

An Understanding of of western views on Subjective well being

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Abstract

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a broad and complex concept that captures an individual's overall sense of happiness and satisfaction with life, including both emotional reactions and cognitive evaluations. Rooted in ancient philosophies, particularly the idea of "hedonia," SWB encompasses various psychological, sociological, and economic perspectives. This paper explores SWB through these three lenses, offering a comparative analysis of its interpretation in Indian and Western contexts. Psychological research has associated SWB with personality traits, life satisfaction, and emotional experiences, while sociological perspectives view it as a reflection of societal conditions and social integration. Economically, SWB integrates income and non-income aspects of well-being, offering a broader understanding of human utility. Theories related to engagement, fulfillment, and social comparison further explain the determinants of SWB. This paper aims to deepen the understanding of SWB by examining its multifaceted nature and its implications for enhancing individual and societal well-being.

The concept of subjective well-being (also referred to as "SWB") originates from the ancient Greek philosophies, especially notions such as "hedonia". Hedonism prioritises profound satisfaction with one's life, SWB and "general happiness"; it is frequently referred to as "feeling well," signifying leading a fulfilling life, and is concreted as happiness (Huta and Ryan, 2010; Adler and Seligman, 2016). SWB is both broad and complex, a concept which includes people's cognitive and emotive perceptions, insights, experiences, and assessments of their lives (Diener, 1984, 2001). Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to a person's "overall subjective experience" of both the positive as well as the negative emotional reactions along with global and specific cognitive assessments of their level of life satisfaction (Proctor, 2014, pp 6437).

Andrew and Withey (1976) posited that SWB comprise three main components: i) ‘‘positive affect, ii) negative affect, and iii) overall life satisfaction’’ (Proctor, 2014, pp. 6437). It has been demonstrated that people have high SWB if they experience high life satisfaction and have a positive affect rather frequently (e.g., happiness, optimism, etc.), and occasional negative affect (say, in the form of anger or sadness). Conversely, people have low SWB if they frequently experience negative emotions like anger or worry, are generally unsatisfied with life, and find little joy (Diener et al., 1997).

Subjective well-being can be understood from various perspectives. For this research, subjective well-being has been understood using three perspectives: sociological, economical, and psychological. Additionally, the theoretical frame work includes the comparison of the concept of subjective well-being as understood in the Indian and the western contexts.

Psychological Construction of SWB:

SWB involves the sum total of an individual's perceptions and experiences of both favourable and unfavourable emotions and reactions, and both general and domain-specific assessments of overall satisfaction with life made cognitively. Both cognitive and emotive assessments of one's life fall under the ‘‘SWB umbrella’’ (Diener, Oishi & Lucas, 2002, p. 63). This, SWB is a person's appreciation of one's QOL (overall quality of life); the two constructs have a significant overlap.

Diener (1984) coined the then-novelism ‘‘SWB’’ as a notion in psychology that seeks to encompass people's self-assessment of their QOL, comprising both one's cognitive judgments and appreciation of emotional states (Diener, Oishi & Suh, 1997). The definition emphasises SWB's cognitive and affective dimensions. Feeling is the emotional/affective component (EMO) of SWB, where higher SWB is produced when positive emotion outweighs negative emotion. Thinking is the analytic component (EVA) of SWB, wherein higher SWB is achieved through evaluating people's lives primarily favourably.

Diener has also related the construct of SWB with personality dimensions of extraversion and neuroticism and found them to have the strongest correlations with SWB (Johns, 2008). Pertinently, the more active reward system in individuals scoring high on extraversion greatly influences overall SWB (Pavot, Diener & Fujita, 1990). Apart from correlating personality with

SWB, Diener and Chan (2011) also note the objective benefits of SWB and that high SWB facilitates better health and longevity. SWB has also shown to promote higher income, enhanced creativity and productivity and better job performance (DeNeve, Diener, Tay & Xuereb, 2013)

Another way of looking at SWB is through the lens of the threefold structure of it comprising *high* life satisfaction, *presence of* positive affect, and the *absence of* negative affect as its determinants, which have been validated by various studies (Bryant & Veroff, 1982; Lucas, Suh, and Diener, 1996).

From the point of view of utilitarianism and theorists like Mill and Bentham, SWB or happiness has been perceived as the only desirable end, and as the presence of pleasure and a concurrent absence of pain; thus, human happiness has been regarded as the final utility (Neff & Olsen, 2007). Crucially, this perspective has also influenced the work of Diener (2000) who along with Seligman (2004) has also proposed a national index of well-being and argues that the definition and meaning of quality of life is essentially subjective in nature and shall be democratic.

Researchers have established that SWB theories frequently have psychological roots and concentrate on the mechanisms by which a person's SWB is at the intersection of and is, therefore, influenced by both personal (internal factors) and social (external factors) 'environment' (Das et al., 2020). SWB-related theories have been divided into four main categories: emotional theories, evaluative theories, theories of personal orientation, and theories of engagement and fulfilment.

These theories contend that any variables that influence an individual's orientation, objectives, needs, actions, assessments, or emotions are SWB determinants. Each group of theories emphasizes on a distinct way that SWB is impacted:

- Theories of engagement and fulfilment concentrate on describing how objectives, demands, and activities affect SWB.
- Personal orientation theories concentrate on describing how temperament affects SWB by dynamically changing the process of engagement and fulfilment and how this dynamic process results in the realignment of personal orientation.
- Evaluative theories concentrate on the connections between the process of emotional fulfilment and personal life evaluations (i.e., the cognitive part of SWB).

- Emotion theories concentrate on the connections between emotional experiences and the processes of fulfilment, engagement, and assessments.

Sociological Perspective on SWB:

SWB has not studied much in sociology; neither in sociological publications nor in textbooks (with the notable exception of Nolan & Lenski, 2004) cover it (Veenhoven, 2008). There are several practical, ideological, and theoretical explanations for this absence. However, sociology does focus on the topic of subjective well-being occasionally. The sociology of work frequently discusses job satisfaction, and the sociology of family frequently examines satisfaction with married life, and the sociology surrounding the phenomenon of ageing frequently investigates life contentment and satisfaction. Recently, comparative sociology and the study of social indicators have both turned their attention to SWB in all its facets (Veenhoven, 2008).

Sociological definitions of subjective well-being

The word is typically associated by sociologists with a slightly different issue. First, sociologists frequently concentrate on issues. The majority of the time, terminology used in sociology literature to describe subjective experiences connote negative states, including anomie, deprivation, alienation, and “subjective poverty”. Secondly, definitions of SWB in sociology are often more precise, taking into account both how well-one feels and what they are feeling about. Anomie is dissatisfaction with the moral atmosphere, while alienation is the perception that one is being governed by a structure in which one is not actively involved (Beerling, 1978 as cited in Veenhoven, 2008).

This kind of specificity has nexus with one more distinction: Sociological definitions of SWB frequently include the reasons behind one's feelings in addition to how one feels about what (i.e., the “reason” is intrinsic to the “idea” per se). “Anomie” is considered a response to the disintegration of social norms rather than just a mental state. The founding father of sociology, Auguste Comte (1851–1854), had exhibited this style of conceptualizing about subjective well-being in his writings. His concept “bonheur” refers to an “enlightened state” that is accompanied

with “sacral” emotions of consensus/unanimity and inclusion, brought about by progressive change (Ple, 2000).

Such technique of conceiving SWB pertains to the expression’s rhetorical usage; it is intended to convey that since something is beneficial, it is, as a consequence, likely linked at a conceptual level to positive sentiments. Analytically speaking, this conception obviously makes less sense; if we combine assumed wellbeing circumstances with actual wellbeing, one will never be able to determine what causes what. Therefore, these ideas cannot be usefully employed in an essentially utilitarian quest for establishing social circumstances that maximize the enjoyment for the maximum number of people. When used for that reason, these ideas produce circular thinking. By definition, social integration is a pre-requisite for SWB, if we define it as the sense of togetherness that comes with social integration, for instance. Based on such ideas, empirical study will only reinforce prepossession. This is frequently true for the well-being indices that are frequently applied in sociology (Veenhoven, 2006).

Subjective well-being as a sociological construct

Lastly, many sociologists believe that since SWB is a mental state and not a characteristic of society, the study of it pertains to psychology. However, the SWB of people proffers information on the texture of the social fabric they inhabit, which is one reason that it is an essential topic for sociology (Veenhoven, 2008). Quite plainly, a social system is not well suited for inhabitants if they frequently “feel bad”. One of sociology's goals is to improve society, and research on subjective well-being offers insights into how to make society more accommodating and life-worthy (Veenhoven, 2004). Such inductive research methodology to a better society also serves as a counterweight to mere speculative theorising about such a society, and remedies the ideological predispositions on the subject.

Social construction theory

The social construction theory examines how humans interpret the world. It assumes that by employing shared ideas as building blocks, we "create" cognitive representations of the world (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Human thought is prioritised by social constructionism, which ignores

affective experience and natural desires. According to this perspective, subjective well-being is a social construct just like "beauty" and "fairness," and as such, it is similar to those concepts.

This line of thinking frequently assumes that individual evaluations are framed by collective beliefs about life, which in turn depend on individual well-being. This mechanism is thought to function, among other things, by influencing individuals' perceptions on optimism (the "glass is half full" mindset) or pessimism (the "half empty" mindset). Civilizations that are more optimistic tend to stress life's virtues while cultures that are more pessimistic tend to focus on its flaws. It has been stated that Americans are an example of the optimistic point of view and the French people of the pessimistic one (Ostroot & Snyder, 1985). In 2018, Inglehart claimed that happiness is higher in the U.S.A. than in France because older generations in France experienced a more difficult way of life, which is reflected in a more negative attitude on the present.

Comparison with popular conceptions of the excellent life is thought to be another cognitive mechanism at play. According to this theory, the difference between perceptions of life as it is and of how life ought to be determines level of SWB (Michalos, 1985). Because it encourages aspirations of a life that are out of range for the average individual, it is sometimes suggested that the advertising sector lowers our well-being.

The idea that one can purchase subjective well-being through resignation is another illustration of this viewpoint. The propensity to see oneself through the eyes of other individuals and subsequently our subjective well-being is another mechanism that has been considered. According to this theory, subjective well-being is a "mirrored evaluation." We would feel better about our lives when others thought we were doing well and worse when they thought we were doing poorly. Accordingly, the lower level of happiness among singles has been attributed to a negative stereotype: despite the obvious benefits of single living, singles grow to view themselves as wretched as a result of being "branded" as sorrowful (Davies and Strong, 1977).

Additionally, the state of one's SWB varies with time. If commonly accepted conceptions around what constitutes a good life determine SWB, it will fluctuate as fads do with changes in such conceptions; such variance can be expected to reflect somewhat unpredictable changes in the overall SWB across nations, and can be likened to shifts in political preferences or popular musical choices. Once more, the data do not support this. In the Western countries (at the very least), over the past three decades, "happiness" increased modestly without much fluctuations (variance),

whereas the general SWB seems to have remained unchanged with time (Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006). Individual follow-up investigations also reveal such significant constancy over time (Ehrhardt, Saris, & Veenhoven, 2000).

Social Comparison Theory

A variation of this theory (involving a “wider comparison”) known as social comparison theory connects to the idea that SWB, as already stated, is what separates life as it actually is from life as it should (or ought to) be. The pre-supposition is that subjective well-being is higher the smaller these disparities are. According to this theory, there can be a variety of discrepancies, including those between what an individual has and what they believe they should have and those between what an individual has and what they feel they should be entitled to (Michalos, 1985). It is believed that perceptions of what is possible and what is fair are based on social comparison. According to this perspective, maintaining one's subjective well-being involves performing better than others.

According to this idea, there is precious little that can be done to increase quantum of happiness for a large populace because enhancing living standards for “everyone” will still leave relative inequalities unaffected. Such social comparison is the basis of Easterlin's (1974) proposition that economic expansion does not increase SWB, and that humans are on a "hedonic treadmill" that negates any and all progress (Brickman and Campbell, 1971). If we somehow make the disparities less obvious or less visible , we can hope to partly mitigate the consequences of such comparisons.

According to Frank (1999), extravagant expenditure should be discouraged by imposing extortionate taxes on luxury goods and services. Strictures on advertising luxury products is also advised, especially for ads that feature images of a lifestyle that is out of the grasp of the average person (Layard, 2005).

Economical Construction of subjective well-being

Subjective well-being in the economical view combines the methods of economists and psychologists, focuses on broader conceptions of utility, in contrast to standard economics

approaches and offers metrics to measure both the income and non-income elements of well-being (Graham, 2016).

Aristotle, Bentham, Mill, and Smith were among the early economists and philosophers who thought the idea of “happiness” and of “welfare” had a strong nexus. However, as economics became more mathematically oriented and embraced too many ‘models’, leading to a rather strait-jacketed conception of wellbeing gaining currency. Utility was pre-supposed to be a function of money and the idea of personal preferences or decisions made under a rational person's fixed budgetary restrictions gained acceptance.

A growing number of economists devised methods to take into account the non-income aspects of welfare even when considering a fairly conventional economic framework. People have various tastes in material and immaterial goods, and they may opt for a job that pays less but is more personally fulfilling, for example. Thus, even within conventional frameworks, analysis has attempted to account for recreation, healthcare, and public benefits. Utilizing interdependent utility functions and taking into account phenomena like altruism have also been incorporated into conventional methods.

According to a research study, there are two types of well-being: hedonic well-being, which includes everyday experience along with quality of life, as well as evaluative well-being, which includes opportunity and life fulfilment (eudemonia) (Graham, 2016). According to some research that seeks to identify the causal characteristics of subjective well-being, higher levels are generally linked to improved health, performance on the job market, and desire to invest in the future. According to preliminary research, greater subjective well-being is generally linked to improved health, performance on the job market, and readiness to make future investments (at lower discount rates) (DeNeve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013; DeNeve & Oswald, 2012; Graham, Eggers, & Sukhtankar, 2004).

Conclusion

Subjective well-being (SWB) is an intricate and multi-dimensional construct that spans psychological, sociological, and economic domains. Its origins in ancient Greek thought highlight the importance of happiness and satisfaction in human life, a notion that remains highly relevant

today. The psychological perspective links SWB with emotions, cognitive evaluations, and personality traits, showing its impact on health, productivity, and personal fulfillment. Sociologically, SWB reflects the quality of social integration and the collective environment, emphasizing the significance of societal conditions in shaping individual well-being. From an economic standpoint, SWB extends beyond material wealth to encompass non-income factors like personal fulfillment and social welfare.

Understanding SWB in both Indian and Western contexts reveals significant cultural differences in the perception of happiness and well-being. The integration of various theoretical frameworks, such as social comparison theory and engagement theories, adds depth to our comprehension of SWB's determinants. By recognizing the subjective and multifaceted nature of well-being, societies can develop more comprehensive policies and interventions aimed at improving both individual happiness and overall societal welfare. In sum, subjective well-being serves as a crucial metric for gauging life satisfaction, health, and societal progress, making it a central concern for both individuals and policymakers alike.

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