

Searching for the Meaning of Community Well-Being

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Introduction

What do people want? What does genuine progress look like? How can government make people's lives better? These are the questions that governments around the world are becoming increasingly interested in and they are focusing on happiness and well-being for potential answers. Bhutan's gross national happiness index, the Canadian Index of Well-being, France's plans for national well-being measurement, Germany's international forum on well-being,¹ Italy's equitable and sustainable well-being project,² Korea's national policies centered on citizen happiness,³ US's plans for a national happiness index, and UK's national well-being index are just a few examples.

Interest in happiness and well-being are not new in academia. Economists, psychologists, and political scientists have built up an impressive amount of research on happiness and well-being. What *is* new in the political discourse is the desire to connect happiness and well-being to the local level through the term

¹ The international forum, "What matters to people—well-being and progress," took place on 5 June 2013 in Berlin, Germany.

² This project is led by the National Council for Economics and Labour and the Italian National Institute of Statistics. The first BES (benessere equo sostenibile) report is available in English at the following URL: http://www.misuredelbenessere.it/fileadmin/upload/Report_on_Equitable_and_Sustainable_Well-being_-_11_Mar_2013_-_Summary.pdf.

³ The current Park Geun Hye government has chosen citizen happiness as one of four keynote goals for national policies.

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community well-being (CWB). That is, even though national governments are speaking of happiness and well-being, they are emphasizing the local level as the stage wherein they can be realized. For example, the UK government has strongly encouraged local governments to become a lead partner in enhancing well-being (DETR 2000),⁴ the CWB Indicators Project in Australia was launched by the Local Government Association of Queensland, and many CWB measurement projects are managed by local governments.⁵

While CWB can be a useful concept for guiding recent efforts to connect policies to well-being (Kim and Lee 2013)—particularly in the context of community development policy and practice—there is still confusion about what it means. This lack of clear definition is problematic for at least two reasons. First, definitions matter a great deal in progress of scientific knowledge for how can one study something without a clear understanding of *what* he or she is trying to study? This is why any researcher begins the research process by defining his or her research topic. Any textbook begins by defining the concepts that are to be explained in a chapter and any legal documents have a long section of definitions. Without a clear definition of what we are studying, there can be little hope of expanding knowledge through collective efforts in the scientific community.

Second, the lack of a clear definition means the term will be of little use for policy decisions. Without a clear definition, policymakers may be talking about different ideas while using the same term and this can lead to a set of policies that completely counteract each other. Even after policy decisions are made, the different understandings of the word community well-being between policymakers and citizens may lead to public disenchantment and dissatisfaction. All of these possibilities come with large costs to public resources.

The confusion around definitions of CWB becomes obvious in the casual and widespread interchanging uses with other words such as happiness, life satisfaction, quality of life, and subjective well-being. While the synonymous use of these words in everyday life may be harmless, it presents a serious problem for academics and practitioners. If indeed these terms all mean the same thing, then different studies that claim to do something new lose their validity and we would all be better off using a single term for the sake of efficiency and efficacy.

This chapter addresses this issue to provide a solid grounding for exploring community well-being. Our main questioning starts with, what is CWB and how is it different from other similar terms? We tackle the first question of defining CWB in the next section by introducing a framework for reviewing previous definitions. The second question is addressed in part three where we compare and contrast CWB with happiness, quality of life, and individual well-being.

⁴ The Community Well-being Board has been established within the Local Government Association in the UK.

⁵ See Kim and Lee (2013) for examples of CWB measurements developed and utilized by local governments.

Definitions of Community Well-Being

What is CWB? Before looking at how the term has been defined in previous literature, we turn to a more linguistic approach to introduce a framework to guide our literature review. We focus on well-being first as the interest in CWB is grounded in the broader well-being literature.

The word “well-being” was first used as early as the 16th century but has become a buzzword of the 21st. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word as “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous.” However, the current usage of well-being seems to warrant replacing the word “or” with “and” since we do not describe a person who is merely happy, merely healthy, or merely prosperous as having a level of high well-being. Rather, the word “well-being” is used to express more than that. Scholars have often borrowed Aristotle’s *eudaemonia* as being the most similar concept. The Greek term *eudaemonia* consists of the words “*eu*” and “*daimon*,” meaning “good” and “spirit”, respectively. The entire term is most often translated as flourishing. Although some scholars have seen *eudaemonia* as a type of well-being, along with hedonia (Henderson and Knight 2012), we follow the work of other scholars that see *eudaemonia* as more closely related to the contemporary understanding of well-being, while hedonia is closer to that of happiness (Ryan et al. 2013).

Similar to well-being, community is also a word with various meanings. In fact, Hillery (1955) found ninety four definitions of community and even contradicting definitions among them. Nonetheless, the same study found that most definitions showed agreement on the following points: community refers to persons in social interaction within a geographic area who have one or more additional common ties (Hillery 1955). Fellin (2001) identified two major types of communities—geographic and functional—and noted that both types share a common characteristic of face-to-face communication, exchange, and interaction. Thus the most general definition of community seems to involve a type of social interaction among people. We interpret the word “community” in CWB as a modifier that distinguishes it from individual well-being or national well-being. That is, we use community to refer to a geographically bound group of people on a local scale who are subject to either direct or indirect interaction with each other.

This examination of CWB concepts in two parts (“community” and “well-being”) led us to the following framework for organizing previous definitions of CWB. The two terms in CWB can be used as characteristics for categorization. That is, the word “community” is related to the level of analysis and “well-being” is related to the scope of analysis. We combined these two elements as spectrums so that the “level of analysis” spectrum has individual and collective at either end, and the “scope of analysis” spectrum has partial and comprehensive at either end. Combining the two spectrums creates four quadrants: (1) collective, comprehensive; (2) collective, partial; (3) individual, partial; (4) individual, comprehensive. Figure 1 is a visual representation of this framework.

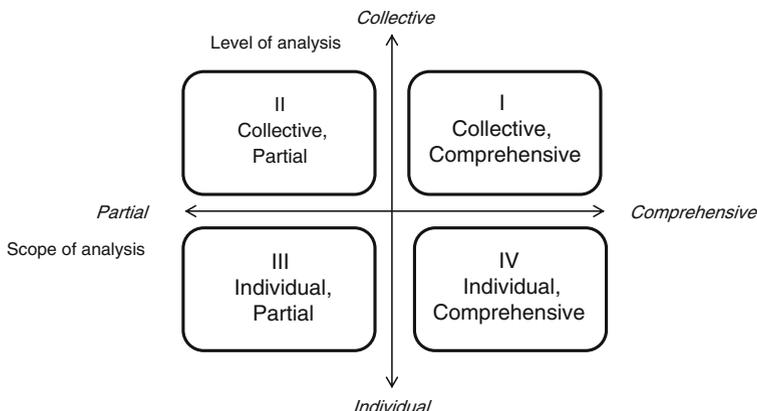


Fig. 1 Framework for analysis of previous community well-being definitions

An important note is although we have examined the term CWB in two parts—community and well-being—this does not mean that CWB is the simple sum of community and well-being. Rather, CWB is related to community on one hand and well-being on the other. It should also be noted that the scope may include several aspects such as domain (economic, natural, physical, political, social, etc.), quantity and/or quality, objective and/or subjective, and approaches (e.g. asset, capital, emotion, resource). Thus scope indicates how many aspects are included in the analysis. In our review of previous literature, we found that most definitions of CWB have only focused on the domain aspect of the scope of analysis. However, this result does not mean that the scope of CWB connotes only domain aspects.

Using the above framework, we analyzed the following literature found through searches in SociINDEX, ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts), Sociological Abstracts, and Google Scholar. We narrowed our review to literature that specifically use the term CWB and define it. Interestingly, we found that none of these studies defined CWB as limited to a narrow scope at an individual level (category III). Instead, most of the studies that use the definition of category III were labeled as quality of life studies and focused on the socioeconomic domain at the individual level.

The most limited definitions of CWB appear in quadrant IV. For example, Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006) defined CWB as consisting of physical, geographic, cultural, economic, political, and psychosocial environments where community members have their needs met. Although this definition acknowledges diverse factors of CWB it still focuses on the needs of individual members, locating it in category IV.

On the other hand, McHardy and O'Sullivan (2004) and Allensworth and Rochin (1996) focus on the socioeconomic needs of community. However, these definitions are also narrow in the sense that CWB is limited to socioeconomic conditions only. These definitions can be placed in category II.

A more holistic approach includes a variety of community factors, such as physical, psychological, political, social, cultural, and environmental. These are the definitions in category I. The City of Calgary (2010) defines CWB as incorporating economic, social, and physical well-being. Cox et al. (2010) takes an even more comprehensive approach by including economic, social, environmental, cultural and governance goals and priorities. Chanan (2002) also defines CWB as a multifaceted term while acknowledging the innate abstractness of the concept:

[community] [is] a number of people who have some degree of common identity or concerns often related to a particular locality or conditions ... a community is not a thing. It is a number of people who have repeated dealing with each other. When community is identifiable with a locality, CWB/the quality of community life is intimately connected with: how well that locality is functioning; how well that locality is governed; how the services in that locality are operating; and how safe, pleasant and rewarding it feels to live in that locality.

The Rural Assistance Information Network (2004) in Australia states that CWB is a concept that refers to an optimal quality of health community life, which is the ultimate goal of all the various processes and strategies that endeavor to meet the needs of people living together in communities. It encapsulates the ideals of people living together harmoniously in vibrant and sustainable communities, where community dynamics are clearly underpinned by 'social justice' considerations.

The most popular use of CWB combines quadrant I and IV, looking at both individual and collective levels. For example, Cuthill (2002) defines CWB as perceptions of life in a community and explains that "description or measurement of these perceptions takes into consideration both qualitative and/or quantitative data of natural, physical, financial, social and human capital which influence both citizen's and community well-being." Hay et al. (1996) focus more on the desires of citizens and define CWB as the fulfillment of the aspirations of different individuals and groups in society. Brasher and Wiseman (2008) and Kusel and Fortmann (1991) also identify the various conditions identified by individuals and the community as community well-being. Ribova (2000) sees the concept as a framework for community assessment that recognizes the psychological, cultural and social requirements of people, and their communities. The Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO 2009) of Canada also mentions diverse components at the individual and community level:

[the term CWB] includes a combination of abstract ideas and human actions...Concepts of community well-being may reflect the interests of individuals within a community and they may also reflect the interests of the collective of community interests. Concepts of well-being may encompass social, economic, spiritual and cultural factors, as well as individual health and security.

These previous interpretations and their respective category are summarized in Table 1.

Important points emerge from reviewing these previous definitions of CWB. First, although there are various definitions of CWB, they all refer to needs, desires, aspirations, or goals. Therefore the concept refers to what is necessary in people's

Table 1 Definitions of community well-being

Author	Definition	Category
Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006)	Physical, geographic, cultural, economic, political, and psychosocial environments where community members have their needs met	IV
Allensworth and Rochin (1996)	Socioeconomic well-being of communities	II
McHardy and O'Sullivan (2004)	Socioeconomic conditions of communities	II
Chanan (2002)	How well that locality is functioning; how well that locality is governed; how the services in that locality are operating; how safe, pleasant and rewarding it feels to live in that locality	I
City of Calgary (2010)	Incorporating economic, social, and physical well-being	I
Cox et al. (2010)	Economic, social, environmental, cultural and governance goals and priorities identified as important by a community, population group or society	I
Rural Assistance Information Network (2004)	Optimal quality of healthy community life ... that encapsulates the ideals of people living together harmoniously in vibrant and sustainable communities, where community dynamics are clearly underpinned by 'social justice' considerations	I
Cuthill (2002)	Perceptions of life in a community. Description or measurement of these perceptions takes into consideration both qualitative and/or quantitative data of natural, physical, financial, social and human capital which influence both citizen's and community well-being	IV + I*
Hay et al. (1996)	The fulfillment of aspirations of different individuals and groups in society	IV + I
Kusel and Fortmann (1991)	Economic, social, cultural and political components of a community in maintaining itself and fulfilling the various needs of its local residents	IV + I
Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) of Canada (2009)	Combination of abstract ideas and human actions...Concepts of community well-being may reflect the interests of individuals within a community and they may also reflect the interests of the collective of community interests. Concepts of well-being may encompass social, economic, spiritual and cultural factors, as well as individual health and security	IV + I

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Author	Definition	Category
Ribova (2000)	Framework for community assessment that recognizes the psychological, cultural, and social requirements of people and their communities	IV + I
Brasher and Wiseman (2008)	Combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfill their potential	IV + I

*IV + I: Combination of both “individual, comprehensive” and “collective, comprehensive”

lives as well as what is desirable. The inclusion of aspirations indicates that the factors of CWB may change as a community’s preferences change.

Second, CWB is a more comprehensive concept that includes environmental, physical, and political domains in comparison to the previously limited concepts of quality of life that tend to focus simply on the socioeconomic domain or even just economic growth. This is in line with the origin of social indicators that attempted to correct the imbalance of economic indicators. However, there are still definitions of CWB that are partial as they focus only on the individual level or socioeconomic factors (category II or IV).

Lastly, there is a tendency to conflate CWB with individual well-being as can be seen in the literature that combine quadrant IV and I. We see this to be problematic for the following two reasons. First, the use of CWB to refer to two concepts that can conflict with each other may lead to theoretical conflicts. For example, Lindsay (1995) points out that individual well-being and CWB can be in conflict with respect to automobile use and the natural environment. The use of automobiles may enhance individual well-being but the consequences of too many people using automobiles instead of public transportation results in greater carbon gas emission, greater consumption of petroleum, and thus lower CWB.

Second, the interchanging use of two concepts at different levels gives little direction for practical policy decisions. We see CWB as the most appropriate concept to guide local governments because it is both impractical and unrealistic for governments to focus on directly enhancing individual well-being. Just as individual well-being and CWB can conflict with each other, there can be multiple points of conflict among individual well-being in a society. Moreover, some scholars of happiness research argue happiness is an unalterable trait that have strong links to genetic makeup (Ebstein et al. 1996; Hamer 1996; Lykken and Tellegen 1996; Tellegen et al. 1988; Lieberman 1970). Thus the more practical course of action for governments is to enhance CWB that will hopefully enhance individual well-being. In other words, we can hypothesize a causal relationship between CWB and individual well-being. However, this relationship can only be conceptualized when individual well-being and CWB are identified as distinct concepts. Without this distinction, there is confusion about the direction of this



Fig. 2 Hypothetical relationship between individual well-being and community well-being

causal relationship since the cause and effect are seen as overlapping. Figure 1 is a visual explanation of this relationship (Fig. 2).

Based on these issues, we argue that although there are different definitions of CWB, the core idea of this concept is best represented by category I as a collective concept. By collective concept we mean that CWB is more than the sum of individual well-being. To be clear, we are not arguing that individual well-being and CWB have no relationship. In fact, they are closely related and we elaborate on the relationship between the two in the next section. Another key point is that this does not mean the measurement of CWB should not be solicited from individuals. After all, individuals are what make up a community and as Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006) argue CWB can be observed on an individual level, organization level, and community level.

Community Well-Being, Happiness, Quality of Life, Community Development, and Well-Being⁶: What's the Difference?

The previous section surveyed existing definitions of CWB. This section discusses the meaning of CWB by comparing and contrasting it with other related terms, such as happiness, quality of life, and individual well-being. As mentioned before, we see the interchanging use of these terms as cause for concern. However, the interchanging use is certainly understandable given the history of how these concepts emerged. The following is a brief description of that history.

⁶ The use of “well-being” alone most often refers to individual well-being, while other types or levels of well-being are modified with other words such as collective well-being, social well-being, and community well-being. We follow this convention of using well-being to refer to individual well-being.

The term CWB emerged in the midst of a larger movement called the social indicators movement. Large scale government involvement in citizen welfare began after World War II when the devastation of the World Wars pushed many national governments to initiate projects and policies focused on economic development. The use of gross domestic product became popular as *the* measure of progress. However, the shortcomings of economic indicators as the sole measure of progress soon sparked the social indicators movement in the 1960s. The movement was closely connected to the emergence of quality of life studies that emphasized social costs and quality, instead of mere quantity. By the 1980s, the social indicators movement briefly lost momentum as it was shadowed once again by enthusiasm for economic growth, but was revived in the 1990s as concerns of social justice, equity, and freedom increased.

Another strand of studies, called the happiness studies, began to take form in the 1970s with the well-known Easterlin Paradox⁷ (Easterlin 1974). Mostly economists and psychologists have searched for factors that influence, or do not influence, happiness with subjective well-being or life satisfaction data. These data are collected from surveys that ask respondents to rate their happiness or life satisfaction levels. They have most frequently used the term well-being interchangeably with happiness, life satisfaction, or subjective well-being and we also treat these three terms as being synonymous.

All of these terms have been used interchangeably and certainly share similar goals of “making society better.” But what are the differences? If there is no distinction among these terms than academics would be better off settling on a single term. The following discussion aims to show that there are indeed differences among these terms. The purpose is to arrive at a clearer understanding of CWB by distinguishing it from other terms that have previously been considered synonymous.

We begin with the most dissimilar pair and proceed to the more similar pair in the following order: CWB and happiness; well-being and quality of life; and finally CWB and well-being. For comparison, we focus on the various aspects of the scope of analysis such as how these concepts are measured, how they are conceptualized, and how they offer policy implications.

The first comparison is between CWB and happiness. In the previous section of this chapter we have seen that CWB refers to the fulfillment of the needs and desires of a community. How is happiness defined? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary happiness is “a state of contentment or a pleasurable or satisfying experience.” The key words used are content, pleasurable, and satisfying. In short, happiness is a concept that is connected to emotions and thus is heavily researched in the psychology sector. In terms of domain, happiness has focused mostly on the

⁷ This Paradox refers to the phenomenon in which increasing levels of wealth were not connected to increasing levels of happiness.

psychological domain while CWB encompasses diverse domains of cultural, economic, environmental, psychological, physical, political, and social. Economists have also studied happiness from a utilitarian perspective and thus the concept of happiness is focused on the quantitative level of positive emotions, rather than quality. In contrast, CWB is interested in both quantity and quality of its components.

Most happiness studies have treated happiness as synonymous with life satisfaction and subjective well-being to emphasize the emotional, personal characteristics of this concept (Veenhoven 2012). Thus measurements of happiness are more concerned with subjective⁸ evaluations on an individual level, while CWB encompasses both objective and subjective evaluations at the collective level.

As the definition indicates by the use of the word “state,” happiness is a more static concept. In contrast, CWB contains the word “being,” which indicates a more dynamic concept that is in motion and thus acknowledges and emphasizes the process towards an end goal. Conceptually, happiness takes an emotional approach while CWB takes an asset approach (e.g. practical efforts to measure CWB often include an asset mapping step).

For policy guidance, happiness aims to induce more positive emotions while CWB aims for more production, accumulation of assets and ultimately flourishing by realizing these community assets. The different goals that happiness and CWB suggest are reflections of their value judgment. That is, happiness as a concept is value-neutral and simply accepts that more positive emotion is desirable regardless of how this emotion is achieved. In contrast, CWB is a value-driven concept that makes implications of whether a certain factor is good or bad for CWB.

Next, we compare well-being and quality of life. Everyday usage and even some scholarly works seem to suggest that these two concepts are in fact the same thing (Galloway 2006). We argue here that these terms can be differentiated and warrant different names. Quality of life was popularized as a term that could correct the bias towards quantity, especially in terms of economic wealth. As such, the concept has emphasized measuring the quality of social and economic factors in an objective manner. In comparison, well-being focuses on both quantity and quality of its factors and incorporates both objective and subjective measurements. These characteristics are in line with the view that well-being is a more comprehensive concept than quality of life. One similarity for well-being and quality of life is the focus on individuals as the level of analysis. For example, Scott (2012) points out that quality of life has been promoted by neoliberal discourse as “belonging to autonomous individuals which could be enhanced in the market place.”

⁸ The comparison of quantity and quality should not be confused with that of objective and subjective. The former refers to the characteristic of an object while the latter concerns the method of evaluation. For example, a community’s medical service can be high in quantity (e.g. number of hospitals) but low in quality (e.g. patient satisfaction of doctor visits). The quantity of this aspect can be evaluated both objectively (e.g. comparison to the average number of hospitals in communities of comparable size) and subjectively (e.g. resident evaluation of the number of hospitals).

Similar to CWB, well-being is also a dynamic concept while quality of life is a more static concept. Quality of life is not focused on process but rather the current level of quality of life is adequate. Well-being also takes an asset approach as CWB, while quality of life takes a capital approach. We borrow the terms “asset” and “capital” from finance to illustrate the different emphasis on the “how to” enhance quality of life and well-being. Capital is the more narrow term that refers to a financial asset, such as cash that is required to produce goods⁹ while asset is a broader term that refers to things that have value in and of itself. Quality of life focuses on measuring the end-level of capital while well-being focuses on a person’s assets or potential that has value but perhaps has not been capitalized yet.

The different approaches also connect to the different end goals that quality of life and well-being suggest. Since quality of life is focused on objective measures of the qualitative aspects of life, it tends to focus on fulfilling any deficiencies in these aspects. In contrast, well-being focuses on the production, accumulation, and flourishing of individual potential. Moreover, since well-being is similar to Aristotle’s *eudaemonia* the end goal of flourishing is value-driven while quality of life is more value-neutral.

As previously mentioned, well-being and CWB share several basic characteristics. In terms of measurement, they both focus on quantity and quality of factors, and include both objective and subjective evaluations. In addition, they are both dynamic concepts that take an asset approach with implications for value-driven flourishing as the end goal. The distinguishing characteristic between these two concepts is the level of analysis. In other words, well-being is focused on the individual while CWB is a collective term. While this may be a simple difference, the mixing of these two concepts can be dangerous both theoretically and practically as we have examined in the previous section.

CWB is also deeply connected to community development as residents and local government alike are very concerned with this dimension. As discussed in chapter, “[Exploring the Intersection of Community Well-Being and Community Development](#)”, community development is defined as both a process and an outcome for across a range of considerations (physical, social, cultural, political, environmental, etc.). Community development builds on the concept of assets or capital in an area across all realms. Within community development, we can see the direct relationship to community well-being, as both a goal/outcome and processes of progressing towards desired states of well-being.

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of happiness, quality of life, well-being, community development, and CWB that have been discussed thus far.

⁹ As defined on www.investopedia.com.

Table 2 Comparison of community well-being and related concepts

	Community well-being	Happiness	Quality of life	(Individual) Well-being	Community development
Individual/Collective	Collective	Individual	Individual	Individual	Collective
Domain	Cultural, economic, environmental, social, physical, political	Psychological	Economic, social	Economic, social, physical, psychological	Cultural, economic, environmental, social, physical, political
Quantity/Quality	Both	Quantity	Quality	Both	Both
Objective/Subjective	Both	Subjective	Objective	Both	Both
Static/Dynamic	Dynamic	Static	Static	Dynamic	Dynamic
Approach	Asset	Emotion	Capital	Asset	Asset
Goal	Production; accumulation; flourishing	Induce positive emotion	Fulfillment of deficiency	Production; accumulation; flourishing	Production; accumulation; flourishing; fulfillment of deficiency
Value judgment	Value-driven	Value-neutral	Value-neutral	Value-driven	Either

Conclusion

CWB has become a buzzword in the policy world and researchers are trying to keep up with this popular interest. While there has been a considerable amount of research on the topic, many of these studies have been carried out without clarifying the meaning of CWB. Instead, there has been a casual interchanging use of CWB with happiness, quality of life, and individual well-being. We see this as a serious impediment to advancing the academic dialogue and use of CWB for policy guidance. The confusion around the concept limits hypothesizing and testing relationships between CWB and other terms as well as creating inefficiency in research and communication. As such, this chapter has sought to clarify the meaning of CWB by first surveying how the term has been defined in the past and by distinguishing it from happiness, quality of life, and individual well-being.

A survey of previous definitions of CWB showed that while there are several definitions, they emphasize needs and desires in common. In addition, most definitions of CWB were comprehensive, encompassing several domains such as social, economic, cultural, environmental, and political. We also found that many previous definitions of CWB have the tendency to conflate CWB with individual well-being and pointed out that this is problematic as there can be instances of individual well-being and CWB conflicting and the confusion that arises in conceptualizing the relationship between the two.

A comparison of CWB with happiness, quality of life, community development and well-being also shows that CWB is a more comprehensive concept. For example, CWB focuses on both quantity and quality of factors and utilizes both objective and subjective measurements. In contrast, happiness focuses solely on quantity and subjective measurements while quality of life focuses on quality and objective measurements. We also pointed out that CWB is a more dynamic concept that takes an asset approach and points to the value-driven goal of flourishing, much akin to community development.

Based on a conceptual and theoretical discussion of CWB, we proposed a definition of CWB that has a comprehensive scope at the collective level. However, there is still more work to be done because different communities can define CWB differently (NWMO 2009). For instance, in the previous section, we identified some aspects of the scope of CWB such various domains, quantity and/or quality, objective and/or subjective, and asset or capital approaches. Future studies of CWB may identify and include additional aspects, leading to more refined definitions of CWB.

These works on defining CWB should be accompanied by empirical research for the concept to be practically useful. For example, our proposed relationship between CWB and individual well-being can be tested in different contexts, and the influencing factors of CWB can be identified as well as the relationships among these factors. The combination of these theoretical and empirical works are both necessary to build a more sophisticated model of CWB.

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