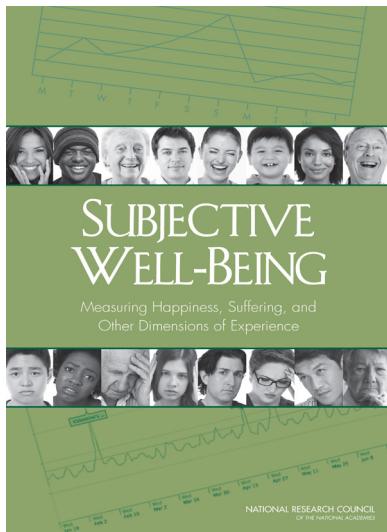


COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL STATISTICS

AT THE NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
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SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING: MEASURING HAPPINESS, SUFFERING, AND OTHER DIMENSIONS OF EXPERIENCE



During the past decade, interest in measuring subjective well-being—how people feel about their experiences and how satisfied they are with their lives—has grown among policy makers, researchers, the media, and the general public. This interest has sprung from concerns that traditional economic measures such as gross domestic product (GDP) do not by themselves adequately reflect a population's well-being and quality of life.

At the request of the U.S. National Institute on Aging and the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council, the U.S. National Research Council convened an expert panel to consider the extent to which it would be useful to measure people's self-reported or "subjective" well-being as a way of creating a fuller accounting of how they are doing and whether such data would be useful for informing policy.

The panel was asked to focus on the potential policy relevance of measuring experienced well-being, which reflects people's moment-to-moment and day-to-day feelings of pleasure, happiness, sadness, stress, pain, and other emotions and sensations.

The panel's report, *Subjective Well-Being: Measuring Happiness, Suffering, and Other Dimensions of Experience*, concludes that data on experienced well-being would be valuable for informing specific, targeted policy questions. Most compellingly, these data could help identify subpopulations that are suffering and aid research into the sources of that suffering and ways to remedy it.

The panel cautions, however, that, at this time, questions that measure experienced well-being should be pursued in experimental surveys or included in large existing surveys only on a pilot basis. More needs to be understood about the accuracy and validity of responses to such questions and how responses depend on the context in which the questions are asked.

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Aspects of Subjective Well-being

Measuring people's subjective well-being is complex because of its many dimensions. A person may be engaged in activities that make daily life stressful or difficult, such as working toward an education or a job promotion, but may find substantial satisfaction in these activities and in life overall. Likewise, a person who is generally suffering or lacking hope may experience a temporary reprieve in an enjoyable moment. Researchers consider well-being as having several dimensions:

Experienced well-being—the focus of the report—reflects a person's moment-to-moment positive feelings of pleasure, joy, contentment, or happiness, and negative feelings such as suffering, distress, sadness, stress, or worry. To measure experienced well-being, researchers typically ask respondents to report their feelings either in real time or shortly afterward, using such questions as “How do you feel at this moment?” or “Overall, how happy would you say your day was?” In time-use surveys, people may be asked to associate these feelings with specific activities of the day.

Evaluative well-being reflects a person's assessment of his or her overall life satisfaction. These assessments may be applied to specific aspects of life—such as relationships, occupation, or health—as well as overall judgments. An example of a question phrased to measure evaluative well-being is “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” Much of the research on subjective well-being so far has focused on this dimension.

Eudaimonic well-being refers to a person's perceptions of the meaningfulness (or pointlessness), sense of purpose, and value of his or her life. Sense of meaning or purpose may affect how people feel moment to moment or about their life overall; in this sense, eudaimonic well-being may interact with both evaluative and experienced well-being. An example of a question designed to measure eudaimonic well-being is “Overall, to

what extent do you feel like the things you do in your life are worthwhile?” Researchers might also ask about the meaningfulness of particular activities as an aspect of experienced well-being.

An activity can rate low in one dimension of well-being but high in another. For example, researchers have found that time spent with children is more rewarding (eudaimonic well-being) than pleasurable (experienced well-being), while the opposite is true for watching television.

Relevance to Policy

Because well-being has multiple dimensions, there is no single measure that reflects the totality of happiness or suffering. The policy value of measuring experienced well-being may not lie in aggregating a single number that reflects an average happiness level of an entire population; indeed, the panel expressed skepticism that such a measure would be useful. Rather, experienced well-being data are most relevant and valuable for informing specific, targeted policy questions. Many policy questions that concern governments and private organizations—for example, those related to an aging population—center on improving quality of life and reducing suffering on a day-to-day basis. Data on experienced well-being could be useful for:

- Identifying subpopulations that are suffering and aiding research into the sources of that suffering and ways to remedy it. For example, data on experienced well-being could help identify interventions that could improve the well-being of older people living with chronic health conditions, or of children in child care or custody arrangements.
- Revealing relationships between self reports of well-being and particular aspects of life—for example, commuting patterns, accessibility of child care, and the presence of neighborhood amenities—that might otherwise

escape attention. Such data could inform employer policies that improve well-being—and possibly, in turn, improve productivity and lower absenteeism—and community or regional planning policies, for example.

- Weighing a potential policy when some of the costs and benefits are not easily quantifiable or reflected in market measures—for example, if government is considering spending to redirect an airport flight path to reduce noise pollution, or selecting between alternative recreational or other uses of environmental resources.

Gathering Data

Momentary assessment methods, which ask respondents to describe their emotions across a sample of moments throughout the day, are the gold standard for measuring experienced well-being. These intensive approaches have not typically been practical for general population surveys administered by federal statistical agencies. However, new technologies—such as smartphones that prompt respondents to enter their real-time experience at a sample of moments throughout the day—are rapidly creating new, less-burdensome measurement opportunities.

“Global yesterday” measures, which ask respondents to report their well-being the previous day, are practical to use in large population surveys and have yielded important insights—for example, about connections between experienced well-being and income, age, and other characteristics. For some research and policy questions, however, more specific information is essential. The Day Reconstruction Method asks respondents to describe their day by type of activity (e.g., commuting to work, having a meal, exercising) and their emotional state during the activity—shedding light not just on who is happy but when they are happy.

Because some methodological issues still need to be resolved—such as how responses to questions are influenced by the order in which they are asked—experienced well-being measurement should, at this point, still be pursued in experimental survey modules. Questions about experienced well-being should, for now, only be considered for inclusion in flagship surveys of federal statistical agencies on a pilot basis.

Fully Capturing Subjective Well Being

Whatever the methods used to gather information on subjective well-being, the data collected must reflect the multiple dimensions of well-being if they are to be useful in policy making.

- **In measuring experienced well-being, both positive and negative emotions must be accounted for**, since research shows that negative emotions do not always diminish in direct proportion to increases in positive emotions—or vice versa—and that an activity may produce both negative and positive feelings in a person. Therefore, questions should ask about both positive and negative feelings in order for meaningful inferences to be drawn.
- **Concepts of purposefulness and worthwhileness are important to consider alongside feelings like pleasure and pain when measuring experienced well-being.** If these aspects are not included, an important part of people’s experiences may be overlooked. People do many things because they deem them purposeful or worthwhile, even if they are not especially pleasurable (e.g., reading the same story over and over to a child, visiting a sick friend, or volunteering).
- **To make well-informed policy decisions, data need to be gathered on both experienced well-being and peoples’ overall sense of satisfaction with their lives.** For

example, policies that aim to improve the longer term opportunities of young people may have short-term negative effects on momentary emotional experience—as in the case of a student who must work hard in school, which at times may be unpleasant—but may pay off later in terms of higher life satisfaction.

PANEL ON MEASURING SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN A POLICY RELEVANT FRAMEWORK

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For More Information . . . This brief was prepared by the Committee on National Statistics based on the report *Subjective Well-Being: Measuring Happiness, Suffering, and Other Dimensions of Experience*. The study was sponsored by the U.S. National Institute on Aging and the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the sponsor. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001; (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the CNSTAT web page at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/cnstat>.

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