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Cummins, Robert and Lau, Anna LD 2005-02, 6th Australian conference on quality of life : understanding subjective well-being, *Expert review of pharmacoeconomics and outcomes research : informing decision-making in the delivery of cost-effective healthcare*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 11-14.

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6th Australian Conference on Quality of Life: Understanding Subjective Well-being.

Cummins, Robert A, and Anna LD Lau. "6th Australian Conference on Quality of Life: Understanding Subjective Well-being." *Expert Review of Pharmacoeconomics & Outcomes Research* 5.1 (2005): 11+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 20 Dec. 2010.

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Author(s): Robert A Cummins ^{[[dagger]] 1} , Anna LD Lau ²

For the sixth consecutive year, this November conference was held in Stonington Mansion (Melbourne, Australia). This beautifully preserved, early 19th century building was home to the first Governor of Victoria and now forms part of Deakin University's, Toorak Campus. During the conference, 19 papers were delivered to the 35 registrants.

A strong theme running through this conference was the management, measurement and application of subjective life quality. The keynote speaker Robert Cummins (Deakin University), elaborated this theme in terms of subjective well-being (SWB) homeostasis. This theory accounts for the extraordinary stability in SWB by proposing a set point which, on average, sits at 75 on a 0-100 scale of perceived wellness anchored by dreadful (0) and delightful (100). Thus, people generally feel positive about themselves and their lives, and this positive outlook is defended in the face of negative challenges by a set of affective-cognitive buffers (see ^[1], for an elaborated view).

The essence of this meeting report is to highlight the nonlinear relationship between SWB and such negative challenging agents as medical ill-health and low income. Traditionally, both in researchers' minds and mandated by our common statistics, such relationships are viewed as linear. On the other hand, SWB homeostasis predicts a nonlinear relationship around a threshold. That is, at low levels of negative experience it predicts no relationship between the strength of the stressing agent and SWB. This is because homeostasis is holding SWB constant, around its set point. However, at some higher strengths, the stressor will exceed the homeostatic capacity of the system. At this point the homeostasis threshold will be breached and SWB will fall.

Evidence in support of the threshold concept was presented using the stressors of body mass index: pain and anxiety. For each of these, a plateau could be discerned, such that increasing strength of the stress at low-to-medium levels was not associated with any reliable decrease in SWB. Then, once the threshold was breached, higher levels of the stressor caused SWB to decrease. These results support the idea of genetically determined set points for SWB and a homeostatic management system.

Exactly how this management system works, however, and what mechanism is responsible for the set point, remain matters of conjecture. A model published by Cummins, Gullone and Lau ^[2] and, Cummins and Nistico ^[1] proposes that the set point is determined by personality, through a balance between extraversion and neuroticism. This hypothesis now appears to have been falsified. Melanie Davern (Deakin University) used structural modeling to determine the relative influence of personality, core affect and cognition to predict SWB. To measure personality she used the five factors derived from the NEO-Personality Inventory ^[3]. Core affect is a new construct, recently described by Russell ^[4] as free-floating affect, not

directed at any particular object. It is, however, consciously accessible as a nonreflective feeling that is an integral blend of hedonic (pleasure-displeasure) and arousal values, consistent with the circumplex model of affect (for a review of affect see ^[5]). Through a series of prior studies, Davern established that the four affects that most strongly predicted SWB were happiness, satisfaction, contentment and dissatisfaction. These became her measure of core affect. Cognition was measured by the seven want-need discrepancies described by Multiple Discrepancies Theory ^[6].

While each of the three predictors were highly correlated with SWB, the strongest predictor was core affect, which explained 66% of the variance. Moreover, when the three predictors were placed into a structural model, neither personality nor discrepancies explained significant unique variance in SWB beyond core affect. From this Davern concludes not only that SWB is primarily composed of pleasant affect, but also that core affect is responsible for the homeostatic set point.

Quality of life at work

Quality of work life has been a major topic of research interest over the past 50 years (for reviews see ^[7,8]), and the literature base is vast. Even by 1974, the US Department of Labor found 3350 publications on this topic. A novel approach to this area was proposed by Pieter Kriel (AUSPACE, Australia) who suggests that ethics in the workplace is a major contributor to job satisfaction. Furthermore, that the cause of this linkage lies within our genes.

There is certainly considerable evidence to support the existence of genetically programmed demands for justice and fairness in everyday life. This is exemplified by such basic programming as tit-for-tat (for a review see ^[10]) where injustice is best met with immediate punishment in order to ensure future cooperation. However, while this may be adaptive in the context of the family or tribal groups in which it evolved, it may well be maladaptive in the workplace.

As Kriel points out, structured employment is a very modern invention, and whatever behavioral programs our genes provide for managing social interaction and mutual expectations of performance may be unsuited to the work environment. Tattling, or revenge behavior in response to wrongdoing, may be effective in a mutually dependent group such as a family, but not in the context of a hierarchical workplace structure where a strong power differential protects the higher-order group members. In such an environment it is common for people to experience a loss of personal control ^[9], and the delivery of a tat up the hierarchy is more likely to result in the loss of employment than future management cooperation.

So, it might be expected that notions of fairness would feature strongly as determinants of job satisfaction. And this seems to be the case. Job satisfaction is known to be related to such workplace perceptions as distributive justice and trust ^[10-12]. Indeed, it is now known that employees and employers impose elaborate and unspoken psychological contracts upon one another ^[13,14]. These comprise elaborate and imagined reciprocal obligations, such as hard work will be rewarded by job security. Transgression of such contracts can have a devastating impact on employer-employee relationships.

Interestingly, it may well be the case that the people most affected by broken psychological contracts are those who, in other circumstances, make the best employees. People high in

extraversion tend to have a high job satisfaction. They are motivated people with a high need for, and sensitivity to, rewards^[15]. This attribute then, turns into the problem when the contract is broken. Even a level of reward that is less than expected (frustrated non-reward^[16]) will be seen as punishment, and job satisfaction will plummet as a consequence.

Loneliness & social capital

Much has been made of social capital in recent years. Catalyzed by *Bowling Alone*^[17], the idea that people gain by forming close, interdependent communities has generated much research interest (for a review see^[18]). Loneliness results when social capital fails.

The theory of homeostasis predicts that there should be a poor relationship between objective measures of social connectedness and SWB. Since SWB is a managed system, levels of well-being should be held constant over a wide range of objective circumstances. There should, however, be a much stronger relationship between SWB and the perception of being socially disconnected.

Data consistent with this prediction were presented by Dianne Vella-Brodrick, Evelyn Scannell, Sue Burney and Fiona Judd (Monash University, Australia). They studied people in Victoria (Australia) who were living in either rural or urban settings and they found that, while the actual level of community participation was not related to SWB, it was strongly predicted by satisfaction with community and the perceived level of support from the community. Thus, the effective component of social capital that supports personal well-being is perceptual not behavioral.

A different concern about social capital is how to define community. This is a vexed issue since people can feel a sense of community in relation to their neighborhood, a dispersed network living throughout a city (e.g., ethnic community) or throughout the world (e.g., internet group). However, the most powerful of these may well be neighborhood since this has the greatest capacity to offer immediate, predictable and tangible support in times of need. How, then, can the social capital of a neighborhood be defined?

This challenge has been taken up by Susan Chambers (Deakin University), who has developed a scale based on the International Well-being Index which defines well-being in terms of Personal and National Well-being^[102]. Chambers has attempted to define an intermediate conceptual space by creating a Neighborhood Well-being Index. Two studies, each involving over 500 people, confirmed the factorial separation of this new index from the other two subscales. A multiple regression of the seven domains against the item satisfaction with neighborhood as a whole explained over 50% of the variance. It is also interesting that the Personal Index domain of 'feeling connected to your community' deflected from the personal factor to join the Neighborhood Index. This is as it should be and gives further credibility to the Neighborhood Index as defining and measuring this conceptual space.

A different approach to measuring aspects of social capital was described by Graeme Hawthorne (University of Melbourne, Australia) in the development of the Friendship Scale. This brief 6-item scale, which measures social isolation, has excellent psychometric qualities. Using a large population sample of older adults, Hawthorne reports that 15% of these people feel socially isolated and only 40% are very socially connected. Such results are surely symptomatic of our age. Humans are social animals and the increasing population drift to low

levels of inter-relationships is certainly linked to the worsening mental health of our society, most particularly evidenced by the rising incidence of depression.

Linked to this is the clear demographic trend in Australia for people to live alone through choice. In many ways this offers the potential of an indulgent living environment where personal primary control is unchallenged. But there are two downsides. The first is in terms of physical resources. Data from the Australian Unity Well-being Index indicate that people who live alone and who earn less than US\$60,000 per annum place their personal well-being at risk ^[19]. This is an issue of demands and resources. If the financial resources are insufficient to meet the demands of the single-dwelling lifestyle, then stress is a consequence.

There are also, of course, people who live alone not through choice but necessity. These people are usually very poorly socially connected and include recent migrants who have a poor grasp of English, people who have a psychiatric illness, and people who are elderly who have lost their partner. John Western and Rod McCrea (University of Queensland, Australia) presented a paper showing how social capital works for such people to reduce their sense of social isolation. Unfortunately, of course, the very people who would benefit most from an increased level of social connection are the ones for whom this aspect of life is the most difficult to foster. As a consequence, many of these people have low levels of two major resources, money and relationships, which are the most effective in buffering the negative challenges of living. For this reason they are highly susceptible to depression.

The second downside to single-living is the danger that social support may not be available when it is needed most. This applies particularly for males, who do not make socially-supportive nonsexual relationships as readily as females. Their social life can comprise fair-weather friends, who are there when the going is good, but fail to provide adequate support when personal difficulties need to be shared.

This gender disparity is made more poignant by the knowledge that males also engage in riskier behavior than females, thereby more frequently requiring the support of good friends when failure is encountered. Richard Ronay and Do-Yeong Kim (both Macquarie University, Australia) confirmed this risk-taking bias not in terms of the male-female demographic but in terms of gender. Using a multimethod approach, they found no difference between males and females in their attitude towards risk or risk behavior. However, strong differences were found when sex was defined by the construct of masculinity. This finding enriches our understanding of sex differences and adds to a large literature supporting the idea that investigating such determinants through the demographic dichotomy of male/female is far too simplistic to allow much power in explaining psychological mechanisms. The constructs of masculinity and femininity, on the other hand, are continuous variables that not only transcend the sex dichotomy but also get closer to the real source of differences in thought and behavior.

So, if life as a single male is riskier for well-being than for single females, does this mean that the overall level of well-being for males is lower than for females? Repeated surveys in Australia indicate that this is so ^[19]. Despite the received wisdom from surveys in North America and Europe indicating no gender difference, in Australia, the Personal Well-being Index shows an approximate 2% point advantage to females, which is a highly statistically significant difference. Nor is this due to a general positivity bias on the part of women. No sex difference is found in the National Well-being Index.

In order to determine whether these Australian results are due to the use of the Personal Well-being Index or a cultural oddity, Annette Svanberg-Miller (Deakin University, Australia) conducted a cross-cultural investigation using data from the International Well-being Group. This group comprises some 80 researchers from 40 countries and has the aim of developing the Personal Well-being Index into a valid cross-cultural measure of SWB ^[103]. Svanberg-Miller used data from ten countries, supplied by members of the group, to show considerable variation in the direction and strength of the gender difference. It is therefore apparent that the male/female difference in personal well-being is driven by social circumstances and culture. It is possible that the classification of countries in terms of this gender difference may provide useful insights into the consequences of different societal structures in terms of male and female well-being.

Conclusions

The studies reported at this conference have advanced understanding about the management of SWB. The relevant results are consistent with SWB as a managed system, which strives to maintain personal well-being around a set point. However, it appears that this set point is determined not, as previously thought, by personality, but by core affect.

In terms of measurement, two new scales have been described. One measures the construct of neighborhood well-being and the other measures loneliness. Each scale has the potential to advance understanding of how social capital works and how its component parts covary with personal well-being.

Finally, attention has been drawn to several areas highly relevant to the search for key links of SWB with other variables. These include, connectedness to other people, ethical behavior and gender differences. Importantly, however, it is the subjective perceptions attached to each of these areas, rather than their objective characteristics, that has the highest relevance for personal well-being.

Information resources

- * Email address for Evelyn Scannell evelyn.scannell@med.monash.edu.au
- * Email address for Sue Burney sue.burney@med.monash.edu.au
- * Email address for Fiona Judd fiona.judd@med.monash.edu.au
- * Email address for Susan Chambers smc@deakin.edu.au
- * Email address for Graeme Hawthorne graemeh@unimelb.edu.au
- * Email address for John Western j.western@uq.edu.au
- * Email address for Rod McCrea r.mccrea@uq.edu.au
- * Email address for Richard Ronay rronay@bigpond.net.au
- * Email address for Do-Yeong Kim Do-Yeong.Kim@psy.mq.edu.au

* Email address for Annette Svanberg-Miller asva@deakin.edu.au

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Author Affiliation(s):

¹ Professor of Psychology, Deakin University, School of Psychology, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia. cummins@deakin.edu.au

² Assistant Professor, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China. rsalau@inet.polyu.edu.hk

Author Note(s):

[dagger] *Author for correspondence*

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