

Review of “Wealth (s) and Subjective Well-being” by Gael Brule

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A much needed book. So much about income, so little about wealth. And it is arguably in most ways wealth, not income, that is key for happiness. The book features the top scholars in the field such as Veenhoven, Cummins, and Rojas. That is much needed as well, as there is unfortunately much writing on happiness by people who don't know much about it like Ed Glaeser and Angus Deaton. As income inequality is a key topic, it is nice to see a section on wealth inequality. Some notable topics covered are: negative wealth, debt, threshold effects (is there a certain amount that's enough).

Ch 2 is very informative. In the tradition of Campbell 1976, it's nice to look at wealth domain satisfaction (ch3). Ch4 includes very useful information on homeostasis. Ch7 is very useful in 2 ways: draws attention to the relative dimension and limits of absolute; and discusses quite indepth various consumptions using a very interesting dataset. Ch8 is a useful discussion of Easterlin paradox and of the concept of utility. Ch9—indeed studies of SWB among adolescent are rare, another valuable contribution in this book, an interesting finding that happiness declines in adolescence. Ch12 is a comparison of generous US philanthropy v not so generous French one.¹ Part 7 on inequality is important and timely! Ch20 shows striking inequalities in China. Ch21 makes an interesting point about wealth inequality—it is increasing across countries.

Ch22 is an important addition, would be even more interesting to extend it in couple years when we know better how covid19 impacted wealth distribution. Likewise many other chapters would benefit from such an update.

In general: the volume is comprehensive; impressive breadth of coverage. No book can cover everything in a given topic. The following is rather ideas for future research than criticism. What's missing is interaction of the two: income and wealth, say would be interesting to look at wealthy people with low income or high income but without wealth. Also, minorities—for instance blacks make less than whites in the US, but their wealth is even lower. Likewise, intergenerational wealth—people from wealthy families and those from poor ones—a self made millionaire should be happier than one who largely inherited it. And how wealth was made? Hard work, rent-seeking, luck, etc? Cost of living? Wealth is relative as cost of living differ widely.

Climate change is the most important challenge of our times. While consumption is the key driver of the climate change, it would be useful to have a chapter on how wealth, and wealth distribution contribute to climate change. It's also related to SWB, as we're reluctant to cut on consumption (and wealth) for the fear of loss in SWB (e.g., Okulicz-Kozaryn and Altman 2019). And per consumption: it's critical how wealth is used! How much happiness there is from stock of wealth and how much from consumption of it. Likewise wealth dynamics should matter. Not just intergenerational/family wealth, but wealth change in person's life—people who made it fast, slow, people who lost it, etc. And spatial/ecological patterns—there is some research on income (e.g., Luttmer 2005), how about wealth? (There is little at the end of ch3, but much more would be useful). And what about values and culture—in some places wealth is a virtue (e.g., the US), in some places it's a vice (e.g., Venezuela). And what about happiness theories in relation to wealth: there are at least 4 different happiness theories, and there could be more here re adaptation, adjustment, hedonic treadmill, and comparison/discrepancies.

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I thank XXX. All mistakes are mine.

¹As a sidenote, there is an interesting discussion of philanthropy in Economist (2020).

In conclusion, Brulé and Suter (2019) will be an important reference for happiness scholars, and there are many ways to build upon and extend this useful book.

References

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