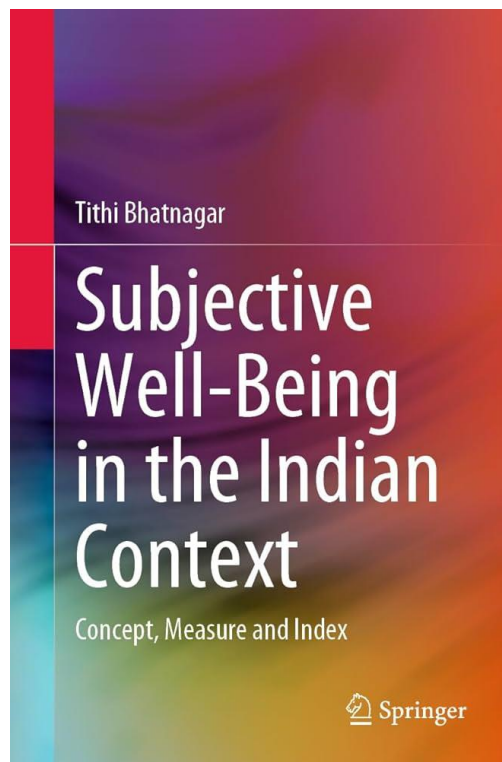




Review of 'Subjective Well-Being in the Indian Context: Concept, Measure and Index': A Culture Based Development (CBD) perspective

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Review by
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1. Introduction

Subjective Well-Being in the Indian Context: Concept, Measure and Index by Tithi Bhatnagar is a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of well-being within the modern Indian socio-cultural context. The book starts with an overview of the theoretical cornerstones and measurement approaches in studying well-being and it ultimately offers a unique index for measuring happiness tailored to the Indian context. This structure helps the book deliver a significant multidisciplinary contribution that is of interest not only to psychology but social sciences more broadly. This review will focus on the book's contribution to specifically social, regional, and cultural economics.



2. Summary

The book consists of three main parts. It begins by defining subjective well-being (SWB) and then engages with the following three aspects of this notion:

1. *Theoretical Overview*: The first part of the book reviews the existing literature on SWB, accentuating the unique cultural, social, and economic factors that influence well-being in India. Bhatnagar pays special attention to the interaction between individual and collective well-being, highlighting the role of family, community, and societal norms – i.e., the role of the context.
2. *Measurement Approaches*: The second part of the book offers an overview of the methodological approaches for measuring SWB. Bhatnagar critically appraises the existing measures and proposes a novel, culturally sensitive tool that captures the multi-dimensional nature of well-being. The author emphasizes what makes this measure reliable and valid.
3. *Development of the Subjective Well-being Index (SWBI) for India*: The third part of the book applies Bhatnagar's SWBI to India. Bhatnagar describes her rigorous process of item selection, pilot testing, and validation, providing a robust measure for future research and policy-making.

3. Critical appraisal

This critical review will offer an appraisal mainly related to the book's wider multidisciplinary contribution to social economics, regional economics, and cultural economics. While building on a sound psychological backbone after the renowned legacy of Ed Diener, the book's contribution is also genuinely valuable for these sister disciplines in several ways. This book's contribution becomes most apparent if we adopt the Culture Based Development (CBD) perspective.

CBD is a Neo-Weberian multidisciplinary paradigm that is an intersection between social economics, regional economics, and cultural economics. It is focused on the interaction between individual and context and the resulting cultural bias from this interaction in economic choice. Clearly, Bhatnagar's book already has a unique fit to the CBD interest, focusing on the interaction between the individual and the context in defining social well-being (see overview of the CBD paradigm in Tubadji 2023).

In addition, CBD raises many main concerns that the book excellently addresses. I will focus below on the four most notable aspects of the book's contribution from a CBD perspective.

First, CBD has raised its concern that multi-dimensional concepts are often over-simplified through approximation to singular indicators, which leads to an under-quantification of the entity in its measurement and consequent under-specification and statistical bias of the quantitative explorations about it (Tubadji, 2014). CBD is concerned with the complexity of the context. Instead, Bhatnagar's book addresses a similar concern about a specific outcome variable affected by the context – in this case – well-being. The book offers an excellent demonstration of how a multi-dimensional complex entity such as well-being can be measured with due attention to all aspects. The book also demonstrates how the complexity can next be reduced by bringing the multifaceted information into a meaningful composite index of well-being. CBD uses other data reduction approaches and complexity reduction methods. Thus, Bhatnagar's proposed original psychology-savvy approach and index methodology add genuine value added to the CBD body of literature. This contribution of the book is generally relevant to the big question in economics about the correct measurement of development where not only economics but also well-being is to be factored in. Bhatnagar's book shows that well-being is as complex as GDP,

and even more so, and a simple happiness measure cannot easily quantify the complex social and psychological aspects underpinning it, by providing an advanced alternative.

Second, CBD has accentuated the role of the context in the realm of regional economic research, and the same was done by the European Joint Research Centre policy-oriented research reports and the OECD quantification and policy-related efforts. Thus, Bhatnagar's book is an excellent fit for this contemporaneous trend of interest in the interaction between the individual and the context. The book's unique contribution stands in the meticulous methodological way in which the endogeneity of the individual experience is examined in terms of its dependence on the context. The methodological mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches demonstrates a novel way of being conceptually accurate and genuinely respectful to and factoring in reality when constructing one's measurement of the phenomena and processes of interaction. CBD has always respected the data and let it speak for itself rather than imposing theoretical constraints on it. Bhatnagar's book brings this concern to a new level by showing that the very generation of the data can be meticulously tailored to reflect the complexity without the imposition of researcher bias and with due constructivist listening to the respondent from reality. Thus, her data is as genuine a reflection of reality as science can breed because it relies on a well-thought data-generation process. The latter is also a very rare characteristic of datasets nowadays when most research is swayed to using big data, which is readily available but poorly identified and relying on algorithmic guesswork to tease out potentially reliable identification of the indicators, which always remain mostly not validated.

Third, what is crucial in the CBD reduction of the complexity of the context is the requirement that both the cultural heritage (vertically inherited cultural attitudes from parents) and living culture (the horizontally transmitted and adaptively adopted attitudes from interaction with peers) are quantified. CBD suggests that only by accounting for the joint impact of cultural heritage and living culture can the quantification account comprehensively for the cultural factor that defines the context of choice. Bhatnagar's measurement approach does that, too. However, it also allows for one more interesting aspect in the measurement of well-being. Bhatnagar's index development approach engages the data generation process with capturing the economic endogeneity of well-being in parallel with the cultural heritage (such as the philosophy of Vedanta or Bhagavad Gita) and current peer effects (like own reading and reflection habits and modern ethnic classifications such as distinction of indigenous and Indian local culture), to which Bhatnagar adds also socio-economic sources of endogeneity and nonlinearity of well-being such as income and age. While this may make the SWBI proposed by Bhatnagar require more attention when used with other measures for econometric regression analysis (that may have economic variables correlated with the SWBI), in itself as an index, SWBI carries very well thorough information recombination. That is why it is likely to be a self-standing index sufficiently robust to depict places' individual and local well-being of places. This construction of the measure allows the endogenous economic component of well-being to show its relevance in the measure.

Fourth, and last but certainly not least, besides ending up with a quantitatively rigorous and precise measurement, Bhatnagar's approach to quantifying local well-being is particularly respectful to reflecting accurately the local self-perception of the population living in India. CBD is a pragmatic paradigm that values both accuracy and precision with equal weight in determining the quality of research. Much more than this, CBD is a Neo-Weberian concept not only because it expands the focus on the context from religion to cultural heritage and living culture but also because CBD wants to correct the original Max Weber pitfall of allowing a lot of researcher bias and exoticism to sneak through his writing. It is a well-known fact that while his book on Protestant ethics was celebrated (Weber, 1905), his sequel books on the religion of China

(1915) and India (Weber, 1916) were met with very mixed reception in both China and India, interpreting the local culture in ways that the locals and scholars studying the local context would disagree with (see for instance Whimster 2001). CBD proposes using a value-free analysis of values to guarantee this mistake is avoided methodologically in estimations (Tubadji 2020). The novelty in Bhatnagar's research is that she manages to avoid Weber's fallacy again in the very process of data collection, a step even before quantitative methodology and interpretation. Namely, the data generation process is constructivist, hence allowing for the represented population to depict its own self-perception, allowing much less space for researcher's exoticism bias. Therefore, CBD truly celebrates the innovative takes demonstrated in this book.

In sum, from a CBD perspective, Bhatnagar's work is commendable for its depth and rigour. The book's strength lies in its holistic approach, integrating theoretical insights with practical applications. The proposed SWBI is a significant advancement, offering a culturally relevant measure that can inform both academic research and public policy.

Clearly, as with every work, this book also has its shortcomings. The book could benefit from a wider pool of interviews on which to base its data collection and generate a more extensive dataset that would be statistically representative and more powerful. De Luca et al. (2021) made such an attempt through a series of qualitative interviews with students from impoverished backgrounds to establish what drives their expectations that explains why they self-select for the worse option to enrol in relatively shorted educational programmes with lower returns as future salaries. After her qualitative work with 150 families, validation of her work through massive representative data with similar characteristics was ensured, and a theoretical model was developed. Bhatnagar's work stops at the first stage with an even more significant number of 184 qualitative cases addressed, but its validation stops there. This shortcoming is clearly a question of the resources employed in the undertaking and the fact that De Luca relied on a big team to do the quantitative extension of her work. The fact that De Luca's important qualitative work was lifted on a representative data scale and formal economic modelling of the psychology of choice only demonstrates that Bhatnagar's important qualitative work has a bright and prosperous future ahead, with great potential for extensions into the future research in a similar manner.

4. Conclusion

"Subjective Well-Being in the Indian Context—Concept, Measure and Index" is an essential read for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners working in the field of well-being. Bhatnagar's highly original research and innovative approaches in many aspects of her work make this book a valuable resource for understanding and extending further research on subjective well-being in India in an accurate and precise manner.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to this review.

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