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Subjective Well-Being at the Workplace

Ambra Poggi and Claudia Villosio

Introduction

It is largely acknowledged that individual well-being\(^1\) is only partially measured by objective indicators of quality of life such as those presented in the previous chapter of this book. They need to be complemented by subjective measures on satisfaction and happiness in order for a complete picture of people’s well-being to be presented.

Initially, the empirical study of (subjective) happiness and satisfaction was mainly developed by psychologists. However, there have been important contributions by sociologists (e.g. Veenhoven, 2002) and political scientists (e.g. Lane, 2000). Moreover, following the seminal contribution by Easterlin (1974, pp. 89–125), a growing number of economists have investigated the impact of economic conditions on subjective well-being measured as self-reported levels of happiness or life satisfaction (see Frey and Stutzer (2002, 2010) for comprehensive reviews). These contributions are mainly based on a subjective view of utility, recognising that everybody has their own ideas about happiness and the good life. Thus, individuals’ happiness can be analysed by asking people directly how satisfied they are with their lives (Frey and Stutzer, 2002).

As argued by Diener (1994) subjective well-being (SWB) encompasses a number of discrete aspects: life satisfaction (a person’s overall judgment about their life); the presence of positive feelings (happiness and joy); the absence of negative feelings (anger, or depression). The first aspect captures the cognitive component of well-being, while the other two are connected with the affects, that is, the pleasure–pain component of well-being. Although highly correlated, they reflect different aspects of SWB, and accord with different conceptions of quality of life.
Measures of SWB are generally obtained through self-reports: people are asked to evaluate their lives as a whole, or some aspect of it. Research indicates that self-reported measures of well-being are reliable and valid. The SWB literature in particular pays a lot of attention to the validity of its measures; the conclusion in most of the reviews is that life satisfaction scores and other measures of SWB correlate with other variables that can be plausibly claimed to be associated with true individual well-being (see, for instance, Diener, 1994; Diener et al., 1999).

This chapter investigates SWB in relation to working conditions in Europe, using data from the 2007 European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) conducted by Eurofound. This analysis has represented part of the walking research project, focusing on the link between quality of work and quality of life. It has been widely accepted, in fact, that workplace features play a crucial role in people’s well-being. The aim of this chapter is thus to highlight the role that working conditions and salient job characteristics have in this relationship, and to identify which groups of workers and types of jobs are concentrated in the organisational forms that generate negative effects on quality of life. These results contribute to defining the characteristics of the jobs that have been recently created in Europe, and will contribute to an assessment of those areas of employment, in terms of the workers and sectors that are particularly vulnerable.

The analysis is structured as follows. The next section presents the data used and some descriptive statistics on SWB variables by different sub-groups. Then we analyse the relationship between workers’ well-being and working conditions, making reference to the most influential theoretical models. The following section presents the main findings, and the final section draws some conclusions.

Data used and some descriptive statistics

The data used in the present analysis are drawn from the 2007 European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) conducted by Eurofound, in 27 EU Member States plus Norway, Croatia, Macedonia and Turkey.

This survey focuses on quality of life issues and collects information on different aspects of subjective well-being as well as on some objective conditions in the domains of employment, economic resources, family life, community life, health, housing and the local environment. More than 35,000 respondents aged 18 years or older were interviewed, with national sample size varying from 1,000 to 2,000. Sample data are weighted by age, sex and region, to conform to national population patterns.