

Why personal wellbeing is good for the nation's health

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Around the world, wellbeing is taking centre stage in policy-making and the measurement of national success. Supported by a proliferation of research revealing the positive outcomes of wellbeing in areas such as health, work and productivity, prosocial behaviour and volunteering, promoting wellbeing is also now being seen as a route to other outcomes for a strong society and economy.



The rise of wellbeing

Wellbeing has been the subject of a great deal of interest and research over the last few decades. A growing number of countries have adopted national wellbeing surveys, not only in places such as the UK¹ and Italy² but also in less wealthy countries from Chile³ to Bhutan.⁴ At the same time, international surveys have also been developed such as the European Social Survey and the Gallup World Poll allowing cross-country comparisons. Making use of these, and other data, the academic literature on wellbeing has boomed, with thousands of peer-reviewed papers and a number of dedicated journals on wellbeing.⁵

Perhaps most importantly, there have been concerted efforts to bring wellbeing into policy-making. The UK has been one of the leaders in this regard. The UK government now requires departments to report on how their policies will improve wellbeing, and has set up a What Works Centre for Wellbeing⁶ to feed research into policy. A dedicated All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics was established in 2009 and has recently published an enquiry into the policy implications of wellbeing.⁷ Outside of government, a number of policy reports have been produced,⁸ including the results of a Commission chaired by former UK Cabinet Secretary Lord Gus O'Donnell.⁹

The role of wellbeing in policy

It would be a mistake to see the rise of interest in wellbeing as just another set of evidence to feed into the policy-making process. Rather, wellbeing has the potential to fundamentally challenge the way in which policy is conceived.

Most people would agree that one of the key aims of government should be to promote the good life: a life which has meaning and in which people feel happy. In short, a life of high wellbeing. However, rather than focusing on achieving wellbeing, most countries have prioritised economic growth and used GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as the primary outcome to assess whether a country is failing or succeeding. The assumption is that promoting economic growth is the best way to promote wellbeing. However, the data suggests otherwise. In recent decades, the relationship between economic growth and wellbeing is not as close as might be expected. For example, Hungary is richer per capita than Poland, and yet life satisfaction is 1.3 points lower on a 10 point scale, while Denmark, which often scores highest in Europe on wellbeing, has lower GDP than Ireland or the Netherlands.¹⁰



Strong social networks and personal relationships play an important role in wellbeing, as do other measures of social capital, for example volunteering and membership of organisations

As a result, there has been an increased focus on the need for an alternative, more nuanced set of indicators which measure the things that really matter.^{11 12} Unsurprisingly, wellbeing has come to the forefront in such debates. In September 2009, the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress convened by the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, advocated a shift “from a ‘production-oriented’ measurement system to one focused on ... wellbeing.”¹³ The South Asian nation Bhutan famously claimed that its government would prioritise ‘gross national happiness’¹⁴, the OECD have developed a Better Life Index,¹⁵ and the devolved government in Wales is developing its own alternative indicators of the ‘Well-being of Future Generations’.

What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing can be defined as the extent to which an individual or group experiences their life as going well, based on experiencing positive emotions and meeting basic psychological needs. Many factors such as the availability of employment, access to personal space and social cohesion have an impact on individuals’ subjective wellbeing. Therefore, wellbeing may be best thought of as a dynamic process, emerging from the way in which people interact with the world around them.

The studies described here use a range of measures, including overall evaluations of life, happy or positive feelings or cheerfulness. These measures all refer to different aspects of wellbeing, broadly defined. It may be that some of these states or emotions relate to drivers and outcomes in different ways, but all are included in this paper to provide an overview of the evidence in relation to wellbeing.

How can wellbeing be improved?

Decades of research have identified a number of personal, social and economic variables that are associated with wellbeing.¹⁶ Strong social networks and personal relationships play an important role, and other measures of social capital, for example volunteering, membership of organisations and social trust also show an association with wellbeing. Having a good income and being employed are associated with higher wellbeing, while being in debt is bad for wellbeing. Both physical and mental health are also strong predictors of wellbeing.

The bulk of the research has traditionally been cross-sectional which, while it can find associations, can’t identify whether these factors are causal drivers of wellbeing.¹⁷ However, an increasing number of longitudinal studies, charting two variables over time, are beginning to provide more evidence of a causal relationship.^{18 19 20}



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What benefits can result from wellbeing?

While most of the literature focuses on wellbeing as an outcome, an increasing body of research has examined the effects of wellbeing on other outcomes. Studies have explored how increasing wellbeing may improve outcomes in health, work and communities.

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has developed a theoretical model that helps to explain this process. Building on a variety of evidence she suggests that, while negative emotions such as fear or anger prompt narrow, survival-oriented behaviours, positive emotions broaden our awareness, encouraging us to seek and experience new opportunities, which in turn build personal resources. For example, joy may lead to playfulness, physical exercise and skills acquisition. Interest may lead to exploration, and knowledge acquisition.^{21 22} If such personal resources are increasing across a population in the way described by this theory, they are likely, in turn, to support improvements in community and society-level outcomes. For example, improved productivity and quality of work can strengthen our economy, while reduced unemployment and illness can reduce pressures on public finances, and prosocial behaviour can have a range of benefits for the communities in which we live. This can be understood as a positive cycle, as in the framework shown here.



A theoretical model of the cycle from personal wellbeing to a stronger society and economy



A review and meta-analysis of 150 longitudinal and experimental studies found compelling evidence of a positive effect of wellbeing on a range of other health outcomes

The effect of wellbeing on other outcomes

Life expectancy and health

There is increasing evidence that wellbeing leads to a number of positive health outcomes. This is best established in the case of length of life, with a number of longitudinal studies finding relatively large effects of wellbeing on life expectancy.^{23 24 25 26 27} One review of 30 longitudinal studies reported that the effect of wellbeing on life expectancy is equivalent in size (though opposite in direction) to that of smoking, though this effect was found in healthy populations only.²⁸ Studies have been conducted in a wide range of contexts. For example, one study looked at the diaries of Catholic nuns, written at an average age of 22. After analysing the diaries for their emotional content, they found nuns with more positive content were more likely to be alive six decades later.²⁹

Not only does wellbeing lead to longer lives, but it also seems to lead to healthier lives. A review and meta-analysis of 150 longitudinal and experimental studies in 2007 found compelling evidence of a positive effect of wellbeing on a range of other health outcomes as well as life expectancy,³⁰ and a number of different studies have been conducted since then providing further evidence. For example, one longitudinal study found that people with positive feelings later reported lower levels of pain,³¹ a finding supported by experimental studies.³² One study also suggested that wellbeing interventions can reduce depression,³³ and a review of longitudinal studies found that wellbeing predicted improved cardiovascular health.³⁴ A further study examined the physiological impact of psychological states by giving students a small, standardized puncture wound and testing how long it took to heal. During the examination period, wounds took an average of three days longer to heal compared to the summer vacation.³⁵

There are a number of hypotheses for how wellbeing might lead to better health. For example, there is some evidence that positive emotions may reduce stress or protect against the negative physiological effects of stress.^{36 37} There is also some evidence that positive feelings may directly improve the performance of the immune system.³⁸ In one study, authors suggest that positive feelings help people to cope with and adjust to pain.³⁹ Alternatively, it is possible that the relationship could be due to those with higher wellbeing demonstrating better health behaviours such as refraining from smoking and alcohol⁴⁰ or adherence to medication.⁴¹ A further study found that differences in social networks seemed to explain the relationship between wellbeing and life expectancy, which is consistent with the independent evidence that wellbeing may lead to stronger relationships (see below).⁴² It is likely that a number of different causal mechanisms are in play. It is important to note, however, that the relationship cannot just be explained through low wellbeing being bad for health; studies suggest that the positive effect of high wellbeing on health is in fact stronger than the negative effect of low wellbeing.⁴³



Those who had higher wellbeing at age 18 had higher occupational attainment, more autonomy at work and more financial independence at age 26

Employment and income

Two outcomes of importance to many people are employment and income, and the evidence also suggests that wellbeing can have an effect on both of these. A longitudinal study found that people who were more cheerful when leaving college were less likely to be unemployed, and had higher incomes 19 years later.⁴⁴ Similarly, in one Russian panel study, people who were happier in 1995 had higher incomes, and were less likely to be unemployed in 2000.⁴⁵ A further study suggests that if someone who is happy does become unemployed, they are more likely to re-enter work than their less happy peers.⁴⁶

Productivity and quality of work

A variety of research provides evidence for the hypothesis that happy workers are also more productive. There is now quite robust cross-sectional evidence from large data sets that wellbeing and productivity are associated.^{47 48 49} One review found that this relationship was backed up in longitudinal and experimental studies.⁵⁰ For example, one study asked employees to rank themselves on a series of questions designed to measure different aspects of happiness and wellbeing. Three and a half years later their administrative officers evaluated their performance at work. Those who rated themselves happier at the start of the study were marked higher than their less happy colleagues on work facilitation, goal emphasis and team building, although the results only held for some measures of happiness, and not all.⁵¹ Other studies have found that positive feelings predict reduced absenteeism five months later,⁵² and that those who had higher wellbeing at age 18 had higher occupational attainment, more autonomy at work, and more financial independence at age 26, compared to their less happy peers.⁵³

A more recent set of experimental studies provides further evidence of a causal link between happiness and productivity.⁵⁴ In three related experiments, the researchers randomly selected individuals into two groups and induced positive feelings in one group by asking them to watch a comedy clip or providing them with free fruit, chocolate and drinks in the workplace. They found that this group had 12% greater productivity than the group who had not watched comedy or received free food.

Encouragingly, there are signs that companies may be recognising the positive effects of wellbeing in the workplace on performance.⁵⁵ One study even suggested that companies had increased their efforts to promote employee wellbeing in the workplace since the recession.⁵⁶

One experimental study pointed to a possible explanation for this relationship. The results suggested that people induced to feel happy set higher goals for themselves, and persist at a difficult task for longer.⁵⁷ The authors conclude that "The high expectations that happy employees set for themselves can produce self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus, happy people's optimistic and self-efficacious thoughts, along with the superior performance that they demonstrate, are instrumental in career advancement and, ultimately, in career success."⁵⁸



One study found that not only does volunteering increase wellbeing, but those with higher wellbeing were also more likely to go on to invest more hours in volunteering

Friendly, prosocial and cooperative behaviour

A review of longitudinal and experimental studies found that people with higher wellbeing, or who were induced into a better mood, were more sociable and extrovert, and more likely to express a liking for a stranger.⁵⁹ For example, one study examined the emotional facial expressions in women's college yearbook pictures, and found that those who expressed happier moods scored higher at ages 43 and 52 on an 'affiliation scale' which measured characteristics such as being warm, understanding, pleasant and affectionate.⁶⁰

There is also some evidence that happier people may engage in more prosocial behaviour - that is, behaviour that helps other people. One longitudinal study found that not only does volunteering increase wellbeing, but those with higher wellbeing were also more likely to go on to invest more hours in volunteering, suggesting a bi-directional relationship.⁶¹ A review of experimental evidence also found that inducing positive emotions is associated with a number of cooperative behaviours, including volunteering, donating blood and making a charitable contribution.⁶² For example, one study found that participants who had been given an unexpected gift and exposed to warm-white light increased the amount of time they were willing to donate as unpaid volunteers.⁶³

The review also found evidence that people with higher levels of positive emotion are more likely to deal with negotiations through collaboration and cooperation rather than through avoidance or competition, and to make more concessions during these negotiations.⁶⁴ In another study, the researchers tested people's levels of cooperation in a number of games in which they had to decide how much money to give away in various scenarios. They found that those who used a higher number of positive words, indicating a better mood, were more likely to be generous and cooperative.⁶⁵

Pro-environmental behaviour

A relatively new area of research is beginning to examine the relationship between wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviour. One cross-sectional study (of the kind that tells us about associations between two variables at one point in time), found slightly contradictory results. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey, they found that people with higher self-reported life satisfaction were more likely to be concerned about species extinction, though they were less likely to express concern about depletion of the ozone layer.⁶⁶ Another study in the US found that people with higher subjective wellbeing demonstrated higher levels of ecologically responsible behaviour.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, even if an association were to exist, the relationship may not be causal. For example, the US study found that the association could be explained by people's intrinsic values and also their levels of mindfulness, suggesting that rather than wellbeing leading to ecologically responsible behaviour, it might be that a third variable leads to both.



Research suggests that as people feel happier, they build stronger relationships, contribute to a stronger society and are more successful in their own lives. This in turn contributes to their happiness and the circle continues.

Conclusion

There is now a wide range of research on the benefits of wellbeing. While establishing causation is notoriously difficult, taken together, the variety of different measures, outcomes and methods provide a strong basis for the case that wellbeing is a cause, not just an effect, of other positive outcomes.

It is notable that many of the drivers of wellbeing (income, volunteering, health) are the same as those which research suggests can also be improved by higher wellbeing itself. It is likely that this points to a bi-directional relationship. In this way, wellbeing may prompt a virtuous circle; as people feel happier, they build stronger relationships, contribute to a stronger society and are more successful in their own lives. This in turn contributes to their happiness, and the circle continues.

Clearly, however, these relationships are complex and further research will provide a clearer picture. Furthermore, some of the original studies are now a number of decades old, and may not adhere to the latest standards in robust research. The collection of data, both on a national and international scale, as well as data related to specific interventions, is crucial in building up a clearer picture of these relationships. Further in-depth understanding will be invaluable to individuals, organisations and policy-makers interested in using wellbeing as a force for social good.

About the authors

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