

Lost in data space?

Joseph Sirgy, *The Psychology of Quality of Life, Social Indicators Research Series*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002, Vol. 12, ISBN 1-4020-0800-7

Ad Bergsma

© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

The number of research papers about subjective aspects of the quality of life is increasing fast. The advantage of this situation is that the possibilities to check or falsify opinions about happiness increase likewise. But on the negative side it gets evermore difficult to keep an overview of the burgeoning research field.

Attempts to get a grip on all the data are very welcome and in this respect the book of Joseph Sirgy does researchers in the field a favour. Sirgy succeeds in bringing synthesis and integration in the field. And he also attempts to answer what he calls the 'so what' question. He tries to show 'how people can use this massive literature to enhance their own subjective well being and the well being of others'.

The book is a rare combination of a self-help book and a review of the literature that discusses the most important empirical findings in detail. The combination is so rare, because these genres usually aim at different readers. Self-help is a popular genre for a lay audience. At its best the self-help literature selects scientific concepts that are empirically grounded and makes them understandable and practical for anybody that is interested enough to finish a book about the subject. Sirgy on the other hand asks a lot more of his reader. He is splitting hairs about unpractical things as scientific definitions. It takes a scholar to get through the boring stuff.

I will discuss whether Sirgy has succeeded as an author of a self-help book, although happiness advice is not the primary aim of the book. Unusual for the self-help genre is also that Sirgy draws the line early. He mentions abstract principles for enhancing happiness. An example is the goal selection principle: 'Subjective well being can be enhanced by being highly selective in pursuing the kinds of goals in which goal attainment is likely to induce positive emotions, e.g., joy, affection, pride'. It is not difficult to make a caricature of this kind of advice. Sirgy states that all you have to do to become happy to find the things that make you feel happy and 'just do it'. Nobody can argue the validity of the advice, but the problem is how one should apply this advice in daily living. Sirgy leaves this largely to his readers. There is another reason to think that a lot of readers can finish Sirgy's book and still do not

A. Bergsma (✉)
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: bergsma@fsw.eur.nl

have a clue how to enhance the subjective experience of quality of life. He describes eleven broad strategies that he categories into three meta-categories and divides into several different subcategories. They are as follows.

Inter-domain strategies

1. Bottom-up spillover
2. Top-down spillover
3. Horizontal spillover
4. Compensation

Intra-domain strategies

5. Re-evaluation based on personal history
6. Re-evaluation based on self-concept
7. Re-evaluation based on social comparison
8. Goal selection
9. Goal implementation and attainment
10. Re-appraisal

Inter- and intra-domain strategies

11. Balance

The main question is that if these strategies have psychological validity for a reader who wants to become happier. A self-help book implies that the author should focus on the actions that a reader should take to enhance his well being, but Sirgy introduces a more heterogeneous set of strategies. Take this sub-principle from the chapter about goal selection: the need deprivation principle of goal selection. This principle is a difficult way to advice people to eat when hungry or to seek company when lonely. Very correct again, but hardly a practical advice. I think that this strategy is hardwired in the emotional systems of the brain.

Another strategy is the ‘what might have been re-evaluation’. If you just lost your job, you feel better if you imagine how you would have been off without some savings at the bank. This seems to be a solid and practical advice that requires a conscious effort of the reader. The heterogeneity of the advice is especially apparent in his description of the first three principles. These strategies implicate an interaction between different domains, like social life, work life and family life. Top-down spillover implies that the affect from superordinate life domains—happiness with life as a whole—influences the affect in subordinate domains, like satisfaction with leisure time. Bottom-up spillover is its mirror image and horizontal spillover is about the influence of one domain of life to another that is neither subordinate nor superordinate.

These ‘strategies’ are visible in the data patterns about happiness and Sirgy backs them up with empirical findings, but I have a hard time to accept his claim that these are in fact different psychological strategies. My guess would be that factors like optimism or spiritual orientation account for the first three strategies. Sirgy’s strategies reflect the abstract world of data and fail to take the underlying psychological processes into account. Sirgy’s book is called *The psychology of quality of life*, but it lacks a solid orientation on psychological concepts. For example, he fails to distinguish between needs and wants and he treats life-satisfaction and income satisfaction as if these are completely interchangeable. All in all Sirgy did not really succeed in

writing a self-help book, but his book does have value. The rare completeness and broad overview of the book makes it useful for anyone who would like to make a theory about subjective well being or who would like to write a serious self-help book. Sirgy's offers a set of eleven strategies, which are divided in subsets of principles, that can serve as a checklist for authors that want to make sure that they did not miss an important pattern in the data. Sirgy's book offers the fundament for a real psychology of quality of life.