

Measuring National Well-being – Discussion paper on domains and measures

The Academy of Social Sciences exists to be the voice of the social sciences in the UK for the public benefit. Our membership encompasses 750 individual Academicians and 43 learned societies (with a total reach of 85,000 social scientists), drawn from right across the social science disciplines at the academic, policy and practice levels. We are glad to have the opportunity of making this submission, which has been compiled with input from Professors Cary Cooper AcSS (Chair of Council, Academy of Social Sciences and Lancaster University), Jonathan Gershuny FBA (Oxford) and Michael Harloe AcSS (Council member, Academy of Social Sciences and LSE / Salford).

We welcome and support the work by ONS to conceptualise and measure National Well-being. However, we have some concerns regarding both conceptualisation and measurement which are set out in this note.

Domains and their definition

The domains considered; individual well-being, the factors that affect individual well-being (e.g. relationships, health, what we do, where we live, personal finance and education and skills), and the contextual factors (e.g. governance, the economy and the natural environment) are all appropriate areas of well-being. They seem more or less to coincide with the government's Foresight project on Mental Capital and Well-being (www.foresight.gov.uk), although there is less on children, the family and the community than we would have expected.

However, the document is at present rather lacking in definition at the conceptual level. We are not really told what a "domain" is. The Venn diagram (Figure 1) and the subsequent discussion of 'Proposed Domains' make the rather idealist assumption that "individual well-being" can be conceived of as a single domain that can be viewed *in parallel with* (or as a combined consequence of) "our relationships", "health", and so on. Yet, despite the concern that the domains should 'reflect evidence from research' this runs contrary to the established much academic (economic, sociological and psychological) research which consider individuals as having distinct subjective reactions to each of various domains (working life, family life, leisure, economic circumstances). There may also be overarching views of well-being or happiness in general—but the complex relationship of instantaneous enjoyment of life events, to general satisfaction with specific domains of life, and to statements about overall happiness, is not well-represented by the document. A good starting point for further development might be Kahneman's brief introductory section to his edited "Introduction to Hedonic Psychology" of 1999, which looks explicitly at these distinct levels of meaning of well-being. (*Interestingly the Cabinet Secretary has recently referred to the advice Prof. Kahneman has already been providing for government on 'behavioural issues'. House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, Inquiry on Role and Function of Chief Scientific Advisers, Uncorrected Evidence (23 November 2011), Sir Gus O'Donnell, Q 186, 200.*)

The measurement of well-being

When it comes to the measurement of the various aspects of each domain, we see serious limitations in what is proposed. Most of the measures used are existing items taken from various surveys (British Household Panel Survey, Citizenship Survey CLG, ONS Labour Force Survey, etc.). We can see the benefits of using these items, given that they already exist and this then provides an existing database to benchmark future progress. However, whilst some of these measures or items are appropriate, they need to be supplemented by more robust psychometrics. We are very much in favour of using items from existing surveys as long as they are properly validated, as in the case of the GHQ12 series from the British Household Panel Survey. Where the current list is weakest is in the work domain, because it relies on too much on *merely* factual demographic data such as the proportion of people employed/unemployed/or that are inactive in the labour market; or the number of contracted hours of working; etc. We need more on people's subjective perceptions, what they feel about these hours, or about the way they are managed, or of their level of job security, or their work-life balance, or the amount of control or autonomy they have over their job. This domain requires robust, validated psychometric workplace wellbeing measures to assess the important aspects of their working environment (akin to the GHQ12 but for sources of stress/wellbeing at work). Such measures do exist (e.g. ASSET), and should be considered alongside the more objective survey measures. There is a big difference between a survey item asking for facts (e.g. hours of work) and validated items that ask how someone feels about working the hours they do. Both are necessary but the current document doesn't sufficiently clearly distinguish between them.

In general the discussion of each domain needs two distinct sections (1) establishing appropriate descriptive evidence about peoples' material circumstances, and (2) providing appropriate evaluative measures of people's subjective experience of these. Each domain discussion needs to make some explicit attempt to demonstrate that its coverage under (1) reasonably *exhaustively* represents that domain (and is not, as seems to be the case in the present document, a partial set of measures that happen currently to be available in existing surveys). It needs to provide some form of vindication of the items in (2), with some proper validation of individual measures, and some demonstration that the subjective measures provide coverage across the whole of each domain. And we need some reassurance that the domains together are reasonably exhaustive of the generality of human experience.

Issues relating to specific domains

There are also some specific issues that are of concern in relation to the domain of 'what we do' and 'the economy' (and we suspect that others may have similar points to make regarding some of the other domains). We have already pointed out that that "Proportion in employment etc." and "proportion working long hours" are weak indicators in relation to subjective measures of well-being but they also represent a distressingly narrow conceptualisation of the world of paid work. What about the characteristics of jobs? When people work? The nature of contracts? The security of employment? We know from successive UK employment surveys since the 1980s that people have distinct and partially independent characterisations of each of these. Of course not all can be included but some

explicit justification of what does eventually go in is essential. And the coverage of 'leisure' is even narrower, just one general "satisfaction with leisure time". There is nothing about what and how much leisure we do, let alone the balance across, say, television watching, sociable leisure, attending different sorts of cultural events, exercise and sports participation. In the context of these absences, the explicit mention of volunteering, quantitatively a very small part of daily life might seem to be more influenced by current governmental priorities than by anything else.

In relation to the contextual domain 'the economy', GDP Net Income and net worth all relate to the *money* economy. About half of all work is in fact outside "the money economy"—unpaid cooking and cleaning, transporting, building and repairing, and of course caring activities that take place both within households and between households. This latter is of course at the heart of the current "big society" interest. But it's always been there, and may well be smaller now than it was—but is completely absent from the proposed measures. Of course, the earlier proposed measure of "volunteering" should be included here. But formal volunteering is in volume terms a tiny proportion of the neighbourly exchanges and intergenerational transfers of unpaid work time among households.

Concluding remarks

The idea of measuring various aspects of our quality of life throughout the life course is excellent and should be of value in terms of developing policy to enhance wellbeing and to ensure that the obstacles to wellbeing are minimised. We recognise that developing a robust and well-validated series of measures will take time and what is currently proposed is only the start of a longer process. We can see the point of using existing factual data and subjective data from surveys, because it is available, cheap to obtain because it is being collected already and can provide some benchmarks. If we were designing a National Wellbeing measure from scratch, we probably would end up with a very different set of measures in the various domains. But this note has set out some serious reservations about what is being proposed. We believe progress on addressing many of them, even within current resource and other limitations, could be made by greater collaboration with social science academics have expertise in the field of "social indicators".

8th December 2011