



The Benefits and Challenges of a Unifying Conceptual Framework for Well-being Constructs

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Abstract

Centuries of philosophical debate and decades of empirical research have sought to characterize what it means to be psychologically well. A unifying conceptual framework to organize these diverse perspectives is needed to facilitate clear communication and cumulative science within the field of well-being science. Although a handful of overarching theoretical and measurement models of well-being have been proposed, they typically make strong claims about which constructs should be included or excluded as well as the manner and degree to which well-being constructs are related to one another. Thus, these models are often not widely adopted as organizational or communicative tools, due to their exclusion of particular theoretical perspectives or disagreement among researchers about the empirical structure of well-being. While the field continues to grapple with these issues, it would benefit from a unifying conceptual framework that is broad in scope and that can flexibly accommodate diverse theoretical perspectives and new empirical advances. In this paper, I discuss the benefits of a unifying conceptual framework for well-being, as well as the challenges in its construction. Specifically, I review strengths and limitations of Park et al.'s proposed framework of “emotional well-being,” and suggest an alternative framework of “psychosocial well-being” that encompasses the diverse array of constructs that have been proposed as positive psychological aspects of well-being.

Keywords Conceptual framework · Emotional well-being · Psychosocial well-being · Well-being

A central question of philosophical debate and psychological research concerns what it means to be psychologically well. Answers to this question highlight the importance of hedonic experiences (e.g., Diener, 1984), eudaimonic virtues (e.g., Ryff, 1989), and social relationships (Keyes, 1998). A unifying conceptual framework to organize these diverse perspectives is needed to guide empirical tests of their shared and unique characteristics and to facilitate clear communication and cumulative science. Park et al.'s (in press) proposed framework of “emotional well-being” is a valuable starting point to address this need. In the following sections, I discuss the benefits and challenges of a unifying conceptual framework for well-being constructs and suggest refinements to Park et al.'s proposed framework.

Terminology

A clearly defined umbrella term that encompasses the diverse array of well-being constructs is an important first step in developing a unifying conceptual framework. Several terms have been used to describe positive aspects of psychological functioning, such as psychological well-being, subjective well-being, mental well-being, hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being, and quality of life. Each of these terms has been used in different ways: sometimes in reference to a broad umbrella construct that encompasses all of the aspects of well-being described here, sometimes to refer to a specific philosophical perspective on well-being, and sometimes to refer to an even more specific *model* or *measure* of well-being. For example, “psychological well-being” has been used as a broad umbrella term, more specifically as a synonym for eudaimonic aspects of well-being, and even more specifically in reference to Ryff's (1989) six-dimensional model. Similarly, “subjective well-being” has been used as a broad umbrella term, more specifically as a synonym for hedonic aspects of well-being, and even more specifically in reference to Diener's (1984) model of high positive affect, low negative affect, and life satisfaction.

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Although any of these terms could be reasonable candidates for an umbrella term that encompasses diverse well-being constructs, their inconsistent and evolving use contributes to conceptual ambiguity within well-being research and impairs effective communication. To illustrate this, I will share a brief anecdote. I recently included a paragraph in the Introduction of a manuscript distinguishing Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being from Diener's (1984) model of subjective well-being. In response, a collaborator from a medical science discipline astutely asked: "Aren't both of these measures self-reports of one's psychological experiences? Doesn't that make both constructs 'subjective' and 'psychological'?" Clearly defined and intuitively-named terminology is an important first step in improving conceptual clarity and reducing miscommunications like this one. However, several challenges lie in selecting an umbrella term that doesn't simply add another term to the existing jumble of well-being terminology. First, an umbrella term needs to be sufficiently narrow to distinguish *psychological* (e.g., affective, motivational, cognitive) aspects of well-being from non-psychological uses of the term well-being (e.g., physical well-being, financial well-being), while also being sufficiently broad to encompass the wide range of constructs encompassed within the term. Second, many potential umbrella terms, such as "psychological well-being" have already been used extensively in the literature to refer to a specific, narrower construct.

Park et al. propose the umbrella term "emotional well-being." The use of the term "emotional well-being" to refer to a broad set of well-being constructs has precedent (e.g., Feller et al., 2018; National Institutes of Health, 2018a, b). However, this term may be misleadingly narrow when used as an umbrella term to refer to the broad range of both emotional and non-affective well-being constructs. At face value, the term "emotional well-being" seems to refer narrowly to emotional aspects of well-being. However, prominent models of well-being include both emotional and non-affective components. Indeed, Park et al.'s definition includes both emotional "experiential features" (e.g., emotional quality of momentary and everyday experiences) and non-affective "reflective features" (e.g., life satisfaction judgments, sense of meaning, goal pursuit). Although reflective features may be related to emotions in some situations and for some people, they are more clearly classified as aspects of cognition or motivation. Second, the term is commonly used in widely-cited literature to refer specifically to frequency and intensity of emotional experiences (e.g., Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010); thus, its dual-use as an umbrella term may lead to confusion.

The term "psychosocial well-being" is an alternative that reflects the breadth of constructs encompassed within Park et al. definition and within the rich literature on psychological aspects of well-being. This term has several strengths which

make it well-suited for wide adoption. The "psycho-" distinguishes the umbrella construct from other non-psychological uses of the term well-being (e.g., physical well-being). The combination of "psycho-" with "social" highlights both intra-personal (e.g., emotional experience, personal growth, self-acceptance) and interpersonal (e.g., personal relationships, social well-being) well-being constructs. The term is sufficiently broad to encompass several prominent models of well-being, including Diener's (1984) subjective well-being, Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being, Keyes's (1998) social well-being, Huppert & So's, (2013) and Seligman's (2011) flourishing, and Su et al.'s (2014) thriving. Finally, the term has not yet been used extensively in the literature to refer to a specific, narrower model of well-being. In contrast to terms such as "emotional well-being" and "psychological well-being," all of the articles returned in the first page of Google Scholar search results in August of 2022 for the term "psychosocial well-being" used the term to refer to a broad set of well-being constructs.

Definition

Given conflicting theoretical perspectives and open empirical questions about what constitutes well-being, a unifying framework for well-being constructs should be *conceptual* in nature, rather than proposing a new theoretical or measurement model. This will allow the framework to continue to be a useful organizational and communicative tool as the field advances. Thus, when defining an umbrella term, the decision of how inclusive or exclusive to be can largely be made on pragmatic grounds. A useful definition should be sufficiently broad to accommodate new theory development and empirical advances, and to incorporate diverse perspectives on what is considered well-being. In line with this goal, I argue that the definition should err on the side of including the vast majority of constructs that have been proposed to be psychological aspects of well-being, rather than excluding constructs based on a particular theoretical perspective. Thus, a unifying conceptual framework should encompass hedonic and eudaimonic, affective and cognitive, and intra- and interpersonal aspects of well-being.

At the same time, the definition should not be so broad that it loses its organizational and communicative value. To avoid this pitfall, the definition should exclude non-psychological aspects of well-being (e.g., physical health) as well as constructs that are more commonly considered something other than well-being (e.g., personality, ill-being or psychopathology). Finally, consistent with the goal of being a conceptual and organizational framework rather than a theoretical or measurement model, a unifying framework of psychosocial well-being should be agnostic to how conceptually distinct well-being constructs are related (e.g., whether well-being is a single formative or reflective construct, a hierarchy with different

levels of specificity, or made up entirely of specific, distinct components).

Park et al.'s proposed definition of emotional well-being has several strengths, including its focus on positive aspects of psychological functioning, its inclusion of constructs from multiple models of well-being, and its acknowledgement that well-being constructs are embedded within contexts, culture, and developmental processes. In addition to these strengths, aspects of the definition would benefit from additional clarity. First, the opening sentence of the definition seems to place greater emphasis on hedonic/subjective aspects of well-being (i.e., positive feelings and life satisfaction) despite the goal to encompass a broader range of hedonic and eudaimonic components. Second, with the exception of “goals that can extend beyond the self,” the definition seems to exclude interpersonal components of well-being. Prominent models of well-being include interpersonal aspects, such as the positive relationships factor of Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being and Keyes' (1998) social well-being model. Although some well-being researchers have argued that interpersonal constructs may be better classified as antecedents or consequences of well-being (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2008), a unifying conceptual framework is likely to be more uniformly adopted if it does not exclude particular theoretical perspectives. Further, lay conceptions of well-being often include interpersonal elements particularly in non-Western samples (Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009), suggesting that social elements may be central to people's understanding of their own well-being. Finally, it is not clear what Park et al. mean by “composite.” Removing this word from the definition would allow the framework to flexibly accommodate diverse perspectives on the structure of well-being (see Disabato et al., 2016, 2019; Goodman et al., 2018; Joshanloo, 2016; Joshanloo et al., 2017; Kashdan et al., 2008).

Building on Park et al.'s framework, I propose “psychosocial well-being” as a unifying umbrella term, with the following definition, the final sentence of which is borrowed from the Park et al. definition:

Psychosocial well-being is an umbrella term that encompasses conceptually distinct yet related aspects of well-being. The framework focuses on *psychological* rather than *physical* aspects of well-being, and on *positive* rather than *negative* aspects of functioning. Psychosocial well-being encompasses *hedonic* (e.g., emotion experience and life satisfaction) and *eudaimonic* (e.g., sense of meaning and purpose) aspects of well-being. It includes *intrapersonal* (e.g., personal growth, self-acceptance) as well as *interpersonal* aspects of well-being (e.g., positive relationships with others, social acceptance). These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and life course.

Concluding Comment

The field of well-being research has been encumbered by confusing and imprecise terminology and stands to benefit from a unifying conceptual framework. Several overarching theoretical and measurement models have been proposed, but their widespread adoption typically depends upon agreement with specific assertions about which constructs should be included or excluded as well as the manner and degree to which well-being constructs are related to one another. While the field continues to grapple with the nature and structure of well-being, it would benefit from a unifying conceptual framework that is agnostic to these issues. In this paper, I proposed a unifying conceptual framework of psychosocial well-being that encompasses the diverse array of constructs that have been proposed as positive psychological aspects of well-being.

This framework has the following advantages: (1) The umbrella term “psychosocial well-being” will reduce the dual-use of terms such as “psychological well-being” to refer both to broadly-construed well-being and to more specific measurement models. This will facilitate clearer communication about whether researchers are referring to a broad umbrella construct versus more precise constructs and measures. (2) This framework will serve as an organizational tool for empirical investigations on the nature and structure of well-being, allowing researchers to empirically test the degree to which specific constructs and measures within the framework are related to one another between- and within-persons. (3) This framework can be used to investigate the causes and consequences of psychosocial well-being, and whether those causal relationships differ across specific constructs within the framework. (4) The framework is inclusive of the diverse constructs that have been proposed to comprise well-being and is agnostic with regard to the structure of well-being. Thus, researchers can empirically test causal relationships among psychosocial well-being constructs without implying that one construct is a component of well-being while the other construct is not. For example, sense of purpose may foster positive emotions, and in other instances positive emotions may facilitate purpose development; in still other contexts, sense of purpose and positive emotion may be unrelated or negatively associated. This allows questions of causality to depend upon context, timescale, and level of analysis, and answers to those questions to rely on tools of causal inference (experimental and statistical control, longitudinal designs) rather than philosophical perspectives.

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