



The assessment of subjective well-being (issues raised by the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire)

Todd B. Kashdan*

*University at Buffalo, Department of Psychology, State University of New York, Park Hill, PO Box 604110,
Buffalo, NY 14260, USA*

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Abstract

This commentary raises conceptual issues related to recent efforts to develop measures of subjective well-being (SWB). Specifically, Hills' and Argyle's (2002) article on the development of the 29-item Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), and its predecessor, the 20-item Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin & Crossland, 1989). Instead of assessing the structure of subjective well-being (SWB), items of the OHQ tap into self-esteem, sense of purpose, social interest and kindness, sense of humor, and aesthetic appreciation. The item content of the OHQ fails to differentiate the assessment of SWB from the predictors, correlates, and consequences of SWB. In contrast to published SWB findings with other measures, data are presented suggesting that the OHQ has artificially inflated correlations with those constructs tapped by the OHQ: self-esteem, sense of purpose, and social interest/extraversion. The operationalization of SWB by the OHQ is not based on relevant definition and theory and appears to invite nonrandom error into the study of SWB. The article concludes with an appeal for the use of more stringent conceptual and analytic approaches.

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1. The structure of subjective well-being

Hills and Argyle (2002) developed the 29-item Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) to be “an improved instrument” to assess subjective well-being (SWB). The OHQ was derived as an improved version of its predecessor, the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989). To the authors' credit, they improved the Oxford Happiness Inventory by changing

* Fax: +1-716-645-3801.

E-mail address: kashdan@buffalo.edu (T.B. Kashdan).

the response format from a 0–3 multiple choice scoring format to a more widely used Likert Scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 6 = “strongly agree”). However, the present concerns are with the diffuse item content of the OHQ purportedly designed to measure SWB. The items of the OHQ include the 20 items of the Oxford Happiness Inventory and an additional nine items. Hills and Argyle report acceptable construct validity for the OHQ by providing data on correlations with other self-report scales of personality traits, human strengths, and SWB. According to the authors, their purpose “is to describe the improved scale and its psychometric properties and, by placing it in the public domain, to allow its wider use and further examination by others” (p. 1074). Prior to wide dissemination and use of the OHQ, I wanted to express some conceptual concerns with the OHQ. These include theoretical and analytic issues concerning the structure of SWB, and the conceptual overlap between several items that comprise the OHQ and many of the predictors, correlates, and consequences of SWB. With the proliferation of well-established, brief self-report measures of SWB (e.g., 1-item *Self-Anchoring Scale*; Cantril, 1965; 4-item *Subjective Happiness Scale*; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; 5-item *Satisfaction with Life Scale*; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; 18-item *Well-Being Scale*; Tellegen, 1982), the onus is on researchers developing new measure to provide additional utility in the understanding and study of SWB. I will argue that the content and structure of the OHQ decreases its utility in the scientific study of SWB compared to other available measures.

The study of SWB, human strengths, and positive psychological outcomes is growing exponentially (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One consequence of this “positive psychology” focus has been the proliferation of new measures based on clear definitions, strong theoretical frameworks, and rigorous methodology. Some of the positively valenced constructs presently under study include sense of purpose or meaningfulness, kindness, curiosity, autonomy, sense of humor, self-esteem, and aesthetic appreciation. Each of these constructs has shown positive relationships with components of SWB. Future prospective studies may find bi-directional relationships among these constructs such that individuals with greater positive character traits will develop SWB, and conversely, high SWB may lead to greater positive character traits.

There are several empirically informed models, with a large degree of conceptual overlap, on the structure of SWB. In his seminal work, Bradburn (1969) found SWB to be a function of the independent dimensions of general positive and negative affectivity. Building on this work, Argyle and Crossland (1987) and Diener (2000) have defined SWB as an individual’s affective and cognitive evaluation of their life. Similarly, Veenhoven (1997) defined SWB as a set of affective and cognitive appraisals concerning one’s life including “how good it feels, how well it meets expectations, how desirable it is deemed to be, etc.” (p. 34). Overall, high SWB is comprised of the combination of three specific factors: (1) frequent and intense positive affective states, (2) the relative absence of anxiety and depression, and (3) global life satisfaction. Using this definition, it becomes apparent that most studies of SWB measure either the affective or cognitive component, but not both. Many studies use measures of negative affectivity, neuroticism, depression, or positive affectivity as less than desirable proxies for SWB. Similar to other measures of SWB (Diener et al., 1985; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), the OHQ is circumscribed to assessing the cognitive appraisal component of happiness (i.e., life satisfaction). However, in contrast to other measures, the OHQ makes the error of including additional items that capture a diffuse range of positive character traits and attributes.

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