Is it useful to investigate “subjective happiness”?

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Introduction

Happiness is a loosely defined term. It can mean momentary positive feelings, hedonic well-being (pleasure and lack of pain), eudaimonic well-being (presence of desirable characteristics like a sense of meaning), long-term satisfaction with life, and more (Diener et al., 2018). Researchers using the term *subjective happiness*, which was introduced by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999), generally refer to the more strictly defined construct of *subjective well-being (SWB).*

SWB reflects one's overall, subjective evaluation of one's life (Diener, 1984). The word "subjective" excludes objective measures of well-being (e.g. Hurka, 2014), and measures solely whether one's life is going well from one's own perspective. SWB is subdivided into three dimensions: life satisfaction, positive affect, and (low) negative affect. A person high in SWB is thus "frequently cheerful, only occasionally sad, and generally satisfied with his or her life" (Biswas-Diener et al., 2004).

There is already some utility in studying happiness[1] in virtue of its being part of the human psyche. However, this essay will evaluate its usefulness by considering the desirability and attainability of higher levels of SWB. It will argue that SWB research is seemingly very useful in virtue of contributing to higher levels of SWB in individuals and societies, which are desirable in themselves and lead to other desirable outcomes. However, closer inspection of the philosophical question of what one should pursue in life reveals that a worthwhile life is much more than a happy one; further, the pursuit of happiness may be ineffective, even self-defeating, which is not the case for the pursuit of other goals that make

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1. *Happiness* will be used synonymously with SWB. However, some studies cited here (e.g. Oishi et al., 2020), do use the former, more ambiguous term. They will still be treated as sufficiently informative since SWB probably captures most of what people have in mind when they see the term *happiness.* See Diener et al. (2018) for a summary of its possible meanings.

one's life (more) worthwhile. It will conclude that investigating SWB, intentionally or not, encourages people to value happiness and, subsequently, spend significant effort in an ineffective enterprise, effort which could be better spent pursuing other goals that will lead to a more worthwhile, and possibly happier, life.

Are higher levels of SWB desirable?

Across cultures, people desire happiness in some form. Diener et al. (1998) surveyed college students in 41 nations and found that happiness is extremely important to people across cultures (average 6.39 on a scale of 1-7). King and Napa (1998) found that happiness forms part of what Americans conceive of as the "good life", such that happier people are even rated as more likely to enter heaven.

The fact that happiness is desired by most individuals should be sufficient for higher levels of SWB to be considered desirable.[2] Furthermore, studies (including longitudinal and experimental ones) have consistently shown that increasing SWB leads to other desirable outcomes such as health (Diener et al., 2017), workplace performance and satisfaction (Boehm et al., 2008), and better social relationships (Moore et al., 2018).[3] High levels of SWB are, therefore, desirable both for its own sake and for leading to other desirable outcomes.

Does SWB research contribute to higher levels of happiness?

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2. This essay will steer clear of making normative claims as to what people *should* desire. For its purposes, what is desirable for an individual is simply what they consider desirable (e.g. to be happy), unless it conflicts with something more important that they also consider desirable (e.g. smoking cigarettes conflicting with having good health).

3. It is worth noting that since SWB and outcomes are often both measured using self-report, the correlation between the two could be inflated due to common-method bias (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, smaller correlations are still found when objective measures (which are, at least for SWB, probably less accurate; see Diener et al., 2018) are used for either or both variables (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Steptoe et al., 2015).

SWB research has informed the design of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs), which are activities or techniques designed to increase SWB. For instance, longitudinal studies have found that gratitude (Sansone & Sansone, 2010) and social relationships (Myers, 2000) both predict high SWB, which informed Seligman et al. (2005) in designing *gratitude visits*, a PPI that involves writing and delivering "a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked". They found large increases in happiness for one month as a result.

Several meta-analyses have found that PPIs result in an increase in SWB in both the general population and those with mental health problems (e.g. Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), and that some of these effects are observable in at least the medium term (Seligman et al., 2005). Further, PPIs that are delivered on a community level have also been shown to be effective, though they mostly aim to increase the happiness of individuals, rather than "to improve the actual community" (Montiel et al., 2021).

In fact, SWB research has been increasingly used to develop, monitor, and assess public policy (Helliwell et al., 2026; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025; Dolan & Metcalfe, 2011), with it being particularly useful in determining the impact policies have on citizens' wellbeing beyond crude economic measurements (Diener et al., 2015). For instance, the significant and long-lasting impact of unemployment (Suppa, 2021) should compel governments to implement policies that encourage job-seeking. It also undermines the view that people choose unemployment over undesirable jobs to preserve their SWB (cf. Dunn, 2015), suggesting that policies which seek to reduce the appeal of unemployment (e.g. by reducing the maximum duration of unemployment benefits) will not have a large impact on job-seeking behaviour. Researchers have indeed found evidence for this (e.g. Fliges et al., 2018).

What is the ultimate goal of SWB research?

Thus far, it is clear that studying SWB seems very useful. However, it is worth stepping back and reflecting on what it ultimately tries to achieve, and whether it achieves its goals better than studying other constructs. If, as this essay will argue, the answer to the latter question is negative, then the time and resources dedicated to it are better utilised studying something else, thereby seriously undermining its usefulness.

Science, or any human endeavour for that matter, is ultimately part of the individual and collective effort to live the most worthwhile life/lives. A worthwhile life is one that is "better lived than not" (Matheson, 2020). It has "the right sort of goods internal to the life to outweigh the bad" (Metz, 2012) — in other words, it has some features that add to its *worth* (which need not be quantifiable) sufficiently to outweigh the sort of features it has which detract from its worth.[4] For instance, a life might have a few periods of utter misery (say, loved ones passing away in quick succession) that detract from its worth, but the periods of peace and joy are long enough, varied enough, and positive enough to render it, on the whole, a pretty worthwhile life.[5,6]

Science contributes to a life's worth in a multitude of ways. It satiates the human desire to be curious; it allows one to gain knowledge of the world; it provides materials which can be shared and discussed with one's peers. Studying any psychological construct

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4. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss whether the worth of a life is (at least partly) objective (i.e. independent of the attitudes of the person living it). However, it is not controversial that it is *significantly* (if not *wholly*) dependent on the extent to which the person living it judges it to be worthwhile. This essay will therefore invoke intuitions as to what makes a life worthwhile, e.g. high SWB.

5. It might also be argued that its feature of *having ups and downs in the right proportion*, or *growing as a person as a result of hardship*, adds more to its worth. In that case, a life where the periods of hardship are replaced by periods where nothing much happens would be *less* worthwhile.

6. Notably, a worthwhile life need not be worth continuing; a life could even be worthwhile *precisely because it is consciously ended* (e.g. sacrificing one's life for one's country) (Matheson, 2020).

will yield these benefits to more or less the same degree. The usefulness of studying SWB, in particular, should therefore be determined by how it contributes to the worth of lives (including one's own) in a way that studying other constructs does not, compared to how studying other constructs does so in a way that studying SWB does not.

One advantage of studying SWB is that SWB is an *intrinsic source of worth (ISW)* (Martela, 2017) — high levels of it add to the worth of a life *per se.* If something is an ISW, then *all else being equal*, its presence makes a life more worthwhile (compared to wealth, which, for most, is not an ISW since a more wealthy life does not seem to be more worthwhile if it does not then lead to (say) more happiness).

Not only does studying ISWs likely add more to a life's worth than studying non-ISWs, it probably also helps develop strategies to increase that ISW's presence (e.g. PPIs) to a greater extent (though that's not necessarily the case). However, there are other intuitive ISWs such as moral praiseworthiness, meaningfulness, variety and interest (what Oishi et al. (2022) termed *psychological richness*), etc. In fact, Oishi et al. (2020) found a significant percentage of Americans and Koreans prefer a meaningful or psychologically rich life over a happy one, which is significant evidence that both meaningfulness and psychological richness are ISWs in their own right.[7]

How much should SWB be studied compared to other ISWs?

Of course, it could still be argued that studying SWB adds more to the worth of one's

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7. It is a popular idea, especially amongst non-philosophers (e.g. Steimie, 2013), that happiness is the only ISW. All other things one might see as ISWs are only add to a life's worth in virtue of their leading to happiness. They could argue that, since the conscious pursuit of happiness could be self-defeating (which will be explored later in this essay), people's conscious preferences for a (say) meaningful life over a happy one is ultimately motivated by the unconscious drive towards happiness. However, that is a much more complex explanation than simply taking people's words, and proponents of this view fail to give compelling reasons for adopting it (further discussion is beyond the scope of this essay; see Moore (2019)).

life than studying other ISWs. However, there is evidence that, at least in some contexts, pursuing SWB may be ineffective or even self-defeating. The literature on this question is mixed. On the one hand, there are studies reporting a positive correlation between how much people value happiness and how happy they are (Catalino et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2020). On the other, Huang (2024) found that increases in how much people value happiness predicted short-term but not long-term SWB, whereas Mauss et al. (2011) reported that participants induced to value happiness more experienced *less* happiness in positive situations (but not negative ones), with subsequent studies linking valuing happiness to loneliness (Mauss et al., 2012) and depression symptoms and diagnoses (Ford et al., 2014).

Psychologists have started to explore the link between *how* people pursue happiness and whether they succeed. Zerwas and Ford (2021) distinguish between *aspiring* for happiness and being *concerned* about it, with the latter hindering people's happiness and the former conducive to it (as long as effective strategies are adopted). Mauss and Ford (2026) point out, among other things, the sabotaging effect of suppressing one's negative emotions (see Hansenne, 2021; Zerwas et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2020 for further discussions).

It might not be immediately apparent how the above findings undermine the usefulness of SWB research; indeed, it is thanks to SWB research that those findings were made in the first place. However, the substantial and increasing attention from researchers (see Diener et al., 2018) inevitably leads to public interest, especially in cultures that already see happiness as both desirable and attainable, most of which are also individualistic (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2013). Unfortunately, it is precisely in individualistic cultures that the pursuit of happiness is most likely to backfire (Ford et al., 2015), creating a vicious cycle in which SWB research reinforces the perception of happiness as attainable, encouraging the valuing and conscious pursuit of happiness which has a substantial chance of backfiring. This not only causes people to feel disappointed and ashamed in not being happy enough, but also

encourages more attempts to "fix" their lack of happiness, creating more demand for SWB research.[8]

One might challenge this view by pointing out that, as mentioned above, there is strong evidence for the effectiveness of some PPIs (e.g. Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Someone motivated to be happier should therefore have a good chance of succeeding, provided they are willing to implement these interventions diligently. However, the tendency to hold high expectations and want results quickly is a very human one, and it is not clear how much people benefit from PPIs compared to the harm done in causing people to value happiness more (which is quite difficult to measure).

One could argue that it is simply an issue of scientific communication, and it is indeed the case that better communication would make people less likely to value happiness in a way likely to be self-defeating. However, studying SWB still falls short against studying other ISWs because valuing other ISWs is less likely to be self-defeating. For instance, valuing (i.e. searching for) meaning has been found to predict higher levels of meaning at follow-up only for those in distress (Chu & Fung, 2021), suggesting that people who search for meaning in difficult circumstances usually find it, whereas for others it is at least harmless. Lim et al. (2022) also showed how searching for meaning leads to higher presence of meaning through encouraging behaviours that lead to mental states (e.g. gratitude) conducive to meaning.[9]

More generally, studying other ISWs probably has the same effect in changing people's values as SWB, but valuing other ISWs seems to be more effective than valuing

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8. Despite being a plausible hypothesis, as of yet, no research has been done on whether people's frustration of not being happy enough leads to more attempts at fixing their lack of happiness. Neither is there research on whether people are valuing happiness more and more (which this hypothesis predicts). These are both future directions for research.

9. There is strong evidence that searching for meaning is associated with *lower* SWB. However, the moderating role of presence of meaning suggests that it is low levels of meaning that causes both more search for meaning and low SWB (Cohen & Cairns, 2011).

SWB, thereby adding more to the worth of one's life (there is almost no literature on, say, whether valuing morality causes people to live more moral lives, but it is difficult to imagine this not being the case). Further, there is already much overlap between the various ISWs such that the outcome of (successfully) pursuing any one likely increases the levels of other ISWs too (Demir et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2025). The advantages of valuing other ISWs than SWB are therefore even more impactful.

Conclusion

This essay explored the usefulness of investigating subjective happiness, which is more commonly referred to as SWB. It argued that, despite it being seemingly very useful, further reflection on the goal of psychological research revealed that there are other useful constructs to study (ISWs). Further, the study of SWB encourages people to value SWB more, which, paradoxically, may actually lead to less SWB. Since this self-defeating effect is likely not present in valuing other ISWs, researching other ISWs may contribute more to the ultimate goal of psychological research (i.e. to help people live more worthwhile lives), and is therefore more useful.

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