

# The Academic Discourse of Subjective Well-Being Within a Cultural Context: Methodological Limitations and Underlying Problems

Mirko Murad Sbeih

Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience  
Maastricht University

Cross-cultural comparisons of data obtained through self-reports underlie several methodological limitations to find objective determinants of Subjective Well-Being (SWB). Cultural relativism emphasizes that because societies vary in their values, individuals in them use different criteria for judging the performance of societies, which heavily influence respondent's self-report measurements. Also translation of questionnaires might have an impact on SWB measurement results of self-reports. Furthermore there are several interfering factors like response biases and cultural differences which affect measuring SWB scores between societies. The methodological limitations and difficulties of cross-cultural measurements have been marginally addressed in empirical research and might impact SWB scaling across nations. Furthermore they might affect underlying comparisons and the validity of drawn conclusions within the academic discourse of SWB. It is necessary to consider these methodological issues in further studies to provide more clarity.

*Keywords:* subjective well-being, cross-cultural comparisons, self-report measurement

Perbandingan lintas-budaya data yang diperoleh melalui laporan-diri mendasari keterbatasan metodologis untuk menemukan penentu objektif kenyamanan subjektif (KS). Relativisme budaya menekankan bahwa karena masyarakat bervariasi dalam nilai, individu di dalamnya memakai kriteria berbeda untuk menilai tampilan masyarakat, yang amat memengaruhi pengukuran laporan-diri para responden. Demikian pula terjemahan kuesioner dapat berdampak terhadap hasil pengukuran laporan-diri. Selanjutnya terdapat beberapa faktor penyela seperti kerancuan respons dan perbedaan budaya yang memengaruhi pengukuran skor KS di antara masyarakat. Keterbatasan dan kesulitan metodologis pengukuran lintas-budaya telah diteliti secara terbatas dalam penelitian empiris dan dapat berdampak terhadap penyekalaan KS antar-negara. Selanjutnya hal tersebut juga dapat memengaruhi perbandingan dan validitas yang mendasari simpulan yang ditarik dalam wacana akademik KS. Amatlah perlu mempertimbangkan isu-isu metodologis ini dalam studi-studi selanjutnya agar makin diperoleh kejelasan.

*Kata kunci:* kenyamanan subjektif, perbandingan lintas-budaya,  
pengukuran berdasar laporan-diri

Whether a specific society is better than another, in terms of the overall quality of living, remains a question that might never receive a definitive answer. This is because the judgment would depend on values and these would depend on the social construction within respective societies. It is however possible to draw conclusions with some certainty about which society has a higher rate of subjective well-being (Diener &

Suh, 2003). Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to the measurement of quality of life of an individual or society (Diener & Suh, 2003). In order to examine SWB among societies it is crucial to understand the way people feel and think about their own lives. By doing so, not only the opinions of leaders and experts are important but also the feelings and beliefs from all people in a particular society (Diener & Suh).

If we imagine an ideal society we would think about one that scores high at SWB instead of a society that is depressed and unsatisfied (Diener & Suh, 1998). But a person or society that scores high on SWB could

This article is part of a bachelor thesis. The author thanks Stefan Gruijters, who whole heartedly supervise the preparation of the thesis.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mirko Murad Sbeih, Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University. E-mail: mirko.sbeih@gmail.com

still miss elements which people might deem as important for a high quality of living. One example would be fairness (Diener & Suh, 2003). For this reason, it is possible to assume that SWB is a necessary although not sufficient indicator of a good society or good life. Indeed there seems to be no element which perfectly matches all characteristics for that. Nonetheless, an adequate level of SWB is seen to be an essential element for a good life of an individual as well as for a good society.

The investigation of SWB is therefore of elementary importance for the behavioral sciences (Diener & Suh, 2003). In order to investigate SWB, not only in one specific society but in general, and to allow comparisons among societies, it is important to include the cultural factor. Only in relation to the cultural context it is possible to make general claims about human functioning (Kim and Berry, 1993). Therefore, it is important to include the cultural factor in the study of SWB as it would be otherwise erroneous to make general statements about it. For this reason, an increasing amount of studies have investigated the influence of the cultural context of SWB. However, there are severe limitations in the comparison between SWB and cultures. Cultural relativism emphasizes that because societies vary in their values, individuals in them use different criteria for judging the performance of societies. People's internal standards are important for an evaluation across societies and therefore heavily influence respondent's self-report measurements (Diener & Suh, 2003).

Also translation of questionnaires into different languages might have an serious impact on cross-cultural SWB measurement results of self-reports. The translation of a valid questionnaire might lead to invalidity because validity is context specific and might change after translation (Griffie, 2001). Furthermore there are several interfering factors such as response biases and cultural differences on measuring SWB scores between societies. The impact of those biases vary across cultures and affect the measurement differently. In addition to difficulties with measurements there are also other methodological issues. One of the biggest limitations is the question of causality. SWB scores are most often assessed through self-reports.

A lack of experiments and longitudinal studies affects the possibility to draw conclusions about causality. Another crucial methodological limitation in cross-cultural measurements results of the fact that within the academic discourse of SWB culture is most often equated with nation (Diener & Suh, 2003). This indicates that it might be questionable to speak of cultural compa-

risons if its measurement rests heavily on nations instead of cultures. It is necessary to deal with these limitations and problems in order to improve the research of SWB.

Therefore this paper does not only aim to explore the academic discourse of SWB within the cultural context, but also aims to examine methodological limitations and underlying problems in this field. This should lead to constructive criticism about certain claims of cultural comparisons in the academic discourse of SWB, as well as several proposals for further research.

This study starts with an explanation of the term 'subjective well-being' and the importance of studying it. Moreover, the thesis examines the relevance of including the cultural context when investigating SWB. The following part is about the measurement of SWB on the one hand and the practical implementation on the other hand. The third part is devoted to the problems and limitations associated with measuring SWB as well as the comparison between SWB in different cultures. The discussion and final section of the paper critically examines some claims of the SWB field and makes several proposals for future research.

## **The Study of Subjective Well-Being and the Influence of Culture**

### **The Importance of Subjective Well-Being and the Cultural Context**

The question "what is a good life" has been examined for thousands of years. Greek philosophers tried to answer this question in several ways. One conclusion, which resulted from this debate, is that a good life is a happy one. However, the philosophers often had different definitions of what happiness is (Diener & Suh, 2003).

The Confucians of the antique China answered this question in terms of a well ordered society in which everybody behaves according to their roles and responsibilities. The Utilitarians on the other hand, described a good life similar to the view advocated by Greek philosophers as one full of happiness and pleasure and they defined a preferable society as one which maximized this happiness and pleasure for everyone (Diener 2003). Even though the quest for elements of quality of life is antique, only in the last decades did the study of well-being develop to one which is systematic and scientific. From the philosophical point of utility, there are three major ways to estimate the

quality of life of societies. SWB is one of them, along with economic and social indicators (Diener & Suh, 2003). That is why the study of SWB is of elementary importance for behavioral science nowadays.

SWB is hard to define briefly (Conceição & Bandura, 2008). Nevertheless it is crucial to understand the concept of SWB before it is possible to speak in more detail about its measurement and underlying limitations.

The academic discourse of SWB contains the scientific analysis of how people experience and evaluate the quality of their lives (Diener & Suh, 2003). Of importance is the measurement of the SWB at a particular moment as well as over a certain period of time (Diener, 1999). SWB includes emotional reactions as well as cognitive judgments (Diener, 1984). The emotional aspect of SWB is the feeling about the own life. The cognitive aspect contains the thinking over the own life. For example the belief that a specific aspect of one's own life, like family or education, is satisfactory (Diener & Fujita 1994).

Moods, emotions, and judgments based on self evaluation are not consistent over time (Diener, 2003). In the field of SWB, researchers study these fluctuations, as well as stable levels of SWB on the long term, between individuals and societies. In doing so, they measure both the emotional and the cognitive aspect of SWB (Diener & Suh, 2003). SWB therefore includes people's moods and emotions and their evaluation of their satisfaction with general as well as specific domains of their life, at the moment and in episodes of their lives (Diener, 1999). As Diener argued, "Thus, SWB concerns the study of what lay people might call happiness or satisfaction". (Diener, 2003, p. 404). SWB is indeed related to the general 'term happiness'. For example when happiness is reported as low, it is often related with an increased risk of depression. The same holds true for low levels of SWB and depression (Diener, 2003).

On the other hand, both high levels of SWB and happiness are related to elation. However, although it appears that happiness and SWB are identical (at the very least, highly similar) concepts, many researchers conceptually distinguish SWB and happiness. One example of a study that examined the difference between happiness and SWB is a study by Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976). The researchers divided American participants in age - related groups. Their results indicated that the group consisting of people younger than 35 years old were the happiest group and the group with people older than 75 year old were the least happy group. However, the younger group expressed lower satisfaction than the older group. Campbell et al.

explain these results by suggesting that the younger group is happy but they did not accomplish their life-goals yet, which leads to less satisfaction. The older group, in contrast, may be more satisfied in general because they can look back on their past accomplishments. Based on this study, Triandis concluded that happiness and SWB is not identical and claimed that the two terms are conceptually different and therefore should be distinguished (Diener & Suh, 2003).

There is a large amount of literature discussing determinants and factors which seem to be related to SWB. In order to speak about the academic discourse of SWB it is not mandatory to speak in detail about these factors. Nevertheless it is helpful to speak briefly about the most important related factors to see about the universality of SWB. There are several factors which many scholars see as causally related to SWB. Diener, Diener and Diener (1995) examined these factors and reported the most important to be (1) high income, (2) individualism, (3) human rights, and (4) social equality. The existence of human rights and social equality perfectly makes sense for a subjective feeling of well-being for most peoples.

Individualism is seen as a crucial element of SWB even if income is statistically controlled. However, a fast increase of income seems to reduce SWB. An interpretation would be that the expectations in this case could rise very fast but will not be realized. However, according to Triandis, "in general, developed countries enjoy high incomes, value human rights and social equality, so they have high levels of SWB. Underdeveloped and developing countries often do not emphasize these factors and therefore show lower levels of SWB" (Diener & Suh, 2003, p.15).

However, SWB is not only influenced by the above mentioned factors but also by personality (Diener & Suh, 2003). The most important traits are extraversion, neuroticism and self-esteem. Extraversion and a high amount of self-esteem appear to lead to higher SWB, whereas neuroticism reduces it. Furthermore, personality makes it possible to explain a great amount of the variability within SWB. Presumably because the circumstances of life as well as the way to deal with them influence long term levels of SWB. Ryff and Keyes (1995) suggested that SWB has six aspects, which are: self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

To investigate SWB in general instead of just in one specific society and in order to allow comparisons, it is necessary to include cross-cultural comparison. Because only in relation to the cultural context it is

possible to form general claims about SWB. Cultural differences can lead to objective factors and are used to investigate differences in the mean levels of SWB (Diener & Suh, 2003). Furthermore, culture can explain which variables influence SWB the most. That is why the cultural context is especially important for the research of SWB. For these reasons, it is necessary to determine how far the influence of the mentioned causal related factors, as well as the personality traits and suggested aspects of Ryff and Keyes are found in all cultures, and whether they vary with culture. So far, the influence of all of the mentioned factors, traits and components are mainly investigated in western societies. But the elements which predict SWB might be different between cultures (Diener & Suh, 2003). In this case it would not be possible to easily arrange universal claims about these elements. Indeed there is clear evidence that some predicting factors for SWB differ across cultures. One example would be the study of Suh and Diener (1997). This study showed that emotions are predictable for the SWB of individuals in individualist cultures.

While in collectivist cultures, emotions as well as behavior according to the society's norms predicted SWB of people. Analogical findings are shown in studies of Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis (1998). These studies point out the importance of more investigation on the cultural level and the difficulties of the universality of claims about SWB.

This chapter discussed the origin of the academic discourse of SWB as well as the importance of it. It thereby explained the term "subjective well-being" and the necessity to explore SWB within the cultural context. The following part describes the different measurement methods and both, its possibilities and practical realization.

## The Measurement of Subjective Well-Being

There are different ways to measure SWB which are dependent on their definitions. One of the earliest understandings of SWB defined it as a continuous hedonic flow of pleasure or pain (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). This conception thus defines SWB – or experienced utility – as the sum of momentary utilities over a certain period of time. In order to measure this "temporal integral of momentary utility" (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006, p.5), individuals have to continuously indicate their level of well-being over a given period of time. Practically, this is done through "experience sampling methods" (ESM), in which participants carry handheld computers with them in their everyday lives and are prompted several times a day to immediately answer a set of questions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Stone & Shiffman, 1994).

The questions are basically time use evaluations where participants are asked to indicate their physical location, which activities they recently engaged in

**Tabel 1**  
*Mean Net Affect by Activity (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006)*

Activity	Percentage of Sample	Time spent (hours)	Net Affect
Intimate relations	12	.23	4.83
Socializing after work	49	1.14	4.15
Relaxing	77	2.17	3.96
Dinner	69	.81	3.94
Lunch	67	.57	3.91
Exercising	16	.22	3.85
Praying/Worship	23	.45	3.78
Socializing at work	41	1.12	3.78
Watching TV	75	2.19	3.65
Phone at home	43	.93	3.52
Napping	43	.89	3.35
Cooking	63	1.15	3.27
Shopping	30	.41	3.23
Computer (non-work)	29	.51	3.22
Housework	49	1.12	2.99
Childcare	36	1.10	2.99
Evening commute	63	.61	2.77
Working	100	6.89	2.68
Morning commute	68	.47	2.09

and with whom they interacted. Besides, they are queried about their subjective experience of these time uses by answering which kind of feelings – such as joy, anger, happiness, or exhaustion – are predominant. The participants' SWB ratings of these reports were inversely correlated to their cortisol levels which contribute to health risks if persisting over a longer period of time (Steptoe, Wardle & Marmot, 2005).

The direct approach of the ESM avoids systematic biases of judgment and memory as much as possible. However, due to higher practicality, researchers often tend to rely on retrospective ratings of remembered utilities (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). It is a whole lot easier to simply ask participants once to evaluate certain aspects of their lives in a questionnaire rather than continuously prompting them to evaluate it in their everyday lives.

Common methods to measure SWB through remembered utility are the "Day Reconstruction Method (DRM)" or global life satisfaction surveys (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). Similar to the ESM, the DRM asks participants to evaluate their time uses through time diaries and emotional recalls (Kahneman, et al., 2004). The DRM is thus an efficient approximation to the more demanding ESM which is difficult to apply to greater sample sizes. It is important to note that both measurements of experienced and remembered utility mainly assess the emotional aspect of SWB, as can be seen in the summarizing factor of net-affect which averages the positive emotions (happy, warm, enjoying myself) minus the average of the negative emotions (hassled, frustrated, criticized, angry, depressed, worried) (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). An overview of the mean net affect by activity can be seen in Table 1.

While the emotional aspect of SWB is certainly an important component, it would be reductive to exclude its cognitive component which can be measured through global life satisfaction surveys (Inglehart et al., p.279). The conception of SWB as overall life satisfaction is not only limited to its emotional aspects but also adds overall cognitive evaluations such as the question whether one leads a meaningful life. Without the cognitive component of SWB it would be quite possible to score high on measured net-affect but still be unsatisfied with the life overall because of its perceived meaninglessness. Thus, to incorporate this aspect, researchers of SWB most commonly refer to global life satisfaction surveys such as the "World Values Survey" which asks individuals from more than 80 nations questions such as "All things considered, how satisfied are you with

your life as a whole these days?" (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006).

However, while global retrospective surveys incorporate aspects that measurements of momentary or remembered utilities exclude, they are partially influenced by random contextual factors such as the current weather (Schwarz & Clore, 1983) or the finding of a dime shortly prior to the taking of the questionnaire (Schwarz, 1987). Accordingly, individual results of such surveys fluctuate a lot over short time periods, although the correlation between two life-satisfaction surveys taken within one month is higher,  $r = .77$  (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996) as opposed to  $r = .59$  (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006) when taking the average of a battery of life-satisfaction questions rather than only a single one. Besides, representative samples are likely to average out random contextual effects, as some participants' good days cancel out others' bad days (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006).

Despite the above mentioned shortcomings of life satisfaction surveys, there is evidence for the validity of such measurements. High levels of life satisfaction significantly correlate with physiological criteria such as the recovery from a cold virus (Cohen et al., 2003) or a controlled wound (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles and Glaser, 2002). Those individuals who reported higher life satisfaction recovered respectively faster from the subjected conditions. Also, neurocognitive research supports the validity of life satisfaction data by confirming a statistically significant correlation of 0.30 between life satisfaction data and left-right difference in brain hemisphere activation (Urry et al., 2004). While the brain's left prefrontal cortex is related to feelings of approach and pleasure, the right prefrontal cortex is associated with the processing of avoidance and aversive stimuli.

### Methodological Limitations and Difficulties

This thesis already pointed out the significance of the cultural factor within the field of SWB. Unfortunately there are several underlying methodological limitations and difficulties, even though many methodological issues have been marginally addressed in empirical research. In order to improve the study of SWB it is necessary to take these methodological issues into consideration, so that further research might give more clarity. To understand the difficulties with cultural comparisons and the problem of the universality of claims about SWB, it is necessary to know about the imitations. This paragraph therefore does not focus on a few single aspects in detail, but aims to provide an

overview of the most important limitations and underlying problems.

### **Cultural Relativism**

While discussing the question of a good life and a successful society, it is important to be aware of the principle of cultural relativism (Diener & Suh, 2003). For scientists who want to compare SWB across cultures in order to investigate universal variables, this indeed is vexatious. Nevertheless they have to handle with it. The question of cultural relativism was introduced by the anthropological researcher Franz Boas who formulated it in 1887 as: "...civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes." (Boas, 1887, p.589). This means that because societies vary in their values, individuals in them use different criteria for judging the performance of societies. For example, love might be the most important value in one society, while in a different culture equality is seen as more important. Thus individuals in different nations might use different criteria in judging societies regarding to the criteria which are considered as most important in their own nation, or in which their own nation is performing well.

### **Self-Report versus Non-Self-Report Measurements**

Cultural relativism thus emphasizes that people's internal standards are important for an evaluation across societies and therefore heavily influence respondent's self-report measurements. In contrast to these methods, non-self-report measurements are a fruitful approach to more objectivity. Behavioral measurements like for example smiling, memory content measures and controlled experiments with regard to SWB yield results that are more easily comparable across individuals from different societies, thereby reducing cultural biases in the measurement paradigm (Diener & Suh, 2003).

There are examples in the literature about methods, other than self-report, with promising results. Balatsky and Diener (1993), for example, showed that memory measures matched the results of self-report studies of SWB. Their research shows that methods which do not depend on culturally dependent internal standards can reliably indicate SWB. Biological measures like hormone studies, brain imaging and EEG studies might also contribute to more objective measures of SWB and might be easier to compare across cultures (Diener & Suh, 2003). However, non-self-report measurements are

not common in social psychological research paradigms today. Instead, research is heavily based on self-reports which has its limitations.

### **Translation of Questionnaires**

Besides the lack of objectivity of self-reports, questions also arise with regard to the language. A major issue is the translation of questionnaires which might have an impact on SWB measurement results of self-reports (Diener & Suh, 2003). It might be possible that the translation of a valid questionnaire leads to invalidity because validity is context specific and might change after translation (Griffie, 2001). Thus, this is another problem which might lead to erroneous conclusion of comparisons between cultures through self-reports.

Regarding SWB, very little research has been done concerning this issue yet. Some studies demonstrated that translations of SWB questionnaires do not lead to less validity. For example, Ouwenel and Veenhoven (1991) reported a study where they examined this issue. They found that in countries where several languages are spoken, the results of SWB measurements were similar between the different language groups within one country. Shao (1993) conducted a study on people who speak more than one language and also showed that the results of his life satisfaction scale were similar regardless of the language in which the questionnaire was administered.

However, these studies did not investigate the difference of validity through translation in different countries but within one country or within a group of people who speak several languages. Unfortunately, research on this topic within the academic discourse of SWB is rare. Also, there is strong evidence that the translation of questionnaires in general might heavily change their validity. Even if a questionnaire is valid, this does not mean that it is still valid after translation (Griffie, 2001). The translation of a valid questionnaire might lead to invalidity because validity is context specific and might change after translation.

The validity of a questionnaire depends on its meaning as well as its intention. However, the meaning and the intention of questionnaires are not as easy to translate as the words. Because of the difference of the cultural context of languages, there are also differences at the understanding of the meaning and intention of the translated words. That is why meaning and intention change through translation, which might affect the validity of translated questionnaires. Therefore, "a questionnaire written in one language and translated into another is not an equivalent survey instrument" (Griffie, 2001).

## Sampling of Surveys

Another methodological problem regarding to cultural comparisons is the issue of sampling. Some studies in the literature of SWB for example used college students as samples for their survey research. Although this is common in psychological research, it is not ideal for the academic study towards SWB. College students reflect only a part of a society and therefore might differ in SWB from the rest of the population. This might compromise the SWB scores in one society, because of the lack of measurement as its whole.

Nowadays, researchers have become aware of these issues. That is why an increasing amount of survey studies which use large random, and also cross-cultural samples, have been published. Nevertheless the data available for comparisons of SWB between cultures is limited and the survey studies which exclusively rely on college students might still affect the data. In addition, a second problem related to sampling methods is the fact that the number of nations with available SWB data was originally small and not representative; most studies used a sample drawn from industrialized Western countries.

Recently, however, the samples of nations with available information on SWB are larger and more diverse. Yet, extremely poor countries, mainly on the African continent, remain underrepresented and pre-literate societies are as good as absent from this area of study. This is unfortunate especially for investigations on cross-cultural differences.

## Interfering Factors on Self-Report Responses

Besides the issue of cultural relativism and possible difficulties through translation and sampling there are several other methodological problems referring to interfering factors on self-report measurements within the cultural context. Some interfering factors have been detected already as shown in the following case: Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao (1995) did research on the impact of humility in relation to lower SWB scores in cultures of East Asia compared to the USA. With different strategies they tried to examine whether humility leads to less SWB scores and therefore confounds the test results of self-reports across cultures. Indeed, their study showed that humility did significantly influenced responding on self-reports. The study of Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao has only little evidence to what extent humility is a contributory cause of the national differences in the SWB scores. Nevertheless, it reveals the existence of interfering factors on measuring SWB scores across

different societies and emphasizes the need of research on these influencing factors which compromise underlying comparisons.

In this context, another methodological problem was found by Diener and Oishi (1999). They reported that various items of self-reports cause differences in scaling SWB across nations. In their study various questions or options to respond, significantly affected the SWB scores and therefore might cause a difference of the scores across nations. Unfortunately, there is still no knowledge about why these various items produce this difference and how exactly they do so (Diener & Suh, 2003). However, self-evidently, it is important to understand how the questions as well as the responding options of self-reports exactly effect the SWB scores. To examine the effect of items of self-reports on its scaling, it would be helpful to get more knowledge about the creation of SWB self-reports. Thus, how differences in the creation of SWB self-report bring along differences in responding. This also emphasizes the next point, the need for more comprehension of the process of responding to self-reports.

In order to get a better understanding of differences in responses between individuals and cultures, one methodological topic deals with the use of process measures in order to comprehend how SWB self-report responses are created. An example in this field is how respondents formulate their answers to life satisfaction scales (e.g., Suh and Diener 1999).

Several different factors may bias responses on self-reports and these factors and the degree of interfering may vary between cultures. In this context there is a need for clear procedures by which the influence of biases in mood reports can be determined. Therefore, procedures to assess the influence of impression management in responding and to appraise the impact of current events and mood on the given responses, are necessary. For instance Schwarz and Strack (1999), demonstrated that situational factors can influence SWB responses. Participants might have a response bias and for example formulate their answer in a way which they think that the experimenter will be satisfied. Therefore it is highly relevant to understand how such transitory situational factors interact with more constant cultural influences in affecting SWB responses.

In addition, the influence of social settings on SWB reports may differ across different cultures. For example, participants which are prone to a high sensitivity for self-presentational issues may alter their SWB response as a response to a certain interpersonal setting in the survey (Suh, 1999). The underlying idea is that understanding the procedures through which SWB judgments

are made, may lead to a much better understanding of the differences in responses between individuals and cultures. This on the other hand could improve the creation of SWB self-reports as well as the setting of its answering. However, there is a lack of understanding of these issues which reveals another limitation for comparisons of SWB reports across cultures.

In a nutshell, there are several different interfering factors on measuring SWB scores between societies. Humility is one example which points out that cultural differences in responding might interfere scaling SWB across nations. How self-reports might interfere with the measurement was shown by the fact that various items of self-reports cause differences in SWB scores. Further comprehension about the creation of SWB self-reports could help investigate differences in responding. This could lead to further dimensions of interfering factors on response differences.

Therefore, various factors seem to interfere self-reports responses differently across cultures. Influence of biases in mood, situational factors and social settings different interfering factors pointed out additional methodological imitations on SWB self-report measurements across societies and its underlying comparisons. In the following section, three more major limitations will be discussed, as are the difficulty of: finding universal variables in measuring SWB, drawing conclusions about causality and the maybe most crucial one for cultural comparisons, the difficulty of actual obtaining 'pure' cultural measurements.

### **Measuring Universal Variables**

Because of the evidence that many variables predict SWB differently across different societies, the need for objective measurement variables is obvious in order to allow cultural comparisons. Thus, a methodological as well as conceptual difficulty in measuring SWB across various cultures is the question of which universal variables predict SWB and should therefore be used for measurement. But so far most variables differ in quality as well as subjectivity. And in some cases, for example in the examination of freedom which seems to be related to SWB, there is simply no single variable yet which is a sufficient valid predictor across all nations (Diener & Suh, 2003).

### **The Question of Causality**

In addition to difficulties with measurements there are also other methodological issues. One of the biggest limitations by the research of SWB is the question of cau-

sality. Like already mentioned there is almost exclusively use of self-report measurements in the field of SWB. Because of the lack of real experiments and longitudinal studies, it is not possible to draw any conclusions with certainty about causality. Only experimental studies allow conclusions about causality and the lack of experiments and longitudinal studies affects the validity of most claims about causality in the field of SWB within the cultural context.

### **The Capability of Obtaining Real Cultural Measurements**

There are, hence, several methodological limitations regarding to measurements of SWB and comparisons of SWB scores between cultures. The next and last methodological topic which will be discussed in this thesis might be the most crucial one for comparisons across cultures. It refers to the actual possibility of 'pure' cultural measurements.

Even if marginally addressed in the literature, scientists studying SWB recognize that a significant limitation within their SWB analysis is that in their study culture is most often equated with nation. They account this circumstance with their limited budget and the availability of statistics on a national level compiled by the United Nations and other agencies. Furthermore, there is little work on measuring attributes since there are at least 650 known cultures and uncountable subcultures (Triandis, 1995).

Thus, every culture entails many different cultures which reduces the feasibility of measurement and is thus left by the authors as a task for future generations who might be capable of obtaining 'pure' cultural measurements (Diener & Suh, 2003). However, as we have seen, the large majority of studies in SWB investigate on cultural differences as equated with nation, even if these are "theoretically unsatisfactory entities." (Diener & Suh, 2003, p.14). This indicates that it might be questionable to speak of cultural comparisons, if its measurement rests heavily on nations instead of cultures.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to explore the academic discourse of SWB within the cultural context, and to point out the methodological limitations and underlying problems of this field. Since these have only been marginally addressed in the literature, it is especially important to discuss them in order to improve the study of SWB.



Up to this point, the importance of the academic discourse of SWB and its cultural factor is established. Without cross-cultural comparisons it would not be possible to draw general conclusions about SWB. Furthermore, cultural variables can lead to objective factors which would allow the investigation of differences of SWB levels between cultures. In addition, only the cultural factor can indicate which variables influence SWB the most. Thus, the study of SWB would be of little use, if they would abandon the exploration among different societies. However, studies towards SWB which include the cultural context have to handle a big amount of its underlying limitations. Due to the high importance of the cultural factor it is especially important to improve investigations among its limitations.

This thesis claims that only with further research and close inspection of all limitations and difficulties, it would be possible to draw universal conclusions about SWB as well as comparisons among cultures with validity. The reason why this thesis aims to clarify the difficulties SWB scientists are dealing with is not to disparage the academic discourse of SWB, but to allow a closer inspection of its improvement. Nevertheless, the number and seriousness of the mentioned limitations also give rise to a critical discussion about the validity of cultural comparisons on SWB and the universality of claims about SWB in general. This leads to the last section of the thesis, where advisement for the improvement of the study towards SWB and future research will be given.

### **General Problems in Drawing Conclusions About Subjective Well-Being**

This thesis discussed why the cultural factor is necessary to draw general conclusions about SWB. For general claims about human functioning cultural comparisons are necessary. Without measurements of SWB among various societies, it is only possible to draw conclusions about a particular society (the measured one) but it would be erroneous to draw general conclusions. However, because of the strong limitations of the obtained cross-cultural measurement data through self-reports, this thesis claims that it is not yet possible to draw universal conclusions about SWB with certainty. This paragraph will discuss the difficulties to draw universal conclusions about SWB. In doing so it is necessary to incorporate a discussion about the validity of cultural comparisons.

First of all, it is important to note that within the academic discourse of SWB culture is most often

equated with nation. As there are more than 650 known cultures and uncountable subcultures which do not run along official boundaries of countries, it is difficult for researchers to actually compare two cultures with each other. Because the common practice is to measure along nations, no 'pure' cultural data are obtained. It is therefore erroneous to speak about actual measurements across cultures. However, even if researchers would investigate cultures as they intend to do and not nations as they currently do, serious limitations would still remain on their capability to make cross-cultural comparisons or to draw general conclusions about SWB.

The principle of cultural relativism makes clear that cultures vary in their values and its individuals use different criteria in judgment and responding to SWB self-reports. Therefore, the measured data and underlying comparisons drawn from these reports are affected through such cultural differences. An example is the above mentioned study by Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao (1995) which showed that humility significantly influences responding on self-reports and therefore affects cultural comparisons. Humility just serves as an example for one of potentially many response biases which have to be investigated in detail before it is possible to draw any definite conclusions.

Furthermore, translation of valid SWB self-reports might lead to invalidity. Multiple studies have shown that the translation of valid questionnaires often leads to invalidity due to different meanings and connotations of certain words in the particular languages. In contrast to these findings, some studies argued that the translation of SWB questionnaires does not seem to reduce validity. However, these studies are older than two decades and therefore might be not up to date. Furthermore, they only investigated the difference of validity through translation within one country or within one group of people who speak several languages. Translation might have a completely different effect, if it is investigated along cultures which only speak one language which differs from the origin language of the self-report. The translation of SWB self-reports thus remains a serious limitation which might lead to invalid measurement data for cultural comparisons. This thesis therefore advises that SWB scientists should not claim that translation does not have any effect on validity of SWB self-reports. Instead, a critical consideration of the issue of translation should be integral as it is the case in most other areas of science which have to deal with the issue of translated questionnaires.

Besides the problem of translation, the study by Diener & Oishi (1999) showed that the design of self-reports can interfere with responses. This is due to the

fact that various items cause differences in SWB scores. It might be that changing items of self-reports cause different responses, because changes affect the conceived meaning and intention of self-reports. If there is for example a change of words or a change in a sequence of words, the understanding and meaning of it changes as well, which could lead to response differences. Such a problem would be exacerbated through a translation of the self-report. But this given example is only theoretical. However, various factors seem to influence responses of self-reports differently across cultures. Situational factors and social settings during testing are additional examples. In fact, all these different interfering factors might compromise self-report measurements across cultures and might affect the validity of their underlying comparisons and conclusions.

### **Establishing Causal Relations to Subjective Well-Being**

This article mentioned several statements of some leading SWB scientists. For example, Diener, Diener and Diener (1995) see several factors as causally related to SWB. They reported the most important factors as (1) high income, (2) individualism, (3) human rights, and (4) social equality. However, without experimental- or longitudinal studies, it is not possible to be certain about the direction of the causal relationship. Unfortunately, thus far, not many experimental studies have been conducted towards SWB. Therefore, the results by Diener et al. (1995) should not be considered to address an issue of causality. However, even without mentioning causal relation, due to the above mentioned limitations of cross-cultural measurements it is not possible to be sure that the factors reported by Diener et al. are connected to SWB in all cultures. It is possible that high income and individualism are just related to western societies instead of being related to all cultures and that these factors therefore are not general related factors of SWB.

This thesis also discussed some claims about the most important personality traits, e.g., extraversion, neuroticism and self-esteem, in relation to SWB. According to Diener (2003), extraversion and a high self-esteem lead to higher SWB whereas neuroticism reduces it. This statement again implies causality. As already mentioned above it is not possible to draw conclusions about the causal direction. It might be that, for example, higher SWB leads to more extraversion instead of the other way around. Still, without mentioning the causal direction there is a problem with the universality of this statement. Given the above mentioned

limitations of cross-cultural measurement of SWB, it is questionable if extraversion leads to higher SWB among all cultures.

Even if it is hard to speak about causality and universal relations, there are interesting results by studies which investigate SWB across different societies. It is important to find out which factors are most important in relation to SWB. Being aware might allow societies to change in a certain way in order to improve well-being of its individuals. Personality may allow explanations about the great amount of the variability within SWB. Circumstances of life as well as the way to deal with them influence long term levels of SWB.

On the other hand, personality obviously influences the way of dealing with particular circumstances in life. However, with the current scientific knowledge, all conclusions should not be stated in a general context with universality expanding over all societies, or even cultures. Furthermore these statements should at the most talk about hints if speaking about causal direction.

The limitations on cross-cultural self-report measurements have to be investigated much closer and rectified before general conclusions about SWB can be drawn. Thus, while this thesis accords with Diener, Suh, Triandis, Oishi and several other authors that cross-cultural comparisons would theoretically enable us to draw general conclusions about SWB, it emphasizes that at the current state of research this is not yet possible.

The next section will critically discuss some statements by SWB scientists about reasons for cultural differences in SWB levels and the difficulty to predict which variables influence SWB the most.

### **Differences of Subjective Well-Being Levels Between Cultures**

Currently, many SWB researchers such as Trinadis, Suh and Diener claim that developed countries show higher SWB than undeveloped countries. In addition, they argue that western cultures score higher on SWB than eastern cultures. The obtained cross-cultural measurement data supports their assumption. According to Diener, Diener and Diener (1995) developed countries enjoy higher income, higher individualism, more human rights, and more social equality and therefore score higher on SWB. This thesis already discussed these factors in the previous section and argued that it is not possible to expand them to all cultures.

Thus, while it might be true that these factors increase well-being in western countries, it does not mean that they are the reason why western countries show higher SWB scores than eastern countries.

Diener et al. claim, that individualism is a crucial element of SWB even if income is statistically controlled. According to them, this is the main reason why western cultures, which are mostly individualistic cultures, score higher on SWB than eastern cultures, which are mostly collectivist and therefore less individualistic.

This thesis argued that the impact of the mentioned measurement limitations might be the cause for SWB mean level differences among other developed countries as well as between western and eastern nations. More developed countries might only score higher on SWB, because of these limitations. The fact that western cultures score higher on SWB than eastern cultures and less developed cultures does not necessarily mean that they also experience more SWB. Humility and other cultural biases, as well as the previous discussed influencing factors on self-report responses might decrease reported SWB in eastern cultures. The issue of less validity through translation of self-reports might have an impact of lower SWB scores as well.

While speaking about SWB mean-level differences between nations might be correct, it is definitely erroneous to speak about cultural comparisons. As already mentioned above, the majority of studies researching SWB investigate cultural differences by comparing nations with each other. Although almost all statements in the academic discourse of SWB pertain to cultural comparisons, the actual measurements do not run along cultural but national lines. It would thus be more correct to speak about a comparison between nations and a use of the term nation instead of culture. For this reason, it might be incorrect to claim that western cultures score higher than eastern cultures in SWB. It does not seem possible to draw such a conclusion with certainty on the basis of subjective self-reports alone. To explore the actual levels of SWB across nations, the limitations of the measurements have to be investigated in depth.

Further research may allow investigation of SWB level differences with more validity. It might also lead to the establishment of variables related to SWB across all countries as well as the investigation of variables which influence SWB the most. With the current knowledge about the impact of the methodological problems on measurement data, this is very difficult. This thesis advises to concentrate on similarities instead of differences when looking on already obtained measurement data. The academic discourse of SWB should not get stuck on possible explanations of these differences. Instead, it might be productive to discuss similarities, since they might be less likely caused by

the methodological limitation compared to differences. For example, one study of Shigehiro Oishi (1999) showed that in collectivist as well as individualistic cultures positive social relationships are equally important. In concentrating on similarities like these, it might be possible to create universal related variables to the experience of SWB as positive social relationships seem to be one of them.

Even though many methodological issues seem to have a big impact on the empirical research of SWB, the thesis still maintains that interesting results have emerged. Notwithstanding, more rigorous methodology in this area is needed. Only after this has been achieved, it is possible for definite conclusions to emerge. The greatest progress on SWB in future decades will probably be derived from improvements in the field of measurement across different societies.

### **Further Research Advises**

This section will present some advises to further research the topic of SWB within a cultural context. These advises are not exhaustive but should rather be seen as an inventory of necessary steps for improvement, derived from the discussion in this paper.

Firstly, it is fundamental to investigate in how far the validity of SWB questionnaires change by translating it into different languages. The study of Griffiee (2001) concludes, that all questionnaires which are translated have to be subjected to additional analysis and pilot studies to reconfirm their validity. Further research should thus take this into consideration while exploring the validity of translated SWB questionnaires.

Secondly, more extensive research about cultural differences in responding to SWB self-reports is needed. Humility gives one example of a cultural difference which significantly influences responding on self-reports differently between cultures. It is important to find out which other cultural differences in responding exist and in how far they interfere in SWB scaling across nations.

Last, it is essential to explore various biases which seem to interfere self-reports responses differently across cultures. Clear procedures which determine these influences are necessary. Like already mentioned, procedures to assess the influence of impression management in responding and to appraise the impact of current events and mood on the given responses are imperative. In this context further research needs to find out in how far for example influence of biases in mood, situational factors and social settings interfere during responding different between cultures. Moreover it is crucial to find out which further factors interfere with responses of self-reports

differently across cultures. The use of process measures in order to comprehend how SWB self-report responses are created might be useful for this undertaking.

## Conclusion

Because of the already discussed methodological limitations and difficulties it is not certain in how far the obtained SWB scores of cross-cultural measurements reflect the actual experienced SWB of the respondents. This thesis claims that only with further research and close inspection of all limitations and difficulties, it would be possible to draw conclusions about SWB through cross-cultural measurement with certainty. Then it might be possible to establish variables related to SWB across all countries as well as establishing which variables influence SWB the most. This would lead to objective determinants of SWB and the possibility to draw universal conclusions of SWB.

## References

- Balatsky, G., & Diener, E. (1993). Subjective well-being among Russian students. *Social Indicators Research*, 28(3), 225-243.
- Boas, F. (1887). Museums of ethnology and their classification. *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, 126.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., & Rodgers, W. L. (1976). *The quality of American life: Perceptions, evaluations, and satisfactions*: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cohen, S., Doyle, W. J., Turner, R., Alper, C. M., & Skoner, D. P. (2003). Sociability and susceptibility to the common cold. *Psychological Science*, 14(5), 389-395.
- Conceição, P., & Bandura, R. (2008). Measuring subjective well-being: a summary review of the literature. *Office of Development Studies, UNDP, NY: USA*.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective Well-Being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95:3, pp. 542-75.
- Diener, E. (1999). Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and a proposal for a national index. *American psychologist*, 55(1), 34.
- Diener, E., Diener, M., & Diener, C. (1995). Factors predicting the subjective well-being of nations. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(5), 851.
- Diener, E., & Fujita, F. (1994). Resources, personal strivings, and subjective well-being: A nomothetic and idiographic approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 926-935.
- Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Lucas, R. E. (2003). Personality, culture, and subjective well-being: Emotional and cognitive evaluations of life. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54(1), 403-425.
- Diener, E., Oishi, S., Lucas, R. E., & Suh, E. M. (1999). Cross-cultural variations in predictors of life satisfaction: Perspectives from needs and values. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 25(8), 980-990.
- Diener, E., & Suh, E. M. (eds): 2003, *Culture and Subjective Well-being* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA).
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1998). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological bulletin*, 125(2), 276.
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., & Oishi, S. (1997). Recent findings on subjective well-being. *Indian Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 24, 25-41.
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Smith, H., & Shao, L. (1995). National differences in reported subjective well-being: Why do they occur? *Social Indicators Research* 34: 7-32.
- Griffiee, D. T. (2001). Questionnaire Translation and Questionnaire Validation: Are They the Same?.
- Inglehart, R. (1990). *Culture shift in advanced industrial society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kahneman, D., Krueger, A. B., Schkade, D., Schwarz, N., & Stone, A. A. (2004). 'A Survey Method for Characterizing Daily Life Experience: The Day Reconstruction Method', *Science* 306, 1776-1780.
- Kahneman, D., Krueger, A. B., Schkade, D., Schwarz, N., & Stone, A. A. (2006). Would you be happier if you were richer? A focusing illusion. *Science*, 312(5782), 1908-1910.
- Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., McGuire, L., Robles, T. F., & Glaser, R. (2002). Psychoneuroimmunology: psychological influences on immune function and health. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 70(3), 537.
- Kim, U. E., & Berry, J. W. (1993). *Indigenous psychologies: Research and experience in cultural context*: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lucas, R. E., Diener, E., & Suh, E. (1996). Discriminant validity of well-being measures. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 71(3), 616.
- Nikias, C. L., & Shao, M. (1995). *Signal processing with alpha-stable distributions and applications*: Wiley-Interscience.
- Oishi, S., Diener, E., Suh, E., & Lucas, R. E. (1999). Value as a moderator in subjective well-being. *Journal of personality*, 67(1), 157-184.
- Ouweneel, P. & Veenhoven, R. (1991) *Cross-national differences in happiness; cultural bias or societal quality?* In: Bleichrodt, N. & Drenth, J.P. (eds) 'Contemporary issues in cross-cultural psychology', Swetz & Zeitlinger, Lisse, Netherlands, pp. 168-184.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of

- psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(4), 719.
- Schwarz, N., & Clore, G.L. (1983). Mood, misattribution, and judgments of well-being: Informative and directive functions of affective states. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 513-523.
- Schwarz, N., & Strack, F. (1999). Reports of subjective well-being: Judgmental processes and their methodological implications. *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology*, 61-84.
- Schwartz, S. H., & Bilsky, W. (1987). Toward a universal psychological structure of human values. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 53(3), 550.
- Shao, J. (1993). Linear model selection by cross-validation. *Journal of the American statistical Association*, 486-494.
- Stephens, A., Wardle, J., & Marmot, M. (2005). Positive affect and health-related neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, and inflammatory processes. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 102(18), 6508.
- Stone, A. A., & Shiffman, S. (1994). Ecological momentary assessment (EMA) in behavioral medicine. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 6(3), 199-202.
- Suh, E. M. (1999). *Self and the use of emotion information: Joining culture, personality, and situational influences*. Manuscript submitted for publication, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Suh, E. M., Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Triandis, H. C. (1998). The shifting basis of life satisfaction judgments across cultures: Emotions versus norms. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 74(2), 482.
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Urry, H. L., Van Reekum, C. M., Johnstone, T., Kalin, N. H., Thuro, M. E., Schaefer, H. S., et al. (2004). Amygdala and ventromedial prefrontal cortex are inversely coupled during regulation of negative affect and predict the diurnal pattern of cortisol secretion among older adults. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 26(16), 4415-4425.