



Notes on the concept of Welfare or Happiness and Life Events: an approximation based on theoretical and empirical findings

NOTES ON THE CONCEPT OF WELFARE OR HAPPINESS AND LIFE EVENTS: AN APPROXIMATION BASED ON THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS



Nota sobre el concepto de bienestar o felicidad y los sucesos de vida: una aproximación a partir de hallazgos teóricos y empíricos

Nota sobre o conceito de Bem-estar ou Felicidade e os Sucessos de vida: uma aproximação a partir de descobertas teóricas e empíricas

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the concepts of subjective well-being (BS in Spanish), psychosocial well-being (BPS in Spanish), and its relation to the concept of life events (SV in Spanish), based on a review of different empirical evidence available in scientific literature. Well-being is understood as equivalent to the concept of happiness. This review explores the main theoretical perspectives, indicating how many attempts focus on its dimensions instead of on the necessary definition. Theories of well-being that refer to the subjective and the psychological, study similar psychological processes, but measure different factors. Subjective well-being has been investigated more as an emotional issue so it can be immediately related to happiness or vital satisfaction. It is detected that researchers treat the subjective well-being and the degree of happiness as synonyms, in general. It is referred that the well-being could be reached through processes as internal or dependent to the person as: the change of its aspirations, the perception it has of itself and its surroundings, the action on itself or the modification of what is being experienced

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RESUMEN

En este trabajo se abordan los conceptos de bienestar subjetivo (BS), bienestar psicosocial (BPS), y su relación con el concepto de sucesos de vida (SV), a partir de una revisión de diferentes evidencias empíricas disponibles en la literatura científica. El bienestar se entiende como equivalente al concepto de la felicidad. Esta revisión explora las principales perspectivas teóricas, indicando que muchos intentos focalizan sus dimensiones en lugar de la necesaria definición. Las teorías del bienestar referidas a lo subjetivo y lo psicológico, estudian procesos psicológicos similares, pero proceden a medir distintos factores. El bienestar subjetivo se lo ha investigado más como una cuestión emocional para en seguida relacionarla con la felicidad o la satisfacción vital. Por lo que se detecta, que en general los investigadores tratan como sinónimos el bienestar subjetivo o grado de felicidad. Se hace referencia a que el bienestar podría alcanzarse, a través de procesos tan internos o dependientes de la persona como pueden ser: el cambio de sus aspiraciones, la percepción que tiene de sí misma y de su entorno, la acción sobre ella misma o la modificación de lo que se está

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RESUMO

Em este trabalho abordam-se os conceitos de bem-estar subjetivo (BS), bem-estar psicosocial (BPS), e a sua relação com o conceito de sucessos de vida (SV), a partir de uma revisão de diferentes evidências empíricas disponíveis na literatura científica. O bem-estar entende-se como equivalente ao conceito da felicidade. Esta revisão explora as principais perspectivas teóricas, indicando que muitos intentos focalizam as suas dimensões em lugar da necessária definição. As teorias do bem-estar referidas ao subjetivo e o psicológico, estudam processos psicológicos similares, mas procedem a medir distintos fatores. O bem-estar subjetivo se o tem pesquisado mais como uma questão emocional para em seguida relacioná-la com a felicidade ou a satisfação vital. Pelo que se detecta, que em geral os pesquisadores tratam como sinónimos o bem-estar subjetivo ou grau de felicidade. Se faz referência a que o bem-estar poderia se alcançar, através de processos tão internos ou dependentes da pessoa como possam ser: o câmbio das suas aspirações, a percepção que tem de si própria e do seu entorno, a ação sobre ela mesma ou a modificação do que se está experimentando

daily. That is, research concerns focus in psychological well-being and social welfare. The focus is on the development of the individual, the ways in which they deal with life events, and how they value circumstances. It is from the integration of both concepts, subjective well-being and psychosocial well-being, that we believe that the organizational "happiness" (wellbeing) construct can be worked on. At present, there are various organizations that postulate that subjective and psychosocial well-being, constitute a desirable organizational goal.

experimentando en el día a día. Es decir, las preocupaciones investigativas focalizan el bienestar psicológico y el bienestar social. El enfoque estudia el desarrollo del individuo, las formas que usan para enfrentar los sucesos de vida y la manera como se valoran las circunstancias. Es a partir, de la integración de ambos conceptos, bienestar subjetivo y bienestar psicosocial que estimamos que se puede trabajar el constructo "felicidad (bienestar) organizacional. En la actualidad, son diversos los organismos que postulan que el bienestar, subjetivo y psicosocial, constituyen una meta organizacional deseable..

no dia a dia. Quer dizer, as preocupações da pesquisa focalizam o bem-estar psicológico e o bem-estar social. A focagem estuda o desenvolvimento do individuo, as formas que usam para enfrentar os sucessos de vida e a maneira como se valoram as circunstâncias. É a partir, da integração dos dois conceitos, bem-estar subjetivo e bem-estar psicosocial que estimamos que se pode trabalhar o constructo "felicidade (bem-estar) organizacional. Na atualidade, são diversos os organismos que postulam que o bem-estar, subjetivo e psicosocial, constituem uma meta organizacional desejável.

Keywords: Subjective well-being, psychological well-being, psychosocial well-being, life events.

Palabras clave: Bienestar subjetivo, bienestar psicológico, bienestar psicosocial, sucesos de vida.

Palavras chave: Bem-estar subjetivo, bem-estar psicológico, bem-estar psicosocial, sucessos de vida.

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INTRODUCTION

Two perspectives can be distinguished in the literature on *well-being*: one that explores *subjective well-being* (SWB) or *hedonic* (Diener, 1994) and another that explores *well-being* from the psychological (PWB) or *eudaimonic* point of view (Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff 2002).

SWB refers to whether the individual lives his reality in a positive way and if it is related to satisfaction. For this purpose, researchers consider the cognitive appraisals and the affective responses that individuals have. A *happy person* would psychologically function better, live a greater number of years, have better physical health, obtain better jobs and establish high quality interpersonal relationships (Diener, 1994).

In more recent decades, interest has focused on the development of individuals and the way they react to certain life events and what turns out to be significant for the person in terms of goals (see Ryff & Keyes, 1995). *Well-being* is understood to be multidimensional, encompassing the social and environmental aspects in order to comprehend it.

This text presents a review of both perspectives in light of the empirical evidence provided by each perspective. When reviewing the literature, it is important to determine the specific meaning present in each publication.

life satisfaction, without ignoring the inclusion of situational, cultural and organizational variables. Hence, one could consider plausible the hypothesis that the concept of *subjective well-being* is associated with variables such as life satisfaction and happiness and the context in which it occurs. From this point of view, we study the variables that allude to certain emotions with respect to individual's life experiences and the respective situation.

It is important to determine the specificity of each concept and its own taxonomy. In the case of *subjective well-being*, authors such as Argyle and Martin (1991) argue that two subclasses should be included: the *cognitive* (degree of personal satisfaction with circumstances), BSC, and the *affective* or *emotional* (balanced relationship of emotions or individual perception of well-being or happiness opposed to opposing feelings), BSA.

The researcher examines the possible variations of each of these concepts at the individual level in each organization or culture, and interprets the variability or dispersions that hypothetically may exist. For example, examining to what extent can SWB be associated with certain value and cultural structures, for example, vertical cultures and more horizontal cultures, thus generating variations in the conceptions of power, achievement, and personal autonomy.

Research has presented results that indicate that personal values such as safety, tradition and conformity are negatively associated with *happiness* (Sagiv and Schwartz, 2000).

In the reviewed research, SWB is associated with the subject's assessment of his own life from a

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING (SWB)

When investigating *subjective well-being*, researchers tend to examine to what extent SWB would be related to certain variables, for example,

positive point of view (positive subjective capital), and, therefore, the concept of "satisfaction with life events" is incorporated.

The person, individually or in the organizational plane, would enjoy *subjective well-being* or greater *happiness* when the positive experiences prevail over the negative ones.

On the other hand, people's daily life with respect to their *subjective well-being* or *happiness*, can be modified to a certain degree (can be equally estimated for psychosocial well-being). There may be certain factors that would allow the person to be more or less happy, and certain negative events can generate a regression in *subjective well-being* or *happiness*.

A widely accepted BS model holds that people should inevitably, quickly, and totally adapt to any event that occurs in their lives. This has been described by different theories, for example, the theory of adaptation (Helson, 1964), the theory of dynamic equilibrium (Headey & Wearing, 1992), and the theory of the previous level (set-point) (Diene, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006).

The fundamental premise of these theories is that the habitual SWB level is highly stable. Changes in life circumstances could cause the SWB to increase or decrease, but (Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996) it would return to its initial level in a matter of months (called level of adaptation, baseline, or previous level).

This can be evidenced by transversal research results, which have observed that correlations between SWB and external life circumstances (for

example, income, marital status) range from small to moderate.

Similarly, longitudinal studies observe that individual SWB differences are highly stable over time (Eid & Diener, 2004, Fujita & Diener, 2005, Lucas & Donnellan, 2007).

All these studies are in line with the theory of adaptation's hypothesis or are interpreted from this theoretical framework (Diener et al., 1999). However, a strict test of this theory's hypothesis requires a direct assessment of changes in life circumstances. For this purpose, SWB can be examined in life contexts that imply substantive changes in the persons' life-unfolding, for example, from employment to unemployment.

We must be aware that in recent years, the theory of adaptation's hypothesis has been empirically (Lucas, 2007, Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004) and theoretically challenged (Diener et al., 2006, Headey, 2006).

As noted above, SWB is related to how people feel (affectivity) and think (cognition) about what happens in their lives (Diener, 1984).

The BSA and BSC differ in their associations with certain variables and can be considered conceptually different (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996, Schimmack, Schupp, & Wagner, 2008), although they are part of SWB.

Subjective well-being is especially important because it presents a positive relationship with *work performance*. Life satisfaction (measure of subjective well-being) would also represent a form of

predicting job satisfaction and performance in the organization.

PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

The scientific literature reveals the need to consider psychosocial factors when studying *well-being*, for example, the norm of internality or externality in controlling life events. This would allow exploring *well-being* from the inter-subjective point of view, by including variables such as the interactions of individuals in the social or organizational structures in which they participate.

This is originated from the researchers' concern to consider the context and external circumstances in which *well-being* is given or not, as well as inter-subjectivity, the development of relationships within organizational teams, and in general, in the relational processes that occur between individuals. This style of approach would correspond to *well-being's* second perspective, which is defined as *psychological well-being*.

One of the most replicated works in different cultural and organizational contexts is one made by Ryff (1989), which posits a six factor structure of *psychological well-being (SWB)*, obtained through psychometric analysis, especially factorial studies. SWB (Ryff, 1989), also known as *eudemonic well-being* (Ryan & Deci, 2001), is a broad concept of *well-being*, which includes facets such as self-acceptance, life purpose, personal growth. If SWB is assumed as an exclusively psychological concept, and could be associated to psychosomatic concepts, but these do not define SWB and it is appropriate to exclude them as part of research when the individual's interactions in an organization are studied.

A reading of the work carried out by Cummins, McCabe, Romeo and Gullone (1994), permits an in depth exploration of the cognitive component of *well-being* and the identification of the different domains involved in individuals' judgments about their lives. Bharadwaj and Wilkening (1977) observed that a person's satisfaction with his life is related to the following domains, in the order that they are presented: family ($r = .50$), living conditions ($r = .46$), work ($r = .45$), health ($r = .41$), leisure activities ($r = .41$) and income ($r = .39$).

In research conducted in Argentina (Páramo, et al, 2012), we studied the correlation between the PWB dimensions and three personality traits areas: *motivational goals, cognitive modes and interpersonal behaviors*. The results obtained, in terms of the relationship between PWB and personality styles, support the conclusion that PWB is associated with certain personality traits that remain more or less stable over time.

Currently, some research has integrated Ryff's (1989) PWB concept with Keyes (1998) concept on *social well-being (SWB)*, so as to propose the concept of *psychosocial well-being (PSWB)*. These are two theoretical approaches to study well-being, that is, research similar psychological processes, but measure different types of factors or facets.

This means researching *well-being* taking into account both the individual and the social, subjectivity as socially constructed intersubjectivity.

The PSWB alludes not only to issues of a psychological nature, but also to events and the way in which organizations and social structures function in general, it would be made up of

dimensions such as: *Social integration*, which Keyes (1998) defines in terms of the quality of the relationships that the individual maintains with social structures (Keyes, 1998); *Social acceptance*, which refers to the individual's need to belong to social structures, to an organization, to a group, and which requires an environment of trust and empathy towards others; *Social contribution*, the subject also needs to feel that it is useful to be a member of a group or organization, thus the feeling of usefulness is important (Keyes, 1998), but also that what he does is valued; *Social update*, it refers to the permanent state of trying to achieve goals, in order to obtain benefits; *Social coherence*, this dimension alludes to the person's degree of awareness of the dynamic in which he participates.

From this type of approach, we consider that *happiness or well-being* is associated with cultural and value elements, for example, representations, beliefs (Zubieta, Delfino and Fernández, 2007).

This approach permits us to deal with subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and carry out research in a more complex way on what is called *well-being or organizational happiness*.

At the level of the person's *well-being*, social interactions would be compounded in organization's interior, and to the study of the organization as such. Linley, et al., 2009 has studied the interconnection between well-being's various aspects, through the psychosocial approach. Adler & Kwon, 2002 researched trust, reciprocity, leader-member exchange, cooperation, coordination and integration. These authors carried out an interesting review of "social capital" in order to understand *well-being*.

Regarding empirical evidence, positive relationships between contextual background and psychological empowerment have been identified, values are significantly greater from zero to the 0.05 level (Whitener, 1990). Although, Chen and Kanfer (2006) researched people's empowerment at the team level, they detected that no significant values would be observed. This means that more research is required, not only to identify the hypotheses in question, but also to confirm or reject them.

LIFE EVENTS

The life events can be examined from two major perspectives, one perspective is stress and the other development. The first sees life events as specific types of stressors. These can cause significant alterations in daily routines (Turner & Wheaton, 1995). This approach includes desirable events such as holidays (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). In contrast, minimal stressors such as daily discomforts (Kanner, et al., (1981) would not have any major effect on the persons' lives.

From the perspective of development, life events are seen as specific transitions. These are defined as a discontinuity in the persons' conscious life space and they demand new behavioral responses. The duration and course of the transition is not specified, so it can be deemed slow and continuous (for example, puberty), or fast and discreet (for example, the transition from high school to university).

Both types of perspectives should be included when carrying out research in order to understand what is happening. The transition would mark the end of a status. A status is a nominal variable with at

least two values, for example, occupational status: employed, unemployed, and studying or not. The transition from one status to another is a specific life event, for example, job loss (from employee to unemployed).

Different studies have been carried out based on the assumption that environmental changes represented by positive and negative life events can influence SWB (Abbey & Andrews, 1985, Block & Zautra, 1981, Headey, Holmstrom, & Wearing, 1984, Headey et al. al., 1985; Zautra & Reich, 1983). Positive life events would improve SWB, and negative ones would reduce it (Grob, 1995). In addition, individuals are apparently capable of managing critical life events, but if they have to face two or more critical life events in a period of five years, their SWB decreases significantly (Grob, 1995).

Veenhoven (1994) has similar findings. He established that positive and negative life events affect individuals' *happiness level*, especially if they include important transitions. This is limited by the fact that life events are entirely treated as exogenous.

There is evidence that the same kind of event occurs very often to the same type of individuals, which would indicate that, in some way, there is an association between personality and the characteristics of life events that certain individuals experience (Headey & Wearing, 1989). However, not all studies confirm the relationship between personality, life events and SWB (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998, McCrae & Costa, 1991).

More research and analysis is needed in order to clarify this type of relationship, especially due to

contradictory results (Headey, 2006, Headey & Wearing, 1989).

There are studies that have presented *well-being* or *happiness* as primarily determined by individual characteristics rather than by external living circumstances (Costa & McCrae, 1984, Diener, Sandvik, Pavot, & Fujita, 1992).

This type of theorization would lead to the belief that *life events* and *personality* may differ in terms of their duration of effect on *well-being*. It is probable that personality has long-term, and *life events* have short term effects on SWB (Diener, Sandvik, Pavot, & Fujita, 1992, McCrae & Costa, 1988).

On the other hand, desirable events are more closely linked to PWB, and undesirable events have an adverse effect on individuals' mental health (Zautra & Reich, 1983).

Positive life events (for example, promotion) would increase SWB. On the other hand, negative events (for example, poor performance assessment) would decrease SWB.

CONCLUSION

The studies reveal that research on *happiness* or *well-being* would require not only taking into account the psychological dimension, but also its social and cultural dimension.

The literature review indicates that some theories address the construct (well-being/happiness) as a psychological issue, others as a psychosocial issue, others emphasize the construct as objective (philosophical) values about human nature's

perfection that does not reside in material matters but in individuals' state of consciousness.

It is possible to argue that an intermediate or multidimensional approach is plausible and recommendable. Nonetheless, it would be an ideal, but one framed in subjectivity and intersubjectivity (subjective well-being) and in person's individual and interactional psychology (psychosocial well-being). Said research would have to consider universalistic, situational and personological, as well as the theory of adaptation, because each one of them approaches the *well-being* or *happiness* construct with their own distinctions.

Given the different positions on *well-being* or *happiness*, the literature reveals the need to use mixed or hybrid approaches.

The theories and publications that talk about the construct include the subjective/objective pair, and it is possible to distinguish different kinds of "subjectivities", for example, differentiating between a person's subjective values expressed in their desires, and the values expressed in their affective states. That is, there would be different kinds of subjective assessments.

This type of approach is found in Hawkins (2010). This author refers to two kinds of subjective assessment: informed preferences and affective states. In the same way, it would be plausible to consider the objective/objective pair.

A mixed approach would indicate that the constitution of *well-being* or *happiness* depends on a multidimensional perspective that considers different factors. This would allow the invocation of a combination of subjective and objective

features, or a combination of both. This suggestion is based on the variety of research on the *well-being* or *happiness* construct, for example, the integration of concepts such as efficiency, resilience, and optimism, that is, a set of mechanisms that promote *well-being* and objective aspects in common occurrences (Avey et al., 2010, 2011; Luthans et al., 2013; Roche, Haar & Luthans, 2014). In addition, a refined task of instrumentation (for example, definition and integration of measurement scales) and operationalization (definition of variables and indicators) will be required in order to clearly determine each concept's contribution to the definition of the *well-being* or *happiness* construct.

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