

**WHOSE WELL-BEING? THE INDIVIDUAL AND
THE NATIONAL IN THE ONS' 'MEASURING
NATIONAL WELL-BEING' PROGRAMME**

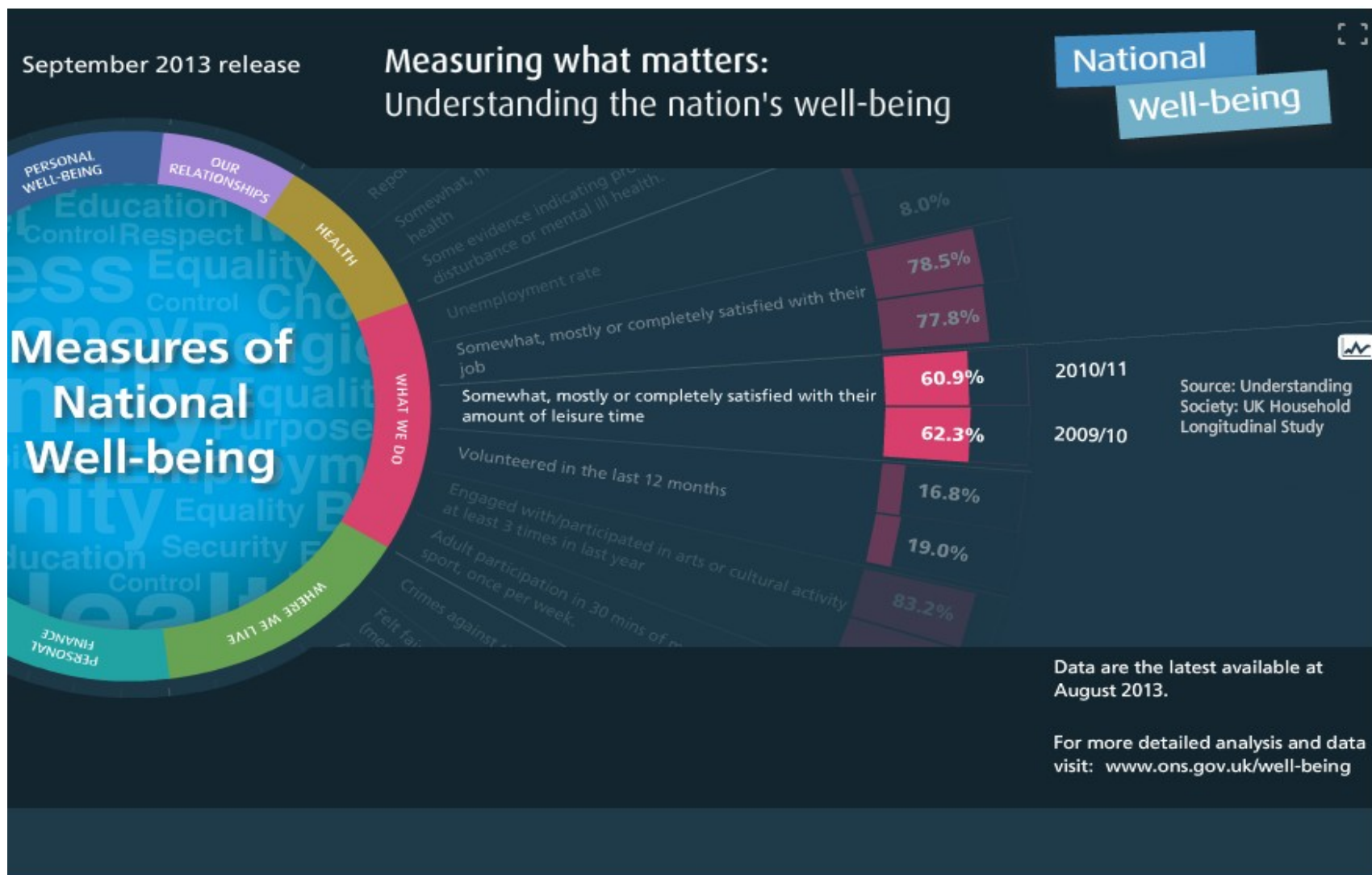
Matt Jenkins

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23rd June 2014

ORCID ID 0000-0001-5361-8953

HOW DO WE MAKE SENSE OF THE MNW?



ONS (2014a)

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"accepted and trusted measures of the well-being of the nation - how the UK as a whole is doing."

ONS (2014a)

INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Tuesday 3 January

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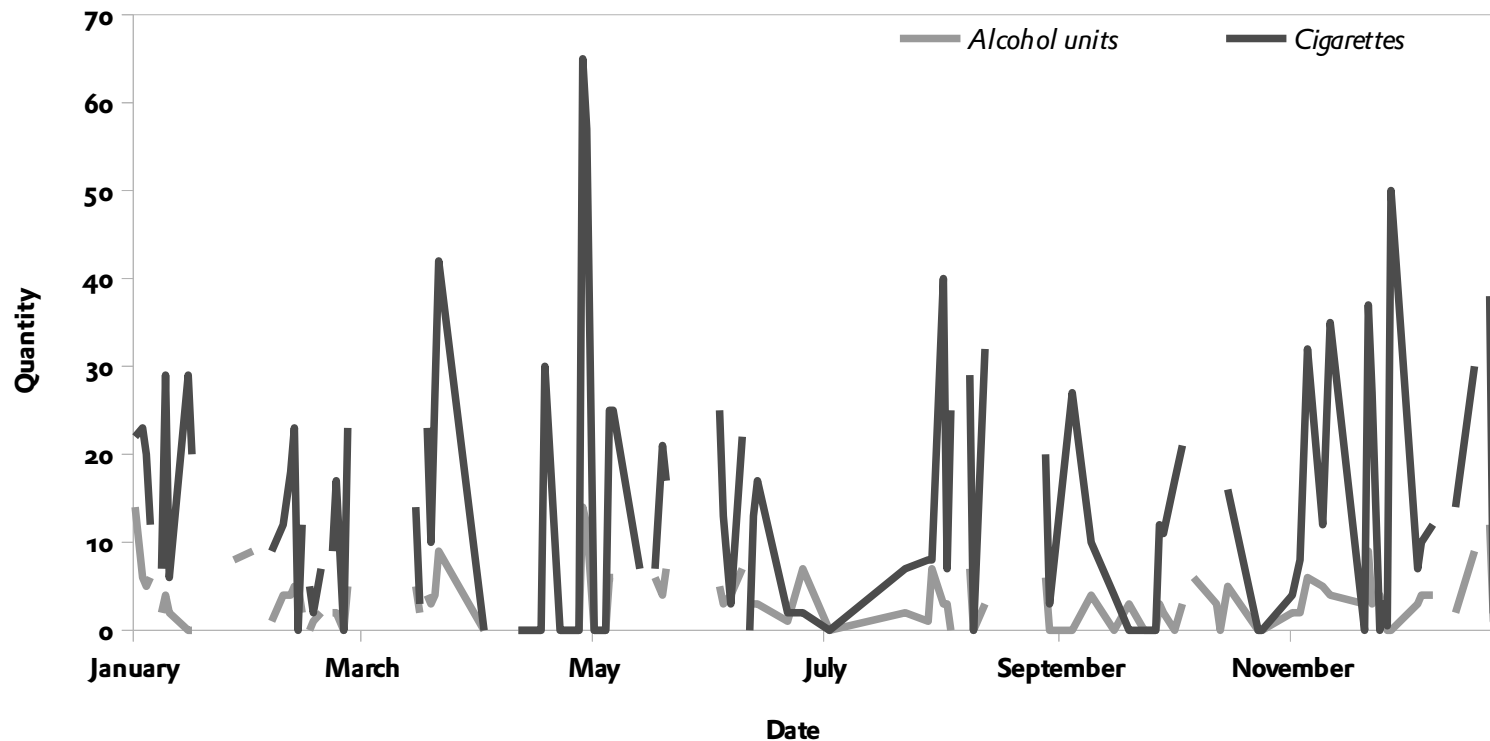
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Matheson (2011) *Response to National Debate*

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Respondent in ONS (2012) Consultation: *Responses Received*

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During development of measures for the discussion paper no appropriate measure in the area of individual's religion, faith, spirituality or values was found, and this continues to be the case. Deciding that there was not currently a measure which would be an effective representation of individual's experience for use as a headline measure. ONS will continue to consider in the future.

Beaumont (2012) *ONS response to Consultation*

ONE SOLUTION: COUNT MANY, AND OFTEN

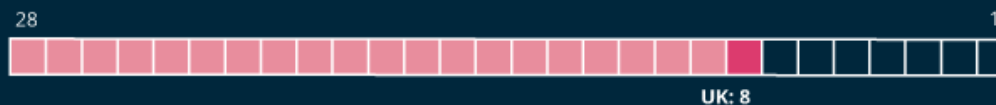
What we do

Unemployment rate (Q4, 2013)

UK: 7.1% | EU-28 average: 10.7%

Lowest ranking

Highest ranking



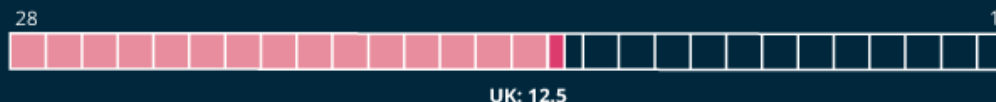
Satisfaction with present job (2011)

UK: 75.1% | EU-28 average: 73.5%



Disagree no time to do things enjoy in life (2011)

UK: 45.8% | EU-28 average: 44.8%



ONS 2014b, detail

NATIONAL WELL-BEING

Economy

NNI per capita (2012)

UK: 108.3 | EU-28 average: 100 (index)

Lowest ranking Highest ranking



Government gross debt (% of GDP) (2013)

UK: 90.60% | EU-28 average: 87.10%



Education & Skills

Mathematics (PISA score) (2012)

UK: 494 average score | no EU average

Lowest ranking Highest ranking



Reading (PISA score) (2012)

UK: 499 average score | no EU average



Science (PISA score) (2012)

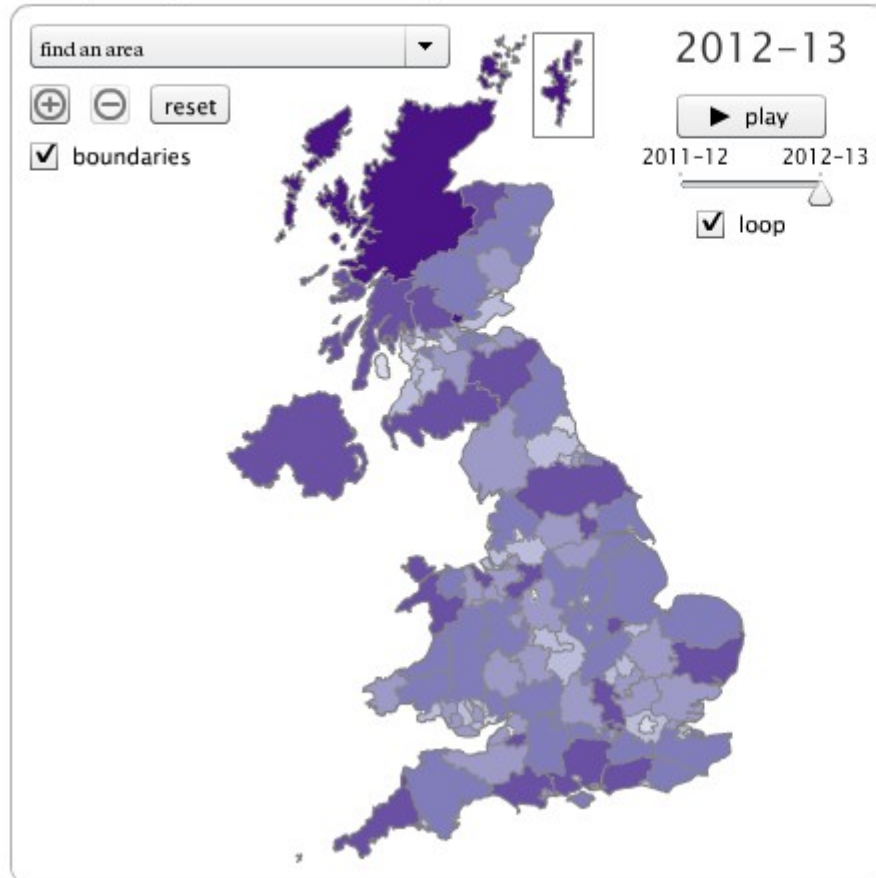
UK: 514 average score | no EU average



ONS 2014b, detail

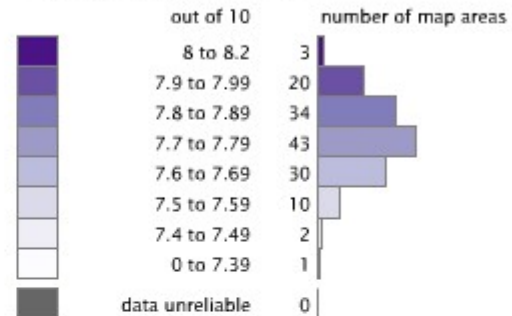
WHOSE WELL-BEING?

UK experimental Personal Well-being estimates
Worthwhile – AVERAGE (out of 10)
UK by County and Local Authority, and Northern Ireland



Map shows: Worthwhile - AVERAGE (out of 10)

Average worthwhile score



Worthwhile

AVERAGE (out of 10)

This is the average score reported by UK adults (aged 16 and over) who gave a rating of 0 to 10 (where zero was 'not at all' and ten 'completely') when asked 'Overall, how worthwhile are the things that you do in your life?'.

from ONS 2013

SOURCES

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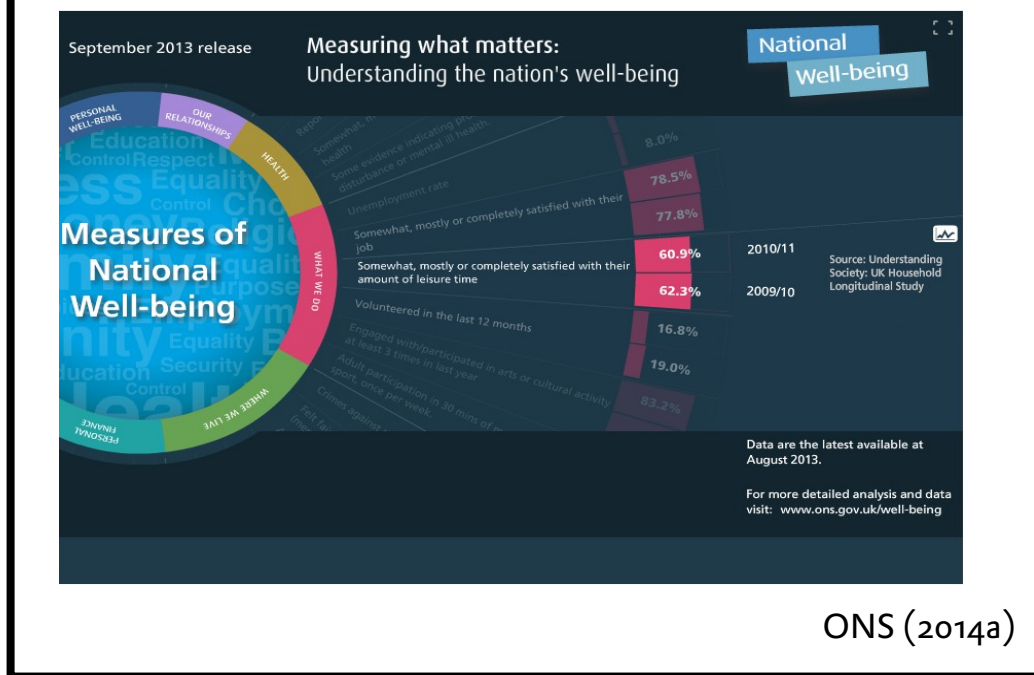
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ABSTRACT

The Office for National Statistics' 'Measuring National Well-being' programme aims to produce "accepted and trusted measures of the well-being of the nation - how the UK as a whole is doing."

This paper will discuss the implications of two different ways of understanding the 'national' in this context: as an aggregation of individuals and as a corporate entity in its own right. It will argue that 'well-being' means something slightly different in the two cases, ultimately because the interests of individuals in an aggregation, and of individuals and corporate entity will not always coincide. Such disagreements come from multiple places: differences in definitions of what constitutes 'well-being', differences in the distribution of its components which are not seen in the national figure, and lack of connection between the nation as a corporate entity and any given individual currently aggregating to it. While the programme deftly balances the needs of both conceptions of nation, this lack of coincidence raises questions of how the final measures of well-being are to be interpreted.

HOW DO WE MAKE SENSE OF THE MNW?



So, we have the Measuring National Well-being Programme, and the question is how we understand it.

Now, as a caveat, we should note that the MNW is targeted at a very wide set of audiences – it's meant to aid public understanding, but also help policymakers. Both of those groups are very diverse – policymakers range from the raft of government offices, through the Devolved Administrations, down to Local Authorities (who need to take social and environmental wellbeing into account when tendering for contracts); all with different aims and powers. Fortunately for the purposes of this paper, they all face the same problem: they have this Programme, with its slate of indicators available at different geographical scales, and they need to make sense of it.

The stated aim of the Programme is producing "accepted and trusted measures of the well-being of the nation - how the UK as a whole is doing." So there are two subsidiary questions: what is well-being in this context, and what is the nation?

Now that second question may seem a little superfluous, but it's an important one. There are two obvious ways of thinking about the nation: as a concrete collection of individuals, and as an abstract corporate individual in its own right. A lot of the time the two will map on to each other, and the interests of both will coincide – but every now and again they don't. Take, for example, wars – it is not in any individual's interest to die for their nation, but it is sometimes in the nation's interest that individuals die. The nation as a corporate individual is not restricted in scope to individuals currently living, but includes those not yet born. Sometimes in the interests of these individuals that sacrifices be made by those currently living. Less drastically, as a set of individuals, it may be in our interests to consume natural resources, but if this leaves the nation with scorched earth, it's clearly against its corporate interests.

This general political question of how to balance the needs of individual and community but it does immediately raise some ambiguities about how should we count national well-being.

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gst 4 (terrifying slide into obesity — why? why?), alcohol units 6 (excellent), cigarettes 23 (v.g.), calories 2472.

Fielding (1996, p17)

So let's start from the perspective of individual – Bridget Jones. As part of her diary, she kept a running tally of her weight, alcohol, cigarette and calorific consumption, as a nascent well-being index. We can think of these as headline indicators. Now it's an ongoing statistical programme, allowing us to get some sort of idea of her well-being over time – imperfectly, there's a lot of missing data, and what we have is not always reliably collected, but we can get an approximate picture.

Now, in this index there are four key metrics – weight, calories consumed, alcohol units consumed and cigarettes smoked. Note that these are a mix of stocks and flows, and of inputs and outcomes. On their own, they are quite difficult to interpret – is alcohol a bad thing in itself, impairing well-being, a compensation for distress and so a sign that well-being is low, or an aid to happiness and so a sign of positive well-being? We can make sense of it based on our knowledge of cultural norms and Ms. Jones' interpretive notes, but we might disagree with her readings. We might disagree that these are important, that they don't actually reflect her well-being and she is mistaken to count them. However, they clearly are important to her in a way that our preferred measures might not be.

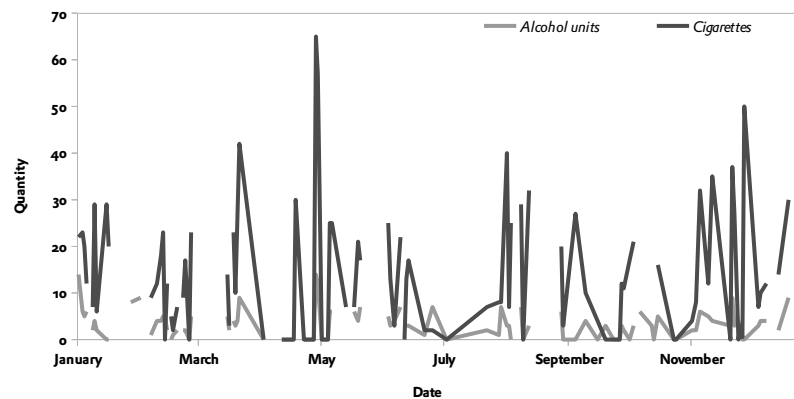
Now, one way out might be to say 'these are all instrumental to the end of happiness, so we'll just measure happiness'. Which would be fine, but wouldn't tell us about how that happiness was achieved – we'd essentially recreate the problems of GDP which this programme hoped to complement of not taking into account the needs of the community at large (or, potentially, the damage inflicted on the self by the individual). We need subjective well-being if we're to make sense of the instrumental measures, and the instrumental if we're to interpret the SWB.

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WHAT TO INCLUDE?

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Matheson (2011) *Response to National Debate*

So, we add in subjective well-being, and we can interpret Ms. Jone's other measures. If she can count them, they're clearly countable, so it's a small matter to extend this index nationally by use of survey.

At which point we hit another, inevitable snag: my weight is not important to me, to the point where I'm not entirely sure what a calorie is. While it's clearly a central measure for Ms. Jones, it's not an especially useful one for me. And that's fine, we may feel few qualms about replacing weight with something more, ahem, weighty. What about faith? Faith is a large part of many people's lives, and contributes to their well-being: it provides support networks, can change access to material resources, can offer a sense of direction and purpose. More importantly, it can modify your relationship to other instrumental factors – things which are good for other people are not necessarily good for people of faith (material wealth, for instance, is not the measure of success and well-being that it is for others, and the response to its lack can be radically different).

When the MNW programme was discussed, faith was raised by respondents. Indeed, more than the ONS expected. And there's an example. Now the ONS' response to this was along the lines of 'we can't think how we'd count this meaningfully' – and, indeed, there would be something odd about counting merely the number of people who profess a faith, or who regularly access religious services, or perform a religious rite – such a measure would reduce a complex and embedded social act to a quantity and would be hard to interpret. But the Programme does this throughout – it counts instances of employment without worrying whether the job pays enough or is worthwhile, for instance. And it's not a problem to assume that any religious activity is positive – we count cultural access in exactly this way. We might be worried about seeming to claim that one particular spiritual path, or a set of them, is superior to others (principally expressions of no religion or no faith, which can be as or more principally held than faith beliefs), but this is not much different from the measures of volunteering or access to nature – there is research showing benefits to believing in a deity, and promoting this can be seen as another example of seatbelt paternalism.

My point here is not that faith *should* have been included, but that it *could* have been. This Programme is pragmatic – there is no correct answer to 'what is wellbeing?', only answers which are more or less useful. The index which records well-being for one individual may completely misinterpret the well-being of another.

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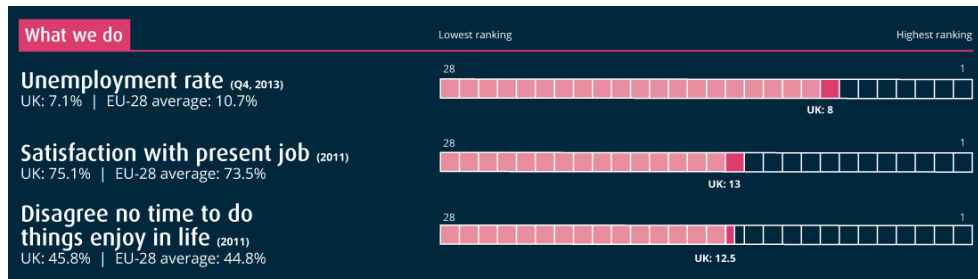
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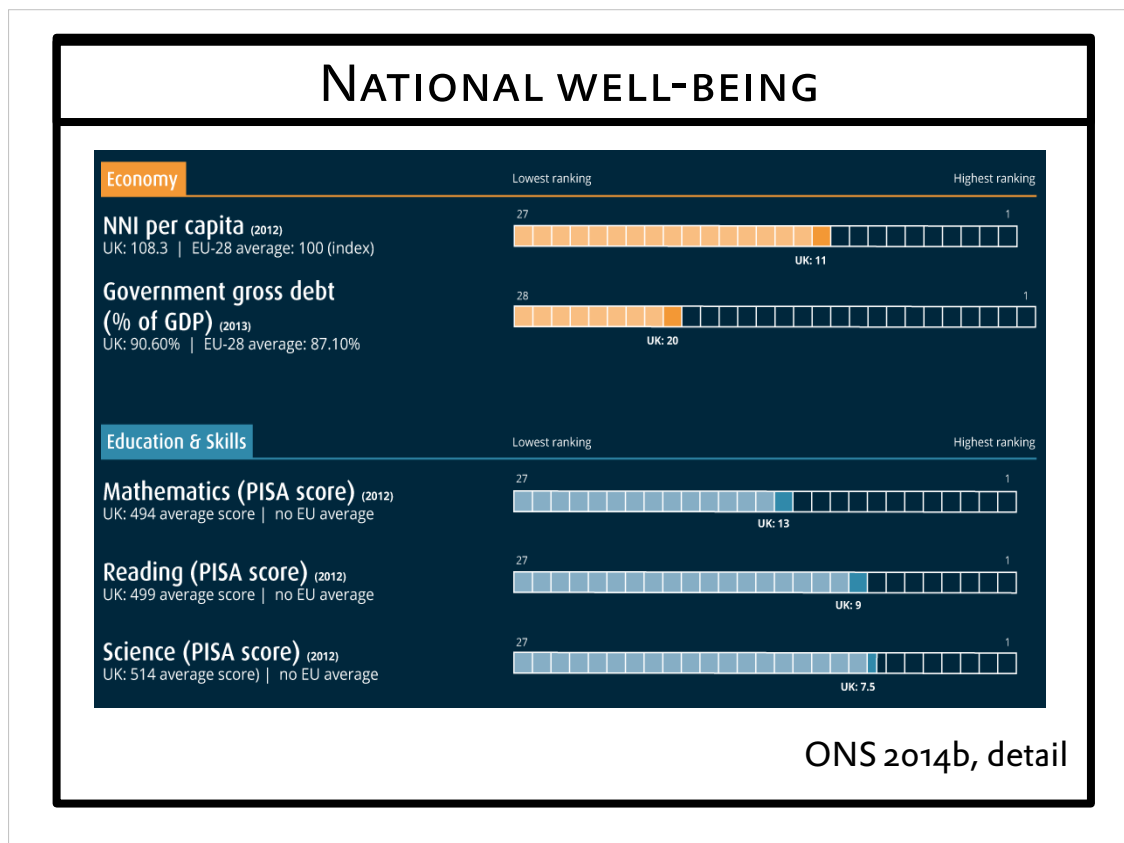
ONE SOLUTION: COUNT MANY, AND OFTEN



ONS 2014b, detail

So, the ONS get around this to an extent by going for relatively uncontroversial measures (and we might feel that faith is controversial, given our tendency to disagree on which spiritual path is the correct one) and by having a lot of them. If I feel that job satisfaction is more important than jobs, I can look at that one in preference to unemployment, and judge how the nation's population is doing that way. This combines a top-down imposition of instrumentality (faith doesn't contribute to well-being, but wealth does: I'm both being told that my assessment of well-being doesn't capture my own well-being, and being asked to ignore that other's well-being is caused by things I think are harmful), but then allows some bottom-up interpretation on what it all means. Which makes the programme both impressively malleable and potentially incoherent. We are not too far progressed from the Programme's predecessor, *Social Trends* of which it was once asked 'This is very nice, but what does it add up to?'

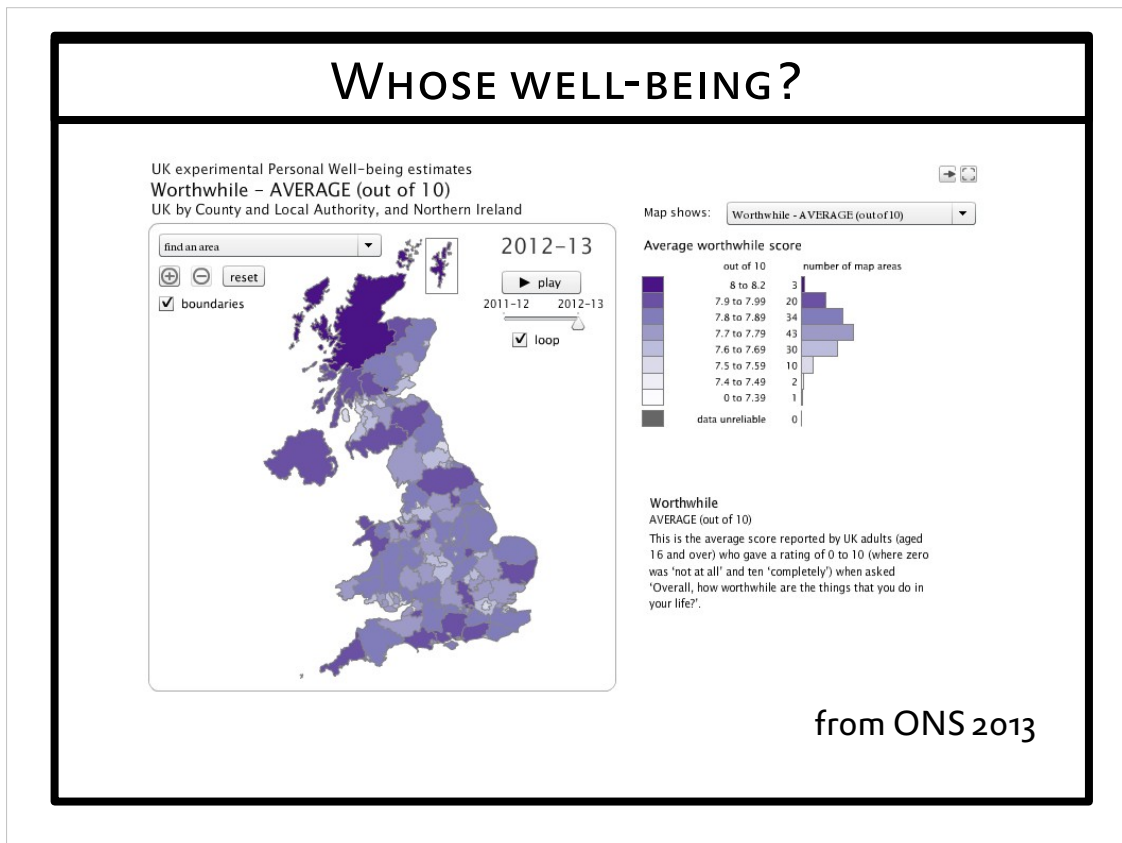
This is only made worse by distributional issues – while the median household income may go up, if mine hasn't, that's not a great deal of good to me. If national anxiety has gone down, by mine hasn't, it's very little consolation (happy, obviously, though I am for the diminished suffering of my less anxious co-nationals).



Now, the instrumentality of the nation as a corporate entity is a little more straightforward – we're looking at basic survival and the maintenance of the means to future survival. On an ongoing basis, we want the national territory to remain inviolate, the national infrastructure and natural resources to remain in their present state or get a little better, the national patrimony to be un-mortgaged. How this is achieved is not immensely important – think back to wars, where a renewable resource, humans, are used to maintain less renewable ones, territory and functional independence.

And so we include stock measures – protected areas, national debt, human capital. These have a very different temporality to the measures we've been looking at previously – they're forward-looking. In as far as they can be drawn on by individuals, it's future individuals who'll be doing the drawing down.

Again, though, as someone interpreting this, we have a question about interpretation. Do I care more about my well-being or that of my children? Or, given my current status as a free-wheeling man about town, other people's children? For the policy-maker, considering, for example, the extension of primary resource extraction, do I care about jobs now or damage later?



And so, whose well-being is this Programme talking about? It's not me, even if it ticked all my well-being boxes perfectly, I'm lost somewhere in an average. And, besides, I knew my well-being to start with. It's not a collection of us, because our definitions of well-being will vary, meaning that, at best, it's talking about a sub-section of well-being. And it's not the national entity, exactly, because the measures of stock are thrown in with the measures of flows.

But this isn't necessarily a bad thing. The same problems apply exactly to social statistics we happily use without thinking about them. Even something seemingly as unambiguous as unemployment gets into all sorts of problems defining what counts as being employed (compare the current definition with recent ILO proposals). The joy of the MNW Programme is that its newness makes these questions, which are ultimately political problems, open and obvious. We suddenly have 40 measures all in one place, and we can argue about their importance. Even if we can't reach any positive conclusions, that's a very good thing.

SOURCES

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