



I'm Happy; Hope You're Happy Too

Individual and Collective Attributions of Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

While most empirical studies show stable and high levels of subjective well-being in Western societies, other studies have documented an apparently contradictory feeling of a loss of sense of community. Based on an analysis of the Social Cohesion Indicators survey (SCIF, Belgium), we demonstrate that subjective well-being and one's view on society are two distinct concepts. Both measurements are related, however, with some spill-over effects from individual well-being toward the assessment of society. Most notably, ethnocentrism does not have an impact on subjective well-being, but it has a strong negative impact on the view on society. We hypothesize that ethnocentric actors might still be satisfied with their own living conditions, but that they feel alienated from the increasingly culturally diverse society they live in.

Keywords: subjective well-being, Belgium, ethnocentrism, alienation, SCIF survey

Introduction

In recent years, various authors have argued that contemporary Western societies are confronted with a general cultural malaise among the population. Levels of generalized trust seem to be declining in a number of countries, there is concern about a lack of social cohesion and a loss of general social purpose (Lane 2001; Putnam 2000; Sandel 1996). In countries like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France and Belgium, acts of random violence are often portrayed as a symptom of this general malaise, and these countries have witnessed a number of mass mobilizations to protest against this form of violence (Furedi 1997).

On a political level too, this form of discontent has manifested itself quite strongly. Populist and extreme right parties have gained ground in a couple of countries (Taggart 2000). Distrust, either toward the political system or toward other groups within society, has been identified as a very important voting motive for these parties (Hooghe, Marien & Pauwels 2010). Apparently, at least some part of public opinion is so fed up with the ways their societies are being governed, that they prefer to cast a protest vote.

While there is quite some anecdotal evidence about the occurrence of this social malaise, from the point of view of subjective well-being studies, these complaints offer a challenge to the current state of knowledge. Lane (2001) has claimed that we are experiencing a “loss of happiness in market democracies”, but this bold claim is not supported at all by the available data on happiness and well-being. Systematic studies of subjective well-being and happiness in Western Europe have not identified any downward trend (Bjørnskov, Gupta & Pedersen 2008; Veenhoven 2007). In fact, even the opposite phenomenon is quite likely, as at least for a couple of countries, an upward trend with regard to general life satisfaction has been identified in recent decades. This trend, of course, makes the puzzle all the more intriguing. If Western populations apparently have become more satisfied with their life, why do they increasingly resort to casting protest votes? Why is there an apparently large audience for studies decrying the alleged growing dissatisfaction in contemporary Western societies, if the studies documenting rising level of happiness are correct? And even if we would be skeptical about the upward trend in subjective well-being, it is still very clear that subjective well-being levels are at least stable, and they certainly do not

decline in a significant manner. Even in these circumstances, the puzzle remains that we do not see any objective grounds for the increasing political role of feelings of dissatisfaction.

To add to the puzzle, we do know that on a country level, there tends to be a positive correlation between subjective well-being and political trust (Veenhoven 2009). In countries where citizens most readily express trust in their political institutions, the level of subjective well-being also tends to be higher (Hudson 2006; Newton 2007). Various reasons have been invoked to explain this positive correlation. On the one hand we can assume that government institutions delivering high quality services to the population also are able to increase the well-being of their citizens (Hudson 2006). A reverse causal logic, however, is just as likely: if citizens on average are trusting and satisfied with life in their communities, it becomes easier for government institutions to function in an effective manner (Catterberg & Moreno 2006).

No matter what position one takes on the direction of causality, we would still expect that the observed positive correlation on the country level is also present on the individual level. We can assume that people who are satisfied with their daily lives are also satisfied with the political system they live in, as their daily life is largely governed by these political institutions (education system, health care, social security, safety, labour market policies, etc.).

Not all that much studies are available, however on the individual level relation between individual well-being and the attitude toward society as a whole. A Dutch population survey has highlighted the fact that while most respondents in the Netherlands are quite satisfied with their own life experience, they do seem to be rather critical about the state of Dutch society. Even parents who are satisfied with the school their own children are attending, express doubts about the quality of the Dutch education system (Bijl, Boelhouwer & Pommer 2007).

The aim of the current article is to explain this discrepancy between individual subjective well-being, and the prevailing view on the functioning of the society one lives in. A rather naive assumption would be that the two attitudes should be closely related. After all, one would expect that respondents have a rather optimistic outlook

on society if they live in a country where the aggregate level of subjective well-being is quite high. Assuming this logic would imply that the rating of one's society should more or less equal the aggregate level of subjective well-being in that society.

Most available evidence, however, suggests that this is not the case. The Dutch study seems to suggest that high levels of subjective well-being can be combined with a negative outlook on the society one lives in. If subjective well-being and satisfaction with one's society would be two distinct concepts, this would allow us to solve an important apparent contradiction in the contemporary social science literature. High levels of subjective well-being (Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz, 2003) and happiness (Veenhoven, 2010) can be combined with a negative view on society, as described in other studies (Putnam 2000; Lane 2001). If these measurements are distinct, it is theoretically possible that both measurements evolve in different manners in contemporary societies.

In the current article, we first want to ascertain what are the differences between subjective well-being and one's view on society. In a second step of the analysis, our aim is to investigate how we could explain different levels of these two variables. The analysis will be based on recent Belgian survey data on subjective well-being.

Data and methods

In order to investigate the relation between subjective well-being and one's perception of society, we will rely on the results of the Social Cohesion Indicators Survey, that was conducted in Belgium in 2009. The survey was conducted with the explicit goal to test and to validate social cohesion indicators (Social Cohesion Indicators in Flanders, or SCIF survey). In total 2,080 respondents took part in the survey, and the response analysis demonstrated that respondents are largely representative for the population. It has to be noted, however, that the survey was conducted only in one language (Dutch) and therefore remains limited to the Dutch speaking autonomous region in the north of Belgium. This region, however, is by far the largest of the Belgian federation, with some 5,800,000 inhabitants out of a total of 10,500,000.

Belgium is one of the smaller countries in Western Europe, it is a founding member of the European Union, and in most attitudinal surveys, it occupies a middle position. Trust and subjective well-being averages tend to be lower than in the Scandinavian

countries or the Netherlands, but they are clearly and consistently higher than in France or the Southern European countries. As such, we have no reason to assume that Belgium would be a highly distinctive case for the European context (Veenhoven & Hagerty 2006).

In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate how “satisfied” they were with the following items in their life: health, leisure time, professional life, family life, social life, sexual life, the way democracy works in Belgium, and the kind of society we live in. For each item, respondents could indicate satisfaction on a 0 (“very dissatisfied”) to 10 (“very satisfied”) scale (Table 1).

Table 1. Subjective Well-Being Indicators in Belgium

	Family Life	Social Life	Health	Sexual Life	Professional	Leisure	Society	Democracy
All	8.24	7.77	7.45	7.32	7.29	7.29	5.56	5.07
Gender:								
- Women	8.15	7.74	7.28	7.27	7.20	7.20	5.46	5.19
- Men	8.33	7.80	7.63	7.38	7.38	7.39	5.66	4.94
Age:								
-18-34	8.33	7.98	8.00	7.80	8.33	7.23	5.83	5.42
-35-49	8.22	7.64	7.51	7.58	8.22	6.62	5.53	5.03
-50-64	8.20	7.75	7.22	7.03	8.20	7.53	5.46	4.86
-65+	8.17	7.70	6.89	6.50	8.17	8.00	5.31	4.88
Education								
- Lower	7.93	7.40	6.66	6.40	6.66	7.62	5.27	4.80
- Lower Sec.	8.20	7.79	7.23	7.08	6.89	7.37	5.46	5.02
-Higher Sec	8.30	7.86	7.49	7.46	7.40	7.25	5.41	4.96
-Higher Ed.	8.29	7.80	7.79	7.56	7.50	7.17	5.85	5.28

Subjective Well-Being scores (0-10 scale). Entries are mean scores per group. Source: SCIF 2009 (n=2,080).

Clearly, respondents are first of all satisfied with their family life, and this indicator obtains an average score of 8.24. For the five other indicators, differences remain limited, although social life, health and sexual life receive somewhat higher scores than leisure time and professional life. Gender differences remain very limited, but on average men score slightly higher on this scale than female respondents do. The strongest difference is that with regard to health (difference: .35), but it has to be kept in mind that the average age of female respondents was higher than that of male respondents, and this age difference largely explains the difference in health scores. The smallest differences between women and men are recorded with regard to social life and satisfaction with one’s sexual life.

For most indicators, age differences remain limited. Only for health and sexual life, we can observe a sharp decline among the 65+ age group. On the other hand, this age group is very satisfied with one's leisure activities. Finally education level explains quite some difference, as the higher educated are much more satisfied with their health, their sexual life and their professional life.

Two distinct concepts

For the two social items toward the end of the battery, the main observation is that the average score is a massive two points lower than for the individual items. Respondents tend to be much more satisfied with their own private life, while they are quite skeptical about the society they live in and about the way democracy functions in their country. As such, the present results are in line with the results from the Dutch survey that was already quoted: while respondents are quite satisfied with their own living conditions, they still express doubts about the quality of the society they live in.

Table 2. Factor Analysis for Subjective Well-Being and View on Society

	Subjective Well-Being	View on Society
Social Life	.802	.095
Family Life	.798	.090
Sexual Life	.701	.093
Leisure Time	.612	.068
Health	.566	.171
Professional Life	.558	.183
Democracy in Belgium	.128	.907
The Society we live in	.172	.901
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Eigen Value	2.83	1.73
Explained Variance	35.3	21.6
Cronbach's α	.77	.81

Principal Component Analysis of Subjective Well-Being scale, Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization. SCIF survey 2009, n=2,080

The figures reported in Table 1 suggest that the view on society tends to be more negative than the level of satisfaction with one's own life. We need a factor analysis, however, to ascertain, whether we can actually label this as two distinct attitudes. The factor analysis confirms that both attitudes should be distinguished. The principal

component analysis clearly demonstrates two different factors, and the cross-loadings remain very limited (Table 2). For subjective well-being, the highest factor loads are obtained for social life, family life and sexual life. Health, and one's professional life score somewhat lower. The factor analysis offers compelling evidence that one's view on society is empirically distinct from subjective well-being.

Table 3. Factor Analysis for Subjective Well-Being

	Full sample	Gender		Age			
		Women	Men	18/34	35/49	50/64	65+
Social Life	.794	.806	.782	.782	.778	.802	.793
Family Life	.783	.797	.765	.781	.800	.812	.752
Sexual Life	.687	.711	.656	.661	.757	.744	.608
Leisure Time	.594	.622	.559	.593	.567	.668	.680
Health	.592	.612	.553	.553	.552	.628	.621
Professional Life	.562	.592	.511	.529	.527	.603	.611
Eigen Value	2.74	2.90	2.52	2.60	2.72	3.06	2.79
Explained Variance	45.6	48.4	41.9	43.3	45.4	51.0	46.4
Cronbach's α	.77	.81	.70	.73	.74	.83	.79

Principal Component Analysis of the subjective well-being scale, for various subgroups, n=2080. SCIF 2009.

If we compare the factor solution for various subgroups within the population, it is striking to observe that the scale for subjective well-being proves to be one-dimensional for the various subgroups within the sample (Table 3). We do see however, that for women the scale is more consistently one-dimensional than it is for men, with a Cronbach's α of .81 among female respondents and .70 among male respondents. The ranking for the various items is identical for women and for men, and for both groups, social life and family life are clearly the main determinants of subjective well-being. For women, satisfaction with one's sexual and professional life receive a stronger factor loading than this is the case for men.

Comparing the age groups, it can be observed that the internal coherence of the scale is positively related to age, with the lowest Cronbach's α being recorded for the youngest age group. The highest Eigen values is recorded among the 50 to 64 age group. This implies that this age group tends to have the most coherent outlook toward life, with cumulative relations between the various topics of satisfaction. In general however, it can be observed that the factor loadings, and the rank order of the

items are remarkably stable across groups, so we can assume that the structural characteristics of this scale tend to be equivalent across various groups within the population.

Multivariate analysis

The previous analysis has shown that subjective well-being and the view on society should be empirically distinguished, as they cannot be reduced to one latent factor. This implies that, in principle, it is possible to combine a high level of subjective well-being with a negative view on the society one lives in, or the other way around. That does not mean, however, that the two measurements are not related, as it could still be argued that subjective well-being will have an impact on the view actors have about society in general. In order to investigate this possibility we conduct a regression analysis, using the view of society as dependent variable and subjective well-being as independent variable. This allows us to assess the assumption that if actors are satisfied with their own life, they might generalize this feeling toward society as a whole. Self-evidently, other control variables that have been shown to have an effect on subjective well-being, like age, having a partner, gender, education and income level, too, need to be included in the multivariate model (Wrosh & Scheier 2003; Dolan, Peasgood & White 2008; Blanchflower & Oswald 2008; Winkelmann 2009; Hooghe & Vanhoutte, forthcoming). Both subjective well-being and view on society have been calculated independently from another, as the Varimax rotation used in Table 2 would maximize the distance between the two measurements. To avoid this, we simply conducted two separate factor analyses.

A first model (Table 4) demonstrates that the effect of socio-economic background variables tends to remain limited. Older respondents have a somewhat more negative view on society, while we observe that having a partner is associated with a more positive outlook on society. Religious practice and membership of voluntary associations do not have an effect on the view on society. Attitudinal variables, on the other hand, prove to have a very strong effect, with mostly ethnocentrism (negative) and generalized trust (positive) standing out. Overall, this model is already quite powerful, with an explained variance of 22 per cent.

Table 4. Explaining View on Society

	Model I		Model II	
	B (S.E)	β	B (S.E.)	β
Cte.	4.344		4.520	
Gender	.056 (.076)	.016	.113 (.082)	.032
Age	-.009 (.002)	-.088***	-.008 (.003)	-.072**
Education Level	-.040 (.028)	-.035	-.017 (.031)	-.015
Income	-.000 (.000)	-.050*	-.000 (.000)	-.061*
Partner	.303 (.090)	.077**	-.005 (.104)	-.001
Number of children	-.021 (.037)	-.013	.035 (.039)	.023
Voluntary Associations	-.036 (.021)	-.037	-.067 (.023)	-.071**
Religious Practice	.139 (.055)	.056*	.115 (.064)	.042
Optimism	.219 (.046)	.106***	.039 (.055)	.018
Ethnocentrism	.509 (.050)	-.244***	.535 (.055)	.257***
Generalized Trust	.026 (.002)	.262***	.024 (.003)	.236***
Subjective Well-Being			.451 (.046)	.254***
Adj. r ²		.217		.278

Entries are the result of an ordinary least squares regression. Dependent variable: view on society (society and democracy). Source: SCIF 2009, n= 2,080.

Subsequently, in Model II we also introduce individual subjective well-being as an additional independent variable. The explained variance of this model rises substantially from 22 to 27 per cent. This already implies that while the two attitudes we distinguished might not be identical and certainly cannot be reduced to one common factor, they are still closely related. In fact, subjective well-being becomes the single most important independent variable with a standardized regression coefficient of .25. Most other independent variables that were significant in Model I do remain significant, although they tend to lose some of their predictive power. The only exceptions are optimism and having a partner. While these two variables were significant in Model I, they are rendered completely non-significant by including subjective well-being¹. We can observe from the difference between the results of model I and model II that optimism as such does not have a direct impact on one's satisfaction with society. The effect of optimism is completely absorbed by individual well-being. This is important, as it suggests that one's view of society is not just a reflection of a general feeling of optimism. Optimism might have an impact on the assessment of one's own living conditions, but taking this form of well-being into account, it does no longer have an independent effect on one's view on society.

The main thing to be learned from the analysis reported in Table 4, therefore is that there is still a strong relation between subjective well-being and one's view on society. A positive assessment of one's own life tends to have a spill-over effect on one's view on society in general.

Explaining the difference

The previous analysis demonstrates that both assessments are related, but it still does not inform us on how we could explain the observed difference between the two measurements, with on average a difference of two points on a zero to ten scale. In a multivariate logic, the most likely explanation for this discrepancy is that there are some variables that can be identified to have a negative impact on the view on society, but not on subjective well-being (or the opposite phenomenon: that some variables have a positive effect on subjective well-being, but not on one's view on society). To test for this possibility, we will conduct two different regression analyses, one on subjective well-being and one on the view on society, to assess whether these two evaluations are determined by different background variables. Basically the same models are used as in Table 4, but with additional variables that, according to the literature, could have an effect on one's view on society. More specifically, we hypothesize that excessive time spent on viewing television could be associated to a 'mean world syndrome', as heavy television watchers are flooded with information on crime, corruption, and other social problems (Uslaner 1998). The assumption is also that those who are very concerned about crime and feel very unsafe in their communities, will feel less satisfied with the society they live in (Nannestad 2008).

Table 5. Explaining Subjective Well-Being and View on Society

	Model I: Subjective Well Being		Model II: View on Society		Model III: View on Society	
(Constant)	- .456		3.593		4.015	
Gender	-.078 (.051)	-.040	.114 (.081)	.032	.111 (.079)	.031
Age	-.005 (.002)	-.075**	-.012 (.003)	-.112***	-.010 (.003)	-.092***
Education Level	-.016 (.019)	-.025	.012 (.029)	.011	-.049 (.029)	-.043
Income	.000 (.000)	.029	-.000 (.000)	-.055*	-.000 (.000)	-.054*
Partner	.623 (.059)	.279***	.195 (.092)	.050*	.253 (.090)	.064**
Children	-.094 (.023)	-.109***	-.001 (.038)	-.001	-.014 (.037)	-.009
Memberships	.030 (.014)	.058*	-.034 (.022)	-.036	-.040 (.021)	-.042
Religious Practice	.023 (.038)	.015	.148 (.056)	.059**	.129 (.055)	.052*
Optimism	.312 (.031)	.265***	.256 (.047)	.125***	.211 (.046)	.103***
Ethnocentrism	.008 (.033)	.006			.507 (.050)	.244***
Generalized Trust	.005 (.002)	.086**	.032 (.002)	.318***	.025 (.002)	.253***
Unsafety	.003 (.011)	.006	-.041 (.017)	-.056**	-.024 (.017)	-.033
Hours Televison	-.008 (.016)	.006	.022 (.025)	.021	.026 (.024)	.025
Newspapers	.022 (.012)	.046	.060 (.019)	.072**	.064 (.019)	.076**
Adj r2		.197		.177		.223

Entries are the result of an ordinary least squares regression. Dependent variables: subjective well-being and view on society. N=2,080, SCIF 2009.

Building exactly the same models for the two dependent variables allows us to ascertain how we could explain the differences in the mean scores for the two assessments. First, we can observe there is no difference with regard to age. Older people have a more negative outlook, both on their own well-being as on society as a whole. Having a partner might be a first obvious culprit. While living together with a partner has a strong effect on subjective well-being, the effect on the view on society lies in the same direction but it remains somewhat more limited. This kind of relation seems again rather obvious, since we can expect that having a partner has a strong effect on the individual life situation of the respondent, while it will have only a limited effect on society as a whole. Somewhat counteracting this partner effect is the effect of generalized trust. Generalized trust has a very strong effect on the view on society, while its impact on subjective well-being remains limited. Again, this relation seems obvious, as generalized trust is meant to capture the trust in strangers in general, and it does not refer to private acquaintances.

The ‘mean world syndrome’ clearly does not play a role in explaining the discrepancy between both scores. The feeling of unsafety in one’s neighborhood has some effect on the view on society, but it is rather weak, and it is even rendered insignificant in

the full model III. The hours spent viewing television are not related, either to subjective well-being or to the view on society.

Somewhat surprisingly, reading newspapers even has the obvious effect than one would expect. Regularly reading newspapers has a consistent and very positive effect on the view on society. The assumption that people who are avid newspaper readers, and regularly watch television, and in this manner would be informed about all kinds of negative things going on in society, which would lead to a negative assessment of the state of society they live in, clearly is not supported, on the contrary. We can expect that people who read newspapers regularly obtain much more information about crime, corruption, inequality, poverty and other ailments of society, but still this is associated with a much more positive view on society.

The main difference in the two analyses is the effect of ethnocentrism, as is rendered clear by the comparison between Models II and III in Table 5. First, we observe (Model I) that ethnocentrism is not related at all to subjective well-being. The variable proves not to be significant at all. On the other hand, however, ethnocentrism has a very strong and significant negative impact on the view on society (Model III). Comparing models II (without ethnocentrism) and III (with ethnocentrism) shows that the inclusion of ethnocentrism lead to a rise in explained variance of 4.5 per cent. It is clear therefore that including ethnocentrism contributes rather strongly to our understanding of respondents' view on society. Including ethnocentrism somewhat reduces the strength of most other independent variables. Ethnocentrism therefore proves to offer the main difference between both dependent variables: while ethnocentrism is not related at all to subjective well-being, it proves to be a key component in explaining respondents' view on society.

This differential impact of ethnocentrism can also be visualized (Figure 1).

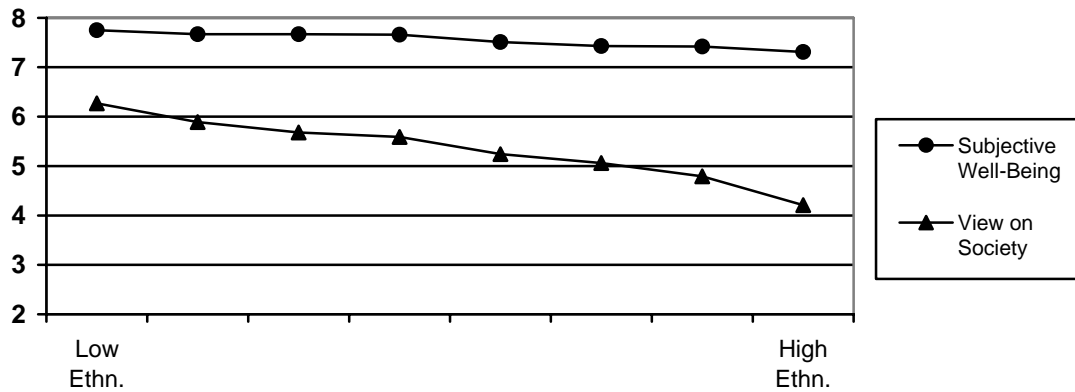


Figure 1. Predicted values for subjective well-being and view on society.
 Predicted values based on regression reported in Table 5. Respondents divided in eight equal groups depending on level of ethnocentrism.

In Figure 1 we plot the predicted values of subjective well-being and view on society for various groups of respondents. The predicted values are obtained as a result of the regression analysis reported in Table 5. Subsequently, respondents are divided in eight equal groups, depending on their level of ethnocentrism, ranging from the group with lowest levels of ethnocentrism to the group with the highest levels. It can be observed that even among the group with low levels of ethnocentrism, subjective well-being scores tend to be higher than the appreciation of the society one lives in. As such it is clear that ethnocentrism is by no means the only variable that could explain the difference in appreciation of individual and collective well-being. We can observe, however, that the difference remains rather limited among this group. As ethnocentrism increases, however, subjective well-being remains rather stable or decreases only slightly. The view on society, on the other hand, is considerably more negative among the group with high levels of ethnocentrism. Among the group with the highest levels of ethnocentrism, the difference between the two attitudes is twice as large as it is among the group with the lowest levels of ethnocentrism. The conclusion, therefore, can be that while ethnocentrism certainly is not the only explanation for the low level of satisfaction with society, it offers at least a substantial part of the explanation for this phenomenon of low levels of satisfaction with one's society.

Discussion

From a sociological point of view, there is an apparent contradiction between the fact that most people in Belgium are quite satisfied with their own lives, but that this feeling does not extend toward society as a whole. For almost all subgroups and indicators, averages are well above 7 on a zero to ten scale, and the few exceptions on this rule can be readily explained. Lowly-educated respondents tend to be less satisfied about their professional life, while those above 65 are less satisfied with their health and their sexual life. If we would simply aggregate all these scores, the only sound conclusion would be that quality of life tends to be quite high in Belgium, as most people are happy about their family life, social and sexual life. Taking this mechanistic point of view, respondents in principle should be very happy with the ‘society they live in’, as this society is composed of people who, on average, have a rewarding and full life. This would be in line with the observation made by Veenhoven (2009) that there is not a conflict at all between individual well-being and the well-being of societies.

Nevertheless, it seems that while respondents in this Belgian survey are satisfied about their own lives, they have serious doubts about the society they live in. While it is clear there is no real conflict between individual well-being and maintaining the quality of the society we live in (Veenhoven 2009), it can still be observed that both measurements seem to be quite distinct, and certainly cannot be reduced to one latent concept.

Given the data that are available, we cannot list all possible elements that could help us to explain the difference between both measurements. Others have already hinted at the different role of attribution. While the respondents in our survey might assume that they are mostly responsible themselves for the choices that lead to their subjective well-being, it is rather easy to attribute the things that go wrong in society to the decision of anonymous ‘others’. This different level of attribution, and hence of responsibility, might indeed play a role. It seems hard to imagine, however, that this would offer a full explanation. Not all elements of the subjective well-being scale are the result of independent choices by the respondent. Family life, e.g., by far is the

most important item in this scale. To some point, one's family life is the result of one's own decision, if, e.g., one decides to enter a relation and to have children. But others do not make this kind of decision, like minors who still live with their parents. It also has to be noted that satisfaction with one's health also loads quite strongly and unequivocally on this factor. Although personal life-style decisions have a strong impact on one's health, it cannot be assumed that actors are fully responsible for the state of their physical health. If it is culturally legitimate to complain about the 'state of society', there is no reason to assume it would not be just as legitimate to complain about the state of one's own health.

While the level of attribution of responsibility certainly will play a role, other elements too clearly are partly responsible for the observed difference. In the current analysis, ethnocentrism stands out as one of the elements that has a huge impact on the view on society, while it is not related to subjective well-being. Contrary to expectations, television and the resulting 'mean world syndrome' did not have an impact on one's view on society. Even individuals who watch television very often, or who feel afraid within their communities, do not tend to have a more negative outlook on society. One might say that, for once, television, and its focus on crime and unsafety is not the main culprit.

At first sight, it might seem strange that ethnocentrism has such a powerful effect on the view on society. After all, Belgium is not that diverse as a society. While there are concentrations of immigrants in the major cities, most of the smaller cities and communities in the country still tend to be rather homogeneous, with a very limited presence of visible minorities. Still, even for people living in these communities, ethnocentrism seems to have a very powerful effect on the way they view society. The discontent with society that is present crystallizes on the presence of ethnic minorities, that are seen as the visible element of contemporary social change.

One of the reasons why ethnocentrism could have such a powerful effect is that respondents grossly overestimate the presence of ethnic minorities in the country. In reality it can be estimated that between five and ten per cent of the population of Belgium can be seen as part of an ethnic minority². Ethnic tensions therefore tend to remain limited and they are concentrated in a small number of metropolitan areas. Respondents, however, consistently tend to overestimate the degree of ethnic diversity

in the country. In the SCIF survey, the respondents were also asked to estimate the proportion of inhabitants of Belgium that were not born in the country. The average estimate was 28.6 per cent of the population, which is a gross overestimation. So apparently, respondents have the idea that Belgian society is very diverse, and this could explain the close relationship between ethnocentrism and their view on society as a whole. Respondents imagine their communities to be much more diverse than they are in reality.

Ethnocentric individuals almost by define perceive the distance between what they perceive as 'others' and themselves as rather large. If they furthermore have the idea that more than a quarter of their society is composed of 'strangers', this might further increase their feeling of alienation toward society as a whole. While ethnocentric individuals can be quite happy with their own life, they do express discontent about society, a society they increasingly perceive as very diverse. The cultural capability to handle this kind of diversity, therefore, might be an important resource if one wants to achieve higher levels of content with the society individuals live in.

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APPENDIX: Variables used in the analysis

		Mean	S.D.
Gender	1=Female	0.516	0.250
Age	Range: 17-84	47.19	17.94
Education Level	1-6 range: Low to University	3.52	1.55
Income	In €/month	2838	2060
Partner	Yes =1	0.675	0.468
Number of children living at home	Count	0.755	1.091
Membership of voluntary Associations	Count: Are you member of any voluntary associations?	1.91	1.85
Religious Practice	How often do you attend religious services? 1= never, 7= daily	2.10	1.54
Optimism	Five Item Scale. Strongest Item: "I expect that things will turn out well for me". Eigen Value: 2.38; Explained Variance: 47.67 %. Cronbach's α : .72	0.00	0.87
Ethnocentrism	Three Item Scale. Strongest Item: "It is bad for Belgian economy that people from other countries come to live here". Eigen Value: 1.96; Explained Variance: 65.43 %. Cronbach's α : .74.	0.00	0.86
Generalized Trust	Three Item Scale. Strongest Item: "Do you think that most people can be trust or do you think you cannot be to careful?". Eigen Value: 2.01; Explained Variance: 66.83 %. Cronbach's α : .75	0.00	0.88
Unsafety	Four Item Scale. Strongest Item: "Does it happen that you do not open the door for strangers because you feel it is not safe?". Eigen Value: 2.29; Explained Variance: 57.12 %. Cronbach's α : .75.	4.96	2.48
Hours Television	How many hours do you watch television on a regular day?	2.48	1.67
Newspapers	How often do you read a newspaper (1=never; 7=daily)	5.27	2.18

Endnotes

¹. In an additional model, we investigated whether there is an interaction effect between, on the one hand individual subjective well-being, and on the other hand optimism or having a partner. Both interaction effects, however, were clearly non-significant.

². Official figures are not available. On the one hand we know that 7 per cent of the population does not have Belgian citizenship. Most of these inhabitants, however, originate from the neighbouring countries, and they are not perceived as ‘visible’ minorities. On the other hand, most of the immigrants originating from Mediterranean countries have by now acquired Belgian citizenship, so they are no longer present in the statistics. Experts’ estimates on the presence of visible minorities therefore differ rather strongly, but they tend to oscillate between five and ten per cent of the population.