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Against well-being: A critique of positive psychology

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Abstract

More than two decades after his seminal paper 'Subjective Well-Being', Ed Diener wrote that he substituted *happiness* with *well-being* to obtain scientific credibility. Are the arguments echoed in positive psychology rigorous enough to justify this substitution? This article focuses on the historical examination of the word *happiness*, covering the lexical universes of ancient Greek, Latin, and English, seeking to identify the connections between them. We found that arguments for such substitution are sustained by a fragile appreciation of the semantic depth of *happiness*. Although it favors quantification, the current understanding of well-being obliterates the plurality of the debate about happiness and the recognition of other ideals of life. Thus, we conclude that well-being and happiness are semantically close, but conceptually, metaphysically, and empirically distinct, demanding, as objects, particular investigations.

Keywords

etymology, happiness, positive psychology, subjective well-being, well-being

The concept of well-being has been of growing importance in psychology research since the 1980s (Diener, 1984; Ryff, 1989), and especially since the formal presentation of the positive psychology movement by Martin Seligman in 1998 (Seligman,

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2019). More than 10 years later, Seligman even wrote: 'I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being' (Seligman, 2011: 13). Regarding both positive psychology and the well-being concept, researcher Ed Diener became a fundamental figure, not only by participating in the 'Positive Psychology steering committee' (Linley *et al.*, 2006: 4), but also by having written what became the inaugural landmark article of the well-being concept in psychology, 'Subjective Well-Being', in 1984 (Michalos, 2014: 6437).

One of the main elements proposed by Diener (1984) that would be echoed in positive psychology was that well-being would be a scientific version of happiness, a concept of great importance for people in general, but with different definitions throughout history. Diener referred to this characteristic of happiness as making the concept too elusive to support scientific investigation (ibid.: 543). For Diener (1984, 2009), two main factors contributed to that elusiveness of happiness: first, the history of happiness in philosophy was especially erratic and without consensus; second, there was a significant difference between the etymological root of the word, its common-sense usage in the United States, and its important definitions, especially that of Aristotle (Diener, 1984: 542–4; Raibley, 2012: 1108). Thus, while the plural meanings of happiness would make a rigorous investigation impossible, well-being, taken as a semantically close object, had the potential to reach the desired scientific rigor while stimulating equivalent interest on the part of people. Drawing on this perception, Diener (1984) proposed his particular definition of well-being (emphasizing its subjective aspect), which would become the most common basis for assessing the concept (see Diener *et al*., 2018; Goodman *et al*., 2017), including in the Gallup World Poll (see Lambert *et al*., 2020), and which had been cited 20,880 times as of May 2022, according to Google Scholar.

However, although there are arguments in favor of taking well-being as a central concept, the fragility of the explanation that Diener later offered about his choice is significant: 'In part to gain credibility within psychological science, researchers began using the term "well-being" rather than "happiness" because it sounded more scientific' (Disabato, Goodman, and Kashdan, 2019: 5). Or, as Lyubomirsky (2008: 316), an important positive psychology researcher, reported: 'Ed Diener … told me once that he coined the term subjective well-being because he didn't think he would be promoted with tenure if his research were perceived as focusing on something so fuzzy and soft as "happiness."' In other words, the choice was made less by the arguments set out above and more by the impact of the words; it represented a substitution not of the object itself, but of the name.

This apparent lack of rigor in choosing to replace *happiness* is perhaps evident in the profusion of adjectives applied to *well-being* in positive psychology, such as *subjective* (Diener, 1984), *psychological* (Ryff, 1989), *eudaimonic*, and *hedonic* (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Or even in the plethora of ways in which that object is evaluated. Linton *et al.* (2016) identifies 99 tools evaluating 196 distinct dimensions of well-being. In other words, the replacement of *happiness* by *well-being* does not seem to have resulted in the desired scientificity.

Observing this context, we ask: how rigorous is the replacement of the word *happiness* by *well-being* in psychology research? Are the arguments organized by Diener (1984)

and echoed in positive psychology rigorous enough to justify this substitution? At what point in its history did the word *happiness* come close to *well-being* in order to make such a replacement seem coherent?

Method

As Bakhtin wrote: '[The] word is able to register the most intimate, most ephemeral transitory phases of social change … [because] the word constitutes the medium in which are produced slow quantitative accumulations of change that have not had time to transform into new theories yet' (Volosinov, 1986: 19). By understanding the changes in the use of specific words (like *happiness* and *well-being*), we can shed light on social aspects that exist in the background of those uses. In the case of Diener's (1984) proposition, we can better understand these social aspects that fueled one of positive psychology's most important concepts.

Given that the approximation between happiness and well-being can be investigated in many ways, we focus on examining it through the history of the word *happiness*. We will cover a time horizon similar to that used in Diener (1984), going from the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* to the scientific concept of well-being. But, unlike Diener (1984), we will consider the various linguistic transformations that these words have undergone, and the fact that new translations are not always faithful to the original words. Thus, we will travel through the lexical universes of ancient Greek (*eudaimonia*/*makarios*), Roman Latin (*felicitas*/*beatitudo*), and English (*happiness*/*well-being*), seeking to identify the connections between them. To do this, we will consult classic works in their original languages, historical review works on happiness (Buffon, 2004; Curtis, 2002; de Heer, 1969; McMahon, 2004, 2006; Wierzbicka, 2004), and critical analyses of positive psychology's use of happiness and well-being (Ahmed, 2010; Alexandrova, 2017; Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008; Davies, 2016).

Eudaimon and *makar*

Aristotle is mentioned repeatedly in works that deal with happiness, his role as a central reference being due to his systematization of the idea in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1934). Unlike other thinkers of his period, Aristotle synthesized a complex semantic field relating to the ideal life (including words like *olbios*, *makarios*, and *eftychia*) around the noun *eudaimonia* and the adjective *eudaimon* (de Heer, 1969). Early on in the work, Aristotle (1934: 1095a14–25) wrote: 'As far as the name goes, we may almost say that the great majority of mankind are agreed about this; for both the multitude and persons of refinement speak of it as Happiness [*eudaimonia*].'

It is to this concept, *eudaimonia*, that contemporary research refers when dealing with Aristotle's understanding of happiness. And, beyond what Aristotle presents about *eudaimonia*, it is relevant to understand the root of this word: *eudaimon* is the combination of the adverbial prefix *eu-* (which means 'something good, positive, prosperous') and the stem *daimon* (which means 'demon'). That is, *eudaimon* literally means 'good demon'. Importantly, demons in ancient Greek thought were considerably different from demons in Christian thought (Abbagnano, 2012: 279). The demon was a neutral

being and was not part of any religious cult, and took on three main meanings in ancient Greek literature and philosophy (Burkert, 1993: 353): 1. *Daimon* could refer to an intermediary being between the gods and human beings, responsible for conveying the prayers of the latter and the commandments of the former. 2. Further, as it appears in Homer, *daimon* could be used to refer to an unspeakable power, indicating that a person had a piece of the divine within him or her. 3. *Daimon* could also be used as a reference to someone's inner voice; Plato and Xenophon, for instance, wrote about the good 'demon' of Socrates that made him brilliant (Fernandes and de Lima, 2019). Generally speaking, being said to have a good demon was desirable; it implied possessing great power, being on track in life, and probably being guided by the gods (Chantraine, 1968). Burnet adds that, due to its enigmatic origin, having a good demon (instead of an evil demon) was a sign of luck (Aristotle, 1900: 1).

However, even after Aristotle's systematization, the use of *eudaimon* and *eudaimonia* did not remain stable. Interestingly, as ancient Greek civilization began to decline, philosophers like Epicurus began to use another noun to refer to the ideal life: *makarios*. *Makarios* (or its adjective, *makar*) was generally used to refer to a good life, but with a more exalted, emotional tone, and a more intense sense of divine participation than was the case with *eudaimon* (de Heer, 1969: 55; McMahon, 2006: 3, 68).

The new context of social chaos (Stock, 1908) strongly influenced the choice of this new word to refer to happiness. Epicurus wanted to propose a philosophy that would help people to live the ideal life, which, for him, consisted of a life immune to the vagaries and misfortunes of a world at war. This ideal life was, for Epicurus, similar to the life of the gods, as he stated in the *Letter to Menoeceus*: 'So practice these and similar things day and night, by yourself and with a like-minded friend, and you will never be disturbed whether waking or sleeping, and you will live as a god among men' (Epicurus, 2011: Excerpt 135).

Using the word *makarios* instead of *eudaimonia* served both as a reference to a life with characteristics shared with the gods and as a provocation, as a sign that the divine secret had been unlocked. But it was not just with Epicurus that the axis of the discussion about happiness would lead to a change in the word used to describe it. A similar change would also occur in the Latin of ancient Rome, involving both philosophers and religious men and women. If in ancient Greece it was *eudaimonia*, *olbios*, *makarios*, and *eftychía* that populated the semantic field of happiness, in ancient Rome the more relevant words were two: *felicitas* and *beatitudo*.

Felicitas and *beatitudo*

Originally, the adjective *felix* and the noun *felicitas* were directly related to fertility (McMahon, 2006: 67). This included fertility conceived in a broad way, as fertility of both the body and the land: abundant crops, plenty of food and drink, a large and healthy family. In an agrarian society, these were important elements for a good life. They were signs that the goddess Fortuna had blessed a land and its people.

Felix and *felicitas*, therefore, pointed to a meaningful, well-lived life, but were words little explored by Roman philosophers. This was partly because their mundane character was associated with the pursuit of unbridled pleasures in urban centers. Roman cultural practices indicate a world of sensory excess, encompassing the politics of bread and

circuses, battles in the coliseum, and chariot races (McMahon, 2006: 66). The Stoic philosopher and poet Horace (1892: Book III.16) made clear the problem of indulging in these excesses of *felix*: 'As riches grow, care follows: men repine / And thirst for more.' This did not mean that philosophers found *felix* a negative word, but the best possible life, the one that referred to what the Greek philosophers proposed, was summarized not by this word but by another: *beatitudo*.

The adjective *beatus* and the noun *beatitudo* derive from the Latin verb *beo*, which means 'to complete', 'to satisfy', 'to fill', in the sense that nothing is missing and everything is in its rightful place (Beraldi, 2010: 13). *Beatitudo*, therefore, suggests a full life, very different from what philosophers thought about *felicitas*, which referred to a life filled with only superficial satisfaction.

Cicero and Seneca are two important Roman Stoic philosophers who wrote copiously on *beatitudo*. See, for instance, this excerpt from Cicero (1914: Chapter 2, Excerpts 86 and 87) about the excellence of a blessed life: 'If there is such a thing as happiness [*beatum*], it is bound to be attainable in its entirety by the Wise Man.… For when happiness [*beata vita*] has once been achieved, it is as permanent as Wisdom itself.' Or the following passage, in which Cicero (1877: Book 5, Excerpt 86) points out that *felicitas* is secondary to a blessed life: 'So life may be properly called happy [*felicitas*], not from its being entirely made up of good things [*beata*], but because it abounds with these to a great and considerable degree.' Seneca (1699) similarly wrote extensively on *beatitudo*, even naming one of his books *De vita beata*.

It is important to consider that, for Roman philosophers, the idea of a blessed life did not yet have the religious meaning that it now has. This meaning developed only with the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, and especially with the dissemination of versions of the New Testament in Latin, which also played a central role in the connection between the Greek words *eudaimonia* and *makarios* and the philosophical-theological tradition in Latin.

The New Testament, written in koine (a popular form of ancient Greek), spread throughout ancient Rome between 50 and 90 AD. In it, the word *makarios* was recurrently used to refer to the ideal life in God's eyes. The famous Sermon on the Mount, in the fifth chapter of Matthew, includes the lines: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. / Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (The Holy Bible, 2016, Matt. 5: 1-4). This choice to convey the notion of the ideal life using *makarios* and not *eudaimonia* had a fundamental reason.

If in the Old Testament God was responsible for all the good and bad things that happened, in the New Testament God was responsible only for the good things. Bad things were the results of the actions of demons. These recent New Testament characters, demons, were referred to in koine as *daimonion*, a diminutive of *daimon*, as in the word *eudaimonia*: 'The sacrifices of the Gentiles are offered to demons [*daimoniis*] and not to God, and I do not want you to have part with demons [*daimoniorum*]' (The Holy Bible, 2016, Cor. 10: 20). And, coherently, the Latin versions of the New Testament ended up translating *makarios* as *beatitudo* (Fernandes and de Lima, 2019; McMahon, 2004: 9); after all, the ideal life referred to in the New Testament was the complete life (of the kingdom of God) and not the earthly life of sensory excess.

It is possible to conclude that the break with the word *eudaimonia*, used to refer to the ideal life, happened in two ways: through philosophy, with Epicurus' protest that the

divine life could be lived by human beings; and through religion, with the emergence of the figure of the Christian devil. And in this rupture, the words *eudaimonia* and *felicitas* were set aside, while *makarios* and *beatitudo* were used by philosophers, poets, and religious people to refer to the best possible life. Later, in the fourth century, Saint Augustine incorporated the philosophical use of *beatitudo* into the religious one, systematizing it. His influence was such that the meaning he gave to *beatitudo* and *beatus* remained dominant during almost the entire Middle Ages, marking these words with the meaning they still have today.

The return of *felicitas* in the Early Middle Ages

After the turn of the first millennium, some scholars began to discreetly question the prohibitions and limits imposed by religious leaders about what could and could not be read and taught at European universities (Buffon, 2004: 451–3). As a result, hitherto prohibited works, such as those by Aristotle, gradually began to receive translations and commentaries (McMahon, 2006: 126). Especially relevant to the story of the word *happiness* are the first Latin translations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*Ethica noua* and *Ethica vetus*), produced between 1150 and 1250 AD. In these translations, the central word of the debate, *eudaimonia*, was translated as *felicitas* (Buffon, 2004: 455), in a departure from the use of the then dominant *beatitudo*.

Buffon (2004: 457) explains that this change in vocabulary – bringing back *felicitas* – indicated the greater independence of human beings in relation to the divine and was a reflection of the cultural change Europe was going through at the time (Robertson, 2021). If Epicurus seemed to protest when using the word *makarios*, the choice of *felix* and *felicitas* also represented a protest in favor of what had been 'forbidden' by religious thought: the relationship with the body and with what could be enjoyed in life. Not that the Renaissance *felicitas* was limited to this, but it was an important point of opposition to *beatitudo*.

Some thinkers close to the church, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, tried to reconcile the idea of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (now *felicitas*) with religious thought. But despite these efforts, social change continued apace. This is clear in works that proposed earthly ideal worlds, such as *Utopia* by Thomas More (1518), and in the profusion of books with *felicitas* in their titles, such as *De viri felicitate* or *De vitae felicitate*. *Felicitas* also spread as a community ideal (Muratori, 1749) and as the subject of works of art, such as Orazio Gentileschi's *Felicità pubblica che trionfa sui pericoli* and Agnolo Bronzino's *Allegoria della Felicità* (McMahon, 2006: 155–8).

Happiness and bonheur

It is curious to note how the idea of luck permeates many of the words that are part of the history of happiness. Aristotle (1934: 1099a31–b5), for example, was keen to point out that without luck (*olbios* and *eftychía*), *eudaimonia* would be impossible or very difficult to achieve, while the fertility of *felicitas* was a kind of consequence of a person's luck (McMahon, 2006). And even with the transformations through which the word *felicitas* rose to prominence in 12th-century Europe, luck remained an important part of the ideal life.

This relationship between happiness and luck was natural. First, since there was no consensus on what *felicitas* was, feeling it, finding it, or feeling confident enough to talk about it was largely also a result of luck. In addition, even though the quality of life had been increasing with technological development, health and longevity were far from reaching today's levels. Up to 1600, 11.3% of women died from problems during pregnancy and almost 20% of children died within the first year of life; in 1745, the life expectancy of a 21-year-old man did not exceed 50 years (Lancaster, 1990: 8–9). Reaching adulthood and wondering about happiness was already a sign of luck.

In Renaissance Europe, therefore, it did not seem strange that the sense of luck continued to be intertwined with *felicitas* and *felix*, even though people's autonomy and power were important parts of the meanings of these words. In other words, it could be said that luck was no longer related to divine will (as in *beatitudo* or *makarios*) but had come to be understood in an earthly way, as chance intrinsic to life. It is against this background of the concept of luck that different European languages developed and ended up incorporating their own versions of *felicitas*.

In the case of happiness, the reference word for this development is *hap*, which has its roots in Old Norse, a language spoken in Scandinavia that spread throughout Northern Europe between the 7th and 15th centuries. There is a record of the word *hap* being used to mean 'chance, luck, coincidence' as early as 1200 (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Suffixes and meanings were added to this radical until it approached the contemporary usage of *happiness*. In 1500 the noun *happiness* was already used to refer to the ideal life. In addition to *happiness*, the word *felicity*, a direct translation from Latin, also became common after 1500, being used as a synonym for *happiness* by Jeremy Bentham (1823), for example. *Happiness* and *felicity* soon became central to reflection on the ideal life in the English language: translations of Aristotle, such as that by John Gillies (Aristotle, 1797), used both words to replace *eudaimonia*, while Protestant religious leaders used *happiness* to address the ideal life in God's eyes, as did Richard Holdsworth (1642: 5–6): '*Happinesse* is the language of all .... We must look through all things upon *happinesse*, and through *happinesse* upon all.' John Locke (1689: 181) also used the word *happiness* several times, as in: 'If it be farther asked, what it is moves desire? I answer, Happiness, and that alone.'

It is noteworthy that a very similar vocabulary development occurred in French. In this language, the word understood as 'luck' around 1200, *heur*, became the root for the translation of the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales, 2012). Until 1500, words derived from *heur* (the adjective *heureux* and the noun *bonheur*, which literally means 'good luck') became the French references for the ideal life. *Bonheur* also gained a synonym derived directly from Latin: *félicité*. Books were published dealing specifically with *bonheur*, such as Fleury Bourriquant's *Exhortation aux parisiens* (1614), in which he writes 'pour le bonheur de sa Majesté', or Émilie du Châtelet's *Discours sur le bonheur* (1997[1779]). *Bonheur* would even become the aspiration underpinning the French Revolution.

In summary, it can be said that there was an important unification of the semantic field related to the ideal life in the period between the 12th and 17th centuries. Prior to this period, the dominant word, *beatitudo*, had been used mostly in a religious sense,

excluding alternative interpretations. On the other hand, the rescue of *felicitas* as a translation of the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* broke the strictly religious tradition and unified a long historical-philosophical journey from the classical Greek, including its religious bias. *Felicitas* was a comprehensive reference to the inquiry into the ideal life, serving as a basis for languages in development and their use for translations of early philosophers' works.

The Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution

The poet Claude Adrien Helvétius (1909: 264–5), in 1740, stated in the poem *Le bonheur* that the 18th century was the century of *bonheur*. And that was actually a good definition. As *happiness* and *bonheur* became central to the ideal of life, they were naturally themes that gained increasing prominence among Enlightenment thinkers (McMahon, 2006: 209; Robertson, 2021). It is not hard to find an emphasis on the concept throughout this period. In 1772, Baron d'Holbach (1795: 9) synthesized the relationship between 'lights' and happiness: 'Men are unhappy, only because they are ignorant.' William Wordsworth (1953: 197), meanwhile, indicated his enthusiasm for the imminence of happiness in the poem *The Prelude*: 'Not in Utopia, – subterranean fields, – / Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where! / But in the very world, which is the world / Of all of us, – the place where, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all!'

However, Enlightenment enthusiasm was not enough to truly unveil happiness. Even using the best equipment of the time, Jeremy Bentham was not able to perform his *felicific calculus*, intended to be the sum of the happiness of all members of society (Bentham, 1823: 2; Davies, 2016: 25–6). At the end of his life, Bentham wrote: ''Tis is vain … to talk of adding quantities which after the addition will continue distinct as they were before. One man's happiness will never be another man's happiness: a gain to one man is no gain to another' (quoted in Dinwiddy, 2004: 49).

In spite of the failure of the illuminist-utilitarian plan to delimit and produce happiness, two important ideas of this movement took deep root in European and American society: the idea that, if happiness was people's purpose, it should be the logical purpose of government; and the idea that happiness was lived individually. By the end of the 18th century, this influence was evident in the French constitution and, above all, in the Declaration of Independence of the United States (1776).

In the case of the American Declaration of Independence, happiness is mentioned in the classic formulation 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' In the case of the French Revolution, the mention of happiness is a little more subtle. It appears in the preamble of the declaration that was written in 1789, which includes the phrase 'au bonheur de tous' (for the happiness of all), and in the preamble of the constitution formulated in 1793, which states, 'Le but de la société est le bonheur commun' (The purpose of society is common happiness; McMahon, 2006: 261).

If happiness as the purpose of government is evident in both documents, its strictly individual character is particular to the Declaration of Independence. Until that moment in history, happiness was still understood as existing on a blurred border between the individual and the collective. Marie Joseph Lequinio (1793: 1; emphasis added), an important character in the French Revolution, wrote: 'L'homme vertueux,

l'homme qui rend fon *bonheur* inhérent à celui des autres, & qui ne fait être *heureux* que de la *félicité publique*' (The virtuous man, the man who makes his *happiness* inherent in the happiness of others, and who is only *happy* as consequence of *public happiness*).

In the Declaration of Independence, however, happiness was treated much more in line with Bentham's utilitarianism, that is, as a strictly individual happiness and not as a 'public' one. Treating it as an individual's right represented an important change in the way people talked about happiness. First, it reinforced the idea that, as an individual right, happiness was experienced and perceived in ways specific to the individual person. Second, in emphasizing the right to pursue happiness, it placed the responsibility for attaining it on each individual. Of course, the government could be held responsible for not fostering that happiness, but it was assumed that its achievement was proper to the private sphere.

The prolongation of happiness in the 19th and 20th centuries

Despite the continued interest in happiness and its extension into the political world, the answer to the question 'What is happiness?' remained uncertain. Inserting it into a constitution or creating a declaration in which it played a central role did not eliminate the historic debate around the word *happiness*. This recurrent failure to define and promote happiness eventually led scholars and philosophers to distance themselves from the theme (Comte-Sponville, 1997; McMahon, 2006) or to adopt a pessimistic tone, as Kant (2002: 11) did when he wrote: 'In fact we also find that the more a cultivated reason gives itself over to the aim of enjoying life and happiness, the further the human being falls short of true contentment.'

Even far from philosophical activity, *happiness* remained as a reference to the ideal life and, therefore, naturally present in contemporary vocabulary. Happiness was still something to be 'chased'. Wierzbicka (2004) tells that, as the word migrated from the philosophical field to the political and everyday field, the meaning of *happiness* gradually transformed, especially in the United States. Up to the 1800s, *happy* and *happiness* were used to refer to something rare, that only a few could achieve; they were references to an ideal. Few would experience happiness, and few would feel truly happy. But, following the Declaration of Independence, in which happiness was perceived as an individual quality, the adjective *happy* started to be used much more frequently, referring to a sensation that could be perceived in different degrees. Calling oneself happy would not depend on anyone else. McMahon (2004) summarizes this important transformation of the idea of happiness as the passage from the 'happiness of virtue' to the 'virtue of happiness': feeling happy became a good in itself.

It is no surprise, therefore, that phrases such as 'I'm happy with the present arrangements' are common nowadays. Wierzbicka (2004: 38) also points out that, although this is no longer particular to the United States, it is more intense in that country: 'Happy is not only uttered much more frequently than sad (roughly three to one) and joyful (roughly 36 to one), but also much more frequently than, for example, *heureux* is in comparable French listings (roughly five to one).' If the Declaration of Independence can be understood as an important trigger for the establishment of this meaning of happiness, events in the first half of the 20th century were its catalysts.

First, given the political interest in happiness, large-scale surveys such as those by Gallup (Newport, 2010), Centers and Cantril (1946), and Watson (1930) started to

investigate the degree to which people perceived themselves to be happy. In other words, they started to collect answers to questions like 'From zero to ten, how happy are you?'. In addition to highlighting the considerable popular interest in happiness, this initiative also strengthened the quantifiable character of happiness for people, which would have been unthinkable in earlier times (Wierzbicka, 2004). Second, the widespread interest in happiness led advertisers to make this theme central to their campaigns (Curtis, 2002). In 1928, American president Herbert Hoover, in a meeting with executives from a number of advertising agencies, stated: 'You have taken over the job of creating desire and have transformed people into constantly moving happiness machines. Machines, which have become the key to economic progress' (ibid.). In addition to being gradable, happiness also became achievable through very simple activities, such as consumption, with advertising playing the 'pedagogical' role, as stated by the president of the advertising agency JWT, Stanley Resor: 'Advertising is educational work, mass education' (Davies, 2016: 93).

Although it has not become as commonplace as the adjective *happy*, the noun *happiness* has also had its meaning transformed. This can be seen in the changes that the word *happiness* has undergone in versions of Webster's dictionary since 1850 (Oishi *et al.*, 2013). In this publication, *happiness* was increasingly defined in sensory terms. While in older versions of the dictionary the definitions included sensations, but also luck and virtue, from 1961 onward the reference to luck started to be pointed out as archaic and sensation became central, with *happiness* thus defined as '(a) a state of well-being characterized by relative permanence, by dominantly agreeable emotion ranging in value from mere contentment to deep and intense joy in living, and by a natural desire for its continuation; (b) a pleasurable or enjoyable experience' (ibid.: 569).

Another important sign of the change in the meaning of *happiness* can be seen in the examination of the translation of *eudaimonia* as 'happiness'. While, in 1900, editor John Burnet wrote on the first page of his *Ethics of Aristotle*, 'We need not hesitate to translate the word "eudaimonia" by the English "happiness"' (Aristotle, 1900: 1), this confidence faded over the course of the 20th century. The idea that the current use of *happiness* had moved away from its Aristotelian meaning gained momentum.

In 1934, translator and editor H. Rackham described his discomfort in a note to the first translation of *eudaimonia* in his edition of Aristotle's works, in which he stated that, despite the fact that the choice of 'happiness' seemed inevitable, the term 'would perhaps be more accurately rendered by "Well-being" or "Prosperity"; and it will be found that the writer does not interpret it as a state of feeling but as a kind of activity' (Aristotle, 1934: note 6). Rackham's perception would eventually be strengthened by other scholars such as Dybikowski (1981: 185):

> The differences between the two notions, it is now commonly supposed, are too many and too deep to think that happiness and *eudaimonia* are very closely related; and consequently 'happiness', the long-established conventional translation, will seriously mislead us in understanding the nature of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*.

It cannot be denied that the current use of *happiness* (as an individual right based on sensation) is considerably different from the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, even

though the history of both words is connected, as outlined here. In any case, the questioning of *happiness* raised by Aristotle's translators generated an apparently irreconcilable tension between academic rigor and common sense, between the history of the word and its current usage. *Happiness* ambiguously represented the ideal life and, at the same time, banal aspects of everyday life.

Happiness and well-being

It was in view of this tension, and the perception that happiness remained acutely relevant for people, that researchers such as Ed Diener approached this theme in the 1980s. There was a perception, particularly in the United States, that the utilitarian failure had been surpassed and complex themes such as happiness could be scientifically studied (Skinner, 1972: 196). And there were several reasons for this enthusiasm: statistical analyses already had computers capable of performing multidimensional calculations (Anderson, 1958); large-scale research on happiness had accumulated results and allowed for important correlations (Wilson, 1967); and devices such as the electroencephalograph made possible the assessment of sensations, avoiding linguistic complexity (Davies, 2016: 32).

In any case, Diener (1984) seemed to understand that the solution to the tension was not only instrumental but also ontological. After all, happiness remained complex and ambiguous as an object. As a solution, then, the author performed what we might metaphorically call 'semantic surgery', in which well-being played a fundamental role.

In order to do his research, Diener (1984: 543) needed an object that was both clearly delimited and socially relevant, and happiness clearly met only the relevance criterion. With that, instead of joining the ancient effort to delimit happiness, Diener opted to invest in another concept, well-being. First, the term *well-being* appeared to be quite malleable and, consequently, definable: it was little used in the common sense (Warr, 2007: 3–4), and its central meaning (existing or being well) was broad enough to be associated with both concrete themes, like physical health, and abstract ones, like the relationship with God. Second, *well-being* and *happiness* were semantically close, as both dealt with desirable aspects of life. It was this proximity that enabled Diener (1984) to 'surgically' transport the relevance of *happiness* to *well-being*.

But how to transfer the relevance from one to the other without *well-being* ending up contaminated by the complexity of *happiness*? To reach this goal, three main strategies were (and have been) used: 1. The importance of *happiness* is carried over to *well-being* whenever these words are used as synonyms, or when it is stated that the latter is the scientific version of the former (Jebb *et al.*, 2020: 293). 2. On the other hand, the complexity of *happiness* is kept away from *well-being* whenever a clear boundary is drawn between them (Seligman, 2011), especially when *happiness* is reduced to its everyday meaning. It is not uncommon for both strategies to be used in the same work, as Diener (1984) did.

3. The third strategy involves reorganizing the way the history of happiness is told. It is noteworthy that, in his seminal work, Diener (1984: 543–4) did just that in the way he presented the findings from his literature review. He presented a variety of definitions of *happiness*, but did not delve into the reflections that led to these definitions, or their relationship with the historical contexts they belonged to. Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, for

example, was characterized as a 'normative standard against which people's lives can be judged' (ibid.: 543), which ignored the complexity of Aristotle's idea of ethics, and Diener also asserted that this 'did not mean that virtue leads to feelings of joy', which was incorrect (Aristotle, 1962: 1104b21–4). Furthermore, the term was given so little importance in Diener's historical account of happiness that he neglected to mention almost any famous thinkers, such as Epicurus, Cicero, or Saint Augustine. On one of the rare occasions when he did mention these figures, he mistakenly wrote that the quotation 'No man is happy who does not think himself so' was from Marcus Aurelius (Diener, 1984: 543) instead of Publius Syrus (1856: 53, Saying 584).

Hence, Diener (1984) divided the history of happiness into two parts: an erratic and confused first part, referred to as the history of happiness; and a second part, more recent, linear, and clearly defined, that selectively grouped elements that reinforced his arguments, framed as the history of well-being. To help with this, Diener grouped together works that investigated objects with different names and definitions as part of a 'coherent' field of well-being research, and even referred to the objects studied in these cases as well-being. This was most glaring when he changed the object addressed by Jeremy Bentham from happiness/felicity to well-being.

Diener's 'semantic surgery' was so successful that later criticism from researchers such as Ryff (1989) and Ryan and Deci (2001) did not touch the word used or its foundations, but focused only on superficial aspects of the theory. In a later overview of his work, Diener wrote in a celebratory tone that his 1984 article had become a 'classic' and that he had been responsible for popularizing the study of the subject among psychologists (Diener, 2009: 4).

How rigorous is it to replace *happiness* with *well-being*?

Discussing the rigor of word substitution implies contrasting arguments for and against it. But it is worth emphasizing that substitution is not subordinated to this rigorous analysis, since substitution can happen in spite of it. In the case of the present analysis, we are dealing with a substitution (from *happiness* to *well-being*) that already happens widely and is, as Bakhtin wrote, evidence of cultural transformation (Volosinov, 1986).

Diener's (1984) formulation of well-being resonated with the zeitgeist of psychology in the United States. Limiting happiness to what could be measured was consistent with the country's recent historical-cultural trajectory: the definition of *happiness* in Webster's dictionary, the text of the Declaration of Independence, survey questions, advertising practices, and recent recommendations from Aristotle's translators. The justification, therefore, for substituting well-being for happiness can be seen as an obvious step in the long and complex historical evolution of happiness. If feeling good has become the most important part of the meaning of happiness, why not limit scientific investigation to feeling itself? Furthermore, if the history of happiness encompasses a wide range of terms, such as those explored here, could *well-being* not be understood as a new term to be added to the most recent page of this story?

In this regard, we have been able to identify six main arguments in favor of replacing the word *happiness* with *well-being*: 1. The etymological root of *happiness*, related to luck, is far removed from the scientific interest in the word. 2. *Happy* and *happiness*

are used erratically in their everyday senses, and, in most cases, they are distanced from the philosophical tradition of the words. 3. The history of *happiness*, considerably plural, makes it difficult to attribute a scientific status to the word. 4. There is an accumulation of academics questioning the classic translation of *eudaimonia* as 'happiness', and even suggesting that 'well-being' would be a better translation. 5. Definitions of *happiness*, as in Webster's dictionary, now emphasize the dimension of feeling good, already very close to what can be understood as the 'being' well of *well-being*. 6. It is the individual's particular universe that would allow a rigorous quantitative assessment.

On the other hand, the history of happiness covered in this article allows us to elaborate a number of counterarguments: 1. When we talk about common usage or dictionary meanings of the word, *happiness* is reduced to a synchronic analysis, disregarding a large part of its history and the linguistic connections that exist between different times and civilizations (Saussure, 1959). 2. In turn, reducing *happiness* to the literalness of its etymological root implies ignoring that this 'luck' originally had a much deeper meaning. 3. If the synchronic analysis of the word were combined with its historical analysis, it would be possible to perceive the semantic depth of *happiness*, even to the point of justifying the classic translation of *eudaimonia*. As we have proposed before (Sewaybricker, 2017), mentions of *happiness* refer to the best way to live, regardless of whether they deal more specifically with pleasures, virtues, reason, or the divine. Stated differently, when the word *happiness* is used to mean 'pleasant sensations', there is an indication of something beyond the pleasurable sensation; it also indicates that pleasurable sensations are central to what is understood to be the best way to live. Understanding that the meaning of *happiness* is not restricted to the explicit would allow us to understand that the contemporary 'happiness' of the United States is a product of cultural change that has taken place over almost two centuries – a process in which the idea of the 'best way to live' has turned into something individual, graduated, and easily perceived (Alexandrova, 2017; Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008).

4. Thus, it can be said that the individual's perception is part of the semantic field of *happiness*, but it cannot be said that happiness is reducible to perception. 5. The substitution proposed by Diener (1984) considers *well-being* as a *tabula rasa*: its common usage and its academic tradition are ignored in favor of a scientific construction. 6. However, a brief reflection on the history of well-being (as welfare) highlights an important distinction between the two terms: if *happiness* is about the best life, *well-being* is about the good life.

This last point deserves to be explored further. Although semantically close, there is a substantial difference between the best life and the good life. To reflect on what is best, it is necessary to compare and rank variables, in addition to considering their relational and circumstantial effects. To reflect on the good life, an isolated analysis of variables and an understanding of their general quality are enough. For example, while optimism is generally perceived as good and part of a good life, a 'best life' analysis would require an understanding of specific relationships and contexts. After all, in certain circumstances, optimism can make someone passive in the face of injustice (Lomas and Ivtzan, 2016).

Overall, the justification for substituting *happiness* with *well-being* is fragile, as it does not identify a paradox that is produced when both terms come together. This paradox even makes the rigorous investigation of well-being unfeasible; in other words, for the investigation of well-being to prosper as desired, the object must be especially simple

(see Diener, 1984: 543). On the other hand, the importance that the term *well-being* borrows from *happiness* is not the result of the latter's superficiality, but precisely of its complexity in dealing with the 'best way to live'. *Well-being* needs to be a synonym of *happiness* to motivate its study and also to distinguish itself from *happiness* in order to be researched as desired.

Final considerations

Two main problems arise from substituting the term *happiness* with *well-being*. The first is the distortion of the rich history of happiness. As exemplified in Diener (1984), this would be a requirement for achieving a rigorously measurable object. The history of happiness in philosophy, being too diverse, became a history of disconnected ideas, synthesized in the erratic and superficial use of the word in its common sense. On the other hand, the new history of happiness as well-being, by cherry-picking data and altering words, has become a one-dimensional history of progressive development (ibid.). In fact, it is this one-dimensional characteristic that makes the science of well-being alien to criticism and reflections on performativity and power dynamics (Ahmed, 2010). The second problem concerns the confusion between different objects: the 'best life' and the 'good life'. As these are not differentiated in psychological research, reflection on the 'best life' might be inadvertently restricted to the simple accumulation of variables perceived as 'good' in general.

In line with the aspects presented here, we contend that both terms, *happiness* and *well-being*, should be treated as distinct objects in psychology. After all, distorting an object of investigation to adjust it to methodological desire seems lax. *Happiness*, with its complex history and ontology, may well represent a scientific tradition unsuited to this simplification, making it better suited, for example, to approaches and methods that are already traditional in social psychology (see Ahmed, 2010; Willig and Rogers, 2017).

Despite the criticisms made here, well-being, in the way it has been treated, is an object that is indeed relevant. This relevance, however, should not, or need not, be 'taken' from happiness. The sociological, economic, and political tradition of welfare, of promoting the good life (often in the form of what government should provide for a decent life; Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, 2009), is relevant in its own right. It even has important points of dialogue with the history of happiness, such as its development in the 1800s in the work of utilitarians.

There is opportunity, as Raibley (2012) suggested, to explore this other history and justification for research on well-being, considering it as research on the good life and distinguishing it from research on the best life. In this sense, *happiness* and *well-being* would be seen as terms that come close to and can complement each other, but can neither replace nor be considered part of each other. They would be, as Raibley wrote, conceptually, metaphysically, and empirically distinct (ibid.: 1106).

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