

EDITORIAL

Research on Well-being: Measuring “Good Life”, Shifting Values, and Cross-cultural Applicability

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The concept of well-being has evolved over the several decades as research continued to reveal its multidimensional, dynamic, person-specific, and culture-specific nature, including most recently, the ecological embeddedness of well-being. Well-being encompasses how well people live with regard to people’s physical, social, and mental conditions, the fulfillment of their basic needs and capabilities, and the opportunities and resources to which they have access. Scholars use well-being research to understand why some humans thrive, while others do not.

Dissatisfaction with the skewed decision-making solely based on the Gross National Product/Gross Domestic Product by many stakeholders has triggered scientists to develop well-being indicators. Scholars and practitioners still disagree about how to best measure well-being due to its complexity (or

comprehensiveness), accessibility, and communicability. There is no single indicator set that will be able to capture all relevant aspects of individual and societal. However, policymakers and scientists need measures that can be used effectively in communication and research to provide relevant information to citizens and politicians. One of the first attempt to move away from the economic indicator is the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), which rank countries by changes that occurred in real-life conditions such as the distribution of social benefits between the sexes, among ethnic groups, and by region and sector. The PQLI facilitates international and regional comparisons by minimizing developmental and cultural ethnocentricities^[1]. The concept of PQLI, with correction on the overlap between infant mortality and life expectancy, was later adopted and improved

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by the United Nations Development Program, the so-called Human Development Index (HDI), which measures average achievement in key dimensions of human development: A long and healthy life, knowledge, and has a decent standard of living ^[2].

The latest report from the HDI in 2021/2022 covers over 190 countries and highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic has toppled economic and social systems and exposed deep-rooted inequalities and injustices, two variables that affect subjective well-being. Many calls are sent out by diverse governments and non-profit organizations worldwide for the transformation and social change needed for a new post-pandemic world, to improve the well-being of the population, to leave no people behind, and to enjoy a “good life”. An example of a well-being study that informs the well-being of the nation following the COVID-19 pandemic is the 2021 report from Australia using the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index. The report incorporated additional information that focused on five key areas of life and their relationship to subjective well-being during the second year of the pandemic. This included changes in household income since the start of the pandemic, as well as levels of mental distress (i.e., stress, anxiety, and depression), resilience, social connectedness, and questions on people’s sense of achieving. Well-being research into measuring the “good life” has the potential to inform all stakeholders that can best support each other toward the post-pandemic future we collectively envisioned.

“Good life” itself is a very subjective word. A lot has been said and written about the “good life,” and with 8 billion people on this planet, there are quite possibly just as many opinions on what it constitutes. Adopting Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, our idea of the “good life” changes, as we move through and up the pyramid of needs to reach self-actualization. For instance, people whose needs for security aren’t met may visualize the “good life” to be a secure environment with meaningful social bonds. Researchers investigate how cultural values and norms shape well-being, and how people’s value and beliefs can influence their happiness and quality of life. Human

values ^[3], such as power, security, tradition, or benevolence, is a collection of principles that guide our selection or evaluation of actions, events, and social relationships and what we “deem to be true and needed in life”. If security is one of your core values, then having a secure job will be your priority, and you may put aside a marriage commitment until you landed a job. Or if one of your core values is benevolence, you are more than willing to spend your spare time volunteering within your community and finding meaning through your charity work. The values that people hold are unrelated to their reported happiness, but the value difference is reflected in what they say is most important in determining their happiness. In short, values and the balance relationships between people, their community, and their natural surroundings co-determine what we consider the good life. The community is deemed to be a prominent influence and space, which enables the individuals within the community to develop their abilities and enrich their knowledge and not threaten human health and the environment. Human beings and their quality of life depend on all the living and non-living elements, and nature is seen as an integrated whole in which human beings are interrelated with the environment.

The well-being indicators that are developed solely at regional or global scales may leave out indicators critical for local systems. Not only that the indicators may discount, mischaracterize, or ignore place-based values, worldviews, and knowledge systems; the culturally grounded perspectives are missing, thus disconnecting communication that results in policies that fail to inspire appropriate action and misdirected resources. Sterling et al. ^[4] introduced the biocultural approaches to incorporate cultural factors within the community we live in designing a well-being indicator. The framework of the biocultural approaches is based on culturally grounded understandings of what factors drive a system, i.e., specific human practices, local knowledge, and cultural beliefs that influence and are influenced by the land and seascapes of which human communities are a part. The biocultural approaches incorporate the

onset of the well-being indicator unequivocally build on local cultural perspectives—entailing values, knowledge, and needs—and encompass feedback between ecosystems and human well-being. The local, place-based indicators will interchangeably represent culturally grounded actors such as local or indigenous peoples. Thus policies can be written to reflect the familiarity with the cultural practices of a place^[5].

Employing biocultural approaches in measuring well-being can stimulate exchange between local and global actors and ease the identification of crucial problems and solutions that are missing from many regional and international framings of sustainability^[6]. These include the well-being of the displaced population—aka diaspora. The current global estimate shows that one in 30 people is a migrant prone to social exclusion, economic deprivation, and other adverse demographic conditions. For children, youth, and families, diaspora is a lifelong person-level social and psychological process and serves as a unique lens by which developmental and cultural processes and practices are experienced.

With the biocultural approaches, the well-being indicators can be examined for their cross-cultural applicability. Literature found that rural residents in developed countries report higher subjective well-being levels than urban residents in the EU, the US, Australia, and Scotland. Studies in China and across Europe support the argument that where we live and with whom we interact is affecting our overall levels of satisfaction^[7,8]. Well-being research can see existing problems from various perspectives and identify workable solutions and recommendations for sustainable development. Overall, research on well-being seeks to provide a deeper understanding of what contributes to a good life, and how individuals, organizations, and societies can promote well-being

and happiness.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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