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An Interesting Mix: The Possibility That Well-Being and a Lack of Well-Being Can Be Experienced Simultaneously

Submitted by: Karin Sperber

Abstract: Many sociological scholars (e.g. Derné 2009) report that well-being consists of an enduring sense of life satisfaction. This definition neglects the possibility that a person can experience well-being and a lack of well-being simultaneously, allowing for well-being to be more mixed. Fifteen students at SUNY Geneseo conducted two qualitative in-depth interviews each, discussing well-being and people's experiences of well-being. After analysis of the data, I found that the simultaneous experience of well-being and a lack of well-being is possible.

A Little of This and a Little of That:

The Idea That Well-Being and a Lack of Well-Being Can Be Experienced Simultaneously

Introduction

The topic of well-being is an interesting concept that has recently been studied by modern sociologists. Many of these sociologists (e.g. Derné 2009) believe that well-being is an enduring sense of life satisfaction. Research is structured around the assumption that a person's life can either be going well, or going badly, that he or she can either be satisfied or dissatisfied with life—that he or she can either have a sense of well-being or of a lack of well-being. This is the assumption that the two possibilities can never occur at the same time. I wanted to find out if it was possible for a person to experience well-being and a lack of well-being simultaneously. Fifteen students, including myself, conducted two interviews each concerning well-being and people's experiences with well-being. We specifically asked the interviewees if they thought the idea

of a mixed well-being was possible. After analyzing the data, I found that the majority of respondents believed it was possible and gave examples from their lives of when they experienced this simultaneous sense of well-being and a lack of well-being. This research provided for some limitations that could be resolved through further research. It also gave rise to possible new research questions as well. Although well-being scholars describe well-being as enduring life satisfaction (e.g. Derné 2009), the experience of well-being is more mixed, and they neglect the possibility that a person can simultaneously experience a sense of well-being and a lack of well-being.

Review of Literature

For any area of study, all important terms must be defined—for the sociology of well-being, the most important thing is to define what well-being actually is. Steve Derné (2009) describes well-being as “a subjective sense of enduring life satisfaction” (127). This means that a sense of well-being lasts and that it is an overall feeling of fulfillment and approval with one's life. Types of questions used in well-being research can also identify the scholars' idea of the meaning of well-being. For example, Markus, Ryff, Curhan and Palmersheim (2004) used the following questions in their interviews: “What does it mean to you to have a good life?” and “What do you think are some of the reasons your life has gone well?” (Markus et al. 2004: 285-286). Although the term well-being is not specifically used, Markus et al. (2004) were studying what people thought well-being was and whether or

not subjects felt well-being. Both interview questions imply that well-being is an overall sense that life is good and is going well. As an attempt to measure well-being, Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (2009) created the Satisfaction with Life Scale, or SWLS. This test asks participants if they agree or disagree with the following statements:

In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

The conditions of my life are excellent.

I am satisfied with my life.

So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing. (Diener et al. 2009)

Similar to the Markus et al. (2004) study, these statements indicate that well-being contains the feeling that one's life is going right. The last statement—"If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing" (Diener et al. 2009)—includes the idea that well-being is an enduring sense that was mentioned by Derné (2009). If people wanted to change something about their life, this would mean that they are not completely satisfied with it. Overall, scholars agree that well-being is an enduring sense of life satisfaction.

Current scholars agree that well-being is an enduring sense of satisfaction with one's life, but they neglect the possibility that well-being can be more mixed. All of the research methods discussed above assume that a person's life has either gone well or not gone well, that he or she either has well-being or does not have well-being. I argue that a person can experience well-being and a lack of well-being simultaneously. In my life, there is evidence that one can experience both simultaneously, but I wanted to see if that was true for others. Therefore, I set out to discover if the simultaneous feeling of well-being and a lack of well-being is possible.

Methodology

The main process of this research in well-being was carried out by the 15 students (including myself) of my senior seminar in well-being at SUNY Geneseo in the fall of 2009. Using qualitative research methods, we separately interviewed two different people about their views on well-being. The sample was a convenience sample due to the fact that participants generally included acquaintances of the researchers that had time to sit down for an in-depth interview. Participants were asked questions that dealt with their opinion of well-being and their personal experiences with well-being and a lack of well-being. Specific to my research hypothesis, the following question was asked: "Do you think it's possible to experience well-being and a lack of well-being simultaneously? If yes, have you ever had such an experience in which you simultaneously felt well-being and a lack of well-being? Can you tell me about it?" If the respondent seemed confused or unsure, the following prompt was given:

Some students in my class believe the experience of well-being is more mixed. For instance, someone may experience well-being because they got a new soccer ball, but experience a lack of well-being because it's raining. Our professor interviewed someone in India who experienced well-being when he survived a bus crash, but simultaneously experienced a lack of well-being because of seeing the others who did not survive.

After all interviews were conducted, there were 30 transcripts in total. I analyzed the data by carefully reading the transcripts and tallying the amount of responses that were for and against the possibility of a mixed well-being. These analyses allowed me to deduce whether or not simultaneous feelings of well-being and a lack of well-being are possible.

Findings

I found that the majority of people interviewed agreed that well-being was more mixed and that experiencing well-being and a lack of well-being simultaneously is possible. Twenty-five out of the thirty participants (83%) responded this way. One respondent, Mr. Mitchell, when asked if he thought the two could be experienced simultaneously, responded, "I think you are describing daily, normal life" (Interviews 2009: Mitchel). He felt that this simultaneous experience is so common that it happens every day. Here are a few examples other people gave when asked if they ever experienced this mix of well-being:

- [I]t might be like when you're coming to school for the first day of the semester. You're experiencing well-being because you get to see your college friends, but for me, at the same time I'm experiencing a lack of well-being because I don't necessarily want to leave home. I'll miss my home and I'll miss my family. (Interviews 2009: Ryan)
- I was in a car accident where I was actually hit by another vehicle when I was in my car and my car was completely totaled, I could hardly move, I was in a neck brace, my wrist was broken, I have permanent nerve damage. Just a whole slew of problems but at that moment I was so happy to be alive that everything felt great but then I looked at my car and it was just completely like a little box and I couldn't move my neck and my wrist but I was still very grateful. (Interviews 2009: Thomas)
- The lack of well-being part would be my family going through a divorce, but the best

thing would be getting along with sisters and mother. While it's sad to lose my father, it turned out for the better. And the sadness and anger of the divorce has brought us closer as a family. I learned a lot. So it was terrible, but good at the same time.

(Interviews 2009: Reid)

These three respondents described an event in their lives that gave them both well-being and a lack of well-being. Another option that many respondents discussed is that there can be two different events occurring at the same time that give you differing senses of well-being. They believed that there are different areas of a person's life and one area may cause a sense of well-being, but another may cause a lack of well-being. Here are some examples:

- It could make sense that you could have well-being in one domain, but not necessarily in another. (Interviews 2009: Mundy)
- I think that you can experience well-being in one area of your life and not the other...My spring semester of 2008 I experienced an extreme sense of well-being in my social network. I felt like I had a lot of friends, a lot of people to talk to, to go out with on the weekends, but an extreme decrease in well-being when it came to school because I didn't really go. My GPA was horrible and I was not proud of my studies or my work. (Interviews 2009: Jenkins)
- [M]y own sense of enduring happiness is by evaluating three things. My body's working, my mind is working on something interesting, and I'm surrounded by people that I care about. And I think that any one of those parts can be broken at any time. I know that when people get older their bodies don't work as well,

and they might replace it with emphasis on doing important work or replace it with spending time with their family.

(Interviews 2009: Iverson).

In both of these last two cases, the participants felt well-being in one area of their lives, but not in the other. For Ms. Jenkins, she got well-being from her social network but felt a lack of well-being because she was doing badly in school—both of these feelings were occurring at the same time. Other statements talk about balance. Ms. Moore answered the question by saying, “It’s all about having a balance in life, being able to balance the good with the bad” (Interviews 2009: Moore). For a person to be able to balance the good with the bad, both situations must be occurring. Therefore, this statement implies that well-being is mixed. The majority of interviewees (83%) responded that they thought it was possible for a person to feel well-being and a lack of well-being simultaneously, which is evidence that my hypothesis was correct.

Discussion

As with all research, there are certain limitations to this study. The main issue is of representativeness. The sample is quite small, consisting of only 30 people. Also, participants were chosen by convenience—the sample was not random. The students performing the interviews all attend university in a small town in Central New York, so most of the respondents were from that area as well. Opinions may differ by location, so this sample may not be representative of the population since our sample may have had biased opinions for this region. Also, since students chose people that they knew, the interviewees tended to be around the same age (70% were between the ages of 19 and 24 years old). Age, like location, can cause different opinions and therefore different results. The question on mixed well-being included in the interview may have been biased. Many students in the class thought that the examples used in the prompt could influence the way that people answered

the question. Because of the light-heartedness of the example of the soccer ball when it is raining outside, many respondents laughed at this, which could have possibly skewed the results due to getting off topic. The other example given about the bus crash was a very extreme case. There was no example that was “in between” the two given. These prompts could have caused people to assume that the questioner was looking for a similar response, but the examples lacked representation of all possibilities. At the beginning of every interview, we asked the interviewee what well-being meant to him or her. This showed the possibility that people could have differing definitions of well-being. So when asked if they believed if well-being and a lack of well-being could be felt simultaneously, the interviewees answered based on their personal definition of well-being. If a uniform definition of well-being was provided to respondents, the results could have been different. The problem of reactivity could have also altered the responses in the interviews. Reactivity occurs when interviewees respond in some way to the interviewer’s presence. Since most of the interviewees were friends of the students performing the interview, this may have caused them to be less serious or answer differently than they would with a stranger.

I believe that the results are valid. The question was straight-forward in asking the respondents if they thought well-being could be mixed. Information on this subject was not volunteered during other questions; it was specifically added into the interview schedule. The data that we collected actually measured people’s opinions on mixed well-being.

My research opens the door for further studies. Further researching this topic could address the limitations discussed previously. By increasing the sample size and including people of different ages that lived in different locations into the research—making the sample more diverse—it would indicate if the data was generalizable to the larger population. The bias created by the extreme differences in examples in the prompt could be eliminated if

another example, one that was in between the other two, was added to the interview schedule. The differences caused by differing definitions of well-being could be addressed by supplying a uniform definition. The problem with this is that this research challenges the currently accepted definition, therefore it would be difficult to decide what to supply to participants. The reactivity caused by the acquaintance of the interviewee and the interviewer could be eliminated if future samples were chosen at random. Further research could also include research on the same topic but by using different methods other than qualitative in-depth interviews. Questionnaires and surveys could add to this research with quantitative data. Another possibility is to perform a longitudinal study. For example, researchers could ask participants to write down their daily thoughts in a diary, which researchers could then analyze these writings. This would eliminate the reactivity due to the researchers' presence and life situations would be fresh in the participants' minds due to the fact that they are writing every day. The data itself also brings up possibilities for further research. One prospect could be to study the effects of a promise of a good future on mixed well-being. Some respondents discussed a time in their life that caused them to experience a lack of well-being, but that the promise of a good future gave them a sense of well-being. For example, Ms. Wishy talked about a bad horse accident she was in. Her injuries gave her a lack of well-being, but the doctor told her that she would recover faster because she was in good shape before the accident, which gave her well-being (Interviews 2009: Wishy). The prospect of getting better caused her to have a mixed well-being. Another respondent, Ms. Reynolds, explained another situation, "sometimes you're stressed out about something but you know that eventually it will better you. Like when you know your classes are really hard but they're gonna be worth it in the long run" (Interviews 2009: Reynolds). I also wonder if the opposite would be true, that if a negative future prospect would cause mixed well-being. If there is something good that is going on in someone's life that gives them well-being, but they know it won't last, could this

give them a lack of well-being and therefore a mixed sense of well-being? Further research concerning future prospects' effect on mixed well-being would be interesting. The idea of optimism, or a good attitude about life and how it affects well-being, was brought up as well. Ms. Berg said that a mixed well-being could be possible "with a good attitude" (Interviews 2009: Berg). Ms. Fillippo said that "I think that it has a lot to do with your overall attitude. I consider myself a pretty positive person so I tend to feel that the good in my life almost always outweighs whatever is going wrong" (Interviews 2009: Fillippo). This could mean that if something is giving a person a lack of well-being, if that person is optimistic or positive, they could experience well-being just because of that fact. Research could also be done on the effects of pessimism on mixed well-being. Further research concerning how a person's outlook on life affects their experiences of well-being could formulate interesting results.

Conclusion

The current research concerning well-being neglects the possibility that well-being can be mixed and people can experience a sense of well-being and a lack of well-being simultaneously. Data collected by Geneseo students proved this point. Eighty-three percent of all interviewees responded that they believed that well-being could be mixed. Some gave examples from their lives where one event caused both well-being and a lack of well-being. Others said that two separate events in their lives caused the two differing feelings of well-being. My research is important to the field of well-being research because it alters the way in which the concept of well-being itself should be thought about and may call for a re-evaluation of the definition of well-being

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