

## WELL-BEING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

George William Antony\*

### **Abstract**

Though the concept of well-being is increasingly being used by researchers and psychologists in various fields of education, mental health, corporate sectors and development of people, there are several underlying issues that have not been addressed critically. The present conceptual Paper, based on a survey of literatures, seeks to explore and analyse issues underlying the concept of well-being. Meaningful and accurate application of the concept of well-being in various fields requires an understanding of assumptions, philosophical orientations, perspectives and methodologies underlying the concept. The Paper analyses issues related to the definition and nature of well-being, structure of Affect, construct of happiness, evaluative process in well-being, dynamics and reliability of well-being, stable or transient nature of well-being, cultural relativism of well-being, and finally the possibility of arriving at a universal concept of well-being. There are many interpretations on each of the above issues depending on the methodologies, models, and philosophical and psychological orientations. The analysis will carry the author's own critique. It is proposed that no one interpretation on the above issues holds total validity. In the conclusion analytical evaluation on each of the above aspects of well-being will be put forth with recommendations for further research. The paper will point out the need for integration of different perspectives on the concept of well-being so that a common understanding of well-being could be arrived at.

**Keywords:** Subjective well-being, structure, affect, happiness, culture, universality, stable, transient

### **1. Introduction**

\* Department of Psychology, CHRIST UNIVERSITY, BANGALORE, INDIA

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With the emergence of positive psychology, well-being has attracted a great deal of research interest, and the term has been widely applied in the fields of mental health, education, employee development, development of the youth, to mention a few. However, despite the fact that the term 'well-being' has been used widely in research literature, no conclusive definition and understanding has been arrived yet. Though people understand what well-being is, different meanings of well-being emerge due to different interpretations such as subjective well-being, psychological well-being, social well-being and spiritual well-being.

The present research focuses more on the concept of subjective well-being (SWB). Even the concept of subjective well-being (SWB) is complex in nature, and the attempt to understand it in unidimension is problematic. It is multidimensional. There are both objective and subjective measures of SWB giving rise to different meanings (Crisp, 2006). A proper and meaningful application of the term requires an understanding of its foundations, assumptions, philosophical and psychological orientations and methodologies. There are different interpretations on every angle of the concept. Based on review of literature, the present research attempts to unravel the underlying meanings of SWB concept in terms of the definition of the concept, dynamics and processes involved in SWB, the relationship between positive and negative affects, the construct of happiness and its relationship with life satisfaction, impact of culture and self in the understanding of SWB, models involved in the affect process, and the universality of the concept.

Each concept will be critically analysed with the author's own critique. In the conclusion, an overall evaluation of the contentions surrounding the dimensions of SWB will be summarized, and direction will be pointed to further research that could lead arriving at an integrated understanding of SWB.

## 2. Definitions of well-being

### 2.1 Subjective well-being (SWB):

Diener (2000) held that well-being was an emotional and cognitive evaluative subjective experience. Combining one's emotional responses to day to day life events and one's broad evaluation of one's life as a whole, he proposed three components of subjective well-being: (1) life satisfaction (global judgments of one's life), (2) satisfaction with important domains (e.g.

work), and (3) positive affect (experiencing many pleasant emotions and moods) and low levels of negative affect (experiencing few unpleasant emotions and moods). According to Diener, SWB was an umbrella term that included joy, feelings of fulfillment, etc. Happiness is a narrower concept than SWB and is different from life satisfaction though happiness and life satisfaction could be components of SWB (Bruni & Porta, 2007).

Diener seemed to identify happiness with affect, a hedonistic position; subjectivity without objectivity. Moreover, his definition lacks aspects of psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of well-being.

## 2.2 Psychological well-being:

Adopting an objective approach to well-being and grounding in theories of Erickson's model of stages of psychosocial development, Maslow's conception of self-actualization, Rogers's view of the fully functioning person, Jung's formulation of individuation, and Allport's concept of maturity, Ryff (1995) evolved a model of psychological well-being. It has six dimensions of self acceptance, positive relationship with other people, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth.

According to Ryff (1995), self acceptance includes not only the possession of positive attitude toward the self but also acceptance of one's good and bad qualities. Taken together, these six dimensions, which form the conceptual framework, encompass a breadth of Wellness that includes positive evaluations of one's self and one's life, a sense of continued growth and development as a person, the belief that life is meaningful, maintaining good relationships with other people, the capacity to manage one's life and environment, and a sense of self-determination.

However, Diener, Sapyta, & Suh (1998) argued that Ryff had omitted subjective well-being in her understanding of psychological well-being. According to Diener et al. (1998), subjective wellbeing was an intrinsic part of well-being. The subjective evaluation of life either in cognitive or emotive aspects are central to well-being. Moreover, they held that Ryff's dimensions could vary according to different cultures and context. They believed that "subjective well-being results from people having a feeling of mastery and making progress toward their goals, from one's temperament, immersion in interesting and pleasurable activities, and positive social relationships" (Diener et al., 1998, p.34).

### 2.3 Social well-being:

Keyes (1998) argued that despite the difference between private life (subjective experience) and public life (social experience), the different experiences were not separable as man was one unit with multiple dimensions. While psychological and subjective experience of well-being emphasize subjective experience of self acceptance, positive emotions and worth, social version of well-being focuses on social experience of well-being, experience of well-being in reference to the society one lives in (Keyes, 1998).

As individuals are embedded in social structures, social scientists investigate one's social well-being in reference to positive social health. Quality of social life is measured by social challenges. According to Keyes (1998), the dimensions that constituted social well-being were: (1) social integration, (2) social acceptance, (3) social contribution, (4) social actualization, and (5) social coherence.

### 2.4 Spiritual well-being:

Over the years, the term 'spirituality' has moved away from ecclesiastical connotation or things related to soul. Currently, it is defined in a broad perspective to include all aspects of human experience. Spiritual well-being is also considered as a reflection of spiritual health.

The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (1975) proposed a wider definition of spiritual well-being. It suggested that "Spiritual well-being is the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness" (Ellison 1983, p. 331). Several authors have described these four-dimensions of spirituality. For example, Goodloe and Arreola (1992) spoke of meaning with self-transcendence; social and spiritual action with others; oneness with nature; and personal relations with God.

On the basis of these four dimensions, Fisher, Francis & Johnson (2000) held that spiritual health was a fundamental dimension of people's overall health and well-being, permeating and integrating all the other dimensions of health (i.e., the physical, mental, emotional, social, and vocational).

## 3. Paradigms in defining well-being

In the field of psychology there have been two trends or paradigms in defining well-being, following two trends of philosophical background, namely hedonism and eudaimonism. Different methodological approaches are proposed to answer why one has higher well-being than the other, and why one is better today than yesterday.

In hedonism well-being is defined in terms of hedonistic pleasure. Hedonistic theories of well-being focus on the intrinsic value of certain psychological states, holding that what is good for a person overall is the greatest achievable balance of pleasure over pain (Crisp, 2006). For a Hedonist, well-being is what is good *for* each individual. This leads to subjectivity. Moreover, the term 'good' is erroneously identified with 'pleasure'.

The simplest form of hedonism is Bentham's hedonism (1996 [1789] in Crisp, 2006) according to which it is the quantity of pleasant experiences as versus painful ones that makes one's life good. Bentham held that man was governed by two principles of pleasure and pain. The characteristics of duration and intensity would qualify the pleasant experiences (Crisp, 2006).

Crisp (2006) made a distinction between substantive and explanatory hedonism. The greatest balance of pleasure over pain is called *substantive* hedonism. But, what makes pleasure good and pain bad? From the point of *explanatory* hedonism it would be the pleasantness of pleasure and painfulness of pain. Crisp (2006) criticised the hedonistic position saying that though the theory of hedonism might be true for simple experiences, it failed to answer the existence of varying level of experiences of human being as there was no one common strand of pleasantness to validate all forms of experiences (Crisp, 2006).

In an attempt to defend hedonism, J.S. Mill added a third property to the two determinants of value identified by Bentham, and the third property was 'quality' based on the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures (J.S. Mill, 1998 [1863], ch. 2 in Crisp, 2006). It seems that there are differences among pleasures arising from intellectual activity and physical activity. J.S. Mill also added a property of 'nobility' to the value of pleasure. However, he failed to explain how 'nobility' affects pleasantness. The important criticism against hedonism is the paradox of hedonism. Pleasure cannot be the goal of an activity; rather it is the consequence of execution of an activity. And question arises whether J.S. Mill's position is hedonistic in the strict sense. (Crisp, 2006).

In this line of hedonistic argument, Subjective well-being consists of subjective experience of pleasant affect over unpleasant affect including life satisfaction. Hedonism and well-being is made synonymous in SWB. The question is how do we evaluate pleasant and painful experience on a continuum? What makes life a pleasant experience? SWB has three components: life satisfaction, presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect. In this context, is life satisfaction synonymous with happiness or positive affect? Is not happiness more than just positive affect? Is it not possible for positive and negative affect to coexist? It is possible for people with negative affect experience life satisfaction. And, Ryff held that measures of SWB did not define psychological wellness adequately (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Hence definition and measures of SWB give rise to issues that are debatable.

Eudaimonic view: Aristotle's search for meaning of well-being or what makes life good is both philosophical and ethical in nature. The central feature of well-being is reflected in how well a person functions that includes all activities. Aristotle's main account of a human function, or *ergon*, is found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, EN 1097b23–1098a21 in Ransome, 2010). *Eudaimonia* or 'human flourishing' (also translated potentially misleadingly as 'happiness') represents the chief human good: perfect well-being. Aristotle emphasized the active element of life as it is being lived, insisting that the flourishing person "both lives well and does well". Living well and doing well requires use of reason and strength of character, a position clearly different from hedonism. The achievement of *eudaimonia* requires three distinct kinds of personal resources: external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul (EN 1098b13–15 in Ransome, 2010). The goods of the soul – its excellences – are not just necessary conditions or tools for living well, as other goods are, but constitute the central active element of *eudaimonia*: "the human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with excellence" (EN 1098a16–17 in Ransome, 2010). Living in accordance with excellence implies cultivating *internal resources* for well-being, which is more than possession of good and feelings of pleasure. Feelings of pleasure and happiness are regarded as various signs and consequences of living in accordance with excellence of character (Ransome, 2010). Hence, according to Aristotle, well-being was both a state of being and doing that was in accordance with excellence and moral character or virtue. Well-being, hence, is an optimal functioning of a human being, an

activity of the soul in accordance with virtue and excellence, and the level of well-being is determined by oneself. (Ransome, 2010).

Aristotle considered hedonic well-being as not worth considering. For him, happiness is found in the expression of virtue, in doing what is worthwhile. Though fulfillment of all desires lead to pleasure, they may not be good for human being and growth. There is a distinction between needs that lead to pleasure and needs that lead to human growth. Hence SWB is not equal to well-being. Ryff developed psychological well-being in line of human flourishing. Realization of one's potential tapped into six aspects of realization of human potential (Ryff, 1995).

Self determination theory (SDT) embraces eudaimonic concept with three aspects of autonomy, relatedness and competence, essential for psychological growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001). It refers to fully functioning than mere fulfillment of desires. Some conditions that foster SWB may not result into eudaimonic well-being. While SWB focuses on the frequency of positive emotions, eudaimonic psychology focuses on the extent a person is fully functioning. Emotions are only byproduct of life lived well. Emotional positivity is not part of the definition of well-being and positive affect is not an end in itself.

From hedonic point of view, money and wealth may bring pleasure but from eudaimonic perspective they are not predictors of well-being; rather, close relationship, personal growth and community generativity are better predictors of well-being. Poverty does have an impact on well-being indirectly as they curtail one's capacity for fully functioning, autonomy, competence, etc.

Ryan and Deci were of the opinion that the concept of well-being was multidimensional and perhaps both aspects of SWB and PWB need to be integrated. Both aspects measure well-being in different ways (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

#### 4. Structure of Affect

There has been controversy over whether positive affect is the opposite of negative affect, and whether they are negatively correlated. Or, whether life satisfaction is the opposite of life dissatisfaction?

Diener (2000) hypothesized that both positive and negative affect were separate components of SWB, posited as one versus the other, both having correlation with different

variables. He held that there was negative correlation between positive and negative affect if time period was short. Moreover, he argued that frequency of positive affect rather than intense positive affect was necessary and sufficient for happiness. His argument for frequency of positive affect was that frequency of positive experiences could be easily coded, retrieved and accurately measured which was not possible with intense positive affect. He also argued that life satisfaction was different from happiness. (Diener, Sandvik & Pavot, 1991)

Most authors hold that positive and negative are independent variables requiring different measures. Relieving someone of depression does not necessarily increase one's level of happiness (Bradburn, 1969). Watson, Clark and Tellegen in their analytic study of structure of affect hypothesized that negative and positive affect were two dominant and relatively independent dimensions, though not opposites. It is a single dimension. Affect and responses are on unipolar scale. There is no correlation between Positive Affect and Negative Affect. Positive Affect is represented when a person feels enthusiastic, active and alert. Negative Affect is seen in aversive mood states, anger, contempt, disgust and guilt. Moreover, they are related to corresponding affective trait dimensions of personality of extraversion and neuroticism, respectively. Low positive affect and high negative affect are the major features of depression and anxiety, respectively (Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1988).

In contrast, Russell (1980) proposed bipolar dimension of Affect in Circumplex model of affect. In this states of affect were categorized in two dimensions of valence (positive and negative affect) and arousal (activation-deactivation). Satisfaction with life and dissatisfaction are located on valence of pleasantness and unpleasantness. Based on analysis of self-reported affective states, he argued that positive and negative affect were not independent but were related to each other. According to this, one may not be happy and sad at the same time. There is a strong correlation -1.0 whereas in unipolar dimension where positive and negative affect are independent, as discussed above, there is no correlation. In unipolar response there is a single dimension of affect, in bipolar there are two dimensions of + and – response format. In two-dimension there is a possibility for neither satisfied nor unsatisfied aspect. This is in accordance with Bradburn's affect theory of balance according to which experiences are coded into positive or negative or neutral, and balance of affect promotes psychological well-being. Bradburn used the terms excited, proud for positive affect, and depressed, bored for negative affect. However, in circumplex model, these terms are not opposites; excited relates to activated-pleasantness and



depressed relates to activated-unpleasantness. Hence, the terms do not describe the same dimension of affect. The circumplex model is represented by a circular model in which the affect states fall in a circle in two-dimensional bipolar space in the order of pleasure ( $0^{\circ}$ ), excitement ( $45^{\circ}$ ), arousal ( $90^{\circ}$ ), distress ( $135^{\circ}$ ), displeasure ( $180^{\circ}$ ), depression ( $225^{\circ}$ ), sleepiness ( $270^{\circ}$ ), and relaxation ( $315^{\circ}$ ). In this circular space, the horizontal dimensions are pleasantness-unpleasantness, and vertical dimensions are arousal-sleep (Russell, 1980).

## 5. Construct of happiness

While Diener contended that happiness was different from life satisfaction, Veenhoven Ruut (ch. 2, 1991) discussed happiness in the sense of life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was the overall evaluation of quality of one's life as a whole. Evaluation of quality of one's life has affective aspect (hedonic level – pleasant experiences) and cognitive aspect (contentment – fulfillment of one's aspirations). On the other hand, in Diener's view cognitive aspect would be a component of life satisfaction and, affect aspect would be part of positive versus negative affect. Veenhoven also raised doubts whether happiness could be objectively measured, whether it is of trait or state characteristic, whether happiness is of temporary or permanent nature.

Csikszentmihalyi and Mei-Ha Wong (ch. 10, 1991) held for relatively stable and transient experience of happiness. They suggested that happiness as a relatively stable disposition for positive experience was related to personality trait and, transitory experience of happiness was related as a state. Momentary happiness could add to the global trait-like tendency and vice versa. Happiness is an important component of well-being. Happiness is correlated to cheerfulness, sociability and friendliness. It also correlates with alert, active, strong and excited, positive motivation and cognitive efficiency. Of the dimensions of WB, the affective component is more of trait-like. The authors linked well-being with flow. Matching of skills and challenges is the state of flow and in this state one experiences highest level of well-being. The authors held that flow was a universal experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Mei-Ha Wong, ch. 10, 1991).

However, the author is of the view that the concept of flow in Eastern tradition where one can experience being in flow without doing anything in the technical sense of the term is different from Western focus on doing. In Eastern tradition it could be just being with nature or in tune with nature where one experiences immersion in the Present. Hence in Eastern tradition happiness need not always be related to challenges and skills.

Haybron (2005) in his excellent critique on concept of happiness argued that happiness was not a unidimensional concept, and moreover, life satisfaction (as is generally stated in understanding subjective well-being) cannot be identified with happiness. He argued that life satisfaction judgment was substantially arbitrary. He asked a fundamental question of 'what makes a state *happiness –constituting?*(Haybron, 2005, p.290). He argued that it was possible for someone to be satisfied with life though he might be depressed. And evaluation of one's life might be governed by factors that had no relation to welfare. Even when things go well one might still be unsatisfied with life. That is, one's evaluation could be arbitrary and often is dependent on the state of one's mood. The question is, when do we judge our lives favorably or unfavorably? Are there any objective parameters for making judgment? One may judge one's life 'in a wide range of ways with no decisive ground (Haybron, 2005, p. 294). People rate themselves differently at different times though things remain the same due to different perspectives. It also raises ethical issues as judgment of life satisfaction is not just psychological but also ethical. It is possible to rate oneself favorably even in adverse conditions. So, what is the objective standard for evaluation? Again, the balance of pleasant feelings over unpleasant feelings, a component of subjective well-being is psychologically superficial. Pleasure itself is passing by nature, and equating well-being and happiness with quantum of pleasant feelings might lead to hedonism and reductionism. Is not one's life worth more than pleasure?

## 6. Evaluative process in subjective well-being

An accurate evaluation of subjective well-being is a complex process, and therefore, it raises questions of validity and reliability. The measurement of subjective well-being is based on the reports of the participants. The debate is about whether the self-reports accurately depict the inner state of well-being. Research studies show there is a weak link between objective conditions and subjective well-being. People in adverse conditions are said to be happier than those in better conditions. (Easterlin cited in Schwarz & Strack, ch. 3,1991).

Therefore, Schwarz and Strack (ch. 3,1991) in their research focused not so much on what made people happy and satisfied with life, but rather on how people made judgments about their internal state of well-being when they reported they were happy. Accessing all the information to make a judgment about well-being is a complex task. Therefore in making a judgment, people usually access information that is easily available and follow a certain principle

for making the judgment. Accessing information is also influenced by various factors. Depending on the moods and circumstances, one may access positive or negative information. What determines is the frequency and recency of the information. In the experiments conducted by the authors, subjects who were induced to think about the positive side of their life, accessed positive information and reported happier than otherwise. Which information one accesses also depends on the preceding question in the interview. However not all the accessible information is used in forming a judgment. Often the context of the interview and the interviewer could influence the screening process.

Moreover, the accessible information could influence the judgment in the opposite direction. In the experiments, while some subjects accessed recent incidents, others recalled incidents of distant past. Those who recalled negative past events reported happier in the present compared to those who recalled recent happy events and reported not so happier in the present. This explains why 'children of great depression' in US reported higher well-being in the present conditions. These studies show that accessibility of information and time frame matter in forming a judgment (Schwarz & Strack, ch. 3, 1991).

In addition, social comparison processes are also involved in forming a judgment. People evaluated their life favorably when they compared themselves with others who were in worse situation. Moreover, judgment is not only an operation of what one thinks but also how one feels at the time of judgment. Objectively things might be going well. But one's mood influences one's judgment. People in good mood tend to recall positive information and those in bad mood tend to recall negative information. In these contexts, therefore, judgments about general satisfaction of life as a whole are more complex than judgments about specific domains of life satisfaction (Schwarz & Strack, ch. 3, 1991).

There is another challenge about how the judgment is reported. Self-presentation and social desirability often bias the reporting process of judgment. The experiments also show that people in direct interview reported higher well-being compared to self-administered interview. Not all the factors that influence one's judgment at a particular time could be controlled, and therefore, the reliability of reports of well-being cannot be taken in absolute sense (Schwarz & Strack, ch. 3, 1991).

In a similar tone of argument, Tversky and Griffin (ch. 6, 1991) held the position that in evaluating our life, we referred to the past memories. Without the past, the present does not give

enough information to define happiness. Memories impact on the present criteria based on which we form judgment. Past positive or negative experience influences present judgment of well-being in two ways: endowment effect and contrast effect. Endowment effect is the direct contribution to well-being. Positive experiences influence our present happiness as negative experience can diminish our well-being. It also has indirect contrast effect on the present. Contrasting the past negative experience one can experience higher level of well-being or happiness in the present condition, as past positive experience influence in reducing present happiness if present condition falls short of the past experience. Repetition of similar positive experience can diminish present happiness as subsequent similar bad experiences can make one experience the present less bad.

According to them, the hedonic impact is the balance of endowment and contrast effect. Endowment depends on the quality of experience and contrast depends on the similarity of subsequent events. Happiness can be maximized by treating positive experiences as endowment, and negative experiences as contrast. People vary in terms of endowment or contrast effect. Both are memory based. Therefore, satisfaction is related directly to quality of experience or endowment and inversely to the evaluative standard as a contrast.

Moreover, pleasure and pain are derived not merely from the present events but also from memories of the past and expectations of the future. The expectations, hope or fear, can influence the impact of future events. Therefore, hedonic experience is related to the past, present and future. A student scoring less mark more than his expectation will be happy while a student scoring high marks falling short of his high expectation will be less happy. Expectations impact on assessment of well-being. And expectation effect is interpreted as contrast. Higher expectation can have lower positive endowment as lower expectation can have higher positive endowment. Pleasure and pain result not only from present events, but also from past experience and future expectations (Tversky and Griffin, ch. 6, 1991).

## 7. Is SWB a stable condition?

Several research literatures address the issues of whether subjective well-being is a stable condition, or do life events change the state of well-being, and if it does, then is the change temporary or permanent?. There are differences of views on this subject.

Brickman and Campbell (cited in Diener et al., 2006) in their *hedonic treadmill* theory, similar to sensory experience, held the position that people emotionally adapted to life circumstances. They proposed that every experience of happiness or sadness was a short-lived reaction to life's circumstances, and therefore sooner or later the person would return to a state of neutrality; that is, every happy or sad experience was temporary. There is no happiness that is permanent. Chasing after permanent happiness that is around the corner is an illusion. This theory is built on automatic habituation model according to which psychological system reacts to deviations from one's current adaptation level. After the period of adaptation, the system returns to its original neutral state. This explains why people with wealth need not be happier than those who are not wealthy. In a similar manner, people in poorer conditions could be happier than the wealthy. That is, people could be happy despite change in the fortunes.

Accepting the fact that there is a weak correlation between external conditions and happiness, Diener, Lucas and Scollon (2006) brought in some changes in the adaptation theory, without altering the core of the theory. Firstly, in contrast to neutral set point of treadmill theory, they held that most people were happy most of the time and were above neutral set point. Hence, after adaptation, people return to a positive base line, not a neutral point. Secondly, the set points differ among individuals and level of well-being is reasonably stable. Thirdly, rejecting unitary set point, they argued for multiple well-being levels in the global category of happiness, and these variables may move in different directions. Fourthly, while treadmill theory held that life circumstances could not change one's well-being, Diener and others contended that stable external circumstances could have lasting impact on happiness. Other researchers also held that major life events can have lasting impact on oneself psychologically and physically. Lastly, individuals differ in the rate and extent of adaptation even to the same event, depending on the personality traits (Diener, Lucas and Scollon, 2006).

The flaw exists in failing to define happiness accurately by Diener and others. They seem to equate happiness with presence of positive and absence of negative affect, a clear hedonistic position. In the author's opinion, happiness is more than a passing state of pleasure. There is a permanent characteristic of happiness that is closely related to one's core of being or living a

virtuous life. Therefore a distinction needs to be made between more stable state of happiness and temporary happiness which could be more aptly termed as moods. Hence, life's circumstances may impact one's moods but one's inner state of happiness may remain stable irrespective of life's events.

Heady and Wearing (1991) contended that personality traits accounted for more or less stable state of well-being, and changing life events accounted for change in the level of subjective well-being. They refer to personality traits as *stocks* and changing circumstances as *flows*. For most people, they say, level of happiness is stable. According to their *dynamic equilibrium* theory the *flows*, *stocks* and subjective well-being are in dynamic equilibrium state. History repeats itself. That is, people tend to react to life situations in a similar manner, and hence, maintain balance between *stocks* and *flows*. The stability may be for five to ten years. In the longer term, the *stock* level could change impacting subjective well-being. The authors drew their evidence from the Victorian Quality of Life Panel study. They proposed this model as an alternative to adaptation model which suggested that all life events had fleeting impact on well-being; personality model according to which well-being was stable because it was dependent on stable personality traits, and static equilibrium model in which all life events as shocks disturbed the existing equilibrium state (Heady and Wearing, ch. 4, 1991).

### 8. Validity and reliability of SWB

As against the commonly held belief that subjective report of well-being was reliable as one's report would be based on one's supposedly realistic perception of oneself and others, Taylor and Brown (1988) argued that subjective experience of well-being was generally based on one's illusory perception of oneself thereby linking illusion with well-being. Surveying extensive research literature to support their views, they held that overly positive self-evaluations, exaggerated perceptions of mastery and unrealistic optimism were characteristics of normal human thought. And these illusions greatly influence one's evaluation of mental health and well-being.

They pointed out that a healthy person had been described as one who was in contact with reality as found in the writings of Allport, Erikson, Menninger and Fromm (as cited in Taylor and Brown, 1988). In this sense, psychological health depends on accurate perception of reality. Apart from philosophical question on whether we can perceive reality objectively, in

subjective comparison of one's happiness, Taylor and Brown (1988) held the view that there was no objective standards of comparison. They held that normal individuals more readily recalled their positive characteristics than negative attributes of personality. This was associated with the research done on self serving biased causal attribution according to which individuals tend to attribute success to self and failure to the task (Miller & Ross 1975 as cited in Taylor and Brown, 1988). People who report they are happy have high opinion about themselves than those who report otherwise, and these people tend to be unrealistically optimistic in terms of control over life events and that future will bring them happiness. The research studies indicate that this illusory perception of oneself is correlated with positive mood though causal relationship has not been established (Brown and Taylor, 1986). In 1994 Taylor and Brown in reply to Colvin and Block's criticism of their position, Taylor and Brown (1994) reaffirmed their theoretical position that overly positive evaluation of oneself, an illusion of control and unrealistic optimism were prevalent in normal human thought, and these illusions fostered the criteria normally associated with mental health and psychological well-being.

This throws up lots of research questions: the questionability of subjective experience of well-being, and subjective report of well-being, lack of an objective parameter to indicate whether one's well-being and happiness is better than others and, at what point "illusion" can really be distinguished and separated from 'reality'.

### **9. Dynamics of well-being**

The meaning of well-being is dependent on what we measure. Different measurement gives different meaning of well-being. McKennel (1978) held that happiness was different from life satisfaction. Based on secondary analyses of data drawn on American survey McKennel proposed that in both variables there were factors of cognition and affect which moved differently. Happiness and satisfaction measure different things. Happiness and life satisfaction ratings each load substantially on cognitive and affective factors. However, cognition is more associated with satisfaction while affect is with happiness. Hence it is possible that people are happy but unsatisfied and, unhappy but satisfied. The study between two groups showed that while satisfaction remained constant, they differed in happiness, and while happiness remained constant they differed in satisfaction. Age and education also affect satisfaction variable while happiness is more influenced by life's circumstances (McKennel, 1978).

Based on research Lyubormisky (2001) argued that besides cognitive process, motivational process moderated the impact of objective environment on well-being. Both cognitive and motivational processes determine why some people are happier than others. The two processes enhance and maintain enduring happiness and transient moods. These processes explain why some people are happy even in adverse circumstances while some people are unhappy even in the best of circumstances. The author used happiness and well-being interchangeably. There are no absolute objective life circumstances that influence one's happiness. Rather, one construes, interprets and analyses the life circumstances in which case happiness becomes subjective. That is, multiple cognitive and motivational processes underline one's well-being. The author also examines psychological processes such as social comparison, self-evaluation, dissonance reduction and personal perception that make a difference between happy and unhappy people. This position is also in line with various theories that suggest that internal factors more than the external factors determine one's happiness (Lyubormisky, 2001).

The study conducted by Lyubomirsky and Ross (1999) showed that happy people were less influenced by the better performance of the peers whereas the less happier ones were happier when they heard that their peer performed poorer, and felt sadder when their peer performed better. Here the two groups interpret the situations differently. In terms of dissonance reduction, happy and unhappy people, based on their emotional temperament, responded differently in the aftermath of decisions: happy people were satisfied with all of their options while the unhappy felt the options given were mediocre and options denied were even worse. Their studies also showed that happy and unhappy people respond to life situations that reinforce their respective affective dispositions. Moreover, the happy people are less prone to self reflection and unhappy people tend to dwell on past unhappy events and ruminate and make themselves unhappier.

Sheldon and Elliot (1999) argued that besides cognitive and affective processes there was conative process underlying the dynamics of well-being. Conation is the human capacity to pursue personal goals and is important for one's well-being. They termed it as Self concordance model, which reflects self determination theory of Deci and Ryan (1991). The conative process implies putting in much effort to attain the goals which in turn fulfills the basic needs of autonomy, competency and interrelatedness and, fulfillment of needs acts as a moderating influence in furthering the well-being.



In self concordant model, the goals are set by oneself and is congruent with one's 'self'; not pressurized by outside forces and introjections of should and shouldn't. These are self generated goals. The self has the capacity to maximize the organismic need satisfaction. There is internal perceived locus of causality. The goals are in tune with one's core values, preferences and direction in life. The action that follows is self integrated action. Self concordant goals are value based, and one need not always feel 'good' or pleasurable. The effort is sustained from beginning till the achievement of goal.

Self concordance model includes need-satisfaction construct. Achieving goal brings satisfaction of meeting the three needs mentioned above. These needs are universal. Autonomy is self agent, competence is efficiency and ability, and interrelatedness is harmony with others. The fulfillment of three needs is the base for enhancing well-being. It is assumed that in evaluation of well-being, one refers to the past task-competency, self-agency and interrelatedness.

Self concordance goals play a moderating role in fulfillment of needs and its relationship to well-being. The above correlation was researched in the study of 169 university students of Rochester (Sheldon and Elliot, 1999).

## 10. Subjective well-being and culture

In the later development Diener and Suh (2013) advocated cultural relativism. What is important in one culture may not be so in other cultures. Cultural relativism refers to internal standards, which form basis for judgment about what is good in life. The authors held that measures of well-being could not be solely based on life satisfaction and affect. Achieving goals and values are also equally important while measuring well-being. While cultural relativism is advocated, the danger of absolute relativism must be avoided. As culture differs, measures of well-being also differ. In individualistic culture, one uses emotions to evaluate life satisfaction while in collectivist culture one measures life satisfaction in terms of social appraisals (Diener & Suh, 2013)

While many literatures address well-being in the context of individual, Sarah C White (2008), drawing from research conducted by the research group largely in Bangladesh on well-being held that well-being was a process and was to be understood in the context of community and relationship. Conceptualising well-being that is more applicable to developing countries as 'doing good' and 'feeling well', reference was made to the moral quality with religious

connotation in 'doing good' in which case well-being was not just about 'doing good' but 'living a good life'. 'Living a good life' implied community and relational aspects more pronounced in developing countries. 'Feeling well' referred to feeling at ease with one's place in the world (White, 2008). The research further pointed out that well-being was socially and culturally contextualised and was person-centred in which no claim was made for 'objective reality'. The reality was perceived and lived in a specific context. The research group therefore proposed five-dimensional framework of well-being, namely material, relational, subjective, time and space. Briefly, material referred to living standard of life; relational to community aspect; subjective referred to personal values and perceptions; time referred to past reflections and expectations of the future, and finally space meant the geographical and living space that contributed to the understanding of well-being. 'Relatedness' as a central issue emerged from the research. The low quality of life would imply social isolation and high quality of life connotes social connectedness. While in the Western ideology relationship is external to the individual, in collectivist culture it is part of the person. Hence, subjectivity and relationality are intertwined (White, 2008).

Triandis (ch. 2, 2013) contended that in individualism the self was regarded as autonomous and, personal goals and attitudes play significant role in influencing the behaviour. In collectivism, the self is regarded in relationship to the group and group goals have priority over individual goals. Interdependency is more important than independency in collectivist culture.

In individualistic countries, people are satisfied with self, freedom, and recreation and have higher SWB. Diener (2000) found higher correlation between Self esteem and SWB in individualistic culture (0.65) than in poorer countries (0.15), and self esteem is significant with satisfaction of basic needs. In poorer countries, basic needs are not met, and so, self esteem is not significant and there is no relationship with SWB. However, people with less desires tend to have high level of SWB. Research also shows that self esteem is related to self enhancement, very much encouraged in individualistic culture, and is related to SWB (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

In collectivist culture, self-centred and other-centred are unrelated, while they are negatively related in individualist culture. In collectivist culture people enjoy more interpersonal relationship and this increases their SWB. In collectivist culture, therefore, interpersonal

relationship and agreeableness is more important in reference to SWB than self esteem to SWB (Realo, 1999).

In reference to social change, Lewin (1952) introduced the concept of quasi stationary equilibrium state. He opined that there were social forces that pushed equilibrium state up or down. At some point these two sets of forces are in balance. But this state is temporary. At the cultural level, income could increase and war could decrease SWB.

Competitiveness as in Individualistic culture can lead to stress which in turn lowers SWB. Affluence can influence SWB as it increases self determination and environmental control. People with high level of sense of control have better health, greater life satisfaction and less depressive symptoms. But even in lower income group, people with high sense of control enjoy better health. Therefore control beliefs could be acting as a moderating effect (Lachman & Weaver, 1998).

The fundamental question about well-being leads to the question of understanding of self in relation to others, which would differ from individualistic to collectivist cultures. John C Christopher (1999) held that earlier research studies focused on defining well-being as the outcome of set of measures, neglecting to understand the very nature of well-being. He argued that the underlying assumptions of the concept of well-being that had come from the western roots must be understood critically. According to him research inquiry into psychological well-being had been shaped by western individualistic moral vision of the good or ideal person. "Individualism relies on an atomistic understanding of the person as being metaphysically discrete and separate from other persons" (Christopher, 1999, p. 142). Society is a second-order level of reality in which an individual who is self contained and autonomous expresses his goals, desires, potentialities and rights (Christopher, 1999). The primacy of self and capacity of oneself is emphasized in individualism. Subjective well-being places the responsibility on the individual to evaluate well-being according to one's standards and norms about good life. The good life in individualism is based on an individual's rights and freedom to pursue happiness.

Christopher argued saying that life satisfaction, one of the components of subjective well-being, was based on assumptions of individualistic culture that emphasized self expression, self promotion and the pursuit of self satisfaction, which might be viewed as selfishness in collectivist culture. The affective balance, another component of subjective well-being was also subjected to self enhancement bias that was prevalent in individualistic culture (Christopher

1999). While happiness is defined as emotional satisfaction in Western culture, in Eastern culture filial piety and harmony with the others characterize happiness. Even Ryff's psychological well-being is based on theories and assumptions of individualism. The characteristics of self autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth and self acceptance are based on the concept of self that is metaphysically discrete from others. But this is uncharacteristic in collectivist culture (Christopher, 1999).

Suh (2003) also contested that the culture shaped the self which in turn was involved in the way one thought and felt. Similar to Christopher's view, understanding of self in the West is individualistic different from the Eastern perspective where the individual is fundamentally socially oriented. The self plays a dominant role in the judgment of subjective well-being. The information is accessed and processed depending on the expected motives of the self, which differ from culture to culture. In the West, the central motives of the self are self-enhancement and self consistency reflected in self esteem. That is why correlation is found between self esteem and WB whereas these are weak predictors of WB in the Eastern tradition.

Though Diener and Diener (1995) found correlation between self esteem and SWB across 31 nations, the strength of correlation varies across cultures. In USA it was 0.60 but in India it was 0.08.

Subjective well-being requires judgment requiring mental process. Individuals generally rely on readily available cues and culture provides the cues for accessing information. In the West the emphasis being more on individual, inner attributes and attitudes, the focus is on inner phenomenological experience as the basis for judgment of SWB. The leaning is towards emotion laden information as opposed to the East (Edwards & Bryan, 1997).

The above discussion highlights the fact that the concepts and underlying assumptions of well-being that is so widely used have their roots in individualism, which is culture specific, and therefore, does not have universal applicability in non-western culture. The onerous task is thus to understand well-being within a specific culture and traditions.

## 11. Universality of well-being concept

The above discussion on cultural relativism throws up an important question whether well-being is a universal concept. Martha Nussbaum attempted to answer this question in her capability approach [cited in Tiberius, 2004). Following Aristotle's framework, she argued that well-being was human flourishing; people lived well when they enacted essential human functions, which might be universal. However, in the list of functions, some function such as sensitivity to environment may be essential in some culture while in others it may not be.

These differences refer to the source of well-being. To have the differences among cultures common usage of well-being must be assumed. This means it must carry some common connotation or definition. A formal analysis of well-being more than finding correlation between factors is necessary. But this requires that all cultures share the same concept of well-being. Do all cultures understand and use the word well-being in the same sense? Aristotle talked about living well based on understanding of human nature, and his concept has ethical overtone, and evaluative understanding of what good life is in reference to virtues such as courage, generosity and kindness. Again, are there differences in the formal understanding of these concepts? Are ingredients of good life proposed by Nussbaum universal? It appears they are universal as they are based on intuitive value understanding of good life, and there may be only difference of degree in the ingredients.

An account of well-being that is universally applicable would depend on whether there are cross-cultural agreements on capabilities that are part of a fully human functioning. It is not an empirical question, rather a philosophical question. Well-being cannot totally depend on one's subjective evaluation or attitude. One may *feel* good about a thing but it could be bad from the point of well-being. Lots of people *feel* good even in repressive and bad conditions. Well-being is different from feeling happy, which is subjective. A formal account of well-being must guard against subjectivity of what is satisfying. Mere life satisfaction and desire fulfillment alone cannot define SWB.

Psychological studies *measure* well-being and they presuppose formal account of well-being. However, subjective valuation of what is good cannot be undermined. But at the same time it cannot be taken as absolute. It requires verification with objective criteria. Whether there are universal criteria or universal understanding of well-being across culture is a philosophical investigation. The differences across culture may be subtle. Probably a middle path between

SWB and PWB needs to be found. Cross cultural understanding of the uses of the word well-being is necessary for formal analysis (Tiberius, 2004).

## 12. Conclusion

The wide application of well-being concept in various fields brings to focus the need for understanding the foundations based upon which well-being is conceived. The analysis in the present Paper was undertaken to examine and analyse various aspects of the foundations of well-being as different meanings of well-being emerge due to various assumptions and perspectives.

The analysis of Diener's subjective well-being shows the tendency towards hedonism, which cannot be the base for a good life and well-being. The subjectivity in Diener's definition of well-being lacks objectivity, as it was pointed out by Ryff. Moreover, to define well-being just in terms of subjective well-being is narrow. It needs to be broad enough to include psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of well-being.

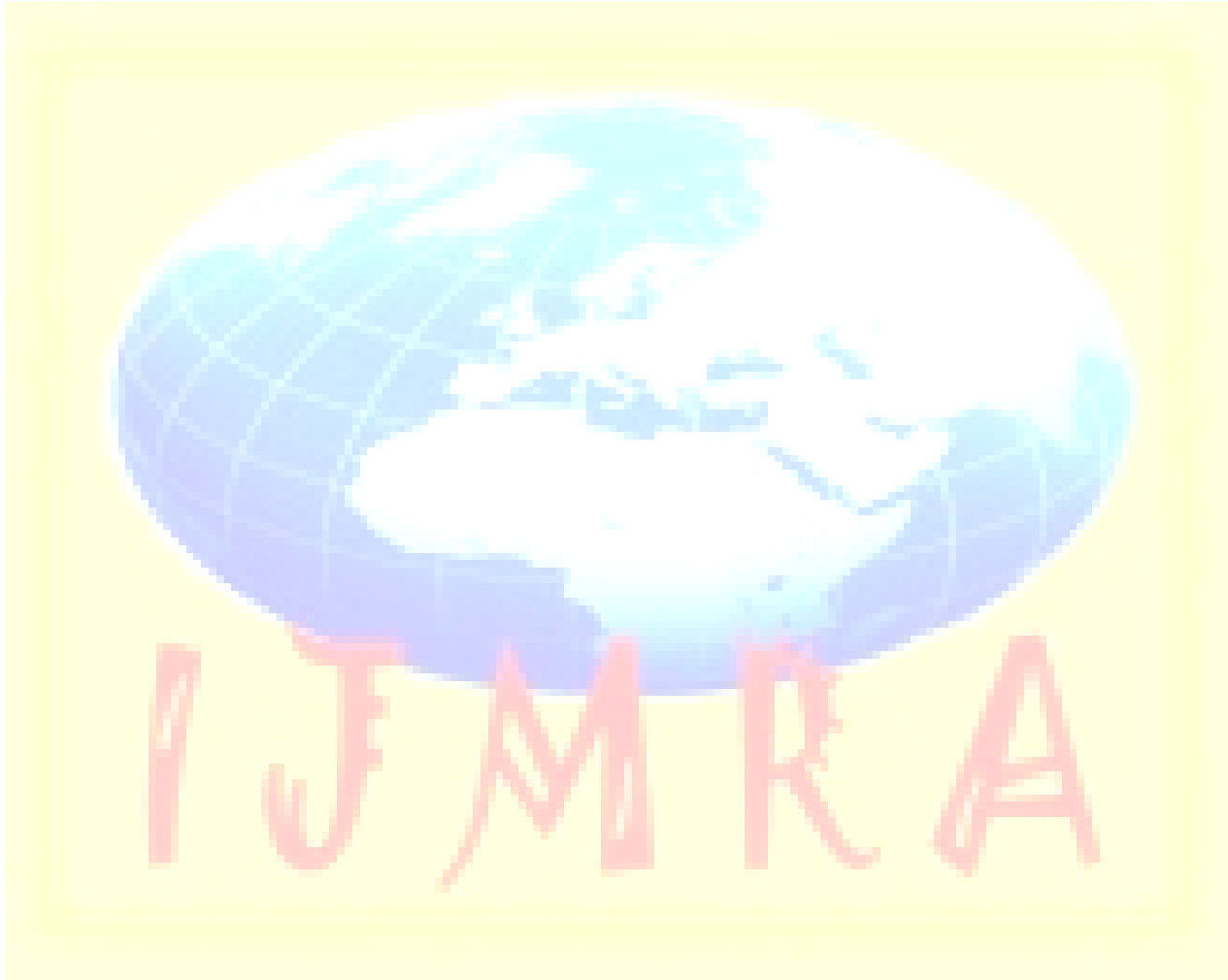
The dispute on the relationship between negative and positive affect has not been fully settled. The analysis pointed out various opinions on the matter, some holding for independency and others for interdependency between the variables. Moreover, Diener seem to identify positive and negative affect with happiness, which is highly questionable. There are also divergent opinions whether happiness is identical with life satisfaction or not. These throw up lots of questions that need further research.

Report on well-being is based one's current judgment, which is influenced by various factors, as it was shown in the analysis. It is also possible that judgment is influenced by bias and social desirability. This poses a challenge to the reliability and objectivity of well-being. The challenge is to differentiate realistic well-being from illusory well-being with attributes of objectivity combined with subjectivity and validity.

The analysis brought to light various processes that are underlying well-being such as psychological, motivational and conative. This is an area where further research could unravel underlying processes that will throw more light on the understanding of well-being.

Recently there has been a great deal of research on cultural relativism in reference to understanding well-being. The 'self' is the central agent involved in acquiring and interpreting information and forming a judgment about well-being. Cultural norms, traditions and values shape the 'self', and therefore what is good in one culture may not be so in some other culture.

Judgments about well-being and what good life is differ from culture to culture, and rightly so. Cultural relativism, therefore, cannot just be ignored or undermined. Hence, the challenge is to respect and appreciate local culture and cultural relativism in the concept of well-being, and at the same time find ingredients of well-being that is universal. Further research can explore ways to integrate the universality of well-being with the heritage and values of local culture.



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