



Subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the notion of “subjective well-being” as it is used in literature on subjective measures of well-being. I argue that those who employ the notion differ at least superficially on at least two points: first, about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*, and second, about the constituents of subjective well-being. In an effort to reconcile the differences, I propose an interpretation according to which subjective measures presuppose preference hedonism: an account according to which well-being is a matter of desired mental states.

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1. Introduction

Subjective measures of well-being are measures of well-being based on questions such as: “Taking things all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say you’re *very happy*, *pretty happy*, or *not too happy* these days?” (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960, p. 411, italics in original).¹ Subjects may be prompted to give a number between 1 and 7, where 1 represents “In general, I consider myself not a very happy person” and 7 “In general, I consider myself a very happy person” (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999, p. 151). In the past, they were asked whether they satisfied descriptions such as: “Cheerful, gay spirits most of the time. Occasionally bothered by something but can usually laugh it off,” “Ups and downs, now happy about things, now depressed. About balanced in the long run,” and “Life often seems so worthless that there is little to keep one going. Nothing matters very much, there has been so much of hurt that laughter would be empty mockery” (Watson, 1930, p. 81). Answers to such questions are used to construct numerical measures of both individual well-being (the well-being of persons) and social well-being (the well-being of groups).

Subjective measures of well-being have become the subject of heated discussion in the academy and beyond. One reason is that they are frequently presented as substitutes for, or complements to, traditional income-based economic welfare measures and to indi-

cators inspired by the capability approach (Kesebir & Diener, 2008). Indeed, to encourage the use of subjective measures for public-policy purposes, proponents have advocated *National Well-Being Accounts (NWBAs)*, which track population-level scores on subjective measures over time (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Diener, 2006; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). While it is hard to predict the extent to which subjective measures will assume the role traditionally played by other measures, subjective measures seem to be gaining ground. For instance, their use was recently endorsed by French President Nicholas Sarkozy’s Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. The Commission, which was headed by Nobel Memorial Prize laureates Joseph E. Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, had been charged with the task of exploring alternatives to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of economic performance and social progress (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009).

Subjective measures of well-being are frequently referred to as *measures of subjective well-being* (Andrews & Robinson, 1991). Thus, for example, Stiglitz and coauthors write: “*Recommendation 1: Measures of subjective well-being provide key information about people’s quality of life. Statistical offices should incorporate questions to capture people’s life evaluations, hedonic experiences and priorities in their own surveys*” (Stiglitz et al., 2009, p. 58, italics in original). The term “subjective well-being” (Diener, 1984) – denoting that which subjective measures of well-being are designed to represent – has its own encyclopedia entries (e.g., Diener, 2001) and handbook articles (e.g., Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2005). By now, an established body of literature employs subjective measures of well-being to shed light on the causes and correlates of subjective well-being. Though issues about the reliability and validity of such measures remain, scientific

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¹ For overviews of subjective measures of well-being, see e.g. Angner (2008, 2009a,b), Campbell (1976), Diener (2001), Diener et al. (2005), Diener and Seligman (2004), Kahneman et al. (2004), and Tiberius (2006).

research these days focuses relatively less on establishing reliability and validity and more on examining substantive empirical relationships.

Nevertheless, considerable confusion remains when it comes to what subjective well-being is and how it relates to what I will call well-being *simpliciter*: “what we have when our lives are going well for us, when we are living lives that are not necessarily morally good, but good for us” (Tiberius, 2006, p. 493, italics in original). It has been pointed out that subjective measures differ from economic and capability-based measures with respect to the underlying account of welfare or well-being (Adler & Posner, 2008; Angner, 2008, 2009a).² It has also been noted that proponents of subjective measures differ among themselves (Bruni, 2008, pp. 117–120; Tiberius, 2006, pp. 494–495). Yet, when it comes to the nature of subjective well-being and its relation to well-being *simpliciter*, existing literature fails to capture the degree of diversity, and disagreement, among proponents of subjective measures. The result is a false impression of homogeneity and an obstacle to fruitful communication and cooperation within and across disciplinary boundaries.

This paper examines the notion of “subjective well-being” as the term is used in literature on subjective measures of well-being. In order to examine what subjective well-being is and how it relates to well-being *simpliciter*, I begin by exploring the accounts of well-being implicit in the literature on subjective measures – as well as the role that subjective well-being plays in those accounts – and proceed to examine what subjective well-being is thought to be.

My aim is to establish that proponents of subjective measures differ at least superficially on at least two points. First, they disagree about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*: about whether subjective well-being constitutes well-being *simpliciter* or merely is a component of it. Second, they disagree about the nature of subjective well-being: about whether it is constituted by a cognitive, hedonic, emotional, or mood state, or some combination, and about whether to call that state “happiness,” “satisfaction,” or something else entirely. In an effort to reconcile these differences, I propose an interpretation according to which subjective measures presuppose preference hedonism: an account according to which well-being is a matter of desired mental states. This reading has not (to my knowledge) been explicitly endorsed by proponents of subjective measures. Yet, it succeeds in reconciling much that has been written about subjective measures and it has the additional advantage of attributing to proponents of subjective measure an account of well-being that has clear axiological foundations and is relatively plausible.

A proper appreciation of the nature of subjective well-being and its relation to well-being *simpliciter* is important for a variety of reasons. Among other things, such an appreciation can help both proponents and critics of subjective measures to develop clearer and more effective arguments. Proponents of subjective measures – like those who argue for the development of NWBAs – will want to identify the most plausible interpretation of these measures, so as to permit the development of as strong a case as possible in their favor. Critics – like those who argue for the superiority of traditional economic or capability-based measures – will want to zero in on the most plausible interpretation of subjective measures so as to avoid the charge that they are attacking a straw man. My hope is that in the end, a clearer appreciation for the foundations of subjective measures can help remove obstacles to scientific communication, collaboration, and progress.

2. Subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*

In this section, I explore the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter* in the writings on subjective measures. I will argue that proponents of subjective measures of well-being disagree about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*: about whether subjective well-being constitutes well-being *simpliciter* or merely is a component of it.

As my starting point, I take the concept of well-being, that is, what I have so far called well-being *simpliciter*: “what we have when our lives are going well for us, when we are living lives that are not necessarily morally good, but good for us” (Tiberius, 2006, p. 493, italics in original). Let us call this the “core” concept of well-being. There are many other terms that are used in the same sense, including “a person’s good, benefit, advantage, interest, prudential value, welfare, happiness, flourishing, *eudaimonia*, and utility” (Moore & Crisp, 1996, p. 599). Because the concept of well-being is intended to capture what is ultimately – and not just instrumentally – good for the individual, it is also supposed to capture that which we have reason to promote – as an end and not just as a means – both in our own lives and in the lives of others. As Thomas Scanlon puts it:

It is commonly supposed that there is a simple notion of individual well-being that plays the following three roles. First, it serves as an important basis for the decisions of a single rational individual, at least for those decisions in which he or she alone is concerned (that is to say, in which moral obligations and concerns for others can be left aside). Second, it is what a concerned benefactor, such as a friend or parent, has reason to promote. Third, it is the basis on which an individual’s interests are taken into account in moral argument (Scanlon, 1998, p. 93).³

In particular, it is frequently assumed that well-being is one consideration – or, as some people would argue, the only consideration – that should serve as an end, and not just a means, for public policy.

Here I will take it for granted that when proponents of subjective measures talk about such measures as representing *well-being*, they use the term in the core sense (Angner, 2009a, in press). First, as indicated above, subjective measures are often presented as alternatives to other measures of welfare or well-being; this would make little sense if, in fact, subjective measures were not intended to represent that which the other measures were designed to represent, viz., welfare or well-being. Second, the proponents’ concept of well-being plays the very same role as that played by the core concept: those who defend the use of subjective measures of well-being often emphasize that they think of well-being as that which is ultimately good for the individual, as that which is worth promoting in the life of others, and as a central (sometimes the only) ultimate goal for public policy (cf. Diener & Seligman, 2004, quoted above). Third, a number of proponents explicitly cite classical philosophical literature in enthusiastic agreement while signaling that they use “well-being” and/or “happiness” in the same sense as philosophers do (Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997; Layard, 2005; Watson, 1930).

Over the years, philosophers have tried to shed light on the concept of well-being by developing and defending various accounts, or conceptions, of well-being. Here, I follow Parfit (1984, pp. 493–502) in dividing such accounts into three main classes: *mental-state accounts*, *preference-satisfaction* or *desire-fulfillment accounts*,

² Following standard practice in the literature, I use “well-being” and “welfare” interchangeably.

³ Though Scanlon proceeds to criticize the view outlined in this passage, this does not change the fact that it is a nice characterization of the role that the concept of well-being is often supposed to play.

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