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

Seema Mehrotra, Ravikesh Tripathi, and Humera Banu,
NIMHANS, Bangalore

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 focuses 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,