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Defining Well-Being: Towards Common Language

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Eric Barberà Mas,
Ferran Mañé

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Eric Barberà Mas*, Ferran Mañé*

Abstract

The increasing interest in understanding how well people live contrasts with confusing terminology. In the social sciences, concepts related to well-being often blur boundaries and overlap, with specific terms carrying multiple definitions and being used interchangeably. To advance science and policymaking, a precise and common language is necessary. This paper proposes a reflective framework for universally understood terminology based on established definitions of core concepts, analysis of frequency and trends in the social sciences, and a review of main measures in literature. It also overviews the consensus and challenges in well-being conceptualization. The distinction between 'life satisfaction' and 'well-being' lies in the multidimensionality and comprehensiveness of the latter, closely tied to societal conditions. The former is more specific and exclusively addresses subjective aspects. Remarkably, there is an absence of a clear theoretical distinction between 'well-being' and 'quality of life'. 'Well-being' is the most used term, with 'happiness' common in subjective contexts and 'subjective well-being' growing recently. 'Happiness' is often used interchangeably with 'life satisfaction', although it denotes emotional states, while the latter represents cognitive judgment. 'Happiness' is strongly associated with hedonism and emotional states. Furthermore, it is crucial to regard 'life satisfaction' not just as a mere measure but to recognize the intrinsic value of the concept itself, representing a cognitive self-evaluation of overall life. Given its broad meaning and prevalence, it is reasonable to use 'well-being' as an umbrella term.

Keywords: Well-being; Quality of Life; Life satisfaction; Happiness; Subjective Well-being; Social Progress

*Department of Economics (ECO-SOS), Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Reus, Catalonia, Spain. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Eric Barberà, e-mail: eric.barbera@urv.cat. Ferran Mañé: ferran.mane@urv.cat

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been a shift from the idea of growth to the idea of having good lives. The academic community, governments, and non-governmental organisations are increasingly placing more importance on studying how well people live, focusing on metrics different from GDP, income or consumption. Concepts like happiness, life satisfaction, quality of life, well-being, and human development are receiving more attention, especially in social and economic literature. The boundaries among these concepts are blurred and overlap (Tomaselli et al., 2021). Moreover, some terms have multiple definitions, while various terms may refer to a single definition. As a result, many scholars use these terms interchangeably (Cooke et al., 2016; Murgáš et al., 2022; Teghe & Rendell, 2005). This lack of common language reduces precision, leads to confusion, and does not contribute to advancing this field. Differently, clear and common language would enhance both the understanding and dissemination of knowledge among

researchers. Furthermore, while this ambiguity may be relatively familiar within the academic community, it is pretty unfamiliar outside of it. For policymakers and the general public, scholars must provide clear and coherent messages about what well-being is and what well-being metrics are measuring (Taylor, 2023).

This is particularly significant in interdisciplinary fields, such as well-being. The study of well-being and happiness began with philosophers. Years later, psychologists joined the discussion (Intelisano et al., 2020). Nowadays, sociologists, economists, architects, and others also explore this topic. The literature highlights that a central challenge for any interdisciplinary research is that disciplines often differ in terminology (Intelisano et al., 2020). Even within a single discipline, a lack of clear vocabulary may occur. In health sciences, there is an awareness of this ambiguity regarding what constitutes well-being and how it should be measured. Through interviews and questionnaires, various studies demonstrate that wording matters, as individuals self-report their happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being differently. These studies suggest that they are distinct concepts, each with its own determinants, and they are not interchangeable (Carlquist et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2016; Maffioletti et al., 2019; Murgaš et al., 2022; Reuter et al., 2022).

Despite scholars being responsible for establishing precise terminology in a field as complex and interdisciplinary as well-being, this conceptual debate is less prevalent outside the subjective realm of well-being. This paper aims to respond to the need for a common language, evaluating the meaning and usage of different terms within social research. Appropriate vocabulary selection should depend on existing definitions and connotations, as well as the relevance assigned to each term and the most common measurement methods. Indeed, the utilisation of specific concepts within academic discourse is subject to dynamic shifts over time, reflecting evolving research interests and societal priorities. This paper delves into the concept of well-being, offering a comprehensive overview of the main trends, consensus, and challenges within the field.

The structure is as follows: Section 2 introduces the importance of focusing on well-being; Section 3 provides a conceptualisation of well-being with definitions of core well-being-related concepts, an analysis of the frequency and trends in the use of these terms in social science research and an overview of the main approaches to measuring well-being. Section 4 provides a discussion and a proposal. Section 5 concludes.

2. From economic growth to well-being

In economic literature, there has been a longstanding assumption that economic growth results in heightened citizen consumption, which, in turn, contributes to greater overall well-being. Consequently, in the last decades, most governments have focused their efforts on increasing the production of goods and services. The "hegemony of the economic growth paradigm" coexists with trickle-down theory. This supports the idea that tax breaks and benefits for corporations and the wealthy will trickle down and eventually benefit everyone. However, economic growth and trickle-down economics neglect the resulting growing inequality in recent decades, accentuated after the economic crisis and the pressing issue of the climate emergency (Kenton, 2022). Indeed, the Matthew effect -or accumulated advantage- is the phenomenon where "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" (Gladwell, 2008). In fact, More Developed Countries (MDCs) have overshoot boundaries without meeting the basic needs of all populations (Well-being Economy Alliance, 2022). The well-being and social progress indicators have not increased at the same rate as classical macroeconomic indicators. Even some authors state that an increasing GDP in rich countries could occur at the same time as a worsening in quality of life (Trainer, 2011). Richard Easterlin was one of the first to highlight a disconnect between the state of the economy

and the state of people in Western societies. This contrast between expanding prosperity and static, and occasionally diminishing, life satisfaction is referred to as the Easterlin paradox. (Murgas̄ & Böh̄m, 2015). In examining the state of our societies, it becomes increasingly evident that the current system is faltering and failing to address critical issues affecting the well-being of individuals and communities. For example, the USA exhibits a significant poverty gap of almost 0.4. Spain struggles with a persistently high unemployment rate of 12% (more than doubling for the youth population). More than half of the adult population in Mexico has below upper secondary education. The suicide rate in Korea is twice the OECD average. The average life satisfaction level of the population in Turkey and Japan is below 6¹. These alarming figures underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive evaluation of the existing system to improve people's well-being effectively.

Thus, economic growth sometimes fails to provide well-being, partially due to the unequal distribution of resources. Indeed, growth should not be considered an end in itself but a means of creating better living conditions (OECD, 2005). It is essential not to confuse “objective” with “tool” so that alternative tools can be sought when a tool ceases to function properly for its objective. Therefore, if economic growth ceases to bring prosperity to all citizens, especially the poorest strata of society, economic growth ceases to be a helpful tool. Following this line of reasoning, the assertion that "economic growth always implies an improvement for society as a whole" appears overly simplistic and out of touch with the present reality due to the substantial amount of information that GDP fails to consider. Economic growth is typically measured through GDP, a metric devised in the 1930s that solely accounts for market economic activity. Firstly, not all income accounted for in GDP reaches households, as some may be retained by companies and governments and even be repatriated by foreign-owned firms (OECD, 2016). In addition, GDP omits crucial information such as the shadow economy, unpaid labour (e.g., domestic work, volunteering) and the externalities stemming from economic activity, including its environmental impacts (Bergh, 2009). GDP neither captures dozens of aspects that human beings care about, such as health, insecurity, interpersonal relationships or emotional experiences (Benjamin et al., 2021). Consequently, it is unsurprising that economic growth and the quality of life for individuals can follow divergent paths. GDP is not only an imperfect measure of an economy's total production level but is also an inadequate measure for evaluating well-being (Benjamin et al., 2021).

Moreover, in the past few years, growth in the global economy, particularly in more developed countries, has been less intense than in previous years. However, governments have been relying on economic growth for the last few decades to improve the well-being of their citizens. Exploring alternative means of improving people's quality of life is now more necessary than ever. The urgent need to focus on other mechanisms different from economic growth results at the beginning of a paradigm shift. The two main pillars of this paradigm shift are human well-being and environmental sustainability. The "Beyond GDP" agenda involves a plurality of critical concepts such as inclusive growth, degrowth, people-first economy, or the economy of well-being, among others. The number of Beyond GDP initiatives has grown significantly in recent years, fitting different organisational strategies or academic aims. This kind of alternative to measuring the success of societies is gaining weight at the policy level as well. Nowadays, many countries worldwide perform following some sort of well-being framework (e.g., Bhutan, Iceland, Sweden, Ireland, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Italy, France, Germany, Australia, New

¹ All the data is extracted from the OECD and is the latest available.

Zealand, Ecuador, Costa Rica, United Arab Emirates, etc.) (Stiglitz et al., 2018a). In an international context, several well-being-related composite indices exist. Initially, the Human Development Index (HDI) - created by the United Nations - has played a dominant role with great recognition. More recently, the Better Life Index (BLI) - an initiative from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) - has received substantial attention, especially from the academic community. Indeed, the OECD's commitment to putting well-being at the centre of the political agenda with important papers and reports is noteworthy, especially those in the "Beyond GDP" and "How's Life?" series. Besides, most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations are designed to improve the well-being of the worldwide population. "Good health and well-being", "zero hunger", "clean water and sanitation", and "gender quality" are a few examples.

The topic of well-being is on the agenda as it has gained increasing interest and recognition in recent years (Peiró-Palomino et al., 2021). This evolving focus on well-being represents a positive step towards creating a more balanced and fulfilling society, placing people's well-being at the heart of decision-making processes. Well-being is essential as it provides a broader perspective on human quality of life, guides policy decisions, and contributes to sustainable and inclusive development. It recognises the interconnectedness of various aspects of life and emphasises the importance of creating societies where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and live fulfilling lives.

3. Conceptualising well-being

3.1. Core concepts

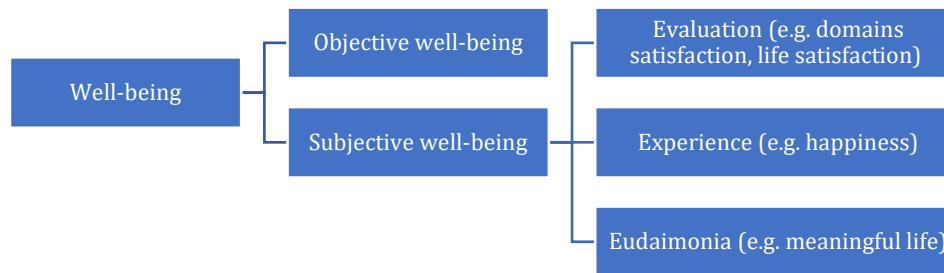
As the introduction outlines, several terms are used interchangeably, contributing to ambiguity and a lack of precision. It is crucial to establish clear definitions by incorporating the most commonly agreed-upon elements from the literature to address this issue. This section responds to this need and presents a conceptual proposal for standardised language. Specifically, the text reviews the following terms: happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, well-being, quality of life, human development, social progress, standard of living, and welfare.

The origin of "**happiness**" can be traced back to ancient Greece, particularly with the work of Aristotle. First, philosophers identified happiness as the ultimate goal of individuals. The philosophical connotations of happiness have evolved throughout history, linked to concepts such as ideal life, eudaimonia, pleasure, hedonism, or luck (Sewaybricker & Massola, 2023). Today, happiness is popularly understood as a positive sensation or emotion. In this context, happiness can be defined as the degree to which an individual enjoys their life (Veenhoven, 2014). Some dictionaries define happiness as "the state of feeling or showing pleasure" as well as "the state of being satisfied that something is good or right" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Sewaybricker & Massola (2023, pg. 18) declare an "irreconcilable tension between academic rigour and common sense; between the word's history and its current use". Precisely due to the long trajectory of the word "happiness," it is currently employed with diverse meanings. In its broadest sense, it serves as an umbrella term encompassing all that is positive and desirable. With this meaning, happiness is used to denote any other similar concept, mainly life satisfaction, subjective well-being, or well-being (Veenhoven, 2004). Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus in conceiving 'happiness' as a life result, as opposed to life changes, and rather about inner or psychological qualities (referring to the individual), as opposed to outer or external qualities (referring to the environment)" (Kneer & Haybron, 2019; Veenhoven, 2004).

“Life satisfaction” or “satisfaction with life” focuses on individuals' subjective evaluation of their overall lives. Thus, it involves a mental process of judgment and reasoning, as contrasted with emotional states. Life satisfaction is not employed to describe the enjoyment of a short life experience or the satisfaction with specific facets of life; instead, it refers to an enduring contentment with life as a whole (Veenhoven, 2004). Nevertheless, satisfaction is often considered in any specific aspect of life. For example, van Praag et al. (2003) decomposed an "overall satisfaction" variable into the following domain-satisfaction: job satisfaction, financial satisfaction, housing satisfaction, health satisfaction, leisure satisfaction and environmental satisfaction. Although life satisfaction theories commonly equate life satisfaction with happiness, Reuter et al. (2022) claim that affect-based theories align more closely with the concept of happiness. They argue that positive affect is both necessary and sufficient for applying this concept.

Throughout history, numerous discussions and theories have emerged concerning various facets of happiness, affect, life satisfaction, and a list of subjective aspects related to well-being. The most appropriate term for this subjective understanding of life, covering a wide range of aspects rather than a singular, specific construct, is "**subjective well-being**" (SWB), sometimes called “perceived well-being” (Diener et al., 1999; Fleche et al., 2012). Building on the contributions of various researchers, the OECD establishes a robust framework for SWB comprising three dimensions: 1) experience - sometimes called ‘affective’ or ‘hedonic’ - refers to the emotional states both positive or negative such as happiness, worry or anger; 2) evaluation - sometimes called ‘cognitive’ - refers to a reflective assessment or self-evaluation, for example life satisfaction or domains satisfaction (e.g. satisfaction with health or job satisfaction); and 3) eudaimonia, a sense of meaning and purpose in life or flourishing of human potential (OECD, 2013; Tomaselli et al., 2021). Figure 1 illustrates the categorisation of well-being into objective and subjective components, with the subjective aspect further divided into evaluation, experience, and eudaimonia. In contrast to this trichotomy (life evaluation, affect, eudaimonia) prevalent in most policy recommendations, recent works question the conceptual structure of eudaimonic well-being and propose that **psychological functioning** should be considered as an external dimension of subjective well-being. Following this framework based on self-determination theory, subjective well-being is composed of affective well-being and evaluative well-being, while psychological functioning includes basic psychological needs, primarily autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Martela & Sheldon, 2019).

Fig. 1 Representation of subjective well-being



Note: authors' elaboration

The main core concept of this paper is “**well-being**”. In short, "well-being" is the quality of life of individuals living in societies. The term "well-being" refers to a complex and multidimensional notion involving objective and subjective aspects of an open set of factors related to individual quality of life and social quality. "Well-being" cannot be understood without considering the term "quality of life". Currently, there is an absence of a clear theoretical distinction between both terms, implying that they both advocate the same idea. For instance, there does not exist a clear accepted definition, which is still under discussion (Murgaš & Böhm, 2015; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Tomaselli et al., 2021; Tvaronavičienė et al., 2021). This lack of precision and clarity in the concept invites certain criticisms in contrast to other more specifically defined concepts, such as happiness (C. P. Barrington-Leigh, 2022). From a standard lexical definition, well-being refers to “the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous; physical, psychological, or moral welfare” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Most academics define well-being as a complex and **multidimensional** or multi-faceted construct characterised by various dimensions and factors of quality of life. The term “quality of life” appears in many definitions of well-being. For example, Alex Michalos, leader of the "Movement for Social Indicators" in the 1960s and editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (2014), declared: “I identify well-being with a life of good quality, all things considered. There is no rule book about what should be included in the “all things considered” (Weijers 2014, p. 106). The definition used by Pena, (2009) is the following: "well-being is called the set of factors that participate in the quality of life of individuals and that make their existence have all those elements that give rise to tranquillity and human satisfaction”.

Smith (1973) proposed that "well-being" be used to refer to objective life conditions, while "quality of life" should more properly be limited to individuals' subjective assessments of their lives linked to an evaluative nature. This distinction has been lost over the years. Nowadays, the terms are often undefined or used inconsistently or interchangeably within studies. One term is often used to define the other, as already seen. Theofilou (2013) suggests two main reasons for the lack of a current distinction. The first reason is the multitude of conceptualisations of these terms that have evolved over the years, implying drastically different ways of measurement, especially across disciplines (economic, hedonic, etc.). For instance, when psychologists and economists discuss well-being, they likely refer to substantially different aspects. Psychology emphasises social relationships, emotions, respect, personality, and affiliation, among others. In contrast, physical and economic security, rights and freedoms, tertiary education, housing, and transportation are areas more commonly studied in economics and political sciences. Murgaš et al. (2022) also claim that methodological divergence increases terminological chaos. Another

potential reason is acknowledging the importance of both subjective and objective aspects. Therefore, any single construct of well-being or QOL must consider both types of information. For example, Borthwick-Duffy (1992) presented three points of view on the quality of life: a) living conditions, b) life satisfaction, and c) a combination of living conditions and life satisfaction. Taking as a reference the previous work, Felce & Perry (1995) proposed that quality of life was a combination of living conditions, life satisfaction and personal values. The introduction of a subjective assessment of life as a definition or part of the definition of QOL and well-being has been consolidated over the years. Contrary to Smith's (1973) proposal, some authors consider well-being as the experience of being well, as something entirely subjective and unidimensional (Rojas, 2017). From this notion, "well-being" is often referred to as a concept, and "life satisfaction" as a measure of the same thing.

The lack of consensus is also present in other aspects. Although most authors consider that well-being or QOL refers to outcomes (Brulé, 2022; Gaucher et al., 2021; Heiz-Herbert, 2004), they have sometimes been delineated as considering both chances and outcomes. Veenhoven (2000) suggests a broad framework for the concept of quality of life as a result of considering two bipartitions: between life 'chances' and life 'results', and between 'outer' and 'inner' qualities. Together, these dichotomies imply four qualities of life: 1) liability of the environment, 2) life-ability of the individual, 3) external utility of life and 4) subjective enjoyment of life (happiness). Apart from specific conceptual nuances that may differ, several proposals exist that consider well-being and QOL to refer to entirely diverse notions. This is due to the lack of clear definitions of these terms and the existence of a multiplicity of concepts and ideas without specific wording. For example, the OECD proposed a well-being framework in which quality of life refers to the non-material well-being conditions (Boarini et al., 2014). More recently, Fuchs et al. (2020) use QOL as an overarching concept encompassing two branches: well-being and sustainable development. The well-being branch includes social, political and economic aspects.

The quality of life (QOL) - and well-being - theory has been initially distinguished from the social quality (SQ) theory. While QOL theory was initially individual-oriented, SQ theory is inherently society-oriented. SQ theory takes into account human relationships and the social system built based on them. The conceptual framework of the SQ theory covers dimensions such as social cohesion, social inclusion, social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social coherence or social empowerment (Keyes, 1998; Lijadi, 2018; Lin, 2013). Individuals exist within the context of social structures and encounter numerous social responsibilities, tasks, necessities and obstacles (Keyes, 1998; Lijadi, 2018). It is worth noting that the individualist orientation of QOL has blurred over time, and well-being also involves social aspects. For example, Veenhoven (2004) suggests that 'quality of life' denotes both individual and social well-being. Humans are social animals, so social relations such as support from family and friends or ties within a community should also be considered to achieve a complete understanding of well-being (Naqvi, 2007). Besides, modern societies must be inclusive so that societal characteristics and qualities such as equality, equity, distribution of well-being, absence of discrimination, respect, interpersonal trust, solidarity or freedom should not be neglected (Bakar et al., 2015; Giambona & Vassallo, 2014; Heiz-Herbert, 2004). Well-being is of great importance for both individuals and society as a whole (Baležentis et al., 2011).

The words "progress" and "development" - often substituted by "social progress" and "human development" - are even broader in meaning. The literature on development, such as development economics, has an extensive history. For this reason, it is also important to differentiate between "well-being" and "**human development**." The latter is primarily focused on addressing basic needs, particularly in developing countries, while "well-being" is centred around complex multidimensional aspects often associated with societies at a more advanced stage of

development. Literature on development is considerably more extensive than literature on well-being. Progress may be defined as the process of improving or advancing toward a better or more desirable state. The terms "progress" and "**social progress**" often relate to the idea of prosperity, including not only aspects regarding human well-being but also regarding the functioning of a nation, mainly the state of the economy or the institutional quality (Taylor, 2023). "Progress" inherently carries a connotation of tracking or evolution.

Standard of living and well-being are often confused due to their perceived similarities in definition, but they are distinct concepts. "Standard of living" or "living standard" refers to the quantity and quality of material goods and services available. Standard of living refers to the level of wealth, comfort, and necessities generally applied to a certain socioeconomic class or geographic area rather than to an individual. It is typically measured using gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, although it may be measured by easily quantified factors like income, employment opportunities, cost of goods and services, and poverty. The standard of living is relevant because it contributes to an individual's well-being, particularly in terms of material well-being, such as the quality of housing (Boyle, 2022).

Finally, "**welfare**" is also sometimes used as a synonym for "well-being". Nevertheless, it usually has another meaning with a clear economic and institutional connotation. The term "welfare" refers to a range of government programs offering financial or other forms of social protection to individuals or groups incapable of self-sustenance. Welfare can cover various areas of assistance depending on the country. Common areas are healthcare, housing, or unemployment support. This concept is directly linked to the "welfare state," signifying a form of governance characterised by a set of institutions and policies wherein the national government assumes a pivotal role in safeguarding and advancing the well-being of its citizens (Hayes, 2023).

3.2. Terms and trends

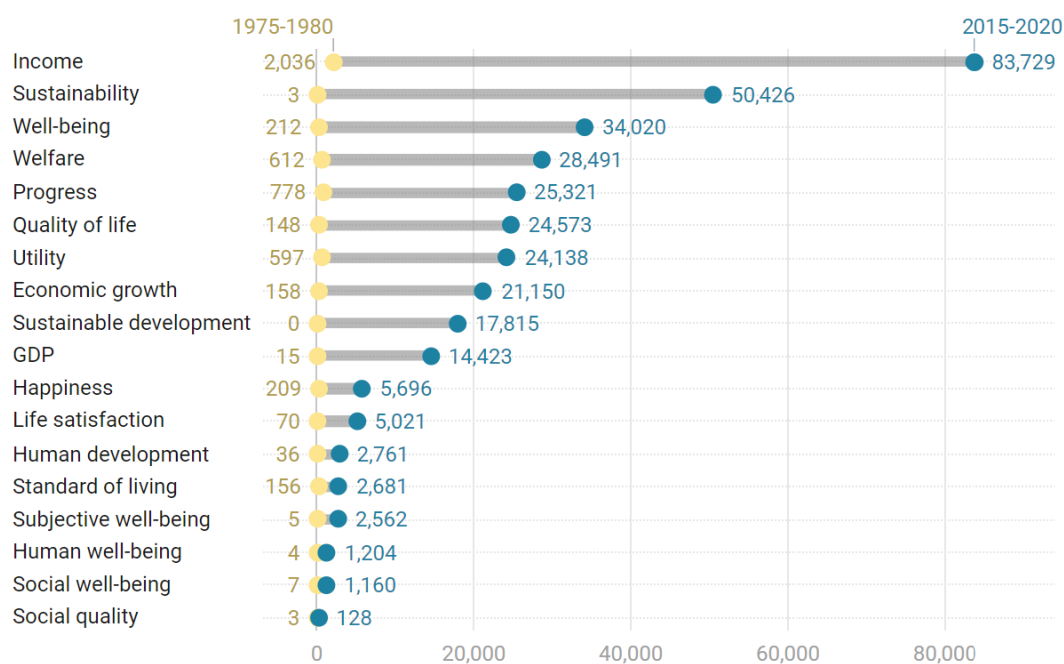
The utilisation of specific concepts within academic discourse is subject to dynamic shifts over time, reflecting evolving research interests and societal priorities. This section provides a review of trends in the use of well-being-related terms in social science research, consisting of four steps. First, a global overview of the use of various economic and well-being-related terms within the social sciences. Second, from the previous list of terms, determining which ones are more commonly used in economic and social literature versus other disciplines. Third, examining the evolution of specific well-being-related terms in the last 50 years. Fourth, analysing the relative growth in the use of well-being-related concepts compared to other main concepts in the last 15 years. This section employs the Web of Science (WoS) platform. WoS provides access to an extensive database designed to support scientific research covering more than 34.000 journals and over 211 million records.²

Figure 2 illustrates the prominence of a selection of key well-being-related terminology, along with other significant terms in economic-related literature for the periods 1975-1980 and 2015-2020. During the period 1975-1980, "income" was the most used term in social science literature, followed by "progress", "welfare", and "utility". Forty years later, "income" is still at the top of the prominent concepts in economics literature. However, this time, it is followed by "sustainability", "well-being", "welfare", "progress", and "quality of life". It is worth emphasising that income holds a prominent place in economic literature, extending well beyond

² See <https://webofscience.com>.

the scope of measuring well-being. Despite being an inherently economic concept, it finds extensive use in research across various social science disciplines. Additionally, its measurement is widely recognised and readily accessible. All the previous could explain its prevailing influence. Nevertheless, the differences in usage between both periods clearly reveal a growing interest in well-being and sustainability at the expense of purely economic terms. In this regard, the academic community increasingly focuses on "well-being" and "quality of life" in comparison to terms like "GDP," "economic growth," or "utility". "Well-being" and "quality of life" have consistently held a significant presence in the titles of composite indicators as well as in national documents of "Beyond GDP" frameworks instead of other more specific such as "happiness" (C. P. Barrington-Leigh, 2022). Although theory does not provide a clear distinction between "well-being" and "quality of life," the former is more prevalent than the latter. Despite the conceptual overlap, they are often presented as distinct notions, which can impact their usage frequency. For instance, in the already mentioned well-being framework of the OECD, individual well-being is divided between material conditions -income, jobs, and housing- and quality of life -other domains- (Boarini et al., 2014).

Fig. 2 Change in the use of economic and well-being-related terminology



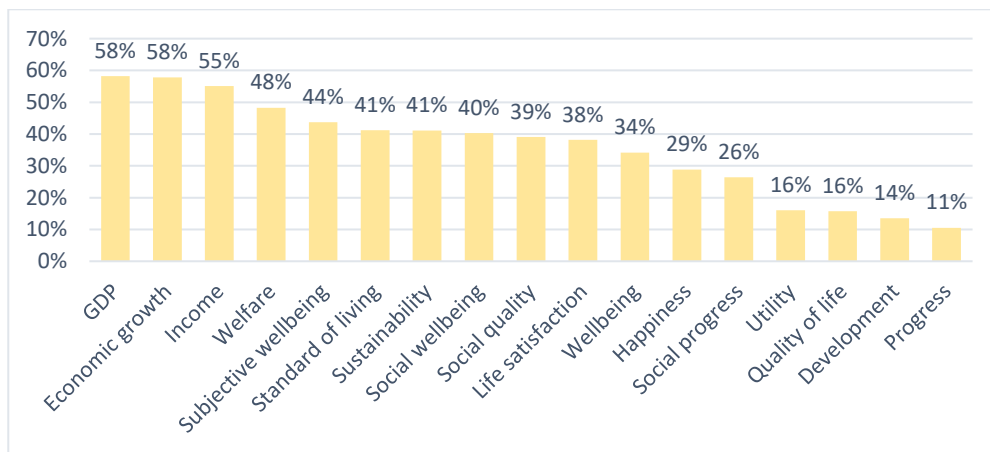
Note: Data refers to the periods 1975-1980 and 2015-2020 and comes from Web of Science. Values refer to the sum of academic publications (research and review articles, dissertations, and books) that contain each term in the title or abstract. The research areas included are business economics, public administration, sociology, social issues, and other topics within the social sciences.

Within the subjective realm, the notion that "happiness" serves as an umbrella term is somewhat validated, given its prevalence as the most frequently used term within subjective concepts. However, it is surprising to note the relatively limited use of the word "happiness" despite its frequent application to refer to related concepts (Veenhoven, 2004). Additionally, the climate emergency and the limitation of finite natural resources, which challenge the current production system, also seem to hold substantial interest within social sciences. "Sustainability" and "sustainable development" are the main concepts in the current academic community, also encompassed under the umbrella of the "Beyond GDP" agenda. On the bottom, "social quality",

“social well-being”, and "human well-being" receive an anecdotal presence due to their relatively greater specificity. This fact goes in line with the argument that concepts more open-ended and inherently less precisely defined, such as "progress," "quality of life," and "well-being," are also more used (C. P. Barrington-Leigh, 2022).

However, these terms are not only employed in the realm of social sciences. While certain concepts align more closely with economics, others find broader utilisation across other disciplines, such as health. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of academic papers pertaining to a selection of concepts within social disciplines. As expected, concepts more intricately linked with economic resources constitute a larger proportion of academic publications in these fields. Notably, "economic growth," "GDP," and "income" lead the rankings, surpassing the 50% mark. In the fourth and the sixth positions, we observe "welfare" and "standards of living". The former refers to a “range of government programs that provide financial or other aid to individuals or groups who cannot support themselves” (Investopedia). The second is usually understood as the level of income, comforts, and services available that contribute to an individual's quality of life. So, both are also somehow related to economic resources. Surprisingly, "subjective well-being", with a relatively high percentage in social sciences (44%), lies quite close to "life satisfaction" (38%) yet notably distant from "happiness" (29%). An intriguing contrast also emerges between "well-being" and "quality of life." While they are similar concepts, the former surpasses the latter by more than twofold in terms of representation in social sciences research. Additionally, when the term is complemented with the adjective "social," its usage within social and economic sciences converges within the middle range of the spectrum, ranging from 26% to 40%. Finally, terms such as "utility," "development," and "progress" trail behind because they are more versatile in meaning and are applied in a broader range of academic disciplines.

Fig. 3 Weight of Social Sciences in well-being-related terminology

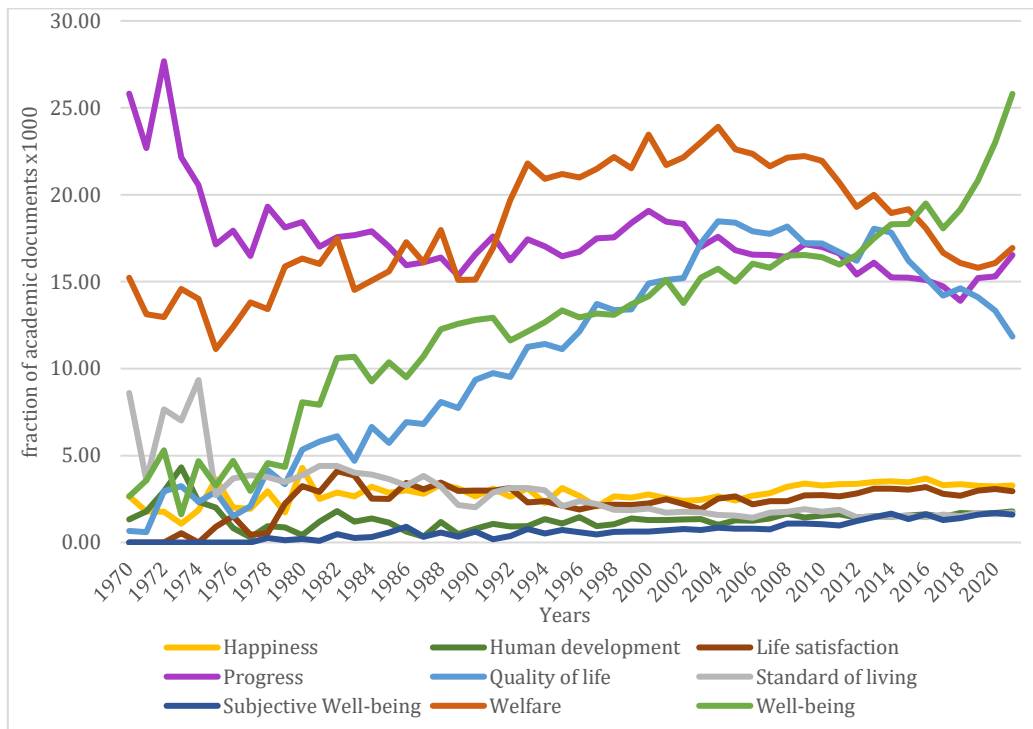


Note: The data refers to the period 2005-2021 and comes from the Web of Science. Values refer to the percentage of academic publications that contain each term in the title or abstract published within the social sciences areas (business economics, public administration, sociology, social issues, and other topics within the social sciences) over all academic publications.

In relation to the usage in other knowledge domains, the more subjective a term is, the more closely it aligns with health sciences, especially psychology, behavioural sciences, neurosciences, psychiatry, and healthcare services. Conversely, environmental sciences, engineering, government law, and mathematics stand out as those concepts are more closely linked to economic

resources. Additionally, educational research significantly employs certain concepts such as "income" or "happiness." (Source: Web of Science).

Fig. 4 Evolution of the use of well-being-related terminology



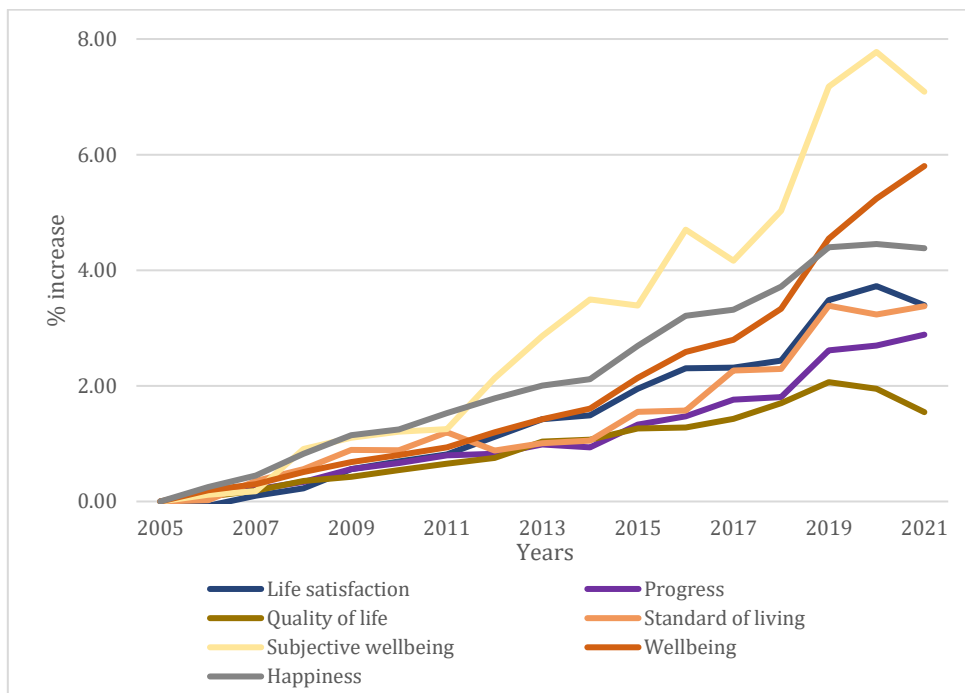
Note: The data refers to the period 1970-2021 and comes from the Web of Science. The fraction of academic documents corresponds to the percentage of academic publications that contain each term in the title or abstract relative to all publications in the field of social sciences. The research areas included are business economics, public administration, sociology, social issues, and other topics within the social sciences.

Figure 4 shows the evolution of well-being-related terminology in social sciences literature. We observe a distinct positive trend in utilising some of these concepts, with a significant dominance of the term "well-being." However, it is noteworthy that the term "progress" had held a preeminent stance until the 1990s, given its expansive and inclusive nature. "Progress" experienced a significant decline during the 1970s and then a gradual decrease, which seems to have partially reversed in the last lustrum. "Well-being" and "quality of life" exhibit analogous trajectories, intertwining on various occasions. Although initially it seemed that "well-being" received more academic attention, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, "quality of life" emerged as the hegemonic term for a few years. Yet, after several years of exponential growth, "well-being" assumes a dominant position. It establishes itself as the most prominently employed term within this domain. On the contrary, "quality of life" peaked in the mid-2000s but has declined since then. Presumably, academic discourse is substituting the term "quality of life," which has a vast literature on it, with "well-being." Regarding the use of "welfare", it was the predominant concept for 25 years. The decline in the use of "welfare", "quality of life", and "progress", together with the rise of the term "well-being", may mainly signify a more accurate utilisation of terms and a shift in research interests. The case of "living standards" is also quite revealing. It saw considerable use in the early 1970s but then slowly fell into irrelevance. The remaining terminologies have undergone different evolutions. However, most have experienced positive yet

gradual growth since the beginning of the century, with "happiness" and "life satisfaction" standing out.

Finally, in Figure 5, we observe the recent relative growth of key well-being-related terminology. Although the relative representation of certain terms has decreased in recent years (Figure 4), it is noteworthy that all these terms are more prevalent in 2021 compared to 2005. However, the graph does confirm a reduction in the growth of the term "quality of life". Conversely, "well-being" is experiencing faster growth than "quality of life". For instance, it seems that since 2019, "quality of life" has been substituted by "well-being". Besides, "subjective well-being" exhibits the most rapid increase in recent years. This aligns with the novel idea that subjective well-being may be regarded as the most important factor for societal progress (O'Connor, 2022). Beyond conveying enhanced precision, the term "subjective well-being" reflects the heightened refinement scholars are applying in managing subjective well-being measures (Barrington-Leigh, 2022). This growth in "subjective well-being" possibly indicates a growing interest in multidimensional frameworks, even when subjectivity has traditionally been approached from a unidimensional perspective.

Fig. 5 Relative growth of well-being-related terminology



Note: The data, which comes from the Web of Science, refers to the period 2005-2021. The percentage increase refers to the relative growth of academic publications that contain each term in the title or abstract since 2005. The research areas included are business economics, public administration, sociology, social issues, and other topics within the social sciences.

3.3. Main measurement methods

Definitions are essential for establishing how to measure concepts. Different methodologies exist for measuring how well people live, depending on the school of thought and specific concepts. After many years of income hegemony as a measure of well-being, aspects of subjectivity and multidimensionality have been introduced. Nowadays, in addition to economic measures, self-reported life satisfaction and multidimensional indexes have emerged as the most

prevalent methodologies. While the life satisfaction approach emphasises individuals' subjective experiences and evaluations, the multidimensional approach provides a broader and more comprehensive perspective by considering a range of dimensions that make up individuals' overall well-being. Both approaches have their merits and contribute to our understanding of well-being. Both are useful non-market valuation techniques within the 'Beyond GDP' agenda. Both approaches complement each other and offer valuable insights for research, policy development, and interventions to enhance individuals' quality of life. Both can be efficiently ranked to compare regions, tracked over time to assess progress, and plotted easily (Barrington-Leigh & Escande, 2018). All these advantages together facilitate communication with the general public (i.e., citizens and media), promote accountability (OECD, 2008), help to underpin narratives and improve policymaking, especially when policymaking requires trade-offs and judging alternatives (Benjamin et al., 2021).

Economic measures

Traditionally, despite the conceptual complexity of well-being, it has usually been measured through economic measures in the research field. In particular, income is typically used in developed countries and consumption in developing countries (Son, 2011). This purely economic approach was due to the conviction of Western countries in the post-war period that economic growth entails development and well-being. The hegemonic use of economic metrics remained largely unchallenged until the 1970s when significant criticisms emerged. This prompted the inclusion of additional information, especially in social terms, to provide a more comprehensive perspective. For instance, considering distributional patterns led to the use of adjusted income. For example, Stiglitz et al. (2018b, 49) use "an income variable that includes social transfers in-kind (especially for education and healthcare) and adds the effect of consumption taxes and subsidies". Some economists attempted to capture well-being by modifying GDP to account for non-market activities, such as household work, or the costs of adverse effects resulting from economic activity, such as crime and resource depletion. Indeed, monetary or quasi-monetary indicators of the "adjusted GDP" type—also referred to as "corrected GDP," "augmented GDP," or "GDP-based"—are typically interpreted as "extended national accounts." International systems of expanded accounting gained traction in the 1990s but have predominantly faded over time (Barrington-Leigh & Escande, 2018). Initially, the most influential adjusted-GDP measure was the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW: Daly and Cobb, 1989), which was gradually replaced by the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI: Cobb, Halstead, and Rowe, 1995) in the late 1990s.

Self-reported life satisfaction

The recognition that Western societies achieved economic prosperity without a corresponding increase in social contentment led to the development of subjective measures. One prominent methodology is the Cantril Self-Anchoring Scale, commonly known as the Cantril Scale or Cantril Ladder. This scale asks respondents to visualize a ladder where the top represents the best possible life for them and the bottom the worst. They then rate their current life on a scale from 0 to 10. The Cantril Scale has been pivotal in assessing SWB, but various verbal and numerical scales also exist to gauge life satisfaction. This measure not only evaluates people's well-being but also helps in understanding their perceptions and experiences. Exploring the subjectivity of well-being involves factors like personal fulfilment, positive and negative emotions, and the sense of life's meaningfulness and satisfaction. This exploration is particularly valuable when studying perceptual and emotional aspects such as interpersonal relationships and mental health. However, SWB measures face some drawbacks, including concerns about their

abstract nature, oversimplification of human reality (Benjamin et al., 2021; Diener & Suh, 1997); adaptation and adaptive preferences (Di Tella et al., 2010); and their homeostatic tendency to limit sensitivity to external conditions (Cummins, 2003). Current discussions also focus on how the wording, question order, and types of scales used can influence results in SWB research (C. P. Barrington-Leigh, 2024; Lee et al., 2016).

Multidimensional Well-being

The multidimensional well-being approach is grounded in the consideration of diverse social indicators. It is important to bear in mind that well-being is defined as a multidimensional concept. Thus, the natural way to approximate it is by utilising social indicators. On one hand, relying on a dashboard or collection of indicators may be helpful. Nevertheless, it is a complex task to evaluate well-being departing from a multitude of specific indicators (Lutz et al., 2021). Instead, a composite (also called synthetic, compound or complex) index can simultaneously integrate different social indicators grouped in several dimensions and subdimensions (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Aggregation into a single metric can capture the multidimensionality and complexity of well-being using a wide range of data, both subjective and objective, neglected by both economic indicators and exclusively subjective metrics (Creutzig & Mattauch, 2013; Grasso & Canova, 2008; J. Stiglitz et al., 2009; World Bank, 2010). In addition, unlike unidimensional indices such as life satisfaction, composite indices can be decomposed into domains. This complementary information is crucial to understanding the complex structure of well-being and domain-specific insights to improve policymaking. It is also relevant that well-defined quantitative indicators allow for translating relatively broad or abstract terms like 'well-being,' 'quality of life,' and 'progress' into tangible and reliable representations, thereby eliminating the considerable ambiguity often associated with them (C. P. Barrington-Leigh, 2022). Besides, composite indices are easier to interpret than many separate indicators (Nardo et al., 2005; OECD, 2008).

On the other hand, a composite index may send misleading or simplistic policy messages if poorly constructed or misinterpreted (Nardo et al., 2005; OECD, 2008). Thus, a primary challenge in this approach is the necessity to find appropriate social indicators for each well-being dimension. Considering the target-oriented nature of social indicators, it is worth noting that a proper selection of social indicators for constructing a well-being index can provide policymakers with valuable information for dealing with social dynamics correctly (Grasso & Canova, 2008). Indeed, there is no theoretical basis for defining an irrefutable scope for a well-being index or the weighting strategy for aggregating its components (Easterlin & Angelescu, 2012). This may complicate the determination of the causal mechanisms of the indicator (Hagerty & Veenhoven, 2006). Some scholars suggest an alternative method for empirically establishing well-being indicators, which involves utilising happiness data, such as individual preferences, to assign weights to other objectively measured factors contributing to well-being (C. P. Barrington-Leigh, 2022; O'Connor, 2022). Another critical challenge of composite indexes is the consideration of sufficient distributive values instead of average ones to capture multiple inequalities. It is also worth considering that the high demands for data availability usually involve significant economic and practical costs.

4. Discussion and proposal

As outlined in the introduction, the boundaries among concepts related to well-being are blurred and often overlap. Additionally, specific terms carry multiple definitions, while various terms may refer to a single definition. As a result, many scholars use these terms interchangeably. Given these circumstances, it would benefit the scientific community to avoid blending concepts

and instead aim for precise and universally understood terminology. Appropriate vocabulary selection should depend on the existing definitions and connotations, as well as the relevance assigned to each term. Figure 6 contextualises the main well-being-related terms; 1st column presents the current situation in terms of clarity of the conceptualisation, frequency of use and trends in use; 2nd column provides key notions for their conceptualisation; and 3rd column suggests appropriate measures. This reflective proposal suggests a clear framework for a common language, which would facilitate research as well as strengthen policy implications. All the concepts complement each other and offer valuable insights for research, policy development, and interventions to enhance individuals' well-being. It is worth noting that myriad concepts linked to well-being exist that are not adequately captured by the proposal. In fact, the term "well-being" allows for a straightforward focus on specific realms of well-being simply by adding an adjective: psychological WB, emotional WB, physical WB, social WB, and so forth. This addition is easier to implement than with other terms like QOL, which could motivate some of the substitution of QOL by WB in the literature.

Life satisfaction is an often misunderstood and under-valued concept. Life satisfaction theories propose that satisfaction leads to happiness, so self-evaluation suffices for measuring happiness. According to Reuter et al. (2022), positive affect has a greater influence on happiness than life satisfaction. Overall, it would be a mistake to equate life satisfaction and happiness. However, it is interesting to note that in the literature on happiness, life satisfaction metrics are commonly used but are frequently named with a different word, mainly happiness or well-being (e.g. Helliwell et al., (2022); Leite Mota & Pereira (2008)). This suggests that life satisfaction is commonly considered a metric rather than a concept. Indeed, using the satisfaction with life measures appears confusing and inconsistent, as each author employs their preferred terminology when referencing this measure. Recognising the value of life satisfaction as a cognitive self-evaluation of one's overall life is crucial.

As previously outlined, in the social sciences, the term '**happiness**' is frequently utilised to signify life satisfaction, despite 'happiness' denoting an emotional feeling and 'life satisfaction' representing a cognitive judgment (Tomaselli et al., 2021). This conceptual use stems from the idea that 'happiness' is assumed to encompass all other related concepts, although this appears to hold primarily within the subjective realm. In practice, terms like 'well-being' and 'quality-of-life' are more commonly employed. Exclusively within the subjective realm, 'happiness' is the most common term, while 'subjective well-being' is the term experiencing the most significant growth. However, even though 'happiness' is considered an umbrella term in its broadest sense, it is less frequently used than expected in current economic and social sciences research. The growing interest in '**subjective well-being**' suggests an evolution from unidimensional measures to multidimensional frameworks of subjective well-being, encompassing cognitive judgments, emotional states, and eudaimonia. Cognitive judgments enclose the well-known measure of life satisfaction, commonly referred to as happiness, despite being more of a self-evaluation of life than an emotional measure. Under these circumstances, it might be beneficial to designate each concept by its specific name, reserving the term 'happiness' for a more precise connotation associated with hedonism and emotional states, thereby differentiating it from life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and even well-being.

Fig. 6 Conceptualisation of main well-being-related terms

Term	Current use	Key notions	Measure
Happiness*	Medium-low use Moderately prevalent in social sciences Multiple definitions Often used as life-satisfaction	Hedonism, emotional state, positive affect, affective well-being	Cantril Scale, verbal scales or multidimensional (e.g., Day Reconstruction Method (DRM))
Life satisfaction*	Medium-low use Prevalent in social sciences Conceptually underrated: usually replaced by happiness, WB or SWB Clear definition	Self-evaluation, cognitive judgment, evaluative well-being	Cantril Scale, verbal scales or multidimensional (e.g. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS))
Subjective well-being (SWB)*	Low use High growth in use Prevalent in social sciences Clear definition	Perceived WB, affect + satisfaction + meaningful life	Multidimensional (e.g. Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT))
Well-being (WB)	High and growing use Moderately prevalent in social sciences Comprehensive definition Sometimes used as life-satisfaction	Quality of life, capabilities, subjective and objective	Multidimensional (e.g. Better Life Index (BLI))
Human development	Low use	Fundamental needs	Multidimensional (e.g. Human Development Index (HDI))
(Social) progress	High and declining use Not prevalent in social sciences Vague definition	Human, economic and political prosperity; Well-being of nations	Multidimensional (e.g. Legatum Prosperity Index (LPI))
Standard of living**	High use before the 80s Low and declining use Prevalent in social sciences Clear definition	Material resources, goods and services, comfort,	Mainly per capita GDP
Welfare**	High use Highly prevalent in social sciences Clear definition Sometimes used as well-being	Economic resources, government programs, social protection	Multidimensional (e.g. Social Protection Index (SPI))

Source: authors' elaboration. * Strictly subjective/psychological concept. **Strictly economic concept

Moreover, it is crucial to emphasise the absence of a clear theoretical distinction between the concepts of **well-being** and **quality of life**. Initially, some specific conceptualisations considered the quality of life to encompass both internal/outputs and external/changes(e.g. Felce & Perry (1995) Veenhoven (2000)). Other specific conceptualisations consider quality of life as the non-material condition of well-being (Boarini et al., 2014) or well-being as the subjective experience of being well (Rojas, 2017). Over time, despite some specific differences, these two concepts have evolved to become synonyms in the field of social sciences. There is a broad consensus in considering both concepts multidimensional, touching on various domains and based on objective and subjective aspects of life. The concept of quality of life is often used to define the concept of well-being, showing a clear interdependence between both. Besides, after a long research period, the term 'well-being' surpasses other terms, including 'quality of life.' The word 'well-being' has undoubtedly consolidated its position as the most frequently used term in academic texts. Since there is a certain contradiction in the conceptualisation of 'quality of life,' and at the same time, its use is declining, it seems reasonable to focus on using 'well-being' as an umbrella term, given

its broad sense and dominant use. Certainly, well-being is a broader and more comprehensive concept than happiness and is closely linked to both individual and societal conditions.

Remind that, as previously explained, happiness (experience), life satisfaction (evaluation), and meaningful life (eudaimonia) have been commonly defined as components of subjective well-being. These components, together with other objective aspects, conform to well-being. Therefore, it is relevant to emphasise that not only is well-being a distinct concept from life satisfaction or happiness, but the former conceptually includes the latter.³ Indeed, subjective well-being is gaining prominence as a pivotal factor in understanding and influencing societal progress and overall well-being (C. P. Barrington-Leigh, 2022; Murgas & Böhm, 2015; O'Connor, 2022). On another note, well-being does not include aspects that extend beyond the scope of quality of life and social quality, involving conditions related to other factors such as the state of the economy or institutions. When referring to this vast set of variables, using terms like **social progress** or prosperity is appropriate. Besides, the majority of concepts can refer to both individuals and collectives, while others are exclusively collective. The concepts that cannot be used at an individual level but rather refer to a place or group are social progress, living standards, and welfare.

This paper also highlights that after many years of the hegemony of income as a measure of well-being, nowadays, the self-reported life satisfaction and the multidimensional approach have emerged as the most prevalent methodologies in social sciences literature. The main differences between both approaches are that the latter is subjective and unidimensional, while the former may refer to both subjective and objective conditions and is multidimensional. Life satisfaction aids in comprehending subjectivity by establishing connections with various external factors, while the multidimensional approach encompasses the multiplicity of factors within the concept itself. It should be clarified that happiness and especially life satisfaction can be measured using a single numerical or verbal scale. In contrast, concepts such as SWB, WB, human development, and social progress inherently require a multidimensional framework.

Ultimately, this is a complex field of knowledge where different disciplines with different paths are converging. Two important groups of concepts can be highlighted. On the one hand, exclusively subjective concepts have received a significant semantic and etymological discussion. Philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists emphasise two main notions. The first is cognitive-rational, where one must recognise the concept of satisfaction as the maximum expression of self-evaluation. The second is hedonic-affective, where happiness fits into the concept thanks to the general understanding of it as a positive sensation. Notably, there is an increasing interest in the multidimensional study of the perception of "the good life," giving rise to the term "subjective well-being".

On the other hand, well-being is closer to the idea of promoting the good life, often linked to what governments should provide to individuals (Sewaybricker & Massola, 2023). Thus, economics and public policy often approach the well-being topic from a normative perspective, focusing more on methods rather than a semantic perspective. In fact, economic literature has undergone significant evolution in the measurement of well-being. Thanks to Beyond GDP

³ Life satisfaction may be regarded as a measure of individual's general well-being. While life satisfaction is part of well-being conceptually, empirical initiatives aiming to capture well-being using a multi-dimensional framework should avoid including life satisfaction measures to prevent from double counting (Peiró-Palomino & Picazo-Tadeo, 2018). The multidimensional approach and life satisfaction scale are complementary measures.

theories, standard economic measures were first replaced by welfare and adjusted metrics, and then they were substituted by complex and multidimensional frameworks of well-being and social progress.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper delves into the concept of well-being, offering a comprehensive overview of the main consensus, trends, and challenges within the field. The main challenge is to use common vocabulary in a complex and multidisciplinary field of study. This paper suggests a reflective proposal for common language based on established definitions, clarity of the conceptualisations, an analysis of the frequency and trends in use within social sciences and the main measures used in current literature. Terms like "well-being," "quality of life," "happiness," "life satisfaction," or "subjective well-being" enjoy widespread recognition in the fields of health sciences, particularly psychology and neuroscience. However, it is noteworthy that economics and social science are prominent arenas that frame these concepts within the "Beyond GDP" agenda. The positive evolution of the use of these terms reflects a shift in focus and narrative, transitioning from an emphasis on economic success to social progress and responsibility. However, this transition has been relatively slow, with governments and academics historically prioritising GDP and growth. After several decades during which economic growth was heralded as a panacea, we are now witnessing the emergence of an era focused on citizen-centric policies that seek alternatives for estimating societal success. Nevertheless, the confusion between concepts and the coexistence of multiple metrics have likely also contributed to this slow take-off. In practice, although the well-being assessment was initially grounded in purely economic measures, subjective indicators and social frameworks have progressively gained prominence.

In relation to the issue raised in this article, the word 'well-being' has undoubtedly consolidated its position as the most frequently used term in academic texts. It is marked by multidisciplinary versatility. Given its broad meaning and prevalence, it is reasonable to use 'well-being' as an umbrella term. It can be comprehended as a complex and multidimensional notion encompassing an open array of factors related to quality of life and social quality. Well-being integrates both objective and subjective aspects, including satisfaction, happiness, and all other subjective dimensions. Remarkably, there is an absence of a clear theoretical distinction between well-being and quality of life.

The term 'happiness' is often used interchangeably with 'life satisfaction,' even though 'happiness' typically denotes an emotional feeling, and 'life satisfaction' represents a cognitive judgment. Notably, despite being considered an umbrella term, 'happiness' is less commonly used in current economic and social sciences research than expected. It could be advantageous to assign specific names to each concept, reserving the term 'happiness' for a more precise connotation associated with hedonism and emotional states, thereby distinguishing it from life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and even well-being. Furthermore, it is crucial to regard life satisfaction not just as a mere measure but to recognise the intrinsic value of the concept itself, representing a cognitive self-evaluation of overall life.

Currently, there are mainly two non-market approaches for measuring how well people live: 1) a unidimensional measure of self-reported life satisfaction -e.g. Cantril scale -, and 2) a multidimensional well-being approach including a wide range of social indicators. Since these are two distinct measures, using a unique term for each would be consistent. This article advocates using 'life satisfaction' and 'well-being', respectively. The conceptualisations of life satisfaction and well-being reveal that well-being is a broader and more comprehensive concept closely linked to societal conditions. On the other hand, life satisfaction is more specific and carries an inner

connotation. The latter pertains solely to subjective aspects, while the former encompasses both subjective and objective aspects.

Regarding the multidimensional approach, aggregating indicators and domains enables a comprehensive assessment, fostering a holistic approach to well-being while promoting comparability and communication of the measure. Consequently, the multidimensional or social indicators approach arises from recognising well-being as a multidimensional concept. Conversely, the absence of a solid theoretical foundation presents a challenge in defining the content and determining the weighting strategy for aggregating its components.

After a long journey towards conceptual clarity, a significant opportunity for knowledge accumulation and precision emerges. Well-being has rightfully taken its place on the agenda, reflecting a growing recognition and attention. As well-being gains prominence, policymakers, researchers, and communities are collaboratively formulating frameworks and policies that prioritise individuals' overall well-being and satisfaction. Currently, there is a noticeable demand for and supply of data, along with increasing public interest, indicating a growing need for deeper insights into the development of policy strategies. From an academic and policy perspective, well-being signifies broad consensus and presents significant challenges. The economics of well-being presents a transformative opportunity for the whole society.

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Appendix

Social indicators

The term "social indicators" was first proposed by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the early 1960s to detect and anticipate the impact of the second-order consequences of the space program on the US society (Land 1983, p. 2; Noll and Zapf 1994, p. 1).

The use of social indicators for decision-making by public authorities was first recommended by Groos (1976 and 1977), Bauer (1967) and Bell (1969). Some governments and **international Organisations** followed this recommendation. Three important current examples are The Human Development Indicator by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) since 1990; The World Development Indicators by the World Bank with data since 1960; and How's life? Well-being and (Your) Better Life Initiative from the OCDE, since 2004 and 2013 respectively.

Before continuing, the meaning of social indicators must be understood. There exist many definitions of social indicators in the literature, reflecting distinct objectives they can serve (Horn, 1983). Some classic definitions of social indicators are the following:

- I. "The main idea behind social indicators is that "any feature of a society or a subgroup within it that can be measured over time and is presumed to reveal some underlying aspect of **social reality** and quality of life (American Psychology Association).
- II. "Social indicators are quantitative data that serve as indexes to **socially important conditions** of society" (Biderman, ed. Bauer, 1966).
- III. Social indicators are "statistics, statistical series, and all other forms of evidence—that enable us to assess where we stand and are going with respect to our **values and goals**, and to evaluate specific programs and determine their impact" (Bauer 1966, p. 1)
- IV. statistical time series "used to monitor the social system, helping to identify changes and to guide **intervention** to alter the course of **social change**" (Ferriss 1988, p. 601)
- V. "There is need for statistics (referring to social indicators) which indicate clearly and precisely **conditions in our society**, including, for example, the magnitude of existing social **problems** and their rate of **change**." (W.B. Cohen, 1968)
- VI. "Social indicators are concerned with the world of people, as it is and as it might be, and can be used in any branch of learning that covers such aspects". (Horn, 1983)

To sum up, three key characteristics can be outlined: 1) Social indicators can be defined as statistics, statistical series or quantitative variables used to capture social features of society. In fact, a common aspect of the different definitions is the use of **society** or society-related terms, such as social conditions, social importance, social change, or social reality. 2) It is also worth highlighting the **target-directed** nature of social indicators, as we can usually appreciate a social purpose of policy action. 3) Tracking **social change** is a recurrent aim used to describe social well-being as well. For example, social indicators can be used to monitor progress in order to evaluate planning performance (Horn, 1983).