
BOOK REVIEW

Lee, M.T., Kubzansky, L.D., & VanderWeele, T.J. (Eds.): MEASURING WELL-BEING: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE HUMANITIES, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 592

Lucian SFETCU¹

DOI: 10.35782/JCPP.2021.2.05

Well-being is receiving an increasing amount of attention, both in scholarly and popular writings. Although the concept is not new, there is no commonly accepted definition, nor of what should be measured and included in a measure of well-being. Is well-being determined by physical health, psychological health or both? If so, should we measure one's subjective perception of physical and psychological health, or should we ask for a physician's objective diagnostic and a psychologist's assessment of one's health to determine well-being? Is well-being tied to a person's personal or professional life? To what, if any, degree they both count? Are economic, cultural, religious, moral or other factors important in measuring well-being? Is well-being a personal measure or a group, organizational, or societal trait?

This volume is focused toward exploring and explaining practical, conceptual and philosophical challenges in measuring well-being. The book's chapters are structured in four parts, each with a specific focus, but all with the same ultimate scope.

Part 1, "*Empirical research and reflections on well-being measurement*" contains five chapters.

The first chapter brings into discussion both philosophical and empirical arguments for using people's own evaluations of their quality of life in shaping public policies that should address well-being. The author argues the use of "*data from everyday life, not to isolate different theories of well-being, but to see how these theories cohere or compete in supporting people's judgments about how their lives are going*" (p.30).

¹ Assistant Professor, Ph.D., Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, e-mail: lucian.sfetcu@gmail.com

In the second chapter, the author argues the use of four subjective well-being questions in the UK's Annual Population Survey in terms of practical utility, also stating that this criterion should be used to determine how to assess other topics. He also argues that statisticians should work harder to engage with politics, public opinion and other domains, to make a visible progress in the quality and quantity of well-being around the world.

The third chapter focuses on the appropriate units of analysis, challenges in translation across cultural contexts, domain-specific and general measures of well-being, and other methodological issues, which the authors think have not been given enough attention in previous research. If followed, their recommendations might lead to more consistent and valid empirical findings.

The fourth chapter offers a review of two types of well-being (eudemonic and hedonic), including reflections on ancient Greek philosophy and recent psychological understanding. They explore how these well-being types are related to various aspects of physical health. Their review further discusses experiencing well-being during illness and life challenges.

The fifth chapter, and the last of the first part offers a specific focus on whether and how psychological well-being influences longevity and selects the most rigorous studies to advance the field. Purpose in life and optimism seem to have the strongest correlations with mortality, while happiness appears weakly related.

Part 2 "*Conceptual reflections on well-being measurement*" contains six chapters.

The sixth chapter of the book (the first in the second part) builds a case for a "positive biology" that focuses on successful aging and promotion of happiness. The author argues that including "the positive" in scholarly endeavors, rather than only focusing on disease and deficits, contributes to a more organized science. A positive biology would "*celebrate a curiosity-driven mindset*" (p. 213) as a basis for improved scientific investigation that would help attaining desired outcomes rather than only avoiding the negative ones.

The second chapter of part two is aimed at social scientists interested in how philosophers are studying well-being, especially how they "*preserve a common subject matter for debate, even in the presence of radical disagreement,*" how they understand theories that use the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goods, the methods they employ, and some current disagreements between psychology and philosophy.

The eighth chapter of the book is based on the idea that there are two primary and distinct "*visions of what human beings are.*" *The Aristotelian conceives humans as having capacities that both enhance functioning and reflect the "kinds of things they are, that is, as human beings"* (p. 230). The one informed by Jacques Lacan, views humans "*as unique individuals with different sets of intrinsic desires*" and argues a more subjective theory of well-being that is built around groups of desires that vary across people. The author argues a hybrid theory to build a more coherent account of well-being.

The ninth chapter is an interdisciplinary exploration of the congruence between the philosophical understanding of well-being and a psychological measure of well-being developed by Carol Ryff. The author argues that there is a certain degree of congruence

in measuring friendship, although not so much for the other domains of the psychological well-being scale.

The tenth chapter develops an understanding of well-being in terms of the ultimate ends of humans as created by God. This vision of well-being contrasts with many social scientific studies, which Messer (p. 299) argues should “*encourage a critical self-awareness*” among researchers.

The final chapter in the second section offers reflections on the relationships between hope, beauty, spiritual experience and spiritual well-being. The author (p. 306) argues that spiritual well-being refers to “*living successfully*” in terms of this fundamental nature. He brings the psychological work of William James into conversation with the theology of Thomas Aquinas.

Part 3 “*Advancing the conversation about measurement*” contains five chapters.

In this section’s first chapter, the authors follow on philosophical scholarship to reach “*an emerging consensus*” in psychology about a structure of meaning consisting of “*cognitive coherence, affective significance, and motivational direction*” (p. 339). This enables them to elaborate dimensions within this three-part framework and to select 21 survey items for a comprehensive measure of meaning. This measure may overcome some conceptual limitations in others and prove the benefit of considering social science and humanities.

The thirteenth chapter of the book explores the relationships between five major conceptualizations of well-being - hedonic well-being, life satisfaction, desire fulfillment, eudaimonia, and non-eudaimonic objective-list well-being - and other measures of well-being, including a measure of “*desire fulfillment*”. The associations are not strong and are overlapping to some degree, but the authors conclude that “*empirical findings based on one type of well-being measure may not generalize to all types of well-being*” (p. 377).

The next chapter proposes a new measure of community well-being, that consists of six domains: flourishing individuals, good relationships, proficient leadership, healthy practices, satisfying community, and strong mission. This measure can be adjusted for different units of analysis like families, schools, neighborhoods or nations. Well-being at community level is different from individual well-being but includes it.

In the fifteenth chapter, the authors argue for a new measure for inner peace and suggest an initial psychometric assessment based on five empirical studies. Results show that inner peace consists of three dimensions: acceptance of loss, transcendence of hedonism and materialism, and inner balance and calmness. Philosophers and theologians stressed the importance of inner peace for a good life, and the authors hope this measure will help future research on human flourishing.

In the last chapter of this section, the authors make the case for tradition-specific measures of spiritual well-being, and not a generic measure, proposing a new measure of Christian spiritual well-being as a model for developing measures for other traditions as well. This measure contains thirty items from six domains: beliefs, practices, service, communion with God, Christian character, and relationships.

Part 4 “*Scholarly dialogue on the science of well-being*” contains four chapters.

The authors of the seventeenth chapter aimed at bringing coherence to the measurement field, mainly responding to a lack of clear guidance in measurement, mostly because of the proliferation of different measures and inconsistent conceptualization. They consider the dimensions of different kinds of surveys, as well as the purposes of the research because this might be different for government, multiuse cohort, or psychological well-being surveys.

In the next chapter, the authors follow on the subject discussed in chapter 17 by offering a critique of these recommendations, while in chapter 19, the three main authors of the recommendations chapter provide a “*Response to ‘Advancing the Science of Well-Being: A Dissenting View on Measurement Recommendations’*”.

The concluding chapter draws together the central themes of the volume.

The topic is increasingly relevant in the drastically and fast changing context brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of what we have been used to and what we considered relevant for our well-being has changed in most aspects of our life, like our social connections (Okabe-Miyamoto & Lyubomirsky, 2021), work (Cotofan et al., 2021) and overall quality of life (Zamfir & Cace, 2020). The mentioned book can be a valuable tool for researchers as it brings on multiple facets of well-being that should be considered when measuring such a complex and central aspect of the social.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declares no conflicting interests.

References

- Cotofan, M., De Neve, J.-E., Golin, M., Kaats, M., & Ward, G. (2021). *Work and Well-being during COVID-19: Impact, Inequalities, Resilience, and the Future of Work*. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. D. Sachs, J.-E. De Neve, L. B. Aknin, & S. Wang (Eds.), *World Happiness Report 2021*. https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2021/WHR+21_Ch7.pdf
- Okabe-Miyamoto, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2021). *Social Connection and Well-Being during COVID-19*. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. D. Sachs, J.-E. De Neve, L. B. Aknin, & S. Wang (Eds.), *World Happiness Report 2021*. https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2021/WHR+21_Ch6.pdf
- Zamfir, C., & Cace, S. (2020). *Covid19 în România. Date, analize, evoluții și statistici*. Editura Expert, București.