

Cognitive and Affective Well-Being in the SOEP

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Well-being has an affective (the amount of pleasant versus unpleasant experiences) and a cognitive (satisfaction with life in general and life domains) component. Since its inception 25 years ago, the SOEP has included measures of cognitive well-being. In the past years, studies of the SOEP data have produced a paradigm shift in well-being research. Previously, influential set-point theories assumed that well-being is largely determined by heritable personality traits, and that effects of life events are short-lived due to adaptation (hedonic treadmill). The SOEP data have uncovered strong environmental influences that parallel or even exceed the effects of personality traits. So far, these conclusions were limited to cognitive well-being. In 2006, the SOEP included four indicators of affective well-being (happy, sad, angry, scared). This presentation examines similarities and differences between cognitive well-being and affective well-being. One study based on a SOEP pilot study revealed that personality traits were a stronger predictor of affective well-being than cognitive well-being. In contrast, unemployment and regional differences between West Germany and East Germany were stronger predictors of cognitive well-being (Schimmack, Schupp, Wagner, in press). An analysis of the SOEP panel data takes advantage of the longitudinal SOEP data to distinguish three components of cognitive well-being: (a) a stable component that does not change over time (trait), (b) a gradually changing component that produces changes over time (state), and (c) a component that reflects random error and temporary deviations (error). Afterwards, the contribution of each variance component to the covariation between cognitive and affective well-being in the 2006 wave was examined. Most important, both the trait and the state component contributed to the covariation. These results reveal a state component in affective well-being. This finding provides initial evidence that hedonic adaptation is incomplete and that environmental factors have lasting effects on both components of well-being.

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