

New directions in cross-cultural well-being research

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- Quality of life
- Indicators
- International comparisons

The analysis of well-being in national and cross-national contexts is currently a booming research area in economics, political science and social indicator analysis (Diener and Ryan, 2009; Diener and Suh, 1997; Noll, 1999; Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Land, Michalos and Sirgi, 2011; Glatzer et al., 2015). It became especially popular in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. More than one decade after the beginning of the financial crisis, we still live in socially turbulent times. Although the economy is back on the track to growth in the United States and various states of the European Union (EU), political and institutional trust is low and can be interpreted as a significant hurdle to democracy (Crouch, 2008; Blühdorm, 2013). In addition, the EU is still in a state of crisis and even subject to an accumulation of contemporary challenges. All critical outbreaks of events during the last decade (e.g. the public debt crisis, conflict in Ukraine, refugee flows to Europe, especially in 2015, combined with widespread EU-scepticism, precarity and protest) have led to the emergence of new cleavages between European major regions and within nation states, threatening social cohesion.

The impact of the 2008 crisis also inspired many well-being researchers to move beyond single measures of progress and focus on multi-dimensional concepts in order to take into account several levels of quality of life. This is particularly evident in the basic statements of the influential report of the so-called Stiglitz Commission in 2008. The commission advised refining the measurement of well-being, which is mainly based on economic indicators, to focus on quality of life from a multi-dimensional perspective and to take sustainability into consideration⁽¹⁾. Today's reorientation of well-being research can be interpreted as a shift to multi-dimensional concepts (Glatzer, 2006) and an increased orientation towards subjective well-being (e.g. as a summary Diener and Ryan, 2009), along with extensions to the evaluation of the societal

context (Harrison et al., 2011; Aschauer, 2014) and an intensified struggle for comparative approaches (Glatzer, 2012). This is particularly visible when it comes to criticism of Western-based approaches on quality of life, especially from authors who focus on quality of life in other world regions (Uchida et al., 2015) or on well-being in developing countries (Yamamoto, 2007).

Historical lines of (quantitative) well-being research

When analysing the history of well-being research, it is possible to identify six stages of progress (figure 1)⁽²⁾.

Well-being research in a first step developed from a one-dimensional view of measuring prosperity solely via GDP (stage 1) to multi-dimensional measurements of quality of life (stage 2). At the same time, happiness research and life satisfaction research was established (stage 3) in a worldwide perspective. Dating from the turn of the millennium and primarily in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, the scientific debate currently revolves around the questions of how objective and subjective indicators should be linked in a multi-dimensional understanding of well-being and how to achieve comparability concerning objective and subjective indicators. Due to these major challenges new concepts emerge, which widely share the view that it is better to focus more precisely on the national level (stage 4). Additionally, new approaches apply ever-more sophisticated concepts to try to capture certain dimensions of subjective well-being (stage 5).

All of these areas of well-being research reflect the state of the art in defining, measuring and presenting crucial social indicators of quality of life. However, although the criteria of reliability and validity seem to be roughly fulfilled, major research gaps still need to be considered and certain methodological fallacies need solving. Thus

(1) The Commission was set up in 2008 by French President Sarkozy and consisted of two Nobel Prize Winners (Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen) and the famous French economist Jean Paul Fitoussi. The Commission clearly advises "to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's wellbeing" (Stiglitz et al., 2009, p. 12).

(2) These authors challenge the comparative validity of the concepts which are developed primarily in the West and doubt their transferability to other cultural regions.

– from a conceptual perspective – I want to focus on a widely neglected field in well-being research which reflects the analyses of impressions of societal functioning and which can be considered as a potential new direction of well-being research (stage 6). There is a clear need to include citizens’ perceptions of societal well-being in a social indicator database to provide new evidence that groups of society are particularly susceptible to feelings of deprivation. Deprivation theory, first developed by Samuel A. Stouffer and his colleagues (1949), highlights an individual’s impression of being underprivileged in comparison to others. Relative individual deprivation denotes a disadvantaged position compared to other group members, while fraternal deprivation occurs when the situation of the ingroup as a whole is perceived negatively in comparison with outgroups (Pettigrew et al., 2008, p. 386). These perceptions are closely linked to societal malaise and may to some extent explain the susceptibility for right-wing populism and ethnocentrism in many European countries.

Additionally, several methodological challenges appear well-being research is conducted in a national and cross-national perspective. From a methodological standpoint, it is important to identify holistic concepts that are

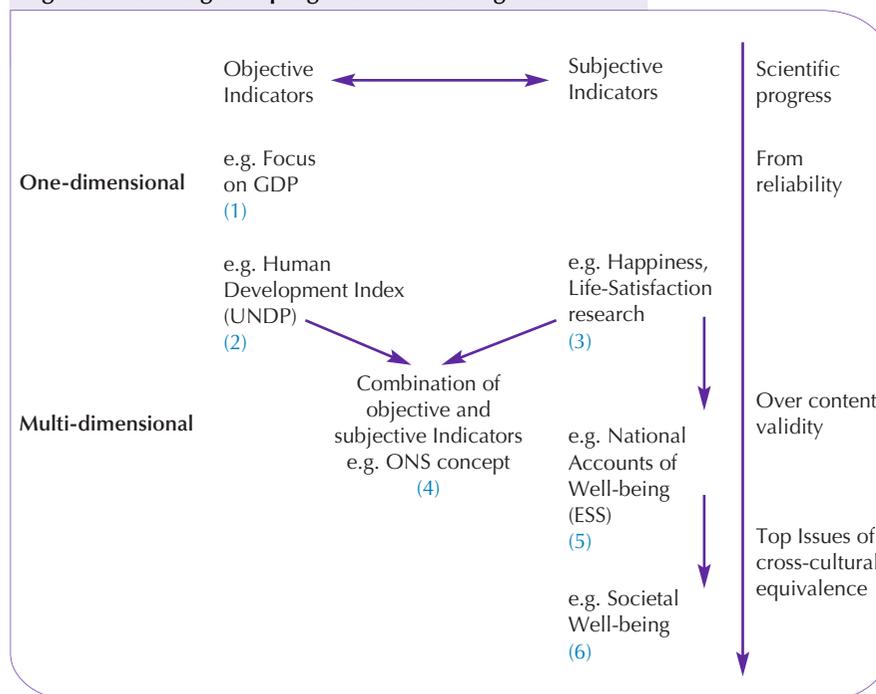
comparable across cultures. In the ideal case, this means theoretically deriving meaningful multi-dimensional concepts that encompass the most relevant dimensions for each cultural group (content validity), and that have the same meaning across cultures (equivalence). In general, numerous concepts are developed in the Western hemisphere that may be inappropriate measurements in other cultural contexts. This methodological puzzle of how to provide content validity *and* equivalence *simultaneously* is further elaborated in the last section and may potentially lead to a higher awareness of comparability issues in the field.

Material living conditions: from single to multiple indicators

In the post-war period of the 20th century, well-being research was mainly oriented towards economic progress. The economic perspective is linked to the central assumption that a higher level of consumption defines better living conditions. For this reason, gross domestic product (GDP), i.e. the sum of all goods produced and used for consumption, has long been defined as the most important measure of social progress (e.g. Conceicao & Bandura, 2008). However, GDP can only be used as a rough measurement of the material standard of living. Therefore,

since the 1970s, the focus has been on other aspects of welfare outside the context of a market-oriented approach, thus complementing GDP with other important indicators. These initiatives can be traced back to the branch of socio-political indicator research which was reflected in the Scandinavian “level of living approach”. Quality of life should mainly be measured by focusing on individual resources (such as income, education and social participation) and contextual conditions (such as environmental quality, health systems and infrastructure) (Erikson and Veichtner, 1974). These efforts resulted in the global human development index (HDI), which, in addition to GDP, also

Figure 1 – Six stages of progress in well-being research



GDP: Gross Domestic Product, UNDP: United Nations Development Programme; ONS: Office of National Statistics; ESS: European Social Survey.

integrates a population's life expectancy and level of education (UNDP, 1990).

The United Nations concept of human development has gained significant popularity over the last three decades and its measurement has been refined and adapted to new worldwide challenges. In 2010, the UNDP developed a new computation method that nevertheless still concentrates on the three core indices of life expectancy, the ability to acquire knowledge (measured by mean years and expected years of schooling), and the ability to achieve a higher living standard (measured by gross national income)⁽³⁾ (UNDP, 2018, p.1). Table 1 illustrates the top 25 countries based on all indicators, all of which belong to the very high human development group (consisting of fifty-nine countries in total).

Norway, Switzerland and Australia rank first, with Ireland following closely behind (due to considerable progress over recent years). Nearly all countries in the list belong to the Western World, with Hongkong (7), Japan (19), Israel (22) and Korea (22) being notable exceptions. No

countries in Southern and Eastern Europe feature in the top 25 countries worldwide, apart from Slovenia just behind France, which comes second to last in this list. Looking back over the last decades, human development has made considerable progress, especially in Asia and also in Sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, war-ridden regions in particular feature considerable setbacks, which can be seen with regard to Libya, Syria and Yemen, where the HDI has fallen dramatically over the last years due to violent conflict (UNDP, 2018, 2f.). Yet using only selected objective indicators of quality of life is just one side of the story. Interestingly, these indicators of progress and subjective values to measure well-being are only moderately correlated with each other (Huppert et al., 2009, p. 302). Some countries and regions fall into the so-called happiness paradox because people demonstrate a high level of subjective well-being despite problematic societal conditions (e.g. countries of Central America which do not feature in the top 25 HDI rankings). On the other hand, some countries are exposed to a so-called dissatisfaction dilemma where a high level of economic progress is combined with a low level of subjective well-being

Table 1 – The top 25 countries using HDI as a composite index based on three combined indicators

Position	Country	HDI 2017	Life expectancy at birth	Expected years schooling	Mean years schooling	GNI per capita
1	Norway	0,953	82,3	17,9	12,6	68,01
2	Switzerland	0,944	83,5	16,2	13,4	57,63
3	Australia	0,939	83,1	22,9	12,9	43,56
4	Ireland	0,938	81,6	19,6	12,5	53,75
5	Germany	0,936	81,2	17,0	14,1	46,14
6	Iceland	0,935	82,9	19,3	12,4	45,81
7	HongKong, China	0,933	84,1	16,3	12,0	58,42
7	Sweden	0,933	82,6	17,6	12,4	47,77
9	Singapore	0,932	83,2	16,2	11,5	82,50
10	Netherlands	0,931	82,0	18,0	12,2	47,90
11	Denmark	0,929	80,9	19,1	12,6	47,92
12	Canada	0,926	82,5	16,4	13,3	43,43
13	United States	0,924	79,5	16,5	13,4	54,94
14	United Kingdom	0,922	81,7	17,4	12,9	39,12
15	Finland	0,920	81,5	17,6	12,4	41,00
16	New Zealand	0,917	82,0	18,9	12,5	33,97
17	Belgium	0,916	81,3	19,8	11,8	42,16
17	Liechtenstein	0,916	80,4	14,7	12,5	97,34
19	Japan	0,909	83,9	15,2	12,8	38,99
20	Austria	0,908	81,8	16,1	12,1	45,42
21	Luxembourg	0,904	82,0	14,0	12,1	65,02
22	Israel	0,903	82,7	15,9	13,0	32,71
22	Korea	0,903	82,4	16,5	12,1	35,95
24	France	0,901	82,7	16,4	11,5	39,25
25	Slovenia	0,896	81,1	17,2	12,2	30,59

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (ed.), 2018, *Human Development, Indices and Indicators, 2018 Statistical Update*. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2018_human_development_statistical_update.pdf, Retrieved December 30, 2018.
HDI: Human Development Index; GNI per capita: Gross National Income.

(3) Additionally in 2010, the United Nations launched three additional indicators to monitor poverty (the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index), adjust the HDI for inequality (IHDI), and control for gender inequality (Gender Inequality Index).

(e.g. Japan, which comes 19th in the HDI rankings). In general, when countries reach a certain threshold of prosperity, it seems to be hard to increase life satisfaction. This phenomenon is known as the Richard A. Easterlin paradox and was first confirmed in the United States (Easterlin, 1974) and later in cross-national research. R. A. Easterlin (1995) was able to show for Japan that despite significant economic growth rates between 1958 and 1991, no further increase in life satisfaction could be achieved.

Subjective well-being: from single to multiple indicators

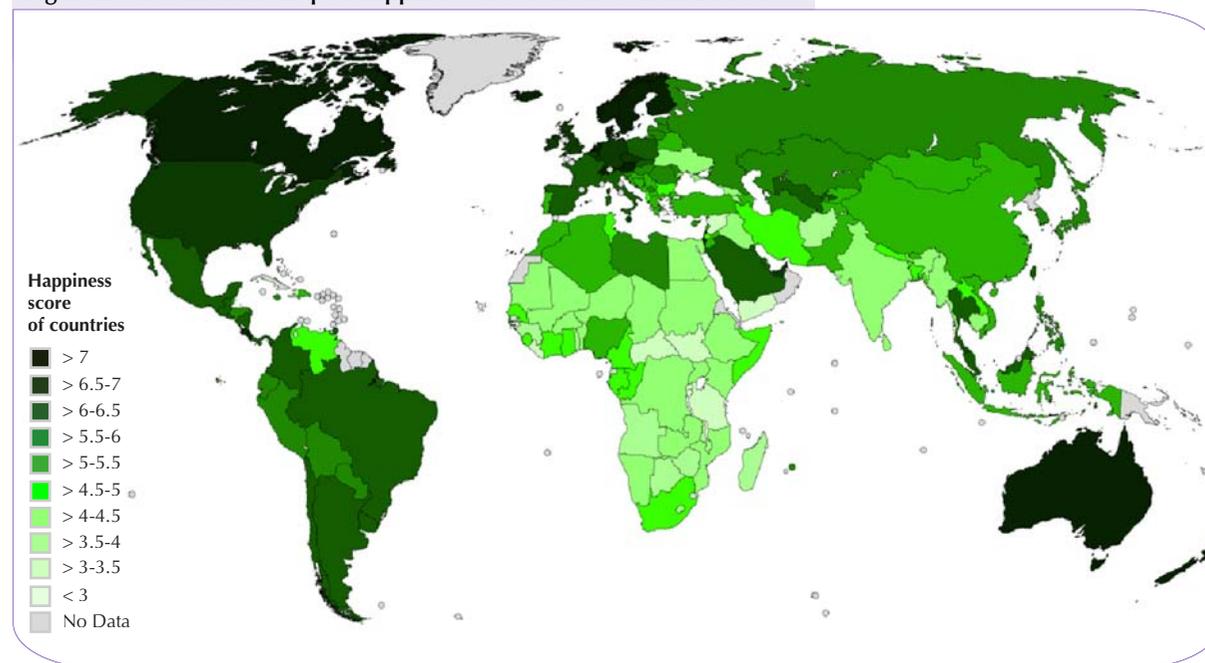
At the same time, once multi-dimensional concepts of quality of life were established, research on well-being in the United States evolved more strongly in the tradition of social psychology. Subjective perceptions of quality of life were defined as the highest criterion for social development. This inspired many researchers to focus on single indicators of subjective well-being (Campbell, 1981), which reflected the beginning of a new era of happiness and life satisfaction research (Noll, 1999, p. 8f.). Subjective well-being is now often measured by operationalizing the affective component (emotional

well-being and thus «happiness») and the cognitive component (general life satisfaction) (Ruckriegel, 2012, p. 2). These two central factors for measuring subjective well-being were already included in the first wave of the World Value Study (1981) and still remain an integral part of numerous cross-national surveys. Figure 2 shows a global map of subjective well-being based on the Gallup World Poll study 2014, where the Cantril Ladder⁽⁴⁾ is used as central indicator to assess global happiness. It is clearly visible that subjective well-being is highest in the Western world, where the mean values are above 7 on this 11-point scale (e.g. in Northern America, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Australia). In Europe and in Latin America, most countries achieve a mean value above 6, while in Asian and African countries the mean estimations on the ladder are still lower than in other world regions.

Other representative and cross-national survey instruments usually ask respondents to state how happy they are with their lives and how to rate their satisfaction with life⁽⁵⁾. However, current research on subjective well-being indicates that only the general state of happiness reflects a kind of balance between different emotional states, while

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Figure 2 – A worldwide map of happiness based on the Cantril Ladder



Source: World Happiness Report 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Happiness_Report, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b3/Happiness_score_of_countries_according_to_the_World_Happiness_Report_%282018%29.png. Interpretation: the darker the colour, the happier people are in their country.

(4) Respondents are asked to imagine a ladder from 0 to 10 (worst possible life and best possible life). They then estimate their own position on this ladder.

tive and negative feelings can exist independently of each other (Helliwell et al., 2012, p. 11). In total, four different measurements of general indicators of subjective well-being are recommended: a cognitive evaluation of life (life satisfaction), a permanent measurement of happiness, and the measurement of positive and negative emotional states as a snapshot over a short period of time (reference to “present” or “yesterday”) or a longer time horizon (reference to the “last week” or “last month”) (Diener et al., 1999, p. 277).

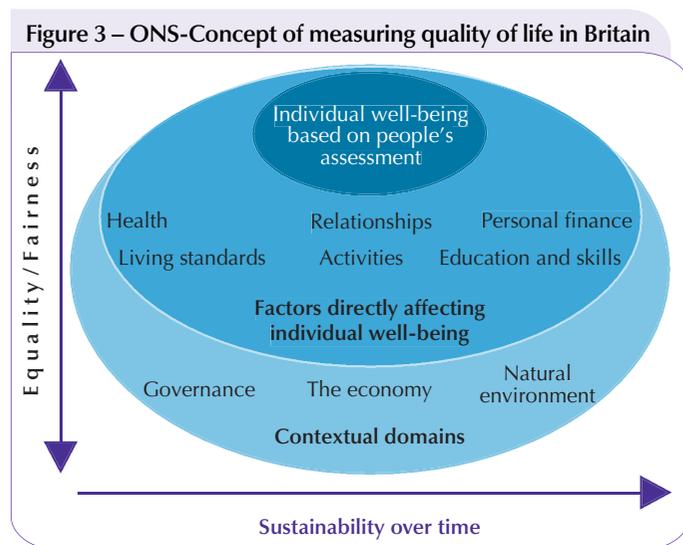
The single item measurements of happiness and life satisfaction are widely considered as reliable and valid (Veenhofen, 2011). However, numerous objections and methodological problems have also been identified with regard to these rather superficial measurements of subjective well-being. Reported happiness is only an extremely weak indication of the actual feeling and is also dependent on the fact of ordering effects in a questionnaire (Helliwell et al., 2012, p. 14). Furthermore, the problem of social desirability (Esser, 1996) is included in all subjective evaluation questions. This problem is particularly relevant when it comes to cultural response styles in cross-national surveys. Individual societies may differ in terms of general social models for describing themselves

as happy (Braun, 2002, p. 50). Georg Kamphausen (1992, p. 92) notes that in US society it is a general public custom to describe oneself as happy and not usually acceptable to openly report a negative emotional state. All of these limitations explain why recent concepts of well-being favour a higher degree of complexity.

Striving for a holistic concept of quality of life

Current well-being research is predominantly oriented towards linking social indicator research with subjective satisfaction research (Diener and Suh, 1997; Glatzer, 2008). In this vein, the Stiglitz Commission report (Stiglitz et al., 2009) identifies seven key dimensions of quality of life (health, education, indicators on employment and housing, political participation and rights, social relations, environmental conditions, and existential insecurity), which should be collected using both objective and subjective indicators (Braakmann, 2009, p. 784f.). These new conceptions are also reflected in the well-known Better Life Index, which was developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011). A differentiated conception of well-being “requires meeting various human needs, some of which are essential (e.g. being in good health) as well as the ability to pursue one’s goals, to thrive and feel satisfied with life.” (ibid., p. 18). In its annual *How is life* publications, the OECD tries to provide an overview of typical quality of life indicators. In addition to certain subjective indicators, the OECD concept primarily refers to objective indicators that have proven to be equivalent among countries. In order to avoid the problem of comparability, many countries also focus on specific national concepts of well-being. I will use the British concept of well-being from its Office of National Statistics (ONS) as one example, because Great Britain is currently pushing ahead with several initiatives on quality of life research and statistics (Bache and Reardon, 2016). The ONS directly tries to implement the recommendations of the Stiglitz Commission (Stiglitz et al., 2009) and favours a distinction between subjective well-being at the individual level, objective living conditions, and contextual dynamics influencing well-being in a certain state (figure 3).

The approach of Great Britain is on the one hand similar to the OECD’s because selected objective indicators,



Source: Beaumont, 2011, p. 2.

(5) Numerous examples of standard items exist and so I mention only two survey instruments here. In the World Value Survey, one of the leading surveys on a global scale, the state of happiness is measured on a four-point-scale (“Taking all things together, would you say you are: Very happy, Quite happy, Not very happy, or Not at all happy?”), while life satisfaction is measured using a 10-point scale: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?”. In the European Social Survey, the most advanced academically driven survey for political and social attitudes of Europeans, almost exactly the same question about life satisfaction is asked (“these days” is replaced by “nowadays”) and the state of happiness is measured with the same 11-point scale (from 0 to 10): “Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?” (Helliwell et al., 2012, p. 14).

subjective perceptions of well-being, and certain contextual factors are combined in a model of quality of life, which is suitable for empirically based long-term observations. All indicators are available for the UK, they are considered as highly politically relevant and are based on extensive and established surveys (British Household Panel, Citizenship Survey, Labour Force Survey) (Beaumont, 2011, p. 5). Following the example of Great Britain, other countries⁽⁶⁾ have also initiated similar multi-dimensional conceptions of well-being including objective and subjective indicators. Besides these national initiatives spreading all over Europe, the concepts of subjective well-being are increasingly sophisticated and multi-dimensional.

Multidimensional concepts of subjective well-being

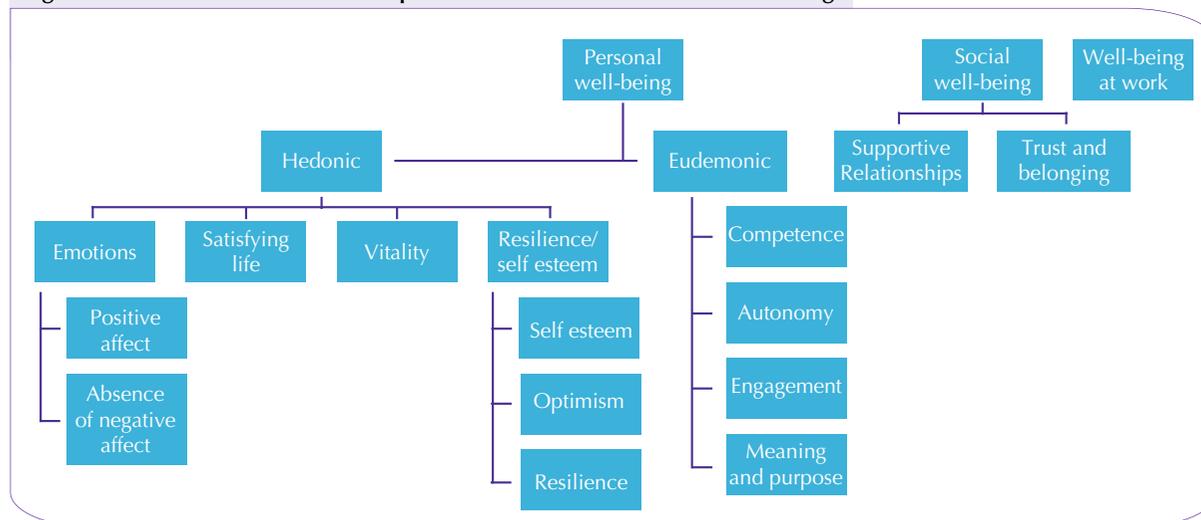
One of the most comprehensive approaches to subjective well-being was presented by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) with the National Accounts of Well-Being (NAWB). Felicia Huppert and her colleagues (2004) succeeded in introducing a scale consisting of fifty-four items in the European Social Survey 2006 to enable a comprehensive country-specific analysis of various facets of subjective well-being across Europe⁽⁷⁾. On the one hand, the authors differentiate between the hedonic individual state of happiness (Kahneman et al., 1999), which is measured by life satisfaction, a positive emotional state,

the absence of negative feelings, resilience, optimism and self-esteem, and the state of social well-being, which is operationalized with items measuring social support and social recognition.

The additional eudaimonic level conceives well-being as a process and attempts to measure personal vitality, thriving for a meaning in life, competence, and goal orientation on an individual level, while altruistic behaviour and helpfulness are also taken into account on the level of social well-being. In general, two objectives seem to be of primary importance to the authors: first, to replace one-item measurements with more sophisticated scales, and second, to illuminate several facets of well-being. In addition to personal and social well-being, job satisfaction was also integrated in the first module of the European Social Survey (ESS) 2006. But empirical tests did show that the connection between the other levels of well-being remains unclear and thus job satisfaction no longer featured in the repeated module for the ESS 2012 (Huppert et al., 2010).

The multi-dimensional conceptualisation consisting of the three overarching factors of personal well-being, social well-being, and well-being at work, is illustrated as follows in the report on the National Accounts of Well-Being (figure 4).

Figure 4 – Multi-dimensional concept of the national accounts of Well-Being



Source: Nef, 2009, p. 21.

(6) Germany: <https://www.gut-leben-in-deutschland.de/static/LB/en/>

or Austria: https://www.statistik.at/web_en/statistics/-----/hows_austria/what_is_hows_austria/index.html.

(7) The National Accounts of Well-being have been extensively promoted by the New Economics Foundation and several publications are available (e.g. NEF, 2009).

In general, the authors provide an interesting proposal for a multi-dimensional conception of subjective well-being and comprehensive operationalisation. However, even in renowned journals (Huppert et al., 2009), the methodological quality and cross-country invariance of the scales are insufficiently reported (Nef, 2009, p. 59).

Extending research to the field of societal well-being

This overview of the different development stages highlights the main achievements in well-being research. Single measures of material standards of living (such as GDP, stage 1) have been extended to certain objective criteria to operationalise citizens' standard of living combined with certain contextual factors (Human Development Index, stage 2). In parallel, subjective well-being indicators can nowadays be considered as established in the discipline of social indicator research (Veenhofen, 2012) and economics (Layard, 2009) (stage 3). Recent concepts of quality of life, inspired by the Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi report (2009), try to combine objective and subjective indicators to provide more holistic national and cross-national concepts of well-being (stage 4). In addition, concepts of subjective well-being are currently further extended to encompass multi-dimensional concepts (National Accounts of Well-Being – Huppert et al., 2009) (stage 5). However, as mentioned in the introduction, subjective perceptions of societal progress (the potential stage 6) and methodological challenges of comparability are still neglected. This leads to the following table which defines the relevant research areas and highlights the main methodological puzzles that need to be solved in the future (table 2).

Table 2 – Areas of well-being research and potential future research agendas

	Individual	Contextual	Methodological challenges
Objective	Living standards	Contextual factors	Content validity
Subjective	Subjective well-being	Societal well-being	Cross-cultural equivalence

In the following, I will focus on certain research gaps to monitor societal well-being in a timely perspective and with regard to cross-national comparisons. Although cross-national survey instruments (WVS, ISSP, EVS, ESS, EQLS)⁽⁸⁾ offer a broad reservoir of data, attitudes to societal developments have not yet been integrated into the population surveys of official statistical institutions. The efforts

of Eric Harrison, Roger Jowell and Elissa Sibley (2011) to promote such a direction of well-being research do not seem to go beyond a mere collection of items and a description of potential dimensions. The result is a lack of theoretically driven and multi-dimensional concepts that analyse several areas of citizens' societal perceptions (Aschauer, 2014). In the aftermath of the economic crisis, and even more so since the prevailing terrorist threat and the refugee movements, we can clearly observe perceived insecurities which are which are interconnected with the economic, political and cultural challenges of redistribution and social cohesion. The decline of the social fabric in many European states can also be seen as a breeding ground for populism. Due to high levels of political alienation (Aschauer, 2017), contemporary populism – whether to the right or left of the political spectrum – succeeds due to a marked separation between the “*ruling elites*” driving society in certain directions and the will of the “*common people*” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Populist politics is thriving in many countries, as social groups feel left behind and overwhelmed by the rapid process of change and search for simple solutions to complex societal challenges. Larger groups in society express *fears of societal decline*, show increasing levels of *political disenchantment*, and react with *social distrust* to the challenges of cultural diversity. It is a major imperative to develop theoretically sound models of social well-being and malaise and to evaluate and test these models in comparison with other countries.

Crucial dimensions of societal well-being

Citizens in Western Europe often consider the ‘golden age’ of the second half of the 20th century (Castel, 2000) as an era of peacebuilding, economic growth, political stability, and European integration. Current middle-class fears can best be attributed to changes in expectations for the future because many European citizens seem to have the impression that the stability of Europe is under threat. Fears of societal decline are thus reflected in high levels of pessimism for the future. It is important to distinguish expressions of fear among the middle classes from the perceptions of social groups who are clearly underprivileged. The emergence of the precariat as a new transnational class (Standing, 2011) experiencing limited opportunities

(8) The World Value Survey (=WVS), the International-Social-Survey-Program (= ISSP), the European Value Survey (=EVS), the European Social Survey (=ESS) and the European Quality of Life Study (=EQLS) are important worldwide and European survey instruments which all measure to a certain extent quality of life with single or multiple indicators.

in the labour market has become a major social problem in many Western and Southern European states. It is thus important to take feelings of recognition (Honneth 1992) into account because people in disadvantaged positions in society suffer from neglect. Enraged citizens in this group have unleashed their anger in recent waves of protest; a process seemingly fuelled by their powerlessness to influence societal change. These impressions of anomie in contemporary society originally developed by Émile Durkheim 1983(1897) reflect not only the violation of societal norms but, more significantly, a relative lack of certainty of expectations within a highly differentiated society (Bohle et al., 1997). Politicians have extensively failed to ignore these far-reaching forms of institutional alienation. A large share of citizens tend to distrust mainstream media, turning instead to dubious internet sources and are increasingly susceptible to conspiracy theories. The representation crisis of democracy (Linden and Thaa, 2011) has already reached a deep level, signalling a post-democratic turn in Western societies (Crouch, 2008; Blühdorn, 2013).

The impact of certain public discourses and the intensified value polarizations within society may lead to a rise in social distrust in many European societies. Under the shadow of neoliberalism (Hall and Lamont, 2013), the pressure to achieve social mobility is growing, and competition may win out over solidarity. Widespread feelings of distrust are provoked not just by economic conditions but by political disruptions to the existing order. In particular, the issue of immigration is a major source of dissent in society. While some groups are still in favour of cultural heterogeneity, those rejecting late-modern transformations tend to shift their values in a defensive direction (Spier, 2010). The disapproval of cultural diversity results in an increased attachment to one's own nation and a renaissance of social values aimed at preserving order by opting for strong leadership while rejecting egalitarianism and a commitment to tolerance. Particular groups such as Muslims start to be identified as "significant others" (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 593) and are perceived as a threat to undermine Western achievements and to Western culture.

These various signs of destabilization signal that integration problems in Europe are not only related to immigrants, but increasingly apply to the majority populations. The processes of disintegration can manifest themselves on the one hand at the objective level (atypical work, low living standards, segregation, bad housing conditions) and on the other hand at the subjective level. These impressions of societal malaise vs. societal functioning should be more prominently addressed in current well-being research.

The societal well-being since the millennium in Europe

The cross-national overview of societal well-being across Europe now provides some descriptive insights into contemporary trends in European countries. To carry out my research, I employed the ESS waves from 2002-2016⁽⁹⁾ and picked out three indicators on societal satisfaction⁽¹⁰⁾ to compute a preliminary index of societal well-being. Mean comparisons (using scales from 0 to 10) should allow a monitoring of societal change based on citizens' attitudes. Figure 5 illustrates European countries which still demonstrate a high level of societal well-being.

Switzerland and Norway are the leading countries concerning societal satisfaction in Europe. Denmark was topped the rankings until 2006 but has lost ground during recent years. In the other Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, a decreasing trend of social satisfaction is clearly visible. However, Germany is a notable example of a continuous increase in societal well-being over the years⁽¹¹⁾ (figure 5). Interestingly, in many countries we can observe a slight decrease in societal satisfaction due to the economic crisis, although as yet no effect with regard to the refugee crisis in 2015.

This thesis is strengthened when we look at European countries subject to even more turbulence over the last decade (figure 6). Especially in liberal welfare states (United Kingdom and Ireland) we observe a sharp decrease in societal well-being due to the economic crisis, but both states have rapidly overcome their higher levels of societal malaise⁽¹²⁾. In Austria, the refugee situation has

(9) The European Social Survey has several advantages compared to other survey instruments. The data quality fulfils the highest standards in survey research, which is demonstrated by concerted efforts of documentation, a high number of participating countries in Europe (from 22 countries in the first wave up to 30 countries in the fourth wave), large probability samples for each country (minimum sample size is 1,500), equal survey modes (face-to-face interviews), and a high target response rate (70 %) (Lynn et al., 2007).

(10) See table 3 for further information on the indicators.

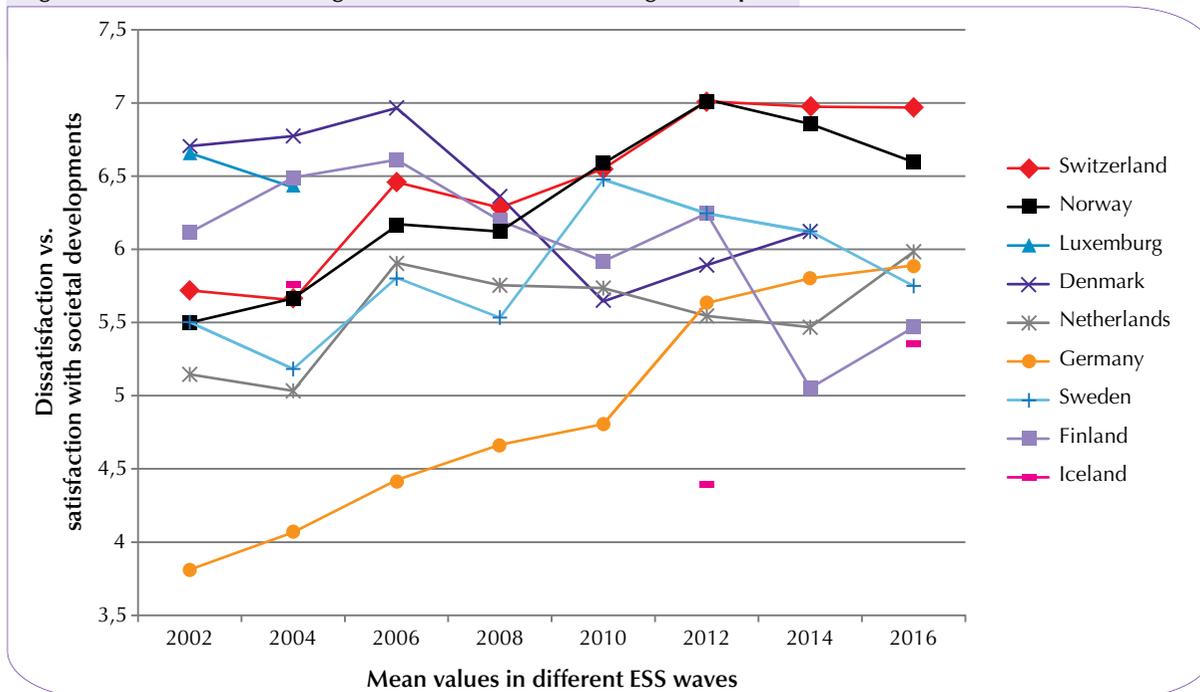
(11) It can be estimated that Germany is also currently on a downward trend due to a growing level of political distrust and political alienation in the past two years.

(12) Of course the Brexit of June 2016 is not visible in the data yet. We can expect – similar to Germany – a decrease in societal well-being in the next wave of the ESS 2018.

had no effect on societal well-being and the mean value is still just above five – which tends to indicate societal functioning. The Czech Republic is the only Eastern European country that demonstrates a similar level of societal well-being.

Turning to Eastern Europe in particular, we can observe higher levels of societal malaise. However, there is no uniform trend because when we consider Poland, Estonia and Russia, a rather positive view towards impressions of societal progress is visible. Slovenia was strongly affected

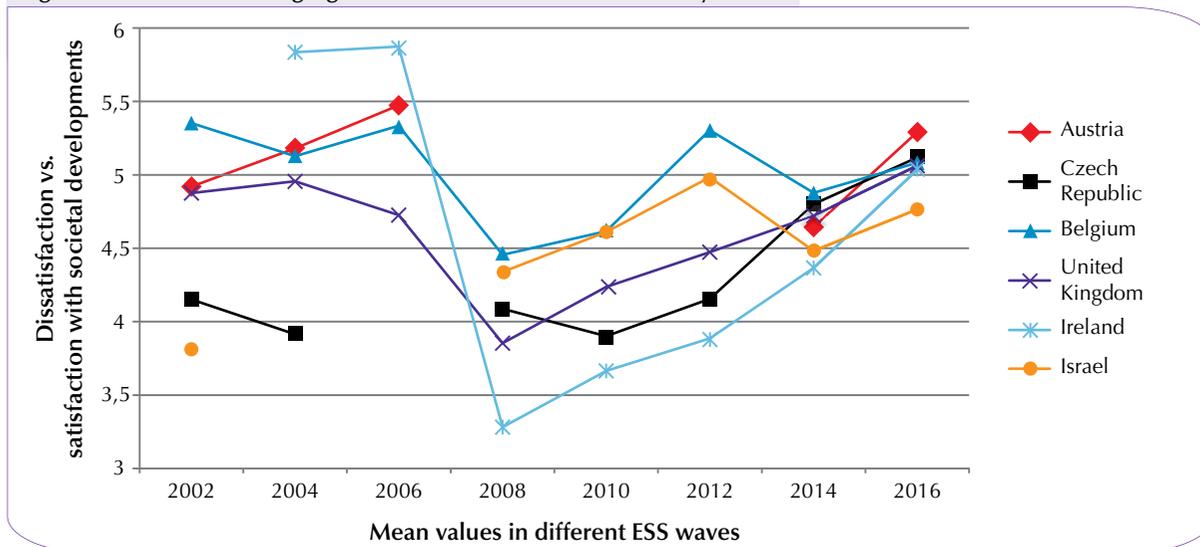
Figure 5 – Countries with a high level of societal functioning in Europe



Source: European Social Survey (ESS) data.

Interpretation: on average, in 2016, Switzerland recorded a societal turbulence level of 7 on a scale between 0 and 10.

Figure 6 – Countries facing signs of societal turbulence over the years



Source: European Social Survey (ESS) data.

Interpretation: on average, in 2016, Ireland recorded a societal functioning level of 5 on a scale between 0 and 10.

by the 2008 economic crisis and Hungary has been confronted with turbulent developments over the years. It is difficult to evaluate the situation in Turkey, because Turkey only participated in the ESS in 2004 and 2008. It can be assumed that the downward trend is even more pronounced during the last decade due to higher levels of political and economic instability (figure 7).

Figure 8 refers predominantly to Southern Europe, which is mainly exposed to high levels of crisis perceptions. Small signs of improvement are visible, but developments over the years indicate a clear increase in societal malaise. Greece, Bulgaria and Ukraine seem to be caught in an ongoing crisis. France and Spain have undergone a continuous path towards societal malfunctioning although there were some signs of recovery in 2016. The sharpest downward trend is visible in Cyprus, which was at the heart of the economic crisis in 2012. All results clearly indicate the existence of new cleavages across Europe and reveal a clear distinction between socially functioning countries and states with higher levels of disintegration.

How to achieve cross-cultural equivalence

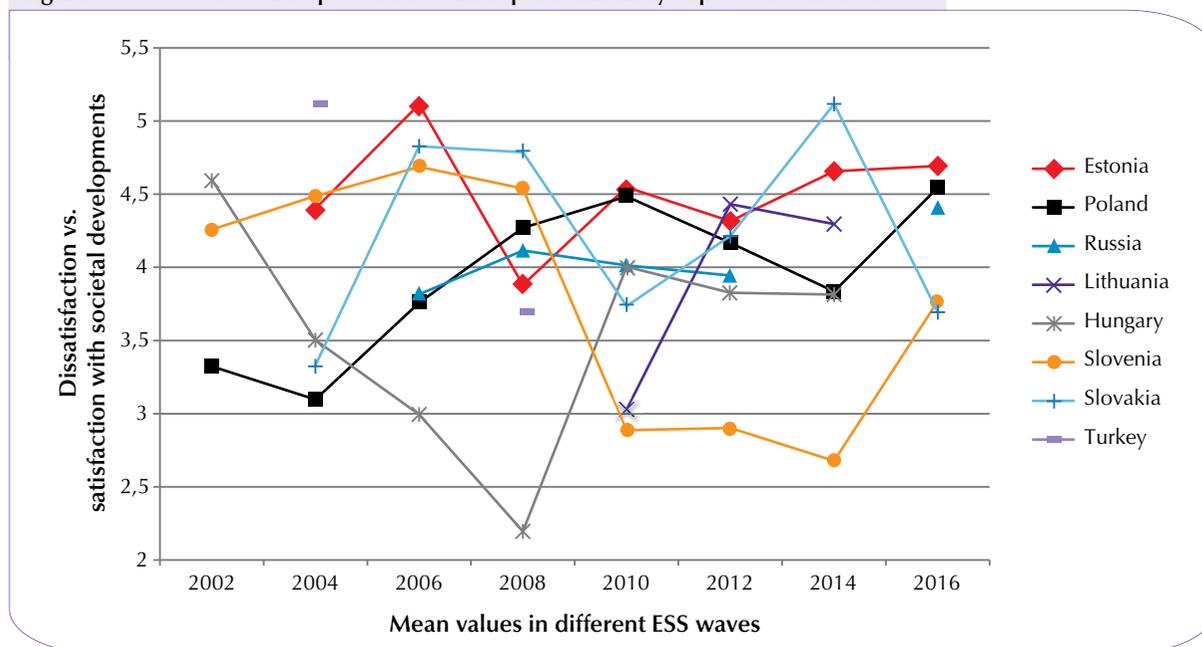
Well-being concepts can only be fruitful for cross-national research if they guarantee sufficient content validity (encompassing the most relevant dimensions of well-being)

and if they are able to prove equivalence across certain nations or cultures. Equivalence in terms of concepts means that latent constructs have to be operationalised in a way that makes the data comparable across countries or different social groups in society. However, theoretical concepts are normally far too complex to be measured with a few single indicators and thus we have to rely on scales and multiple indicators to fully operationalize our constructs.

Central approaches to deal with equivalence in well-being research

A review of current research trends on well-being reveals three main strategies to deal with comparability. The first approach, which is still quite common in research, is to fully refrain from any tests for equivalence. This problematic strategy of *neglecting comparability* and adopting an unchallenged use of Western-based conceptions is still state of the art in most approaches. I would like to highlight the example of the National Accounts of Wellbeing concept (NAOW) here. Its publications are limited to pure frequency analyses of indicators and to correlations with related characteristics without referring to the reliability of the scales or to a methodical analysis of the factorial structure of the indicators. Only a single hint in the NEF-report indicates that the proposed well-being construct

Figure 7 – Countries in Europe where citizens predominantly express dissatisfaction



Source: European Social Survey ESS data.

Interpretation: on average, in 2016, Poland recorded a dissatisfaction level of 4,5 on a scale between 0 and 10.

cannot be empirically validated and that a cross-country equivalence test would inevitably fail:

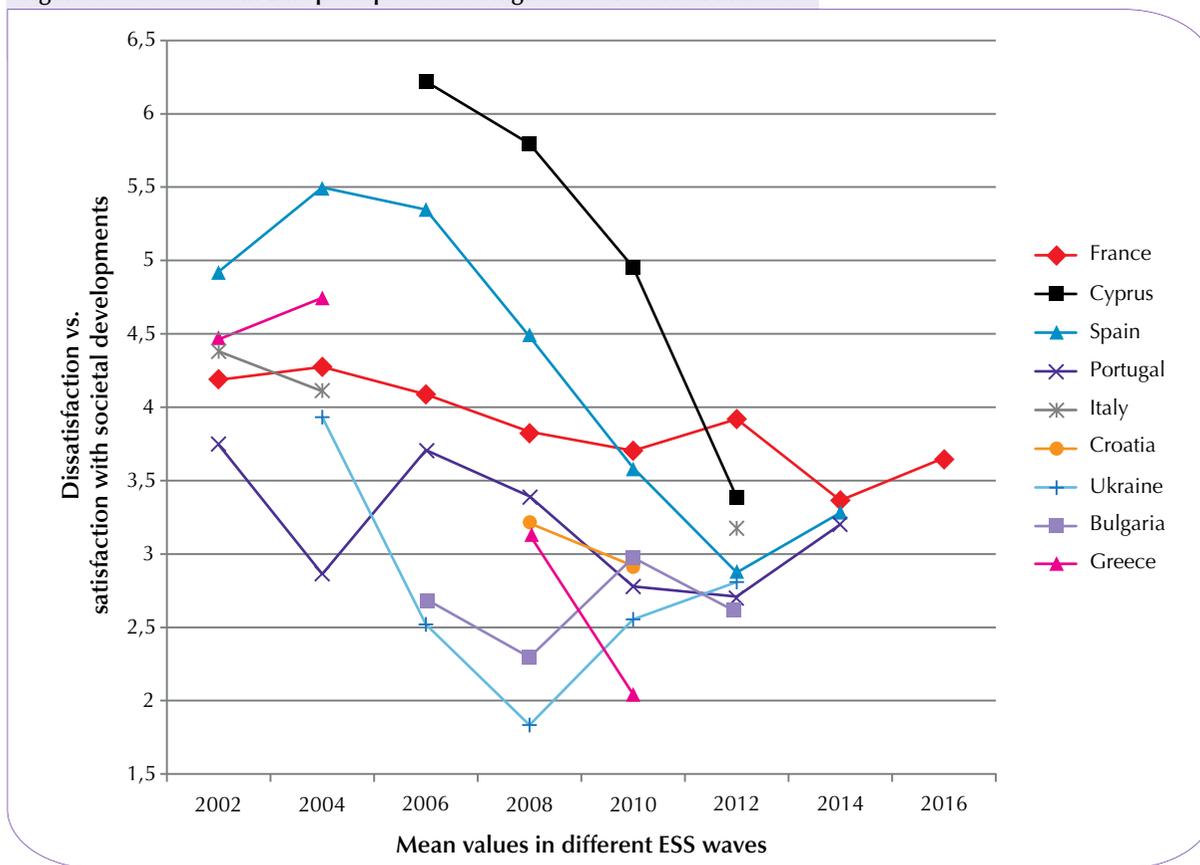
– “An attempt to use the statistical patterns of the responses to validate our structure was made using factor analyses; however these were dominated by response code effects and did not provide conclusive evidence about the underlying structure of well-being. Furthermore, factor analysis suggests that attempting to statistically determine a structure based on a cross-national sample may not be appropriate, as there are substantial differences in the shape of well-being for different nations, and these differences may distort the overall picture.” (NEF, 2009, p. 59).

The authors thus admit that their concept is not suitable for cross-cultural comparisons, but they still insist on further data aggregation and the calculation of country rankings

both for individual sub-factors and for an overarching indicator of subjective well-being.

Recognizing equivalence issues is the second main strategy in research where the proponents of new concepts try to at least address issues of comparability. In numerous research projects, a descriptive evaluation of cross-national invariance is carried out (by means of standard reliability analyses or correspondence analyses)⁽¹³⁾. Using strict methodological evaluation criteria, it is highly probable that the number of comparable indicators will need to be reduced further until a few comparable aspects remain. However, the (necessarily) broad spectrum of indicators for sophisticated comparisons ultimately suffers from major restrictions. One example is the OECD “How is life” approach to well-being, where the concept’s comparability is put to the fore. The indicators selected are mostly those that are regularly surveyed by statistical institutions, have been

Figure 8 – Countries in Europe exposed to a high level of societal malaise



Source: ESS data.

Interpretation: On average, in 2016, France recorded a societal malaise level of 3,6 on a scale between 0 and 10.

(13) In this case, at least culture-specific conclusions of item quality can be drawn. Especially in the case of newly developed instruments, this mono-cultural analysis can reveal weaknesses in the instruments.

tested for comparability, and are generally accepted as quality of life indicators (OECD, 2017, p. 22ff.). However, the OECD also addresses the challenge of equivalence by inviting citizens from participating countries to comment online on the country-specific relevance of the indicators and by allowing for subjective weighting concerning the (personal) significance of indicators.

When comparability is in the spotlight and is the overarching quality criterion, we can speak of a third strategy, the *strict approach to equivalence testing*, where one concept has to fit all cultures. Multi Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (MGCFA) is a statistical technique that seems to be the leading strategy to deal with cross-cultural invariance in survey research.

Cross-national equivalence of societal well-being

On p. 156 of this article, I used only a simple index of three indicators on societal dissatisfaction to illustrate the evolution of societal malaise in Europe in a timely comparison. However, this concept of societal well-being can also be extended to a theory-driven approach encompassing different levels of societal functioning. Table 3 provides a list of all indicators used to measure societal well-being at a subjective level in European societies. In total, fourteen indicators belonging to five subordinate factors were included in the measurement.

Political trust is a standard measurement whereby similar items regarding trust in parliament, politicians and political parties are often used in cross-national surveys. A second important concept to judge the state of society is satisfaction with societal developments. This factor consists of three items measuring satisfaction with the economy, the national government, and the way democracy works in the country⁽¹⁴⁾. Fears of societal *descent* can be measured using two items concerning pessimism about the future, while the other factor, consisting of a further three items,

predominantly deals with individual feelings of recognition in society. A potential crisis of cohesion is operationalised with the concept of social *distrust*, which is measured with three standard items in cross-national surveys. The multi-dimensional concept of societal well-being can be seen as a second-order construct and is thus composed of five first-order factors (political trust, satisfaction with society, feelings of societal progress, feelings of recognition and social trust)⁽¹⁵⁾. A confirmatory factor analysis based on the total individual sample is illustrated in figure 9 as well as the structural equation based on the total individual sample. The structural equation model is computed with the Amos program and based on the total European sample for 2012⁽¹⁶⁾.

The solution of the first order factors leads to a clear empirical distinction between the different levels⁽¹⁷⁾. All loadings of the indicators are above 0,5 (except one item loading regarding feelings of recognition), which demonstrates a high-quality measurement of latent variables. In addition, the correlations with the higher order factor of societal malaise vs. social well-being are generally substantial. Impressions of societal functioning are closely related to satisfaction with society, future optimism, and political and social trust. There is only one weaker correlation between feelings of recognition and societal well-being.

Table 3 – Measurement of societal malaise vs societal well-being

Dimensions	Indicators
Political distrust vs political trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust in parliament (ESS Code: TRSTPRL). • Trust in politicians (ESS Code: TRSTPLT). • Trust in political parties (ESS Code: TRSTPRT). (11-point scale from 0 = no trust to 10 = complete trust).
Dissatisfaction vs satisfaction with societal developments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction with economy (ESS Code: STFECO). • Satisfaction with national government (ESS Code: STFGOV). • Satisfaction with way democracy works (ESS Code: STFDDEM). (11-point scale from 0 = dissatisfaction to 10 = satisfaction).
Fear of societal descent vs feelings of societal progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to be hopeful for the future (ESS Code: NHPFTR). • Situation of people in country gets worse (ESS Code: LFWRS). (5-point scale from 1 = disagree to 5 = agree).
Lack of recognition vs feelings of recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free to decide how to live my life (ESS Code: DCLVLF). • Feel accomplishment for what I do (ESS Code: AC-CDNG). • What I do is valuable and worthwhile (ESS Code: DNGVAL). (5-point scale from 1 = disagree to 5 = agree).
Social distrust vs social trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most people can be trusted (ESS Code: PPLTRST). • Most people try to be fair (ESS Code: PPLFAIR). • Most of the time people try to be helpful (ESS Code: PPLHLP). (11-point scale from 0 = no trust to 10 = complete trust).

Source: Indicators from European Social Survey (ESS) 2012.

(14) This indicator was also used to depict trends in Europe over the last decade (see figures 5 to 8).

(15) It is proposed that the indicators clearly belong to the lower order factors while these dimensions are substantially correlated to the higher order factor of societal well-being.

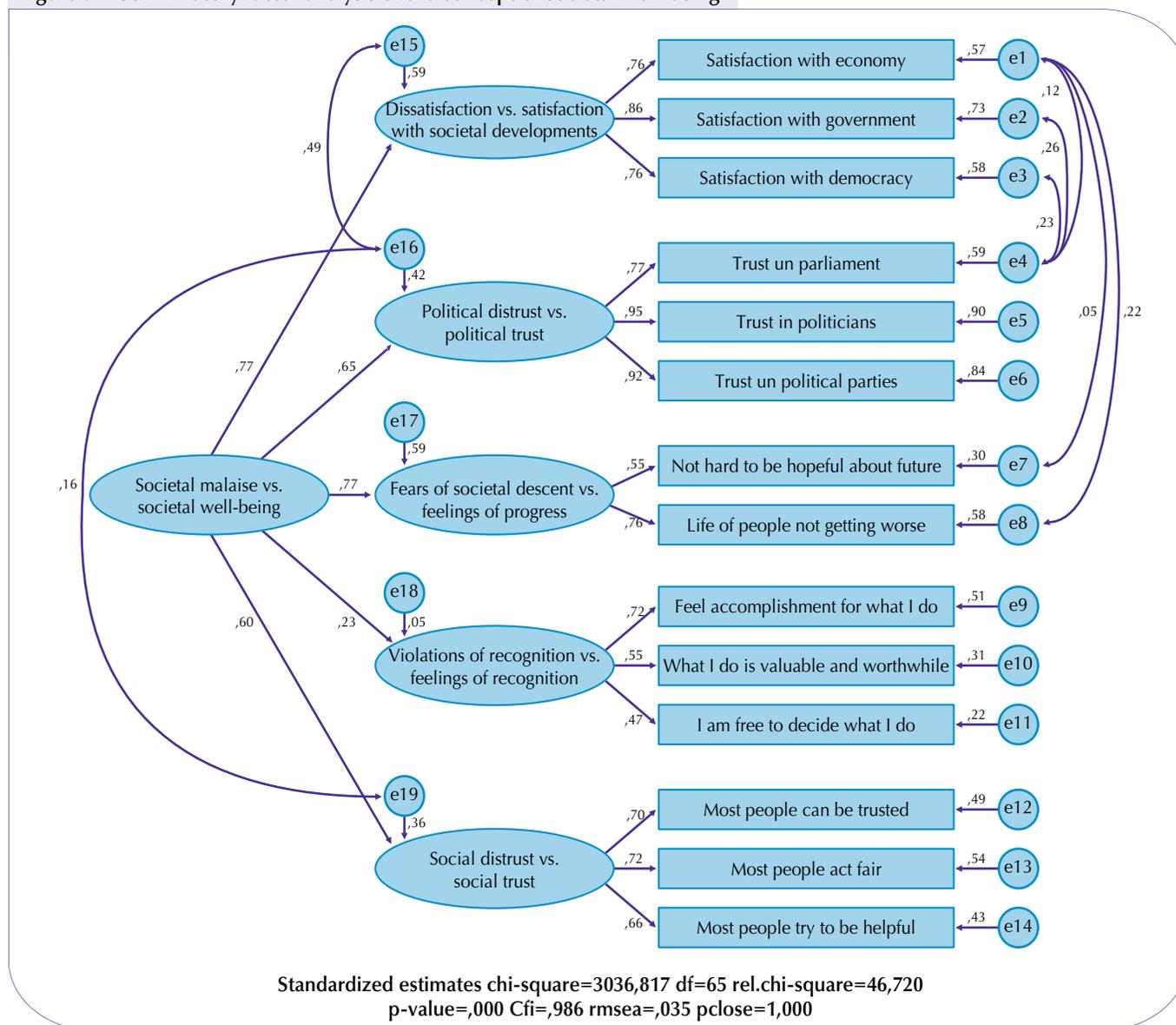
(16) A methodological box is given below the model to further explain the Goodness of Fit Indices with regard to SEM-Models.

(17) Otherwise, some high error correlations between the factors appear. From a theoretical standpoint it can be argued that trust (on the personal and political levels) correlates with a general satisfaction with societal developments.

This is plausible because recognition refers more directly to the individual level. Testing for cross-national equivalence means that the same model of societal well-being should converge in every nation state (table 4). The cultural invariance test is generally done using the MGCFA method. According to Fan Fan Chen, Karen H. Sousa and Stephen G. West (2005), measurement invariance should be tested

at different levels. In general, a bottom-up approach from weak to strict forms of equivalence is recommended. The first step of invariance testing is called “configural equivalence”. This means that the same items should belong to the construct in every single country but the factor loadings can differ. The second step of equal factor loadings between countries is called metric equivalence. This stage can only

Figure 9 – Confirmatory factor analysis of the concept of societal well-being



Source: based on total EU-sample 2012.

Interpretation: confirmatory factor analysis relies on structural equation modelling and represents the most advanced technique to empirically confirm theoretical models. Societal malaise vs. societal well-being is here seen as a second-order factor. The factor loadings illustrate the correlations of the subordinate factors with the higher-order concept and the correlations of the subordinate factors with the items at the lowest level. Several fit measures allow testing of the appropriateness of the theoretical model. The coefficients Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0,035) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0,986) are well below or above the necessary criteria (RMSEA < 0,05 and CFI > 0,90 respectively) which reflects an adequate model fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). The chi² remains too high to achieve an adequate model fit but this indicator is sensitive to large sample sizes and is therefore rarely used in cross-national survey research (Cheung and Rensvold, 2002).

be fulfilled when all first- and second-order factors constrained as equal lead to a sufficient model fit of the data⁽¹⁸⁾.

However, the means of the underlying concepts can only be compared if scalar invariance is fulfilled. To test for this highest level of equivalence, the intercepts of the items have to be constrained as equal to guarantee a high degree of comparability of the results. Recent methodological articles (Davidov et al., 2014) clearly demonstrate that full scalar invariance is rarely reached in cross-national research. Thus, several authors suggest testing for partial scalar invariance. They claim that releasing the equality constraints of a small number of indicators does not necessarily degrade the quality of mean comparisons between countries (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998; Davidov, 2010).

Applying that rules already described in detail above, “configural invariance” between all 21 EU countries, used in the ESS 2012, is given because the CFI (0,98) indicates a very high model fit. Additionally, metric invariance concerning the whole second-order model (see models 2 and 3) is also fulfilled because the CFI in model 3 is still higher than the proposed threshold (0,971 respectively). However, there is a clear decrease of the CFI value in model 4 and model 5. Nor was it possible to reach full scalar equivalence or partial scalar invariance, which is

a necessary precondition to compare the means between countries⁽¹⁹⁾. Despite the established methods to test for equivalence, MGCFA also has some weaknesses. We should be aware that this strategy maintains the assumption of universal concepts and can easily lead to a restricted content validity. The tendency is to delete several indicators or subordinate factors when only partial scalar invariance is given. This may result in a small interface of comparable items and limited content validity of the concept. When it comes to the definition of content validity, we should be aware that – in the ideal case – our central concepts should be entirely and exhaustively measured in all cultures. When we just use a small interface of comparable dimensions, we only compare incomplete parts of different worldviews.

Towards a new strategy – the cross-cultural loopway

The main procedures to cope with challenges of equivalence have shown that no common strategy reflects an ideal way to achieve comparability. With reference to well-being in particular, we should search for new strategies that are more appropriate for the field. One possibility is to focus more closely on validity instead of invariance and to establish cultural sensibility through local relevance. We should be aware that most well-being concepts are not equally relevant in all different cultural contexts, and that they cannot be measured in

Table 4 – Evaluation of cross-national equivalence

Sample	Equivalence test	Chi ² based models				Global Fit-Indices		
		Chi ²	df	Chi ² / df	Sig.	RMSEA	pclose	CFI
21 EU-Countries 2012 (model 5: release of intercept invariance concerning items 1,3,4,6,8,9,11,12,14)	Configural invariance (model 1)	5 821,4	1 344	4,33	< 0,001	0,009	1,000	0,980
	Metric invariance (model 2, first order factor loadings)	7 288,3	1 524	4,78	< 0,001	0,010	1,000	0,974
	Metric invariance (model 3: first and second order factor loadings)	8 055,6	1 604	5,02	< 0,001	0,010	1,000	0,971
	Full scalar invariance (model 4)	41 791,1	1 884	22,2	< 0,001	0,023	1,000	0,819
	Partial scalar invariance (model 5)	24 371,7	1 704	14,30	< 0,001	0,018	1,000	0,897

Source: Fit Indices based on MGCFA.

Sig.: Significance; RMSEA; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; pclose: value of criteria for closeness of fit; CFI; Comparative Fit Index. Interpretation: to assess and evaluate these different stages of equivalence, various goodness of fit measures are used in the literature. The chi² difference test should lead to insignificant changes between the models. On the other hand, the chi² test is sensitive to large sample sizes and thus not recommended for data with large sample sizes. To assess the fit of the five models, we can here analyse the changes in the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) between the models. According to Gordon W. Cheung and Roger B. Rensvold (2002), a difference larger than 0,1 in the CFI value indicates a substantial change in model fit.

(18) If this stage of metric equivalence is achieved, relations between the construct and other variables can be tested and the operationalization of societal well-being may be used for regression analysis.

(19) Yet the model was successful to establish partial scalar invariance, at least within most of the European regions and over time (between two survey waves) in most of the countries (Aschauer, 2017, for further computations).

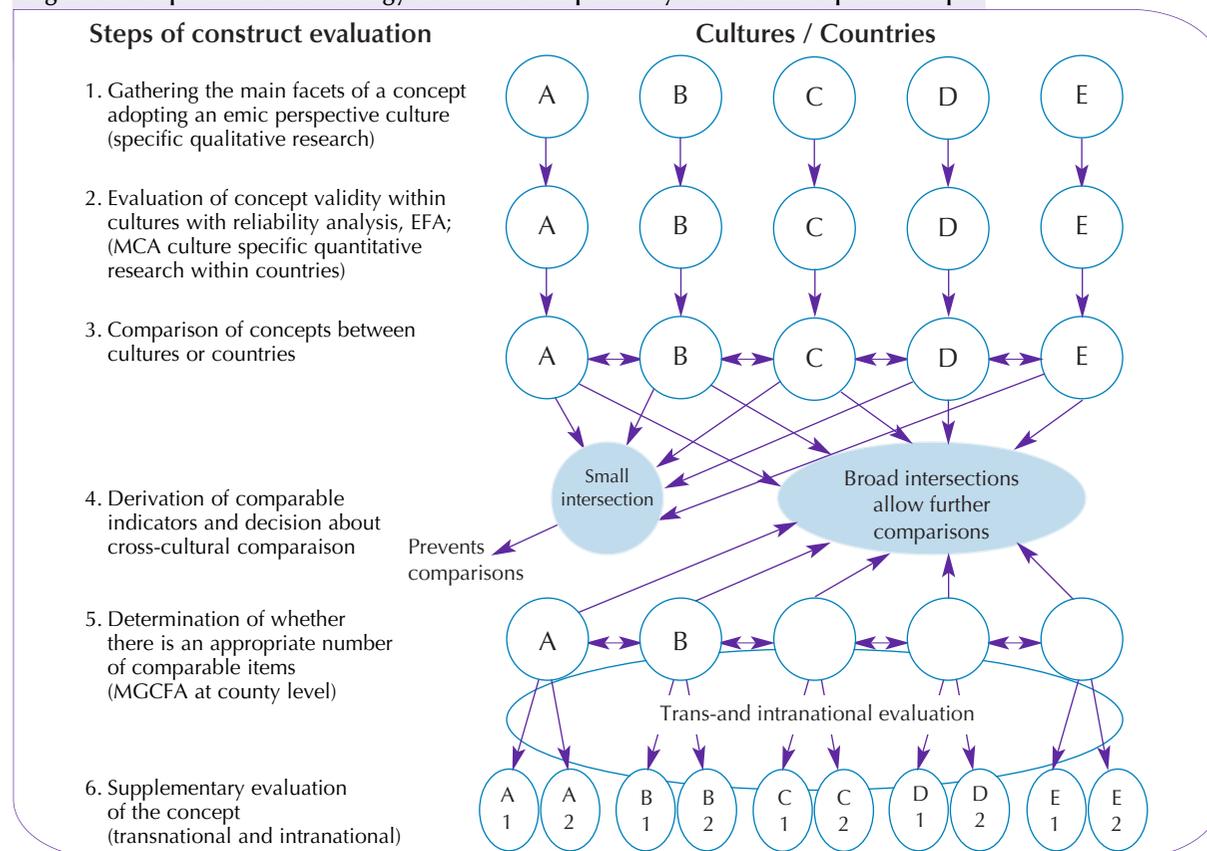
the same way. Thus, we should focus on “functional equivalence” (Bachleitner et al., 2014). This means that the methods used to define concepts and gather items need not be the same in different cultural contexts, but they must follow the same function; with other words, you can (and sometimes must) use different paths to reach the goal of comparable results. I like to call this potential new strategy the “culture-specific loop”, because we have to focus on cross-cultural equivalence instead of cross-national comparability. In our highly interconnected world (Castells, 1996), where a re-figuration of space (Knoblauch and Löw, 2017) is taking place, it is an imperative to move beyond the nation state and to develop culturally sensitive concepts that are appropriate for more fine-tuned regions, specific societal groups, and particularly other world regions. The WeD-QoL initiative can serve as a fruitful example. It represents a planned system of indicators for developing countries conceptualized on the basis of an emic research perspective. Jorge Yamamoto (2007) criticizes Western-oriented concepts as being out of touch with reality, and clearly advocates ethnographic

research. This should be conducted by researchers who are culturally involved, speak the native language and understand the on-site cultural symbols. The authors of the WeD concept also clearly opt for multiple dimensions, which is reflected in their definition of well-being.

– “Well-being is both a state and a process, and it is multi-dimensional. It cannot be simply equated with wealth, happiness or goal satisfaction. Similarly, ill-being cannot be simplistically equated with material poverty, misery or frustrated goal achievement.” (WeD, 2007, p. 2).

The culture-specific loop to achieve comparability is illustrated in figure 10. A set of five fictitious countries or cultural groups is illustrated for potential comparisons to keep the model simple. In line with the WeDQoL-Group, I propose to always gathering the main facets of a concept by adopting an emic perspective. It seems to be useful to apply qualitative research at the beginning (stage 1) to explore the most important facets of the concept in single

Figure 10 – A potential new strategy to achieve comparability – the culture-specific loop



EFA = Explanatory Factor Analysis, MCA = Multiple correspondence analysis, MGCFAt = Multi Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

countries, cultural regions or within specific groups in society (immigrants, children, elderly people). After this explorative approach it is possible to operationalize the construct in a multidimensional way for further quantitative research. Survey research may be relevant at this stage 2, but still within certain countries, cultural groups or regions. This preliminary quantitative data can be used for first evaluations of the concept (computing reliability measures, factor analysis and validity tests). If content validity seems to be fulfilled within the preferred unit of analysis, we can plan to start our comparisons, extending our concept to other countries, further social groups and even other world regions (stage 3). This equivalence test should ultimately lead to a decision of whether it is possible to derive comparable indicators or whether the concepts are inappropriate to compare our units of analysis. A small interface of comparable indicators may prevent any further comparisons, while a larger set of appropriate items or dimensions may allow us to use the concept in cross-national and cross-cultural surveys (stage 4). We can then enter the next phase of evaluating the concepts using sophisticated statistical methods. In the ideal case, we could even use MGCFA to analyse the three levels of equivalence. If scalar equivalence is fulfilled, we can – at least – compare the concepts across nations or among our preferred social groups (stage 5). However, we should be aware that “nation” does not

equal “culture”. We should target fine-tuned regions more or aim to further evaluate our concept for transnational units⁽²⁰⁾ (stage 6).

Sophisticated approaches on well-being for specific social groups are urgently needed for policy approaches in the struggle for a better world. This comes across as imperative today at a time when we are witnessing crucial shifts to a ‘post-truth’ era of politics combined with the ever-growing relevance of rapid information processing (Keyes, 2004). While it is difficult to determine crucial elements of good life in a comparative perspective, we can still aim for identifying conditions that counteract a high quality of life. Thus – in our role as researchers – we should strive for critical viewpoints based on empirical facts and draw attention to factors that impair the success of human life (see for instance Cooke, 2009, p. 118). In order not to be exposed to the dangers of ideological standpoints, new directions of empirical social research are urgently needed. In general, I propose to refrain from one-sided comparisons and to favour content validity as the most important research criterion. This would increase our efforts to conceptualize holistic approaches for specific cultural regions or societal groups. It would take us away from country rankings towards greater cultural sensitivity and from the strategy of impression management (concerning worldwide figures) to more empirically sound approaches.

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(20) When it comes to societal malaise, we can pick out many examples of people who feel left behind. Regarding Italy, it is highly plausible that the inhabitants of Southern regions have more in common with people subject to precarious living conditions in France and Spain than they do with the inhabitants of other Italian regions. It thus often seems more appropriate to adopt a transnational perspective to analyse the needs of certain social groups in a supranational European constellation.

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