5. STUDYING HAPPINESS SCIENTIFICALLY: THE IMPORTANCE OF OPERATIONALISATION

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Ormerod (2007) noted that by the year 2000 over four thousand academic articles had been published on happiness (or life satisfaction or well-being). So there is a lot of interest in studying this topic, not only in psychology.

Myers (2000) referred to public opinion surveys which showed that many individuals are self-reporting as happy/very happy or satisfied with their lives. If the surveys are aggregated (916 studies with 1.1 million people in forty-five countries), the average rating is 6.75 (on a scale of 0-10 with 10 as "very happy and completely satisfied with life")(Myers and Diener 1996).

In research, happiness (or whatever term used eg subjective well-being) needs to be clearly defined. For example, Veenhoven (2003) defined happiness as "the overall appreciation of one's life as a whole". While the Sustainable Development Research Network defined well-being as "elements of life satisfaction which cannot be defined, explained or primarily influenced by economic growth" (quoted in Ormerod 2007).

These definitions are too vague for scientific purposes. Happiness is a hypothetical concept, and it must be made into a definition that can be measured. This is known as operationalisation. In other words, something that cannot be touched or seen is made into something quantifiable.

There are risks with operationalisation of any concept, particularly that the definition is inadequate or not valid, but the process is crucial in science.

5.2. STRENGTHS OF OPERATIONALISATION

1. Takes a vague idea or concept and makes it objectively measurable for research purposes.

Lyubomirsky et al (2005) used the operational definition, "chronic happiness level", which they defined as "retrospective summary judgments regarding his or her mood and satisfaction during some recent period (such as

the past 2, 6 or 12 months) or as the average of momentary judgments of mood and satisfaction made at several times during the selected period" (p116).

2. Common definitions allow comparison between studies.

3. Operationalisation is the basis of constructing psychometric instruments to measure behaviour.

Diener and Seligman (2002), in their study of happiness among students at the University of Illinois, used a psychometric instrument called the "Satisfaction With Life Scale" (Diener et al 1985). Total scores on this instrument range from 5 (extreme dissatisfaction), 20 (neutral) to 35 (extreme satisfaction).

4. Operational definitions are reliable ie consistency of measurement over time and place (eg number of times laughed per day).

5. Allows studies like experiments to establish the causes of happiness or the effects of it.

6. Can be the only way to study hypothetical constructs scientifically.

7. Allows the collection of quantitative data and statistical analysis which is crucial to science.

8. Operational definitions can be used by both individual themselves (self-reports) and by third parties (eg observers). This is convergent validity - two separate scores of the same behaviour.

5.3. WEAKNESSES OF OPERATIONALISATION

1. A complex phenomenon is reduced to a simple score. "It rarely covers the whole of what is usually understood by that construct" (Coolican 1990).

2. The operational definition may not be valid ie it does not measure what it claims to measure. For example, number of smiles per hour is not necessarily a valid measure of happiness because individuals may smile for other reasons like politeness.

3. A subjective experience is forcibly converted into a numerical score. Happiness involves subjective elements that are lost by any quantitative measure.

4. There can be many different ways to operationalise a concept (some of which may be contradictory).

5. Different terms are used which may not be interchangeable eg life satisfaction, quality of life, subjective well-being.

6. Happiness may be a multi-dimensional concept, and a single operational definition fails to capture its truth.

7. The language used in the definition can influence the answers given.

Andrews and Withey (1976) tried to overcome this problem by using seven simple faces from "most happy" (20% of participants chose) to "least happy" (0%).

8. How the operational definition is labelled and scored can influence the results. For example, each of the scales below will produce different results (table 5.1).

1	2	3	4	5
very unhappy	unhappy	neutral	happy	very unhappy
exceptionally unhappy		unsure		exceptionally happy
much more unhappy than happy	slightly more unhappy than happy	neither happy or unhappy	slightly more happy than unhappy	much more happy than unhappy

Table 5.1 - Three different wording of happiness measures.

5.4. REFERENCES

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