

# Psychological needs at the core of national well-being: The why, how, and what of doing SDT research on national and political level

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The key role of basic psychological needs in explaining individual well-being is well established. But how useful are they in explaining the well-being of nations? Research examining and explaining national differences in subjective wellbeing has proliferated in the last decade, providing important insights into how factors like the quality of democratic institutions, gender inequality, welfare benefits, trust between people, and freedom explain why people in some countries thrive and in other countries languish. International organizations like OECD and even UN increasingly recommend that all nations should measure subjective wellbeing and utilize it in policy evaluations. Many governments across the world have taken heed, having started initiatives to measure well-being more comprehensively. Unfortunately, most national and cross-national efforts to explain national well-being have thus far not included measures for psychological needs. Psychological needs could prove to be key mediating variables explaining why various institutional factors affect subjective indicators of well-being. A recent study with data from 27 European countries showed, for example, that the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness substantially and in many cases fully mediated the effects of socio-economic position on well-being. However, to establish the role of psychological needs on national level, we need more empirical research – and for that, we need to convince those conducting international surveys to include indicators of psychological needs in their studies. The present talk will review the state of the art as regards how Self Determination Theory and especially the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness have been utilized on cross-national and policy level research. We will go through the existing research and activity on the topic, such as how the Motivation Barometer

provided up to date data on people's motivations to adhere to various restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium. The talk will also take a look at how subjective well-being, eudaimonic wellbeing, and psychological functioning have been defined, providing an integrative typology of key elements of well-being, where the key role of psychological needs is highlighted as core components of more functional and eudaimonic dimensions of well-being. Furthermore, I will set up a research agenda on what needs to happen next if we want to more fully establish SDT and psychological needs on national and international agenda.