The Conundrums of Happiness and Subjective Well-being: Views from Brazil

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Introduction
In this issue of MGDR the authors tackle a topic that has attracted multidisciplinary academic interest as well as a good deal of general and popular public attention. This is the topic of ‘Happiness’ (in popular parlance), or Subjective Well-being (to use one of the social science terminologies). Here are some examples – selective and illustrative – of the academic interest in this issue:

- Happiness has become a major theme of life consultants, gurus, advice-dispensing authors, and motivational speakers (see Dolan 2014; Rao 2022).
- A detailed multidisciplinary review of happiness, written in a way to be accessible to a variety of readers, by Haybron (2020), is a good starting point for delving into this topic, especially since it provides the philosophical history of the concept also.
- Psychology has created a special subdiscipline, positive psychology, to advance our knowledge of the psychological aspects of happiness (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 2014).
- Economists have found that, while being poor has a negative effect on happiness or subjective well-being, there is no gain (and even a decline) in happiness after a certain comfortable middle-income level is reached (Graham 2005; Stutzer and Frey 2010).
- There is even a precise, engineering-oriented approach to happiness proposed by Baucells and Sarin (2012).

And, some examples of popular interest in this issue:

- Happiness rankings of nations get reported on an annual basis, with the Scandinavian nations usually occupying the top several ranks.
- The movies and television shows with ‘happiness’ in the title often tend to take fictional and cynical approaches to the idea of happiness.
- The small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has developed the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), and its people and administrators, despite the low income levels of the population and fairly high inequality, continue to believe in this concept (see McCarthy 2018).
The authors in this issue of MGDR present their views on the topic of subjective well-being (or happiness), from one of the most important developmental settings in the world, and the most important national setting in South America, viz., Brazil.

The next sections take a closer look at the contributions on the topic of Subjective Well-being. While the context is Brazil, the concerns are of course global, affecting government policies and marketing strategies as well as daily lives of people.

**Article in this Issue**

In this issue, the final one of Volume 6, Farias and Leite (2021) empirically analyze the role of the marketing system on the subjective well-being of consumers, in the Brazilian context. Through a qualitative inquiry, the authors show the discrepancies in the well-being of consumers, especially between the rich who hold the majority of wealth in the country and the poor who make up the majority of the population but hold a small fraction of the wealth. They discuss the implications of unfair income distribution and lack of public investment in the poorer regions of the country. They also point at the low level of education of the majority of people in the country, making them even more vulnerable to the marketing system, deficient of the critical skills to interpret the marketing messages. Farias and Leite (2021) find that not being able to access the products and services of the marketing system, low-income Brazilian consumers seek happiness in interpersonal relationships, investing in family and friends.

**Commentaries in this Issue**

The first commentary, by De Almeida, Ordovás and Mattos (2021), acknowledges the importance of the topic addressed and the work reported in the lead article. The commentary authors extend the discussion/dialogue in some important ways. First, they report some findings from a comparable study done in the southern region of Brazil. Next, they present a general analysis of and reflections on the various macro and micro factors that influence subjective well-being in Brazil. Finally, De Almeida, Ordovás and Mattos (2021) point to the complex public and private policy challenges that arise when iconic branded goods become such important markers of perceived subjective well-being that low-income consumers often end up paying unnecessary high prices and incurring debt to acquire such branded goods.
The second commentary, by Gammarano (2021), goes into considerable details of the methods used in the collection and analysis/interpretation in the lead article of this issue. The author of the second commentary points out supplemental methodological sources and further refinements, which of course would be of considerable value to those wishing to study subjective well-being, in the Brazilian or Latin American contexts, as well as in other geographical contexts.

The second commentary also brings in additional references that deal other issues that relate to consumption and subjective well-being, such as minimalist consumption, anti-consumption, hedonic consumption and conspicuous consumption. In this sense, Gammarano (2021) alerts us to the need for – and the potential for – linking subjective well-being to various styles of consumption, especially on the minimalist-maximalist spectrum. Overall, the second commentary would constitute a good-and-tilled groundwork for those wanting to explore this topic further, especially using qualitative interviewing methods.

**Concluding Comments**

It is of course quite natural to search for policies and actions – from state agencies and institutions as well as from corporations and nonprofit service organizations – to enhance happiness. While usually laudable, overreliance on such policies and actions could also be criticized for the implied paternalism. Whether it is the Kingdom of Bhutan, the enlightened governments of relatively equitable Scandinavian nations, or the populist-instrumental forces of political power in countries like Brazil, some people believe that trying to increase perceived subjective well-being and happiness often result in manipulative actions. Even the desire to help low-income consumers avoid the traps of unfairly high prices and debt can be seen as elitist. Yet, the opposite – a libertarian view that let things be as they are, in terms of well-being perceptions – seems equally elitist and irresponsible. In the pages of MGDR, we hope these discussions and dialogues will continue. In our view, it is imperative to expose and critique the wrongs in our world; and it is also important to keep searching for pathways to better futures.
References


