

Psychological Well-being: Reflections on an Elusive Construct and its Assessment

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Research on the concept of well-being in the field of psychology has a long history. The construct of subjective well-being has received significant attention and there is a fair degree of consensus amongst scientists on its conceptualization. In contrast, the construct of psychological well-being that focusses on positive psychological functioning continues to generate debates on its meaning, dimensions, and measurement. This paper aims at presenting a few concerns in the emerging literature on psychological well being, with a special focus on the Ryff's model. Through the presentation of data on measurement of psychological well-being in the Indian context, this paper highlights that the nature and the number of dimensions of psychological well-being across different cultures may not fully correspond to the Ryff's model. Self acceptance, mastery and competence, positive relations, engagement, and growth emerged as the four factors on a 20-item measure of psychological well-being developed through two field trials, briefly described in the paper. Further studies are required on this measure. There is also an urgent need for qualitative methods of inquiry to develop an in-depth, culturally-rooted understanding of dimensions of psychological wellbeing as well for developing new assessment tools/modifying existing ones.

Keywords: Well being, Self -acceptance, Mastery and competence, Positive relations,

The concept of wellbeing forms one of the popular foci of inquiry for theoreticians and researchers of multiple disciplines such as philosophy, economics, and psychology. Discussions, and debates notwithstanding, subjective wellbeing and psychological wellbeing have emerged as the two most popular conceptualizations of wellbeing in the history of psychology. Subjective wellbeing is defined in terms of an affective component (presence of positive affect and low negative affect) and a cognitive-evaluative component namely, sense of satisfaction in life (Diener, 1984). Often viewed as corresponding to the hedonic approach in philosophy, subjective wellbeing has a longer history of rigorous scientific examination in psychological research as compared to the construct of psychological wellbeing, which is seen as corresponding to the eudaimonic tradition (Waterman, 2008). Psychological wellbeing has been defined (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002, p. 1007) as "engagement with existential challenges of life". Ryff (1989) and Ryff and Keyes (1995) proposed a six dimensional model of psychological wellbeing, based on extensive

literature review. Self-acceptance, purpose in life, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, and autonomy were theorized as the six dimensions. Although there is a broad consensus on the conceptualization and measurement of subjective wellbeing, the construct of psychological wellbeing and its measurement continues to generate an array of opinions and observations amongst scientists across the globe.

To the best of our knowledge, there is a dearth of appropriate tools to assess psychological wellbeing in the Indian socio-cultural context. Factor structure of Ryff's measures of psychological wellbeing in Indian samples is yet to be well determined and the other commonly used measures tend to tap features of emotional wellbeing, rather than psychological wellbeing/positive functioning. A few indigenous measures that capture psychological wellbeing to varying extent are the subjective wellbeing inventory (SUBI; Sell & Nagpal, 1992)., psychological wellbeing questionnaire (Bhogle, & Prakash, 1995), and PGI wellbeing scale (Verma., Dubey,

& Gupta 1983). The SUBI has not emerged as a popular tool due to its length as well as high difficulty level/ambiguity of certain items. Bhogle and Jaiprakash (1995) mentioned more than 10 factors that are tapped through their questionnaire, which range from meaninglessness, somatic symptoms, positive affect, and personal-control to suicidal thoughts etc. Their measure appears to utilize a rather broad-based conceptualization of wellbeing that includes aspects pertaining to both emotional and psychological wellbeing (hedonic and eudaimonic aspects). The PGI wellbeing scale developed by Verma, Dubey, and Gupta (1983) consists of 20 items of low difficulty level. The utility of the PGI wellbeing scale and its factor structure in the context of work was examined by Singh and Singh (2003) who concluded that this measure would benefit from revisions.

On the whole, although the construct of psychological wellbeing is an extremely appealing variable in psychological research owing to the fact that it goes beyond the 'feeling good' notion of wellbeing and attempts to capture positive psychological functioning, its meaningful utilization in research and practice is hampered due to unresolved issues regarding its conceptualization and measurement.

A tryst with psychological well being: Present Study

In the above background, the present paper attempts to explore the psychometric properties of a measure of psychological wellbeing based on Ryff's model in the Indian context. The paper also aims to highlight observations and raise issues for further research on conceptualization and assessment of psychological wellbeing.

This paper is based on part of a larger study that aimed at examining character strengths in Indian youth. The study was carried out in multiple phases and the two-field trials that involved assessment of psychological wellbeing are briefly described below.

First field trial

Materials and Method:

Van Dierendonck (2004) examined the content and factorial validity of 3, 9, as well as the 14

item versions of the Ryff's scales (Ryff, 1989) and recommended shorter scales consisting of 39 items (with 6-8 items per scale) that were demonstrated to have good internal consistency and reasonable factorial fit indices. In view of maintaining brevity and minimizing respondent burden as well as the findings regarding better psychometric properties of the 39 items version, it was decided to begin with the same in the initial phase of the present study.

The first field trial sample of the study consisted of 323 youth in the age range of 20-35 years, of which 40% were working youth whereas the rest were college-going youth. Both the genders were equally represented in working and college youth sub samples.

Key findings

In the first field trial, the internal consistency-reliability (alpha) of the total scores on psychological well-being scale (39 items) was high (0.85). Four original PWB subscales namely, personal relationships with others, autonomy, purpose in life, and self-acceptance had reliabilities between the range of 0.62 and 0.72. However, environmental mastery and personal growth subscales showed poor reliabilities (0.52 and 0.48 respectively). In view of this observation, an exploratory factor analysis of the data was carried out using principal component method and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. Five factors were found meaningful for interpretation, namely positive social relations, positive future orientation, self acceptance, self confidence, and autonomy. The reliabilities of these factor-based subscales (total: 26 items) ranged from 0.72 (positive social relations) to 0.57 (self confidence). Each of these contained at least three items and had loadings above 0.40 and no cross loading items. Only the positive relations factor was returned as it was in the original subscale. The other factors that emerged were tentatively labeled as self-acceptance, self-confidence, autonomy, and positive future orientation. Environmental mastery did not emerge as a clear factor, though this was somewhat represented by a new factor called self-confidence. However, it had low reliability. Personal growth items did not emerge together

as a clear factor either. On the whole, the results of the first field trial indicated that the 39-item version required modification for use in the Indian context. It was planned to re-assess the psychometric properties of the measure after discarding seven items that did not load on any of the five factors.

Second Field Trial

Materials and Method:

A modified 32-item pool of PWB arrived at through the first field trial was used in the second field trial. An indigenous measure of character strengths, namely self perceived strengths scale (SPS) comprising of 24 vignette-based items (Mehrotra, Tripathi & Banu 2012) and PGI wellbeing measure (Verma, Dubey, & Gupta, 1983) were also used in this field trial to obtain data on concurrent and convergent validity of the modified psychological wellbeing measure. Scores on PGI wellbeing were expected to correlate moderately with the modified PWB scale as the former is not a pure measure, including not just eudaimonic but also hedonic aspects of wellbeing. Based on prior research, it was expected that character strength and their applications would positively correlate with psychological wellbeing. The study sample in this phase comprised 614 youth within the age range of 20-35 years with a roughly equal gender representation (302 men and 312 women).

Key findings

Exploratory factor analysis using the new 32 items pool of the psychological wellbeing was carried out using the second field trial data. Using principal axis factoring and oblique rotation resulted in identification of twenty items with four factors (Table 1). Each item in the emerged factors had a loading of at least 0.32 on the given factor and no cross loadings on any other factor. All the factors retained comprised > 3 items and formed subscales with high internal consistency. In line with the first field trial, the only factor similar to Ryff's dimensions of wellbeing that emerged was 'positive relations with others' and it contained five items that pertain to positive relations in Ryff's model. None of the other original Ryff's dimensions were replicated in their original form. One of the factors was labeled as self-acceptance so as to

reflect its resemblance to the corresponding dimension by Ryff, although its constituent items were different. The original environmental mastery items based on Ryff's model did not combine to form a factor. However, a factor involving six items emerged that could be labeled as a sense of mastery and competence. It was labeled as such because it did not merely comprise items denoting meeting external challenges but also contained items with regard to a sense of competence/incompetence with respect to oneself as a person. The sense of purpose or personal growth did not emerge as two clear and distinct factors as proposed by Ryff. Instead, a new factor comprising five items emerged that could be best named as 'sense of engagement and growth'. The items on this factor reflect a sense of being engaged actively with one's environment, and experiencing a sense of direction, learning, and growth in the process of engagement.

Table 1. Factor Analysis – Psychological Wellbeing Measure (Second field trial)

Factors Item Numbers	Self - Acceptance	Mastery & Competence	Positive Relations	Engagement & Growth
1			.442	
4	.585			
5	.582			
6			.427	
9				.667
10				.416
11			.595	
16		.546		
17				.687
19			.465	
20		.554		
21		.396		
23				.495
24		.479		
25			.658	
27				.325
28	.425			
29	.646			
30		.615		
31		.433		

Note: Out of the 32 item pool used, only the items loading significantly on the four extracted factors are shown.

Table 2 depicts the descriptive statistics based on the final modified version of PWB (20 items) that emerged during the second field trial. It is observed that the scores on psychological

Table 2. Psychological Well being measure (20 items version): Descriptive Statistics (N=614)

	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	K-S Z value*	Internal consistency (alpha)
PWB-20 Total	92.61	93	86	13.71	1.01 (NS)	0.83

Note: * For assessing normality of distribution, NS: Not significant

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Psychological Well-being (PWB-20) subscales

PWB- 20 subscales	No. of Items	Min-Max possible	Min-Max obtained	Mean (S.D)	Reliability(Alpha)
Self-Acceptance	4	4-24	6-24	20.45 (3.32)	0.72
Mastery & Competence	6	6-36	8-36	23.65 (6.84)	0.75
Positive relations	5	5-30	5-30	22.30 (5.23)	0.69
Engagement & Growth	5	5-30	11-30	26.20 (3.72)	0.74

wellbeing are normally distributed and the scale has high overall internal consistency reliability.

Table 3 indicates that all the four subscales, factorially derived from the second field trial and based on the modified PWB measure (20 items) showed good internal consistency reliabilities, unlike the larger item pools examined in the first field trial.

The correlations of scores on psychological wellbeing (PWB-20) with a measure of character strengths and an established measure of wellbeing (PGI wellbeing) were examined. Table 4 depicts that as far as the strengths subscales are concerned, moderate correlations with psychological wellbeing were obtained. The social and relational strengths subscales had the highest correlation with psychological wellbeing. The application of the self identified signature strengths in daily life also had a modest positive correlation with wellbeing scores. PGI wellbeing scores correlated moderately with overall PWB scores on the 20 item measure, supporting the latter's concurrent validity.

Table 4: Correlations of PWB-20 with other variables (N=614)

S No	Variables	Correlation
I	Strength subscales	
	A. Social	0.41
	B. Learning orientation	0.38
	C. Relational	0.41
	D. Pragmatic	0.36
II	Application of self-indicated signature strengths	0.29
III	PGI Well being	0.40

Note: Spearman correlations used. All values are significant at 0.001 level (one tailed test of significance).

Discussion

As mentioned at the outset, the construct of psychological wellbeing has generated a lot of debate in scientific literature. To add to the plurality of discourse on psychological well being, this phrase has been, at times, used rather loosely/broadly; sometimes even synonymously with subjective wellbeing. Unfortunately, it has also been observed that the conceptualization and theoretical basis of psychological wellbeing are, many a time, not explicitly mentioned by researchers but need to be inferred through the nature of the measure that is used in a given study (Diener, 1994, Danna & Griffin, 1999). In a thought provoking review that clearly brought to focus the conceptual confusions in this area, Dagenais-Desmarais, and Savoie (2012) surveyed the existing literature and identified 23 different operationalizations of psychological wellbeing (PWB) and 42 distinct dimensions under the 'aegis of five slightly different terminologies'.

Getting back to Ryff's conceptualization of psychological wellbeing, this was developed through a synthesis of ideas from various personality theorists such as Maslow, Jung, Rogers, Allport, Erickson, and Jahoda (Christopher, 1999). The extent to which such a conceptualization rooted primarily in the ideas of western personality theorists may be universally appropriate is an issue worth serious attention.

Although Ryff's model is the most popular model of psychological wellbeing, the measures based on this model have not thrown up a consistent factor structure (e.g. Abbott et al, 2006; Springer & Hauser, 2006). Ryff's briefest measure

consists of three items for each of the six PWB dimensions but has not been recommended by the author herself as well as other researchers due to low test-retest reliabilities. The longer 14 items per dimension measure consists of 84 items and is not very suitable due to its length, for use in large scale surveys that involve the use of other measures as well. A version, briefer than Ryff's 54 items version, has been reported to yield better inter rater reliability estimates as well as factorial structure. This version (39 items) was hence used in the first field trial of our study. The findings from this trial resulted in a modified 32-item version that was used in the next field trial. Finally, four meaningful factors could be extracted based on 20 items in our study. Out of the four, only one factor consisted of the same items as grouped in the original scale under 'positive relations with others'. This factor name was hence retained as such. All other factors consisted of items that were a mix of items grouped under different dimensions by Ryff. These observations are not surprising, given the fact that the available studies have raised questions on the correspondence among items and the theoretical dimensions and the need for as many as six dimensions and their distinctiveness etc (Abbott et al, 2006).

One of the most debatable dimensions of Ryff is that of autonomy. We are yet to understand the relevance, meanings, experience, and the manifestations of autonomy in non-western cultures clearly. In an interesting study, Shweder and Bourne (1984 p. 190) explored and compared the concept of the person in India vs. the United States. They concluded that "the concept of an autonomous, bounded, abstract individual existing free of society yet living in society is uncharacteristic of Indian social thought". This may at least partly explain the lack of emergence of autonomy as a consistent factor in the present study.

Similarly, the concept of environmental mastery may have different meanings in western and non-western cultures, with the latter placing a higher emphasis on adapting to one's environment and thereby, deriving a sense of control rather than a focus on shaping the environment. In the present study, environmental mastery did not emerge as a

clear factor. The factor that came the closest to environmental mastery was broader than the notion of mastery over one's environment. It contained items suggesting a sense of confidence, stemming from being able to manage not just one's environmental demands but also one's own internal world and hence was labeled as a sense of mastery and competence.

The dimension labeled as a sense of purpose has also attracted attention of the critiques who argue that examining a sense of purpose in isolation of societal values and its alignment with individual and collective good can be a problematic exercise. For example, it is questionable whether a sense of purpose derived from activities that are detrimental to a society may be said to be characteristic of a person with high psychological wellbeing. The dimension of personal growth carries its ambiguities in terms of how it may be interpreted and experienced in predominantly individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures. It is quite plausible that personal growth is not a very individualistic phenomenon in a collectivistic society but is rather embedded in a relational context that provides triggers, meanings, and support to the growth endeavors and experience. In one of the first studies by Ryff (1989), a strong association between personal growth and purpose in life was observed. In keeping with this observation, an interesting finding in the present study was the emergence of a factor named as 'engagement and growth'. It comprised items that were a combination of purpose in life and growth and on the whole, reflected an individual's sense of meaningful engagement with one's world and the experience of growing. Yet another factor brought together a set of items which contained a mix of self-acceptance and purpose in life items of the original scale. These items, on the whole, reflected a sense of satisfaction and contentment with self and with one's life, the way it has turned out. The term self-acceptance has been retained to describe this factor's partial resemblance to the original dimension.

The distribution of the PWB 20 items-measure was normal and the overall scale had good internal consistency. Its correlation with another indigenous wellbeing scale denotes acceptable concurrent validity. A high correlation

is not expected as the two measures tap somewhat different kinds of well being. The four factorially derived subscales showed good internal consistency reliability. Very high inter correlations among factor-based scales have been reported to be one of the problematic issues as far as Ryff's six dimensions are concerned (Abbott et al., 2006). In the present study, the inter-correlations amongst the four factor-based scales were low to moderate, ranging between 0.15 and 0.51. These four factor-based subscales and the total scores (based on 20 items) were used for further analyses that examined the relationship of character strengths with psychological wellbeing. Similar to the findings in other studies (e.g. Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Shimai et al., 2006), individual strengths such as close loving relationship, being energetic and lively (zest) and hope had the highest correlation with psychological well being in addition to creativity. The magnitudes of correlations were low to modest, and quite similar to those reported by other researchers. All the strengths of subscales had a significant positive correlation with PWB, with social and relational strengths, having the highest correlation. Application of strengths had a modest positive correlation with psychological wellbeing as well. These findings lend preliminary evidence to the convergent validity of PWB-20.

On the whole, the brief measure of psychological wellbeing tested in the present study seems to hold some promise for further research. Despite the fact that it was derived from a measure based on Ryff's six dimensional models, the findings point to the possibility that their interpretations and relevance are likely to vary across cultures. We envisage that this tool can serve as a starting ground for research in the Indian context which can focus not merely on replication of factor structure across samples, but also arriving at a deeper understanding of the these individual dimensions and their external correlates. It is quite possible that accumulation of research evidence may point towards further modifications in the nature and number of dimensions that most meaningfully capture the construct of psychological wellbeing. Scholars have highlighted a need for in-depth conceptual understanding of psychological wellbeing (Abbott

et al., 2010). Even if some dimensions are universally relevant, cultures are likely to vary in the manner in which these are experienced and get manifested in day to day life of individuals in a given socio-cultural context. This has implications for measurement of psychological wellbeing, especially in terms of writing up of items for any new scale of psychological wellbeing. However, most studies on psychological wellbeing to date have aimed at examining factor structure of Ryff's measures. There is an insufficient attention to bottom up approaches that may throw light on the meanings of individual items for respondents as well as the nature of items that can best capture the dimensions of psychological wellbeing. Qualitative approaches may perhaps be most appropriate for developing a richer understanding of constituents of psychological wellbeing within specific cultures which can pave way for development/refinement of contextually appropriate assessment tools as well as cross cultural comparisons.

Conclusion

In contrast to subjective wellbeing, the construct of psychological wellbeing continues to generate significant concerns, regarding its conceptualization and assessment. Notwithstanding the popularity of Ryff's six dimensional model of psychological wellbeing, results from empirical studies have been inconsistent. Explorations of psychological wellbeing using a measure-based on Ryff's dimensions led to the development of a 20-item version with four constituent factors in the Indian context. While the new measure of psychological wellbeing shows promising psychometric properties worth further examination; the study findings also reiterate the need for an in-depth culturally-grounded understanding of psychological wellbeing dimensions.

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