

A faint, light blue line drawing on a dark blue background. It depicts a hand with fingers spread, holding a small bird or creature. The drawing is stylized and occupies the central part of the slide.

GWA Meta_Analysis

Wellbeing/ Happiness/ Satisfaction with Life

How to measure Well-being?

ECONOMICS

Measuring Subjective Well-Being

Richard Layard

How should human happiness and life-satisfaction be assessed?

What is progress, and how should we measure the well-being of a population? The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has held two major conferences on the subject, and last year, President Sarkozy of France established a distinguished commission to report on the same questions (1). This major debate reflects the fact that higher national income has not brought the better quality of life that many expected, and surveys in the United States show no increase in happiness over the past 60 years. These surveys rely on questions about subjective well-being, and it is reasonable to ask how reliable survey answers are as measures of the quality of life as people experience it. On page 576 of this issue (2), Oswald and Wu carry out an interesting test of this. First they measure subjective well-being in each U.S. state, and then compare it with the average objectively measured wage in the same U.S. state (both variables being controlled for personal factors). The negative correlation of the two variables is remarkably high—as it should be if higher wages are compensating for a lower experienced quality of life (and vice versa). The study will likely stimulate

people say about their subjective state well enough correlated with the inner reality?

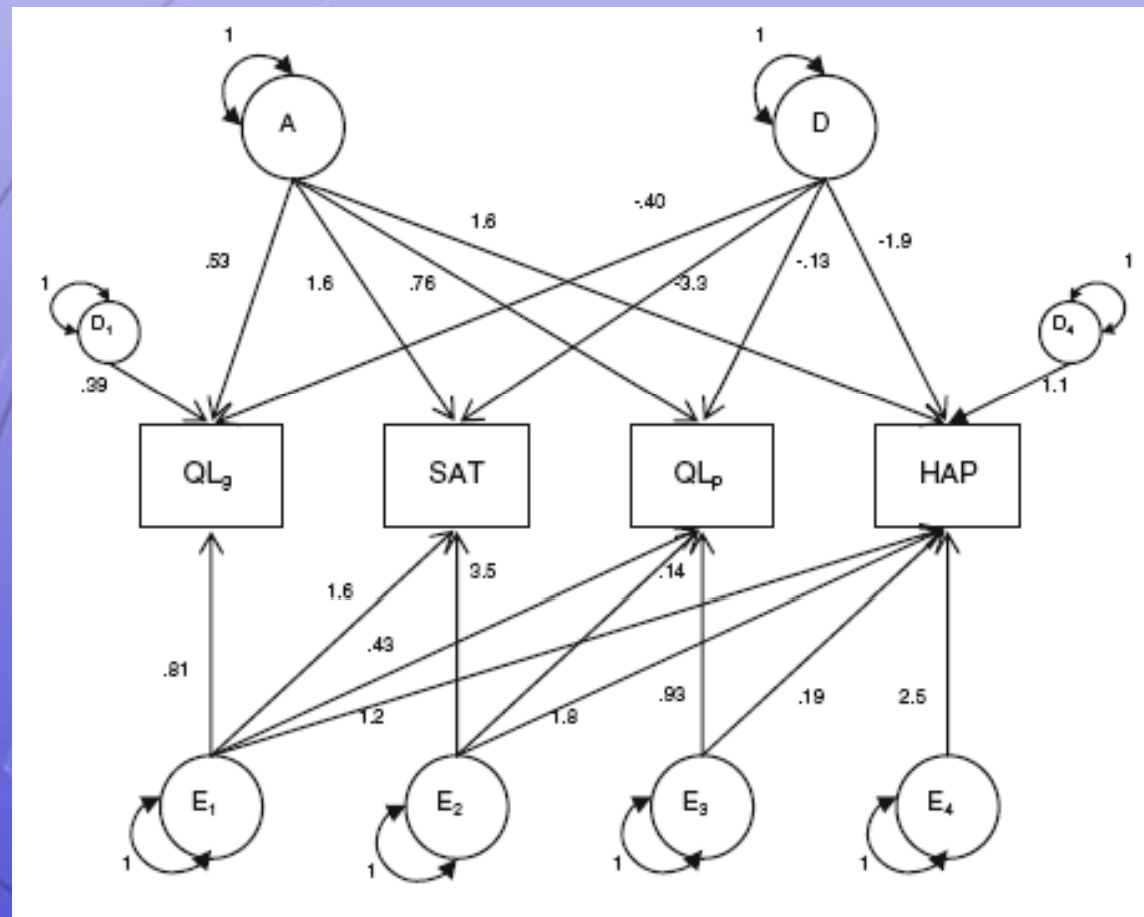
The science is, of course, very young, but it is well enough developed for us to say “yes.” In the typical question, an individual is asked, “Taking all things together, how happy are you?” The possible answers range from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 10 (extremely happy). To evaluate the information con-

Similarly, responses on life satisfaction can be used to explain behavior such as quitting one's job and exiting from marriage. They can also, as Oswald and Wu show, be used to measure quality-of-life differences across the United States in a way that is consistent with the pattern of wage differences.

Answers about happiness are also well correlated with measurements of bodily function, such as amounts of salivary cortisol, fibrinogen stress responses, blood pressure, heart rate, and (in some cases) immune system responses to a flu vaccination. These correlations hold across individuals, as in the famous cross-sectional study of British Whitehall civil servants (4), and also in some cases within the same individual over time.



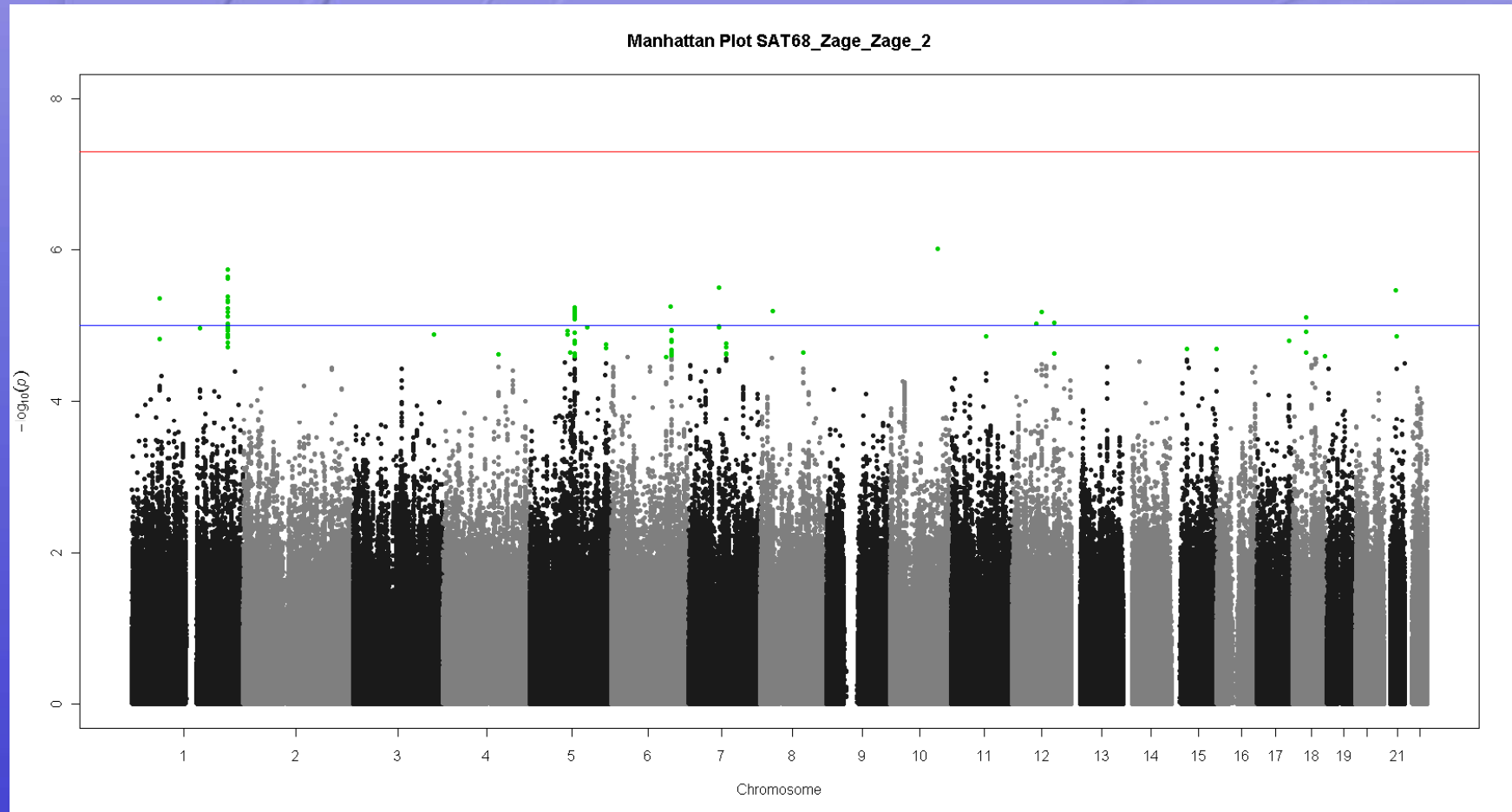
Downloaded from www.sciencemag.org on January 29, 2010



A relative culture free measure, such as the Cantril ladder, shows complete genetic overlap with more culturally sensitive measures of life satisfaction

Studies that so far collected distinct measures of SWB can still be compared, based on the fact the distinct measures all load on a similar genetic factor, and thus represent biological overlapping constructs.

One small sample – Satisfaction with life



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Interested?

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