

# PURSUING HAPPINESS AND HEALTH



**DEFINING,  
MEASURING,  
AND TRANSLATING  
WELLBEING  
IN POLICY AND  
PRACTICE**

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A BACKGROUND PAPER



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### **About the Lee Kum Sheung Center for Health and Happiness**

The mission of the Center is to build a rigorous and interdisciplinary science of positive health and well-being, and to translate the science to influence practice and policy. We aim to achieve this through knowledge production, capacity building, and translation and communication.

Funded through the initiative and generosity of the Lee Kum Kee family of Hong Kong, the Center represents a unique opportunity to advance scientific understanding of the connections between positive psychological well-being, positive social environments, and physical health.

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# INTRODUCTION

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**T**he promotion of “happiness” is generating considerable buzz among policymakers, academics, governments, and, of course, the general public. The idea is central to a growing social movement that is calling on governments to measure and consider happiness in policy decisions. However, the intention to promote happiness, or wellbeing, has a long and prestigious history, having been a subject of attention in religious philosophies of both the East and the West. While many are trying to use public policy to increase happiness or other variants with which it is conflated, such as “wellbeing,” or “life satisfaction,” many questions remain. What are the policies, if any, that governments should adopt to promote happiness? To what extent can happiness be promoted through government policies and practices? How is happiness related to other realms of public and private life—specifically, health?

While a variety of organizations, major international bodies, and several governments have undertaken laudable actions to increase happiness, these questions remain unanswered because of two major gaps in translating research into policy, which must be addressed if the movement to promote happiness is to advance. The first is clarity on the concept of happiness, especially how it is defined, measured, and to what end. A review of a subset of the reports and projects note a variety of terms used to describe what they are measuring—“happiness,” “wellbeing,” “flourishing,” and “quality of life,” among others. The abundance of terms plausibly underscores deeper differences in philosophies and practices, making it difficult to track across time and space. Absent a consensus on a definition and purpose, it is questionable as to how to develop, execute, and track the impact of public policies to promote happiness.

The second challenge is the inconsistent understanding of the role of health in happiness/wellbeing policies and practices. Again, a review of a subset of happiness policies from around the world finds that health is defined in terms of physical, mental, or psychological dimensions and is included in measures as a constituent part, as another discrete concept, or as the total concept of happiness itself. For example, the *World Happiness Report*,<sup>1</sup> one of the more prominent and systematic international efforts supported by the United Nations, equates happiness with wellbeing and measures the value by a subjective question about life satisfaction from the Gallup World Poll. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index, another international measure, includes both wellbeing and physical health as distinct components within a framework to measure social progress.<sup>2</sup> Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) purports that happiness is their overall measure, which includes physical health and mental health as two of nine components of happiness.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as "... a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."<sup>4</sup> Considering that health consists of states of wellbeing, then the two terms may appear to be equivalent. However, the WHO

does not equate either with happiness. The lesser-known sentence before the definition states that health is one of the basic principles for the "...*happiness, harmonious relations and security of all peoples*"<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added). Despite some criticism, the WHO definition is still the seminal description in

A growing social movement is calling on governments to measure and consider happiness in policy decisions.

the field. How we reconcile the relationship between health, happiness, and wellbeing is more than a pedantic issue. Healthcare is one of the largest industries in the world. If happiness was in the purview of health, then happiness policies would have access to many more resources than it has now. If health is a component of happiness, then the health sector needs better coordination with other sectors that improve happiness.

The goal of this background paper is to review:

- Major definitions of happiness that have been developed and measured
- How health is connected or not connected to happiness
- The gap between research, practice, and policy in connection with happiness and health.

The goal of this background paper is not to offer an extensive review of these issues—in fact, our review is selective—but to serve as a background document for a more systematic exploration to build a bridge between policies and practices to promote wellbeing and research on wellbeing in all its variants.

# BACKGROUND

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## BRIEF HISTORY

**M**any current discussions about happiness policies compare wellbeing measures with Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is arguably the prevailing indicator of growth and development. Because GDP is often the comparator, it is important to understand the history of its development. The history of GDP begins in the 1930s, when the US government sought to understand the degree of economic instability and disruption caused by the Great Depression. A committee within the US Congress chose Simon Kuznets, an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania at the time, to examine the problem of economic measurement. Kuznets' solution was a method to aggregate income of individuals and businesses across the nation, which developed into the approach to GDP we still use today.<sup>5</sup>

Though his measure caught on, Kuznets was quick to criticize it, warning of its limitations, especially around inequality. GDP does not track inequality within a country—a prescient observation for the current time.<sup>5</sup> It also does not adequately account for unpaid labor, such as family childcare, and consumption externalities, such as pollution and environmental damage. Despite his warnings, seeking GDP growth became conventional government wisdom as a way to indicate that lives were getting better, though criticism dogged the concept throughout the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> One famous example, at least in the West, was a 1968 observation from then Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy: “[GDP] measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”<sup>7</sup>

It is this idea of what is “worthwhile” that drove some across the globe to look beyond GDP and measure social progress in other ways, especially the small Asian





country of Bhutan. Per an apocryphal story,<sup>8</sup> Bhutan's novel vision of development was started by an offhand statement by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in 1979, in the Mumbai, India, airport. He said in reply to a question from a journalist, "Gross National Happiness (GNH) is more important than Gross Domestic Product."

There is no published, contemporaneous mention of this incident. The first published piece to mention GNH was an article in London's *Financial Times* by journalist John Elliot in 1987,<sup>9</sup> who traveled to Bhutan to interview the king. The idea had minor and sporadic references in the early 1990s until the Bhutanese prime minister discussed the idea in a 1998 speech at the Asia-Pacific Millennium Summit in Seoul, Korea.<sup>10</sup> In the years following this speech, Bhutan facilitated five international conferences on using happiness as an explicit development goal between 2004 and 2009.<sup>10</sup>

Another alternative approach to GDP was the Human Development Index (HDI), which was first developed in 1990 by the economists Mahbub Ul Haq and Amartya Sen. The goal of the HDI was to measure the "richness in human life," rather than a country's income.<sup>11</sup> Ul Haq and Sen were attempting to create a broader measure of development to better encapsulate quality of life, though they did not include a measure of happiness. Instead, the three dimensions of HDI are physical health, as measured by life expectancy, knowledge, as measured by years in school, and standard of living, as measured by Gross National Income per capita. The HDI is also published with adjustments made for gender justice and socio-economic inequality, to highlight specific development issues.<sup>11</sup>

In 2008, then President of France, Nicholas Sarkozy, took a major step to promote alternative measures to GDP. Dissatisfied with the economic and social measures his government was using, he formed a commission headed by French academic Jean-Paul Fitoussi with Nobel Prize-winning economists, Amartya Sen of the HDI and Joseph Stiglitz, to study the limitations of GDP and recommend improvements to measures of social progress. The commission worked during an interesting time. It was formed before the 2008 global financial crisis but gave its final report afterward, noting in it that the time appeared prescient for major changes.<sup>12</sup>

The Commission released the *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, also known as the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi

Report. Its key message was a recommendation for governments to “shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being” (p.12).<sup>12</sup> GDP was still seen as a useful measure, but the authors suggested that considerations of wellbeing were needed as a supplemental measure to address the increasing gap between aggregate GDP and what cultivated individual wellbeing. The report offered recommendations on measurement and described eight subcomponents of wellbeing, including wealth, health, education, and subjective satisfaction measures.

## UNITED NATIONS’ INVOLVEMENT

Overall, the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Report drew new attention to the idea of measuring wellbeing, but created little immediate change, possibly due to the financial crisis. Bhutan, however, continued to advocate on the international stage and sponsored a resolution at the United Nations in July 2011.<sup>13</sup> The resolution raised many of the same issues as the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Report, such as the limitations of GDP, stating that it does not adequately reflect the wellbeing and happiness of citizens. It also invited countries “to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and wellbeing in development with a view to guiding their public policies,” and stated that “the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal.”<sup>14</sup>

This resolution included a call for a high-level meeting to occur the following year. In 2012, that meeting took place in New York, led by Bhutan, and included discussion of a new economic paradigm to analyze society and development.<sup>13</sup> The conversation came at a fortuitous time as the UN was planning the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and how they would be evaluated. Measuring happiness, or wellbeing, was discussed as an option for evaluating efforts toward the SDG goals, but no major action was taken.<sup>13</sup>

However, a major milestone of the meeting was the first publication of the *World Happiness Report 2012*, which was led by three academics: John Helliwell, professor emeritus of economics at the University of British Columbia, Richard Layard, director of the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, and Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.<sup>15</sup> Their report had three major sections. The first section argued for the importance and validity of measuring happiness and highlighted three ongoing efforts: the Gallup World Poll, the World Values Survey, and the European

The key message of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Report was a recommendation for governments to “shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being.”

Social Survey. The second section considered what factors influence happiness, such as mental and physical health, family, and education. The third section looked at the policy implications of measuring happiness. Objectives of policies were considered, such as increasing employment to improve wellbeing, and it ended with case studies on efforts in the UK, the OECD, and Bhutan.<sup>15</sup>

Since the 2012 inaugural report, the *World Happiness Report* has been published annually, independent of the UN, but with financial support from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, a UN affiliate. All reports have included a ranking of the “happiest” countries from around the world, with data based on the Gallup World Poll.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the rankings were based on pooled results (2016-2018) of responses to a single survey question in the Gallup World Poll:

*Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?*<sup>16</sup>

A country’s score was created by weighting results by population and averaging across the three years. It is worth noting here that it is critical to examine the extent to which the previous question’s wording measures happiness, say, using a ladder, and whether it is applicable across different countries and cultures, considering issues of measurement validity and reliability.

In 2018, for the first time, there was a corollary report to the *World Happiness Report*, called the *Global Happiness Policy Report*, which was a targeted look at public policies that promote happiness.

In addition to the aggregate scores, the 2019 report looked at global trends of happiness from the inception of the Gallup World Poll in 2005 to 2018. Measures included not only the previously referenced Cantril ladder, but positive and negative affect. For positive affect, people answered “yes” or “no” to the question of whether they had happiness, laughter, or enjoyment on the previous day. Negative affect was measured by those who had worry, sadness, or anger the previous day. Since these questions were binary (yes or no), their average indicates

the prevalent percentage of affect in the population. The report also includes a chapter describing the relationship between happiness and political behavior, such as voting. Most often political behavior is seen as the cause of happiness. However, there is an emerging field of study that questions the direction of this relationship and uses happiness to explain political behavior. This promising field may entice politicians to consider happiness more, since initial results suggest happier societies are more likely to re-elect politicians.



## GLOBAL HAPPINESS POLICY REPORTS

In 2018, for the first time, there was a corollary report to the *World Happiness Report*, called the *Global Happiness Policy Report*, which was a targeted look at public policies that promote happiness.<sup>17</sup> The report was produced in conjunction with the World Government Summit in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in February 2018 and was written by the Global Happiness Council (GHC), which included economist Jeffery Sachs, psychologists Martin Seligman and Ed Diener, and Martine Durand, the chief statistician at the OECD. The GHC was formed in 2017 mainly from the authors who wrote the *World Happiness Reports* to facilitate adoption of happiness policies in interested countries. The second annual report was published in February 2019.

The objective of the 2018 report was to inventory and assess policies and practices to eventually identify best practices. The 2019 report aimed to identify policy frameworks and specific interventions that would increase happiness. The first step in the process was to identify policy themes. Six were chosen: health, education, work, personal happiness, cities, and metrics (p.13).<sup>17</sup> The



authors write: “The chapters generally accept as a starting point that subjective well-being—especially, but not exclusively, assessed by asking how people evaluate the quality of their own lives—provides a good measure of the quality of life in society as a whole, and is a useful focus for public policy.” The authors found several common themes in policies: a gap between the scope of data collected and what data are needed to design and select policies, a need for more deliberative experimental approaches to identify best practices, greater input of internal stakeholders, difficulty in forming generalizations due to local contexts, and the value of interventions on children, now and for the future. It was also noted that the current measures of happiness are on the periphery of policy making, rather than the central evaluative metric, where the authors want them.

The 2018 report ended with an appendix that included a list of policy ideas from each of the six themes. The goals of these policies are either to increase happiness or to reduce misery. The list included nearly 100 ideas, categorized as principles,

interventions, and public/private initiatives. They can roughly be split into best practices for cities or for nations. The best practices at the national level are:

- Regular measurement of wellbeing
- Rigorous evaluation of interventions
- Expanding the evidence base on work and wellbeing
- Ex post and ex ante subjective well-being (SWB) monitoring of policies
- Charging national statistical offices with the development and collection of data on subjective wellbeing
- Aiming for international comparability

A special section looked at happiness specifically in cities, noting that people face different challenges, namely the availability, simplicity, and usability of basic services in cities (p.161).<sup>17</sup> Following the “Smart Cities” framework by the European Union, the recommendations for cities are:

- Collect citywide happiness measures
- Make happiness an explicit aim of city government
- Crowdsource city service quality data
- Guide and evaluate policy using standardized data-processing approaches
- Consider trust in the city as a desirable policy outcome
- Balance the need for evidence with the imperative of innovation

The 2019 report focused on similar policy areas but focused on frameworks for policy making.<sup>18</sup> They gave eight recommendations for supporting successful happiness policies:

1. Establish happiness strategies
2. Create the “magic sauce” to turn talk into action, translating research into policy and practice
3. Enable collaboration within ministries or organizations
4. Enable collaboration across ministries, NGOs, and others
5. Create the necessary space for experimentation, innovation, evaluation, and risk-taking
6. Facilitate consistency among policy choices
7. Assure continuity
8. Learn from experiences near and far

In addition, the 2019 report devoted an entire chapter for using happiness measures to appraise healthcare priority setting. The authors note that health spending is around 10% of global GDP and national health outcomes are inconsistent with overall spending. Thus, how resources are allocated is vital to health outcome. They argue that happiness measures should be used to appraise

resource allocation and offered the following four recommendations. Formal healthcare appraisal should: guide decision making, consider opportunity cost, measure benefits in terms of happiness rather than health, and include benefits to all parties, not just patients.

Finally, the *World Happiness Report 2019* made five recommendations to central governments on where to introduce happiness policies: in the budget process, in legislation to establish wellbeing objectives or collect wellbeing data, in national development strategies with a wellbeing focus, in new ministries or agencies, and in strengthening civil service capacity.<sup>18</sup>

## EFFORTS OUTSIDE GOVERNMENT

Complementing the work by Bhutan and the Global Happiness Council, several civil society organizations and for-profit companies are also advocating for wellbeing measures and policies, such as the New Economics Foundation, Happiness Alliance, Oxford Foundation for Knowledge Exchange, Action for Happiness, Gross National Happiness USA, Greater Good Science Center, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), and What Works Centre for Wellbeing, among others. Most of these organizations are based in the UK, and many produce reports and rankings of happiness countries.

A select few are highlighted below.

The New Economics Foundation is a UK think tank that seeks to empower people to take greater control of the economy. The Foundation published the Happy Planet Index in 2016 to measure sustainable, community wellbeing,<sup>19</sup> which they calculated by multiplying three components—wellbeing (according to the Gallup World Poll), life expectancy, and inequality as measured by the GINI coefficient—and dividing by their environmental impact.

The Oxford Foundation for Knowledge Exchange published the *Global Analysis of Wellbeing Report*.<sup>20</sup> Their report includes policy recommendations for civil organizations, in addition to recommendations for government to increase wellbeing. In addition to policy recommendations, their report has seven suggestions for measuring wellbeing, including measuring multiple domains, measuring across the life-course, and using subjective measures. The report also includes nine case studies.

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing is a non-profit consulting firm in the UK that offers help to small and medium-size organizations to start measuring

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—*Global Happiness Policy Report 2019*

and impacting the wellbeing of stakeholders. They offer nine steps to aid organizations in identifying subjective and objective measures, in choosing questions to ask about the measures, in running analyses on the results, and then in using the data in future decision-making.<sup>21</sup> They work with researchers, think tanks, businesses, government departments, and non-profits on several attributes of wellbeing, such as housing, workplace wellbeing, and physical activity.

Moreover, some for-profit companies have gotten involved. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) publishes a Sustainable Economic Development Assessment (SEDA), which measures the sustainability of a country’s development.<sup>22</sup> Sustainability is defined as both environmental and social inclusion, which includes governance and civil society. SEDA uses 40 objective indicators, including health, to rank countries and help governments identify needs and priorities of their citizens.

## REPORT’S RANKINGS

Several of the reports mentioned above rank countries. A summation of select rankings by different organizations is reported in Table 1. There is clearly a high representation of Scandinavian countries, which take up some or all top positions in the *World Happiness Report*, HDI, SEDA, and OECD Better Life. The biggest outlier is the Happy Planet Index, because their formula accounts for environmental impact, and the per capita impact for Central and South American countries is much lower than others. One caveat for true comparison across rankings is the number of countries included in the measures: The *World Happiness Report* and the HDI measure over 180 countries, SEDA includes 152 countries, Happy Planet includes 140, and Better Life includes 38—the OECD countries, plus Russia and Brazil.

**Table 1. Cross-Country Rankings**

International comparisons	World Happiness Report 2019	Human Development Index (HDI)	BCG’s SEDA	Happy Planet Index	OECD Better Life*
Top 3 countries	Finland	Norway	Norway	Costa Rica	Norway
	Denmark	Switzerland	Switzerland	Mexico	Denmark
	Norway	Australia	Iceland	Colombia	Australia

*\*The Better Life Index does not give explicit rankings because dimensions can be weighed differently. The top 3 countries are listed if all dimensions are weighted equally.*

# DEFINING AND MEASURING HAPPINESS

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**W**hile the previous section provided a brief review of the current state of happiness and wellbeing projects, this section will discuss how the concept of happiness has been defined and measured in academia and in practice. It is notable that the preceding section focused on the field of public policy, which is led mainly by economists. In this section, we will see how behavioral scientists, primarily psychologists, have led the field in defining happiness and the practical replications of these studies. We will provide a brief overview of the concept in academic research and discuss the definitions and measures used in practice.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF HAPPINESS IN THE LITERATURE

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In peer-reviewed literature, the terms “happiness,” or “wellbeing,” began to appear in the early decades of the 20th century, according to a literature analysis.<sup>23</sup> Early published papers examined the concept in married couples and in recent university graduates.<sup>24</sup> In a citation review of academic literature, the terms “happiness” and “wellbeing” occurred as early as 1904, but sporadically until 1960, when the terms appeared more consistently.<sup>23</sup> A cursory review of some of the major works in this field include Wilson’s (1967), which looked at factors for “avowed happiness,”<sup>25</sup> and Bradburn’s (1969), which was an early examination into the structures of psychological wellbeing.<sup>26</sup> Diener’s work (1984) made important contributions toward the definition of “subjective wellbeing,” noting the three hallmarks of the concept: that it is subjective, includes positive measures, and is a global assessment of all aspects of one’s life.<sup>27</sup>



In addition to these works that defined the concept, there are also some key works in exploring its dimensions, especially adding a social element. Ryff (1989) was notable for advocating for social factors to be included in psychological wellbeing,

bringing in the issue of social context to the psychological domains.<sup>26</sup> The importance of social aspects in wellbeing was refined in Keyes' work (1998) around five dimensions: social integration, social contribution, social coherence, social actualization, and social acceptance.<sup>28</sup> Table 2 lists some definitions of happiness or a variant from peer-reviewed literature.

Another major moment in exploring happiness and wellbeing came in 1998 with psychologist Martin Seligman's speech to the American Psychological Association, when he called for a "positive psychology" that would reorient the science toward positive qualities of an individual.<sup>29</sup> He felt that psychology had

become too focused on curing mental illness, rather than studying positive traits of individuals. He echoed the words of Robert Kennedy:

*Yet we have scant knowledge of what makes life worth living. For although psychology has come to understand quite a bit about how people survive and endure under conditions of adversity, we know very little about how normal people flourish...*

Positive psychology itself has flourished in the years since his speech. Ongoing research has focused on the specific components of what makes a positive life, such as grit, optimism, happiness, and flow. Seligman himself has published many books in the field, such as *Flourish*, *Authentic Happiness*, *Learned Optimism*, and most recently, *The Hope Circuit*.<sup>30</sup>

Seligman's most recent theory offers five building blocks of wellbeing under the acronym PERMA: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments.<sup>30</sup> "Positive emotion" is the hedonic, colloquial idea of feeling happiness, though it can be extended beyond the present in two ways: into the past by building gratitude and forgiveness, and into the future by building optimism. "Engagement" references participating in an activity where you "lose yourself" and create flow. "Relationships," another building block, are the social connections to others in one's life. "Meaning," also sometimes called purpose, is a feeling of connection to a higher purpose or calling in life. Finally, "accomplishments" are what people pursue because of drive or ambition. Striving toward accomplishments is an end in itself to some people, regardless of the outcome.

The PERMA theory has been further refined by Tyler VanderWeele, who

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equates human wellbeing with the term “flourishing” and summarizes some of its major determinants based on empirical research.<sup>31</sup> He identifies five major determinants of human wellbeing as: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. He describes how these determinants are impacted along four pathways: family, work, education, and religious community. Because there are multiple factors to wellbeing, he ends by calling for more holistic outcome measures in health and other social science research that examines effects on people.



## DEFINING HAPPINESS IN ACADEMIA

Despite these attempts to define happiness and wellbeing, there remains a lack of consensus in the field. The abundance of measurement approaches can be seen in the work of Ruut Veenhoven, a Dutch sociology professor, who has collected measures and studies of happiness in an online database, which currently includes over 13,000 articles. Veenhoven defines happiness as the “subjective enjoyment of one’s own life as a whole.”<sup>32</sup> The database, last updated in September 2018, contains 1,200 ways that happiness has been measured, many of which are single survey questions, with over 2,200 empirical studies. Measures are classified by focus, time reference, observation, and rating scale, and are in a searchable database available to the public.<sup>32</sup> The Lee Kum Sheung Center for Health and Happiness at Harvard has also begun developing a repository of measures (found on the Resources page of the Center’s website: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/health-happiness>) that relate psychological wellbeing with happiness.

Even co-authors define the term differently. In a 2009 book, *Wellbeing for Public Policy*, Diener, the lead author, defined wellbeing as “an overall evaluation that an individual makes of his or her life in all its important aspects.”<sup>33</sup> A co-author with Diener, Richard Lucas, phrases it slightly differently. In 2016, he wrote in *The Oxford Handbook on Wellbeing and Public Policy* that “Within psychology, subjective well-being refers to a person’s overall evaluation of the quality of life from his or her own perspective.”<sup>34</sup>

One key distinction in these definitions is how they use objective and subjective measures to validate the definitions. A single definition of wellbeing or happiness can include both components, but it is important to note the difference, especially regarding implications for measurement.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 2. Selection of Key Definitions from Academia**

Source	Term	Definition
World Health Organization (1946)	Health	A state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity
Seligman (2011)	Flourishing	A focus on five pillars: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (PERMA)
Diener (1984)	Subjective wellbeing	3 hallmarks: It's subjective, includes positive measures, and includes a global assessment of one's life
Diener et al (2009)	Wellbeing	An overall evaluation that an individual makes of his or her life in all its important aspects
Lucas (2016)	Subjective wellbeing	A person's overall evaluation of the quality of life from his or her own perspective
VanderWeele (2017)	Flourishing	A state in which all aspects of a person's life are good
Ruut Veenhoven, World Database of Happiness (2018)	Happiness	Subjective enjoyment of one's own life as a whole

## DEFINING HAPPINESS IN PRACTICE

Several psychologists, including Diener and Seligman, have worked to move the psychological research into policy analysis. They are both on the Global Happiness Council, are involved in the *World Happiness Reports*, and have written extensively on collaborating with policy experts. They are arguably at the vanguard of translating psychological research into practice. Their work has led to a large “grey literature” of practice-focused definitions of happiness or a similar term. Table 2 lists these definitions and terms.

Starting in chronological order, the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Report in France from 2009 looked for measures of social progress that went beyond GDP to indicate quality of life; it mainly used the term “subjective wellbeing.” The report’s description is based on Diener’s (1984) three hallmarks of subjective wellbeing—that it is subjective, includes positive measures, and contains an overall evaluation of feelings. However, the report adds two important points. First, quality-of-life indicators should include objective measures, such as physical health and educational attainment across the population. Second, inequality within the population should be assessed for all metrics, because inequality is integral to cross-country comparisons.

In the first *World Happiness Report 2012*, the authors noted that “happiness” and “subjective wellbeing” are both general terms with overlap in possible

connotations, but that the report would use measures of subjective wellbeing.<sup>15</sup> They give a general definition for subjective wellbeing as “the general expression used to cover a range of individual self-reports of moods and life assessments,” and go on to state that it has three domains—life evaluations, negative emotional reports, and positive emotional reports (p.11).<sup>15</sup>

The *Global Happiness Policy Report 2018*, which grew out of the *World Happiness Reports*, used the OECD’s definition from their 2013 book, *Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-Being*, which strived to provide an international standard for comparability.<sup>17</sup> The OECD guidelines suggest using the term “subjective wellbeing” because it “covers a wider range of concepts than just happiness” (p. 10).<sup>35</sup> Their definition encompasses three elements: life evaluation, affect, and eudaimonia. “Life evaluation” is a self-reflection on the quality of one’s life. “Affect” is one’s feelings or emotional states, usually measured in terms of a reference point in time. “Eudaimonia” is a more profound concept, representing the degree of meaning or purpose in one’s life.

The UK has an interesting history in their efforts to measure wellbeing. In 2010, then Prime Minister David Cameron said, “It’s time we focused not just on GDP but on GWB—general wellbeing.”<sup>36</sup> His comments led to efforts by the Office of National Statistics to determine how to measure wellbeing. They started a national debate and held over 175 events to gather input from citizens on what is important to them.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, their efforts led to questions on wellbeing and happiness being included in national surveys. A data dashboard has been released with objective and subjective measures of wellbeing.<sup>38</sup> In addition, there is a What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which is part of a network of quasi-government agencies that strengthen the bridge between evidence and practice. This center furthers the work of the Office of National Statistics and uses the same definition of wellbeing. For the UK, health is one of the objective components on the data dashboard for a holistic perspective, but happiness and wellbeing are explicitly linked to subjective survey questions.

Another example of measuring wellbeing is the Happy Planet Index, which measures “sustainable wellbeing” through a single composite measure. Unique from other measures discussed so far, the Happy Planet Index uses wellbeing, defined as “how satisfied the residents of each country say they feel with life overall,” as one of the inputs to their composite measure. They measure wellbeing for each country based on the Gallup World Poll. The score for each country (from 0-10) is then multiplied by two other values: the average life expectancy and a measure of inequality (GINI coefficient). This number is then divided by a numeric measure of the ecological footprint of each country for the final score.<sup>19</sup>

Examples of wellbeing definitions within country-specific measures come from the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and the Gross National Happiness Index of Bhutan. The Canadian index was founded by a research group out of the University

of Waterloo, which wanted to look beyond GDP to general quality-of-life indicators. They chose to define wellbeing as “the presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression focused on but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture.”<sup>39</sup> Based on the indicators included in their measure, the group views health as a component of wellbeing.

Finally, the Centre for Bhutan Studies, which produces the Gross National Happiness Index, published a thorough account of their methodology and definitions in 2017. The report, *Happiness: Transforming the Development Landscape*, defined happiness as “everything that makes a person’s life that goes well” (p.22).<sup>40</sup> The report also states that “happiness,” “wellbeing,” and “flourishing,” are generally equivalent terms. Health is viewed as a component of these concepts.

**Table 3. Selective List of Terms and Definitions**

Source	Term	Definition
Fitoussi Commission (2009)	Subjective wellbeing	3 components: life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect (from Diener, 1984)
World Happiness Report 2012	Subjective wellbeing	General expression used to cover a range of individual self-reports of moods and life assessments
OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Wellbeing (2013)	Subjective wellbeing	Good mental states, including all of the various evaluations, positive and negative, that people make of their lives and the affective reactions of people to their experiences
Measuring National Wellbeing Programme (UK Government) (2013)	Subjective wellbeing	How we are doing as individuals, as communities, and as a nation, and how sustainable this is for the future
Happy Planet Index (2016)	Wellbeing	How satisfied the residents of each country say they feel with life overall
Canadian Index of Wellbeing (2016)	Wellbeing	The presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression focused on, but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture
Centre for Bhutan Studies (2016)	Happiness	Everything that makes a person’s life that goes well



## HOW TO MEASURE

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The definitions and measurement approaches to happiness and wellbeing are sometimes intertwined. Some definitions are simply constituent parts, with an implication that the measurement approach needs to account for each one. Diener's (1984) definition of subjective wellbeing implies what type of measures should be included, namely subjective metrics and one of a comprehensive life evaluation. Just as with definitions, a gold-standard measurement approach does not exist.

The OECD's book on guidelines tries to be a comprehensive guide for the measurement of subjective wellbeing, especially for national statistical offices. Recognizing that there is differential interest and ability in national statistic offices for measuring wellbeing, the report provides advice on best practices, rather than a formal statistical standard. Issues around collection of subjective wellbeing are discussed, including the wording of questions to avoid bias. For subjective wellbeing measures, the report recommends using a 0- to 10-point scale and having life satisfaction questions appear early in surveys to minimize bias from other questions.

Another suggestion regarding collection is adding life satisfaction questions to household or general population surveys, which should be collected at least annually. There is a caveat included that the exact "optimal" collection approach to wellbeing is still unknown. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence supporting the value of including wellbeing questions, and that wellbeing may actually have more evidence of validity, compared to other common metrics collected in surveys (p. 15).<sup>35</sup>

The Gallup World Poll is a distinctly important measure because its results are used in several global datasets. Gallup's World Poll is an annual survey conducted in 160 countries using a nationally representative sample based on face-to-face and telephone responses. Wellbeing questions include affect questions within the last 24 hours, negative and positive experience indices, and life evaluation questions. The most-often-quoted question from the report is the life evaluation question, which is based on a scale from 0-10 called the Cantril ladder and asks respondents to rate their lives on it.<sup>41</sup> Many measures, such as the Better Life Index, the *World Happiness Report*, the Human Development Index, and the Happy Planet Index, use this question as their measure of wellbeing. Several other reports use the Gallup data with slight modifications, notably the *World Happiness Report*, which averages responses over the last three years. Gallup produces its own wellbeing index, categorically ranking scores, but no major study we found used this calculation.

In addition to the global measure, Gallup has another survey, the Gallup-

Just as with definitions, a gold-standard measurement approach to happiness and wellbeing does not exist.

Sharecare Well-Being Index, that includes wellbeing questions only in the US. The index uses a different nationally representative sample than the world poll and gathers approximately 10,000 responses through a web-based and mail survey. Questions are across five dimensions of wellbeing: purpose, social, financial, community, and physical. Responses are aggregated by state and by overall 180 metropolitan areas, which are ranked annually.<sup>42</sup>

**Table 4. Sample of International Measures of Happiness or Wellbeing**

	Measure components								
	Life satisfaction questions	Financial/employment	Physical health	Purpose	Social & family relationships	Environmental	Education	Safety	Mental health
OECD Better Life Index	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Gallup World Poll	X								
Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index		X	X	X	X	X			
Human Development Index		X	X				X		
BCG's SEDA		X	X			X	X	X	
Happy Planet Index	X		X			X			

In addition to Gallup, there are several efforts to report and aggregate country wellbeing measures from around the world. A selection of efforts is listed in Table 4. One example is the OECD Better Life Index, which started in 2011 and incorporates the OECD guidelines on measures. It includes 11 dimensions of wellbeing: community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, housing, income, jobs, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance. Data are updated annually and are available online through an interactive tool.<sup>2</sup>

## NATIONAL AND MUNICIPAL MEASURES

This section will discuss efforts by specific countries to measure happiness or wellbeing (Table 5). Notably, a forthcoming publication from the OECD surveyed national statistics offices and found that 35 out of 36 OECD countries collect measures of subjective wellbeing as measured by life evaluation questions. The most common measurement mechanism is a 0-10 life satisfaction measure that is used in 30 countries.<sup>43</sup>

The most-noted measure is the Gross National Happiness Index produced by the Centre for Bhutan Studies within the government of Bhutan. The index is based on a national survey and is released every five years. The latest edition from 2015 noted improvement from 2010 to 2015. The output is condensed into a single number, which comprises 33 indicators classified under nine domains: living standards, health, education, good governance, ecological diversity and resilience, time use, psychological wellbeing, cultural diversity and resilience, and community vitality.<sup>3</sup>

The government of Thailand produces the Green and Happiness Index within the National Social and Economic Development Board, part of the national government.<sup>44</sup> The measure was created in response to a national strategic plan that called for holistic growth alongside concerns for the environment and wellbeing, rather than a complete reliance on economic growth. Work on the index began in 2006 with outreach to the population about what dimensions to



include. The final set of factors is: health, warm and loving family, empowerment of community, economic strength and equity, good quality environment and ecological system, and democratic society and good governance.

The government of Israel passed a resolution in 2015 requiring the Central Bureau of Statistics to publish measures of wellbeing across 11 domains: quality of employment; personal security; health; housing and infrastructure; education and skills; personal and social wellbeing; environment; civic engagement and governance; material standard of living; information technology; and leisure, culture, and community. The measures are published annually as of 2016 and include over 45 indicators.<sup>45</sup>

The Central Statistics Agency of the government of Indonesia produces a national happiness index known as Indeks Kebahagiaan. The index consists

of 10 dimensions: health, education, jobs, household income, family, leisure time, social relationships, house and assets, environment, and safety.<sup>46</sup>

The UK began efforts to measure wellbeing after comments from then Prime Minister David Cameron in 2010.<sup>36</sup> The Measuring National Well-being Programme within the Office of National Statistics was formed shortly afterward and now publishes biannual updates to its measures on an online dashboard. The site lists 43 indicators over the following 10 dimensions: personal wellbeing, relationships, health, what we do, where we live, personal

finance, economy, education and skills, governance, and environment.<sup>47</sup>

Within Canada, researchers at the University of Waterloo produce the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. The last release was in 2016 and contained eight dimensions: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture. There are eight indicators for each dimension, meaning 64 indicators are reported overall.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, other locations have indicated an interest in wellbeing without adopting an independent measure. The United Arab Emirates has appointed a minister for happiness and wellbeing. They are concentrating their efforts in the “Smart Dubai” initiative to make the city the happiest city in the world.<sup>48</sup> The government of Singapore lists a mental wellbeing survey on their online, open data site that includes five dimensions: social intelligence, cognitive efficacy, self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and resilience.<sup>49</sup> Another example is the Indian city of Goa, which has mentioned plans to evaluate wellbeing as part of their

A forthcoming publication from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) surveyed national statistics offices and found that 35 out of 36 OECD countries collect measures of subjective wellbeing as measured by life evaluation questions.

strategic plan to 2035. South Korean prime ministers have mentioned happiness as part of their campaign platform with different intervention strategies.<sup>50</sup>

**Table 5. Select Location-Specific Measures**

Source	Common components of measure								
	Life satisfaction questions	Financial/employment	Physical health	Purpose	Social & family relationships	Environmental	Education	Safety	Mental health
Government of Bhutan		X	X		X	X	X		X
Government of Thailand		X	X		X	X			
Government of Israel	X	X	X			X		X	
Government of Indonesia		X	X		X	X	X	X	
Government of United Kingdom	X								
Government of Singapore	X						X		X
University of Waterloo – Canadian Index of Wellbeing		X	X		X	X	X		
City of Somerville, MA USA	X								
City of Santa Monica, CA USA		X	X			X	X		
City of Seattle, WA USA	X	X	X			X	X		X



## RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF MEASURES OF HAPPINESS AND WELLBEING

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With such a variety, the validity of measuring wellbeing is a major question. In general, many authors have stated unequivocal support to the validity of measuring wellbeing.<sup>33,35,51</sup> Seligman states that measures of wellbeing are “theoretically, metrically, and empirically advanced enough to supplement” traditional measures of progress, like economic growth.<sup>30</sup> The OECD guidelines say that “It is clear that for many potential uses, measures of subjective wellbeing, when carefully collected, are able to meet the basic standard of fitness for purpose” (p. 13).<sup>35</sup>

Diener et al (2009) have a lengthy discussion on the validity of subjective measures of wellbeing. Examining several aspects of reliability and validity, Diener concludes that both single and multiple measures of subjective wellbeing can be valid. There are several tests to evaluate measures for validity, such as asking the same question multiple times in an interview, comparing a single question result to a multiple question survey, or re-surveying individuals over a prescribed time period. One qualification is that measures with different content and dimensions provide relatively similar information, but caution is needed if they are used for national comparisons.<sup>33</sup>

# ROLE OF HEALTH

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**W**here does health fit into happiness? Unlike happiness and wellbeing, there is an arguably standard definition to health. In 1946, the WHO defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>54</sup> While it remains a seminal definition in the field, many have noted that the definition seems to equate “wellbeing” and “health,” which has drawn criticism.<sup>52</sup> As noted above, the WHO constitution uses the word “happiness” in the sentence before as one of the outcomes of the basic principles, in which health is included. This wording suggests that “happiness” is distinct from “health.”

However, Saracci<sup>53</sup> makes the opposite argument and states that the WHO has conflated health and happiness based on the use of “wellbeing,” which suggests that a complete state of wellbeing corresponds more to happiness than to health (p. 1409). Saracci is only one example of the criticism of the WHO definition, which is ongoing.<sup>52,54,55</sup> One of the latest, and most cited, criticisms is from Huber et al (2011), who proposed a new definition: Health is “the ability to adapt and to self-manage.”<sup>56</sup>

Though health has been defined by the WHO, its integration in happiness policies is inconsistent and often not in sync with the WHO definition. As shown

Much work remains to be done on clarifying how exactly health fits into the definition and measures of happiness, and the extent to which policies to promote happiness affect and are affected by health.

above, health is included as an objective component within subjective wellbeing, a separate factor alongside wellbeing (e.g., Happy Planet Index), or not included at all in purely subjective measures. Much work remains to be done on clarifying how exactly health fits into the definition and measures of happiness, and the extent to which policies to promote happiness affect and are affected by health.

# CONCLUSION

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**A**s shown through a discussion of a sampling of definitions and measures from academia and the field of happiness policies, there is a lack of consensus around how to define and measure happiness or wellbeing in both academia and in practice. But the philosopher L.W. Sumner provides a silver lining for the abundance of terms (happiness, wellbeing, flourishing); though they appear fragmented, he traced the interpretation of each term back to the etymology of “welfare”—the condition of faring or doing well (p.1).<sup>57</sup> Most people have a sense when the condition of their life is good and prefer it to the opposite. This condition is central to common-sense morality and has played a central role in most studies of ethics, even “counting for everything” in some systems (p. 4).<sup>57</sup> From this perspective, the differences in terminology might not be a major hindrance if they all point toward a similar underlying concept. The general direction for most efforts is a quality-of-life indicator, to accompany or replace GDP.

This conclusion is supported by our findings that the Gallup World Poll is widely used as a measure, yet a widely used definition does not exist. We also found that some examples did not include a clear definition, or used different terms, like wellbeing or happiness, sometimes interchangeably. Despite these difficulties of definitions, measurement approaches are slightly less ambiguous, with many using Gallup’s World Poll for input data, or multiple criteria across several areas. The OECD is leading efforts at standardizing the definition and measurement, though some of the practices they support pose major logistical problems for survey responders, such as using the Cantril ladder to measure

life satisfaction on surveys administered on cell phones. Moreover, questions remain of cross-national applicability and translation of terms into multiple languages.

Regardless of the dissonance, happiness policies have expanded rapidly in the last decades, creating a multitude of measures, definitions, and practices that are actively used from the UK to South Korea. To facilitate translation of research into practice, we will need to overcome the hurdles of definition and measurement. A beneficial next step is to understand the role of health, especially how physical, mental, and social dimensions of health fit into the definition and measurement of happiness. Reconciling the concepts of health and happiness may leverage the resources in the health sector to better promote both throughout the world.



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# **PURSUING HAPPINESS AND HEALTH**

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DEFINING, MEASURING, AND  
TRANSLATING WELLBEING  
IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

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A BACKGROUND PAPER

