'Free-text' and 'forced-choices'

What Matters to whom about measuring national well-being?

Susan Oman

twitter suoman

The What Matters to YOU? Debate – as framework

"The Measuring National Well-being programme began in November 2010 with a six month National Debate, asking, 'what matters', to understand what measures of well-being should include. Following 175 events, with 2,750 people and 34,000 responses received online or via other channels, ONS developed a framework for measuring national well-being

(ONS: 'Measuring National Well-being: Life in the UK, 2012')

Office for National Statistics

Consultation

Office for National Statistics

What Matters to you?

Office for National Statistics
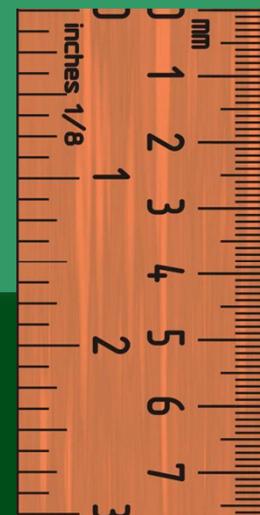
Measuring what matters

National Statistician's Reflections on the National Debate on Measuring National Well-being

---

30 May 2013

Office for National Statistics

Measuring National Well-being - What matters most to Personal Well-being?

Author Name(s): Sebnem Oguz, Salah Merad, Dawn Snape, Office for National Statistics

Abstract

This article uses data from the Annual Population Survey collected between April 2011 and March 2012 which includes measures of personal well-being. It describes the results of regression analysis – a statistical technique which analyses variation in well-being outcomes by specific characteristics and circumstances of individuals while holding all other characteristics equal. This allows for a better understanding of what matters most to personal well-being than when different factors are considered separately.

Introduction

This article is published as part of the Office for National Statistics Measuring National Well-being Programme. The programme aims to produce accepted and trusted measures of the well-being of the nation - how the UK as a whole is doing. The Office for National Statistics measures of well-being are organised into ten domains with each domain having between three and five separate indicators. More information about the measures can be found in the 'National Well-being wheel of measures' (ONS 2012). The aim of the Programme is to achieve an accepted and trusted set of National Statistics to help people understand and monitor national well-being.

As part of the Programme four measures of the personal well-being of individuals were developed (Tinkler & Hicks 2011). Since April 2011 these have been collected from respondents to the Annual Population Survey and asked of adults aged 16 and over. A number of analyses of these data have been released by ONS already which examine the measures and their distribution by specific characteristics.

These analyses considered how different factors are associated with personal well-being separately, for example, how self-reported health is related to the different measures of personal well-being. The regression analysis (see section 5.1) in this report takes factors from within the large scale Annual Population Survey together and considers how these are related to personal well-being. So when looking at how self-reported health is associated with personal well-being, it also controls for a range of other factors for example people's age and sex and ethnicity to name a few. This allows for a better understanding of what matters most to personal well-being as the relationship between the variable in question and personal well-being is considered knowing that other factors included in the analysis are held equal.

What Matters

- "based on what people tell us"

- "the general public knows best"

> " We must measure what matters - the key elements of national well-being. We want to develop measures based on what people tell us matters most.
>
> "
>
> Jil Matheson, National Statistician

(On the ONS MNW homepage now: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html)

"The ONS held a national debate in order to engage with experts on well-being.. and the general public, who not only know best about what matters to them but would also be affected by any policies that would result from this work."

(Written evidence submitted by The Office for National Statistics Measuring National Well-being Programme 18 May 2012: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmenvaud/1025/1025vw35.htm)

Measuring What Matters

David Cameron

"It will open a national debate about how together we can build a better life. It will help bring about a re-appraisal of what matters, and in time, it will lead to government policy that is more focused not just on the bottom line, but on all those things that make life worthwhile"

"These are instincts we feel to the core, but it's right that as far as possible we put them to the practical test, so we really know what matters to people. Every day, ministers, officials, people working throughout the public sector make decisions that affect people's lives, and this is about helping to make sure those government decisions on policy and spending are made in a balanced way, taking account of what really matters."

(Cameron speech November 2010)

Measures of National Well-being

"These weren't decided by politicians. They were framed by the debate"

(Cabinet Minister, Well-being seminar , 2014)

"In that wheel you can mark off departments and agencies"

(Cabinet Minister Well-being seminar, 2014)

Q1 What things in life matter to you? Please tick all that apply.

- ▪ **Income and wealth**
- ▪ **Job satisfaction and economic security**
- ▪ **Ability to have a say on local and national issues**
- ▪ **Having good connections with friends and relatives**
- ▪ **Present and future conditions of the environment**
- ▪ **Crime**
- ▪ **Health**
- ▪ **Education and training**
- ▪ **Personal and cultural activities, including caring and volunteering**

Other…. Please specify

..How people answered..
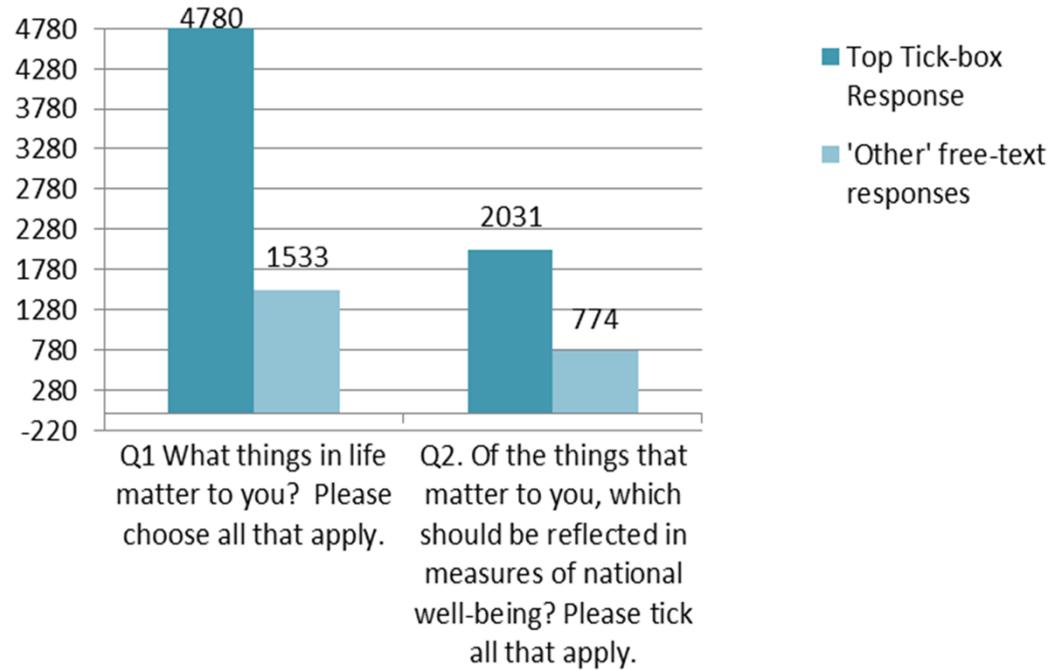
Q1
Highest response Health, 4780

Other, 1533

Q2
Highest response Health, 2031

Other, 774
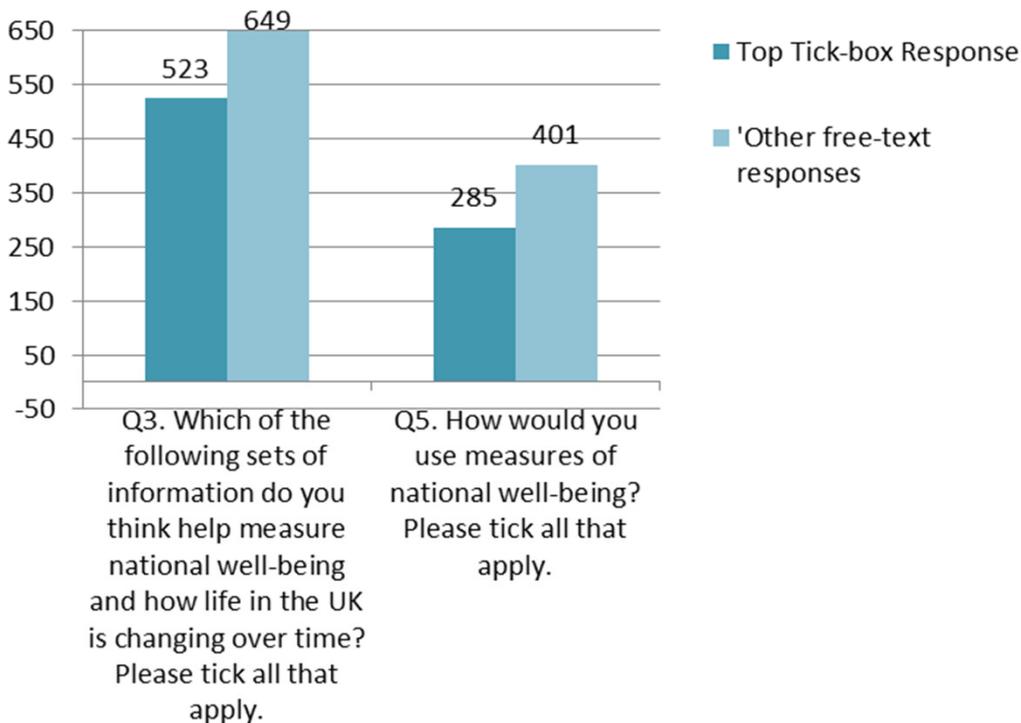
Q3
Highest response **Life Satisfaction, 523**

Other, 649

Q5
Highest response:
To help understand the longer term implications of our current activities, 285

Other, 401

*"Do you really expect people to
understand what these options mean?"*

Used the 'Other' field to communicate What Matters

"found the scope of choices [in tick boxes] limiting"

With *"too many forced-choices an[d] assumptions"*

Other

I do not think any of these indicators will be useful. Better would be a much smaller but in depth study asking people for their 'stories' as in 'well-being for me means......' and 'the nation I woukld [sic] like to live in would be like.....'

Other

"These [tick-boxes] are all relevant to government and public bodies. Is this inevitable? More interesting to the individual, and thus the means of increasing the credibility of the exercise, is to establish consensual measures"

Debate | Conversation

Discursive forms in the free-text responses, imply participants thought they were having a conversation with someone

What might this mean for participants?
What might this mean for the debate?

Your [sic] talking to people about their lives, not selling them a product. Empathy and understanding with how you word your surveys will make people actually give a damn and "want" to take part as they believe (rightly or wrongly) that they will be *listened too [sic] and their opinion might just count for something.*

"I need to know my voice matters;
indeed, the offer of effective voice is crucial to
the legitimacy of modern democracies,
while across economic and cultural life
voice is ignored in various ways....

Voice

Yet we have
grown used to ways of
organising things that
ignore voice, that assume
voice does not matter."

Nick Couldry

> *"I would hate for someone to be worrying about whether they will have something to eat or a roof over their head. Also doing other things including recreation activities improves your mental well-being which in turn affects your general well-being but you can only do those things if you are in a good financial position"*

Represents 'personal finance' in ONS' 'Life in the UK' Report (2012)

While the 'participant-author' sees financial position as important, it is only because that facilitates access to qualities of life -> well-being

Not listening to *'rich personal accounts of what aspects of well-being were important to their individual sense of well-being'* (ONS, 2011)

'Other' Fields

Little discussion /guidance re how free-text fields might be analysed, or even used (Garcia *et al.* 2004)

Concerns regarding 'efficiency... in survey methodology' often justify their omission or minimal attention in analysis (*O'Cathain and Thomas* 2004)

as 'a valuable data source, suitable for content, thematic and narrative analysis' (Rich *et al.,* 2013)

value-judgements – what data to analyse? How to analyse?

What to represent?

The full potential of data left unexplored

"All citizen [sic] should feel valued and respected. I used to work as a *********************, ran a busy department, managed a multi-million pound budget and a group of staff and earned a very good salary. Due to sudden, serious ill-health I had to finish work early and found this very hard to accept. **Now I have had my DLA [Disability Living Allowance] stopped and will soon have my incapacity benefit stopped** as I have been getting it for more than a year and do not qualify for means-tested benefits. So after working extremely hard for 32 years including at least 10 hours of unpaid overtime every week and paying my taxes I will now get precisely nothing. So much for making work pay. Those of us who have worked and paid NI but have a working partner (who only earns a low wage, less than he did 20 years ago thanks to the *************) get nothing, but those who haven't worked will still get their benefits. **In case you haven't guessed my well-being is rapidly deteriorating, contributed to by the stress of losing the little income I still had and worrying how I am going to manage with nothing. My condition is made worse by stress, maybe I will worry myself into an early grave and the government might be happy then.**"

some text removed for anonymisation

Listening to 'Other'
inclusively
otherwise
What &
WHO is
excluded?
What matters?

Well-being as an alternative measure of progress?

Or competition?

We often talk about the **importance** of **science and research**; this is a little bit, if you like, of science and research that is being **looked at the world over** and I would rather we were in the **vanguard** of doing this rather than just **meekly following** on **behind.**

I think there is an **opportunity** on that front as well.   (Cameron 2010)
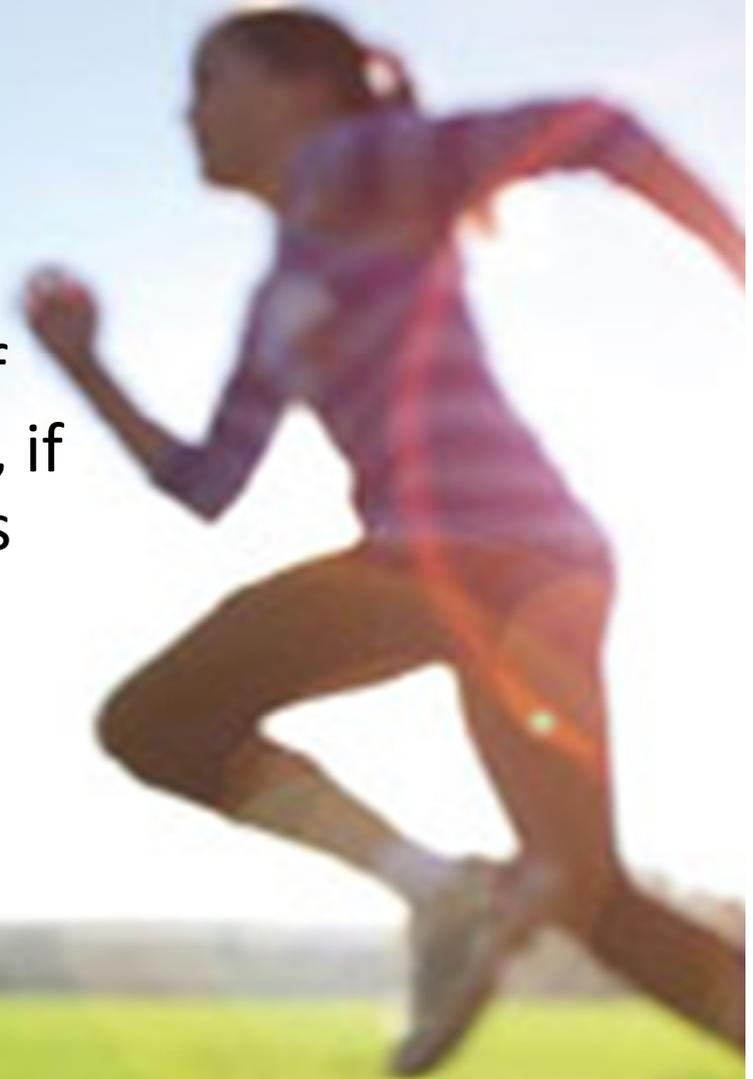
**Challenging the methods of understanding well-being:
– conclusions on what matters?**

My inquiry into the ONS' inquiry

- questions asked: issues of language

- how people answered: what people said

- how answers were analysed: **who listened, and what happened to the analysis?**

- how this analysis is presented: **the loss of *rich data* for the ease of accessible numbers**

- how different analysis might answer the question of what matters differently

- how might the approaches of others help answer these challenges: **open to new measures which accommodate what people said matter**

Or as framing to push
'What matters to us?',
as those with interests in measuring wellbeing?