

Understanding Subjective Well-Being from a Top Down Theory Approach

Moh Fikri Tanzil Mutaqin, Hani Yulindrasari, Tina Hayati Dahlan

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
fikritanzil@upi.edu

Abstract

This article is a part of a Master of Education's thesis concerning on subjective well-being of teenage inmates who join an alternative education in prison. This article focuses on discussing subjective well-being based on a top down theory approach. In general, to look at the quality of life and subjective well-being is limited by accumulating hedonic momentary pleasures, that perspective is known as the bottom up theory approach. For this reason, there is a top down theory approach that views subjective well-being more broadly based on one's perception of directional emotions. In this case, the perception is believed to explain subjective well-being, because the bottom-up theory approach that only limits the objective conditions is considered incapable of understanding subjective well-being that varies greatly from person to person. Then in the top down theory approach, humans can live and interpret every life event as a form of subjective well-being.

Keywords: subjective well-being, top down theory approach

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans who live in this earth cannot be separated from the desire to meet the needs of life that are very diverse nowadays. They are not just clothing, food, shelter, but the need to have mental health and to be happy while having life satisfaction has become the need of every human being. However, these days, the custom of humans finding happiness and life satisfaction is marked by economic and material independence. Whereas, it is not only economic and material issues that serve as benchmarks for quality of life, but also a person's psychological condition that should be a benchmark for the quality of human life. Naturally, in this case the subject matters of subjective well-being in which there are dimensions of happiness and life satisfaction are of particular concern to researchers because having subjective well-being is a hallmark of a good quality of life. Several studies concerning on subjective well-being found that a good life is a happy life (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas 2003). Looking at the condition, Diener et al. (2003) suggests subjective well-being can be used to assess the quality of life instead of economic independence factors.

Several ways currently to assess subjective well-being emphasize on the accumulation of pleasures in the form of objective and material conditions obtained over a certain period of time. For example, a person who has earned the amount of salary then has leisure and at the same day he wins a lottery, it is accumulated that the person is feeling pleasure. Then in the following day, he must end the vacation, and his salary and lottery results are used to go shopping, then the feeling of pleasure will also end and disappear. That is called

momentary pleasure, and is a hedonic treadmill, so when the pleasant moment disappears, then happiness will disappear. As mentioned by Diener (1984), the lack of pleasant moments has a potential to make someone depressed. Indeed, if we want to get happiness, we are required to find pleasant moments, while if we want to be happy every day, we also find at least two pleasant moments to be accumulated at one time. The aforementioned cases conclude that happiness obtained based on the bottom up theory approach.

Therefore, the concept of subjective well-being offered by the top down theory approach emerges to avoid getting stuck in the hedonic treadmill concept. This approach highly emphasizes on one's perception of happiness. In this case, perception is used as a way to build subjective well-being on the grounds that factors which are objective and refined, as in the case above, cannot be a benchmark for someone to reveal quality of life (Andrews, 1974).

The presence of the top down theory approach is expected to be able to address limitations in viewing subjective well-being that is limited by separate dimensions, so that it is possible not to answer reflections on one's subjective well-being, such as Sulistiyo (2011) and Putri (2015) research. Whereas, subjective well-being related to life experiences should not be manipulated in dimensions, because everyone has different conditions of subjective well-being even though one's experience with others tends to be the same. In this case, Diener et al. (2003) also view the subjective well-being that everyone has will be different and can go up and down all the time in every moment.

2. SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Various literatures that discuss subjective well-being, such as Diener et al., (2003), Skevington & Böhnke, (2018) can be concluded that subjective well-being consists of scientific analysis of how people evaluate life-both now and for a longer period like last year. Nowadays subjective well-being is known as an evaluation process that reveal experiences, emotional reactions to circumstances of quality of life that involves cognitive and affective aspects. Both aspects have dimensions, such as the affective aspect is related to the happiness dimension and the cognitive aspect is the dimension of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2003).

Evaluation based on cognitive aspects is done consciously by assessing satisfaction with life as a whole or specifically such as satisfaction with work, satisfaction with relationship or satisfaction with interest. However, the affective aspect evaluates individual reactions to life events that include pleasant and unpleasant emotions (Diener et al., 2003).

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Everyone is talking about happiness and life satisfaction because it will lead to productivity, sociability, health, and self-recognition. On the other hand, according to Boniwell (2012), subjective well-being can enhance creativity with different thoughts, also someone who has subjective well-being will be better at handling multitasking, systematic, and full-attention work. So if someone has a good subjective well-being in terms of work activities, he has the potential to have productive and directed work methods in carrying out all tasks. It is because subjective well-being is closely related to the dimensions of positive emotions. So, when a person engages in activities with good emotions it will affect his work productivity. The results of the study prove that the importance of positive emotions in a person is to increase work creatively (Holder, 2012).

This case illustration might strengthen why it is important to have subjective well-being. If you as a company leader plan to hold a meeting, then the meeting is so complicated to solve the problem, you had better invite employees who have subjective well-being and better happiness. According to Sutton, Evans, Davies, & Lawson (2016), subjective well-being has a positive impact on work.

In several studies conducted in a more specific context in schooling, happy students will have higher life expectancy, be more active, and be far from anxiety and stress (Prasetyo, 2018). Students with good subjective well-being tend to perform positive impacts especially in relation to good academic performance. Subjective well-being in the student environment also needs to be presented to maximize student learning and activities, also to provide good and meaningful experiences (Phan, Ngu, & Alrashidi, 2016).

4. DICHOTOMY APPROACH OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

After pointing at the importance of subjective well-being for human life, we try to identify how perception can become a participant in the perspective and approach of subjective well-being, where perception is a derivative of the top down theory approach. A little review of the theoretical approach is used to describe phenomena, understand problems, and provide synthesis according to certain theoretical perspectives. Diener (1984) collected several relevant psychological theories to view subjective well-being such as telic theory, pleasant and pain theory, activity theory, judgment theory, associationistic theory, judgment theory, bottom up theory, and top down theory.

The concept presence of subjective well-being is inseparable from various theories and perspectives, yet there are dichotomies of different theoretical approaches in assuming subjective well-being, namely bottom up theory, and top down theory. Both approaches are distinguished by Diener (1984). These approaches have distinctive characteristics that can be alternative theories and ideas in research. Briefly, the subjective well-being approach in the bottom up theory approach is mainly influenced by the number of happy moments coming from the outside environment, then they are accumulated for a certain part of the time (Diener, 1984).

As an obvious example, someone who is getting married, has enough income, and often has pleasure moments, will probably have a good subjective well-being. Brief, Butcher, George, & Link (1993) state that well-being comes from objective conditions rather than subjective ones. In this approach, a good quality of the surrounding environment will have a good impact on subjective well-being. Therefore, according to the bottom up theory, Compton & Hoffman (2012) state that the efforts to improve subjective well-being can be conducted by changing the situation and the surrounding environment in order to provide pleasant conditions so that one gets a good subjective well-being level.

5. BUILDING SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING BASED ON TOP DOWN THEORY APPROACH

Another approach in understanding subjective well-being is the top down theory. This approach no longer emphasizes on external or environmental factors as an influence of subjective well-being, but emphasizes on psychological factors as determinants of subjective well-being. This perspective believes that someone who is able to enjoy happiness reactions is because someone is judging himself as a happy person in daily activity and experience during his life time. The top down theory approach is used as a perspective in assessing the quality of life, while there is a theorist supporting this approach, Andrews (1974) discussing how to assess the quality of life by using perception, because of it, the researchers believed the objective factors cannot reveal

the conditions of the quality of life of someone. The top down theory approach examining perception is Gregory (2015) revealing that anything seen can have different meanings and perceptions and has influence on the process of interpreting what has been seen.

The ability in building perceptions of the quality of life is derived from how much prior experience and knowledge in assessing the situation and surrounding environment. In this case, King (2010) expresses perceptions arising from complex cognitive processes based on experience, knowledge, and trust. This perspective is believed by Andrews (1974) that knowledge provides a significant role in building perceptions of what is felt based on objective factors.

The assessment process of the quality of life through perception is built on cognitive processing. Therefore, in cognitive theory, to assess subjective well-being plays an important role in evaluating associated with information processing of self, the environment, and others (Compton, 2005). The use of cognition in subjective well-being is a thought process regarding experiences in the past, present, and future (Holder, 2012). The basic explanation of information processing is started when someone receives, processes, stores, and produces information by the brain about the world and its experience (Surya, 2015; Solso, Maclin, & Maclin, 2007). Nevertheless, there are criticisms cognitive use in answering the conditions of quality of life. Life satisfaction is incompatibility of the actual conditions. The possibility that will occur when someone is asked regarding the quality of life is that he will think to make a better answer than the actual conditions Argyle (2013). This becomes a weakness that needs to be considered in evaluating subjective well-being.

6. CONCLUSION

A significant literature of subjective well-being focusing on top down theory approach is presented. Through this literature, subjective well-being as a contributor in improving the quality of life and human productivity can be studied by building perception so as not to be trapped in a state that makes us continue to find happiness without stopping or what is called a hedonic treadmill. And there are several ways that might be done to build subjective well-being, including maintaining a positive mood. Thus, all the potential possessed can work optimally, and can be done through the intervention of hope, Boniwell (2012).

7. REFERENCES

- Andrews, F. M. (1974). Social indicators of perceived life quality. *Social Indicators Research*, 1(3), 279–299. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00303860
- Argyle, M. (2013). *The psychology of happiness*. Britania Raya: Routledge.
- Boniwell, I. (2012). *Positive psychology in a nutshell (the science of happiness)*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Brief, A. P., Butcher, A. H., George, J. M., & Link, K. E. (1993). Integrating bottom-up and top-down theories of subjective well-being: The case of health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64(4), 646–653. doi:http://dx.doi.org.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/10.1037/0022-3514.64.4.646
- Compton, W. C. (2005). *Positive psychology*. USA: Thomson wadsworth.
- Compton, W. C., & Hoffman, E. (2012). *Positive psychology: the science of human flourishing*. Australia: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95(3), 542.
- Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Lucas, R. E. (2003). Personality, culture, and subjective well-being: Emotional and cognitive evaluations of life. *Annual Review of psychology*, 54(1), 403-425.
- Gregory, R. L. (2015). *Eye and brain: The psychology of seeing*, 38. Princeton university press.
- Holder, M. D. (2012). *Happiness in children: measurement, correlates and enhancement of positive subjective well-being*. New York: Springer.
- King, L. A. (2010). *The science of psychology: an appreciative view*. New York: MacMoran.
- Phan, H. P., Ngu, B. H., & Alrashidi, O. (2016). role of student well-being: a study using structural equation modeling. *Psychological Reports*, 119(1), 77–105. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294116656819
- Prasetyo, R. A. B. (2018). Persepsi iklim sekolah dan kesejahteraan subjektif siswa di sekolah. *Jurnal Psikologi Teori dan Terapan*, 8(2), 133–144.
- Putri, M. D. (2015). *Happiness narapidana narkoba lembaga pemyarakatan wanita*. Retrieved from http://eprints.umm.ac.id/23691/
- Skevington, S. M., & Böhnke, J. R. (2018). How is subjective well-being related to quality of life? do we need two concepts and both measures?. *Social Science & Medicine*, 206, 22–30. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.04.005
- Solso, R. L., Maclin, O. H., & Maclin, M. K. (2007). *Psikologi kognitif*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Sulistiyo, F. W. (2011). *Kebahagiaan pada narapidana* (Bachelor thesis). Retrieved from http://eprints.ums.ac.id/14634/
- Surya, M. (2015). *Strategi kognitif dalam proses pembelajaran*. Bandung: Alfabeta.
- Sutton, A., Evans, M., Davies, C., & Lawson, C. (2016). The development and longitudinal evaluation of a wellbeing programme: An organisation case study. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 6(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v6i1.487