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Is the West really the best?

Richard Eckersley

It seems self-evident that Western liberal democracies represent the leading edge of national progress. As a group, Western nations score highest on most, if not all, of the indicators usually used to measure human development: life expectancy, happiness and satisfaction, wealth, education, governance, personal freedom, human rights.

From this perspective, developing countries would be better off if they were more like developed countries (and other developed countries would be better off if they were more like Sweden or Denmark). I want to challenge this supposition, at least to the extent that it suggests continuing on this developmental path will improve people's quality of life. While this unorthodox view is accepted at some levels of analysis, it is not reflected in the picture painted by the usual international comparisons.

My grounds are that: life expectancy is not a valid measure of overall health; happiness may not be comparable across cultures and does not, in any case, cover the all the attributes of healthy people or societies; and other common measures, being mainly structural and institutional, do not adequately reflect the cultural and moral qualities that shape the more intimate aspects of life, and so are central to wellbeing. By these cultural measures, it is arguable that Western societies have become increasingly dysfunctional in recent decades. (The environmental costs of Western, high-consumption lifestyles are additional grounds, but are not discussed here.)

Health

With the possible exception of increasing wealth, improving health is the most widely used measure of human progress. The standard measure of population health is life expectancy (the number of years people can, on average, expect to live at prevailing mortality rates). The dramatic rise in life expectancy, which globally has more than doubled in the last 100 years, is one of humanity's greatest achievements. Historically, it might well have been a valid indicator, but this is now questionable, especially in the developed world.

Life expectancy does not reflect adequately the growing importance to health of non-fatal, chronic health problems. Just as we often wrongly equate quality of life with standard of living, we confuse how well people live with how long they live. This 'measurement error' is particularly pronounced with mental illnesses, whose health burden has a low fatality component, but a high disability component.

According to the WHO, mental and neurological conditions account globally for almost a third of all years lived with disability. In 1990, they accounted for 10% of the total burden of disease, measured as both death and disability, and this figure is expected to rise to 15% by 2020. Major depression is now the leading single cause of

disability globally, and it is projected to rise from fourth to second as a contributor to the total burden of disease by 2020.

This issue is particularly important in Western nations because of their disease profile. To take Australia as an example, mental disorders are the third largest contributor to the total burden of disease after cancer and cardiovascular disease, and the largest contributor to the non-fatal component. Furthermore, while the burden of the physical diseases falls overwhelmingly on people over 60, that of mental disorders falls mostly on those under 60. As these are the most productive years of life, the personal, social and economic costs are therefore much higher.

Happiness

Happiness measures (including life satisfaction) are being increasingly used to compare nations. Indeed, their correlation with the many, varied objective indicators of human development seemed to suggest happiness might be the 'holy grail' of national indicators: a simple, easily understood and measured quality that could serve as a single measure of human wellbeing and societal progress.

However, like life expectancy, happiness has its limitations. While some researchers argue it represents a valid measure of the quality of development, others doubt its comparability across countries and cultures. Happiness is closely correlated to individualism, and the higher scores in individualistic societies may reflect a higher degree of self-deception rather than the benefits of individualism. Some differences in subjective wellbeing between nations also appear to be because people value wellbeing differently; people may trade some amount of positive emotions to obtain other things they value.

Even if we regard comparisons of happiness as valid, they are still only partial indicators of societal functioning. Historians have noted that civilisations rise or fall on the confidence and optimism of their peoples. The Pew Research Center's 2007 global attitudes survey shows that, broadly speaking, non-Western nations score lower than Western nations on personal life satisfaction, but higher on next-generation optimism (Japan is a somewhat unhappy blend) (*see Table*). The results may, in part at least, reflect response differences between cultures and stages of economic development, but this does not negate their significance. Even the most cursory assessment of China and the US today exposes the danger of using happiness scores as a measure of their national performance.

[Insert table about here.]

Another limitation is that the positive picture happiness indicators present is at odds with other measures of psychological wellbeing. A survey of more than 10,000 Australian school students aged 4-18 found that while 89% of the students said they were happy, about 40% scored in the lower levels of social and emotional wellbeing. Between a fifth and a half of students admitted to feeling lonely, very stressed, recently hopeless and depressed, and frequently angry.

Another study found that over 80% of young Australians (aged 19-20) were satisfied with their lives – including lifestyle, work or study, relationships with parents and

friends, accomplishments and self-perceptions. However, 50% were experiencing one or more health problems associated with depression, anxiety, anti-social behaviour and alcohol use. In other words, most of those with problems were satisfied with life.

Quality of life

A third argument against the view that Western nations are at the vanguard of progress is that, for all their positive qualities, most of their people do not believe life is getting better. Many studies over the past decade reveal levels of anger and anxiety about changes in Western society that were not apparent thirty years ago.

The studies show many people are concerned about the materialism, greed and selfishness they believe drive society today, underlie social ills, and threaten their children's future. They yearn for a better balance in their lives, believing that when it comes to individual freedom and material abundance, people don't seem 'to know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

The 2006 European Social Survey found 61% felt that for most people in their country, life was getting worse. A 2004 US survey showed large majorities believed that the country was not focused on the right priorities, with too much emphasis on work and money and not enough on family and community; and that American society was too materialistic, with serious consequences for children, society, the environment and the world.

Britain's Joseph Rowntree Foundation found in its recent consultation on today's social evils 'a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society'. The top concerns were: a decline in community; individualism, consumerism and greed; and a decline in values. More concrete concerns included: the decline of the family; young people as victims or perpetrators; drugs and alcohol; poverty and inequality; immigration; and crime and violence.

These surveys predate the current global financial crisis, the root causes of which include the very qualities that worry people. It is just one of the more dramatic expressions of their concerns about 'progress' and 'development'.

Conclusion

Standard measures of national progress and human development suggest the Western liberal democracies are leading the way. Yet when we look 'inside' these societies at their psychosocial dynamics and how these have played out over time, a very different picture emerges. The West has its own set of problems that indicators do not adequately capture.

The contrast between the two views could scarcely be more marked. The orthodox human development model emphasises what can easily be measured and the correlations between them: simple measures of wellbeing (happiness or life expectancy) and mainly material, structural and institutional factors (for example, income, education, democratic government, and human rights). A psychosocial-dynamics model of human development emphasises multiple measures of wellbeing

and broader, cultural and moral causes and correlates (for example, the effects of materialism and individualism).

The standard model may be useful in evaluating earlier stages of human development, but it is less relevant in assessing so-called highly developed societies. Across all stages, but especially in the latter cases, it needs to be supplemented by the psychosocial dynamics model. This model helps to improve our understanding of, and response to, the concerns at the heart of the OECD project on the progress of societies: the focus of governments on economic growth and material welfare, even at the expense of other aspects of life.

The evidence shows that material progress does not simply and straightforwardly make us richer, so giving us the freedom to live as we wish. Rather, it comes with an array of cultural and moral prerequisites and consequences that affects profoundly how we think of the world and ourselves, and so the choices we make. These choices are not, collectively, optimising human health, wellbeing and potential. Measures of progress need to reflect this reality.

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Eckersley, R. 2008. Population measures of subjective wellbeing: How useful are they? *Social Indicators Research* (Published online 19 October). Subscribers can access at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11205-008-9339-z>

Eckersley, R. 2008. Never better – or getting worse? The health and wellbeing of young Australians. Canberra: Australia 21 Ltd. Available at: www.australia21.org.au

Table

Country	Sat. own life %	Sat. state of nation %	Sat. national govt %	Next generation better off - %
US	65	25	51	31
Sweden	72	66	64	29
Japan	43	22	50	10
China	34	83	89	86
India	41	42	77	64

Satisfaction and optimism: East vs West. Personal life satisfaction 7-10 on 0-10 scale.

Source: Pew Research Center, 2007.

<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=257>