

Inequalities in well-being: Insights from a comprehensive well-being measure

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Approach

Subjective well-being is a multidimensional construct (e.g. Dolan & Metcalfe 2011; Huppert & So, 2013). Based on the multidimensional nature of subjective well-being, ten key items were selected from the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 6 to comprehensively represent subjective (or psychological) well-being. This incorporated the following ten components of well-being previously identified by Huppert and So (2013) as the features of flourishing (high well-being): competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, and vitality. These items have been condensed into a single score, which allows us to report both on *Comprehensive Psychological Well-being* (CPWB) and on the individual dimensions where appropriate. As these analyses parallel work using life satisfaction, they should be understood as complementary insights relevant to policy.

To calculate the single composite score, a factor scoring approach was used rather than a simplistic summing of raw scores on these items. After finding that a single factor structure fit the data sufficiently, we computed the factor scores, and these are standardised and normally distributed across the included populations when they are calculated. This technique was selected both because of its ability to take into account the different response scales used for measuring the items included in the comprehensive well-being measure and because it could take account of how strongly each item loaded onto the comprehensive well-being factor. This method is validated in forthcoming papers related to this project.

Using this comprehensive measure, we have taken a macro-level approach to looking at key variables associated with well-being. We are particularly interested in understanding the extent to which well-being inequalities exist in Europe. To explore potential drivers of inequalities, we present well-being by highlighting the distance between the highest and lowest 20% on CPWB within groups using specific variables that may provide further insights for policy.

Research Questions

The intended aims for work on this theme addressed the following questions:

1. What is the spread of well-being across Europe for the 21 countries that participated in both Round 3 and Round 6 of the European Social Survey using a comprehensive well-being measure?
2. What is the size of well-being inequality within those 21 countries?
3. What do key demographic categories indicate about well-being and well-being inequality of use to policymakers?

Methods

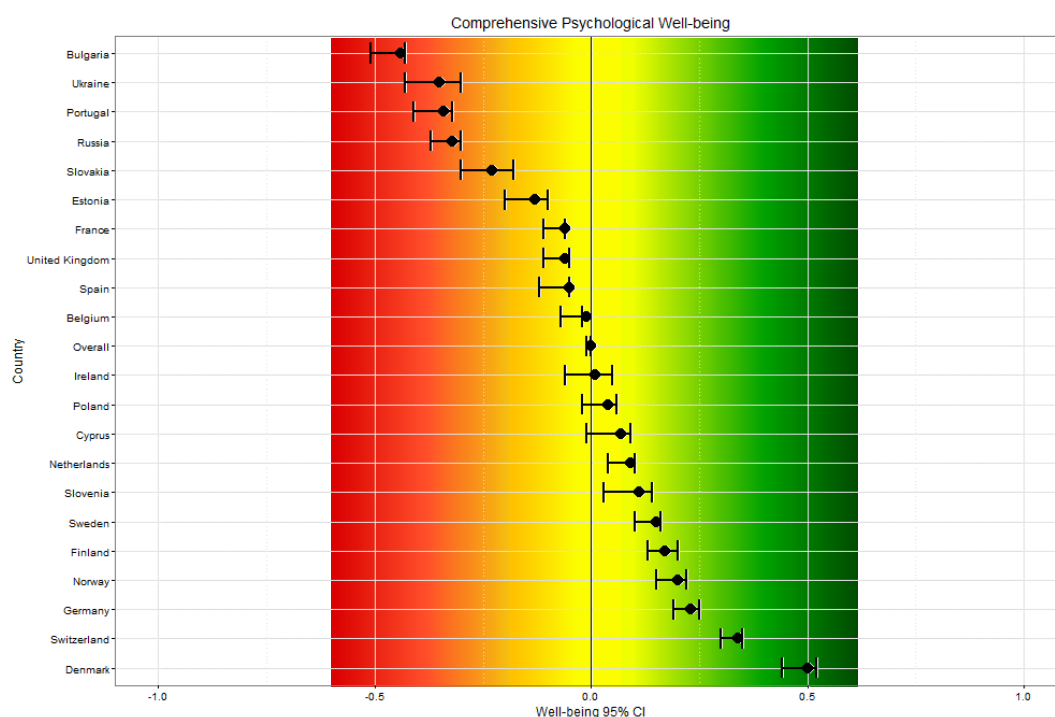
For these analyses, only the 21 countries that completed both Round 3 and Round 6 of the ESS well-being module have been included. The analyses reported here include data from Round 6 only (representing 32,000 participants). For each country, there are a minimum of 800, a maximum of 2400, and an average of 1600 participants, which was reduced slightly by excluding any participants missing data for the items or demographic variables analysed here. Details on the ESS itself are provided in the additional briefing document for this workshop.

Findings

Distribution of well-being in Europe

Using the combined single score for CPWB, well-being ranged from -0.41 in Bulgaria to 0.46 in Denmark. The overall mean is automatically zero based on the calculation technique. While the pattern is typically that northern and Scandinavian countries are doing the best and that eastern countries have the lowest means, exceptions exist. The most notable exception to this is Portugal, which has the third-lowest mean and is not significantly (confidence intervals overlap) higher than Ukraine, which is second lowest. Switzerland and Germany are second and third highest respectively, and show generally similar patterns to the Scandinavian countries. Figure 1 presents these with a colour gradient to simplify understanding of the pattern.

Figure 1. Distribution of national CPWB means and confidence intervals across Europe.

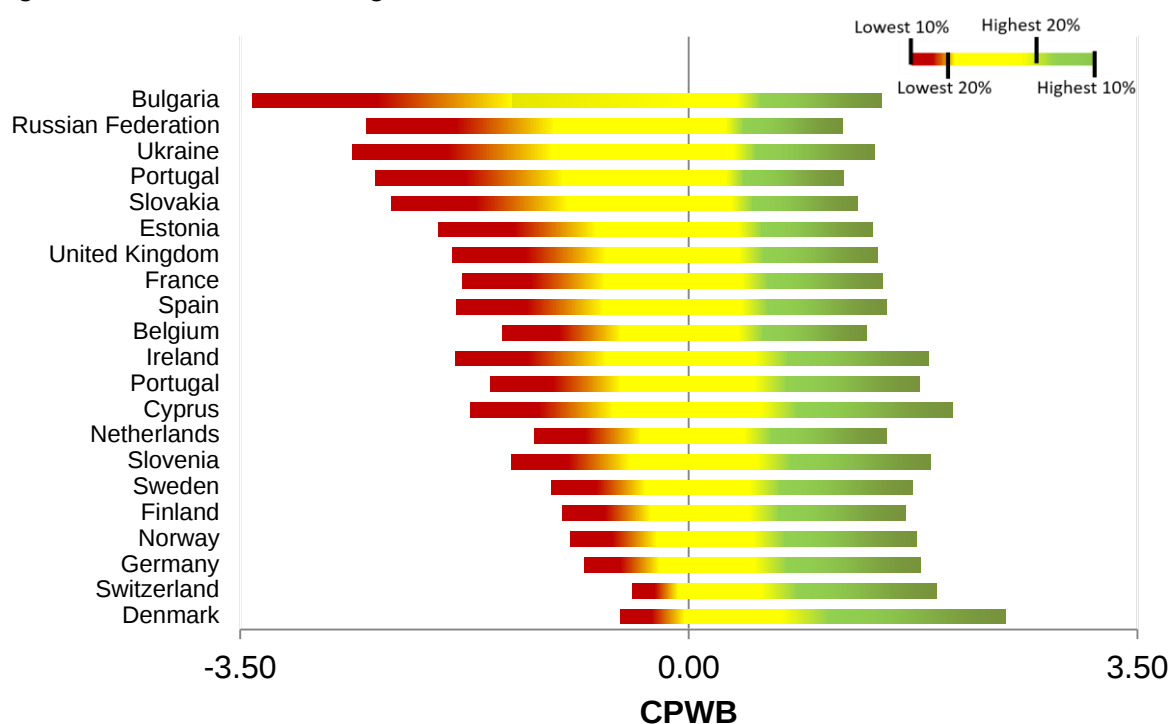


Inequalities in well-being

One of the primary aims of this research was to better understand inequalities in well-being. As seen in Figure 2, the general pattern is that the countries with the highest scores on CPWB have the lowest scores for inequalities, with 0 representing the average across all participants included in the analysis. There is a visible inverse relationship between the well-being gap and national CPWB mean. This means that countries with lower CPWB means tend to have greater well-being inequality.

Figure 2 includes 80% of the population for each of the 21 countries, excluding the highest and lowest 10%. This is done in order to emphasise the yellow section, which represents the difference between the highest 20% and the lowest 20%. In other words, the yellow represents the size of the inequality within each country. The relevant pattern is slightly less visible when including the extreme ends, thus they have been removed in this visual. This is not to ignore the extremes but rather to highlight the size of inequality within each country.

Figure 2. Distance between highest and lowest 20% in CPWB for 21 countries.

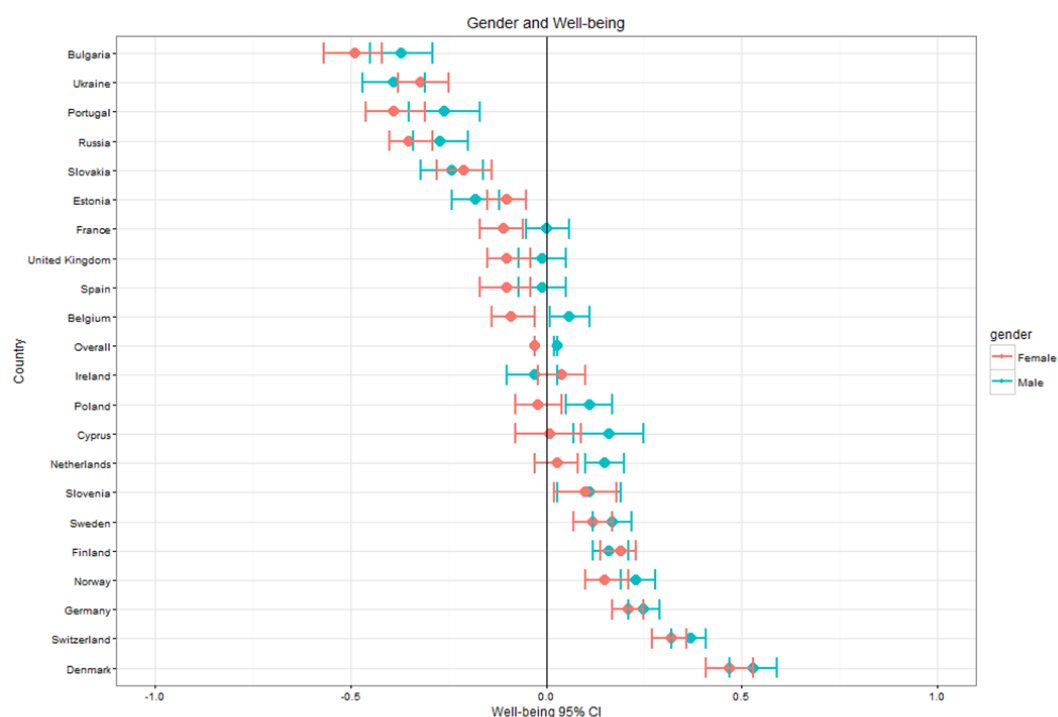


Gender and well-being

For the most part, women exhibited lower CPWB scores than men across Europe. However, these results must be interpreted with caution due to considerable overlap in confidence intervals for many of the countries, and greater exploration of related variables is required. This is particularly true for the four exceptions where women have higher means than men. Perhaps more critically, though, is the continued pattern of increased gender difference for countries with lower national well-being. These patterns are visible in Figure 3.

Further insights on patterns identified for other demographic variables such as age, education, and employment will be presented in the workshop. However, these present a similar narrative as with gender, which is why it has been selected as a case example.

Figure 3. Gender means and confidence intervals for CPWB by country.



Conclusions

Policy considerations

These findings provide useful insights for policymakers to develop actions that can recognise well-being as a desired outcome of policy. The thresholds for high and low well-being make it possible to recognise inequalities such that organisations undertaking population-based interventions know which groups are likely to benefit.

Using these insights, policies can be nuanced to address those most in need of change by identifying those groups with the largest gaps. It is then critical to understand both ends of the well-being spectrum to ensure that improvements for those doing worst do not negatively impact those at the top. Applying thresholds would further provide effective benchmarking for setting targets and establishing what can be considered meaningful change.

In this report, we have presented several macro-level analyses of population well-being across Europe, broken apart by key demographic variables. Results generally show that the countries and groups with lower well-being consistently have greater inequality within. In the workshop, we will present how this applies for gender, age, employment, and education. Additionally, the link between employment and well-being is unmistakable, which is particularly clear in the United Kingdom.

References

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