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A Global Projection of Subjective Well-being: A Challenge to Positive Psychology?

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Rarely in recent years has a development in the field of academic psychology captured such widespread attention as the current developments in positive psychology on the topic of happiness. Whilst academic investigation of something as intangible as happiness may seem at first surprising the age long search for happiness, a primary motive of human behaviour, has ensured a broader audience than psychologists usually attract.

The search for happiness is not new and neither is academic interest in the topic. In 1776 the American Declaration of Independence argued for “certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” (The American Declaration of Independence, 1776, as cited in Hawke, 1964). As such, nations have been formed on the basis of the search for happiness, and this desire has been put on a par with the right to life and the right to freedom. In the U.K. interest in happiness was brought to widespread attention with the moral philosophy of Jeremy Bentham (1789) who argued that the purpose of politics should be to bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.

Political interest in happiness has not diminished in modern times. A recent survey (Easton, 2006) found that 81% of the UK population agreed that the Government’s primary objective should be the creation of happiness not wealth. Earlier this year David Cameron, HM Leader of the Opposition, put happiness firmly on the political agenda by arguing that “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 well-being” (BBC, 2006).

It seems likely that the current political and media interest in happiness has to a large extent been provoked by a surge of research interest in the topic in economics (see Oswald & Powdthavee, 2006) and positive psychology (see Diener,

2000). Indeed psychologists have led the call for measures of subjective well-being (SWB) to form the basis of Government policy and the political assessment of a nation's success (Diener, 2000). The increasing importance of SWB in comparison to other measures has been reviewed by Diener & Suh (1997) who concluded that "subjective well-being measures are necessary to evaluate a society, and add substantially to the economic indicators that are now favoured by policy makers" (p.189). As such psychologists are arguing that psychological theory and testing should form a basis of political governance.

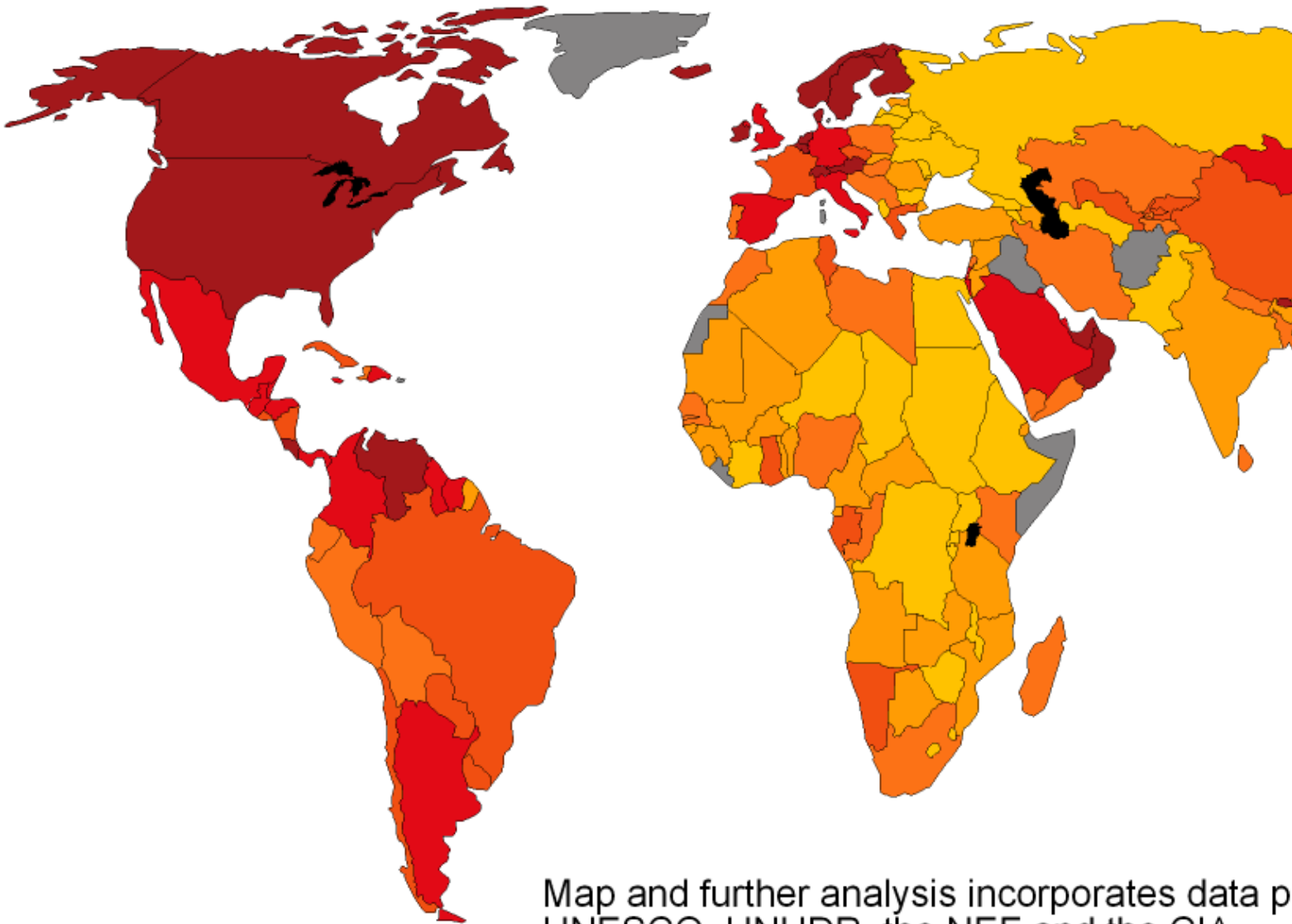
It is worth taking a moment at this point to explore the psychological research into SWB. In the literature a major distinction is drawn between brief emotional episodes, periods of joy or acute happiness, and an underlying state of happiness. This underlying state is conceptualised as a sense of satisfaction with one's life, both in general and in specific areas of one's life such as relationships, health and work. It is this underlying state of happiness, a measure of subjective well-being (SWB), that is the focus of most current research. A good example of this is the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993), a currently popular measure of SWB.

The measurement of something as intangible as SWB is not without difficulties. Schwarz & Stack (1999) have shown, for example, that temporary mood states can influence a participant's response to SWB measures. However others have shown that temporary moods have only a marginal effect on SWB responses when compared to longer-term influences (Eid & Diener, 1999). It has also been shown the long-term changes to an individual's circumstances can affect levels of SWB (countering the suggestion that SWB is biologically determined). Brickman, Coates & Janoff-Bulman (1978) showed that lottery winners were significantly happier than controls, and controls were happier than people who had recently become paraplegics (although the effect was insufficient to reject the null hypothesis due to a small sample size). As such it has been shown that temporary mood states have only a marginal effect on SWB, whilst long term changes and situational factors have a significant effect on SWB.

Whilst happiness is in itself intangible measures of SWB have been shown to be both valid and reliable (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In addition, measures of SWB have shown to be closely associated with more tangible outcomes that would be expected to correlate with measures of SWB. There is extensive evidence of correlations between SWB and general health (Diener, 2000). Arrindell, Heesink & Feij (1999) also found that the use of medical services correlated negatively with SWB. This finding was further supported by Eid & Diener (1999) who showed that SWB was a significant predictor of mental health levels.

Having shown that SWB is affected by long-term situational factors, and that SWB is closely associated with positive outcomes, researchers in positive psychology have focussed on how to increase levels of SWB (see Snyder, 2002, and Seligman, 2006). Diener (2000) has shown the effect of financial well-being on SWB. Additionally, Inglehart (1990) has shown meeting the basic needs of people, needs such as healthcare, education and housing, have strong effects on SWB.

A Global Projection of Subjective Well-being



High SWB - - - - Low SWB

In the map shown here international levels of SWB are presented in a global projection. The data on SWB was extracted from a meta-analysis by Marks, Abdallah, Simms & Thompson (2006). This is the first time a map of global happiness has been published. It is immediately evident that there is an effect of poverty on levels of SWB. The map itself mirrors other projection of poverty and GDP. This data on SWB was compared with data on access to education (UNESCO, 2005), health (United Nations, 2005), and poverty (CIA, 2006). It was found that SWB correlated most strongly with health (.7) closely followed by wealth (.6) and access to basic education (.6). This adds to the evidence that from a global perspective the biggest causes of SWB are poverty and associated variables.

Positive psychological research is almost exclusively focussed in the West (see Snyder, 2002). It is notable from the map above that the areas where research into SWB is greatest are in the very countries where SWB is already highest. It is also notable that positive psychology is currently undergoing something of a transformation. What was initially a predominantly academic field (and in particular not a clinical one) is increasingly becoming a commercial activity. Companies offering positive psychology services are proliferating.

Whilst the interest in SWB within positive psychology is to be welcomed it is interesting to note that the commercial development of the subject is in the very countries where SWB is highest. This leaves positive psychology open to the accusation of selling self-help to the worried well. The current lack of positive psychological studies in countries where levels of SWB are low does nothing to assuage this concern. It is worth asking where are the positive psychological studies exploring the effects on SWB of providing healthcare and education to communities that have never before has access to such resources? An approach that explored these questions really could be called positive psychology.

If you live in the UK and would like to take part in an online study of environmental issues and personality please follow this link: [NEPS 2007](#)

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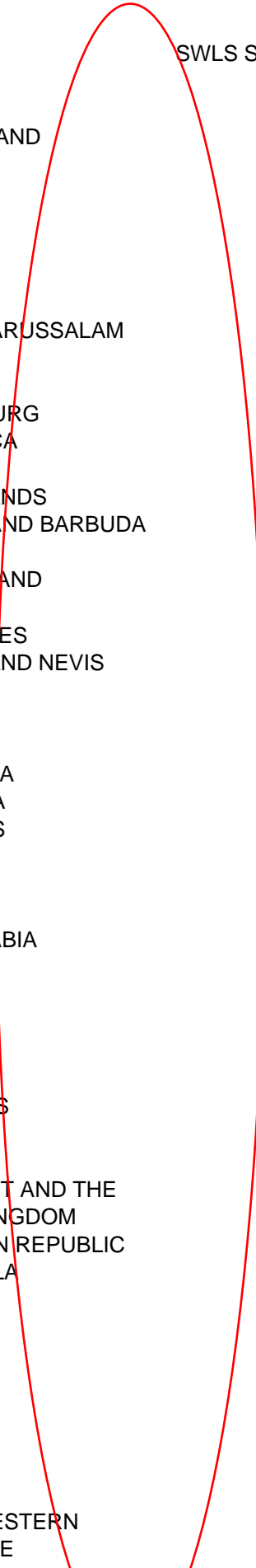
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Appendix



| Nation | SWLS Score |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| DENMARK | 273 |
| SWITZERLAND | 273 |
| AUSTRIA | 260 |
| ICELAND | 260 |
| BAHAMAS | 257 |
| FINLAND | 257 |
| SWEDEN | 257 |
| BHUTAN | 253 |
| BRUNEI DARUSSALAM | 253 |
| CANADA | 253 |
| IRELAND | 253 |
| LUXEMBOURG | 253 |
| COSTA RICA | 250 |
| MALTA | 250 |
| NETHERLANDS | 250 |
| ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA | 247 |
| MALAYSIA | 247 |
| NEW ZEALAND | 247 |
| NORWAY | 247 |
| SEYCHELLES | 247 |
| ST KITTS AND NEVIS | 247 |
| UAE | 247 |
| USA | 247 |
| VANUATU | 247 |
| VENEZUELA | 247 |
| AUSTRALIA | 243 |
| BARBADOS | 243 |
| BELGIUM | 243 |
| DOMINICA | 243 |
| OMAN | 243 |
| SAUDI ARABIA | 243 |
| SURINAME | 243 |
| BAHRAIN | 240 |
| COLUMBIA | 240 |
| GERMANY | 240 |
| GUYANA | 240 |
| HONDURAS | 240 |
| KUWAIT | 240 |
| PANAMA | 240 |
| ST VINCENT AND THE UNITED KINGDOM | 240 |
| DOMINICAN REPUBLIC | 237 |
| GUATEMALA | 233 |
| JAMAICA | 233 |
| QATAR | 233 |
| SPAIN | 233 |
| ST LUCIA | 233 |
| BELIZE | 230 |
| CYPRUS | 230 |
| ITALY | 230 |
| MEXICO | 230 |
| SAMOA WESTERN | 230 |
| SINGAPORE | 230 |
| SOLOMON ISLANDS | 230 |
| TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO | 230 |

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| ARGENTINA | 227 |
| FIJI | 223 |
| ISRAEL | 223 |
| MONGOLIA | 223 |
| SAO TOME AND PERINI | 223 |
| EL SALVADOR | 220 |
| FRANCE | 220 |
| HONG KONG | 220 |
| INDONESIA | 220 |
| KYRGYZSTAN | 220 |
| MALDIVES | 220 |
| SLOVENIA | 220 |
| TAIWAN | 220 |
| TIMOR-LESTE | 220 |
| TONGA | 220 |
| CHILE | 217 |
| GRENADA | 217 |
| MAURITIUS | 217 |
| NAMIBIA | 217 |
| PARAGUAY | 217 |
| THAILAND | 217 |
| CZECH REPUBLIC | 213 |
| PHILIPPINES | 213 |
| TUNISIA | 213 |
| UZBEKISTAN | 213 |
| BRAZIL | 210 |
| CHINA | 210 |
| CUBA | 210 |
| GREECE | 210 |
| NICARAGUA | 210 |
| PAPUA NEW GUINEA | 210 |
| URUGUAY | 210 |
| GABON | 207 |
| GHANA | 207 |
| JAPAN | 207 |
| YEMEN | 207 |
| PORTUGAL | 203 |
| SRI LANKA | 203 |
| TAJIKISTAN | 203 |
| VIETNAM | 203 |
| IRAN | 200 |
| COMOROS | 197 |
| CROATIA | 197 |
| POLAND | 197 |
| CAPE VERDI | 193 |
| KAZAKHSTAN | 193 |
| MADAGASCAR | 193 |
| SOUTH KOREA | 193 |
| BANGLADESH | 190 |
| CONGO REPUBLIC | 190 |
| GAMBIA | 190 |
| HUNGARY | 190 |
| LIBYA | 190 |
| SOUTH AFRICA | 190 |
| CAMBODIA | 187 |
| ECUADOR | 187 |
| KENYA | 187 |
| LEBANON | 187 |
| MOROCCO | 187 |
| PERU | 187 |
| SENEGAL | 187 |

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| BOLIVIA | 183 |
| HAITI | 183 |
| NEPAL | 183 |
| NIGERIA | 183 |
| TANZANIA | 183 |
| BENIN | 180 |
| BOTSWANA | 180 |
| GUINEA-BISSAU | 180 |
| INDIA | 180 |
| LAOS | 180 |
| MOZAMBIQUE | 180 |
| PALESTINE | 180 |
| SLOVAKIA | 180 |
| BURMA | 177 |
| MALI | 177 |
| MAURITANIA | 177 |
| TURKEY | 177 |
| ALGERIA | 173 |
| EQUATORIAL GUINEA | 173 |
| ROMANIA | 173 |
| BOSNIA & HERZE | 170 |
| CAMEROON | 170 |
| ESTONIA | 170 |
| GUINEA | 170 |
| JORDAN | 170 |
| SYRIA | 170 |
| SIERRA LEONE | 167 |
| AZERBAIJAN | 163 |
| CENTRAL AFRICAN RE | 163 |
| MACEDONIA | 163 |
| TOGO | 163 |
| ZAMBIA | 163 |
| ANGOLA | 160 |
| DJIBOUTI | 160 |
| EGYPT | 160 |
| BURKINA FASO | 157 |
| ETHIOPIA | 157 |
| LATVIA | 157 |
| LITHUANIA | 157 |
| UGANDA | 157 |
| ALBANIA | 153 |
| MALAWI | 153 |
| CHAD | 150 |
| IVORY COAST | 150 |
| NIGER | 150 |
| ERITREA | 147 |
| RWANDA | 147 |
| BULGARIA | 143 |
| LESOTHO | 143 |
| PAKISTAN | 143 |
| RUSSIA | 143 |
| SWAZILAND | 140 |
| GEORGIA | 137 |
| BELARUS | 133 |
| TURKMENISTAN | 133 |
| ARMENIA | 123 |
| SUDAN | 120 |
| UKRAINE | 120 |
| MOLDOVA | 117 |
| CONGO DEMOCRATIC | 110 |
| ZIMBABWE | 110 |

The table above gives the SWLS score for each country presented in the map. Data on SWLS is extracted from Marks, N., Abdallah, S., Simms, A, Thompson, S. (2006). Scores have been presented from an index baseline of 100 for ease of comparison. For more information on the Marks et al (2006) study, and the work of the NEF, follow this link: [NEF Homepage](#)



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