasure in emotion or cognition. The new paradigm, on the other hand, approaches the same question from the collectivist perspective of *eudaimonism*, treating it as a multidimensional and multi-level phenomenon. The latter, therefore, takes into account not only *feeling well* as an individual human being, but also *functioning well* as a social being. In this new paradigm, key components of hedonic and *eudaimonic* wellbeing are combined into more inclusive and integrative conceptualizations of subjective wellbeing.

Theoretically, such broad conceptions have made it possible to re-conceptualize people's wellbeing as a dynamic process in which forces of *positive functioning* and *positive feeling* interact with each other. What sorts of linkages between these two forces would lead to sustainable rather than transient wellbeing among both individual citizens and their countries? To address this and other related questions, scholars and policy analysts have been working together to develop new theoretical models of sustainable happiness or endurable wellbeing. They have further proposed alternative methods of data collection and a variety of multi-item scales tapping affective, cognitive, and *eudaimonic* wellbeing.

Using these innovative scales, an increasing number of research institutes and government agencies around the world have begun to regularly conduct national and multinational public opinion surveys, and prepare reports on the status and trends in the quality of life people experience. Public opinion data from these ongoing surveys are now making it possible to study their happiness and wellbeing more globally and scientifically than at any time in the past. It is these data that make it possible to explore policy interventions more directly and effectively than ever before.

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