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COMMENTARY / OPINIONS

A Perfect Storm to Set the Stage for Ontological Exploration: Response to Commentaries on "Emotional Well-Being: What It Is and Why It Matters"

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Abstract

Our target article (Park et al., this issue) described the process of developing a provisional conceptualization of emotional well-being (EWB). In that article, we considered strengths and gaps in current perspectives on a variety of related concepts and ways that the proposed conceptualization of EWB informs our evaluation of measures and methods of assessment and identification of its causes and consequences. We concluded with recommendations for moving the framework and the field forward. Eight rich, thoughtful, and highly engaged commentaries addressed the target article. Collectively, these commentaries illustrate both points of consensus and areas of substantial disagreement, providing a potential roadmap for continued work. In this response, we summarize key issues raised and highlight those points raised by multiple commentators or that we considered seminal to advancing future discussion and research.

In our target article detailing the process of developing a conceptualization of emotional well-being (EWB), we described prior conceptual and theoretical approaches that informed this work (Park et al., this issue). We also considered strengths and gaps in current perspectives on concepts related to EWB and ways that the proposed conceptualization could inform our ability to evaluate measures and methods of assessment and to identify causes and consequences of EWB, ultimately leading to effective intervention strategies. We included a broad-ranging discussion of challenges to this work and offered recommendations for moving the framework and the field forward.

In response, 19 colleagues provided eight rich, thoughtful, and highly engaged commentaries. Collectively, these commentaries illustrate both points of consensus and areas of substantial disagreement. Many important issues and ideas were brought to the fore, forming a perfect storm that sets the stage for ontological work. As Necka et al. (this issue) aptly noted, "Any definition of a construct made while a line of inquiry is still evolving is bound to be inadequate as the field advances further empirical study; at the same time,

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further empirical study would be disheveled and fragmented in the absence of the inciting, organizing definition." We agree that a conceptual definition is essential and that the work is not finished. The commentaries collectively form a roadmap for continued work.

In this response, we summarize key issues raised, highlighting those points put forward by multiple scholars or that we considered seminal to furthering discussion and research. First, and perhaps most important, was whether a new construct is necessary. Second was contention by some that the term emotional well-being implies that well-being is exclusively situated in the affective domain and thus is too narrowly focused to cover the full complement of experiences that can characterize well-being. Third, numerous commentators voiced concerns that any concept (and measure) of EWB (regardless of the term used) must be able to account for social and intergroup experience in meaningful ways, incorporating issues of context and culture (Campos & Hernandez; this issue; Necka et al., this issue) and other critical elements in social and cognitive domains (Willroth, this issue; VanderWeele & Lomas, this issue; Sin & Ong, this issue; Ryff, this issue; Campos & Hernandez, this issue). Fourth, concerns were raised regarding whether the conceptual definition of EWB (or another term) should have an explicitly positive orientation. Fifth, several commentators advocated broadening the methodologies used to study well-being (e.g., Campos & Hernandez, this issue) and being more explicit about the role of theory in this work (Ryff, this issue; Willroth, this issue).

Collectively, our target article and the responses exemplify the need for behavioral sciences to engage in ontological work that can accelerate research and the spread of knowledge (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). In the following sections, we expand on points that emerged as prominent hotbeds of contention, aiming to inform directions for ontological work.

Connecting the Proposed Approach with Prior Work

Commentators generally agreed on the importance of focusing on a domain of well-being beyond the physical or contextual, but disagreed on the constituents of this domain. Clearly, what is included and excluded within the domain of psychological aspects of well-being can vary depending on the specific goals of the investigator and, as we emphasized in the target article, it behooves researchers to be clear and explicit regarding the type of well-being they intend to capture or examine. There are many models of well-being; all may be useful or reflect relevant aspects depending on the research question(s) posed. However, given these many models and perspectives, the collective science can only advance when sufficient clarity and cohesion is available to permit relevant comparisons or understanding of why findings may differ. As noted in the National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine (2022) report, "Inconsistent use of terms and classification systems makes it challenging to integrate findings from individual studies and in turn to cumulatively build bodies of knowledge even in domains that are consistently studied (p. 1)."

In their commentary, VanderWeele and Lomas (this issue) present a hierarchy of terms starting with the broadest category, well-being, and branch out to psychological well-being specifically. This sort of logical branching helps to situate different subtypes of well-being, but it does not help to compare the current well-being schemes currently proposed to characterize psychological aspects of well-being. Instead, a Venn diagram-like approach more usefully illustrates the overlap and divergence among the constructs in widest use. For example, our definition of EWB includes many hedonic elements included in definitions of subjective well-being (SWB) (positive affect, life satisfaction) as described by Lucas and Oishi (this issue) but additionally includes elements of having a sense of meaning in life and ability to pursue goals. Our conceptualization of EWB also captures some elements included in Ryff's (1989, this issue) model of psychological well-being (PWB), specifically with respect to including eudaimonic elements such as a sense of meaning in life (her PWB construct includes purpose). Indeed, in our conceptualization, we endeavor to draw attention to this critical nexus of both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of feeling good.

As described above, while other conceptualizations of psychological aspects of well-being have included elements similar to those we have included in the conceptualization of EWB, they have largely studied these elements in isolation (e.g., SWB, sense of meaning in life) or as part of a broader construct (PWB). Thus, the particular space we refer to as EWB (and set of constituent elements) remains relatively unexamined as a single construct. Our intention in drawing attention to this space was never to say it is the only way to categorize or consider psychological aspects of well-being. Rather, we believe it is a useful and meaningful area of focus given that how good people feel about their lives appears to involve both aspects of eudaimonia and hedonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001). For example, studies of community samples have shown a desirable or "good" life includes both happiness and meaning (King & Napa, 1998). Consistent with this perspective, others have recently proposed combining both hedonic and eudaimonic elements in a single construct (National Research Council, 2013; Stone, 2018), although typically proposing to expand the term SWB to include eudaimonic elements. As we have argued in our target article, the term SWB is already well-established and very widely used as referring specifically to life satisfaction and affect (Park et al., this issue).

Some commentators found our proscribed focus too narrow (e.g., VanderWeele & Lomas, this issue) while others found it too broad (e.g., Lucas & Oishi, this issue). Again, the breadth of the WB construct on which an investigator focuses will vary and should depend on the specific research questions. One reason for keeping our focus squarely on internal experiences of well-being rather than including a host of other constructs that lead to or follow from EWB is to allow future research to identify the predictors or causes of EWB and those that constitute outcomes of EWB. For example, VanderWeele and Lomas (this issue) argue that including emotion regulation in the definition of EWB is essential. We instead consider effective emotion regulation a condition that would be expected to lead to EWB (Balzarotti et al., 2016; Quoidbach et al., 2010). Similarly, Willroth (this issue) and others have proposed that social relationships or connections are an integral aspect of EWB; again, we would consider social connection to be a potentially strong predictor of EWB rather than a constituent. We argue that separating predictors from our target of focus—feeling good about one's life—creates opportunities to assess and test relationships between determinants of EWB and EWB itself and EWB as a determinant of other outcomes, such as physical health. As Campos and Hernandez (this issue) noted, EWB may vary in its association with physical health, and identifying potential conditional moderators that affect these associations would be a worthwhile direction for research. On the other hand, Lucas and Oishi (this issue) prefer to assess well-being more narrowly. This preference notwithstanding, Oishi not only proposed that the good life consists of both eudaimonic and hedonic aspects, but also offered a third aspect: level of richness and variability in one's experiences (Oishi & Westgate, 2021). In our view, we would consider an environment offering rich experiences as a potential precursor of EWB rather than a constituent itself.

We agree with VanderWeele and Lomas (this issue) that feeling one has meaning in life is a key element of feeling good about one's life overall, an assertion backed up by copious research demonstrating strong connections between meaning in life and a host of positive mental and physical health indices (see Czekierda et al., 2017). Our definition of EWB includes "sense of meaning," which refers to a subjective sense that life is meaningful, that is, perceiving that the world is comprehensible, that one has purposeful goals, and that one matters to others and/or the cosmos (George & Park, 2016). This eudaimonic component may prove to be essential to the overall experience of feeling good, or may interact with hedonic components (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2013).

More generally, we assert that a focus on how good people feel about their lives that takes into account both eudaimonic and hedonic components is valuable and justifiable. That said, we do not believe, per VanderWeele and Lomas (this issue), that this construct should or would capture "all psychological aspects of well-being" or "all aspects of mental well-being," such as cognitive functioning. Rather, we seek to spotlight the concept of how good people feel. Is there theoretical justification for identifying and studying this specific nexus of hedonic and eudaimonic "feeling good"? While both approaches have long historical roots (see Ryan & Deci, 2001), it seems unlikely that a theory in the traditional sense (i.e., a set of general scientific principles that explain the phenomenon) would dictate the contents circumscribed by the terms used to connote "well-being." In fact, the current array of operational definitions of well-being, sometimes based on philosophy and sometimes on models developed by investigators, do not reliably specify a true theory, contributing to divergence across approaches. Thus, we reassert that the onus is on investigators to explain and justify the construct that is the focus of their investigation and the meaningfulness of that construct.

That said, it is also important to be clear about why we think obtaining a conceptual understanding of EWB is worthwhile. That is, why connect these particular constituents within a single concept? We assert that this framework provides a starting point rather than an endpoint; in drawing attention to EWB and promoting research on this construct, we will likely learn a great deal about EWB, and perhaps the definition will expand or contract based on empirical findings.

Emphasis on the Positive

Several commentaries expressed reservations about having any positive orientation embedded within the concept of EWB (e.g., Necka et al., this issue). The primary concern was that including a positive direction in the definition would suggest a construct impoverished with regard to understanding the role and importance of negative emotions, cognitions, and evaluations. We certainly agree that the EWB concept must not be only about positivity with regard to the emotions and experiences that define it. However, we would argue that the proposed definition, which describes EWB as a composite that "encompasses *how* positive an individual feels…" (emphasis added), suggests that the concept is meant to capture level of positivity, which refers simply to the extent to which individuals are experiencing explicitly positive emotions or reflections. Although the definition captures how positive an individual feels generally and overall (i.e., the reflective component), it also includes experiential features that include "emotional quality of momentary and everyday experiences." These experiences can and should encompass negative emotional experiences. As many have noted, the absence of distress or negative states does not necessarily indicate the presence of positive functioning, and both

negative and positive aspects of the facets of EWB must be assessed if one aims to determine the extent to which an individual's orientation is net positive. As proposed, the definition does not address whether and how negative aspects of experience shape EWB. This neutrality should help drive future research to explore whether and how negative states and experiences shape EWB.

Other efforts to define forms of well-being have also tried to signal the orientation to actively healthy psychological functioning. For example, the OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being (OECD, 2013) define subjective well-being as "Good mental states, including all the various evaluations, positive and negative, that people make of their lives, and the affective reactions of people to their experiences." The World Health Organization and others (e.g., Keyes, 2003) coined the phrase "complete mental health" or "complete mental well-being," defined as a state in which individuals can realize their own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and make contributions to their communities. They also note that this state is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities. Although these definitions are broader than the concept we are seeking to define, including physical and other aspects of well-being that may or may not be subjective, they also seek to signal the presence of healthy functioning over and above disease and infirmity.

The decision on the part of the working group to frame the definition positively was not an easy one. For example, our working group discussed at length the use of words such as good, positive, or well to describe how people feel. Some members suggested the term well better accommodates the possibility that one can feel appropriately sad in a situation yet also feel that all is okay; however, other members felt the term well connoted physical health or that using it to define well-being is circular. Thus, the group somewhat ambivalently settled on the use of the term positive, but sought to make explicit that it does not refer to undifferentiated positive affect. That is, the group acknowledges the possibility of experiencing negative emotions yet having an overall positive evaluation of one's experiences. Thus, framing the definition positively provides a way to mark "good" or "healthy" functioning explicitly while leaving the description of experiential and reflective features agnostic about whether these were positive or negative, on the assumption that both will matter. While this phrasing may be imperfect, the process by which we arrived at this solution illustrates that devising a term to explicitly denote good mental health, healthy psychological functioning, or adaptive (versus maladaptive) processes remains quite difficult. We view our recommendation to engage the ontological process as a next step in this important work to provide additional guidance for how to communicate an orientation to healthy functioning without dismissing the importance of experiencing and reporting stress, negative emotions, and life challenges.

Inclusive or Exclusive of Social Well-Being

Several commentators suggested our proposal to center the definition within the individual was problematic, and that EWB should not be separated from context, culture, or identity (e.g., Campos & Hernandez, this issue; Necka et al., this issue) and offered excellent elaborations (e.g., Shiota, this issue; Sin & Ong, this issue; Willroth, this issue). Although we agree with Campos and Hernandez (this issue) that evidence supports cultural differences in the meaning of well-being and associations between well-being and health, we also again assert the necessity of separating constituents from correlates, causes, and consequences. We take the perspective that emotion is a response tendency (behavioral, physiological, experiential) (Gross, 2014). This means that, by definition, EWB is an individual experience. The contexts in which an individual responds to emotional cues are precursors (or consequences) rather than a constituent itself of EWB. Identifying collective EWB is possible, but that collective derives from individual experiences. That said, we wholeheartedly agree that social well-being is important; much work remains to understand the complexities of dynamic contexts underlying EWB (Sin & Ong, this issue). Social well-being, however, is likely a distinct form of well-being (albeit one that poses its own challenges to definition; Kane, 1985) that intersects as a cause or consequence but is not a constituent of EWB. In our proposed definition, we articulated this perspective by including the statement "these features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and life course." We agree with Shiota (this issue) on the utility of differentiating felt well-being from objective causal factors and outcomes of interest. That said, as we state throughout this response, we do agree much work remains to be done to more deeply consider constituents that might be missing.

In fact, defining social well-being has faced its own challenges. For example, when the World Health Organization (WHO) was founded in 1948, the preamble to its constitution defined health as "A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Despite intense discussion and debate, the social well-being component of the WHO definition of health has remained elusive for nearly 75 years and is perhaps another target for ontological exploration. However, that is a discussion for another article and here we simply agree with the WHO's definition that separates social from other forms of well-being

and maintain our position that social circumstances and social support are better considered predictors of EWB rather than as constituents of EWB per se.

To Use or Not to Use the Term Emotional Well-Being

Across the commentaries, perhaps the biggest source of contention is the term used to define this area of science to be advanced within this NIH initiative. EWB was the term chosen by NIH, prior to the individual networks being selected, as the overarching label for work that falls within this domain. Commentators were mostly in agreement that the construct is multi-component, and that work is needed to advance understanding of well-being; we note that it is the "emotional" part of the term that stirs the very emotions being studied by researchers with diverse perspectives.

We acknowledge that the end result of this divergence of opinions and scholarly debate may be another term to describe this conceptualization, or least one with greater consensus. Of note, some commentators offered that it may not be possible or beneficial to find a consensus definition (VanderWeele & Lomas, this issue; Lucas & Oishi, this issue) whereas others were more optimistic, offering alternative terms for consideration such as psychological or experiential well-being (Shiota, this issue) or psychosocial well-being (Willroth, this issue). With this acknowledgement, however, we propose that the term EWB provides an opportunity to reflect on whether the constituents are, in fact, set. Judgments about life satisfaction or meaning are imbued with affect, and thus, these cognitive processes may be appropriately included as constituents of EWB, whereas other cognitive processes may be better conceptualized as causes, consequences, or moderators of EWB.

In the end, the terminology chosen to represent this space of well-being must be accessible to the intended user. As cautioned in the National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine (2022) report, "… knowledge generated by behavioral science research is not efficiently translated for the consumers who will apply it to benefit individuals and society" (p. 1). The intended user is not only the researcher community but also the general public. As such, terminology should not be jockeyed to advance one particular perspective, and instead must be grounded in usability for real world application. VanderWeele and Lomas (this issue) suggest that deviating from common usage of language is dangerous, yet we suggest this concern may be unfounded here. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) provides the following definition: "emo·tion i-ˈmō-shən.: a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body.: a state of feeling.: the affective aspect of consciousness: feeling." This definition appears inclusive of both experiential and reflective features, and is consistent with lay descriptions of "feeling good about their lives" (King & Napa, 1998). As such, we assert it may be premature to discard potential use of the term emotional in describing this construct of psychological aspects of well-being.

What's Next?: Advancing the Science of Emotional Well-Being

Collectively, the different perspectives reflected in the commentaries provide a strong impetus for engaging in ontological work to reduce the gap between what is known and how to act on that knowledge to better lives. Perhaps the trouble is not with our proposed definition, but with the lack of common terminology across researchers and disciplines participating in overlapping work on well-being. Shiota (this issue), for example, eloquently reminds us that precisely defined psychological constructs are required not only for measurement but also for theory development that can explain variation in behavior and other outcomes, guide hypothesis testing, and facilitate effective intervention development. We agree as, ultimately, identifying distinct constituents within a construct enables determining how causes and consequences differ across constituents and identifying networks of associations among constituents. Lucas and Oishi (this issue) further emphasize that precise terminology is essential for effective scientific communication, and VanderWeele and Lomas (this issue) caution against exclusionary branding of terms. We strongly concur with Sin and Ong (this issue) regarding the necessity of including diverse voices in capturing the breadth of optimal human experience by engaging inclusive and community-partnered approaches.

Future work will require substantial engagement in refining the conceptual space and considering whether and how related factors fit within that space or should be considered separate. A set of future activities focused on understanding well-being will be needed, once questions about the conceptual definition are resolved (e.g., see Shiota, this issue).

For example, the very phrase EWB invites the consideration of how the processing and expression of emotions varies with different levels of well-being. How might the temporal dynamics of emotion processing differ in those with high versus low levels of well-being and what are the bidirectional influences between emotion processing and well-being? Some research (e.g., Heller et al., 2013) suggests that longer duration activation of positive emotional networks in the brain in response to positive incentives is associated with higher levels of EWB. These and related findings underscore the importance of the temporal dynamics of emotion processing for well-being and

highlight the need for further examination of the detailed emotion response trajectories that might underlie it.

Further, Willroth (this issue) discussed the benefits and challenges involved in developing a unifying framework, suggesting that such a framework should be conceptual rather than theoretical in nature or relying on measurement models. Conceptual frameworks can be agnostic to issues that can arise in dueling theories such as which constructs should be included or the degree to which constructs are related to one another. As noted throughout our response, with clearly defined terminology, we can develop this type of framework and thereby improve conceptual clarity and reduce the possibility of miscommunication. In addition, Willroth (this issue) laid out conditions under which an umbrella term is useful, noting that both breadth and specificity are needed. Finally, Willroth notes that a unifying framework can serve as an organizing tool for empirical investigations that would inform our understanding of the nature and structure of well-being and thereby aid in theory development.

Again, we are grateful to all commentators for sharing thoughtful perspectives and providing specific directions for establishing an agenda aimed toward a unifying framework. We point to one recent example demonstrating the work as involving a multi-stage, multi-year process. In a recent paper on accelerating a research agenda to advance understanding of implementation mechanisms in health and public health, the process described detailed steps that included systematic reviews, qualitative content analysis, concept mapping, and nominal group techniques (Lewis et al., 2021). In working together to prepare the initial paper and this response, we hope that our collective U24 networks have contributed to starting this path for advancing the science of EWB. We have highlighted key issues to set the stage for the arduous yet rewarding processes involved in ontological exploration. We conclude by reiterating a comment provided by Shiota (this issue): "The conversation initiated by the target article is a promising sign of a field maturing, ready to synthesize existing basic research on well-being to provide a foundation for large-scale, real-world application."

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