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# Well-being: Strengthening and Broadening a Key Psychological Construct

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## Abstract

Park et al.'s (2022) goal of bringing conceptual clarity to the study of psychological aspects of well-being is a good one. We consider their work in terms of its implications for moving towards an understanding of well-being that reflects the full spectrum of human experience, especially the experience of people who remain underrepresented, and poorly accounted for, in psychological science. In our view, there is reason to think that strengthening existing frameworks and broadening in terms of methodologies will be most productive for developing a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of well-being. We describe the distinct strength of the subjective well-being (SWB) construct for this purpose and offer two empirical examples that highlight the value of multiple measures and methods for understanding well-being. We suggest that continued use of the SWB measure, combined with state-of-the-art emotion measurement, and a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies be recommended as the way forward.

**Keywords** Well-being · Emotion · Measurement · Qualitative · culture

The goal of creating a definition of well-being that brings greater conceptual clarity and the prospect of consensus that can be useful to researchers, policy makers, and the public alike is laudable. As Park et al. (2022) note, psychological science needs conceptual clarity and consensus to move forward theory, research, and application. The authors' focus on emotion is particularly valuable; the emotionally positive aspects of life experience should be as central to the science of well-being as they are to human experience. For these reasons, we appreciate that the working definition they offer is broad and comprehensive. The natural next step will be measurement and methodological guidance. As the field moves in that direction, priority needs to be placed on measures and methods that are best poised to produce an understanding of

well-being that reflects the full spectrum of human experience. In our view, this will mean use of measures and methods most likely to be inclusive of people who remain underrepresented, and poorly accounted for, in frameworks that psychological scientists use to understand well-being. In the paragraphs below, we describe the appropriateness of the subjective well-being (SWB) construct for meeting this goal and offer two empirical examples that highlight the gains to be made by encouraging the use of multiple measures and methods in the study of well-being.

Consideration of variation in the conceptualization of well-being across cultures is important for recommending best practices for measurement. Well-being has historically been studied in terms of the individual with less attention paid to the *social aspects* of well-being. The social and the personal, however, are inextricably intertwined. This is especially true among those of us immersed in cultural collectivism, a way of understanding the world that prioritizes one's important relationships over the self (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). In these settings, the experiences that inform one's sense of well-being are likely to differ from that of people immersed in more culturally individualistic settings where the personal preferences of the self are more likely to take precedence. This reality has consequences for research on well-being. First, it heightens the importance of subjective experience. Subjective experience, by definition, captures the elements of experience that are distinct to the person

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reporting on it and can capture factors that psychological scientists already understand (e.g., positive emotions, life satisfaction), as well as factors that will require additional work to better understand. An example of this can be found in the study of physical health. A person's subjective rating of their health is such a robust predictor of mortality that it is recommended for use in the study of global health (McGee et al., 1999; Wu et al., 2013). Second, cultural collectivism is the prevalent way to be in the contexts that are still poorly incorporated into psychological science. Together, these are strong reasons for moving forward with a continued emphasis on SWB and its useful and brief measure. Measuring SWB in conjunction with state-of-the-art emotion measures, and thus keeping the subjective while incorporating emotion experience, could be a powerful tool for more comprehensively understanding well-being.

Broadening the methodologies that psychologists use to study well-being will also be needed. The work of Rojas Perez et al. (2022) is an example of the utility of qualitative methodologies for understanding the cultural shaping of well-being. These authors wanted to gain insight into how well-being is conceptualized in Spanish-speaking immigrant adults living in the Midwest (Rojas Perez et al., 2022). Through semi-structured interviews, participants described the importance of an inner tranquility that was felt with knowing that family members and loved ones were physically and emotionally well. For these participants, own well-being was contingent on the wellness of important others. This view of well-being also included responsibility to one's family as well as a connection with God and faith. In the view of Rojas Perez et al. (2022), their qualitative study uncovered evidence of an *interdependent* way of conceptualizing well-being that is infused with cultural values regarding family that are prevalent among Latin Americans. How can this perspective be accounted for and potentially incorporated into future studies of well-being? The answer could be complex. The SWB measure does not explicitly ask about knowing if loved ones are physically and emotionally well. However, it is likely that people's responses to questions such as "I am satisfied with my life" and "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life" would factor in their particulars. Moreover, researchers who include the SWB measure and also measure emotion experience in their studies may generate new insights regarding the breadth of the aspects of well-being that are shared across people and the role of emotion experience in shaping one's sense of well-being.

Izquierdo (2005) provides a second example of the utility of qualitative methodologies for the study of well-being, this time as part of a multiple-method research study. As Park et al. (2022) note, well-being encompasses many things. Indeed, this is one of the issues they are trying to address. While physical health and well-being are generally related, this is not always the case. Moreover, the

conditions under which the two are decoupled are informative about the well-being construct, the power of the subjective, and the emotion experiences that shape the subjective. Izquierdo (2005) reports on circumstances under which physical health improves yet well-being declines. In her study of a group of members of the Matsigenka people of the Peruvian Amazon, she combined biomedical measures (i.e., hemoglobin and protein levels from blood samples, parasite tests) taken 20 years apart with qualitative methods that included participant observation as well as in-depth semi-structured and open-ended interviews. The findings of this work indicated that while the Matsigenka were physically healthier than in the past, their subjective experience was that they were doing more poorly than in the past. They explained this as due to their encounters with "outsiders" (e.g., health personnel, government officials). The discrepancy is conceptually important. It speaks to theoretical concerns regarding the extent to which well-being and physical health are correlated and is evidence in favor of Park et al.'s efforts to put emotion experience at the forefront of well-being. It also highlights the importance of social experience and intergroup experience for understanding well-being. SWB measured in people who have experienced what the Matsigenka people have lived through could capture their sense of decline and distress via their responses to questions such as "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" and "The conditions of my life are excellent." Measuring their subjective experience and emotions would also preclude the possibility that a focus on objective indices of physical health could let researchers, policymakers, or broader society ignore the Matsigenka people's distress. Izquierdo's (2005) work is a reminder that well-being and physical health should be measured separately, with multiple methods, and that the distinction between the psychological and the physical is especially important in the context of marginalization and other ways that people dehumanize one another.

The Rojas Perez et al. (2022) and Izquierdo (2005) examples highlight the ways in which the current understanding of well-being, including the proposal for emotional well-being, may and may not fit all worldviews. These examples also purposefully highlight methodologies that may still be unfamiliar to many psychological scientists. This is necessary. In order for the experiences of people who remain underrepresented in psychological science to be included, subjective measurements and, crucially, multiple methods that span from the quantitative to the qualitative are needed. Psychological scientists may shy away from qualitative methodologies because they are perceived to take too long and/or yield results with limited generalizability (Kelle, 2006). Qualitative methods, however, are indispensable to researchers when there is no basis for a formal hypothesis, when information obtained "from the ground up" is needed

for understanding a process, or when there is reason to believe that previous efforts to understand people in a particular context are imbued with prejudice. As the Izquierdo (2005) example highlights, combining qualitative with quantitative methods can be an especially fruitful approach for studying underrepresented people. Qualitative data can help explain patterns in quantitative data or generate testable hypotheses that inform the design of subsequent quantitative studies with larger scale sample sizes (Kelle, 2006). Simply put, becoming more comfortable with qualitative methodologies is important for understanding underrepresented populations better.

We are confident that Park et al. (2022) would agree with our suggestion that using multiple measures and methods to be inclusive of people who remain underrepresented in psychological science be recommended. Every day, emerging research on people who have been underrepresented in psychology in the past continues to challenge patterns thought to be psychological truths (e.g., Wiley et al., 2022). To do better, we agree that emotion should be central. We also argue for continued use of the SWB construct rather than pivoting to new constructs. Existing measures that emphasize the subjective evaluation of one's life are necessary and quickly adaptable for people all cross the world. Indeed, the SWB measure is already used this way. Guidance from Park et al. (2022) or another working group could offer researchers a suite of options that encourage multiple measurement and multiple methods. We suggest that combining the brief SWB with state-of-the-art emotion measures and encouraging the use of methodological approaches that span the quantitative to the qualitative is the best path forward to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the psychological aspects of well-being.

## Additional Information

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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