

Exploring different facets of subjective well-being – A conceptual review

Jayant P V Sundaresan,

Research Scholar, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad,
Haryana, India

Prof. (Dr.) Chavi Bhargava Sharma,

Executive Director and Dean, Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Manav Rachna
International Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, Haryana, India

Abstract

This paper focuses on the different facets of subjective well-being (SWB) and its relevance in personal and professional life. Numerous factors impacting SWB are looked at including demographic and psychosocial factors. The paper further covers the different theories that have been used to explain SWB, including Telic theories, Hedonic and Eudaimonic theories, Need Hierarchy theories and finally the Adaptation Model theory. The need for the measurement of subjective experience in the context of SWB is underlined and the Easterlin Paradox is explained. The paper concludes with the need to conduct more research on SWB to build a robust road map for the development of life satisfaction and SWB at the nation level so as to improve the lives of everyone.

Introduction

As human beings, we have been able to evolve with time and create lives of purpose and meaning for ourselves. While there are different things that motivate us and the decisions we make, nevertheless our emotional state and mental happiness does have an effect on ourselves. When we are in a situation of crisis, the barrier between personal and professional tends to get blurred and that which is happening in our personal life impacts our professional life and similarly that which impacts our professional life in turn impacts our personal life. As we human beings are not machines, we are at our work and at our home as complete people, not with our emotional state being compartmentalized or sanitized.

Therefore, it has been increasingly important to understand the role and relevance of Subjective Well Being (SWB), particularly in our personal and professional life. The more the

understand it, the further will be our journey to being complete and actualized human beings, both at a personal and national level

Subjective Well Being (SWB) includes the feelings associated with contentment, happiness, and job satisfaction. While prosperity has been seen to be a predictor of happiness, wealth-based prosperity includes being physically healthy and also includes an individual's life experiences. It also includes the contribution of individual's job roles in the context of mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual aspects in the context of work. Demographic factors such as income and marital status also influence SWB. Several other factors, such as mental health, adaptation to conditions, temperament and striving towards goals also influence the person's SWB. Personality and self-esteem are also related to SWB. The individual personality along with one's ability interacts with the person's self-esteem and striving towards goals affects SWB in the context of resources available to the person. While individual prosperity contributes to the stage being set across the person's life, the other psychosocial factors also play a role in the person's SWB. Psychosocial factors associated with personal satisfaction have a bearing on the achievement of all the different parts of an individual's life including physical wellbeing, mental prosperity, social prosperity, money related prosperity, family connections, fellowship, work, and recreation (Suldo et al, 2011).

Telic theories

The Telic theory of SWB is based on the gaining of a happiness state associated with a need or goal to achieve them. Many philosophers were concerned with the related telic theory's questions and the persistence of satisfaction based on a need of attaining happiness, and conversely, the context of unhappiness caused due to the unfulfilled needs. The fulfillment of desires as recommended by the scholars in context to the suppression of desires raises an important question (Newman *et al.* 2014). It questions the belief that whether happiness is derived from the act of fulfilling one's desires that are recently achieved as an ambition, or in the form of pursuit that led to the process of moving toward the desired target or goals. As for an example: they were asked as if the concept of happiness can be gained by suppressing their satisfaction for some other's desires or by addressing one's own need and wants.

Hedonic and Eudaimonic theories

As commented by Ngamaba (2017), the context of Subjective Well-being is defined in the form of an individual's cognitive and self-evaluation that are affective. The ancient and more recent philosophers like Zhuangzi, Jean, Aristippus, Jacques Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, Aristotle & Bertrand Russell all the way through history, considered the concept of subjective well-being as being the form of the highest motivational human goal. For example, a former student of Socrates named Aristippus (435 - 356 BC), was instrumental in suggesting a life's purpose be associated with the experience of attaining pleasure to its maximum level. Contrarily, Aristotle (384–322 BC), Plato's student and Alexander's teacher, insisted on arguing that the

realization of the human potential as a true pursuit of happiness and this was not to be found in attaining pursuits of pleasure.

As stated by Sirgy (2012), the well-being approach associated with a hedonic perspective tends to incorporate the aspect of emotion, feeling, and life's satisfaction. He also suggests that a good life can be achieved along with experiencing maximum pleasure and in the avoidance of pain. The Eudaimonic approach looked at a perspective of self-realization and meaning, allowing the well-being approach based to be based on prosperity and human flourishing, to understand the complexity of the well-being concept. Thus, it tends to embrace the meaning of life based on the purpose of life with freedom of having a positive relation with others. It addresses the concept of truth, growth, self-acceptance, and autonomy as being the individual elements. Therefore, both Hedonic and Eudaimonic well-being were associated with subjective well-being (happiness through satisfaction of life).

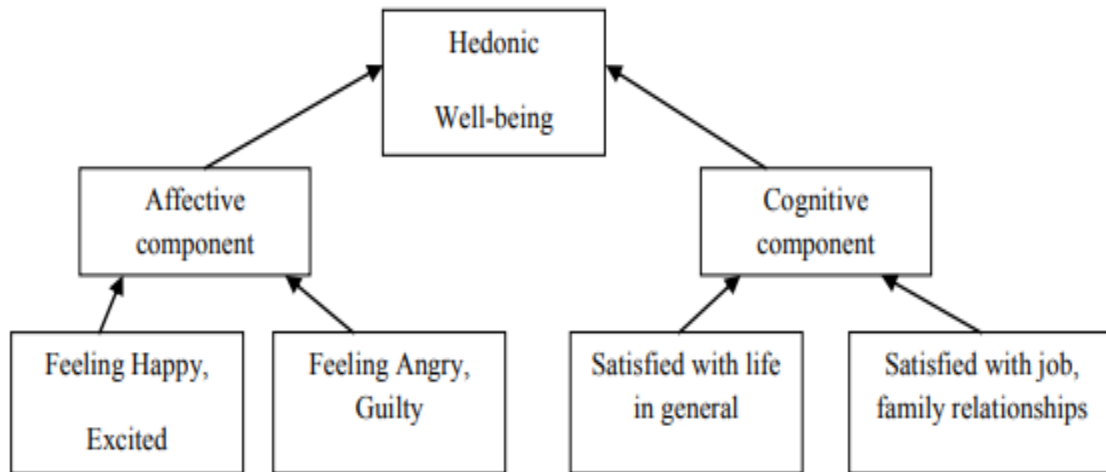


Figure 1: Hedonic Well-being (Source: Created by the researcher)

The scientific studies of the best possible human flourishing and functioning in terms of collective studies is from the field of Positive Psychology, which tends to not focus on mental illness and disease. Over the years, psychologists have developed a good understanding of Hedonic Well-being Affective components and the Cognitive components based on Feeling Happy, Feeling Excited or Feeling Angry and the perception of Guilt. It also addresses the satisfaction quotient associated with life. It, in general terms, refers to the aspect of satisfaction associated with an individual's job, family relationships, and treatments of psychological illnesses that includes for example the aspects of Anxiety, Psychosis, Post-Traumatic Stress disorders and Depression. It is suggested that in addition to the aspects associated with positive psychology, researchers should also focus on mental illness that is related to the feeling of

worthlessness, lack of motivation such as hopelessness, decreasing tolerance, loss of creativity and spiritual connect.

Of the models and theories of factors that influence Subjective Well-being (SWB), some have explained the theories by laying an emphasis on the needs and goals while some are based on the personality traits of the person. Some theories are based on the cognitive factors of the process of motivation (Sirgy, 2012).

Need Hierarchy theory

As commented by Maslow, a need of a universal hierarchy in a similar order emerges in all individuals (Newman *et al.* 2014). At their individual levels, SWB should be experienced by the individuals on condition of fulfilling the requirement at each level. Also, higher degrees of happiness are associated with higher levels of the need hierarchy.

Adaptation model

According to Ngamaba, (2017), Brickman and Campbell were instrumental in proposing the thought of a hedonic treadmill in which they said that people can never be happy in the long run, because they always fit in either with good or the bad and that eventually they return to neutrality. This idea was seen in the finding that lottery winners were not happier significantly than non-lottery winners when put in the same group for comparison. On the contrary, it was observed that the lottery winners were more pleased with the aspects of attaining the pleasures of small things from everyday life. More evidence for the hedonic treadmill came up in that "people who were disabled severely in an accident were at first troubled and unhappy, but over a relatively short time became happier". Therefore, the adaptation idea in the dynamic equilibrium model has combined the temperament of the person with that of the life events of the future which are making people either happy or unhappy. It depends on the circumstances considered to be good or bad. However, all these individuals over time will return to their original temperament baselines. It should also be noted that the research data does not support the dynamic equilibrium model, in those conditions where the individual has to face unemployment or living in extremely poor conditions. In these situations, the person does not return to the original baseline temperament as they do to not fully adapt to the situation.

An increasing need in context to Subjective Well-Being research

As stated by Tay & Diener (2011), measures of life satisfaction and happiness in recent studies among disabled people, are perceived as reliable and helpful in measuring the objectives associated with personal well-being. It includes concepts that are related to activities of the brain, blood pressure, positive emotions and personality. All these leave a lasting impression based on disabled people's subjective well-being. For example, measures of personal well-being correlate well with the frequency of laughter in left and right brain activity. It also takes into account the levels of cortical stress hormones in the person. Also, some self-assessment measures of present

well-being are available, including those based on the frequency of laughter available from activity to activity. All of these are related to satisfaction or to the focus of happiness in life.

When it come to the measurement of life satisfaction, some organizations are interested in global surveys, such as the World Value Survey and the European Quality of Life Survey. They have found that the single-item scale of life satisfaction and happiness is reliable and is widely used to judge the well-being of a subjective person. This is called a life satisfaction measure in a country where more than one language is spoken, and the results confirm its reliability. Also, another finding of measuring the life satisfaction of this single item is that if the possible response provided is limited to two or three possible responses, then the study may be more accurate than the standard scale chosen typically of 1 to 10 to measure life satisfaction. Measuring happiness, on the other hand, is not as easy as measuring the satisfaction of life, but as noted, the amount of happiness has proven to be reliable as a measure of personal happiness and is widely used in some countries (Ngamaba, 2017).

The final report of the Stiglitz – Sen – Fitoussi Commission published in the year 2009, commissioned by the French government, looked at alternatives to study the social progress and growth of a country beyond the typical measure traditionally used of the gross domestic product, which was considered as being too unidimensional. The Economic Advisor for this commission was Amartya Sen. It suggested the importance of determining the context of well-being by using subjectivity measures. Warner Wilson stated that a happy person generally is “young, healthy, well educated, well paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry free, religious, married, with high self-esteem, high job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex and of a wide range of intelligence”.

Generally, economists agree that the time has arrived to reallocate the emphasis from measuring financial production to the context to the well-being of the individuals. Stiglitz's report stated, “it is feasible to collect meaningful and reliable data on subjective and objective well-being as shown by the research that includes different aspects of subjective well-being that encompasses the cognitive evaluations of one's life with happiness. In order to derive a more comprehensive appreciation of people's lives, it is necessary to measure each of them separately”.

Based on the recommendations of the Stiglitz commission, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron committed to the development of a comprehensive national health index by the Government of UK using the Office of National Statistics (ONS) (Dolan *et al*, 2011). In November 2010, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Mr. David stated that “people's well-being should be improved; ...you've got to take practical steps to make sure government is focused properly on our quality of life as well as economic growth.” (Cameron, 2010).

Based on the work of the ONS, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, an independent organization led by Dr. Paul Litchfield, delivered a plan that relates to the ways in which the

people of the United Kingdom can improve their well-being" (What Works Wellbeing, 2016). Around the world, there exists a significant amount of international interest in context to psychological wellness which has led to countries that are part of the UN General Assembly to pursue additional steps so as to improve their psychosocial aspect of well-being (Helliwell *et al*, 2016).

The life course placed above Subjective well-being

Based on general social surveys in the United States, Easterlin's finding is known as the Easterlin paradox and states that "at a point in time, happiness varies directly with income both among and within nations, but over time happiness does not trend upward as income continues to grow" (Easterlin, 1995). A study in Norway found that low-income adults were more likely to be monetarily satisfied as compared to their younger and equally poorer peers. Also, it was found that over the course of life, the psychosocial wellbeing of an individual was very important.

There were several researchers who have said that the psychological study on Subjective Well-Being is related to psychosocial wellbeing. Findings have also indicated that in the context of financial terms and social support based on stability, marriage is connected with higher Subjective Well-being. On the other hand, with reference to the outcome of marriage being on Subjective Well-Being, some studies impart as mixed and seem to account for premarital cohabitation (Plagnol, 2010). The importance of the subjective well-being of different age groups is still underestimated, due to the small longitudinal study that follows subjective well-being among different age groups. Most studies are done in advanced countries because these nations have the financial wherewithal for investigation and the participants are accordingly reachable in comparison to participants in developing nations with scarce infrastructure.

Can "subjective well-being" change?

Some studies have investigated factors associated with widespread concept of reduction or unchanging in happiness caused due to change in situation like unexpected loss etc. along with the ones that have taken a look on factors that are associated positively with an well-being aspect treated subjectively (as for an example, getting married). Similarly, disabled people suffering from chronic painful conditions possess a lower level of subjective well-being over time as compared to their non-disabled counterparts (Headey, 2010).

Developing a robust and comparable human SWB system is essential and has an important role to play in the process of decision making, particularly to improve the personal lives and peoples conditions of working associated with different populations that includes both senior citizens and the future of every nations, its children. For the elderly, their health status, the level of ease of their mobility and their degree of social isolation are factors that impact their SWB. In addition, friendship and connections with people are also considered as important

additional factors for SWB. Connections are also important for the other measures of life satisfaction and evaluative well-being, as well as about respondents' evaluative well-being other than the measures of those who have skills or other broader life goals.

Ngamaba (2016) states that “Factors driving SWB include state of health, financial satisfaction, freedom of choice, GDP per capita, income scale, importance of friends, leisure, being females, weekly religious attendance, unemployment and income”.

Firstly, the adaptation and application of the findings of major studies that look at the drivers in psychosocial terms associated with subjective well-being have been hampered by the studies having typically been conducted in developed nations due to availability of financial resources, and accessible participants as compared to inadequately structured developing nations (World-Values-Survey, 2015).

Secondly, the same terms are typically used assess subjective well-being are also used to address the life's satisfaction and happiness pursuits. However, there is evidence to suggest that this happiness associated with emotional feelings or moods.

Thirdly, life is concerned with and includes both work and personal relationships evaluations based on people's judgments when observing “life-as-a-whole”. Consequently, researchers based in countries that are a member of The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have followed the guidelines based on OECD recommendations which have been used in measuring subjective well-being. It has also suggested that there needs to be a more comprehensive measurement of people's life quality and that it should be measured separately, to allow the determinants to understanding them in a better way (OECD, 2013).

Conclusion

To summarize, there are different approaches that have been taken to different people when looking at well-being. Depending of the framework that has been used to explain well-being, some explain life satisfaction in the context of the attainment of happiness. Others use a cognitive well-being concept as essential towards life satisfaction, while some others focus on well-being as being an affective component (real happiness). Each of these have limitations as there is disagreement on the framework to be used based on personal well-being. certain limitations that are methodologically difficult to agree on the framework based on personal well-being. In contrary to the individual frameworks, it is the authors suggestion that all parts are eed when we are understanding and explaining subjective well-being.

Another set of well-being frameworks are designed to specifically take into perspective the direction of national needs and are tested across nations. These include the Office of National

Statistics (ONS) national well-being framework which assesses social progress and informs upon the idea of subjective well-being.

Together with the measures of the different objectives along with the policy at the individual or national level, are then put into use to explain the subjective measures associated with an average personal well-being.

Traditionally well-being has been estimated based on GDP. In developed nations, there is evidence that rent is not reliably adequate as an approach to upgrade personal wellbeing since the most significant issue of a person's own wellbeing is not identified with income. For instance, in understanding the wellbeing of individuals, there is an impact of different non-income-related factors like the level of social connections, relative income, welfare, and self-evaluated perspectives. Therefore, knowing its relationship to subjective wellbeing may, in a roundabout way, make lead to circumstances where residents can improve their quality of life (Kuykendall *et al*, 2016).

Different personal wellbeing structures have been proposed in writing, which features parts of human wellbeing and at times, life fulfillment. These include the national satisfaction structure of the ONS, the global joy zone of Gallup, the topics of the OECD and the determinants of world joy. These frameworks measure singular wellbeing while utilizing an assortment of inquiries identified with the intellectual or touchy segments of joy, for example, fulfillment, satisfaction, and positive and negative impacts on life (Tay and Diener, 2011).

Easterlin contends that joy increments in the United States from the age of 18 onwards, and afterwards bit by bit it diminishes as fulfilment with family life and work increases. Easterlin recommends that notwithstanding ongoing revelations, satisfaction is the after effect of both goal and subjective variables (Ngamaba, 2017).

Gallup's World Welfare Framework, which covers numerous nations around the globe, has identified a few factors that influence the comfort of an entire country. It includes GDP per capita, social help, freedom of life, the liberality of donations, and the perception of corruption.

OECD, along with its issues and wellness determinants, has delivered explanations of the healthy life fulfilment of all OECD members through the development of The OECD Framework for Measuring Well-Being and Progress Welfare Framework. The OECD framework proposes that there are three components to be kept in mind, the resources available for future well-being, the inequalities in the outcomes and the current well-being. In addition to SWB, it includes the dimensions of safety, work life balance, social connections, civil engagement, income and wealth, work and job quality, housing, health, knowledge and skills and finally environment quality (OECD, 2013).

Keeping all the above in mind, it suggested that more research needs to be conducted for us to gain a deeper understanding into the different facets of SWB. We need to build focus on

this to cut through the clutter and fixate on a few malleable facets of SWB, as it will help us in our nation building to further strengthen our beloved country.

References

1. Cameron, D., (2010). Prime Minister's speech on wellbeing on 25 November 2010, from:
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/nov/25/david-cameron-defends-wellbeing-index>
3. Diener, E. (2012). New findings and future directions for subjective well-being research. *American Psychologist*, 67(8), 590–597. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029541>
4. Dolan, P. & Metcalfe, R., (2012). Measuring Subjective Wellbeing: Recommendations on Measures for use by National Governments. *Journal of Social Policy*, 41(2), 409-427. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279411000833>
5. Easterlin, R., (1995). Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*. 27(1):35-48. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-2681\(95\)00003-B](https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-2681(95)00003-B).
6. Headey, B., (2010). The set point theory of well-being has serious flaws: on the eve of a scientific revolution? *Social Indicators Research*, 97(1), pp.7-21.
7. Helliwell, J.F., Layard, P.R. & Sachs, J. eds., (2016). *World happiness report 2016 update: volume I*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
8. Kuykendall, L., Tay, L. & Ng, V., (2015). Leisure engagement and subjective well-being: A meta-analysis. *Psychological bulletin*, 141(2), p.364.
9. Newman, D.B., Tay, L. & Diener, E., (2014). Leisure and subjective well-being: A model of psychological mechanisms as mediating factors. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15(3), pp.555-578.
10. Ngamaba, K.H., (2017). *The correlates of subjective well-being* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Manchester (United Kingdom)).
11. Ngamaba, K.H., (2016). Determinates of subjective well-being in representative samples of nations. *The European Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 377-382
12. OECD (2013), *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264191655-en>.
13. Plagnol, A., (2010). Subjective well-being over the life course: Conceptualizations and evaluations. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 77(2), pp.749-768.
14. Sirgy, M.J., (2012). *The psychology of quality of life: Hedonic well-being, life satisfaction, and eudaimonia* (Vol. 50). Springer Science & Business Media.
15. Stiglitz, J.E., Sen, A. & Fitoussi, J.P., (2009). Report by the commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress (CMEPSP)

16. Suldo, S., Thalji, A. & Ferron, J., (2011). Longitudinal academic outcomes predicted by early adolescents' subjective well-being, psychopathology, and mental health status yielded from a dual factor model. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(1), pp.17-30.
17. Tay, L. & Diener, E., (2011). Needs and subjective well-being around the world. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 101(2), p.354-365
18. Whatworkswellbeing (2016), from:
<https://whatworkswellbeing.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/public-dialogue-and-workplan.pdf>
19. World-Values-Survey. (2015). World Value Survey 1981-2014 Longitudinal Aggregate v.20150418, from: www.worldvaluessurvey.org