



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE

**“COSÌ È (SE VI PARE)” REMARKS ON SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING FROM
A RESOURCE-BASED PERSPECTIVE**
**Conference on “Social Monitoring and Reporting in Europe”,
Villa Vigoni, Lovenno di Menaggio, Italy, April 25-27, 2012**
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”COSÌ È (SE VI PARE)” : It is so (if you think so)- Structure of the presentation

- **Opening remarks: devil’s advocate, title of the paper etc.**
- **Roots and variations of the “Scandinavian resource-based concept of the level of living and well-being”**
- **Critical remarks on the need for subjective welfare measures: reflections from the Scandinavian tradition**
- **Subjective well-being and resource-based well-being as a basis for policy: which one gives more space for individual choice?**
- **The interest in subjective well-being is creeping into the Scandinavian debate from a backdoor**
- **How much new does the idea of subjective well-being add to the Scandinavian tradition of welfare measurement?**
- **An anecdotal final paradox: Nordic countries on the top of world happiness statistics without politics of happiness**



Opening remarks: devil's advocate, title of the paper etc.

- Devil's advocate /advocatus diaboli: to question the merit of the applicant (here: subjective well-being)
- "Così è (se vi pare)" <Luigi Pirandello> : "It is so (if you think so)"
- Subjective well-being opens road to manipulation of consciousness
 - Cf. Thomas' theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"
 - But: "There is no way to happiness: happiness is the way"
- Sociology at the service of politics:
 - Scandinavian welfare policies in the 1960s and 1970s
 - Politics of happiness and subjective well-being now



Roots and variations of the “Scandinavian resource-based concept of the level of living and well-being”

- Basic model from Sweden around 1970 (Johansson, Erikson), with applications in all Nordic countries (strongest in Sweden and Norway)
- A critical voice was Allardt (1976): “Having, loving, being” (adding immaterial and subjective elements)
- Canonized presentations around 1990 (Erikson, Hansen, Ringen, Uusitalo)
- The resource-based approach with emphasis on equity is still strong in Nordic welfare research (most recently: Kvist et al, 2012)
- An interesting incidence: The Swedish Social Democratic Party tried to register “The Scandinavian model” as the Party’s own registered trade mark in 2011-2012

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Critical remarks on the need for subjective welfare measures: reflections from the Scandinavian tradition

- Comparison of Scandinavian concept with Veenhoven's (2002) list (1-5)
- 1 Social policy is never limited to merely material matters **Nor is the Scandinavian concept**
- 2 Progress in material goals cannot always be measured objectively **Unclear. Relative positions? A recent Swedish report points out to the importance of economic margins**
- 3. Inclusive measurement is difficult with objective substance. **The Scandinavian concept is a multi-component solution, not an inclusive one-number measure**
- 4. Objective indicators do little to inform policy makers about public preferences **How policy-makers could use information about preferences: either by influencing resources or turning into manipulation of consciousness (values, attitudes etc.)**
- 5 Policy makers ... require assesment of subjective appreciation of life as a whole. **Why, if basic resources are guaranteed?**



Subjective well-being and resource-based well-being as a basis for policy: which one gives more space for individual choice?

- Using a German expert report on policies to maintain life satisfaction (i.e., level of subjective well-being) as an example, one notices that many of the policies proposed actually concern resources, equity, fairness and smoothening of the changes.
- This comes surprisingly close to the ideas of the Scandinavian welfare policies
- An interesting question can be raised: Policies based on subjective well-being emphasise the importance of individual choice. But how does this differ from the Nordic resource-based concept where resources will be guaranteed to allow (most) people to live their lives (mostly) as they like



The interest in subjective well-being is creeping into the Scandinavian debate from a backdoor

- N.B. The tradition of specific "Social Reporting" is weak in the Nordic countries
- EU membership, Eurostat and EU-SILC have imported some minor elements of subjective well-being in the follow-up of living conditions
- Strong national institutes that have been built around the ideas of resource-based well-being have been reluctant to introduce subjective well-being in their programs
 - Examples: national statistical institutions, governmental research institutions (universities have been more interested in subjective well-being)



How much new does the idea of subjective well-being add to the Scandinavian tradition of welfare measurement?

- **Overall conclusion:** the difference between (1) Scandinavian resource-based concept of well-being and (2) many proposals based on subjective well-being are smaller than they seem to be at a first glance
- However, some acute problems (e.g., mental health problems and problems of children and families) require new elements in the Nordic welfare concept (including subjective well-being)
- Critique coming from influential circles near business interest blame the "traditional" Scandinavian concept of well-being for too little space for individual choice and too much space for democracy and equity ("Tyranny of the majority")
- **The concept of subjective well-being is not politically innocent, either.**



An anecdotal final paradox: Nordic countries on the top of world happiness statistics without politics of happiness

- [World Happiness Report](#), April 2012
- Among top countries: Denmark (1.), Finland (2.), Norway (3.), Sweden (7.), Iceland (20.)
- Nordic countries have never had any politics of happiness, built on the concept of subjective well-being
- (But, as has been shown above, Scandinavian resource-based welfare politics contain many features that the proponents of subjective well-being would like to promote)



”Così è (se vi pare)” & ultimate happiness

- ”Secure against the designs of men, secure against the malignity of the Gods, they have accomplished a thing of infinite difficulty; **that to them nothing remains even to be wished**”
 - Tacitus, in *Germania*, about *Fenni*, in 98 a.D.
- Is not this the ultimate happiness? Così è (se vi pare) - It is so (if you think so)!



The full text on *Fenni* by Tacitus:

- “In wonderful savageness live the nation of the Fenni, and in beastly poverty, destitute of arms, of horses, and of homes; their food, the common herbs; their apparel, skins; their bed, the earth; their only hope in their arrows, which for want of iron they point with bones. Their common support they have from the chase, women as well as men; for with these the former wander up and down, and crave a portion of the prey. Nor other shelter have they even for their babes, against the violence of tempests and ravening beasts, than to cover them with the branches of trees twisted together; this a reception for the old men, and hither resort the young. Such a condition they judge more happy than the painful occupation of cultivating the ground, than the labour of rearing houses, than the agitations of hope and fear attending the defense of their own property or the seizing that of others. Secure against the designs of men, secure against the malignity of the Gods, they have accomplished a thing of infinite difficulty; that to them nothing remains even to be wished”

