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## APPROACHES TO WELL-BEING

A Multidimensional Field of Research

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# Approaches to Well-being<sup>1</sup>

## A Multidimensional Field of Research



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Contrary to popular belief, the notion of well-being is not self-evident. It is a polysemic concept that evolves according to the different disciplines that studied it and which have, over the years, attempted to create indicators to either measure it or highlight its determinants. This article aims to emphasise this multidimensional aspect. In order to do so, it will first review the plurality of its definitions and measurements, their evolutions over the years, and what they owe to international organisations. Then, it will highlight the many (unresolved) scientific debates that continue to surround this concept: how is it possible to capture well-being at individual and collective levels, and both in an objective and subjective manner?

**KEYWORDS:** well-being, definition, literature review

### **Les approches du bien-être**

#### **Un champ de recherche multidimensionnel**

Contrairement aux idées reçues, la notion de bien-être ne va pas de soi. Il s'agit d'un concept polysémique qui évolue en fonction des différentes disciplines qui l'ont pris pour objet et qui ont tenté, au fil des ans, d'élaborer des indicateurs permettant de le mesurer ou de mettre en lumière ses principaux déterminants. L'objectif de cet article est de souligner cet aspect multidimensionnel. Pour ce faire, il reviendra tout d'abord sur la pluralité de ses définitions et de ses mesures, leurs évolutions au cours du temps – et ce qu'elles doivent aux organisations internationales. Puis, il soulignera les nombreux débats scientifiques (non résolus) qui continuent d'entourer ce concept : comment saisir le bien-être au niveau individuel et collectif, de façon objective et subjective ?

**MOTS-CLÉS :** bien-être, définition, revue de littérature

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1. The original version of this article was published in French in the n°131-132 issue of the RPSF journal, [https://www.persee.fr/doc/caf\\_2431-4501\\_2019\\_num\\_131\\_1\\_3349?q=o%09Perron+Zoé,+Buzaud+Julia,+Diter+Kevin+et+Martin+Claude,+%22Les+approches+du+bien-être.+Un+champ+de+recherche+multidimensionnel%22](https://www.persee.fr/doc/caf_2431-4501_2019_num_131_1_3349?q=o%09Perron+Zoé,+Buzaud+Julia,+Diter+Kevin+et+Martin+Claude,+%22Les+approches+du+bien-être.+Un+champ+de+recherche+multidimensionnel%22) (accessed 14 September 2021)

The definition of well-being seems obvious and there lies undoubtedly the first difficulty. Definitions offered by various dictionaries distinguish three types of well-being: it would mean a "*pleasant state resulting from the satisfaction of body needs and the quietness of the mind*", as well as "*material comfort allowing a pleasant life*" (definitions from the French Larousse dictionary). Thus, well-being would mean the combination of these different physical, mental and material aspects. But to what level and what weighting of these different aspects do we experience this feeling of well-being? How do we feel it and what makes it different from relatively close notions of "happiness", "joy", "good quality of life", "feeling of satisfaction" about our lives? Is it only a feeling? Does this state rather refer to material, physical, mental comfort, or even a combination of all these elements, in short on conditions of happiness? Is it a stable or a flickering state?

Beyond the difficulty of defining this notion of "well-being", several avenues of research have been explored simultaneously and put this concept into tension: should well-being be analysed individually or collectively, from a micro- or a macro-societal point of view? Should it be regarded as an objective dimension, that could be measured with indicators of the population's living conditions, wealth and state of health, or as a subjective concept, based on self-evaluations of the feeling of well-being, happiness or satisfaction about one's own life? Finally, how can we relate this notion to the feeling of social justice?

Well-being being a multidimensional notion, this literature review aims at understanding how it has been understood, constructed and evaluated by various disciplines and expert circles.

## Various Disciplines on a Multidimensional Object

### The Diversity of Approaches

The notion of "well-being" belongs to a semantic field that includes at least happiness, joy and pleasure (Pawin, 2013 a and b). However, the notions of "well-being" and "happiness" have probably resulted in the largest academic interest. Besides philosophers' contributions since Antiquity with Aristotle<sup>2</sup> and Épicure, or during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (G. W. Leibniz, B. Spinoza, E. Kant<sup>3</sup>, A. Schopenhauer) on issues of "good life" or happiness, the notion of "well-being" is taken into account in surveys right after the First World War in England, prior to significant developments to date, particularly under the impetus of international organisations. Since the 2000s, scientific journals dedicated to these issues started to appear in the field of economics and psychology, such as the *Journal of Happiness Studies* or the *Journal of Positive Psychology*. For some, well-being is a very specific notion that should not be confused with other ones. This is the position of M. Forsé and S. Langlois who consider that "*it is a somewhat polysemic notion that should be differentiated from the related notions of happiness, satisfaction, pleasure, usefulness and quality of life. Yet the frontiers between these notions are not totally consensual*" (Forsé and Langlois, 2014, p. 262). According to economist R. Layard, well-being pertains to "feeling well—to enjoy life and want this feeling to be maintained" (2006, p. 12). For philosopher D. Haybron, it is a "*positive emotional state*" (2008). However, sociologist D. Bartram, co-editor of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2012)

2. Concerning happiness, Aristotle distinguishes happiness as a pleasurable experience—hedonism—from happiness as a characteristic of "living well"—eudemonism. According to him, a happy man lives well and is doing well.

3. "*Power, wealth, consideration, even health, as well as full well-being and satisfaction with one's condition, is what we call happiness*" (Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*).

questions the relevance of any attempt to define this notion *a priori*. Should a definition of happiness or well-being be imposed, since individuals are the only ones who can appreciate whether they feel happy or not, and knowing that this perception constantly varies in time? Statisticians D. Neff and W. Olsen defend a similar position: "*individuals themselves are the best judges of their own happiness*" (2007, p. 50).

According to Finnish sociologist E. Allardt (1976 and 1993), well-being is related to "the satisfaction of a need" and he differentiates it from happiness and the standard of living, or from the quality of life. In the perspective of E. Allardt's work, S. Johansson distinguishes these different concepts. In his opinion, the standard of living first refers to the individual as consumer: "*individuals command over resources in the form of money, possessions, knowledge, mental and physical energy, social relations, security and so on, through which the individual can control and consciously direct his living conditions*" (Johansson, 1970, p. 25). Consequently, well-being would be a collective notion in which individuals, defined as citizens, try to advance their society through collective and institutional decisions and actions. And, finally, happiness would fall within the private sphere, on which neither the market nor politics should exercise any influence. Social psychologists A. Campbell, P. E. Converse and W. Rodgers, specialised in voting behaviours in the United States, highlight that "*the level of satisfaction can be precisely defined as the perceived discrepancy between aspiration and achievement, ranging from the perception of fulfilment to that of deprivation. Satisfaction implies a judgmental or cognitive experience while happiness suggests an experience of feeling of affect*" (Campbell et al., 1976). In many of these research works, "*Happiness is of the order of the emotional and the affective, thus it is more subjected to mood swings and constitutes a less reliable index on the long term: this is why Anglo-Saxons prefer to use the term "satisfaction" and its derivatives*" (Pawin, 2014, p. 276). According to J. Delhey, sociologist specialised in the comparison of the links between quality of life and social cohesion, "happiness" does not mean the same thing as "well-being". The author prefers to use the term "*subjective quality of life*", which, in his opinion, would be "*the sum of people's experiences of opportunities and the actual choices they make and the life results they achieve within their social context*" (Delhey, 2004, p. 2). For political scientist G. Duncan, the notions of "subjective well-being", of "satisfaction with life" or "happiness" are almost synonyms. Well-being being composed of two words, he prefers to look into the term "happiness" and its etymology. Thus, he highlights that "*in many European languages other than English, the words that we normally translate as happiness (glück, bonheur, felicità, etc.) carry both the connotation of feeling good and having good fortune or luck. The old English hap began, however, with the meaning of 'fortune' or 'luck'—not necessarily 'good'. In the 1790s, T. Malthus (1993) described as 'happy' any nation that could feed its populace*" (Duncan, 2014, p. 7).

Well-being would be the result of a complex mix of dimensions: material comfort, emotional stability, being in good health, the level of collective well-being, trust, etc. In their research, P. Hall and M. Lamont (2009)<sup>4</sup> bring the societal dimension to the fore. These researchers propose to analyse different institutional and cultural support systems, which groups and individuals can access to overcome challenges they face in life. More precisely, they focus on the notion of "recognition" to understand how mental health, the feeling of isolation and consequences on poverty articulate. Although material resources are necessary to live a decent life and enjoy some comfort, many people attribute this feeling of well-being to the access to social resources (to have relatives around, support within the community, trust in the institutions, etc.), yet authors also emphasise the importance of the feeling of security acquired during childhood, the ability to cooperate

4. See also the article by P. A. Hall and M. Lamont published in the n°131-132 issue of the RPSF journal.

with others, to make sense of one's experiences, the ability to collectively mobilise to gain recognition. In an interview of M. Lamont conducted in 2011 by N. Duvoux, E. Tenret and N. Vezinat, this sociologist from Harvard University highlights that:

*"D. Kahneman's surveys show that we are happier when we meet friends and exercise. These are very individual images of happiness. Issues of solidarity, for instance, have no place in the formulation of this question, where people being surveyed must fill diaries and mark down when they feel best. Are we less happy when we know that we live in a society that does not care for the poor like us? These questions must be answered empirically, without presupposed answers".*

[Duvoux et al., 2011]

Many states, such as Scandinavian countries or Bhutan, who, in the 1970s, invented the gross national happiness index (GNH), have for a long time stressed the importance of people's well-being, as well as the importance of social institutions, which, through the quality of their services, ensure people and society as a whole a decent standard of living.

## The Influence of International Organisations

Several major international organisations have taken up this notion of "well-being", by submitting their own vision and definition of the topic. In 1946, the World Health Organisation (WHO) was the first organisation to include a definition of well-being in its constitution's foreword, which details the meaning of "health": *"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"* or else *"health is one of the main factors affecting global well-being"* (WHO, 1985, p. 1). For WHO, health is one of the first conditions of well-being. Moreover, the WHO's European observatory on health systems and policies highlights the economic interest of this health component of well-being, in the sense that health *"raises economic productivity and national growth, which can promote social well-being—a healthy population is more productive"* (WHO and the European regional bureau, 2014, p. 120). Considering and measuring well-being are also at the heart of the United Nations Organisation's concerns (UN), which stresses the importance of social bonds and freedom in its definition of well-being. The main message advanced is that wealth is not enough to make people happy.

*"In fact, political freedom, strong social networks and the absence of corruption, together, are factors that explain more than wealth differences in well-being between the highest and the lowest ranked countries. Other significant characteristics are at the individual and family levels, a good mental and physical health, having someone to rely on, job security, family stability and the trust of relatives, which are all crucial factors."*

[WHO and the European regional bureau, 2014, p. 111].

In 2012, the UN declared March 20 the "International Day of Happiness", stating that happiness and well-being were *"universal goals and aspirations the world over"*. The UN also much insisted that public policies acknowledge these two notions as recognised and stated goals.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for its part, emphasises the economic and monetary dimensions of well-being, by stating that *"a wealthier economy will be better able to create and preserve other conditions for greater well-being, including a healthy environment, the possibility for the average person to complete at least ten years of study and the likelihood of living a relatively*



*long, healthy life*" (Boarini et al., 2006, p. 7). Although this monetary component is a major factor for people's well-being, OECD acknowledges the importance of other indicators: "Measuring well-being must therefore build on GDP or other monetary indicators, but must also be completed by other social and environmental indicators. The quality of public administrations should also be measured, since well-being will be all the greater if institutions allow citizens to manage their own lives and feel that their time and resources investment will be profitable" (ibid., p. 7).

France is part of this movement of thoughts on well-being, although empirical research started later (and mainly since the 1970s). Sociologists and historians began to investigate this research field even more recently (first in the areas of labour, culture or leisure sociology) and have enriched the study of this multidisciplinary research topic (Pawin, 2014). Other sciences, such as natural science, have also invested the study of well-being, making this concept more and more complex and polysemic.

## The Measure of Well-Being in Tension

Well-being is therefore a multidimensional notion, whose definition is highly discussed and disputed. Measuring well-being is also difficult because of its different approaches, be it individual or collective well-being, objective or subjective well-being, or else well-being in its relation to social justice.

### Individual and Collective Well-being

Well-being is a key notion for disciplines focused on the individual scale (psychology, economy, biomedical approach), because it reveals physical and mental health. Some research works attempt to articulate all these dimensions. For example, in a Swedish study focusing on the elderly's well-being, B. Halleröd and D. Seldén (2013) have identified five components of individual well-being and, on the contrary, "ill-being":

- Health: subjective evaluation of one's health and indicators of somatic health problems;
- Functions: what people can or cannot do, for instance if they need help to perform daily tasks or struggle moving;
- Psycho-social indicators: being discouraged or sad, anxious and worried;
- Social relations: not having close friend(s), lacking contact with neighbours;
- Economy: experiences of economic hardship, vulnerable economic situation.

The two researchers assert that these spheres are all interconnected and impact one another. When the feeling of ill-being reaches several spheres, they mention a "*multi-dimensional well-being problem*"; health issues resulting in a multidimensional problem more quickly than others. Although most studies highlight phenomena of "vicious circles", "positive circles" or virtuous circles also exist.

However, well-being affects the whole of everyday life and is thus part of an economic, social, political and geographical context. Therefore, the study of well-being does not only focus on individuals and can be included in much larger fields of analysis. W. Aschauer, for example, highlights that the lack of social acknowledgment, integration and belonging (especially in Europe) generates a more global distress which he, as well as other authors, qualifies as "*societal malaise*" (Aschauer, 2014). The sociologist shows that the fear of social decline in conservative states and a greater precariousness in liberal countries lead to high levels of dissatisfaction. Most economists, mainly influenced by the utilitarian paradigm, think that an optimal economic policy maximises

collective well-being, understood as the sum (or even the average) of well-being of all individuals. Utilitarianism stresses that the well-being of all is more important than individual well-being. It is in this spirit that "well-being economics" developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

*"The most often used optimality criterion is that by Vilfredo Pareto (1905): a situation is optimal when a person's satisfaction cannot be improved anymore without damaging that of another. It is an efficiency criterion that can eliminate situations of obvious waste where a better use of resources could raise everyone's well-being".*

[Généreux, 2003, p. 1]

We can then question the following point: is social, collective well-being, common to an entire society, essential to individual well-being? Can we be happy if the country in which we live is plagued with social unrest? Are these two aspects of well-being separable?

This debate on economic conditions of well-being and collective happiness has recently developed, especially within the framework of a critique of indicators usually used to compare national performances, meaning the gross domestic product (GDP) and its growth (Senik, 2014). In France, in 2009, the Siglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report examines the limits of a GDP approach, the preferred index until then, to measure people's well-being. This report suggests more relevant indicators of social progress. On the basis that current well-being *"depends both on economic resources, such as incomes, and non-economic aspects of people's lives: what they do and can do, how they appreciate life, their natural surroundings"* (Stiglitz et al., 2009, p. 13), these works include the multiple dimensions of well-being: material living conditions (income, consumption and wealth); health; education; personal activities, including work; participation to political life and governance; social connections and relationships; the environment (in its actual and future states); economic and physical insecurity.

In 1974, R. Easterlin already showed that several aspects of well-being escaped the measurement of GDP, including non-commercial aspects (domestic work, childcare, leisure time, time with relatives etc.) or specific features of societies (their democratic nature, the freedom of movement and thought, the access to an efficient and independent justice system). The Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report also adds that *"what is really important are the capacities (capabilities) of individuals, that is to say the range of possibilities available to them and their freedom to choose, within this range, the kind of life they value"* (ibid., p. 17). These authors claim that measuring all these elements requires objective as well as subjective data.

## Objective and Subjective Well-being

Well-being has long been considered as a phenomenon that could solely be measured by economic and monetary indicators, even by health or absence of morbidity indicators. Indeed, the first national and international well-being measures mainly focused on GDP, as they considered wealth and the possession of material goods as indicative of a higher state of well-being. Ever since, research continued and if it is still difficult to give a clear and precise definition of the elements composing well-being, almost all agree that subjective well-being is as important as more objective aspects of well-being (health and resources). It is precisely what WHO stresses in the following excerpts:

*"The elements of objective well-being include in particular the living conditions of people and the possibilities to realise their potential, which have to be fairly distributed among all, without any kind of discrimination. The equal possibility*



*to enjoy good health is part of objective well-being. The subjective well-being comes in particular from lived experiences of people in their own lives."*  
[WHO and European regional bureau, 2014, p. 95]

Or further:

*"Well-being includes two dimensions, a subjective and an objective one. It includes the personal experience of life and a comparison between living conditions and social norms and values [...] Subjective well-being can include a person's general feeling of well-being, his/her psychological behaviours, as well as his/her emotional condition. Whereas objective well-being and living conditions are for instance determined by health, education, employment, social relations, (natural and built) environment, civic engagement and governance, housing and leisure."*  
[*ibid.*, p. 117]

OECD, which at first mainly focused on the economic and monetary aspects of well-being, now acknowledges the importance of the subjective component. This organisation insists on the measure and evaluation of subjective well-being and identifies three components of this state of being:

- The hedonist well-being: the self-perception of autonomy, skills, goals in life, places of control, that is to say aspects and events a person thinks to be in control of;
- Positive and negative states: experiences of joy, happiness, pride and anxiety, sadness, pain;
- Evaluation of life: satisfaction at work, feeling of security.

Sociologist J. Delhey stresses the importance of the subjective aspect of well-being and the limitations of global objective indicators, which he perceives as *"selective, incomplete and arbitrary, because they are more in line with the researcher's choices than that of individuals. Many of these problems can be avoided if people themselves, as experts, make an overall assessment of their life"* (Delhey, 2004, p. 6).

Although most authors agree that subjective well-being is a combination of a feeling of happiness and satisfaction towards the life people live, definitions and measuring indicators have been, and are still, widely discussed. R. Veenhoven (1984), D. Bartram (2012) and S. Langlois (2014) agree that satisfaction towards the life lived includes a cognitive dimension, whereas the issue of happiness refers to the emotional dimension of well-being. These two indicators are therefore not exchangeable, yet closely related (declaring oneself unhappy is hardly compatible with a high satisfaction about one's life). American psychologist E. Diener considers that *"subjective well-being comprises people's longer-term levels of pleasant affect, lack of unpleasant affect, and life satisfaction"* (Diener, 1994, p. 16). Sociologists M. Forsé and M. Parodi (2014) identify three components of one's own life satisfaction: a person's resources (financial, as well as physical and mental health), employment and the quality of professional life; the feeling of success as well as work and professional recognition, various aspects of sentimental and social life (couple, children, friends, participation in voluntary associations, etc.).

Subjective well-being would therefore be a combination of a feeling of happiness and life satisfaction, including different aspects such as the cognitive evaluation of life, positive emotions such as joy or pride, as well as the presence—or absence—of negative emotions such as pain or worry. In order to fully grasp the notion of well-being, it is therefore necessary to include both its objective and subjective components. Well-being, mainly in its subjective dimension, is a concept that is experiencing significant growth, particularly since it refers, for a number of political leaders and businessmen, to the idea that happier citizens enable more economically efficient societies.

## Well-being and the Feeling of Social Justice

Several comparative research projects compare these different components: objective and subjective, individual and collective. Some of these research works focus on the role played by the perception of living in a fair or unfair world. For researchers focusing on this angle, well-being seems to go hand in hand with the feeling of social justice. If individuals feel social injustice, their well-being is impacted. *"Doesn't the feeling of being discriminated against play a role in the feeling of well-being? How does the place occupied by one's social grouping within society and the treatment accorded to it impact the feeling of well-being?"* asks S. Langlois (2014, p. 391). To support his questions, the sociologist brings forward the issue of the relative distribution of income. If households, especially middle-class households, experience a feeling of social injustice concerning their income (that of *"not receiving their fair share in society"*), then their feeling of well-being is impacted. *"To understand well-being, one should not only study real wages, but also how everyone perceives this income, or else, other associated representations"* (*ibid.*, p. 400). M. Forsé and M. Parodi show that it is above all the comparison between one's situation to that of others that grounds this feeling of social justice. They make a distinction between macrojustice, carried by individuals over their entire society, and microjustice related to their personal situation against that of others. These authors point out that *"satisfaction is (also) a matter of comparison"* against others (Forsé and Langlois, 2014).

From the fieldwork *Perception of Inequalities and Feelings of Justice* (PISJ in French) conducted in France in 2009, G. Manzo asks: *"Does the income impact happiness on its own or does it do so through the comparisons it stimulates in people? [...] To what extent does the income play a role in stimulating advantageous comparisons—for those at the top—or disadvantageous comparisons—for those at the bottom?"* (Manzo, 2011, p. 175). The results of the survey showed that, the more an interviewee feels he/she lives in a fair society and receives a fair salary, the higher his/her level of satisfaction. The feeling of social justice—or injustice—is almost always linked to a comparison of one's own situation with that of others. In studies on well-being, many authors have focused on this aspect, considering that this is an important component of people's well-being (Senik, 2014). R. Di Tella (Tella et al., 2003) has thus demonstrated that, when the unemployment rate is high, people's happiness is less, even for those who already have a job, because the risk to lose this job is higher and a fear sets in even for those with a stable job. This may suggest that, when the rate of unemployment is high, unemployed people feel less isolated and they are less likely to feel that their job loss is a result of personal failure. This shows the consequences of the effects of comparing one's situation with that of another, in the sense that an individual situation is less badly experienced if it is shared by many others.

## Conclusion

Comparing oneself to others may seem like a trait of human nature. However, this trait also includes a cultural component. Research works identified in this article show that if people feel some kind of social justice, be it macro or micro, and if people's aspirations and expectations are respected, then they are likely to be happier. However, a feeling of social injustice, as well as a sense of deprivation, lead to much lesser levels of well-being. This explains the importance of not solely focusing on the so-called "objective" aspects of well-being. The sense of social justice or deprivation, the levels of expectations and aspirations expressed by individuals, or else the fact of socially comparing oneself to others, are dimensions that cannot be measured objectively, using quantified and scientifically

stable indicators. Therefore, one of the challenges of these contemporary studies is to compare the "objective" and "subjective" data collected (Aschauer, 2019, p. 15).

To conclude this literature review, it is also worth mentioning the numerous studies that criticize the normative aspects of this concern for happiness and well-being (Ahmed, 2010; Cederström, 2019; Frawley, 2015; Graham, 2011; Illouz and Cabanas, 2018; Wilson, 2008). This kind of research shows not only the effects of the imperative of happiness expressed by experts in this area, the shortcomings of the political uses made of this "science of happiness" and, more specifically, of positive psychology, but above all the individualising vision it favours and promotes. The way to access happiness has become a market consistent with the neoliberal ideology, which dominates all sectors of social life, from school to the labour market (Martin, 2019).

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