



An Interview with Conal Smith

Interview by
Dan Weijers
20 September 2013

1. What got you interested in wellbeing research?

After leaving university I spent the first eleven years of my career working as a policy analyst for the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development (with a couple of secondments to the Treasury). Many of the key policy challenges faced by both agencies boil down to how to evaluate the outcomes of policy interventions and how to assess the relative impact of quite different alternatives – for example, do you invest in hip operations or in an active labour market programme? The cost of the programme is, at best, only part of the picture since cost is minimised by doing nothing. To provide meaningful advice you need to be able to measure the outcomes of different policy programmes as well as the cost and to do this comprehensively means measuring wellbeing.

2. What do you take "wellbeing" to mean?

I take wellbeing to refer to individual happiness, quality of life, and those aspects of community, environmental, and economic functioning that are important to a person's welfare. To a large degree I think of individual wellbeing as more or less equivalent to an economist's notion of utility, as it is used in welfare economics. Both objective and subjective indicators can be used to measure wellbeing.

3. Why is wellbeing research important?

Wellbeing matters crucially to government policy: in practice, most government spending is ultimately concerned with improvements to peoples' wellbeing. Thus understanding how to measure wellbeing and understanding what drives it is crucial to improved policy-making. However, the same insights are also relevant to firms and voluntary organisations aiming for improved outcomes for both their clients and their workforce, and to individuals interested in the effect of life choices on their own wellbeing.

4. What is the most important wellbeing-related finding to date?

That wellbeing can be validly and reliably measured.

5. What is the most important application of wellbeing research to our lives?

This is a difficult question. One finding to have emerged from the literature on subjective wellbeing is that we are not necessarily particularly good at predicting how we will feel in the future or what things will contribute most strongly to our future sense of wellbeing. This is an



area where wellbeing research can function usefully to help people make informed decisions about their own lives.

6. What is the most important wellbeing-related finding from your research?

I'm not sure it's possible to know how important any piece of research is until you see what other people do with it in terms of further research or direct policy implications. The finding that I find myself referring back to most often is the evidence – from my own work and a large number of other authors – that there is a common structure to the elements of wellbeing that is remarkably consistent across countries and population groups.

7. What are you working on right now?

I'm mostly working on measures of subjective wellbeing. On the research front, I am currently involved in a project looking at the effect of culture on responses to subjective wellbeing questions and investigating ways to distinguish between measurement biases due to culture and real changes in subjective wellbeing associated with unmeasured features of life that co-vary with cultures. I'm also heavily engaged in promoting the uptake and use of the *OECD Guidelines on the Measurement of Subjective Well-being* (OECD 2013) in order to get national statistical offices to produce measures of subjective wellbeing in a consistent way across countries.

8. What do you think the next big thing in wellbeing research will be?

In the area of subjective wellbeing I think there will be a range of very interesting opportunities for research over the next few years as very large, high quality datasets containing measures of subjective wellbeing become available from national statistical offices. Many of the most contentious areas of debate on subjective wellbeing, such as whether income improves people's life satisfaction, are fundamentally impossible to resolve with datasets of fewer than 1000 respondents, or with poor measures of subjective wellbeing and worse measures of income.

9. What are the main benefits of interdisciplinary research on wellbeing?

It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that most real progress on measuring wellbeing has occurred only since psychologists, economists and others started working on the problem jointly, drawing on insights and data from an even wider range of disciplines. We would be worried if physicists could shed no light for chemists as to why the periodic table is structured the way it is. Similarly, many of the most interesting developments in the social sciences over the past two decades have been driven by applying the empirical findings from one discipline in another area.

10. What would the ideal census question on wellbeing be and why?

Given that space in a census is always going to be very limited, I would go with a single question on the evaluative aspect of subjective wellbeing (below). This captures a lot of information relevant to all aspects of wellbeing in a concise format.

The following question asks how satisfied you feel, on a scale from 0 to 10. Zero means you feel "not at all satisfied" and 10 means you feel "completely satisfied".

Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?

Author

Dan Weijers
Victoria University of Wellington
Dan.Weijers@vuw.ac.nz

References

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