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The state of play in measuring SWB in the Netherlands

**Tineke de Jonge
Statistics Netherlands**

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1 Introduction

Quality of life (QOL) is one of the core research areas of Statistics Netherlands in the coming years. Subjective well-being (SWB) is one of its main themes. With this theme, Statistics Netherlands meets with growing interest both nationally and internationally. Statistics Netherlands wants to improve the provision of information in this field because of the prominent role people's subjective measures and perceptions, their experiences and feelings have played in recent discussions held by economists, psychologists and policymakers.

SWB is primarily an individual phenomenon that refers to people's emotional and cognitive evaluations of their lives or, put simply, how satisfied they are with life and how happy they feel. On the one hand this may be influenced by the situation they are in, their trust in public policy and how they value public services. On the other hand the outcomes may be indicative of the situation they are in, their trust in public policy and their appreciation of public services. Statistics Netherlands will study SWB with this in mind and for different domains in life.

Measuring SWB is not new in the Netherlands. The next section outlines the history. Section three goes into the availability and quality of SWB data in the data sets of Statistics Netherlands, whereas section four briefly describes the plans for further exploring the measurement of SWB in the Netherlands. A list of abbreviations used for the surveys can be found in appendix A.

2 History

In 1974, Statistics Netherlands developed its first Life Situation Survey (LSS) at the request of and in close collaboration with the then recently founded Netherlands Institute for Social Research (NISR). Purpose of this survey was to measure whether or not specific groups of the population shared in the growing material prosperity and psychological well-being in the Netherlands. The survey covered the following domains: living, working, social contacts, health, leisure activities, marriage and family and the social and financial situation. Besides an objective indication for each domain, respondents were asked for their subjective findings. In addition the survey contained more general subjective questions, such as "How satisfied are you with your life?", "How satisfied are you with your financial situation?" and "Do you consider yourself a happy person?" Finally some questions were asked to measure the psychological and health condition.

The LSS marked the kick-off of the biennial Social Cultural Reports and the development of a life situation index (LSI) by the NISR, which still exists but has changed along with the life situation in the past decades. At first the LSS was held every three years. In 1989-1996 the LSS was a continuous survey. The questions on which the LSI was based remained more or less the same during this period. In 1997 the LSS was added as a module to the Continuous Survey Life Situation (CSLS). The questions were adapted to the new insights gained in the previous period. The LSS module was part of the CSLS in 1999 and in 2002, but then Statistics Netherlands ended its participation. This was because the interest in the subjective indicators from the survey that started in the eighties had dwindled. Also, several questions had been incorporated in other social surveys that all addressed a specific aspect of the life situation. However, the NISR stuck with the LSS and incorporated the questionnaire in the biennial survey on cultural changes (SCC), conducted by the institute since 1975 and based on survey questions from previous research in this field. The data collection for the SCC had for long been granted to commercial agencies. In 2008 the NISR came to an agreement with Statistics Netherlands for the field work of the SCC. Again the LSS part had

been split off into a separate survey. Data collection took place in the sample that was drawn for the labour force survey (LFS) of Statistics Netherlands. Respondents to the LFS were asked to fill in the LSS-questionnaire. The advantage of this approach is that the LSS data are enriched with comprehensive information on the labour force. It has not yet been decided whether Statistics Netherlands will collect the data for the LSS survey in the future and whether the same data collection method will be used.

In the course of time several modules disappeared from the CSLS, such as modules on youth and living conditions. In 2005 questions on justice were integrated in a Safety Monitor, which is a shared service of Statistics Netherlands and the ministries of Justice and the Interior. In the same year a new survey was made up of the questions on participation and environment.

In 2007 Statistics Netherlands started a program of redesigning social surveys. This was not only motivated by cutting costs as well as the administrative burden for citizens, but also by the new possibilities allowed by internet observation, advanced estimation techniques and the greater accessibility of register data. As part of the redesigning program, the CSLS was cut back further. The general part was replaced by a short questionnaire that will serve as the basis of all of Statistics Netherlands' social surveys in the near future. What is left of the CSLS beyond this basic part is merely a health survey. At this stage a module on social cohesion has been added. This covers questions that were previously asked in the general part, but were left out in the new basic part. The future of the module on social cohesion is currently being discussed. It may remain part of the CSLS or be continued as a separate survey.

3 SWB data at Statistics Netherlands

Questions on subjective well-being are also incorporated in other surveys. For instance, the five-yearly survey on family formation, which is another Statistics Netherlands survey that incorporates questions on SWB. Then there is the national survey on labour conditions, which is part of the long-term programme on Innovation of Labour by TNO conducted in collaboration with Statistics Netherlands.

The only SWB question that has been preserved in the post-redesign basis of all social surveys is "How is your health in general?". The other SWB questions are spread over different surveys. The number of SWB questions is very limited or very topical in the social surveys mentioned except in the CSLS and the LSS. Also the different surveys have different data collection methods and response rates. Appendix B gives an overview of the data collection methods.

The next section provides a short description of SWB questions for each survey. This is followed by a discussion on the response options.

3.1 SWB questions in the social surveys

The continuous survey on life situation

The CSLS consists of a main module on health, a module on social cohesion and a questionnaire on paper that is left behind to fill in after the personal interview. In the paper questionnaire respondents are asked some additional questions on their health that need more time to answer than is possible in a personal interview.

The main module only includes questions on the subjective well-being of the respondent's children who are minors. These questions cover how satisfied they are about their life and friendships, their positive and negative feelings (mood), and how they do in school.

In the paper questionnaire all respondents have to answer a five-item question about their mood. Respondents who are part of the working population are asked some additional questions on their feelings related to work (all negatively formulated, to measure burn-out), and their (inter)personal functioning at work.

The module on social cohesion now incorporates the more general subjective questions “How satisfied are you with your life?” and “Do you consider yourself a happy person?” that were previously contained in the general part of the survey. Other SWB questions in the social cohesion module cover feelings on lack of safety, trust in other people, satisfaction with the mixture of people living in one’s neighbourhood, and on the frequency of contact with other people.

The NISR life situation survey

The present LSS-survey is more elaborate with respect to subjective well-being than the CSLS. Except for the general questions on satisfaction and happiness, this survey contains questions on the satisfaction with the life situation, positive and negative feelings, inter-personal feelings, social contacts and self-esteem. Compared to the LSS-questions in 2006, this latter part is extended significantly. This is because almost all questions from the rotating module of SWB on personal functioning included in the 2006/2007 round of the European Social Survey (ESS) were incorporated in the 2008 version of the LSS survey. The conceptual framework underpinning the SWB module in the ESS distinguishes between a personal and an interpersonal dimension of well-being broken down into feeling (being) and functioning (doing). The latest version of the LSS survey includes several questions on each of these dimensions.

The Safety Monitor

The SWB questions in the safety monitor are all about how safe people feel on certain locations or spots and on inter-personal feelings, although it lacks a question on trust in other people.

The survey on participation and environment

The survey on participation and environment incorporates a large number of (objective) questions on voluntary work and some on inter-personal feelings. There is a very limited number of questions on personal feelings or personal functioning in this survey, but the question about satisfaction with one’s financial situation that once belonged to the LSS is included.

The survey on family formation

The survey on family formation is the only survey apart from CSLS and LSS that asks “Do you consider yourself a happy person?”. Other SWB questions in this survey are restricted to feelings towards partners and parents.

The survey on cultural changes

The SCC is the only other survey apart from the CSLS and LSS that asks about satisfaction with life. In addition the survey includes a question on isolation from other people and two on voluntary work.

The survey on labour conditions

The survey on labour conditions covers the same SWB questions as in the CSLS that are put to respondents in the labour force, and two additional questions on job loss.

3.2 Response options, scales, and comparability of questions

The surveys described only use verbal response options. The inventory of the questions shows some inconsistency in options and a misbalance in the scales that have been used. This can best be illustrated by the general question on life satisfaction in the CSLS.

A five-point scale is used for the response on the life satisfaction of children, varying from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied”. This is a balanced scale, with a neutral option in the middle and comparable extremes on both sides. The response options for the respondents’ own satisfaction with life are not the same as for their children. Again a five-point scale is used, but the options are “extraordinarily satisfied”, “very satisfied”, “satisfied”, “fairly satisfied” and “not so satisfied”. This is not a very balanced scale and it lacks an option to indicate that one is dissatisfied: “not so satisfied” can still be interpreted as at least a little satisfied. The response options for the question on happiness are on a balanced scale varying from “very happy” to “very unhappy”. One can question if a proper comparison between life satisfaction and happiness is possible with those response options. Furthermore the question on the children’s satisfaction is asked about their life as a whole and based on their average feelings about it in the previous four weeks. Respondents themselves have to indicate how satisfied they are with their present life.

There has not been much variation in the average happiness and satisfaction in the Netherlands. One can accept this at face value or ask whether this is due to the verbal response options and whether a numerical 10-point scale would show a comparable result. For all subjective questions it is relevant to ask which scale can be best interpreted by respondents: a verbal or a numerical scale, and with what range?

Both the CSLS and the survey on labour conditions contain questions on feelings about work. These are all formulated negatively. No questions are asked on positive feelings and therefore they only give insight in the negative mood of respondents with respect to their work, where it says in the literature that respondents may report a high level of satisfaction if they genuinely experience their life as going well, but they may also report a high level of satisfaction if their experience is far less positive, but their expectations are very low. The assessment of subjective well-being therefore requires more direct measures of the respondent’s current state, including questions about both positive and negative mood.¹

4 Plans for further exploring the measurement of SWB

Exploring analyses

To breathe new life into measuring SWB we need to chart the relevant political and societal issues and with this in mind we will make exploring analyses. As the previous section shows, the SWB measurement in the Netherlands has become rather fragmented in the course of time. In addition, depending on the topic, the number of respondents to SWB questions differs considerable. The exploring analyses are therefore multipurpose. The first aim is to demonstrate the merits of SWB measures for political and societal issues. The second is to give insight in white spots: what can be measured and what issues remain underexposed. The third aim is more methodological and addresses such questions as the type of scale to be used, the number and type of questions necessary to properly measure SWB, and what can be done to tackle fragmentation. This defragmentation is a matter of strategic decision and policy rather than a methodological problem.

In addition to the surveys available at Statistics Netherlands, we will explore the outcomes of the 2006/2007 round of the ESS and compare the results with those of the other surveys and support the conclusions from the analyses.

¹ Huppert, F.A., N. Marks, A. Clark, J. Siegrist, A. Stutzer, J. Vittersø, M. Wahrendorf, *Measuring Well-being Across Europe: Description of the ESS Well-being Module and Preliminary Findings*, Soc Indic Res (2009) 91:301–315

Common ground with other themes

In the introduction, quality of life has been mentioned as one of the core research areas Statistics Netherlands focuses on the coming years. The main reason why Statistics Netherlands pays new attention to the quality of life themes is the widespread call for new indicators that can complement the traditional and often objective measures of progress such as GDP. From this perspective Statistics Netherlands already pays attention to the theme of sustainability. In 2009 a monitor on sustainability was published, which was realized by Statistics Netherlands in close collaboration with the NISR, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, and the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. This monitor does not restrict sustainability to the depletion of natural resources, but stresses that for a society to be sustainable, social cohesion and human capital are indispensable. Several policy issues with respects to this passed in review and offer interesting points of departure for developing subjective indicators from the SWB measurements. These subjective indicators may than be compared with the more objective ones for sustainability.

Register data

The growing availability of register data offers much more opportunities for analyses than was possible until recently. Data at the micro level from a large number of registers and surveys are linked in the Social Statistical Dataset (SSD) of Statistics Netherlands, a growing dataset that came in existence in 1999. With the SSD a consistent description of several aspects of Dutch society can be made. The collection covers data on births, deaths, marital status, incomes, taxes, social security benefits, job careers of employees and education level, among others. These data are available for successive moments in time, which makes it possible to conduct social dynamics studies. The opportunities the SSD offers for SWB measurements will be explored as well.

Appendix A Methods of data collection

The table below gives an overview of the methods for data collection.

Survey	Target group	Response rate	Frequency	Method for data collection
CSLS: main module on health	Individuals aged over 14	9.500 (year)	Continuous	CAPI
CSLS: additional module on health	Individuals aged over 14	9.500 (year)	Continuous	PAPI
CSLS: module on social cohesion	Individuals aged over 14	9.500 (year)	Continuous	CAPI
Survey on Participation and Environment	Individuals aged over 14	4.000	Every year	CATI
Safety Monitor	Individuals aged over 14	20.000	Every year	CAWI/CATI/PAPI
Survey on Cultural Changes	Individuals aged over 18	2.000	Every 2 years	CAPI
Life Situation Survey	Individuals aged over 18	2.000	Every 2 years	PAPI
Survey on Family Formation	Individuals aged 18-62	8.000	Every 5 years	PAPI
National Survey on Labour Conditions	Dutch employees	22.000	Every year	PAPI/CAWI

CAPI: Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing, PAPI: Paper and Pencil Interviewing, CATI: Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing

CAWI: Computer Assisted Web Interviewing

At first stage, addressees of the Safety Monitor are asked to answer the questionnaire online but they can get a paper version on request. In a second stage, non-responding individuals are interviewed by telephone if possible, and otherwise they are asked to fill in and return a paper questionnaire.

The LSS survey respondents to the labour force survey are asked if they are willing to fill in an additional paper questionnaire on their life situation.

Employees in the sample of the survey on labour conditions receive a paper questionnaire at their home address. They can fill in the paper version and send it back by mail or to fill in the online questionnaire. In 2008, for the first time, respondents of the previous round were approached once again. Nearly half of them responded. In 2009 the entire group of persons that responded in 2008 will be approached once more, which makes the survey longitudinal.

Appendix B List of abbreviations

CSLS	Continuous Survey Life Situation
ESS	European Social Survey
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LSI	Life Situation Index
LSS	Life Situation Survey
NISR	Netherlands Institute for Social Research
QOL	Quality Of Life
SCC	Survey on Cultural Changes
SSD	Social Statistical Dataset
SWB	Subjective well-being
TNO	Institute for Applied Scientific Research