

Abstract

Trends in multi-dimensional well-being over time.

Christopher Jacobi, Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

Theory. The positive psychology approach postulates mental health to be inherently multi-dimensional, and to consist of the tripartite domains of hedonic (affective, emotional and cognitive), psychological and social well-being. It is also often argued that the presence of positive mental health is not simply mirrored by the absence of mental disorders and illnesses. Despite these clear theoretical motivations, many studies have focused on only one or two dimensions at a time, rather than a holistic assessment of all dimensions from a longitudinal perspective. One key question in the field is how the different domains of mental health change over time. The present paper hence empirically investigates these assumptions with nationally representative household data of the United Kingdom with a focus on the potentially differing time-trends.

Methods. 7 waves of Understanding Society data are used to study baseline level differences and especially changes between 4 competing mental health variables, the GHQ (negative mental health), life satisfaction, the SF-12 MCS and the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) of positive mental health. It is one of the first large-scale longitudinal studies to ever consider 3 measurement points of the WEMWBS. Fixed effects regressions are used to analyse time trends in mental health. Time-varying covariates for economic conditions (unemployment) and changes in physical health are employed as explanatory variables.

Results. In line with the relevant literature, the correlations between the four mental health variables are moderately high at around .5, thus suggesting significant overlap but also substantial independence between the dimensions. In contrast, repeated factor analyses of all indicators hint at overall similarities between the dimensions, and importantly that these relations are stable over time. Fixed effects regressions show that the effects of standard demographic, personality and socioeconomic variables on baseline levels and changes over time are not identical. The results of the modelling exercise of time-varying factors hint at some differential receptivity between the four mental health variables, with the WEMWBS being particularly affected.

Policy Implications. The preliminary results of this study highlight that policy makers should be aware of the differences and large empirical similarities between the multiple mental health scales, but that more research is needed to recommend one over the other.