

Measuring Wellbeing Series

These discussion papers draw from a range of experts on approaches to measuring wellbeing. The intention is to promote debate and thought. Views expressed do not necessarily represent the What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

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definition and measures of subjective wellbeing

DISCUSSION PAPER 3

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About the Measuring Wellbeing Series

The *measuring wellbeing* series consists of **discussion papers** and **how-to guides**. This publication is a discussion paper.

Why ignite discussion about measuring wellbeing?

In our role as an independent collaborating centre and thought leader, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing brings together the disparate theoretical threads to draw out what this means, practically, for decision makers. The Centre recognises wellbeing as a multi-dimensional concept, where a range of definitions and measures may apply and are useful for different purposes.

We don't have just one measure of health or illness; we have many different tools designed to help us understand each in different situations. We'd like to encourage discussion of how different approaches to understanding and measuring wellbeing might be applied as 'the best tool for the job' in different situations as well.

This series of discussion papers includes inputs from leaders in the field. It draws together views of how we could define and measure wellbeing and use this in decision-making in different sectors across UK.

What does this mean for me?

These discussion papers are mainly aimed at analysts, wanting to understand the latest thinking and theoretical underpinnings. However, the accompanying blog and 'Practical Guides' are aimed at all audiences who may be considering how to put wellbeing into practice.

We hope that this paper and series will prompt discussion and bring these methods to life, so we can put these into practice.

Got a question about this paper? Want to share your views? Try our online expert network

About the What Works Centre for Wellbeing

We are an independent organisation set up to produce robust, relevant and accessible evidence on wellbeing. We work with individuals, communities, businesses and government, to enable them to use this evidence make decisions and take action to improve wellbeing.

The Centre is supported by the ESRC and partners to produce evidence on wellbeing in four areas: work & learning, culture & sport, community, and cross-cutting capabilities in definitions, evaluation, determinants and effects

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The measurement and valuation of individual wellbeing is central to monitoring welfare trends over time, informing the design of policy interventions, and in the economic appraisal of policies (e.g., Dolan & Metcalfe 2012; Dolan et al., 2011). The conclusions we reach about the effectiveness of policy interventions, about who is doing well and badly, and to what extent, depend on how wellbeing is defined and measured (e.g., Luhmann et al, 2012; Layard et al., 2008; Peasgood, 2008).

Many definitions of wellbeing have been proposed in the philosophical and social sciences (see Parfit, 1984; Dolan et al., 2011). In recent years, policymakers and academics (e.g., Stone & Mackie, 2014; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013; Waldron, 2010; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Dolan & Kahneman, 2008; HM Treasury, 2008) have been focussing increasing interest on the “mental state” account of wellbeing – also known as subjective wellbeing (SWB).

SWB describes wellbeing in terms of the feelings, experiences and sentiments arising from what people do and how they think (Dolan, 2014). This definition builds on the notion of wellbeing conceived by Bentham (1879), who theorised that pleasure and pain are the only things that are good and bad for human beings. What makes these things good and bad is, respectively, their pleasurable and painfulness (Crisp, 2006) – that is, the amount of positive and negative affect felt. Feelings such as happiness, joy, contentment, and excitement are all instances of pleasure, while sadness, worry, stress, and anxiety are examples of pain.

People’s experiences also involve feelings of purpose (e.g., worthwhileness, meaningfulness) and pointlessness (e.g., futility, boredom), which are evocative of the Aristotelian construct of “eudemonia” – the state of virtue and self-proliferation that all human beings should strive towards (Rowe & Broadie, 2002). Modern philosophers argue that feelings of purpose contribute towards wellbeing independently of pleasure and pain (e.g., Hurka, 1993). In order to be considered an adequate account of human wellbeing, therefore, SWB should encompass feelings of both pleasure and purpose – referred to as “sentimental hedonism” by Dolan (2014).

From a both theoretical and policy perspective, the SWB account of wellbeing has many advantages over alternative definitions of wellbeing that have been rehearsed elsewhere (see Fujiwara & Campbell, 2011; Dolan & Peasgood, 2008; Dolan & Kahneman, 2008; Kahneman et al., 1997). In particular, and contrary to other definitions, SWB can account for a wide range of psychological phenomena characterising wellbeing dynamics over time, such as adaptation (Dolan 2014; Bradford & Dolan, 2010; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999).

Let us be clear however that we view SWB as the ultimate variable of interest – the left-hand side variable in a regression model. There is considerable category confusion around what constitutes wellbeing itself and what is an important determinant of wellbeing, or right hand side variable. This confusion is not surprising, because the boundaries between some of the items are very blurred. For example, in the distinction between SWB and mental health, where does one stop and the other one start?



To us, SWB is explained by everything else that could potentially be experienced, felt or happen in life, ranging from the circumstances of people's lives (income, employment, etc.) through to activities they engage in (sport, culture, arts, etc.), as well as the thoughts in their mind, which cover a whole range of possible mental health conditions. Our circumstances, activities and what we attend to are all independent, explanatory variables for the final consequence that is SWB.

Significantly, we need to be alert to issues of reverse causality – the fact that SWB will cause other consequences of policy interest. Our behaviours, and the context within which these behaviours occur, determine our SWB; but, in turn, the feelings we experience influence how we subsequently behave (Dolan & Galizzi, 2015). In other words, SWB causally influences the circumstances of our life, the activities we engage in and other outcomes that society and policymakers care about, such as physical health (Cohen et al, 2006).

The measurement of SWB can be implemented in a number of different ways. To date, SWB has been most often assessed by asking people to provide global and retrospective evaluations of their life and experiences. Such evaluative measures are especially commonplace in national and international surveys on wellbeing. In the UK, for instance, the Measuring National Wellbeing programme at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) asks people to report on their satisfaction and feelings in specific life domains (e.g., work, health, relationships) and in relation to their life overall and their previous day (the "ONS 4"). Similar measurements in other surveys have also been focused on life satisfaction (Donovan & Halpern, 2002), as well as general happiness (Waldron, 2010).

We can learn a lot from how people evaluate their life and their experiences. Evaluative SWB may indeed reveal the degree to which people have satisfied their preferences (Akay et al., 2015) and be informative of their future choices (Kahneman et al., 1997). In general, though, these evaluations are prone to be biased by the context of the survey (e.g., Schwarz et al., 1987) and are shaped by what is currently salient in their memory and attention (e.g., Wilson et al., 2000). Most crucially, people tend to neglect the duration of their experiences when making evaluative judgments (Tadić et al., 2014; Miron-Shatz et al., 2009; Morewedge et al., 2005; Kahneman et al., 1993).

Policy-makers should therefore exercise caution when drawing conclusions about how people are doing based on evaluative measures, because such measures may not be accurate representations of people's experiences and how these evolve over time due to psychological "biases" such as duration neglect (Kahneman et al., 1997). In practice, this means that policy-makers may not be able to intervene accordingly to improve wellbeing.

Consider, for instance, those people whose SWB is more susceptible to positive and negative environmental influences (see Pluess, 2015): their SWB is likely to fluctuate more than others' during a period of time, as environments constantly change over time. Yet this experienced variability might not transpire in people's global evaluations, which would then be less informative for policy purposes. The same issue applies to people with



mental health conditions, such as bipolar disorder, which are characterised by extreme fluctuations in mood over time.

In contrast, directly capturing experiences over time allows policy-makers to assess more precisely whether or not there is the need for intervention, whether or not policies are effectively accomplishing the desired outcomes, and whether or not SWB is improving over sufficiently long time periods (Dolan & Kahneman, 2008; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Kahneman et al., 2004).

A valid measure of SWB will not only account for the valence and intensity of feelings but also how long these feelings last. Someone who reports feeling happy throughout the day is happier than someone who reports feeling happy for only one moment in the day. Measures of SWB fit for policy purposes and central to establishing “what works” should be able to directly capture the flow of SWB over time.

Experience-based measures of SWB can be collected in several ways. One way is to ask people in experimental settings to continuously report on their feelings as they are engaged in a task (e.g., Fredrickson & Kahneman, 1993; Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996). Other measurement methods have been developed, such as the Ecological Momentary Assessment (Stone et al., 1999) and the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman et al., 2004). Experiences may be also affected by “mind wanderings” (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006) and “intrusive thoughts” (Dolan, 2011), which should ideally be monitored in empirical investigations.

In a nutshell – the measure matters. There can be substantial divergence between evaluative and experience-based measures of SWB, as well as between pleasure and purpose (see Dolan, 2014; Luhmann et al., 2012; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Evaluative measures can be informative for policy, but we now need to go further because they do not accurately account for the duration of feelings, and may not even account for feelings at all. People experience their life always, but only evaluate it sometimes (Haybron, 2008; Feldman, 2004), and we should care about the frequency with which people are doing well or badly.

What type of SWB the general public prefers is of course important. But prior research in this area usually poses trade-offs between overall evaluations of life and time-limited snapshots of experienced SWB. This may explain why the public tends to prefer SWB evaluations, in addition to the lack of awareness of duration neglect in evaluations (O’Donnell & Oswald, 2015; Benjamin et al, 2012). When duration has been considered in people’s trade-offs, it has only been considered for positive and not negative affect or experienced purpose (Benjamin et al, 2013). As with most areas, more research is needed before we can start drawing meaningful conclusions about what the public wants (assuming what they want has normative significance, of course).

Whatever the current state of knowledge about such matters, and irrespective of the views held about the suitability of life satisfaction as an account of wellbeing,, experience-based SWB measures can reveal information that might not emerge in evaluative assessments and, in this respect, such measures are needed to complement evaluative SWB. We would go further and argue that we should look at experience-



based SWB as the ultimate conceptualisation of wellbeing to guide our approach, independently of and additionally to people's evaluative judgements.

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