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Commentary

Brief well-being assessments, or nothing at all?

Tyler J. VanderWeele^{a,*}, Claudia Trudel-Fitzgerald^a, Paul Allin^b, Colin Farrelly^c, Guy Fletcher^d, Donald E. Frederick^e, Jon Hall^f, John F. Helliwell^g, Eric S. Kim^a, William A. Lauinger^h, Matthew T. Lee^e, Sonja Lyubomirskyⁱ, Seth Margolisⁱ, Eileen McNeely^a, Louis Tay^j, Vish Viswanath^a, Dorota Węziak-Białowolska^a, Laura D. Kubzansky^a

^a Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA^b Imperial College London, London, UK^c Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada^d University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK^e Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA^f United Nations Development Programme, New York, NY, USA^g University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada^h Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia, PA, USAⁱ University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA, USA^j Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

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Our recent paper on recommendations for the measurement of well-being put forward a number of preliminary proposals for different settings (VanderWeele et al., 2020a). Our recommendations varied depending on the context and purposes of the well-being assessment and took account of potential constraints on the number of items that might be included for any given assessment. We discussed settings ranging from government surveys, to multi-purpose cohort studies, to empirical studies directed principally towards research on well-being. We considered that potential restrictions on the number of items to be included could range from settings in which only a single item might be possible to those in which there would be effectively almost no practical constraints. We acknowledged that our recommendations were provisional, and would be subject to refinement over time as knowledge in the field continued to expand. We invited debate over these questions with the hope of further refinement. Ryff et al. (2020a) in their

commentary have expressed several points of clarification, and of dissent, concerning the recommendations we put forward. We agree with some of their points, and disagree with others. We will outline these points below and also refer the reader to further discussion on this topic elsewhere (Ryff et al., 2020b; VanderWeele et al., 2020b).

Our most fundamental disagreement with Ryff et al. is their view that our position that “including even one item is better than not assessing it at all” is misguided. Contrary to Ryff et al., we do strongly believe that the inclusion of one well-being item is better than none. We certainly agree that more extensive well-being assessments are preferable and we would advocate for the inclusion of multi-item well-being measures whenever possible (VanderWeele et al., 2020b). However, we also believe there are circumstances where this is simply infeasible. For instance, in a particular survey, or in a national assessment, especially one that is designed principally for other purposes, resources may be

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: tvanderw@hsph.harvard.edu (T.J. VanderWeele), ctrudel@hsph.harvard.edu (C. Trudel-Fitzgerald), p.allin@imperial.ac.uk (P. Allin), farrelly@queensu.ca (C. Farrelly), Guy.Fletcher@ed.ac.uk (G. Fletcher), jonathan.hall@undp.org (J. Hall), eskim@hsph.harvard.edu (E.S. Kim), LauingerW@chc.edu (W.A. Lauinger), matthew_lee@fas.harvard.edu (M.T. Lee), sonja.lyubomirsky@ucr.edu (S. Lyubomirsky), emcneely@hsph.harvard.edu (E. McNeely), stay@purdue.edu (L. Tay), vish_viswanath@dfci.harvard.edu (V. Viswanath), doweziak@hsph.harvard.edu (D. Węziak-Białowolska), lkubzans@hsph.harvard.edu (L.D. Kubzansky).

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available to include only one item, or a very limited number of items. Likewise, an investigator skeptical about subjective well-being research might be willing to devote space to including a single well-being item, but not more than one. We believe this represents an opportunity to obtain data and to show when, why and how such information can be informative. Ryff et al. seem to believe it is an opportunity that one ought to decline. We disagree.

We think there are several reasons for preferring even a single-item well-being measure to none at all. First, some single-item measures are strongly correlated with much richer well-being indices (Cheung and Lucas, 2014; VanderWeele et al., 2020b). This may accordingly indicate that certain single-item questions prompt respondents to reflect upon their life as a whole in some depth, and that they might be capable of at least crudely representing a larger constellation of aspects of well-being and their determinants (Helliwell, 2020). Second, certain single-item measures are themselves highly predictive of future outcomes, including health-related ones (Cohen et al., 2016; Steptoe and Fancourt, 2019; Rosella et al., 2019; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Third, inclusion of even a single item can influence conversations around well-being. The inclusion of such items at all makes the concept of well-being more visible, making it possible to discuss potential trends, antecedents, and consequences, and why it might matter, in ways that would otherwise be impossible (Hall and Rickard, 2013; UK, 2013; Kanbur et al., 2018). What we measure shapes what we discuss, what we know, what we aim for, and policies put in place to achieve it. Well-being needs to be prioritized and some inclusion - some discussion - is better than none at all. Thus while we entirely agree with Ryff et al. about the complexity of “how people think and feel about their well-being” and that “no single question can do justice to this fundamentally important realm of human experience”, we nevertheless, for the reasons above, still think a single item assessment is better than none. What is the best single-item assessment and whether this too might vary across contexts, we think are still open questions, as we noted at the conclusion of our paper and in further discussion (VanderWeele et al., 2020a, 2020b).

The potential value of single-item measures also shaped our recommendations on what to assess in circumstances under which it is possible to include only 4, or perhaps 6, items. In such settings, we prioritized measuring multiple aspects of well-being (evaluative, hedonic, eudaimonic) and related constructs (negative affect, optimism) over a multi-item measure of only one aspect of well-being. It is unclear from the comments of Ryff et al. which of these two alternatives they think preferable, or whether they believe this is another setting for which the well-being investigator should dismiss the opportunity and abdicate assessment.

We do agree with Ryff et al. that the role and importance of different aspects of well-being is likely to vary according to different cultural and socio-economic contexts, and we have discussed this nuance in prior research as well (Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Indeed, that is in part why our recommendations for measure selection were, whenever possible, to cover numerous aspects of well-being, regardless of whether 4 items, or 54 items, or more, were available. In all contexts, we recommended collecting evaluative, hedonic, and eudaimonic measures. Accordingly, our specific recommendations for multi-item measures were based on ideally (i) having multiple well-being items corresponding to each well-being construct, and (ii) the broadest possible conceptual coverage of all well-being constructs. On these grounds, we recommended the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (Su et al., 2014) covering 18 facets across 7 dimensions of well-being, or, more briefly, if space is constrained, the 12-item flourishing measure of VanderWeele (2017), covering 6 domains of well-being with two items each. Importantly also, each of these inventories for assessing well-being is comprised principally of items that have been used extensively in past well-being research. In cases for which more resources are available, we also recommended supplementing the measures of each construct assessed in each of these inventories with other measures of

allegedly the same constructs from other available options (e.g., Diener et al., 1985; Ryff, 1989; Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999; Keyes, 2002; Steger et al., 2006; George and Park, 2017; Warwick Medical School, 2018). We believe using additional measures, when possible, will lead to a deeper understanding of the nuances of the instruments and constructs employed.

While we agree that the scope of prior usage of certain measures is an important consideration in the selection of which measures to use in future research, we certainly do not think it should be the only, or principal, criterion. That would effectively preclude the use of any new measures and further progress in the development of measures. Conceptual and empirical progress on measurement continues to be made with regard to well-being assessment. For example, for the assessment of meaning and purpose, conceptual and empirical researchers have recently come to some consensus that these are best assessed with three separate constructs sometimes referred to as coherence, significance, and purpose or direction (Martela and Steger, 2016; George and Park, 2017; Hanson and VanderWeele, 2020). Prior work has often used “meaning” and “purpose” interchangeably, or ignores one of these two domains, whereas more recent work distinguishes them, with purpose being directed towards some particular end, whereas meaning is concerned with understanding the context and relation of things; yet further more refined distinctions concerning meaning and purpose can also be drawn (Hanson and VanderWeele, 2020). We believe these sorts of distinctions will be important (cf. Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2020), just as were earlier distinctions between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 1989). A principle of only using measures that have considerable prior past usage has the potential to effectively leave a field in stagnation. As noted above, our recommendations were, when resources and survey space are adequate, to include at least two measures of any construct that is of interest. When feasible, both prior and more recent measures could be included. We believe this would likely be the best way to advance research on well-being and to ensure that well-being research can be used in as many different ways as possible.

We welcome further discussion and debate of the recommendations that we put forward, and we previously noted that these recommendations were provisional and subject to change as knowledge advances. We acknowledge that there are numerous important open questions, perhaps especially concerning which single-item measures to assess in which contexts. However, we also believe the field of well-being research will not make as much progress as might be possible unless there is a clear set of recommendations. We see no need at present to change our recommendations in response to the comments of Ryff et al. (2020a, 2020b) and we likewise continue to strongly support the notion that a brief assessment of well-being is preferable to nothing at all.

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