Measuring Wellbeing and Mapping the Gaps

Prepared for the HSRC Flagship Study on Poverty and Inequality
A public conversation in partnership with the University of the Western Cape

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What Is Wellbeing And How Can It Be Measured?
Study Rationale and Aims

A systematic review on the ways in which ‘wellbeing’ has been measured in South Africa during the democratic period

Questions

• When did the research take place?
• What was the research foci of the article?
• How was wellbeing defined?
• What was the profile of the research sample?
• How has wellbeing been measured?

Systematic Review Search Terms

**Wellbeing terms (AND)**
- Happiness
- Quality of life
- Life satisfaction
- Personal wellbeing index
- Capability/ies
- Family wellbeing
- Community wellbeing
- Collective wellbeing
- Cognitive wellbeing*
- National wellbeing
- Personal wellbeing
- Social wellbeing*
- Psychological wellbeing
- Affective wellbeing
- Relational Goods

**Poverty terms (OR)**
- Deprivation
- Low Income
- Community context
- Impoverished
- Socioeconomic
- Disadvantaged

**Inequality terms (OR)**
- Social comparison
- Reference group
- Social divide
- Injustice
- inequity
Criteria for Systematic Literature Review

• The literature was limited to peer-reviewed empirical studies (quantitative and qualitative).

• Article had to be published between January 1994 and December 2016.

• All included articles were in English

• One of the fifteen wellbeing keywords had to be included in the articles’ titles and/or abstracts for it to be selected for review.

• The articles had to have South Africa as one of the primary sites of study.

Abstract and content screen results

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**Word Cloud for Database’s Accredited Peer-Reviewed Journals**

**Date of Publication for the Articles in Our Database**

- 1994-1996
- 1997-1999
- 2000-2002
- 2003-2005
- 2006-2008
- 2009-2011
- 2012-2014
- 2015-2016
Research Foci amongst the Articles in Our Database

How Are South African Scholars Defining Wellbeing?

The term ‘wellbeing’ was used in a **number of ways** by different researchers.

Wellbeing is most **often portrayed** as a psychological concept and most seem to treat wellbeing as a **psychological** or **mental state**.

Diverging views – for example **Health-Related Quality of Life** versus **Subjective Wellbeing**

So-called ‘real’ definitions are **dysfunctional** - Chaïm Perelman
What is the Demographic Profile of the Samples Studied?

Most studies used small random samples of individuals.

Many focused explicitly on a specific subset of the population – HIV/AIDS patients, school teachers, police officers etc.

Most of the studies are focused on adults although there is a significant degree of work on children (N=24) and adolescents (N=13).

A significant portion (N=56) used samples of university students.

Word Cloud of the Quantitative Research Tools Used in Our Database
Quantitative Dominance in How Wellbeing is Measured

- **Advantages** of quantitative research tools: Standardisation, reliability, and representativeness.
- **One-dimensional** measures, **multidimensional** single scale measures, or **multiple** separate measures are predominant.
- Quantitative tools rely on a **fixed ‘reality’ of wellbeing**—validations of what has already been **assumed** to be ‘true’.
- A minority (N=40) of the articles took on a **qualitative approach**.

The Global North and the Wellbeing Measures Used

- The **dominant research instruments** used were originally developed by **Global North** scholars.
- Less than half of the studies in our dataset assessed the **reliability** and **validity** of the scales that they were using.
- Problem:
  - Assumed **individualistic cultural orientation** and value systems
  - Neglected **contextual** influences
  - Disregard African **cultural traditions** and **meaning-making** systems
New and Underused Tools for Measuring Wellbeing

- Recent advances in **leveraging social media** to measure wellbeing in **real time**.
- Methods for **capturing psychological states** through language analysis – Facebook and Twitter.
- Look at what are the wellbeing ‘goals’ of South Africans
- Work of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) Research Programme at the University of Bath

Conclusion: Policy Recommendations