

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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In: Michael Eid & Randy Larsen (Eds). "The Science of Subjective Well-being: A tribute to Ed Diener", Guilford Publications, New York, pp. 44-61

Subjective well-being is no great issue in sociology; the subject is not mentioned in sociological textbooks (a notable exception is Nolan & Lenski, 2004) and is rarely discussed in sociological journals. This absence has many reasons: pragmatic, ideological, and theoretical. To begin with pragmatic reasons: Sociologists are more interested in what people do than in how they feel. Their main objective is to explain social behavior, and subjective well-being is, at best, a variable in that context. A related point is that sociology is about collectivities, whereas subjective well-being is an individual-level concept. A further pragmatic reason is that sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems. So, if they look at well-being at all, they focus on "ill-being" in the first place. Next there are ideological reasons. Many sociologists are committed to notions of objective well-being, such as social equality and social cohesion. They are therefore not eager to investigate how people actually feel in such conditions and often ignore research results that contradict their favored views. When people appear to feel subjectively good in conditions deemed to be objectively bad, the discrepancy is easily disposed of as "desirability bias" or "false consciousness." Lastly, there are theoretical reasons. As we will see below, sociologists tend to think of subjective well-being as a mere idea that depends on social comparison with variable standards and that is therefore a whimsical state of mind, not worth pursuing and hence not worth studying.

Nevertheless, the subject of subjective well-being is not entirely absent in sociology. Job satisfaction is a common topic in the sociology of work, marital satisfaction is a well-known variable in the sociology of family, and life satisfaction is a regular theme in the sociology of aging. Recently subjective well-being has also become a theme in comparative sociology and in social indicators research. I have reviewed this sociological literature elsewhere (Veenhoven, 2006a).

Questions about Subjective Well-Being

Theories are tentative answers to questions. In the case of subjective well-being, four main questions are at stake. The first question is what subjective well-being is precisely, and, in particular, how we distinguish subjective well-being as such from its determinants. The second question—how people appraise how well they are—concerns the mental processes involved. The third question is about the conditions for subjective well-being and is closely linked to the question of how subjective well-being can be raised. Lastly a fourth question is about the consequences of subjective well-being, which links up to the ideological issue of whether subjective well-being should be raised. In this chapter I give an outline of how mainstream sociology has dealt with these four questions.

