

Child subjective well-being studies

Some points for discussion

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Keywords

- Subjective well-being
- Children
- Policy

This paper tackles three questions that arose at the first seminar of the Chair “*Childhood, well-being, parenting*” in Rennes. All concern research on the subjective well-being of children. First, it was suggested that research on child subjective well-being was a smokescreen, distracting attention from much more important issues in children’s lives. Second, it was questioned whether the comparisons that we make of children’s subjective well-being between countries and over time are valid and reliable. Third, it was asked whether there was any policy relevance to research on child subjective well-being.

The smokescreen argument

It is perhaps understandable that this challenge came from the British participants at the seminar mentioned above, given the assault on children that has been launched by the British government since 2010. Austerity measures have been targeted at families with children, with huge cuts in spending on family services and cash benefits and with much more still to come. Child poverty rates and gaps are rising, child homelessness is up, infant mortality increased in each of the last two years, youth suicide rates have stopped falling, the number of children in care is rising, child mental health and subjective well-being are deteriorating. All this comes after a period when these, and almost all other, indicators of the well-being of children had been improving (from not a very high base) (Bradshaw et al., 2013, 2017; Bradshaw and Rees, 2017).

In the face of all this, it is argued, why focus on child subjective well-being? The answer is that the subjective well-being of children is not the only domain of child well-being that is worth studying, nor indeed even the most important. My own research has always primarily focussed on child poverty. However, a new interest in subjective well-being sprang from a realisation that child poverty was not enough, and the fact that we needed to take a more rounded, multi-dimensional view of children’s lives. Thus, the work on observing and comparing several domains of well-being emerged (Bradshaw et al., 2007) and resulted in the Unicef Innocenti Report Cards (Unicef, 2013, 2016 and 2019) and in the OECD How’s Life (2009) indicators. The domains of

well-being that tend to be included are material well-being or the absence of poverty and deprivation, child health, education (participation and attainment), child behaviours, the relationships of children with their family and friends, housing and environmental conditions and, yes, subjective well-being – what children think and feel about their lives. One argument in favour of studying child subjective well-being is that parents (and grandparents) have a concern for the happiness of their children. Also, schools have a duty to ensure the well-being of their students. Governments are duty bearers with responsibilities for ensuring children’s rights. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 is to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child enjoins us to listen to children and take account of what children think and feel about their lives. Studying subjective well-being is one way to achieve this. As the so-called new sociology of childhood has insisted, childhood is a period of life with its own value, not just a preparation for adulthood. Parents cannot stand proxy for their children and empirically there is only a very weak association between the level of the national happiness of adults and children (Bradshaw and Rees, 2017). Of course, it is possible to take the view that that it is better to press children to attain and achieve in childhood so that they become skilled and productive adults, even at the expense of making their childhoods miserable. This, as we shall see, may have been a mistake made by Korea. In addition, there is evidence that unhappy childhoods are associated with worse outcomes in adulthood (Poulton et al., 2015).

I therefore accept that it may be a smokescreen to focus solely on subjective well-being but there are strong arguments for not ignoring it.

Reliability and validity

This argument comes to nought if we cannot measure children’s subjective well-being reliably and validly. There are a number of nuances to this issue (Bradshaw, 2015 a). It may be claimed that:

- you cannot ask children what they think or feel because they do not understand concepts like “satisfied with life”;

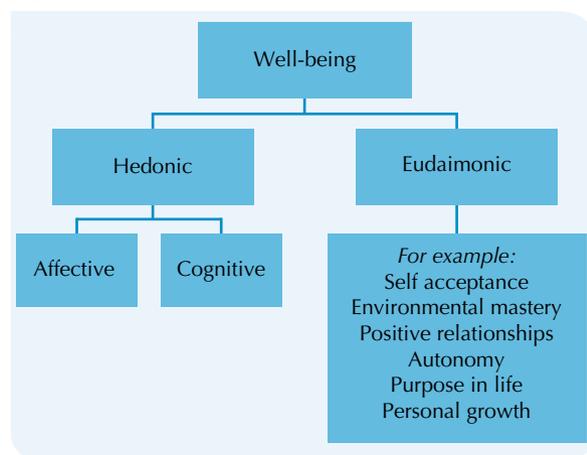
- you cannot ask children about happiness because they are too immature to make a rounded judgement;
- or you cannot ask children about their lives because of false consciousness, ignorance of the possibilities of life, or because adaptive preferences will lead to responses that do not represent “reality”;
- Children are too volatile, immediate and impulsive to deliver reliable responses.

Since the Stiglitz Commission (Stiglitz et al., 2009) the conceptualisation of subjective well-being tends to distinguish three components – life satisfaction (‘a person’s overall judgement about their life at a particular point in time’), positive affect (e.g. feelings of happiness, joy and vitality) and negative affect (e.g. feelings of sadness, anger or depression). This approach reflects the most common framework used in the subjective well-being literature which divides the concept into a cognitive component (life satisfaction and satisfaction with particular aspects of life) and an affective component (comprising two sub-components – positive affect and negative affect) shown in figure 1. The cognitive component has been found to be more stable than the affective component (Bradshaw and Rees, 2017).

Most of the empirical work on children has focussed on the cognitive component. Three international studies of children include measures of subjective well-being:

- the Health Behaviour of School Aged Children (HBSC) is an international school based comparative survey of children aged 11, 13 and 15 undertaken every four years

Figure 1 – Components of self-reported well-being



Source: Rees et al., 2013.

in mainly Europe and North America under the auspices of the World Health Organisation⁽¹⁾. The questionnaire contains a number of questions relevant to subjective well-being and has been used in comparative studies of subjective well-being (Klocke et al., 2014 and 2015; Unicef, 2013);

- Children’s Worlds is an international comparative school-based survey of subjective well-being of children aged 8,10 and 12. It is currently (2019-2020) in its third wave covering more than 30 countries throughout the world. It is run by the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) and sponsored by the Jacobs Foundation. The website contains further details including publications. Gwyther Rees (2017) is the overall report on the second wave. France is included for the first time in the third wave;
- the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) is a comparative study of educational attainment in 15-year-olds undertaken every three years. It includes a pupil questionnaire which in the 2015 survey included a measure of life satisfaction⁽²⁾.

All three surveys use a version of Cantril’s Ladder a 0-10 Likert scale of overall life satisfaction. Children’s Worlds has tried a number of other scales and after considerable psychometric work (González-Carrasco et al., 2015) has settled on the SLSS, an adaptation of the Huebner scale (1991). The Children’s Worlds survey also includes scales and questions covering the domains of home, family, things, friends, school, freedom, health, appearance, time and future. The building block for much of this work has been the research undertaken by mainly Gwyther Rees and his colleagues (Rees et al., 2011; Rees and Bradshaw, 2018) on behalf of the Children’s Society for the *Good Childhood Reports* in England.

Validity and reliability are very difficult to assess. Children’s understanding at very young ages probably has its limits, but researchers have managed to interview large samples of eight-year-olds in the Children’s Worlds Study (Rees et al., 2016). The Good Childhood Report (The Children’s Society, 2018) produced analysis supporting the life satisfaction scale (Cantril’s Ladder) that is used in the UK, and shows it has good psychometric properties. Work arising from Children’s Worlds also provides support for these scales (Casas, 2017; Casas and Rees, 2015). Indeed, it could also be argued that much more work has been done developing multi-item measures for children than some of the research on adults’ subjective well-being. The World Happiness

(1) For more information see the HBSC website <http://www.hbsc.org/>.

(2) Further details are on the Pisa website: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>.

Report for example uses only a single-item life satisfaction question. Perhaps the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The research to date has produced the following general findings. Mean scores of subjective well-being are generally well above the median (figure 2) and scores have little variation (Klocke et al., 2014). But there is usually a tail, which should probably be the focus of more attention. This is all true of adults (Helliwell et al., 2015). Scores tend to fall with age until 16. Girls tend to have lower scores than boys, though this is not always consistent between countries. Most of the variation in subjective well-being cannot be, or, has not been explained. This is also true of

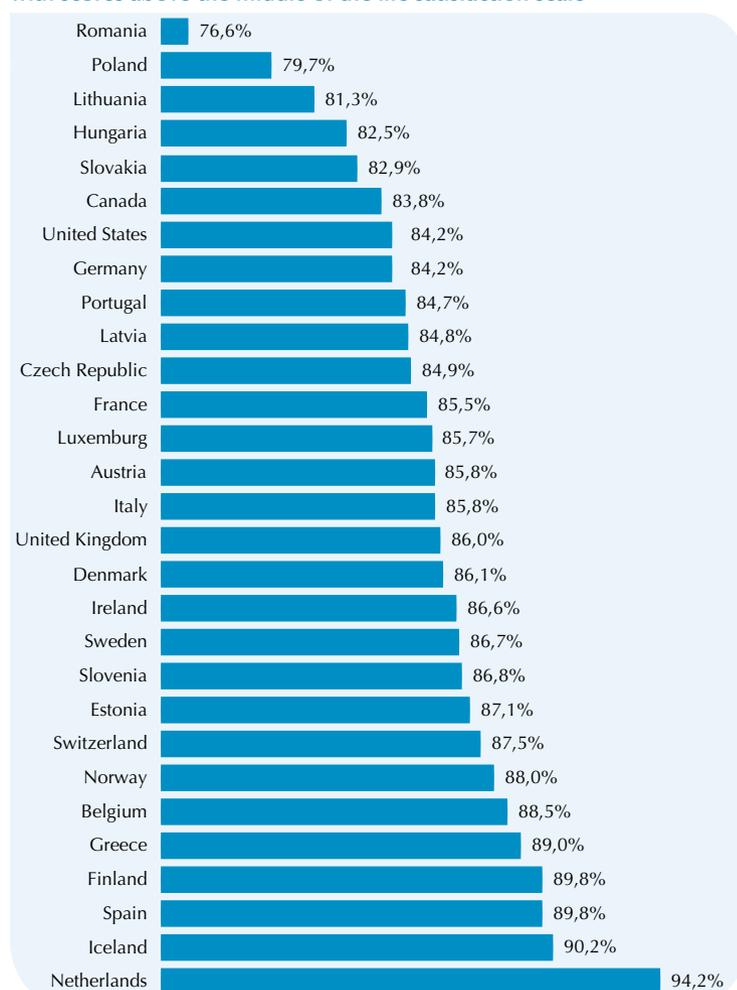
adults, though more tends to be explained with adults (Helliwell et al., 2015).

Overall subjective well-being tends to vary between countries (figure 3). Dutch children in the EU consistently out-perform children in other EU/OECD countries (Unicef, 2013 and 2016) for reasons that we do not really understand. It is possible that the democratic nature of the school system might contribute (no uniforms; teachers and pupils on first name terms; broad choice in the curriculum). The factors that explain overall subjective well-being vary within countries and between countries. For example, in Children's Worlds,

deprivation is significantly more important explanatory factor within some countries than in others. In Children's Worlds Wave 2, this factor explained over 10% of the variation in Ethiopia and Algeria but less than 2% in Finland and Nepal (Rees, 2017). However, national wealth explains very little of the variation between countries, unlike in the case of adults. Korea and Japan tend to have low levels of child subjective well-being, which is also thought to be due to their educational pressures (school after school) and lack of choice about how they use their time. Korea ranked badly (in Children's Worlds), largely because of educational pressures (after-school schooling, freedom, etc.) (Main et al., 2017).

The factors that influence subjective well-being seem to vary from country to country. In general, family and freedom to choose are more salient than friends or school. Things (material well-being) matter to child subjective well-being, but household poverty is only weakly associated with subjective well-being (Bradshaw, 2015 b), although using child-based deprivation measures increases the explanatory power (Main and Bradshaw, 2012). Recent experience of bullying has more impact than anything else (Klocke, 2015) and rates of bullying vary substantially between countries (figure 4). Family structure does not matter, certainly when poverty is controlled for. French child subjective well-being is dragged down (in HBSC) by comparatively low scores on relationships (ability to talk to mothers, fathers and finding class mates kind and helpful) and the results seem to hold in the most

Figure 2 – Percentage of young people with scores above the middle of the life satisfaction scale



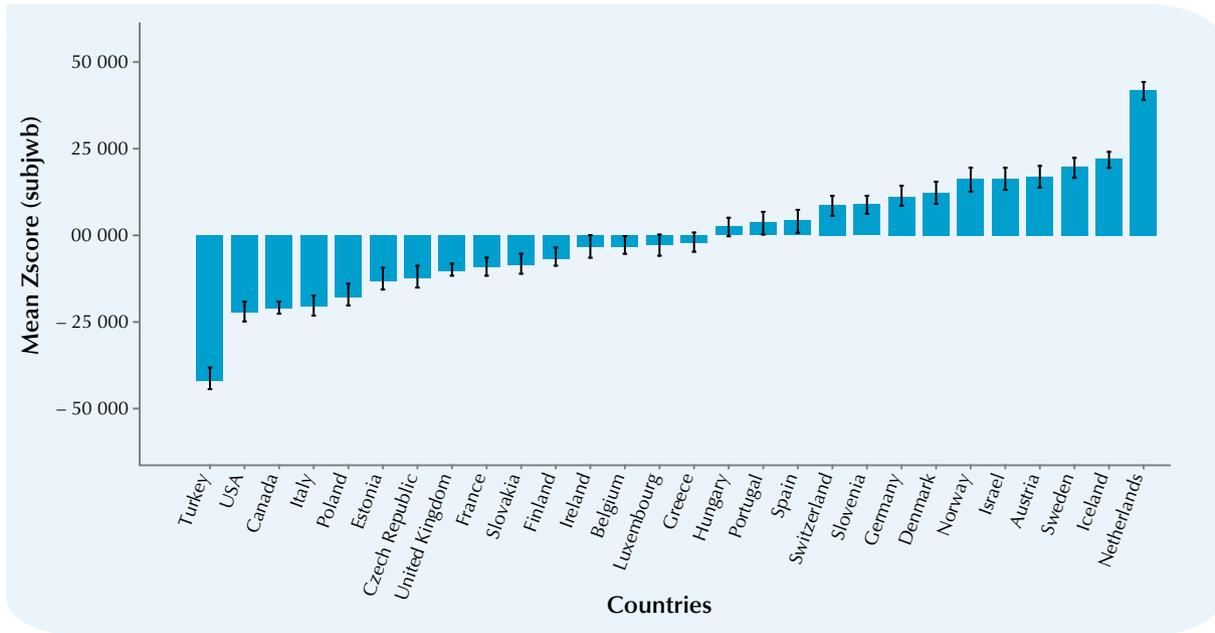
Source: HBSC 2009-2010 survey.

Scope: children aged 11, 13 and 15.

The position of Romania is wrong in the 2010 HBSC survey. There was an error in the question and subsequently HBSC Romania featured towards the top of the international league table of subjective well-being, which was also the case in the Children's Worlds Study.

Interpretation: in France, 85,5% of children aged 11, 13 and 15 have life satisfaction scores above the middle of the scale (5,5).

Figure 3 – Variation in overall subjective well-being of children



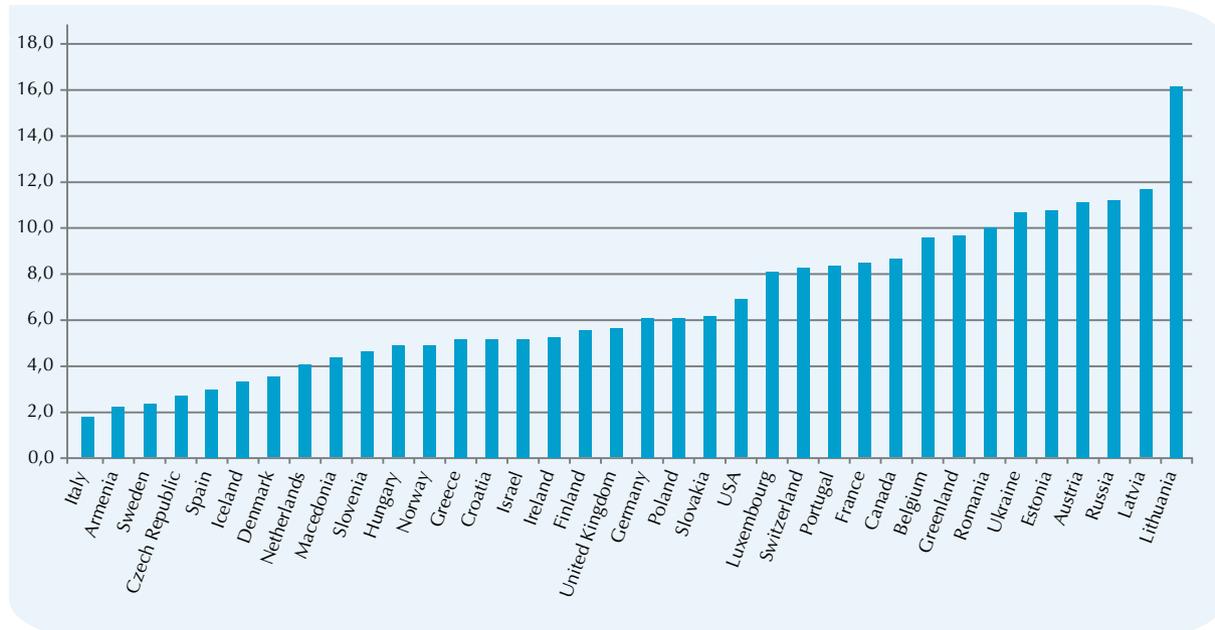
Source: HBSC 2009/2010 survey; Klocke et al., 2014.

Scope: children aged 11, 13 and 15.

Error bars: 95 % CI: confidence interval.

Interpretation: children aged 11, 13 and 15 years old in the Netherlands have the highest mean overall subjective well-being scores out of twenty-eight countries. The overall subjective well-being is “a standardized combination of the z scores of these four components: life satisfaction, relationships, subjective education and subjective health” (Klocke et al., 2014, p. 6). As a reminder, the z scores are calculated by subtracting the population mean from an individual raw score, and then dividing the difference by the population standard deviation. Observed values above the mean have positive standard scores, while values below the mean have negative standard scores.

Figure 4 – Children bullied at least weekly



Source: HBSC 2009/2010 survey; Klocke, 2015.

Scope: Children aged 11, 13 and 15.

Interpretation: in France, 8,3% of children aged 11, 13 and 15 say they are bullied at least weekly. In comparison, this is the case for only 4% of children living in the Netherlands.

recent wave of HBSC (Klocke et al., 2014). We are looking forward to the French results for the Children's Worlds latest sweep so that we can explore this in more detail.

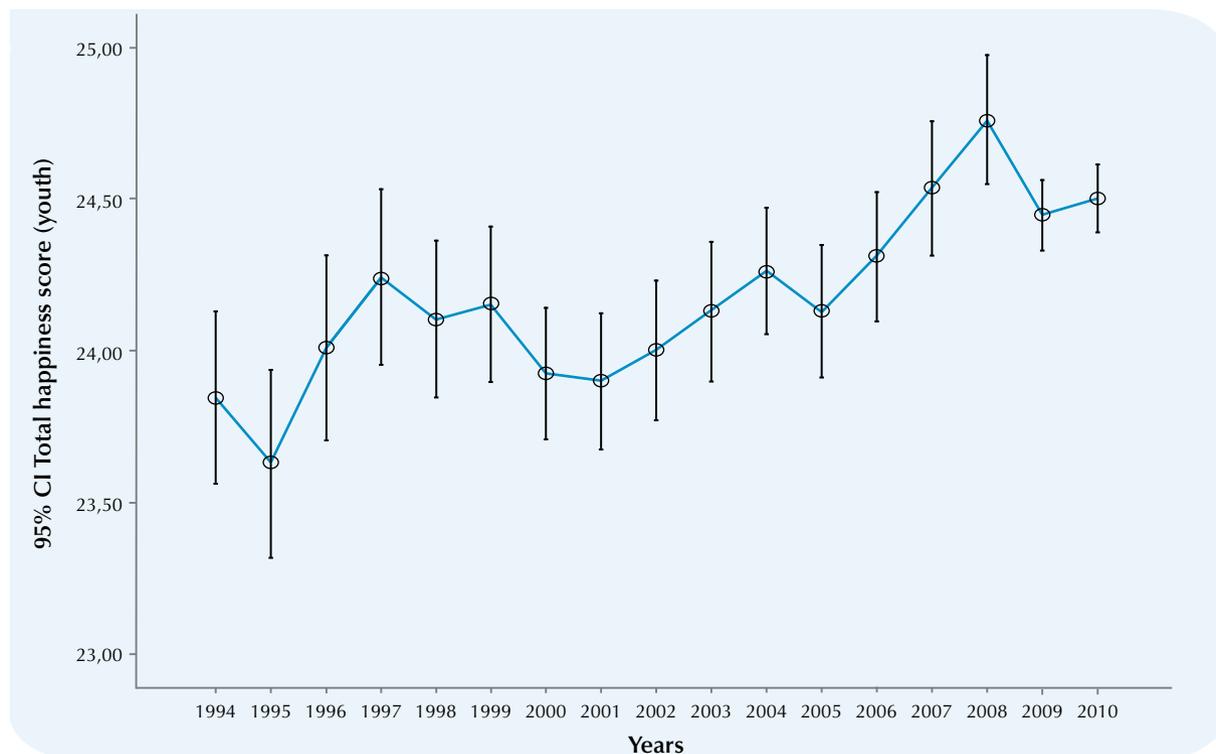
Few studies have provided time series data on child subjective well-being, but the youth cohort (10-15) of the British Household Panel Survey (now Understanding Society) has been used to trace subjective well-being (Cantril's Ladder) since 1974 (Bradshaw and Keung, 2011). There was an improvement until 2010 (figure 5) and evidence that girls' subjective well-being was catching up with that of boys. Yet since the crisis and austerity, that trend appears to have ended (Rees and Pople, 2017). Some evidence exists at a between-country level of a link between adults' assessments of social life in the country and children's subjective well-being (Rees, 2017). I think this is the most convincing explanation, yet why children in Romania and Colombia are happier than children in Korea – social relationships are really important to children – we know that at the within-country level also.

A good deal of work has been done on the reliability and validity of SWB measures and no doubt more needs to be achieved. However, there is really no evidence to conclude that results of the existing measures applied with children over a certain age are any worse than those used for adults – indeed some of the measures are identical.

Policy relevance

Given our failure to explain much of the variation in child subjective well-being at the micro or macro level, it behoves social scientists to be circumspect in recommending policies to improve it (Bradshaw, 2015 a). Also, given the national variations and the evidence that domains differ in their impact on subjective well-being in different countries, general policy recommendations need to be sensitive to the national context. Further, there may be some important determinants of child subjective well-being which are not, at least directly, capable of being mitigated by public policy – for example

Figure 5 – Subjective well-being



Source: British Household Panel Survey 1994-2007; Bradshaw and Keung, 2011.

Scope: UK children between 11 and 15 years old (n=1 300).

95% CI: Confidence interval.

Interpretation: in 1994, the overall happiness mean among British children aged 11-15 was 23,8 (over 30). One decade later, in 2008, the mean was 24,75 (over 30). However, while the overall mean happiness scores of British children aged 11-15 improved between 1994 and 2008, this improvement has not been maintained since the recession.

As a reminder, the mean score of happiness is calculated from the answers to the five following questions: on a scale from 0 to 6, "how do you feel about your: a) school work, b) appearance, c) family, d) friends, e) life as a whole?". 0 = not happy at all and 6 = very happy.

there is probably no direct policy response to sibling bullying or parental conflict. Finally, the evidence based on the effectiveness of interventions could of course be better – research on this topic has hardly begun.

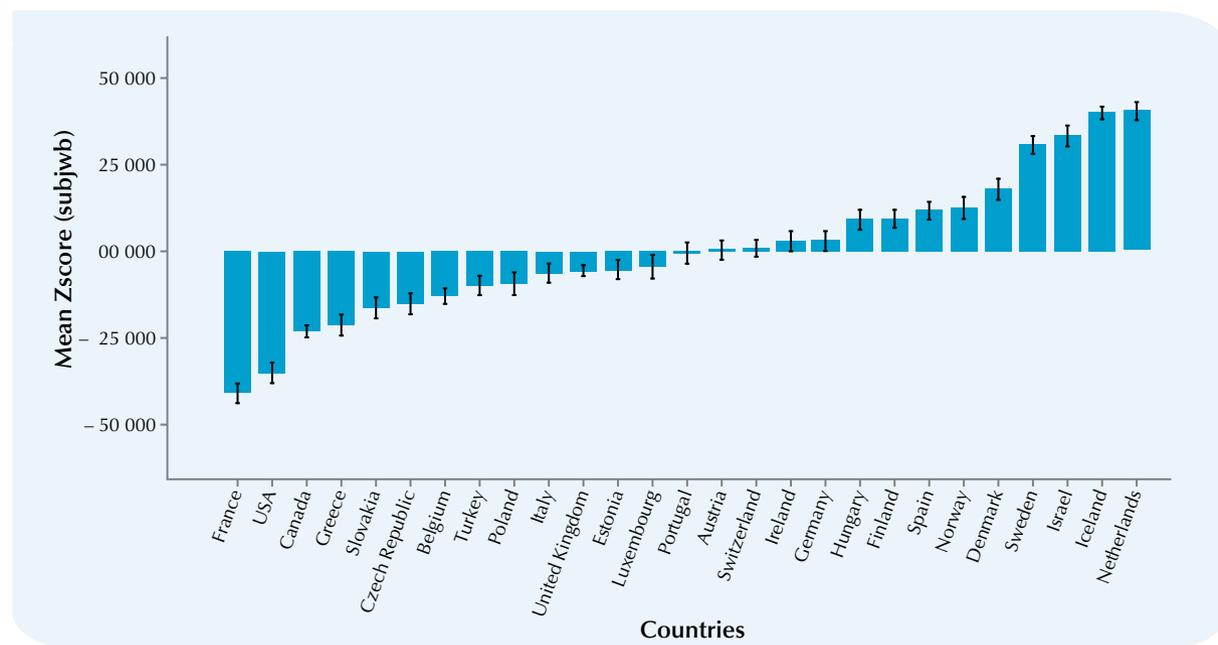
Let us focus on France. French children according to the HBSC (Bradshaw et al., 2013) do comparatively badly on ease of talking to fathers and mothers, finding friends kind and helpful, (and taking exercise and experimenting with tobacco and cannabis but not alcohol). In terms of children’s relationships, France comes bottom of the international league table (figure 6). According to new evidence to be published by Pisa (forthcoming in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*) a significant gap exists between the subjective well-being of immigrant and native 15-year-olds in France but not all other countries.

There is good evidence that strategies to reduce bullying would improve subjective well-being in all countries. As we have seen in figure 4, bullying rates vary but after controlling for age and gender, 17% of the variation in SWB could be explained by bullying in France. That is significantly more than any other factor for which there

is data. Apparently, France has reduced bullying recently – has subjective well-being improved? Then of course poverty matters. It matters not as much as might be expected (or hoped), but the macro association between poverty and SWB is quite strong – stronger than inequality and, although the micro association is small but significant, the evidence suggests that this is because parents are protecting children (Bradshaw, 2015 b). The country level reveals a much stronger association between subjective well-being and the relative risk of poverty rate, as shown in figure 7.

A consistent finding from the Children’s Society surveys in England (Rees and Pople, 2017) and now the Children’s Worlds Survey (Bradshaw and Rees, 2017) is that freedom to choose is probably very important to children – what to wear, eat, time, friends. Schools clearly have a role here. British schools are viciously controlling – uniforms, bells, curriculum, relationships (teachers are always addressed as “Mr” and “Ms”) whereas in the Netherlands pupils use first names and wear no uniform. We know from Children’s Worlds data that in the UK that girls are more troubled by their appearance than in other countries and

Figure 6 – Relationships score in HBSC 2010



Source: HBSC 2009/2010 survey; Klocke et al., 2014.

Scope: children aged 11, 13 and 15.

Error bars: 95 % CI: Confidence interval.

Interpretation: in France, the mean relationship scores of children aged 11, 13 and 15 is the lowest out of twenty-seven countries. The mean relationship score for a country is “derived by combining the z scores of the proportion of young people finding it easy to talk to their father, mother and who found their friends kind and helpful” (Klocke et al., 2014, p. 4). As a reminder, the z scores are calculated by subtracting the population mean from an individual raw score, and then dividing the difference by the population standard deviation. Observed values above the mean have positive standard scores, while values below the mean have negative standard scores.

this is increasingly salient in undermining their well-being (Rees et al., 2015). The impact of social media on child subjective well-being has been the focus of huge interest. Our evidence suggests that subjective well-being in the UK improved as social media was being developed, particularly for girls (Bradshaw and Keung, 2011), and that moderate use of social media is associated with higher subjective well-being (Rees and Pople, 2017). Cyber bullying, however, is clearly a disaster for subjective well-being.

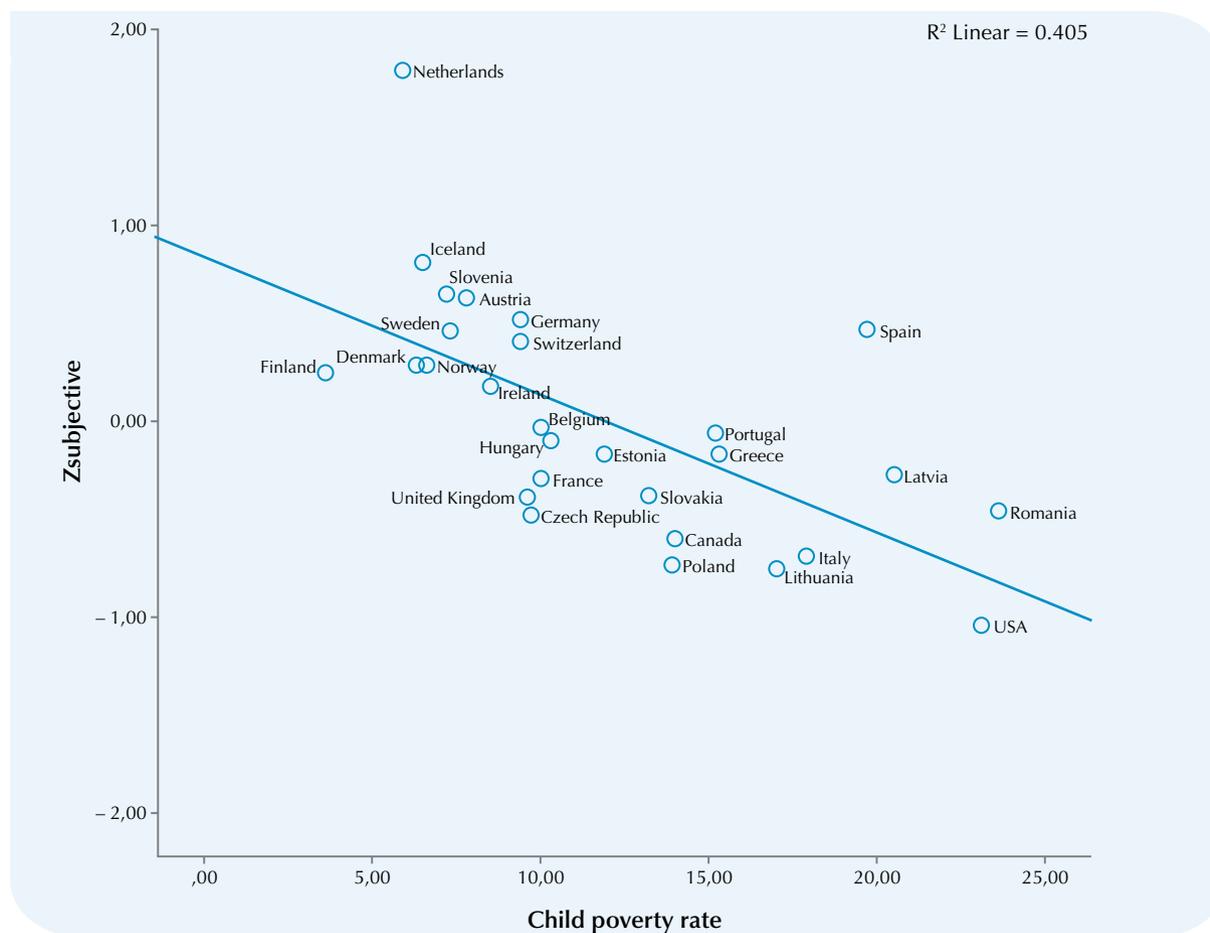
More broadly at a macro level there is a strong association between all domains of well-being and SWB. Material, health, education, behaviour, relationships, housing and the environment are all strongly associated with SWB. Table 1 shows the high correlation between the different

Domains of objective well-being strongly correlated with subjective well-being

	Overall subjective well-being
Material well-being domain	.677**
Health and safety domain	.542**
Education domain	.474**
Behaviour domain	.534**
Housing and environment domain	.610**
Overall (exc subjective)	.666**

Source: UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 11; Bradshaw 2015 a.
 Scope: Children aged 11, 13 and 15.
 Interpretation: there is a strong association between overall subjective well-being and all the other 'objective' domains of well-being at a national level in OECD countries. The higher the coefficient (which varies between 0 and 1), the stronger and more significant the statistical association. A large number of stars (**) indicates greater significance.

Figure 7 - Children's subjective well-being by the relative risk of child poverty rate



Source: HBSC 2009/2010 survey; Klocke et al., 2014.
 Scope: children aged 11, 13 and 15. Error bars: 95 % CI: Confidence interval.
 Interpretation: In general, countries with lower levels of child poverty have more happy children. The Netherlands stands out with a low child poverty rate and a high overall subjective well-being z scores, while the USA express a high rate of child poverty and a low subjective well-being z score. The overall subjective well-being is "a standardized combination of the z scores of these four components: life satisfaction, relationships, subjective education and subjective health" (Klocke et al., 2014: 6). As a reminder, the z scores is calculated by subtracting the population mean from an individual raw score, and then dividing the difference by the population standard deviation.

domains of well-being and subjective well-being derived from the Innocenti Report Card 11 (Unicef, 2013). Figure 8 gives a scatter plot of countries comparing subjective well-being against the mean of the other (objective) domains of well-being. The only outlying country is Romania and that is because the subjective well-being data for Romania were incorrectly collected in the 2010 HBSC report. It is highly significant to this debate that national social policy efforts directed at children, as measured by OECD data on spending on family cash benefits and services and education as a percentage of GDP, are associated with subjective well-being (figure 9). The Netherlands is a positive outlier in this association, having much higher subjective well-being than expected given its spending; France is a modest outlier in the other direction, having lower subjective well-being than you might expect given its spending.

Research on child subjective well-being has had a policy impact. A recent clear example comes from Korea; Professor Bong Jo Lee (Seoul National University) writes to the author:

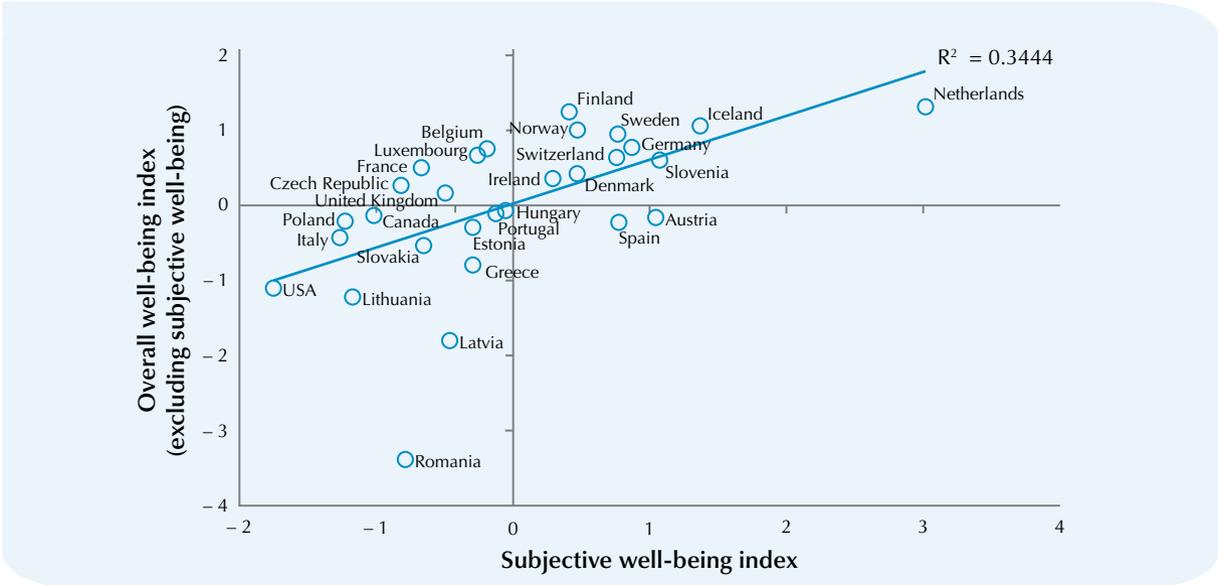
– “The recent Children’s Worlds survey showed the Korean children’s subjective well-being is the lowest among the study countries. The OECD data also show that the level

of happiness of Korean children is the lowest among the OECD countries. The Korean Government had taken seriously these recent evidences of low subjective well-being of Korean children. In order to improve children’s well-being, the Korean Government is mandated to provide its children’s policy plan every five years. In 2015, the Korean Government issued its first ‘Children’s Policy Basic Plan.’ The plan provides the vision of children’s policy is to achieve ‘happiness’ and ‘respect’ for children. The main policy goal the plan provided is to increase the level of Korean children’s happiness up to average of OECD countries in ten years. Because school and academic demands are known to be the major reason for low subjective well-being of Korean children, the plan provides the school curriculum change where children’s ‘right to play’ can be protected. As an effort to provide more diverse learning experiences, the Korean Government instituted ‘free semester system’ where the middle school students have one or two semesters without exams participating diverse set of career development activities at the community level.”

Conclusion

When the Unicef Innocenti Centre (2013) updated their league table of child well-being, they decided not to include

Figure 8 – Subjective well-being vs objective well-being (excluding subjective)



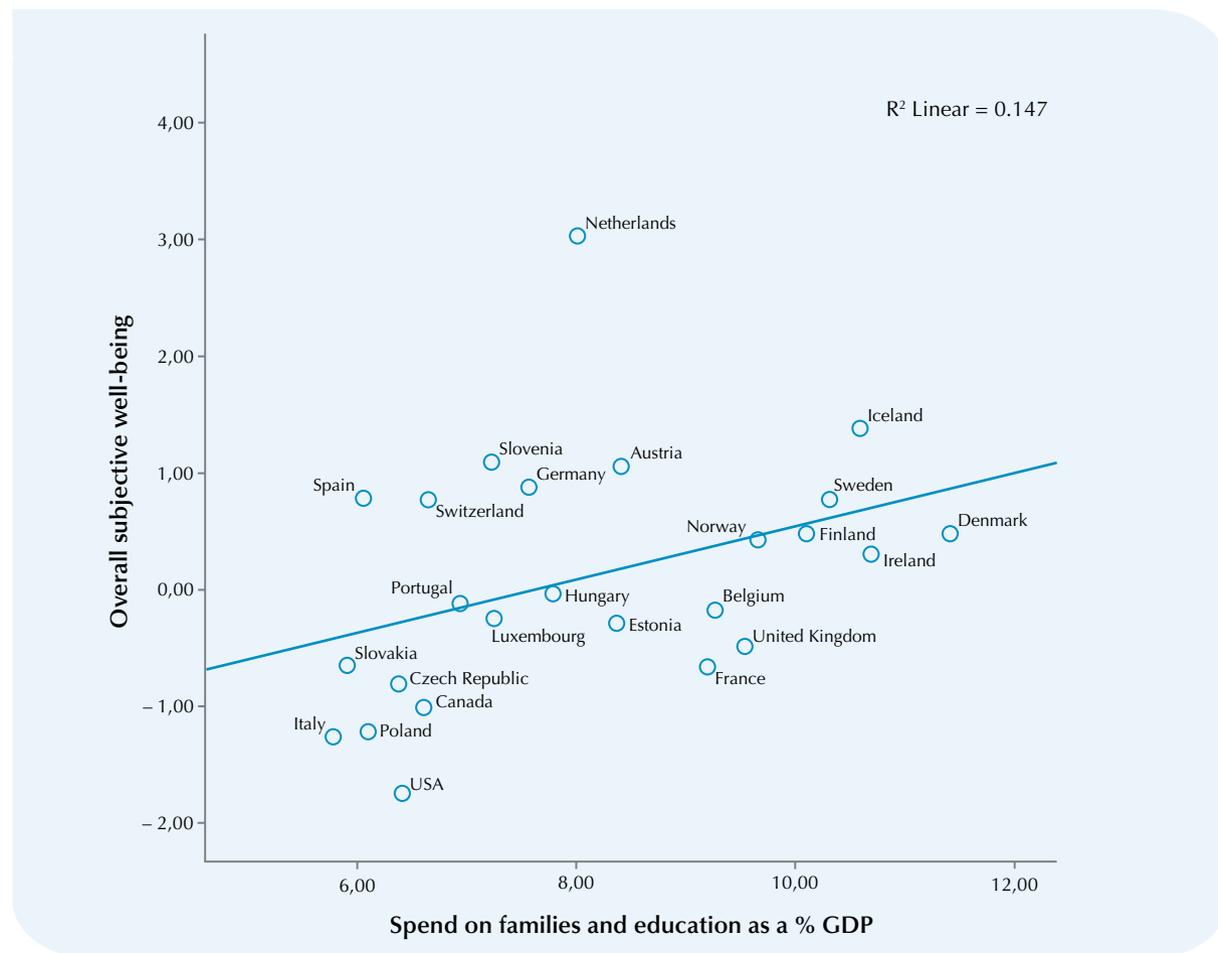
Source: Unicef Innocenti Report Card 11; Bradshaw 2015 a. Scope: Children aged 11, 13 and 15. Interpretation: there is a strong positive association between overall well-being excluding subjective well-being and subjective well-being at the national level in OECD countries. Romania has a low index of subjective well-being and a low index of overall well-being (excluding subjective well-being). The Netherlands has a high index of subjective well-being and a high index of overall well-being (excluding subjective well-being).

the domain of subjective well-being in the summary table. They argued that subjective well-being was different from the other more 'objective' domains of well-being. Indeed, it was an outcome of those domains. Subjective well-being was considered in the report but not in the league table. I thought this was a mistake (and as a consultant for them at the time argued against it) and produced an associated working paper (Bradshaw et al., 2013) which incorporated subjective well-being as a domain contributing to the overall league table, and published papers doing the same (Bradshaw, 2015 b; Bradshaw et al., 2013). It is clear that at national (or macro) level variations in subjective well-being are associated with variations in the other domains, such as poverty, health, housing, education and behaviours. The correlations are presented above.

They may well be causal factors. Indeed, at a macro level, the 'objective' domains are closely associated with each other, which is no argument for treating, for example, poverty and housing conditions or educational attainment and health as outcomes of each other. They are different experiences of childhood

At an individual child (micro level) these domains are more weakly related to subjective well-being and often no association is discernible at all. Subjective well-being has its own essence and its own validity and cannot be treated as a handmaid or outcome of other things. This fact is one of the research challenges we face. We know already that personality type explains quite a lot of the variation in subjective well-being at an individual level

Figure 9 – Spending on family benefits and services and education as a % of GDP and subjective well-being



Source: Unicef Innocenti Report Cards C11; Bradshaw J., 2015 b.

Scope: Children aged 11, 13 and 15.

Interpretation: higher levels of spending on family benefits and services and education as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is (weakly) associated with higher levels of overall subjective well-being of children. In France, spending on family and education amounts to more than 9% of GDP and overall subjective well-being is rather low.

(Goswami, 2014), though this is complicated by the fact that personality scales are not independent of the subjective well-being measures. It is also possible that the (national) cultural zeitgeist plays a part – for example *French aplomb, sang-froid, joie de vivre, râleur!* An array of more likely influences that have not been fully investigated include sibling bullying (hardly ever asked about), school regime, child-friendly urban spaces and the internet.

In future research on this topic, it would be sensible to separate between-country and within-country research strategies. The within-country strategy might be similar to that pursued by the Children's Society (2012) Good Childhood Reports over sixteen years in collaboration with the University of York:

- finding out from children what is important for their well-being;
- constructing, testing and validating measures based on the above plus existing research;
- running a survey to identify the key factors associated with variations in SWB.

As we have seen, there is reasonable evidence that these factors might be quite different from one country to another. Going beyond this basic work, further priorities are:

- longitudinal research during childhood to explore how factors earlier in life affect later subjective well-being and how subjective well-being develops over time. In the UK some good studies are beginning to emerge from the Millennium Cohort Survey;
- shorter-term longitudinal research to understand, for example, the possible directions of influence between factors such as bullying and subjective well-being;
- longitudinal research to look at the links between subjective well-being in childhood and adult outcomes. Very little research of this type has been done to date.

In the between-country analysis, we are a lot further behind. It is not certain that we are asking the right questions. It is really problematic to compare mean scores of subjective well-being between countries. But we can use international comparisons in other ways. For example, the findings on gender differences in appearance are quite striking and comparing within-country patterns like this is more robust than comparing means of subjective well-being. Also, analysis suggests that we can use the same subjective well-being measures to compare regression results across countries – so that findings, for example, on bullying being more important in some countries and material deprivation in others, seem useful.

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