

RC55

NEWSLETTER

Social Indicator Matters

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1. The First Measurement of Happiness in Psychological Science

The First Measurement of Happiness in Psychological Science

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Background. The following discussion of Watson (1930) concerns one of the most remarkable papers in the history of research into subjective wellbeing (SWB). It is truly ground-breaking. The fact Watson’s paper has been cited only 150 times over the 91 years since it was published indicates the tragic extent to which SWB researchers feel they must seek the most recent papers to cite, rather than being informed of the historical antecedents

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of their research. The result, for the literature, is an endless repetition of published findings as though they are novel, whereas in truth their findings are often so well documented as to make such repetition scientifically trivial.

Watson cites no references in his text, and declares "it extraordinary almost beyond belief that so few attempts have been made to apply the techniques of psychological study to the understanding of happiness" (p. 79). If this is so, and I have no reason to doubt Watson's claim, then his study is indeed the first to apply the principles of psychological measurement to happiness. Not only that, but it is an excellently conducted study for its time, that revealed many of the empirical associations of happiness that form the basis of SWB research today.

My comments are in two parts. First to examine the methodology Watson used to measure happiness, and to compare his results with contemporary norms. The second part is to examine the set of 38 hypotheses derived from his results.

Comments on methodology and empirical results. The successful approach to theory formation in psychology has been fundamentally reductionist, aimed at understanding the basic structure and operational character of line spacing the simplest psychological variables that display reliable stability of either association or level. This spirit of enquiry drove Watson's (1930) study into the single affect of happiness. His newly minted measurement scale comprised six measures of self-rated happiness. His validity assumption, in creating these measures, was that: "the individual is called happy if he believes himself happier than most others of like age and sex, if he believes his prevailing moods cheerful, his spirits high, his satisfactions lasting, his days full of interesting and amusing things, his prevalent attitudes described by such words as "enthusiastic," "jolly," "tranquil," "joyful," "fortunate," or "well-integrated." (p.79).

His resulting composite instrument of six items represented the above characteristics, and could be likely completed in 5-10 minutes. Several of the items used rating scales to generate data and "Each graphic rating scale was scored by a scale of units ranging from 0 at the most unhappy extreme to 100 at the happiest extreme with 50 in the middle" (p.82). While Freyd (1923) had introduced the Graphic Rating Scale in deciles (0 to 10), Watson was the first to apply this technology to happiness measurement. It is notable that this form of response scale preceded the 5-choice scale of Likert (1932), which continues to dominate rating scale design. It is only quite recently that the numerical, decile form has come back into favor with the realization that 11-choice (0 to 10), unipolar response scales yield superior

measurement sensitivity with no loss of reliability (Cummins 2021n). Watson obtained his data from a sample of 388 graduate students.

In addition to using rating scales, other items required various forms of response, including one open-ended qualitative item. As one consequence of this mixed response format, assembling the data from each person into a single scale, to produce their 'happiness rating', proved challenging. Various means were employed which included seeking the opinion of a committee to determine comparative adjectival ratings, item weightings, subtracting negative item scores from positive item scores, etc.

Watson then checked the internal reliability of his scale by creating two sub-scale scores, each derived from a different sub-set of items. Application of the Spearman-Brown formula, which provides a correlation corrected for test-length, yielded reliabilities of .83 and .85. He concluded that "that the measure is reasonably consistent, throughout" (p.83). Given the heterogeneous construction of the scale items, this level of reliability is extraordinary and Watson needs to be credited with developing the first reflective measurement scale for happiness. But this was not his most remarkable result.

His Table 2 presents a distribution of individual happiness scores, derived from the whole scale, on a range that extends from 100 to 380 units. The median value is 273 units. Using the formula provided in the Personal Wellbeing Index Manual (PWI: International Wellbeing Group 2013) this value converts to a score of 71.84 percentage points (pp) on a 0 to 100 percentage point scale. This median score is just below the normative range for the PWI using Australian data (mean 75.43pp, normative range 74.13 to 76.73pp) and is a close approximation to the level generally reported for graduate students.

It might seem incredible that the cumbersome, mixed method instrument used by Watson some 80 years ago in the USA to measure 'happiness' produced such comparable results to the PWI for contemporary graduate students in Austria and the Australian normative data for the PWI (Khor, Fuller-Tyszewicz et al. 2020) which measures 'satisfaction'. But this result is no coincidence. It is caused by the domination of each 'happiness' and 'satisfaction' response by their content of Homeostatically Protected Mood, as demonstrated and explained by Cummins, Capic et al. (2018a).

Conclusion. Watson's 1930 study produced the first numerical, end-defined rating scale to measure general happiness, the first multi-item, reflective scale to measure happiness and, in retrospect, results demonstrating that these measures were valid. This is truly a

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remarkable publication. It deserves to be known by all contemporary researchers using measures of subjective wellbeing, with a view to acknowledging the original source of coinciding results. A standing ovation seems in order.

References

- Cummins, R. A., Capic, T., Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, M., Hutchinson, D., Olsson, C. A. and Richardson, B. 2018. Why Self-Report Variables Inter-Correlate: the Role of Homeostatically Protected Mood. *Journal of Well-Being Assessment* 2:93-114.
- Khor, S., M. Fuller-Tyszkiewicz and D. Hutchinson. 2020. Australian normative data – Subjective wellbeing. In *Personal wellbeing index manual* (6th ed.), Deakin University, Australian Centre on Quality of Life.
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2. Information from the ISA Research Council: Upcoming ISA congresses and postponement of elections

The year 2021 has been very busy for the International Sociological Association in general and the ISA Research Council in particular. The ISA Research Council which is composed of representatives of all research committees normally meets just once every two years, namely at the ISA World Congress and at the ISA Forum of Sociology. Over the past ten months, however, the Research Council became rather active and has established itself as an important actor within ISA. Using the new possibilities offered by virtual meetings a total of five half-day online meetings were organized in response to the challenges of the current covid-19 situation. As RC55 delegate, I represented our research committee in these meetings and consultations. The first of these meetings took place in March 2021 following the online Porto Alegre Forum, and the last was held in mid-December. In the first meeting the experiences of the online Porto Alegre Forum have been discussed, the second and third meetings dealt with the date and the format of the next World Congress of Sociology (2022 or 2023, online or on-site). The fourth meeting discussed the format of the next Forum of Sociology (online or on-site) and in the December 2021 meeting the roles and missions of the ISA secretariat and the ISA online communication and social media strategy have been

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debated. What follows is a brief summary of the most important outcomes and decisions of these meetings.

➤ *Research Council evaluation of the Porto Alegre Forum*

The ISA Forum is mainly a conference run by the research committees, working groups and thematic groups. For the Porto Alegre Online Forum over 800 panels were organized and 3525 participants from over 100 countries attended the conference (56% female participants, 25% students; 59% of participants were from category A countries, 33% from category B, and 9% from category C). Overall, the Research Council considered that the virtual Forum was a success and “better than expected”. The virtual platform worked well and was easy to use.^[1] A positive point mentioned by several research committees was the stronger presence of participants from the Global South compared to the previous (on-site) congresses. However, most research committees also observed that the audience participating in the sessions was generally smaller than in the previous on-site congresses. This may be related to the fact that most participants had to combine the Forum with teaching, regular university commitments and family commitments. Most delegates of the research committees considered the Forum registration fees and the ISA membership fees to be too high and asked to lower them for future forums and congresses. Several research committees asked to compress the time period between the call for sessions, the call for abstracts and the congress and to be consulted on the calendar of the congress. Finally, most research committees favored a hybrid format for the next ISA congresses.

➤ *Decisions on the date and format of the upcoming ISA World Congress and on the postponement of the elections*

On May 1st, the ISA Assembly of Councils (i.e. the members of the Research Council and of the National Association Council representing the national associations) decided to postpone the ISA World Congress to June 2023 and to hold it on-site in Melbourne, rather than virtually. Consequently, the next Forum of Sociology will also be postponed by one year (i.e. to 2025). The Assembly of Councils also decided to postpone elections to 2023, i.e. to extend by one year the mandate of all elected ISA and RC/WG/TG officers, and to extend individual memberships by one year. These decisions correspond to the results of an ISA-wide survey, where 72% of respondents preferred postponing the Melbourne World Congress to 2023. This view has been shared by members in both, the Global North and the Global South, with a

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somewhat higher preference for postponement in the Global North. The delegates of nearly all of the research committees, working groups, and thematic groups were in favor of postponing (91%), just like most of the delegates of the National Assembly (71%).

These decisions mean that all the officers of the RC55 board that were elected for the 2018-2022 term will serve until 2023. Although current officers' mandates have been extended to 5 years, the next ordinary elections of RC55 (that will be held in 2023) will be again for 4-year terms.

➤ *Discussions on the format of the next ISA Forum*

The format of the next ISA Forum (2025) has been extensively discussed by the delegates of the Research Council and a list of the main arguments for both, on-site (strengthening of networking, exchanging ideas, developing dialogues, the on-site format could be combined with a (partial) online participation, etc.) and online options (increasing inclusiveness, reduction of costs, reduction of carbon footprint, increasing flexibility and organizational autonomy for individual research committees, etc.) has been established. The final vote of the delegates of the Research Council was almost evenly split between the two options (37% for on-site preference, 35% for online preference, 28% equal support for both options), and there is a strong will of the research committees, working groups, and thematic groups to support the Forum process whatever format it takes. The Research Council considers it essential to adapt the ISA Forum format to take better in consideration three crucial criteria: inclusiveness, environment (lowering our carbon footprint) and integrating online innovations (even for an on-site Forum).

➤ *Concluding remarks*

In 2021, the Research Council has become a space to express the voices of the research committees, working groups, and thematic groups and to discuss and take part in decisions on central issues of ISA. It also served to share experiences, ideas and opinions about ISA and as a platform for research committees, working groups, and thematic groups to take initiatives. ISA president Sari Hanafi attended the meetings, listened to the suggestions, proposals and requests by RC presidents and delegates and informed them about the 2022/23 congress preparation process. The meetings were able to build trust and improve mutual understanding between ISA and its research committees, working groups, and thematic groups whose leaders expressed

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a feeling of not being heard or consulted sufficiently. These meetings have paved the way for more systematic consultations of the research committee leaders, better communication/information to the RCs about ISA, and a better understanding of the way ISA works.

3. Report on the RC55 Mid-term Conference on “Indicators of social sustainability and wellbeing”, Fiesole/Florence, April 22-23, 2021

Conference topic, organization and attendance

Sustainability, including its social dimension, has become one of the most urgent and debated issues over the past years, both in scientific research and at the policymaking level. Within the framework of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) sustainability indicator and monitoring tools have been initiated and established at the global and national, but also at the regional, local, and community levels. The measurement of complex and multifaceted phenomena like (social) sustainability and wellbeing is a challenging endeavor that has kept scholars and scientists busy over the past years and decades. Of particular importance for RC55 and its mid-term conference are the focus on social and relational aspects of wellbeing, but also the complex relationships between (the different components of) sustainability and wellbeing.

The RC55 mid-term conference 2021 has been organized in collaboration with another association, the *Italian Association for Quality of Life Studies* (Associazione Italiana per gli Studi sulla Qualità della Vita / AIQUAV), in order to open up RC55 to other research communities. Originally, it has been planned to meet in Fiesole/Florence. Due to the covid-19 situation it has, unfortunately, not been possible for most participants to travel to Florence. The 2021 RC55 mid-term conference, therefore, has been fully organized in an online format (although some Italian colleagues have been present on-site at the conference venue in Florence).

The conference took place on April 22-23, 2021. It included four 2-hour sessions with a total of 22 paper presentations, in addition to an opening session. The sessions have been recorded and made available for the participants for a limited time (for personal use only). The organization of the conference (including the virtual platform) has been provided by the Florence based *Executive Congress Srl*. Overall, the virtual platform worked quite well and the online format provided space for lively and productive discussions and debates. About 50 participants attended the four sessions; the audience of the individual sessions varied

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between 10-20 people – which is somewhat smaller than in previous RC55 on-site conferences.

Financial support by an ISA RC activities grant

The Mid-term conference has been supported by the International Sociological Association by an ISA Research Committees' activities grant (of Euro 880), which has been used for the conference organization provided by *Executive Congress Srl.* (notably conference platform including free access for all conference participants and the technical support provided during the conference, but also for assistance in preparing the conference program and the book of abstracts).

Conference publications

The conference proceedings with the book of abstracts have been published online in pdf format. A selection of the papers presented at the RC55 mid-term conference will be published in a forthcoming special issue on "Indicators of Social Sustainability and Wellbeing" in the *Sustainability* journal. This special issue will be coordinated by the responsible conference organizer, Enrico di Bella (University of Genoa).

Concluding remarks

This mid-term conference has been the first online conference organized by our research committee. Although we have missed informal discussions and the beautiful location of the study center on the hills over Florence, the virtual mid-term conference has been very successful and the RC55 board is happy that the conference could take place despite these difficult times.

Christian Suter, President RC55

Enrico di Bella, local coordinator of the organizing conference committee

4. New publications authored by members

- Georg P. Mueller (University of Fribourg, Switzerland) recently published:
 - a). Georg P. Mueller (2021). Entropy Measures of Social Mobility: The Example of the Intergenerational Transmission of Education (= FORS Working Paper 2021-3). Lausanne: FORS. [DOI: 10.24440/FWP-2021-00003](https://doi.org/10.24440/FWP-2021-00003)
- Oliver Nahkur (University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia) recently published:

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- a). Nahkur, Oliver; Casas, Ferran (2021). Fit and Cross-Country Comparability of Children's Worlds Psychological Well-Being Scale Using 12-Year-Olds Samples. *Child Indicators Research*, 14 (6), 2211–2247. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-021-09833-0>
- b). Kutsar, Dagmar; Nahkur, Oliver (2021). Subjective well-being of children in the context of family change in Estonia, Poland and Romania. In: Castrén, A.-M., Cesnūityte, V., Crespi, I., Gauthier, J.-A., Gouveia, R., Martin, C., Moreno Mínguez, A., Suwada, K. (Ed.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Family Sociology in Europe* (399–414). Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73306-3_20



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