

WHAT IS SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ARTICLE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING, BY ED DIENER

*O QUE É BEM-ESTAR SUBJETIVO? ANÁLISE CRÍTICA DO
ARTIGO SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING DE ED DIENER*

*¿QUÉ ES EL BIENESTAR SUBJETIVO? ANÁLISIS CRÍTICO DEL
ARTÍCULO SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING, DE ED DIENER*

Luciano Espósito Sewaybricker e Gustavo Massola

Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo/SP, Brasil

Abstract: Ed Diener's article "Subjective Well-Being", fundamental for the consolidation of this object in Positive Psychology, was critically analyzed in terms of its internal consistency and its influence on research in this new area. Each textual block of the article was evaluated for its fragility according to three categories: theoretical-philosophical consideration, concept's definition and its parts, bibliographic references. As a result, we emphasize that Subjective Well-Being (SWB) and Happiness are weakly defined in Diener's paper, giving rise to ambiguous interpretations; important questions, such as the difference between the best life and the good life, are ignored; important bibliographical references are used inconsistently or not presented during central argumentation. However, we recognize that the weaknesses identified in the article are consistent with the Positive Psychology project: to emphasize what is measurable at the cost of theoretical rigor. It is recommended that research on Subjective Well-Being recover the history of its central concepts in order to recognize their own limits and solve ethical problems in the field.

Keywords: Subjective well-being; Happiness; Positive psychology; Philosophy; Ed Diener.

Resumo: O artigo de Ed Diener "Bem-Estar Subjetivo", fundamental para a consolidação desse objeto na Psicologia Positiva, foi analisado criticamente em sua consistência interna e em sua influência para essa nova área. Cada bloco textual do artigo foi avaliado quanto a sua fragilidade segundo três categorias: consideração teórico-filosófica, definição do conceito e suas partes, referências bibliográficas. Como resultado, destacamos que Bem-Estar Subjetivo (BES) e Felicidade são fragilmente definidos no artigo, dando margem a ambíguas interpretações que se prolongam até o presente; importantes perguntas, como a diferença entre a melhor vida e a vida boa, são ignoradas; importantes referências bibliográficas são utilizadas inconsistentemente. Todavia, reconhece-se que as fragilidades identificadas no artigo são coerentes com o projeto da Psicologia Positiva: enfatizar aquilo que é mensurável ao custo do rigor. Recomenda-se que pesquisas sobre BES resgatem a história dos conceitos centrais a fim de reconhecer seus próprios limites e solucionar problemas éticos do campo.

Palavras-chave: Bem-estar subjetivo; Felicidade; Psicologia positiva; Filosofia; Ed Diener.

Resumen: El artículo de Ed Diener "Bienestar Subjetivo", fundamental para la consolidación de este objeto en la Psicología Positiva, fue analizado críticamente en cuanto a su consistencia interna y su influencia en esta nueva área. Cada bloque textual del artículo fue evaluado por su fragilidad según tres categorías: consideración teórico-filosófica, definición del concepto y sus partes, referencias bibliográficas. Como resultado, destacamos que el Bienestar Subjetivo (BES) y la Felicidad están débilmente definidos en el artículo de Diener, dando lugar a interpretaciones ambiguas que continúan hasta el presente; se ignoran cuestiones importantes, como la diferencia entre la mejor vida y la buena vida; las referencias bibliográficas importantes se usan de manera inconsistente. Sin embargo, se reconoce que las debilidades identificadas en el artículo de Diener son consistentes con el proyecto de Psicología Positiva: enfatizar lo medible a costa del rigor. Se recomienda que la investigación sobre BES recupere la historia de los conceptos centrales para reconocer sus propios límites y resolver problemas éticos en el campo.

Palabras-clave: Bienestar subjetivo; Felicidad; Psicología Positiva; Filosofía; Ed Diener.

Introduction and Problematization

The researches that are part of the Positive Psychology (PP) movement are marked by the interest in the so-called positive subjective experiences (Seligman, 1998, 2002), in the great functioning of the human being (Snyder & Lopez, 2002) and by the contrast to the investigation of illness. Within this universe of interest, Well-Being is possibly the object that receives attention the most. Martin Seligman, referred to as the founder of PP (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006, p. 4), wrote more than 10 years after the institutionalization of the area: “*I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being*” (Seligman, 2011, p. 13).

However, despite the centrality of Well-Being in the universe of PP, research is far from consensus towards this object. With a brief research, it is easy to find profusion of proposals, such as Subjective Well-Being (Diener, 1984), Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), Eudaimonic and Hedonic Well-Being (Deci & Ryan, 2002). For instance, Miles-Jay Linton, Paul Dieppe and Antonieta Medina-Lara (2016) identified 196 different being evaluated in 99 Well-Being self-evaluation instruments.

Thus, the main criticisms are about fragile definitions of Well-Being as an object of research. Carol Ryff and Corey Keyes (1995, pp. 719-720) already reported surprise before the scope of quantitative research without due attention to the theoretical aspects: “*The absence of theory-based formulations of well-being is puzzling given abundant accounts of positive functioning in subfields of psychology.*” More recently, as a consequence of this lack of theoretical attention, research such as Robert Biswas-Diener, Todd Kashdan and Laura King’s (2009) and Douglas MacDonald’s (2017) question the lack of clarity about whether these different types of Well-Being would be focusing on different objects or would measure a single broad object.

In any case, Well-Being, as an object of research, continued to grow in importance, and publications multiplied, even leading to handbooks dedicated to the topic (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018a; Joar Vittersø, 2016). Inside this prolific universe, the proposal of Subjective Well-Being (SWB), systematized by Ed Diener (1984) and defined as “*an overall evaluation of the quality of a person’s life from her or his own perspective*” (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2018b, p. 1), is probably the most significant variation due to its pioneering influence in the field.

In the introduction of his research collection, Diener (2009, p. 4) himself wrote about the importance of his 1984 article:

the 1984 Psychological Bulletin article, which popularized the field among psychologists ... has become a citation classic, with over 1,400 citations by 2008. This citation count represents about 1/10th of the total 14,500 citations to my work. ... Since that article, the number of scholarly publications on subjective well-being has multiplied many times.

A search on *Google Scholar* platform on October 28, 2021, showed that Diener’s article, *Subjective Well-Being*, had been cited 18.989 times. In the “*Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*” (Michalos, 2014, p. 6437), the input “Subjective Well-being” is specifically linked to Diener’s article: “*The term SWB was first introduced by Diener (1984).* ... *The scientific term <subjective well-being> introduced by Diener (1984).*”

Diener’s own prominence in the field is clear in his role as lead author of the “*Handbook of Well-Being*” (Diener et al., 2018a) and as a select participant at the *International Well-Being Summit* held in Kyoto, Japan in August 2019, to reformulate the questions involving well-being and happiness in the *Gallup World Poll* (Lambert et al., 2020).

Amid the continuing importance of Diener's inaugural article and the diffuse character of the research field involving Well-Being, the hypothesis that the current problems of rigor in research would already be present in the systematization presented by Diener, incurring a fragility systemic to the field, was raised.

Method

The purpose of the present article is to provide an in-depth and critical review of Diener's *Subjective Well-Being* (1984) article, relating this analysis, where relevant, to recent publications in the field. In view of this aim, Diener's article was analyzed, sentence by sentence, and the bibliographic references, checked. The sentences that composed an argumentation block were grouped and classified into "conceptual construction", "bibliographic support" or "nda" (none of the above, in Portuguese). Yet, each of the blocks was evaluated from one to three according to the level of theoretical fragility (with "1" referring to low fragility and "3" to high fragility). When the arguments were clear, with precise support from the bibliography and consistent with the rest of the article, the rating assigned was 1. Otherwise, the rating assigned was 3. When identified, these fragilities were pointed out in a brief analysis of the block, as shown in the example referring to the excerpt "*For example, Marcus Aurelius wrote that 'no man is happy who does not think himself so'*", present on page 543 (Diener, 1984): "Bibliographic reference is not pointed out and the cited sentence is not Marcus Aurelius, but Publius Syrus".

Special emphasis was given to the initial chapters of the article (pp. 542-544), since the arguments used in the initial pages served as a basis for the subsequent ones, mainly concerned with presenting the history of research related to SWB. A shortened version of this analysis, in tabular form, is available as supplementary material.

From the table produced and the subsequent analysis, three main themes were listed for the presentation of the results: (1) theoretical-philosophical consideration, (2) definition of the concept and its parts, (3) bibliographic references. Each of the three themes will be further explored below and related to current literature in the field.

Theoretical-philosophical consideration

Historical review

Right on the first sentence of his article's abstract, Diener (1984, p. 542) indicates that he will present a historical review of his central object of investigation, Subjective Well-Being (SWB): "*The literature on subjective well-being (SWB), including happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect, is reviewed*". And this step plays an important role in the greater aim of systematizing the field of study and favoring future research. It is by reviewing the literature that Diener intends to indicate the perimeter of what is and what is not part of the field.

Interestingly, this review starts from ambiguous terrain. At times, especially when echoing Warner Wilson's conclusion (Diener, 1984, p. 542), that little theoretical progress had been made on happiness since the ancient Greeks, Diener demonstrates that it is an im-

mature field of study. At other times, he indicates dealing with a reasonably mature field: “*Satisfaction with life and positive affect are both studied by subjective well-being researchers*” (Diener, 1984, p. 543). Field mature enough to approach a well determined object, be it referred to as SWB, “*recent work on measuring and conceptualizing SWB is reviewed*” (Diener, 1984, p. 542), be it happiness, “*Perhaps the most important advance since Wilson’s [1967] review is in defining and measuring happiness*” (Diener, 1984, p. 543).

Regarding SWB, it is hard to discuss the rigor of the theoretical rescue, since there are few works prior to Diener’s that attributed this name to its object of investigation and, of these few, it is not possible to find a precise definition (e.g. Andrews & Inglehart, 1979; Wilkening & Mc-Granahan, 1978). On the other hand, regarding happiness, there is a wide universe of references. Diener cites some of them (e.g. Chekola, 1975; Jones, 1953; Tatarkiewicz, 1976) and chooses to adopt the position of Warner Wilson (1967), already mentioned. By echoing this position, Diener excludes famous authors from Ancient Rome from the debate, such as Cicero, Lucretius, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, from the Middle Age, such as Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, and many others. Diener ends up restricting himself to the happiness proposed by Aristotle and, thus, ignoring the complexity of the theme that is dealt with in depth in the reviews he cites.

Having Aristotle as his main philosophical reference, Diener (1984, p. 543) offers a summary of the concept *eudaemonia*: “*when Aristotle wrote that eudaemonia is gained mainly by leading a virtuous life, he did not mean that virtue leads to feelings of joy. Rather, Aristotle was prescribing virtue as the normative standard against which people’s lives can be judged*”.

However, attention should be paid to a careless transposition of *eudaemonia* into the lexicon of Psychology, as Biswas-Diener et al. (2009, p. 208) alert. For example, the separation between *eudaemonia* and emotions proposed by Diener does not match the proposal of the Greek philosopher. Unlike what Diener wrote, one of the interpretations of Aristotle’s work is that action can be referred to as virtuous only when it is accompanied by positive emotions. If the virtuous action is not accompanied by, say, joy, it would only be the result of the mechanical reproduction of a prescribed action (Aristóteles, 1962, 1104b21-24).

Even in later publications, Diener does not demonstrate rigor on happiness’s philosophical review and in the choice of the used terms. Diener, Jeffrey Sapyta and Eunkook Suh’s (1998, p. 32) article states that: “*Jeremy Bentham built [his] idea of the good society on the maximization of subjective well-being. Thus, the topic of subjective well-being has deep philosophical and religious roots*”. However, Jeremy Bentham defined his objects of interest in a particularly precise mode: happiness while a broad concept and suffering and pleasure as measurable variables (Bentham, 1823, p. 1). As an object, SWB passed by Bentham’s philosophy.

Diener’s position seems to be in sync with the desire of avoiding the complexity of the object «happiness» and the philosophical debate, inaugurating a new and less polemic object that eases measurement. Diener (1984, p. 543) wrote about this: “*Unfortunately, terms like happiness that have been used frequently in daily discourse will necessarily have fuzzy and somewhat different meanings*”, and completed next, to show the priority character of measurement: “*Nevertheless, as measurement and other work proceeds, the most scientifically useful concepts will be those that can be measured and show, within a theoretical framework, interesting relationships to other variables*”.

It is easy to find echoes of Diener’s (1984) little rigorous vision about the history behind SWB in the field’s literature (Kesebir, 2018; Michalos, 2014, p. 6437), almost becoming common sense. In fact, it is interesting that in systematic reviews (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener et al., 2018b) the notes for future research do not mention the need for revision or theoretical-philosophical deepening.

Relation between happiness and Subjective Well-Being

The articulation between the concepts of happiness and SWB is portrayed in different ways throughout the article by Diener (1984) and, in general, can be separated into two types: as synonyms and as happiness being a minor concept, a piece of SWB.

In the writing of the article, as in many others that followed it, it is easy to find the fluid use of the words, implying that they are synonymous: “*Throughout history philosophers considered happiness to be the highest good and ultimate motivation for human action. Yet for decades psychologists largely ignored positive subjective well-being, although human unhappiness was explored in depth*” (Diener, 1984, p. 542). More recently, in the article by Andrew Jebb, Mike Morrison, Louis Tay and Ed Diener (2020, p. 293), this is even more evident: “*the subjective-well-being construct (the scientific concept for ‘happiness’)*”.

Yet, in other excerpts from the article, the word happiness can be found as a piece of SWB:

The literature on SWB is concerned with how and why people experience their lives in positive ways, including both cognitive judgements and affective reactions. As such, it covers studies that have used such diverse terms as happiness, satisfaction, morale, and positive affect. (Diener, 1984, p. 542)

Although Diener aims at precision, the variations in reference to the relation between happiness and SWB show the complexity of the former. The 1984 paper and many others that followed echo the idea that happiness is a problematic word for science because it is widely used in common sense and has a history of endless variations (Diener, 1984, p. 543; Michalos, 2014, p. 6437). Therefore, it seems reasonable that the effort to make happiness a secondary concept in relation to SWB has gained strength, and PP. Kesebir (2018, p. 9) explains:

As difficult as it may be to converge on a single definition of happiness, to be able to study it scientifically, we need to define and operationalize it. Psychologists pioneering the study of happiness dealt with this challenge by proposing the concept of “subjective well-being».

As for this specific exchange of happiness by SWB, Sonya Lyubomirsky (2008, p. 316) explains:

Ed Diener, the most distinguished and most widely published researcher in the field of subjective well-being, told me once that he coined the term subjective well-being because he didn’t think he would be promoted with tenure if his research were perceived as focusing on something as fuzzy and soft as «happiness».

Despite the inherent complexities of happiness, it is curious that Diener problematizes its history and its use in common sense, but not even superficially in relation to SWB. What is the history of Well-Being? What are the meanings in its current use?

Reflecting with Friedrich Nietzsche (2009, p. 63), that “definable is only what has no history”, the distancing from the word happiness seems to have been a necessary action for the project of an empirical science about it. However, the counterpart of this project would be to take another inert object, an object of research without history.

The difference between the good life and the best life

Given the fragile theoretical foundation of SWB, we highlight an important problem arising: disregarding the difference between investigating the good life and investigating the best life. At moments in his article, Diener (1984, p. 542) indicates that he is investigating the problem of the best possible life: “*Throughout history philosophers considered happiness to be the highest good and ultimate motivation for human action*”. In other moments, he indicates investigating the good or positive life: “*Second, social scientists have focused on the questions of what leads people to evaluate their lives in positive terms*” (Diener, 1984, p. 543). In any case, the difference between these guidelines does not seem to be considered substantial in field research. As an example, Todd Kashdan, Robert Biswas-Diener and Laura King (2008, p. 227) argue that the best possible life should not be an object of study, since it would be the simple sum of good times.

However, contrary to what was proposed by Kashdan et al. (2008), the difference between investigating the good life and investigating the best life is more significant than the intensity or amount of “feeling good”. Investigating the good life is a broad undertaking and seems consistent with the investigation of “positive” themes. That is, it deals with objects or circumstances generally taken as good, desired by people in general. Research is much closer to “good” on average.

On the other hand, the investigation of the best life implies comparison and hierarchy. It is not any good (or any good thing) that will be part of the best life. The best life will consist of a specific combination and measure of things. Some combinations of things and events will be better than others, for example. Aristotle highlighted the importance of the right measure (equilibrium or midpoint) for *eudaemonia*. Seneca (1932) recognized that luck and pleasure were good, but the happy life (blessed life) required a specific combination of both. Saint Augustine (1867) presented elements of the good life, but made it clear that happiness (beatitude) consisted in being with God in the afterlife. Through the ideas of *eudaemonia*, blissful life or beatitude, these authors were busy describing a way of life superior to all others.

However, Diener avoided focusing on the hierarchy of aspects of life, as he understood that they are far from an important criterion for him: subjectivity. Criticizing the normative character of the Aristotelian concept of *eudaemonia*, Diener (1984, p. 543; Diener et al. 1998, p. 34) proposed that it was not up to researchers to investigate the “best”, but simply to let each one evaluate SWB from their own perspective of what is “good”.

Once scientists began to study subjective well-being, they focused less on trying to decide whether it is, in fact, the most desirable of all states, which was usually considered to be a philosophical question beyond science. Instead, they emphasized understanding the antecedents and consequences of subjective well-being, assuming that it was good regardless of whether it was the highest good. (Diener, 2009, p. 1)

But what would be the impacts of evaluating and measuring how good people think their lives are, as opposed to evaluating how close people are to the life they consider ideal? What is the impact of mistakenly researching the good life as if it were the best possible life? For Diener, there seem to be no losses, only gains in applicability and scope.

If Diener abandoned “the best life” because it was normative, it is curious that normativity is not considered when choosing the constituent parts of a SWB assessment instrument and their respective weights in this evaluation. One could also question whether the investigation of the “good life” would not leave out some essential aspect of human life. Journalist Jerome Taylor suggests this in 2006 after Denmark was “awarded” to the top spot in the ranking of

the happiest countries in the world conducted by the University of Leicester: *“I’m not sure about these studies and I really wonder about the suicide rates in Denmark ... I mean, is it that we’re so happy we kill ourselves? I really wonder about that”* (Taylor, 2006). To consider this difference may clarify the fact that some countries with high indexes of SWB, such as Finland and Austria, also have high indexes of suicide (Andrés & Halicioglu, 2010; Daly, Oswald, Wilson, & Wu, 2011).

Definition of Subjective Well-Being and its parts

Early in the 1984 article, Diener (p. 542) writes that defining SWB is one of his goals. On the other hand, it seems logical that, given the fragile philosophical rescue, the definition of SWB will suffer from this fragility. Although, throughout the text, Diener treats as if his aim had been achieved, in fact the definition of the object is only tangential.

The negative definition of SWB offered by Diener is an example of the absence of a precise definition of the term: *“Notably absent from definitions of SWB are necessary objective conditions such as health, comfort, virtue, or wealth”* (1984, p. 543). Another example is the fact that SBW is presented at times as an already delimited object, other times as a research field, and between both, it is easier to identify mentions to its characteristic as a field: *“Because the area of subjective well-being can no longer be reviewed in depth in a single article”; “The area of subjective well-being has three hallmarks”* (Diener, 1984, p. 543). In some articles after 1984 it is interesting to notice that the intention of delimiting SWB as an object, central to the seminal article, is disposed: *“Subjective well-being is a broad category of phenomena that includes people’s emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgements of life satisfaction. ... Thus, we define SWB as a general area of scientific interest rather than a single specific construct”* (Diener et al. 1999, p. 277).

More recently, some papers assume SWB’s *“fuzzy and soft”* character, as William Tov (2018, p. 43) affirms: *“[a]n important development in this field over the past few decades is the recognition and growing acceptance that well-being consists of many aspects that it cannot be fully represented by any one measure”*. But that does not mean the field embraces that posture and reviews its measuring capacity. This is clear when it is affirmed in Diener et al. (2018b, p. 1) that *“[SWB is a] general term referring to the various types of subjective evaluations of one’s life, including both cognitive evaluations and affective feelings”*; or when it is affirmed that *“SWB researchers are interested in evaluations of the quality of a person’s life from that person’s own perspective”* (p. 3).

If the definition of SWB is not precise since its inaugural article, it is not surprising that there are differences as to whether its constituent parts are independent or dependent to represent the larger object. These parts are usually represented by (a) cognitive assessment of life itself, (b) intensity and frequency of positive and negative affections. Going deeper into this discussion is central to dealing with SWB’s ability to be measurable.

In the 1984 article (p. 543), Diener refers to these parts as “components”, as the following two excerpts illustrate: *“In addition, work on measurement is helping to provide clearer definitions of the components of subjective well-being.”; “How these two components [positive affect e Life satisfaction] relate to one another is an empirical question, not one of definition”*.

By using the word «components», the author seems to suggest that each one that composes the bigger object (as the components of a computer) and, therefore, would represent different aspects of SWB. By investigating both, you understand the bigger object (SWB).

But there are articles written by Diener where these parts are referred to in a distinct manner. In an article by Weiting Ng and Ed Diener (2019, pp. 157-158), for instance, these are mentioned as «types» of SWB: “*Second, it examined three types of SWB*”. E, ambiguamente, algumas linhas depois: “*the present research examined different SWB components (life satisfaction, positive feelings, and negative feelings)*”. Yet, in other articles, Diener refers to different «forms» of evaluating SWB, which seems to be more aligned with the idea of having «types»: “*In this review we examine the relation of different forms of SWB, such as life satisfaction, positive affect, optimism, and low negative affect, with health and longevity*” (Diener, Pressman, Hunter, & Delgado-Chase, 2017, p. 134). Therefore, each form or type would lead to a way of evaluating the same object, SWB (Diener, 2018b).

The quoted passages and the brief analysis of the field indicate that Diener’s proposal in 1984, of presenting a precise object, did not materialize. The fragility of investigating happiness seems to continue to echo in SWB research as it is not difficult to find great variation in the way researchers portray this object (indicating an opportunity for a thorough review of the accumulated research). Even so, despite the variation, the “mood” of the PP is to treat SWB as a supposedly “inert”, measurable object.

Bibliographic references: lack of support and inaccurate use

Diener’s article (1984) refers intensively to the literature, citing 255 references throughout the text. It does not seem difficult to imagine that the organization of such a large number of articles, books, theses and dissertations is particularly difficult. Amid the possible difficulties and resulting fragilities, it is surprising that some important arguments precisely lack bibliographic references to support them. For the most part, these arguments concern the importance of Diener’s object of study.

For instance, Diener (1984, p. 543) quotes that “*Although well-being from a subjective perspective has become a popular idea in the last century, this concept can be traced back several millennia*», but he does not use reference to support SWB’s popularity in the twentieth century, nor even a specific reference to support the specific use of the term SWB in past millennia. He also does not offer a clear reference about what type of search returned over 700 studies mentioned in: “*Over 700 studies have been published since Wilson’s review*” (Diener, 1984, p. 542). Or so, which reference criterion to affirm over the great quantity of articles regarding SWB that was published after the foundation of the scientific journal *Social Indicators Research* in 1974 (Diener, 1984, p. 542). In the latter case, specific searches for the expression “*subject well-being*” or “*subject wellbeing*” in the title of articles published in the journal over 10 years, from its foundation to 1984, return only three (3) articles, one of which is a comment. Otherwise, searches for “*subject well-being*” or “*subject wellbeing*” in the body text of articles in the same period return 39 results.

It is difficult to know whether Diener believed that the importance of the field was self-evident or whether his understanding of well-being was too broad to need theoretical support. In any case, the lack of clarity raises doubts about how prominent was, in fact, this field of research to which Diener referred. Moreover, Diener (1984, p. 542) writes that “*For a comprehensive bibliography of the burgeoning SWB literature, see Diener and Griffin (in press)*”, but this is an article that ended up not being published, leaving the reader without a reliable way to track the supposed effervescence of the field. Still, another four of the twelve articles cited by Diener were under evaluation for publication, but even so they formed a self-validating basis for his 1984 text.

It is also relevant to mention two other cases about the bibliographic references used by Diener (1984) in an imprecise way. In the first of these, the phrase «*Marcus Aurelius wrote that <no man is happy who does not think himself so>*» (Diener, 1984, p. 543) is especially problematic. By using a quote of a thinker posterior to the ancient Greeks, Diener contradicts himself, since, at the beginning of the article, he had reinforced Wilson's conclusion that no relevant advances in happiness had been made since the Greek philosophers. Furthermore, a search for the reference (not offered in Diener's article) indicates that the quote was not written by Marcus Aurelius, but in reality, through the Roman slave Publius Syrus (1856, p. 53 – quote 584). The second of the imprecision cases is more comprehensive. In the presentation of the literature concerning the universe of SWB, Diener ends up approaching researches that focused on different objects, be them happiness, satisfaction with life, well-being, among others. These papers had different definitions and aims, but were presented as part of a field much more cohesive than the case. Diener (1984, p. 543) wrote: “*Because the area of subjective well-being can no longer be reviewed in depth in a single article the reader is also referred to other major works*”, and quoted three references: Frank Andrews and Stephen Withey (1976); Norman Bradburn (1969); Angus Campbell, Philip Converse and Willard Rodgers (1976).

Andrews and Withey (1976) treated life satisfaction as the broad concept to be investigated sociologically, but reduced its measurable part to Well-Being (associating it with the social concern with *welfare*). Bradburn (1969), in a psychological perspective, took the object Psychological Well-Being or happiness as broader and evaluated it from the pleasures and displeasures. On the other hand, Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976) conducted exploratory research in which they considered Well-Being as a broader concept, evaluating it with a diverse range of measures (life satisfaction, happiness and through the association of the perception of life with a list of words – adjectives and emotions).

If there is any convergence in the use of some expressions, such as well-being, the construction of the central concept and the form with what was measured differs significantly in each work. These aspects are ignored by Diener (1984), who treats them as complementary. However, even more concerning is the fact that the review proposed by Diener and the presentation of the fragile Subjective Well-being, although having its merits, continues being intensely reproduced until today.

Conclusion

In general, the image constructed by Diener at the time of his important publication, that the SWB study was already a cohesive field, was not verified, either due to lack of evidence or lack of consistency in the information provided for this purpose. Although well-being, quality of life and happiness were already taken as an object in the Social Sciences, for example, the erratic definition they received until 1984 would not support the inauguration of a particular field of investigation. Therefore, it can be said that the object presented by Diener in 1984 lacked ballast and the existence of a cohesive field was a fiction.

Still, at the beginning of this work, the hypothesis was raised that the fragilities of the SWB field of study and its variants would already be identified in the 1984 article, which can be confirmed by the detailed analysis of Diener's article and by crossing it with the literature of the field. Fragilities in the historical-philosophical analysis remained present, such as the lack of clarity about whether it is the best life or simply the good life.

In any case, it seems that the SWB study faces a dilemma: investing in theoretical rigor or optimizing the measurement capacity of already consolidated instruments (one of which seems to have a negative influence on the other). Faced with this dilemma, Diener's proposal (1984) is clear: theory must be subordinated to quantitative capacity; for him, only theories that allow broad measurement and application in society should advance. In this sense, replacing the word happiness with SWB, with a much less known and discussed story, would serve precisely this purpose.

However, this effort did not eliminate the problems of SWB research, which continued finding a field with few consensus. Apart from that, as Lyubomirsky (2008) confesses, the research gained a more «scientific» look. It is undeniable that Diener's presentation (1984), consistent or not with the reality of the time, became popular. Undoubtedly, this is due to the effort of synthesis and narration in the face of a vast and ambiguous literature. For this reason, as a counterpoint to what is exposed here, it can be argued that Diener's central aim, to present a sufficiently useful, measurable and reproducible concept, was achieved.

But this does not change the fact that SWB lacks ballast and that SWB-related research faces its limit: how to understand the paradox of the happy poor and the miserable millionaires (Graham, 2012) or how to compare SWB indicators from very distinct, as between the population of a metropolis and the population of a Guarani *Mbyá* indigenous community? These questions indicate the need to analyze the foundations of the field, to address the issue of universality or non-universality of its object and its ethical implications. And these are not aspects addressed in publications, such as the one by Lambert et al. (2020, p. 7), when referring to the future of the field. In general, the need to expand the application of the instruments or increase their complexity is mentioned, grouping, for example, concepts close to the SWB, such as Psychological Well-being.

We suggest that research related to SWB and its correlated concepts go more intensely through the theoretical basis of the field, rescuing historical aspects that are systematically neglected. This undertake will enable the recognition of the researches' limits and its ethical implications, beyond allowing truly critical decision making about the future of the field.

T. N. - Translator's notes:

The direct quote on page 6 was freely translated from the Portuguese original quotation by the article's translator.

References

- Andrés, Antonio R. & Halicioğlu, Ferda** (2010). Determinants of suicides in Denmark: evidence from time series data. *Health Policy*, 98(2-3), 263-269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2010.06.023>
- Andrews, Frank M. & Inglehart, Ronald F.** (1979). The structure of subjective well-being in nine western societies. *Soc Indic Res.*, 6(1), 73-90. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00305437>
- Andrews, Frank M. & Withey, Stephen B.** (1976). *Social indicators of well-being: America's perception of life quality*. Plenum Press.
- Aristóteles.** (1962). *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Loeb Classical Library.
- Bentham, Jeremy** (1823). *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. Clarendon Press.
- Biswas-Diener, Robert, Kashdan, Todd B., & King, Laura A.** (2009). Two traditions of happiness research, not two distinct types of happiness. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(3), 208-211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760902844400>
- Bradburn, Norman M.** (1969). *The structure of psychological well-being*. Aldine.
- Campbell, Angus, Converse, Philip E., & Rodgers, Willard L.** (1976). *The quality of American life: Perceptions, Evaluations, and Satisfaction*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Chekola, Mark G.** (1975). *The concept of happiness*. Tese de Doutorado, University of Michigan. https://worlddatabaseofhappiness-archive.eur.nl/hap_bib/freetexts/chekola_mg_1974.pdf
- Daly, Mary C., Oswald, Andrew J., Wilson, Daniel, & Wu, Stephen.** (2011). Dark contrasts: The paradox of high rates of suicide in happy places. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 80(3), 435-442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2011.04.007>
- Deci, Edward L. & Ryan, Richard M.** (2002). Overview of self-determination theory: An organismic dialectical perspective. In *Handbook of self-determination research* (pp. 3-33). University of Rochester Press.
- Diener, Ed** (1984). Subjective Well-Being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95(3), 542-575. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2162125>
- Diener, Ed** (2009). *The science of well-being: The collected works of Ed Diener* (vol. 37). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2350-6>
- Diener, Ed, Sapyta, Jeffrey J., & Suh, Eunkook** (1998). Subjective well-being is essential to well-being. *Psychological inquiry*, 9(1), 33-37. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0901_3
- Diener, Ed, Suh, Eunkook M., Lucas, Richard E., & Smith, Heidi L.** (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological bulletin*, 125(2), 276. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.276>
- Diener, Ed, Pressman, Sarah D., Hunter, John, & Delgado-Chase, Desiree.** (2017). If, why, and when subjective well-being influences health, and future needed research. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 9(2), 133-167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12090>
- Diener, Ed, Oishi, Shigehiro, & Tay, Louis** (Eds.). (2018a). *Handbook of well-being*. DEF Publishers. www.nobascholar.com
- Diener, Ed, Lucas, Richard E., & Oishi, Shigehiro.** (2018b). Advances and open questions in the science of subjective well-being. *Collabra. Psychology*, 4(1). <http://doi.org/10.1525/colabra.115>
- Graham, Carol** (2012). *Happiness around the world: The paradox of happy peasants and miserable millionaires*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0335.2011.00884.x>
- Jebb, Andrew T., Morrison, Mike, Tay, Louis, & Diener, Ed** (2020). Subjective Well-Being Around the World: Trends and Predictors Across the Life Span. *Psychological Science*, 31(3), 293-305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619898826>

- Jones, Howard M.** (1953). *The pursuit of happiness*. Harvard University.
- Kashdan, Todd B., Biswas-Diener, Robert, & King, Laura A.** (2008). Reconsidering happiness: The costs of distinguishing between hedonics and eudaimonia. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(4), 219-233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760802303044>
- Kesebir, Pelin** (2018). Scientific answers to the timeless philosophical question of happiness. In Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi, & Louis Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being*. DEF Publishers. www.nobascholar.com
- Lambert, Louise, Lomas, Tim, van de Weijer, Magot P., Passmore, Holli Anne, Joshanloo, Mohsen, Harter, Jim, Ishikawa, Yoshiki, Lai, Alden., Kitagawa, Takuya, Chen, Dominique, Kawakami, Takafumi, Miyata, Hiroaki, & Diener, Ed** (2020). Towards a greater global understanding of wellbeing: A proposal for a more inclusive measure. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 10(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v10i2.1037>
- Linley, Alex, Joseph, Stephen, Harrington, Susan, & Wood, Alex** (2006). Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future. *The journal of positive psychology*, 1(1), 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760500372796>
- Linton, Myles-Jay, Dieppe, Paul, & Medina-Lara, Antonieta** (2016). Review of 99 self-report measures for assessing well-being in adults: exploring dimensions of well-being and developments over time. *BMJ open*, 6(7). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2015-010641>
- Lyubomirsky, Sonya** (2008). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. Penguin Press.
- MacDonald, Douglas** (2017). Taking a closer look at well-being as a scientific construct: Delineating its conceptual nature and boundaries in relation to spirituality and existential functioning. In Nicholas J. Brown, Tim Lomas, & Francisco J. Eiroa-Orosa (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of critical positive psychology* (pp. 26-52). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315659794>
- Michalos, Alex** (Ed.). (2014). *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. Springer Netherlands. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5>
- Ng, Weiting & Diener, Ed** (2019). Affluence and subjective well-being: does income inequality moderate their associations? *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 14(1), 155-170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-017-9585-9>
- Nietzsche, Fredrich** (2009). *A genealogia da moral*. Cia das Letras.
- Publius Syrus** (1856). *The moral sayings of Publius Syrus, a Roman slave: from the Latin* (Darius Lyman, trad.). LE Bernard & Company.
- Ryff, Carol D.** (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 57(6), 1069. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.43.4.653>
- Ryff, Carol D. & Keyes, Corey L.** (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(4), 719-727. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719>
- Santo Agostinho** (1867). *Confessions of Augustine* (W. G. T. Shedd, ed.). Draper and Halliday.
- Seligman, Martin** (1998). Building human strengths: psychology's forgotten mission. *APA Monitor*, January 2. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e529932010-003>
- Seligman, Martin** (2002). Positive psychology, positive prevention, and positive therapy. In Charles R. Snyder & Shane J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology*. (pp. 3-12). Oxford University Press.
- Seligman, Martin** (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. Atria. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974173920160420>
- Sêneca** (1932). *Moral Essays: volume 2* (John W. Basore, trad.). Heinemann.

- Snyder, Charles & Lopez, Shane J.** (2002). The future of positive psychology. In *Handbook of positive psychology*, (pp. 751-767). Oxford University Press.
- Tatarkiewicz, Wladyslaw** (1976). *Analysis of happiness*. Martinus Nijhoff. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00461162>
- Tay, Louis, Chan, David, & Diener, Ed** (2014). The metrics of societal happiness. *Social Indicators Research*, 117(2), 577-600. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0356-1>
- Taylor, Jerome** (2006). Denmark is the world's happiest country-official. *Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/denmark-is-the-worlds-happiest-country-official-5329998.html>
- Tov, William** (2018). Well-being concepts and components. In Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi, & Louis Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being*. DEF Publishers. www.nobascholar.com
- Vittersø, Joar** (Ed.). (2016). *Handbook of eudaimonic well-being*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42445-3>
- Wilkening, Eugene A. & McGranahan, David** (1978) Correlates of subjective well-being in Northern Wisconsin. *Social Indicators Research*, 5, 211-234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00352930>
- Wilson, Warner** (1967). Correlates of avowed happiness. *Psychological Bulletin*, 67(4), 294-306.

LUCIANO ESPÓSITO SEWAYBRICKER

Researcher, Psychology Institute University of São Paulo.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6917-7275>

E-mail: luciano.sewaybricker@gmail.com

GUSTAVO MASSOLA

Professor and Deputy-Director, Psychology Institute University of São Paulo.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1601-9211>

E-mail: gustavomassola@usp.br

History	<p>Submission: 11/16/2021</p> <p>Review: 03/15/2022</p> <p>Acceptance: 04/24/2022</p>
Contribution	<p>Conception: LES, GMM</p> <p>Data collection: LES, GMM</p> <p>Data analysis: LES, GMM</p> <p>Elaboration of manuscript: LES, GMM</p> <p>Reviews of important intellectual content: LES, GMM</p> <p>Final approval of manuscript: LES, GMM</p>
Financing	Does not apply.