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Patterns of subjective well-being: From self-victimizing to social contribution.

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Abstract

The study investigated the psychological reasons behind low/high levels of civil and personal satisfaction, subjective social well-being, civil comfort and positive social contribution. Grounded Theory was used as general methodology. Data collection included in depth interviews in Hungary (n=30), direct observations and theoretical coding of live and culture-specific texts. The basic social process uncovered in the research is self-differentiating, which is an implicit process to socially situate and frame the self and the other in a given social/societal situation that guides social perception, cognition and action. The most salient outcome of self-differentiating in the Hungarian sample is self-victimizing, which involves three further basic social psychological processes (self-inactivating, questioning and self-isolating) and contributes to certain socio-cultural phenomenon such as distrust, bystanderism, pessimism or anomie. Other modes of social contribution may modify the social consequences of self-victimizing, such as: achieving, celebrating, protesting, withdrawing, complaining, defying. Based on the discoveries, the concept of SSWB (subjective social well-being) is introduced and an expanded three-dimensional model of civil satisfaction, comfort and contribution along with psychological and cultural implications are discussed.

Introduction

The research aimed at discovering social psychological causes and mechanisms behind unusually low levels of civil and personal satisfaction, civil comfort as well as low levels of social and subjective well-being that have been experienced in the Hungarian society continually since the change of the political system two decades ago. A cultural psychological approach were taken to reveal the main social psychological processes that govern the development and endurance of these problems (Sági, 2002; Molnár and Kapitány, 2007; Tóth, 2009) apart from the structural, political, historical, economical, etc factors (Spéder and Kapitány, 2002). Throughout the last two decades, both public and scientific discourse in post-communist Hungary (along with some other post-socialist societies) has conceptualized certain characteristics of the cultural and social scene as disadvantageous socio-cultural and/or system-based traits and highlighted such problems as high levels of depression (Kopp, 2008), affective disorders and a high rate of suicide attempts (Kopp, 2008), low indicators of public mood (Sági, 2002; Kopp, 2008), high levels of alcoholism and other depression related drug abuse (Széll, 2007; Kopp, 2008), or a high occurrence of chronic disease (Kopp, 2008). Other problems are: distrust in both the political and civil sphere and in interpersonal relations (Tóth, 2009; Skrabski and Kopp, 2008); anomie and a conforming attitude towards both small and large-scale corruption (Tóth, 2009); concerning moral dysfunctions (Spéder and Kapitány, 2002); as well as dissatisfaction and forthright violence (Sági, 2002).

However, consideration was given in these matters to psychological and social psychological reasons only to a limited extent. Public and scientific discourse, on the other hand pointed out the salience of complaining, distrust, irrational expectations, anomie, perceived loss of morality, and pessimism, which apart from being overall, macro-level problems, tend to influence people's everyday lives and to reduce the levels of positive affect and both personal and social subjective well-being (see Csepeli, 2008; Kopp, 2008; Skrabski és Kopp, 2008; Hunyady, 2008).

Scientific research behind subjective well-being (SWB) has been developing fast both in body and scope in the last few decades. SWB has been conceptualized previously in many ways, starting from hedonic quality of experience, to experiences in personal growth however, most commonly used indicators of SWB still remain to be global life satisfaction and evaluation of personal happiness (see Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). Cultural differences shown by general indicators of SWB have been pointed out earlier, just as personal differences in experiencing relative satisfaction with life (Diener, Oishi, and Lucas, 2003; Diener and Diener, 1995). Personal SWB is, according to previous results influenced by certain personality traits such as neuroticism and extraversion, as well as situational, demographic, institutional, environmental, and economical factors (see van Hoorn, 2007), Previous research shows that SWB of a nation can be determined by subjective (social and psychological) background factors in particular, apart from hard data in a country such as GDP, and some other features expressible in numbers to a lesser extent such as sociological and political factors and other cultural aspects. There is, furthermore an expansion in the concept of subjective well being, with the notion of psychological well-being added to the picture (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995). Ryff and fellow scientists promote a more complex framework of human well-being that encompasses 6 distinct dimensions of wellness (Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, Self-Acceptance). There is a striking lack in the literature of examination of social well-being however – all SWB and PWB concepts seem to focus merely on the individual side of the human. What is the case, when we examine subjective social well-being?

Theoretical background

SSWB (subjective social well-being) is a more complex notion than either PWB, SWB or SWB among cultures, and therefore it requires a more detailed examination with inductive and qualitative elements as well as a socio-cultural point of view to begin with. SSWB reflects to the fact that human well-being stems from social aspects of the everyday life as much (or even more significantly) as it is tempered by individual goals, emotions and evaluations (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Diener and Diener, 1995; Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003). SSWB comes from a systemic viewpoint of social and cultural psychology and comes down to the fact that happiness is social. It seems necessary to expand the scope of research concerning SSWB so that it includes social and public aspects next to the individual features of the subjective states of the people.
The aim of my research was to discover and highlight the social psychological mechanisms behind SSWB and to determine the main factors (main social psychological processes) behind social, political and personal satisfaction and civil comfort. The antecedent to such a concept of social well being exists in the research on cultural

aspects of SWB (Diener and Diener, 1995; Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003). By cultural aspects I mean culturally transmitted psychological predispositions that determine subjective well-being of people on a large scale. Compared to other countries with similar economical performance, similar system features and levels of political freedom or even with similar historical and political background, Hungary falls behind in most cross-national studies that examine differences in subjective well-being and civil satisfaction (see for example Andorka 1994; Rose és Haerpfer 1994; Rose, Mishler és Haerpfer 1998; Spéder és Kapitány, 2002; Sági, 2002). With these in mind the main question of the research was: *what is going on* in the Hungarian socio-cultural setting that explains such deficiencies in SWB, PWB and SSWB of the citizens? I was looking for social, cultural, psychological patterns that are salient in people's experiencing of their social circumstances, and in the affects and reactions of people to the various personal, societal and political changes and events in their lives.

Methodology and procedure

A complex form of classical Glaserian Grounded Theory (GGT) was used as general methodology in the study. GGT (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser 1978; Glaser, 1998) is a general research methodology that is suitable with both quantitative and qualitative data. GGT is "the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method" (Glaser, 1998, p.3). Grounded theory is not findings, nor is it description of data. GT is rather an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses or, in other words probability statements about the relationship between previously discovered (emerging) concepts. Grounded theory operates in a reverse fashion from traditional research, and thus it is challenging to describe the process or the stages of the research if one adheres to the traditional forms in accounting. GT, rather than beginning with developing a hypothesis, starts out with data collection through various methods (in-depth interviewing, direct observation, text analysis, questionnaires, statistical data, and so on). From the collected data, key points are marked by codes that emerge (are extracted) from the text itself. Coding is followed by conceptualizing (memoing and sorting), during which concepts are formed from the codes then concepts are organized into categories. The emerging categories will provide the skeleton or the frame for the emerging theory, which is written up in the last phase of the research. The two most important aspects to GT are constant built-in verification of emerging categories and concepts by constant comparison (1) and using all observed stimulus as data (2). Other elements of the method include theoretical sampling, theoretical coding, memo writing and sorting, as described above. GT helps researchers define a problem in its most natural context, to discover relevancies of certain factors in a complex question regarding the social world, and makes it relatively easy to find out what is going on. GT was used as a general methodology for this study because it provides the researcher with a careful balance of the inductive and the deductive approach, making it relatively easy to discover new concepts and categories relevant in a given research area and test multiple hypotheses emerging at the same time. GGT in its present form generally focuses on one category, that is, one basic psychological or social psychological process to discover and particularize. However, with complex psychological issues such as SWB or SSWB, a complex form of GGT is needed.

Data collection started out in Hungary. Participants were volunteering via the biggest Hungarian online social network. Criteria for selection was nationality and mother tongue (Hungarian), samples included 30 in-depth interviews of residents (15 male, 15 female) who belonged to two age-groups: they were between either 25-35 or 55-65 of age. A theoretical sampling for age were important to reveal any potential differences in SWB and SSWB processes due to different socialization effects before and after 1989. Hungarian mother tongue was the only requirement at this point. Theoretical sampling guided the research later for more carefully conceptualized data selection, such as direct observation and text analysis for more theoretical coding

The interviews started out with the following question: "When you think through your life, what turning points come to your mind that have been significant emotionally to you – be it any type of personal or social incidence?" This way of questioning helped the research participants to start out from their own, subjectively important life events and give a narrative-evaluative frame to their accounts to which an affective evaluation were attached inherently. These could be traced both episode by episode as well as on the general level (e.g. overall life-satisfaction). Perceptual, affective and evaluative patterns became transparent and accessible for examination and theoretical coding. After coding for categories in the interviews, focus shifted onto direct observations as well as onto analysis of public texts both live (political, public or other media-based) and symbolic (songs, tales, proverbs) in order to test the new codes and identify more broad cultural patterns of SWB and SSWB.

The Main Research Findings

Main categories and overt psychological processes

The research uncovered a complex system of social psychological processes, with two interrelated basic processes on the superordinate level and several outcomes and further processes on the subordinate level. In this paper, two subordinate level outcomes, *self-differentiating* and *self-victimizing* will be presented and discussed in detail. However, when necessary, some thought will be given to other elements of this complex framework as well. *Self-differentiating* is the outcome of *social situating* which is one of the two basic social processes, while *self-victimizing* occurs as a possible outcome of *social reacting.* The three subordinate level processes of self-differentiating will also be introduced, these are: *self-inactivating*, *questioning* and *self-isolating*. *Social situating* is the general social process by which people give meaning to their social surroundings and at the same time define and interpret the self in the given social situation. During everyday social contact the person's own self is experienced not as a finite, stable, steady entity; it is much rather assessed each time through a latent procedure of social placement and as a correlate to the general other or others in the given social setting. Social situating and the placement of the self are realized on three separated parallel dimensions that mark the evaluations and personal experience in each and every social situation: agency, valence and social layout. Social situating may result in two mutually exclusive outcomes: self-accommodating and self-differentiating. While *self-differentiating*, the self is contrasted to the social surroundings (as opposed to being accommodated) and situated outside the social nucleus of a given social setting. Self-

differentiating may be realized by three subordinate basic social processes, *self-inactivating*, *questioning* and *self-isolating*. According to discoveries in this research, the several forms of self-differentiating are all similar in that they inhibit SWB, PWB and SSWB by causing a subjective feeling of the lack of control. *Self-inactivating* is the social process by which the self is differentiated from others in the social setting on the dimension of agency. The inactivated self is framed as less powerful, competent, responsible, capable or active than the other or others in a particular situation. *Questioning*, the social process by which the self is differentiated from others in the social setting on the dimension of valence, occurs when the social situation of the self is viewed as less favorable, just or fair than that of the other or others in a particular situation. *Self-isolating,* the third form of self-differentiating is the social process by which the self is differentiated from others in the social setting on the dimension of social layout. The isolated self is framed as less embedded or more isolated than the other or others in a particular situation.

According to findings, the consequences of social situating of the self manifest themselves in *social reacting* which is the general social psychological process by which people enforce their socially experienced self onto their social milieu. Social reacting begins with perceiving the self through the processes of self-situating, and includes all forms of mental or physical social action. The modes or outcomes of social reacting are eight particular, mutually exclusive patterns of social attitude: self-victimizing, achieving, celebrating, protesting, withdrawing, complaining, defying and contributing. *Self-victimizing* is the pattern of social reacting that proved to be most salient in the Hungarian sample. Self-victimizing is a mainly harmful outcome which occurs when the self is perceived as fully differentiated from its social surroundings: it is relatively and subjectively inactive, isolated and is being treated unfavorably. The victimized self lacks accommodation to the social nucleus in any aspect and therefore the person experiences subjective estrangement from the rest of the social world.

Experiencing the social self

The results of the research indicate that psychological and cultural factors predominate in influencing civil satisfaction and contribution over both actual life events or running public affairs, and current economic or political states of the nation. According to results the most relevant modes of mediation between actual events and civil comfort are culture-specific patterns of social perception, cognition and action which guide the latent framing of the *self* and the *other* and implicitly direct the interpretation of social/societal situations. The most important notion here is that (based on the participants' experience and narrative reports) it is impossible to perceive and frame meaningfully a social event or situation without situating the self in relation to the particular or generalized other. This means that the person's attribution about what is happening to him or her is organically interrelated with the attribution about what is there to understand about others in the same situation.

As pointed out before, the most salient social pattern in post-communist Hungary is self-victimizing, which occurs at the intersection of three basic social psychological processes (self-inactivating, questioning and self-isolating) thus resulting in self-estranging or the extreme splitting of *the I* and *the other*. Self-victimizing contributes to

certain socio-cultural phenomenon such as distrust, bystanderism, pessimism or anomie. Apart from shaping civil (dis)satisfaction and (dis)comfort, the operations of cultural patterns bear enormous social relevance in every society by determining modes of civil contribution and social (in)action. Depending on the social processes in motion, next to self-victimizing seven other modes of social reacting were found, these are the following: *achieving, celebrating, protesting, withdrawing, complaining, defying and contributing*. Cross-cultural, situational and personal differences in the probability of prevalence of these are all emerging from the data, as well as differences in the levels of subjective, personal and social satisfaction at each strategy are present. These strategies or reaction modes differ in their components: *defying* is the reaction mode of the isolated and active citizen, who is questioning his or her social setting; *protesting* is different from defying in that it involves a grouping up of individuals who are therefore not isolated but connected; *celebrating* is the passive collective behavior of people who accept their circumstances (*accepting* is in this framework the opposite of questioning), *withdrawing* is a reaction mode that involves the isolated and inactive individual to accept his or her circumstances, *complaining* means grouping up but staying inactive while questioning things around us; *achieving* occurs while self-isolating, self-activating and accepting in the social setting; while *contributing* represents the counterpoint to self-victimizing. All forms/patterns of social attitudes and action involve gains (e.g. an active role or positive affections) as well as losses (e.g. solitude, negative emotions such as anger, guilt, shame or a lack of contribution). According to these findings, SSWB as well as SWB and PWB cannot be determined by single psychological factors; rather, it is a complex structure of determinants that influence people's subjective evaluations, life satisfaction, sense of happiness and social comfort, which on the other hand is in harmony and causal relation (of a yet undiscovered nature) with social attitudes and action at the same time.

Conclusion

An extended view and a complex framework of SWB were introduced in the paper. When examined from a systemic point of view, SWB turns out to be primarily a social function, which is determined mostly by social psychological factors. Such factors include implicit processes by which we socially situate and frame our own selves and the general or particular other in a given social/societal situation. These processes, namely *social situating* (the two basic social processes uncovered in the research were *self-differentiating* and its antagonism, *social accommodating*) and *social reacting* guide social perception, cognition and action. These are also the main background factors that guide SWB and SSWB processes and are in correlation with affective evaluations and feelings. As the Hungarian sample showed, the three most disadvantageous outcomes are *self-inactivating, self-isolating and questioning* (a sense of injustice). All are modes of lost control – the person experiences his or her self as outside of the social nucleus causing a weakening or loss in SWB and SSWB and a lack of civil comfort. When examined on a long-term scale, patterns of the self-other relation can be generalized, and can serve as stereotypes or (mal)functioning patterns or reaction modes as well as personal, sub-cultural or national properties or sets of attitudes.

Further work

The expanded three-dimensional model of civil satisfaction, comfort and contribution described above is parallel to previous concepts and research evidence both in SWB and PWB studies and in research related to cross-cultural differences regarding either the self and social perceptions or outcomes in well-being and happiness. It would be fruitful to examine further however the relationship of these categories to other previously discovered notions such as individualism and collectivism, self-esteem, self-regard, purpose in life, community service, personal goals and personal evaluation of control over life events. Apart from shaping social situations *self-differentiating, isolating, inactivating* and *questioning* may also play an important role in more broad, societal (historical even) incidents and processes, and their actual real-life operation also deserve a further detailed look (e.g. how are mistrust and isolation connected; how can an executive activate his or her listeners; which are the most striking health consequences of differentiating the self in the long run, and so on). Less distant aims for further research are operationalization of the above introduced concepts and performing correlational examinations to show their convergence to previous indicators of subjective well-being.

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