

Chapter 28

Challenges in Defining and Measuring Well-Being and Their Implications for Policy

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Abstract This chapter focuses on how psychologists understand and measure well-being and the related constructs, mental health and flourishing. For psychologists, well-being is about how people experience their lives, not the objective facts of their lives. Why does well-being matter? Although the instrumental benefits of well-being are frequently cited as the reason for its importance, it is argued here that they are merely a by-product of a high level of well-being. The real reason well-being matters is that well-being is an end in itself – an ultimate good. However, because there is as yet no agreed definition of well-being, there is no universally agreed method for measuring well-being. It is argued here that well-being is a combination of feeling good (the hedonic view) and functioning well (the eudaimonic view), and that in order to advance well-being science, we need a multi-dimensional approach to definition and measurement. Accordingly, at this early stage in the science of well-being, policymakers would be well advised to use measures which encompass a diversity of well-being constructs.

In this chapter, I address some of the major challenges and controversies in the field of well-being. I focus on how psychologists understand well-being and the related constructs, mental health and flourishing. For psychologists, well-being is about how people experience their lives, not the objective facts of their lives, since we know that individuals may experience low well-being even if they have high socio-economic advantage and good physical health.

The instrumental benefits of well-being are frequently cited as the reason for its importance. There is evidence that people with high levels of well-being learn more effectively, are more productive and more creative, have better relationships, and better health and life expectancy (e.g. Lyubomirsky 2008; Ryan and Deci 2001). However,

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the instrumental benefits of well-being are not the main reason why well-being is important. They are merely a by-product or bonus of a high level of well-being. The real reason well-being matters is that well-being is an end in itself – an ultimate good.

Defining Well-Being

In broad terms, well-being is the perception that our life is going well. This perception may apply at the individual or group level. An individual may perceive their personal life to be going very well, moderately well or not well at all; likewise family members, work colleagues or groups of citizens may perceive their institutional life to be going very well, moderately well or not well at all.

One of the biggest challenges in the field is that there is no agreed definition of well-being. Definitions vary widely - for a more detailed description see Huppert and Ruggeri (2017). Some scholars focus on positive emotions such as happiness, as defining well-being (e.g. Diener et al., 1999; Kahneman et al. 1999; Layard 2005; Fredrickson 2009). This is the hedonic view of well-being. Others downplay the importance of positive emotions, focusing instead on positive functioning (e.g. Jahoda 1958; Ryff 1989; Waterman 1993). This represents the eudemonic view of well-being (see Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Deci 2001, for a review). Still others regard well-being as the combination of feeling good and functioning well, believing that both are necessary for the perception that life is going well (e.g. Huppert and So 2013; Keyes 2006; Seligman 2002, 2011).

Another challenge is whether well-being is viewed as an outcome of how one feels and/or functions (e.g. a global evaluation of life satisfaction), or whether it is viewed as comprising a particular set of components. The latter view is exemplified by Ryff's six dimensions (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, self-acceptance), Seligman's PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) or Huppert & So's 10 features of flourishing (competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, vitality). Most lists of well-being components are based either on the author's theoretical background or preferences (e.g. Ryff based her list on psychodynamic theory and developmental psychology), or derived more idiosyncratically (e.g. Seligman 2011). In contrast, Huppert and So (2013) used a systematic approach to identify the components of well-being. Arguing that mental well-being is the opposite of mental ill-being, they listed all the psychological symptoms of common mental disorders (depression, anxiety) and identified their opposite, which resulted in the 10 features of flourishing (listed above).

Yet another challenge in the field of well-being is its confusing terminology. In 1999, Diener, one of the most influential researchers in the field, defined 'subjective well-being (SWB)' as the combination of life satisfaction, high levels of pleasant affect, and low levels of unpleasant affect. On the other hand, Ryff used the term 'psychological well-being (PWB)' to refer to self-reports about how well an

individual perceives their functioning on six dimensions of well-being. Of course both approaches are subjective and both are psychological, so the terminology is confusing and unhelpful.

Measuring Well-Being

At its core, well-being requires a subjective evaluation, since perception is a subjective matter. Some critics, invariably non-psychologists, challenge whether subjective experience can be reliably measured. Yet the same people presumably have no problem if they need to rate the severity of pain they experience. Of course a person might lie about their pain or about their well-being, but there is no reason to doubt that most people give an honest reply when asked to report on their experience.

It would be handy if a single question could measure how well we perceive our life to be going. This has been the aim of life satisfaction questions such as: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?” Responses are typically made on a scale from 0–10, where 0 means ‘extremely dissatisfied’ and 10 means ‘extremely satisfied’. There are numerous problems with life satisfaction questions (see Huppert 2014), including poor distributional properties (most people respond with a 7 or 8), insensitivity to change, wide variation in how people weigh up different aspects of their life, and in their interpretation of ‘satisfied’ (Ralph et al. 2012). Nevertheless, life satisfaction measures continue to be used simply because they have always been used. But we need to do better.

Even if we could construct a well-phrased single-item measure of well-being, it would not be very illuminating, since well-being is a multi-dimensional construct. Many popular scales capture the multi-dimensional nature of well-being (e.g. Ryff’s PWB 1989; Diener’s Flourishing Scale 2010; and scales based on Seligman’s PERMA 2011), but their psychometric properties may be inadequate or not well established (e.g. Abbott et al. 2006). One scale with good psychometric properties and normative data from representative population samples is the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS; Stewart-Brown et al. 2011) in which diverse well-being items are added to yield a total score. Another multi-dimensional approach is described in a recent study by Ruggeri et al. (2016) using 10 indicator items derived from the 10 features of flourishing (Huppert and So 2013). The items in this Comprehensive Psychological Well-being (CPWB) measure are weighted to produce a combined score which shows good psychometric properties, and normative data are provided from representative samples of over 40,000 people from 21 countries. However, as with most existing measures of well-being, the items themselves could be improved to produce better scaling properties.

For anyone wanting to select a well-being measure from among the hundreds of existing measures, a useful resource has recently been developed to assist in this daunting process. WEBMAT (Well-being Measurement Advisory Tool), is an interactive online tool that helps you choose the content and length of survey measures to suit your purposes. See <http://webmat.micsti.at/>.

Well-Being and Policy

How well-being is conceptualized and measured has implications for policy. If well-being is understood as primarily about happiness, many would argue that it is not the business of government and policymakers to make us happy. On the other hand, if well-being is understood as including positive functioning, then it is very much the business of a government that cares about its citizens, to create the conditions whereby they can flourish and develop their full potential, for the benefit of themselves and their society.

In a seminal document from 2004, Shah and Marks asked “What would policy look like if it were seeking to promote well-being?” (p. 5). Among the things it would include is a quality educational system for all children, which alongside academic attainment, teaches the skills for living life well. Another thing it would include is a healthcare system with equal access for all, which places equal weight on physical and mental health, and recognizes the human and economic benefits of prevention and promotion programs. It would also promote flourishing at work, including autonomy supportive practices to encourage engagement and creativity, and flexible working hours to facilitate a healthy work-life balance.

With the increasing recognition that policy needs to be evidence-based and outcome focused, programs designed to increase well-being must be carefully evaluated, and this requires high quality measures of well-being. Although well-being scholars have not yet reached agreement on exactly how to measure well-being, there is substantial overlap in what they consider to be the essential components of well-being or its major determinants. Accordingly, at this early stage in the science of well-being, policymakers would be well advised to use measures which encompass a diversity of well-being constructs.

A recent attempt to create a high quality combined measure is the Comprehensive Psychological Well-being (CPWB) measure described by Ruggeri et al. (2016) referred to earlier, which employs psychometric analysis to combine scores on the 10 features of flourishing identified by Huppert and So (2013). In addition, the Ruggeri et al. analysis of data from 21 countries demonstrates the policy benefits of examining scores on the individual features alongside the comprehensive measure. For example, two countries or population groups may have very similar values on the comprehensive measure, but their underlying profile of the components that comprise or contribute to well-being can be very different. Identifying where the strengths and weaknesses lie can assist policymakers in targeting programs that meet the specific needs of a population group.

I conclude by asking “What would our world look like if policy was seeking to promote well-being?” Governments would orchestrate programs that promote capability, engagement, positive relationships, and health. We might envisage a world where people have vitality, develop their full potential, respect one another, and live in harmony.

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