Engineering Happiness in Childhood: Can Policy Influence Child well-being

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Promoting children’s well-being and happiness: What role for social policy
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Introduction

- Clarification of the title.
- Well-being generally understood as multi-dimensional
- There can be no doubt that we can engineer improvements in many domains of child well-being (objective lists) – health, education, housing, material…..
Pre and post transfer child poverty rates (50% median threshold): UNICEF RC 10 (2012)
Introduction

- Clarification of the title.
- Well-being generally understood as multi-dimensional
- There can be no doubt that we can engineer improvements in many domains of child well-being – health, education, housing, material....
- Major improvements in UK position RC7 to RC11.
- The focus of my lecture is whether you can engineer happiness or subjective well-being in children
Outline

- Background
- Arguments
- Concepts and measures
- International comparative data
- National data from large surveys in England
- Conclusions
Background

- Happiness increasing focus of attention
- Prosperity Paradox: Becoming richer does not mean becoming happier
- OECD How’s Life index
Life satisfaction 2010
Background

- In the UK Layard happiness tsar
- Making Australia Happy
- Cameron in the UK
  - *It's time we admitted that there's more to life than money, and it's time we focused not just on GDP but on GWB - General Wellbeing. It's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture and above all the strength of our relationships. There is a deep satisfaction which comes from belonging to someone and to some place.* David Cameron, May 2006

- Big programme of research
  - Adults
  - Children

- What can/should governments do – for children’s subjective well-being?
Why might we be concerned about child happiness

- UN CRC obliges us to listen to children and take their views into account
- Redmond – test of ‘to their fullest potential’ performance of the top quintile
- Well-being more/as important as well-becoming
- Happiness leads to well becoming
- Unhappiness a failure of parenting
- Unhappiness a failure of policy
- Policy may be doing harm
  - Attainment versus happiness - Finland
  - Earning versus caring – UNICEF spa, swe, uk
- Unhappiness may lead to mental illness
Why we might not be concerned about happiness

- OECD *Doing better for Children* – subjective well-being ‘not policy salient’
- **It is subjective** (validity and reliability)
  - It is (transient) mood
  - Culturally determined
  - Lost in translation – ”best possible life for you..”
- **It is a function of (false) expectations** – adaptive preferences
- **It is a function of personality**
- It is genetic homeostatic adaptation (Cummins)
- **We cannot explain variation** – therefore we don’t know how to intervene
Subjective well-being: the concept

◆ Evaluative - Life satisfaction/Happiness
◆ Experience –
  ◆ Positive affect (joy/pride)
  ◆ Negative affect (pain/worry)
◆ Eudemonic well-being – worthwhileness, achieving rewards in life independent of pleasure
◆ Research (on children) mainly focussed on the first
Subjective well-being: the measures

- Life satisfaction – Cantril’s ladder 0-10
- Happiness scale – Casas 0-10 Likert scale
- Scott Huebner – five four item Likert scales
  - My life is going well
  - My life is just right
  - I wish I had a different kind of life (reverse coded)
  - I have a good life
  - I have what I want in life
- Children’s Society *Good Childhood Index* 0 very unhappy to 10 very happy with ten domains
Overall well-being in England 10-14: Composite measure

9% score below the mid-point
International comparisons

- How and why do nation’s subjective well-being vary?
- Reliant on HBSC every four years, national school based samples 11, 13 and 15.
- Life satisfaction - Cantril’s ladder
- Subjective well-being composite: Four components, 8 indicators
  - Life satisfaction
  - Relationships
    - Easy to talk to mothers, fathers, classmates kind and helpful
  - School
    - Pressured by school work, liking school a lot
  - Subjective health
    - Rating health as fair or poor, self reported health complaints
% with high life satisfaction >6 HBSC 2010
Subjective well-being: HBSC 2010

Netherlands
Iceland
Slovenia
Spain
Finland
Portugal
Ireland
Norway
Germany
Austria
Denmark
Sweden
Switzerland
Greece
United Kingdom
Estonia
Lithuania
Canada
Belgium
Luxembourg
Romania
Italy
Hungary
Czech Republic
Latvia
USA
France
Slovakia
Poland
Life satisfaction of 11, 13 and 15 year olds HBSC 2001 and 2005
Life satisfaction of 11, 13 and 15 year olds
HBSC 2005 and 2010
## HBSC 2010: High life satisfaction by age and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>11</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>83</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Life satisfaction and subjective well-being v other domains of well-being EU29 countries
Life satisfaction and subjective vs structural factors EU 29
Subjective by % GDP spent on families
2007
Subjective well-being varies between countries

Associated with age and gender in all countries

Associated with most domains of well-being and overall well-being

Associated with deprivation, income poverty, inequality

Not associated with family breakdown or welfare state effort – possible trade-off

Not associated with GDP.
Happiness has increased in the UK

Mean happiness of 11-15 year olds (BHPS 1994-2008). With 95% confidence intervals

Error bars: 95% CI
BHPS: Trends, 1994 to 2008
Children’s Society school based surveys of subjective well-being

- Individual factors considered:
  - Age**
  - Gender**
  - Disability**
  - Religious affiliation*
  - Ethnicity*
  - Country of birth

- Low explanatory power (3%-4%). Age most significant factor
Family factors

- Factors considered:
  - Poverty**
  - Family structure*
  - Number of siblings

- Very low explanatory power (1% to 2.5%)

- But, query re: poverty measures
Being bullied

Overall well-being (0-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of being bullied in last 12 months</th>
<th>Overall well-being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly ever</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Associations with overall well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>.178</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money and possessions</td>
<td>.139</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time use</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The future</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Explains 52% of variation in well-being*
Subjective well-being is generally positive – only 10% of children fall below the mean.

The elements of subjective well-being that correlate most strongly with overall subjective well-being are Choice .61, Family .56,

The association between overall subjective well-being and the socio-demographic characteristics of the child and the family are much smaller than might be expected.

However there were stronger associations with some other experiences of life.

Children being looked after tended to have lower subjective well-being.

The quality of relationships mattered a lot, certainly family conflict matters more than family structure.

Although indicators of family poverty are only weakly related to subjective well-being, a child centred index of deprivation explains much more variation.

Life events such as a change in family structure and experiences of bullying had a discernible association with well-being. In fact a child’s recent experiences of bullying explained roughly as much of the variation in overall well-being as all the individual and family characteristics combined.
Conclusions

- No easy lessons from this analysis.
- Other domains of well-being and some structural elements do seem to be associated with variations in child subjective well-being at an international comparative level.
- At a national level there is also a weak association between some socio-economic indicators and subjective well-being.
- There is enough evidence to disagree with the OECD that subjective well-being is not policy salient.
Conclusions

- Children are happier if they live in decent houses, in safe neighbourhoods, are not bullied, enjoy and achieve in schools and are not materially deprived.
- These can all be influenced by policy.
- Family and other relationships may matter more than these things and they may not be directly amenable to policy.
- But indirectly they can be - by for example
  - reducing the burdens of poverty and inequality on parents,
  - treating parental depression,
  - providing family friendly services.
- Research in this field is pretty much in its infancy.
- Inevitably we need more research.
  - Intervention studies (ie Bullying Finland)
  - Surveys of child well-being in more countries (Australia)
  - Comparative research (including Australia)