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Managing Well-Being

Andrew N. Rowan
WellBeing International, arowan@wellbeingintl.org

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Oct 03, 2022 Measuring Well-Being

By Andrew Rowan, DPhil

WellBeing News has published articles on the challenges of measuring human well-being and reported on the growing number of organizations involved in such efforts. One recently established organization is the [Happier Lives Institute](#), founded in 2019 and based in Oxford (UK), to explore the most cost-effective ways to make lives happier. A recent [blog](#) (16 August 2022) presents an opportunity for interested readers to explore some of the innovative ideas and approaches adopted by the Institute (for example, the blog discusses the development of a new standardized measure – the Wellby or *Well-being-adjusted life year*).

The blog notes that many donors and foundations (e.g., those following the effective altruism movement) are interested in funding interventions that improve human well-being. But defining well-being is not that simple, and for decades, economists have focused mainly on measures of wealth or income rather than well-being. The blog notes that health and wealth measures are not *intrinsically* valuable for us – they are *instrumentally* valuable in that they are a means to achieving some further end. The blog further argues that perhaps well-being can be measured directly and suggests that an appropriate measure has been in front of our noses for some time. The Wellby metric measures people's subjective well-being – how individuals rate the quality of their lives on a 0-10 scale. Extensive research has demonstrated that the standard Subjective well-being measures are valid – that is, the measurements are reliable and capture the phenomenon they are designed to capture.



If an individual's subjective well-being rating jumps two points in half a year or one point in a whole year, that would equal *1 WELLBY*. The blog then details how WELLBY might be deployed to rate interventions. The Institute notes that they are not the first to promote the idea of the WELLBY but that using WELLBYs to identify the benefits of specific policies or interventions remains largely unexplored.

The best way to measure human well-being is by asking people how they think or feel about their lives – a measure referred to as Subjective Well-being (SWB). While there has been some debate about the suitability of subjective well-being as a measure, the Institute has examined the appropriate measures to use when comparing people's happiness. The blog provides a specific example of the use of WELLBYs. Comparing the cost-effectiveness of psychotherapy against cash transfers on subjective well-being found that cash transfers generate 7.5 WELLBYs per \$1,000. In contrast, a particular psychotherapy intervention provided 71.3 WELLBYs per \$1,000.

The blog notes that subjective well-being measures (and hence WELLBYs) are not perfect but capture an essential quality of individual lives. This quality is valued by humans and not necessarily captured by health or income measures.



The measurement of SWB is also a central feature of the UK-based [Mappiness](#) project. The project, developed by researchers at the London School of Economics, aims to track individual subjective well-being at specific moments in a person's life and takes advantage of a fantastic tool most of us now have the smartphone. The Mappiness project was launched via an app for the iPhone available in the UK. At random times during the day, the project organizers beep the more than 30,000 iPhone users who have signed up and ask how one is feeling (subjective well-being score) at that particular moment. Organizers also ask the person to report where they are, what they are doing (if outdoors, one is encouraged to take a photo), and with whom. The data is returned – anonymously – to a central data store together with the phone's approximate location and a noise-level measure. The Mappiness project aims to determine how a person's environment affects one's sense of well-being. As of 2020,

the Mappiness [data set](#) included 4.5 million responses from 66,000 volunteers. While the sample is self-selected and is not representative of the UK population (the volunteers are younger and wealthier and more likely to be employed than the average British citizen), the size and richness of the data permit a unique examination of the link between happiness and the environment. The project found that being outdoors in green or blue spaces significantly boosts happiness. Weather conditions also have substantial and intuitive effects, with temperature being a significant influence. Sunshine increases happiness while rain and wind decrease it. The [report](#) by Krekel and Mackerron in the *2020 World Happiness Report* on the Mappiness project provides a rich resource on human subjective well-being and environmental effects. However, the report is scratching the surface of what the technology (the Mappiness App) might deliver.

Between the Mappiness project, the Happier Lives Institute, and other well-being centers in the country, the UK is becoming a major center of research into subjective well-being and associated policies.

(Video Credit: Don Hammond | iStock)

