



The assessment of subjective well-being (issues raised by the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire)

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Abstract

This commentary raises conceptual issues related to recent efforts to develop measures of subjective well-being (SWB). Specifically, Hills' and Argyle's (2002) article on the development of the 29-item Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), and its predecessor, the 20-item Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin & Crossland, 1989). Instead of assessing the structure of subjective well-being (SWB), items of the OHQ tap into self-esteem, sense of purpose, social interest and kindness, sense of humor, and aesthetic appreciation. The item content of the OHQ fails to differentiate the assessment of SWB from the predictors, correlates, and consequences of SWB. In contrast to published SWB findings with other measures, data are presented suggesting that the OHQ has artificially inflated correlations with those constructs tapped by the OHQ: self-esteem, sense of purpose, and social interest/extraversion. The operationalization of SWB by the OHQ is not based on relevant definition and theory and appears to invite nonrandom error into the study of SWB. The article concludes with an appeal for the use of more stringent conceptual and analytic approaches.

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1. The structure of subjective well-being

Hills and Argyle (2002) developed the 29-item Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) to be “an improved instrument” to assess subjective well-being (SWB). The OHQ was derived as an improved version of its predecessor, the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989). To the authors' credit, they improved the Oxford Happiness Inventory by changing

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the response format from a 0–3 multiple choice scoring format to a more widely used Likert Scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 6 = “strongly agree”). However, the present concerns are with the diffuse item content of the OHQ purportedly designed to measure SWB. The items of the OHQ include the 20 items of the Oxford Happiness Inventory and an additional nine items. Hills and Argyle report acceptable construct validity for the OHQ by providing data on correlations with other self-report scales of personality traits, human strengths, and SWB. According to the authors, their purpose “is to describe the improved scale and its psychometric properties and, by placing it in the public domain, to allow its wider use and further examination by others” (p. 1074). Prior to wide dissemination and use of the OHQ, I wanted to express some conceptual concerns with the OHQ. These include theoretical and analytic issues concerning the structure of SWB, and the conceptual overlap between several items that comprise the OHQ and many of the predictors, correlates, and consequences of SWB. With the proliferation of well-established, brief self-report measures of SWB (e.g., 1-item *Self-Anchoring Scale*; Cantril, 1965; 4-item *Subjective Happiness Scale*; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; 5-item *Satisfaction with Life Scale*; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; 18-item *Well-Being Scale*; Tellegen, 1982), the onus is on researchers developing new measure to provide additional utility in the understanding and study of SWB. I will argue that the content and structure of the OHQ decreases its utility in the scientific study of SWB compared to other available measures.

The study of SWB, human strengths, and positive psychological outcomes is growing exponentially (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One consequence of this “positive psychology” focus has been the proliferation of new measures based on clear definitions, strong theoretical frameworks, and rigorous methodology. Some of the positively valenced constructs presently under study include sense of purpose or meaningfulness, kindness, curiosity, autonomy, sense of humor, self-esteem, and aesthetic appreciation. Each of these constructs has shown positive relationships with components of SWB. Future prospective studies may find bi-directional relationships among these constructs such that individuals with greater positive character traits will develop SWB, and conversely, high SWB may lead to greater positive character traits.

There are several empirically informed models, with a large degree of conceptual overlap, on the structure of SWB. In his seminal work, Bradburn (1969) found SWB to be a function of the independent dimensions of general positive and negative affectivity. Building on this work, Argyle and Crossland (1987) and Diener (2000) have defined SWB as an individual’s affective and cognitive evaluation of their life. Similarly, Veenhoven (1997) defined SWB as a set of affective and cognitive appraisals concerning one’s life including “how good it feels, how well it meets expectations, how desirable it is deemed to be, etc.” (p. 34). Overall, high SWB is comprised of the combination of three specific factors: (1) frequent and intense positive affective states, (2) the relative absence of anxiety and depression, and (3) global life satisfaction. Using this definition, it becomes apparent that most studies of SWB measure either the affective or cognitive component, but not both. Many studies use measures of negative affectivity, neuroticism, depression, or positive affectivity as less than desirable proxies for SWB. Similar to other measures of SWB (Diener et al., 1985; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), the OHQ is circumscribed to assessing the cognitive appraisal component of happiness (i.e., life satisfaction). However, in contrast to other measures, the OHQ makes the error of including additional items that capture a diffuse range of positive character traits and attributes.

It has been argued that constructs such as positive affect and SWB are more parsimoniously explained by the absence of negative affect and pessimism (i.e., a single continuum of positive and negative psychological states). Although a discussion on the unique qualities associated with positive compared to negative affect (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998), and optimism compared to pessimism (e.g., Snyder, 2000) are beyond the scope of the present paper, the issue broaches the importance of defining and measuring new constructs using a strong theoretical framework. New measures of SWB should be informed by theory-driven definitions of well-being (e.g., Diener, 2000; Kahneman, 1999; Veenhoven, 1997) and empirical research on the structure of well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Unfortunately, Hills and Argyle (2002) fail to specify either a definition or theory of SWB to support the item content of their self-report scale. The authors refer to a book chapter describing the development of the Oxford Happiness Inventory. Nonetheless, they merely indicate that the Oxford Happiness Inventory was “devised as a broad measure of personal happiness, mainly for in-house use in the Department of Experimental Psychology of the University of Oxford in the late 1980s” (p.1073). Although the purpose of developing the OHQ was to disseminate a valid measure of SWB for future research, the authors neglect to define or provide a theoretical framework of SWB. More importantly, the items selected for the final version are potentially problematic.

2. Conceptual overlap between the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and other distinct constructs

To date, a great deal has been learned about the personality traits, values, goals, and social behaviors and cognitions of happy individuals compared to their less happy counterparts (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The study of the potential predictors, consequences, and correlates of SWB would suffer if measures of SWB included items measuring these same antecedents, consequences, and correlates. The diffuse items of the OHQ not only tap the cognitive component of SWB, but traits such as social interest, kindness, and sense of humor, and qualities such as perceived physical attractiveness and sense of purpose. The content of the OHQ fails to discriminate between SWB and several related human strengths with specific definitions, theories, and measures. What is the potential consequence of this overinclusive item set? Future studies using the OHQ to assess SWB are likely to result in artificially inflated relationships between SWB and those constructs included in the OHQ.

If the correlates of SWB are included in a measure of SWB, how can we decompose the lives of happy individuals, the activities and cognitive styles that influence SWB, and cross-national and cross-cultural differences in the processes leading to SWB? Additionally, how can we feel confident that interventions using SWB as an outcome are in fact, assessing SWB? Table 1 reports the items shared between the Oxford Happiness Inventory and the long form of the OHQ that address human strengths and psychological outcomes instead of the structure of SWB.

The authors of the OHQ partially acknowledge the loose array of constructs being assessed. They reference the labeled factors found in factor analyses of its predecessor, the Oxford Happiness Inventory: “social commitment,” “sense of control,” “physical fitness,” “efficacy,” and “self-esteem” (based on Argyle, Martin, & Lu, 1995 and Hills & Argyle, 1998). Although

Table 1
Content of Various Items from the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and Oxford Happiness Inventory

Item No.	Actual item	Construct being assessed
2 (9)	I am intensely interested in other people	Social Interest/Extraversion
4 (17)	I have very warm feelings toward almost everyone	Kindness/Agreeableness
7 (29)	I find most things amusing	Humor
11 (27)	I laugh a lot	Humor
8 (25)	I am always committed and involved	Sense of Purpose
24 (24)	I do not have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life	Sense of Purpose
16 (14) ^a	I find beauty in some things	Awe or Aesthetic Appreciation
19 (4)	I feel that I am not especially in control of my life	Autonomy/Locus of Control
26 (7)	I usually have a good influence on events	Autonomy/Locus of Control
20	I feel able to take anything on	Self-Efficacy
28 (16)	I don't feel particularly healthy	Physical Health
1 (6) ^a	I don't feel particularly pleased with the way I am	Self-Esteem/Self-Acceptance
13 (28) ^a	I don't think I look attractive	Self-Esteem/Self-Acceptance

Actual item numbers are from the 29-item long version of the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ; Hills & Argyle, 2002). Item Numbers in parentheses refer to the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI; Argyle et al., 1989). The column for “Construct being assessed” is based on the face-validity of each item.

^a Denotes items that are also included in the 8-item short version.

the authors extracted eight factors from a principal components analysis in their OHQ validation study (positive cognition, social commitment, positive affect, sense of control, physical fitness, satisfaction with self, mental alertness), they failed to report the factor loadings. Thus, readers were not able to interpret the data. Instead, the authors reported that the “non-interpretability of the OHQ was a consequence of the relatively large number of factors extracted using the Eigenvalue criterion” (Hills & Argyle, 2002, p.1079). After a series of alternative factor analytic techniques, a one-factor solution was found using an oblique rotation. Considering the inconsistent results of separate factor analyses with the Oxford Happiness Inventory and the OHQ, and the small sample size used by Hills and Argyle (2002) to assess the structural validity of the OHQ, further research is needed to elucidate the structure of the OHQ.

Based on the substantive content of the OHQ, and the multi-factorial solutions reported by the authors in studies with the Oxford Happiness Inventory and OHQ, the OHQ appears to be a measure of diffuse constructs rather than a clear, precise measure of SWB. Consequently, there are a number of potential adverse consequences that may impede the study of SWB if the OHQ or measures like it are used. As mentioned, there will be artificially inflated relationships between SWB and the diverse positive traits tapped by the OHQ. The correlation matrix reported (Hills & Argyle, 2002, p.1077) indicates a high degree of multicollinearity between the OHQ and both self-esteem ($r=0.81$) and sense of purpose ($r=0.77$). Given the alpha reliability of these scales, these correlations approach the maximum value. This is not surprising, because the OHQ has several items assessing self-esteem and self-acceptance that are not necessary features of SWB (Lyubomirsky, 2001). It can be presumed that the OHQ would also show artificially large relationships with social interest, kindness, sense of purpose, sense of humor, and autonomy compared to other SWB measures (see Table 1).

Table 2
Bivariate correlations between self-report measures of SWB and positive attributes

Variable	Self-Esteem	Sense of Purpose	Social Interest	Agreeableness
<i>Specific measures</i>				
OHQ ^a	0.81	0.77	0.61	–
OHI ^b	0.66	0.64	0.61	0.39
Self-Anchoring Scale ^c	0.48	0.21	0.32	–
Subjective Happiness Scale ^d	0.53–0.58	0.66	0.36	–
Affect Balance Scale ^e	0.55	0.30 and 0.42	0.30	–
<i>Meta-analyses^f</i>				
Happiness ^g	–	–	0.27	0.19
Life Satisfaction ^h	–	–	0.17	0.16
SWB ^l	0.35	–	0.17 and 0.20	0.17

“–” = Data are not available. Social Interest = measured by lower-order (sociability) and higher-order (extraversion) personality scales. Agreeableness = measured by lower-order (kindness) and higher-order (agreeableness) personality scales.

^a Hills and Argyle (2002).

^b Argyle et al. (1989). Agreeableness correlation reported in Furnham and Cheng (1997).

^c Cantril (1965); reported in Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff (2002).

^d Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999). Sense of Purpose correlation reported in Lyubomirsky et al. (submitted for publication).

^e Bradburn (1969). The first Sense of Purpose correlation was by Chang and Dodder (1983) and all other correlations were by Ryff and Keyes (1995).

^f see DeNeve & Cooper (1998) for specific details. Happiness measures assessed appraisals of general positive and negative affect.

^g Life Satisfaction measures assessed cognitive appraisals of the quality of life experiences.

^h SWB grouped measures of happiness, life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect. For Self-Esteem, the traits self-confidence and self-respect were aggregated. For Social interest, the first correlation used 23 traits related to extraversion and the second focused on sociability.

As preliminary support for the hypothesis of artificially inflated relationships, Table 2 shows published correlations between the OHQ and other measures of SWB with self-esteem, sense of purpose, social interest, and agreeableness. Included in this comparison are data from a large-scale meta-analysis using various well-validated SWB measures (see DeNeve & Cooper, 1998 for details). As can be seen, other measures of SWB had small to moderate positive correlations with these traits; the only exception was a 0.66 correlation between sense of purpose and the 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale. In contrast, the OHQ had excessively large positive correlations with self-esteem ($r=0.81$), sense of purpose ($r=0.77$), and extraversion ($r=0.61$). Interestingly, self-esteem accounted for 66% of the variance in the OHQ in contrast to 12.25% of the variance in SWB from the meta-analytic findings. Given the large correlations between the OHQ with self-esteem and sense of purpose, this new measure of SWB is almost redundant with these constructs. This is problematic since by definition, SWB is not synonymous with self-esteem or sense of purpose.

It is not possible to conduct a valid examination of relationships between self-esteem, sense of purpose, social interest, kindness, aesthetic appreciation, sense of humor, and autonomy with

SWB if each of these constructs is being assessed in the measure of SWB. Additionally, how can researchers examine the relative influence of self-esteem, sense of purpose, social interest, and kindness on SWB compared to other attributes such as wisdom, gratitude, and playfulness that are not assessed by items in the OHQ? An individual high in SWB does not need to be intensely interested in other people (item 2) nor do they need to think they look attractive (item 13). Socially curious individuals may report slightly elevated SWB than their less curious peers. However, there are plenty of individuals experiencing intense curiosity and flow in non-social activities that live pleasurable, meaningful, and satisfying lives (see reviews in Csiksentmihalyi, 1990 and Seligman, 2002). It is argued that individuals high in SWB are not by definition higher in social interest and perceived physical attractiveness, rather they have a high frequency of positive affect, a low frequency of negative affect, and have a greater overall positive evaluation of their life situation. Although this definition was espoused by Argyle (e.g., Argyle et al., 1995), item content and data show that the OHQ was not based on this definition, as the OHQ is not clearly differentiable from the traits of self-esteem and sense of purpose (see Table 2).

The consequence of having respondents with particular characteristics that either match or fail to match the specific domains captured by OHQ scale items introduces nonrandom error. For example, individuals describing themselves as very physically attractive would score artificially higher on the OHQ. As a consequence, self-appraisals of physical attraction would have an artificially strong influence on levels of SWB. Furthermore, if there are gender, ethnicity, or cultural differences in perceived physical attractiveness, cross-national and cross-cultural differences in SWB will be artificially inflated because feeling physically attractive is in fact part of the definition of high SWB. The preliminary data in Table 2 suggest that the OHQ strongly diverges from other measures tied to the structure and theory of SWB.

3. General summary

The available data on the development of the OHQ reported by Hills and Argyle are at best, equivocal. Since their measure was based on a definition and theory of SWB that is not described in their paper, my goal was to elucidate salient conceptual issues that may or may not be able to be addressed by the authors. The OHQ appears to measure an amalgamation of SWB, various human strengths, cognitive characteristics, and physical fitness. SWB was operationalized as the degree to which individuals are interested in other people (item 2), have warm feelings toward others (item 4), find things amusing (item 7), find beauty in things (item 16), and feel like they look attractive (item 13), among other items. At present, there are no theoretical models that include these qualities as defining components of happiness. Rather, these positive qualities and outcomes have been examined as antecedents, correlates, and/or consequences of happiness. In fact, there is empirical evidence that some happy individuals exhibit low self-esteem (Lyubomirsky, 2001; Lyubomirsky, Lepper, & Tkach, submitted for publication), and that physical attractiveness fails to differentiate very happy individuals from their less happy peers (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Moreover, although various indices of social activity are strongly associated with SWB (e.g., Myers & Diener, 1995), these behaviors appear to be preconditions and are not a “sufficient condition for high happiness” (Diener & Seligman, 2002, p. 83). Overall, these findings raise serious questions as to whether the items of the OHQ are assessing happiness.

In comparison to other well-established measures of SWB, the 29-item OHQ is longer, overly redundant with the constructs of self-esteem and sense of purpose, and has no theoretical rationale for the diffuse content being assessed. I believe SWB is more accurately measured by self-report scales that are less time-intensive, theory-driven, with good psychometric properties such as the 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), and the 18-item Well-Being Scale (Tellegen, 1982). Alternatively, an excellent avenue for future research is to objectively measure well-being (Kahneman, 1999). Specifically, researchers can use ecological momentary assessment (e.g., electronic diaries, cell phones, pagers) to obtain multiple daily reports from participants on the quality of their affective experiences and life evaluations. These multiple self-reports can be aggregated within each participant to form an index of their objective well-being. Based on the present recommendations it may be presently imprudent for the authors to disseminate the OHQ as a measure of SWB. The measurement of SWB will inform research designed to enhance our understanding of the nature of SWB. Besides basic research, SWB serves as an important outcome in prevention and intervention programs. Yet, to advance scientific study, SWB needs to be measured carefully and each item should have clear, theoretical ties to the construct of happiness. In sum, many of the qualities tapped by the OHQ are not essential to SWB and thus, interfere with the study of a psychological construct with relevance to nearly all domains of human study.

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