Can wellbeing be measured?

Is it possible to measure wellbeing? What types of measures should we include?

The possibility of measuring changes in national ‘wellbeing’ raises a number of serious sociological questions and some fascinating methodological issues. First, what exactly does wellbeing mean? It certainly involves an evaluation of how we feel about and experience our lives. But should we use wellbeing mean? It certainly involves an evaluation of how we feel — as part of the assessment? Or should we emphasise instead only — such as rates of crime and levels of poverty in different societies — as part of the assessment? Or should we emphasise instead only subjective accounts — such as to what extent people say they feel fearful of crime, or say they are generally happy with their lives?

Measuring wellbeing is argued to help support governments and their partners to measure ‘real’ change by directly capturing people’s experience of their lives rather than using proxy indicators. But assessing the validity of what people say about their experiences and feelings has long been a bone of contention in sociological analysis. Applying ‘objective’ measures also has its acute problems: there is no national ‘average’ experience of crime, for example, because crime rates differ so much between neighbourhood areas.

Measures of wellbeing

The National Wellbeing Programme began in the Office for National Statistics in the UK in November 2010 aiming to: ‘develop and publish an accepted and trusted set of National Statistics which help people understand and monitor wellbeing’. The programme uses both objective and subjective measures taken from a range of different national surveys and has developed a set of 41 headline measures organised into ten ‘domains’. These include topics such as ‘Health’, ‘What we do’ and ‘Where we live’. Measures are updated with the latest data in March and September each year. Figure 1 is an ‘infographic’ which shows some measures taken from the latest data collected in the UK.

Figure 1 UK wellbeing, 2014

Life in the UK

March 2014

Natural environment

43.2%

said they rated their life satisfaction agreement with others in the UK in 2013

Personal wellbeing

77%

and their partners to measure ‘real’ change by directly capturing people’s experience of their lives rather than using proxy indicators.

Our relationships

87%

people in the UK in 2013

Governance

24%

if they had a problem with their accommodation in 2013

Education and skills

9.3%

people aged 16 to 64 had no qualifications in 2013

Economy

£20,725

the median household income per head in the UK in 2012

Personal finance

10.9%

in the last 12 months in the UK in 2013

Where we live

91.2%

people lived with their accommodation in England in 2013

Life satisfaction

Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Distribution of responses (UK, 2012/13)

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS), Office for National Statistics. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v2.0

Figure 2 Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Distribution of responses (UK, 2012/13)

Trust in government

Recently, too, material on measures of national wellbeing has been collected for use in international comparisons. As part of the ‘governance’ domain, for example, people across the EU were asked about the extent to which they had trust in their government (Figure 3). Having for a long time been below the EU average, in the autumn of 2013 just under one-quarter (24%) of people aged 15 and over in the UK said they tended to trust their government, slightly higher than the EU-28 average of 23%. The highest proportion of reported trust was in Sweden (57%) and the lowest in Spain (9%), followed by Greece, Italy and Slovenia (10%). Between 2004 and 2013, the proportion of people who said they trusted in government in the UK and the EU peaked in spring 2007 at 34% and 41% respectively, but the proportions have remained below these peaks since.

Figure 3 Trust in national government in the EU and UK (2004–13)

Conclusions

Wellbeing is undoubtedly a slippery concept and arguments will continue among sociologists and policy makers about what ‘wellbeing’ actually is and whether and how we can measure it. But it looks like public discussions about local and national indicators of wellbeing are here to stay. Moreover, measures of wellbeing are likely to be used increasingly by government as a convenient means of assessing the state of the nation.

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