

WELL-BEING IN ADULTS

The subjective well-being of a person as a prism of personal and socio-psychological characteristics

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Objective. This article examines the concept of subjective well-being and the approaches to researching it and its qualities; it also attempts to create a reticulated personal and socio-psychological portrait of a person who sustains a certain level of subjective well-being.

Design. To accomplish this objective, we conducted a meta-analysis of modern empirical studies of those personal traits and socio-psychological aspects of a person's existence which are "responsible" for the person's interaction with a complex changing world. They included: personal self-perception, including issues of identity; the person's defense mechanisms and reactions to stress, including the stress of others (characteristics of empathy); self-attitudes; will power; conscious setting of goals; interpersonal relationships; and ability to deliberately regulate one's personality.

Results. The results of different Russian and international empirical studies are analyzed. We concluded that subjective well-being is the result of the interaction of internal powers (conventionally, personal factors) with social context (conventionally, objective external aspects).

Conclusion. Based on this finding, the most insightful and timely method for studying subjective well-being can be the creation of models which involve the double correlation of "internal" and "external" sides of the process of achieving subjective well-being.

Keywords: subjective well-being, objective well-being, social problems

Introduction

Current research by sociologists and social psychologists, on one side, and clinical psychologists and psychiatrists, on the other, raises the question of a dangerous trend in modern society. In one respect, it is hard to overlook the growing popular-

ity of discourse in the media, blogs, and popular science regarding the quickening pace of modern society's development, which inevitably causes complications in people's ability to adapt to the modern world and, as a result, leads to problems in people's perceptions of their personal well-being.

Discourse on this issue cannot be considered new; the concept of "future shock" leading to maladjustment, neuroses, escapism, and, as a consequence, to psychological ill-being (Toffler, 2002), was put forward several decades ago. Nonetheless, the fact that the subject conjures up a certain tired rhetoric does not render it less appropriate to our time: a person has to alter his or her behavioral strategies in order to support optimal indexes of his or her inner "thermometer" in a changing environment.

The concept of "well-being" is multifactorial, and in our opinion, this concept cannot be defined separately from the person who experiences it, and who evaluates it subjectively. So-called objective (economic) well-being is based on nothing more than having a sufficient quantity of economic goods and social resources, as well as the potential to own them. We consider subjective well-being in relation to two theoretical approaches—the hedonistic and eudemonistic. We understand the hedonistic approach to be a set of internal judgments and assessments regarding the degree of satisfaction with various aspects of one's own life, and the eudemonistic approach as the potential for achieving self-realization as a whole (Sozontov, 2006; Zotova & Karapetyan, 2015; Diener, 1984). These definitions are very general, so they will be concretized below, because subjective well-being always needs to be operationalized through linkage with individual psychological and socio-psychological factors.

The situation would be simpler for researchers and practitioners if the hypotheses advanced earlier (and considered natural by virtue of intuitive logic) regarding the direct and proximate connection between one's subjective and so-called objective manifestations of well-being were confirmed. Indeed, objective well-being that relies on real economic, political, and social living standards in a certain country could directly affect the entirety of a national population's subjective perceptions.

However, both evocative cases (such as frequent instances of mass-shooting in U.S. schools, which seem to indicate some citizens' subjective ill-being, despite the fact that the United States has decent indicators of *objective* well-being, such as a high levels of economic development and technological and social infrastructure), and standard studies (such as those showing similar levels of subjective well-being among the population of desperate areas in Latin America, and the European middle class) demonstrate the complexity of such a connection.

Thus, if subjective well-being is not easily correlated with objective well-being, then obviously objective well-being is not the only factor determining it. But what else affects subjective well-being? And what personal mechanisms are necessary to the support of one's sense of well-being? What is the relationship between external and internal factors of well-being?

Results and discussion

We begin by examining the *concept* of subjective well-being, as well as the main *approaches* to its study. It is worth noting that initially, the analytical models can be

divided into the hedonistic and eudemonistic, according to the well-being classification devised by R. Ryan and E. Deci. The eudemonistic approach sees the sense of well-being being reflected in the fullness of self-actualization, and as having been formed by cultural, social, psychological, physical, economic, and spiritual factors. This approach was put forward in positive psychology by C. Rogers, K.G. Jung, E. Erikson, and others. Hedonistic theories of subjective well-being refer to the term “satisfaction,” and see well-being itself as determined by a balance between positive and negative effects, which also apply to the person’s attempt to attain pleasure and avoid the discontent caused by negative social comparison (Sozontov, 2006).

Working in the eudemonistic framework, M. Seligman analyzes subjective well-being by putting forward a concept of “authentic happiness,” in which subjective well-being serves as a “measure of happiness” (Seligman, 2006). At the same time, C. Ryff, in her theory of well-being, considers it a psychological aspect of human life, with subjective well-being being one component part of the psychological makeup (Carapetyan, 2014). In the opinion of D.A. Leontiev, subjective well-being is mostly dependent on a person’s individual characteristics rather than on any objective conditions of life; meanwhile, happiness is a sum of a person’s desires and his reality. The main determinants of well-being, according to Leontiev, are as follows: relations with other people; goals; one’s world view; and one’s values (Leontiev, 2011). It ought to be mentioned that today the term “subjective well-being” is more carefully studied in Western literature than in Russia and comports with the most prevalent hedonistic theories: the theory of adaptation, the multiple discrepancies theory, the dynamic model of equilibrium, and the homeostatic model (Yaremchuk, 2013).

The theory of adaptation was put forward by Brickman and Campbell. They based it on the fact that, although individuals immediately react to positive or negative events in their lives one way or another, nevertheless some time later they return to a certain neutral attitude. Thus, feelings of happiness or unhappiness do not appear to be a stable condition, but act as short-term reactions to some circumstances in their lives (Brickman & Campbell, 1971).

However, American scientist E. Diener later introduced some critical points to this theory, stating that one’s subjective well-being has an individual character, and that the level of one’s well-being thus is not hedonistically neutral. He observed that 1) people maintain subjective well-being on different levels, which partially depend on their temperaments; 2) various components of well-being (positive and negative emotions, life satisfaction) are dynamic and tend to “shift” towards different vectors; 3) individuals are unlike each other in the way they adapt to events; and 4) some components of subjective well-being can change and some can’t (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006).

A. Michalos’s theory of multiple discrepancies relies on the idea that one’s subjective well-being is heavily linked to what one desires compared with his or her reality. Thus, the bigger the discrepancy between those two indexes, the less happy one feels. Additionally, the criteria of social comparison with other people, one’s past, one’s expected future, interests, and merits are taken into account (Yaremchuk, 2013). The dynamic model of well-being emphasizes that, with the passage of time, one also returns to one’s previous condition; however, a major role in this is played by one’s personal traits (Yaremchuk, 2013).

Other models are also interesting: They include the concept of V.A. Petrovsky, who considers well-being the correspondence between one's needs and apperceived resources (there are four models: reserve, working, external, and mastered) (Petrovsky, 2008); and the concept of R. Cummins, in which well-being is described as a result of homeostasis between internal (personal) and external (societal) buffers (Cummins, 1998).

There are various classifications as to what comprises subjective well-being. One focuses on spheres of the individual's life and divides subjective well-being into the psychological, social, and physical components (Tarasova, 2013); or, more generally, into social, immaterial, material, and psychological well-being (Kulikov, 2004); or psychosomatic health, social adaptation, mental health and psychological health (Voronina, 2002). Another differentiates cognitive, emotionally evaluative, and motivational behavioral aspects of well-being (Eliseeva, 2011).

One of the most prolific researchers to have addressed factors of subjective well-being, C. Ryff, details various characteristics of personality as contributors: she mentions the presence of life goals, positive personal development, an opportunity to affect one's environment, self-acceptance, and autonomy. She also notes such important socio-psychological characteristics as good relationships with others (Dubovik, 2011). Shamionov looks at these aspects in a different light and deduces a list of factors based primarily on the characteristics of the person's social interaction: relations with a small contact group (family); relations with a larger community (processes in society); labor processes (work, relationships in the workplace, nature of profession, income); interests (communicative and intellectual aspects); aspects of a person's intrapersonal processes (system of value orientations, balance between personal and social areas); and social experience (behavioral patterns, social orientation). But Shamionov also pays attention to such individually specific determinants of well-being (though he designates it more superficially than Ryff) as conditions and qualities (personal temperament, qualities, and traits) (Shamionov, 2015).

Thus different authors emphasize different determinants of subjective well-being: either mostly individual, or predominantly socio-psychological (interactional) factors. Ideological differences lead to different scientific viewpoints on this concept, and change the specifics of its study in each case.

We propose to consider subjective well-being in connection with its personal factors, manifested in the context of the surrounding social environment. Our portrait of subjective well-being may overlap with the previously described classifications, but it does not fully correspond to any of them, since the factors we discuss were revealed in the meta-analysis of empirical studies. The psychological features that are related to subjective well-being may not constitute an exhaustive list of its determinants, since this concept is very multifaceted, as we said at the beginning of this review.

Personal portrait of subjective well-being

The construct of subjective well-being per se has not been of sufficient interest to modern researchers, but rather, as mentioned above, it's been considered in relationship to personal psychological factors.

The matter of personal *identity* has been raised in many Russian and foreign studies (Tarasova, 2013; Usova, 2014; De Leersnyder, Kim, & Mesquita, 2015; Moreira et al., 2015, etc.).

The level of subjective well-being directly affects a person's degree of cultural identity, which is expressed, *inter alia*, in the similarity of emotional reactions within a population. Thus, it was shown among an international sample of white Americans (N=300), Koreans (N=80), and Belgians (N=266) that the higher the level of subjective well-being, the higher the degree of identification with one's own cultural environment, and the closer the patterns of emotional reactions to the patterns common throughout society. It is interesting that this result manifested itself in such divergent cultures, i.e. the individualist American and the collectivist Korean (De Leersnyder, Kim, & Mesquita, 2015). Several Russian studies have also supported this finding (Tarasova, 2013).

Similar results appeared in a study of connections between well-being and religious identity: a positive relationship between religious identity and the feeling of subjective well-being was detected in a sample of 319 Italian Catholics (Carlucci et al., 2015).

In this context it is interesting that not all Russian studies show similar results. Thus, N. Usova, in her research based on a sample of 160 people, established a parallel between an evaluative component of subjective well-being and a person's attitude toward their own ethnicity (the study was conducted in a multicultural region). The results contained evidence that the main predictors of subjective well-being in relation to ethnicity were ethnic education and ethnic freedom (communicative, political, and religious). Yet it is worth mentioning that such aspects as ethnic reflection and ethnic pride were negative predictors of subjective well-being. The researcher connected this finding to the notion that these characteristics contribute to other ethnic individuals' alienation from their social environment, which also, in our opinion, can be correlated with personal adaptability, a quality which plays a major role in increasing a person's feeling of subjective well-being (Usova, 2014).

Studies of *personal characteristics* and *self-attitude* in the context of the well-being issue are widespread in modern science. In particular, they support the logical conclusion that the optimism of a person's orientation increases his or her level of subjective well-being (Carver et al., 2010). People who have a high level of subjective well-being demonstrate less aggression and worry, along with higher self-esteem and self-effectiveness (McKnight et al., 2002). Studies into the so-called "Big Five" reveal a negative connection between the level of well-being, and neuroticism and openness factors, and a positive one with extroversion factors; this result has appeared in foreign research (Garcis, 2011) as well as in Russian studies (Uryvaev & Tarasova, 2011).

A newly conducted cross-cultural study on aspects of self-attitude (Finland, Israel) revealed that so-called self-directedness and a feeling of self-excellence (accentuations of a narcissistic nature), appear to be relatively clear predictors of various aspects of subjective well-being (life satisfaction, feeling of social support, and subjective esteem of one's state of health) (Cloninger & Zohar, 2011; Joseffson, 2011).

Studies of a person's axiological sphere support the importance of the absence of discrepancies in his or her system of "value-accessibility" for his/her subjective well-being's development (Kolmogorova, 2015). The prevalence of external motivational indexes over the internal appears as a negative predictor for the development of subjective well-being, while a person's orientation toward responsibility in the structure of values is, by contrast, positively correlated with a degree of personal adaptation (Shadrin, 2015).

External objective factors which have a negative impact on a person's psychological well-being, directly involve resilience against stress. In this context, the logical gender differences can be demonstrated empirically: women are more prone to stress factors which affect their general state, mood, and resistance to negative life situations; however, as their subjective well-being rises, so does their problem-solving ability. Meanwhile, in men a correlation between stress and subjective well-being was much less explicit (Vturina, 2013).

There are interesting studies of a sense of humor as a coping strategy in response to environmental stress factors. A series of foreign research projects revealed that the ability to demonstrate a sense of humor directly correlates with multiple subjective well-being indexes. The authors identified the sustainable positive influence of the majority of kinds of humor the subjects of the studies described, since they helped people build a specific system of defense and support of well-being on a certain level (Cann & Collette, 2014).

Regarding aspects of *will power* and *conscious setting of goals*, meta-analysis of 85 foreign studies demonstrated the importance of the setting and reaching of goals in shaping subjective well-being. It was revealed that the more a test participant reflected on the progress of their personal achievements, and the better their goals were defined, the stronger the positive connection to a sense of personal well-being (Klug & Maier, 2015). Despite the fact that, according to the authors, these results are more characteristic of individualistic cultures than collectivist ones, there are similar trends in Russian studies: in newly conducted research by A. Chumakov, it was discovered that people with more developed volitional powers consider their lives to be better. This can be explained as an effect of their aptitude for tolerating negative impacts and their ability to actively transform their environment (Chumakov, 2015).

Some studies describe the entirety of personal characteristics that connect subjective well-being with *interpersonal relations*.

In this context, any statement regarding the positive influence of a developed social network on the development of subjective well-being is axiomatic, while the thesis of mutual reciprocal influence on the two factors appears logical (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). This conclusion repeatedly arises in the majority of studies and appears to be a point of agreement among all the classicists of world psychology: people perceive themselves as happier in the company of other people, writes D. Kahneman (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). This supports the evidence of a positive connection between the feeling of well-being and precise indexes of interpersonal relations: leadership abilities, sociability, etc. (Cunningham, 1988).

It is peculiar that studies conducted involving children and teenagers showed similar but less explicit results: meta-analysis of 246 studies revealed that the positive connection between the level of social support and subjective well-being grows

along with a person, and while it exists in a sample of schoolchildren, it is not as sufficient (Chu et al., 2010).

Russian studies confirm this general trend. In particular, E. Troitskaya, who based her work on D. Leontiev's concept of personal potential, revealed that a feeling such as empathy positively correlates with the level of subjective well-being, along with resilience and risk-taking; the phenomenon known to social psychologists as "belief in a fair world" serves as a foundation for this connection (Troitskaya, 2014).

Let us assume that the overall level of subjective well-being in each particular case can be determined by different combinations of these factors, since the possession of all the indicated characteristics simultaneously does not seem realistic. Also, as we saw, only some factors relate to external objectively fixed circumstances (in particular, indicators of the social and economic sphere); these include the level of stress-resistance and the choice of coping strategies, which are possible components of psychological well-being, but do not comprehensively define it.

Conclusion

The topic of subjective well-being belongs to the area of psychology where practical needs are prominent on the agenda. With all the evidence of psychology's practicality as a science, it must be noted that the matter of subjective well-being may be of concern not only to psychology practitioners and consultants, trainers, and life coaches, but, more broadly, to various social institutions, including government bodies. This is because it is the subjective, not objective, well-being of a country's citizens that ensures the absence of most social problems.

In this context, the afore-cited analysis could become a basis for the development of training practices and educational programs which would increase characteristics of subjective well-being. However, such a plan does not appear particularly viable for the following reasons.

First, a lot of data concerning particular personal traits clearly establishes the following: the prevalence of an orientation towards optimism within the personal structure of psychologically well-off people, or the ability to create and reach goals, as a source of one's well-being, can hardly surprise either theorists or practitioners of psychology.

Second, the majority of the evidence does not belong to the sphere of influence of practical psychology: teaching a person to master extraversion or to accentuate narcissistic tendencies, with the goal of stimulating the growth of their psychological well-being, is not quite possible, and, it goes without saying, not always ethical.

Third, in areas where practical recommendations or creation of some state programs of active learning are conceivable, the results of the studies are sometimes contradictory: for instance, the degree of one's identification with ethnicity, as afore-cited, is ambiguously connected to the growth of well-being.

Fourthly, as shown in the conclusions of up-to-date Western studies (Cloninger, et al., 2015; Joseffson et al., 2011), the influence of personal characteristics on subjective well-being (as with the influence of objective parameters) can frequently not be described with linear connections. Moreover, all too often non-linear complex analysis specifically shows the most important results.

In this situation, psychological theory has only one conclusion that appears to be a logical methodological conclusion from the afore-cited data, and is based on the classical philosophy of social psychology: subjective well-being as a psychological phenomenon is the result of interaction of internal powers (conventionally, personal factors) and social context (conventionally, objective external aspects). Based on this, the most insightful and timely method for the study of subjective well-being can be the creation of models which involve double correlation of the “internal” and “external” sides of the process of developing subjective well-being.

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