

Comment



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People in middle-income nations often report higher levels of meaning and relationship satisfaction than do individuals in high-income ones.

Why we need to measure people's well-being – lessons from a global survey

Tyler J. VanderWeele & Byron R. Johnson

Greater insights into what makes people happy, secure and hopeful will make for a better world.

Flourishing – a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good – should be the goal of people and nations everywhere^{1,2}. As well as encompassing personal experiences of happiness, health, meaning, pro-sociality, relationships and financial security, flourishing extends to strong communities and good environments.

Yet, for something so central to all our lives, research efforts on flourishing have, so far, been woefully inadequate. It's not entirely for lack of trying. It's hard to build infrastructure to collect data nationally, let alone globally, on so many aspects of people's lives. And there are many challenges in how to analyse such

data meaningfully so that they can be used to inform policies.

There's no single question that can be asked to evaluate well-being³. For example, economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP) don't tell us how people in a given country are faring – loneliness, societal division and meaninglessness can be rife even in the richest countries^{2,4}. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁵ can support general drivers of well-being, such as public health and access to water and energy. But they don't include subjective personal assessments of how purposeful or hopeful people are.

To get policies on the right track to help

people flourish, governments should set up systems for collecting robust data on their citizens' well-being. Rigorous research needs to be undertaken to track populations and guide our understanding of the determinants of flourishing. Neither will be easy.

As a first step, here we highlight early results from a large multinational survey – the Global Flourishing Study² (GFS) – that has collected data from more than 200,000 individuals in 22 countries, representing about half of the world's population. We call on governments around the globe to step up and do more.

Five challenges

Collection of global data on flourishing is hindered by five factors.

Multiple dimensions. First, if flourishing consists of all aspects of life, the list of what potentially to measure is endless. Moreover, happiness, meaning, relationship quality, income and health are not all perfectly correlated. For example, people in high-income countries tend to evaluate their quality of life as higher but their meaning of life lower than do those in lower-income nations^{2,4,6}. Extensive assessments are needed to understand these nuances, yet no single survey can cover everything.

To take a general look, the World Happiness Report's⁷ global ranking is based on one question from a data-collection survey called the Gallup World Poll, which uses the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril Ladder). The question asks: "Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?" But a study published last year has indicated that this question often prompts people to think more about status and money than other aspects of well-being, such as relationships⁸.

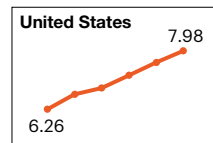
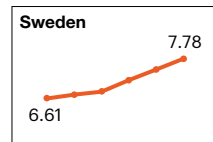
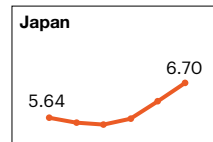
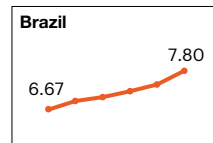
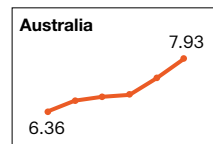
Furthermore, a single question cannot unveil the subtleties and different dynamics across various aspects of well-being. For example, in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, people's perceptions of happiness, health and financial security decreased more than did those of meaning and social connectedness⁹. Yet few surveys look beyond questions of life evaluation and satisfaction.

Objective and subjective elements. Assessments of flourishing must cover both the objective state of affairs around a person's life

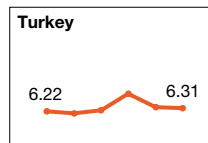
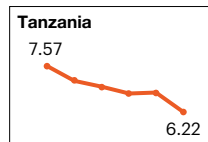
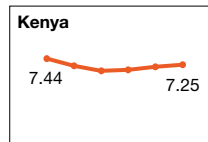
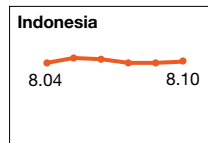
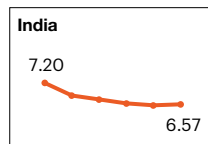
FLOURISHING BY AGE

In a global survey, people in various countries and regions reported different rates of well-being, on a scale of 0 to 10, by age group*.

Countries and regions in which older generations report highest flourishing



Countries and regions with various flourishing patterns that vary across age group



*These are a selection of regions to illustrate patterns; see Supplementary information for the full set (go.nature.com/4trjvd9).

(their income, environment, job and so on) and the person's subjective sense of well-being (how happy, secure and connected they feel, for example).

The former is more routinely measured, with national data often available on income, literacy, employment, life expectancy and a host of other objective measures. The latter is less frequently explored, but crucially important. Two people can spend the same amount of time with others in a work setting or school, and one might feel connected and the other lonely. More research is needed around these

“More attention needs to be given to improving the well-being of young people.”

subjective aspects to more fully understand human experience.

Another difficult question is how to prioritize objective versus subjective elements when designing policy. There is plenty of evidence that objective elements affect subjective elements, and vice versa¹⁰. For example, happy individuals are more successful in relationships, income and work performance. But there is no definitive way to judge these trade-offs between the objective and the subjective. Researchers still need to examine whether targeting policies towards objective well-being ultimately has a larger effect on subjective well-being, or the reverse.

Translation and interpretation. In any global survey, people who live in different countries and who speak different languages will have varying understandings of the questions. Words are translated and interpreted differently in different contexts.

Even perceptions on numbered response scales can vary by country. For example, people in some East Asian countries might prefer to report towards the middle of the scale⁶, because extremes can seem boastful or undesirable.

Researchers need to know: are we really measuring the same thing? Are results comparable across countries? If they are not, well-being rankings⁷ must be interpreted cautiously. A better understanding of differences in interpretation through cognitive interviews¹¹ can provide greater context, help to situate results and further increase awareness of limitations.

Differing priorities. Different societies might value autonomy, relationships and financial prosperity to varying degrees. Any set of questions necessarily entails settling on a set of values that might not be equally applicable to all. Autonomy might be given more emphasis in Western societies. Balance, peace and harmony, although arguably universally valued, might be given more emphasis in Eastern cultures¹². We should respect the priorities and values of each nation and culture. This, however, does make standardized data collection more challenging and requires a broader set of measures.

Methodological challenges. As well as the obstacles we've already mentioned, researchers struggle to obtain longitudinal data over time in order to discern causation, to achieve adequate sample sizes and to obtain data that can act as controls in discerning true drivers of flourishing. Association is not causation,

and longitudinal data from the same group of linked individuals over time is needed to try to separate cause from effect. Controlling for confounding factors requires yet more data. Therefore, large sample sizes are essential to help to tease out associations.

Researchers must also pay attention to issues around measurement. With self-reported survey answers, social-desirability biases (respondents wanting to give more attractive answers) and self-deception biases (with respondents thinking of themselves more highly than they ought to) come into play and can vary by country. Collecting data on more-objective assessments of well-being can partially counter these problems.

A world-wide perspective

The GFS² is an ambitious project that is trying to address some of these challenges, through including large sample sizes, a wide range of questions, nationally representative samples to understand dynamics at the country level and longitudinal data collection. It is collecting data annually for five years, from 2022 to 2027. The survey was shaped by input from scholars around the world and includes 109 questions, including ones on community, economics, politics, childhood experiences and spirituality or religion^{2,13}. The data are freely available through the Center for Open Science (see www.cos.io/gfs). The first wave (mostly 2023 data) was released in February 2024, and the second wave (2024 data) was released in April this year.

Insights that have emerged include the relation between age and flourishing², such that flourishing (in terms of happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships and financial security) tends to increase with age in many countries (including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Germany, Mexico, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States). This highlights how more attention needs to be given to improving the well-being of young people (see ‘Flourishing by age’).

We have also found evidence of the importance of religion and spirituality in flourishing. When pooled across countries, flourishing was higher for those who attend a religious service more than weekly, by nearly a full point on a scale of 0–10, than for those who never attend (7.7 compared with 6.9)².

People in different countries are flourishing in different ways. Those in high-income countries often report higher levels of life satisfaction and financial security than do those in low- and middle-income countries^{2,7}. But those in middle-income nations often report higher levels of meaning, relationship quality or pro-social behaviours that benefit others, such as caring and volunteering, than do people in high-income nations^{2,4}. For example, of the 22 GFS countries, Sweden reported the second-highest life evaluation, but came in 19th for meaning. This raises important questions as

to how nations can achieve economic development without compromising people’s sense of meaning, relationships and pro-sociality.

In spite of these insights, the GFS’s limitations highlight the need for further country-specific and policy-relevant data-collection efforts. First, the GFS study covered only 22 countries, leaving 173 unrepresented. Second, questions were not tailored to each country and context, nor were they selected to reflect each country’s central priorities and cultural values. Third, questions can be interpreted in different ways across contexts^{6,11}. Fourth, although the questions spanned a wide

“People in different countries are flourishing in different ways.”

range of issues, there was only a single question (rather than many) on broad concepts such as gratitude, peace and hope – limiting the scope, validity and reliability of the survey. And finally, although the survey is being repeated, the sample will, through attrition, inevitably gradually lose its representative nature over time.

Putting it into practice

All societies need high-quality flourishing data collection, focused on each nation’s and culture’s priorities, throughout the world. Here, we call on countries around the globe to advance this work.

Governments should begin at least annual, nationally representative data collection on the aspects of flourishing that they deem most important for their country and context. For example, as part of its Annual Population Survey, in 2011 the United Kingdom began collecting data on life satisfaction, worthwhile activities, happiness and anxiety. Similar, but more extensive, data collection would help nations to understand several matters: what is going well and what is not; who needs help and in what ways; how things are changing over time; and what is improving and what is not.

Such survey efforts would more firmly bring considerations of flourishing into policy^{14,15}. Through repeated cross-sectional samples, data collection could overcome the GFS limitation of attrition. Flourishing survey questions tailored to each country’s needs and priorities would likewise overcome the non-tailored constraints of the GFS.

When sufficient resources are available, countries should also begin establishing their own nationally representative longitudinal studies that involve the same individuals. Such studies are needed not only to understand the distribution of flourishing, but also to provide evidence as to its determinants, and what interventions and policy measures might help to promote flourishing and in what ways.

Although there is tremendous value in choosing well-being questions that are tailored to the needs, priorities and values of each society, there is also value in common measurements. The World Happiness Report has accomplished a remarkable achievement using a single life-evaluation question across more than 150 countries. Such common measurements could be expanded to other aspects of flourishing or flourishing indices¹.

One simple step would be to embed a question on meaning in the Gallup World Poll, such as: “Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?” (with response options: zero being not at all worthwhile and ten being completely worthwhile). This question has been used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in the UK Annual Population Survey, by a number of longitudinal cohort studies and at least once by the Gallup World Poll⁴.

More remains to be done. But if each country were to advance flourishing data collection, use and study, we would all be better able to meet the challenges we face.

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