

# Happiness and Well-Being: Is It All in Your Head? Evidence from the Folk

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**Abstract:** Despite a voluminous literature on happiness and well-being, there is still no scholarly consensus on whether happiness and well-being are purely psychological phenomena, or for that matter whether they are identical. Commentators frequently defend their views by reference to intuitions about the nature of happiness or well-being, raising the question of how representative those intuitions are. In a series of studies we examined lay intuitions involving a variety of happiness and well-being-related terms to assess their sensitivity to psychological (internal) versus external conditions. We found that all terms, including ‘happy’, ‘doing well’ and ‘good life’, were far more sensitive to internal than external conditions, suggesting that for laypersons, mental states are the most important part of happiness and well-being. But several terms, including ‘doing well’, ‘good life’ and ‘enviable life’ were also sensitive to external conditions, consistent with dominant philosophical views of well-being. ‘Happy’, by contrast, appears to be ambiguous: for many participants, but not all, it was completely insensitive to external conditions, suggesting that the folk are divided about whether happiness is purely a psychological notion or equivalent to well-being. Overall, our findings suggest that lay thinking about matters of well-being divides between two concepts, or families of concepts: a purely psychological notion associated with ‘happy’, and one or more notions related to the philosophical concept of well-being that concern how well a person’s life is going and are generally thought to involve both psychological and external conditions. Strikingly, even though the folk do not generally seem to endorse mental state views of well-being, they seem clearly to regard mental states as more important for well-being than external conditions.

## 1. Introduction

Learning what it means for human beings to flourish, and how best to bring it about, would seem to be among the weightier imperatives for scientific and philosophical inquiry. Considerable research, policy, and popular attention has gone toward the topics of happiness and well-being in recent decades, and prominent voices are calling for policy to focus entirely on the promotion of happiness or well-being (e.g., Clark, Flèche, Layard, Powdthavee, & Ward, 2018). But the discussion of these matters has suffered from a lack of clarity or consensus about what, exactly, we are talking about and how it relates to the practical concerns that ultimately motivate the enterprise. Philosophical discussions often rely heavily on intuitions about cases putatively involving happiness or well-being, yet intuitions are remarkably diverse even within the relatively homogeneous, and perhaps unrepresentative, community of academic philosophers. We lack even consensus about whether happiness and well-being are one thing or two—or three or more—with some philosophers arguing that the concept of happiness is merely a descriptive psychological notion, while others maintain that it is really an evaluative concept equivalent to well-being—or,

again, flourishing or eudaimonia. Indeed, the very expression ‘happiness and well-being’ owes much of its prevalence to uncertainty about what either term means, making it a convenient way to hedge one’s bets. The notion of well-being in turn is subject to considerable dispute, and some philosophers have suggested that two or more concepts of well-being need to be distinguished, or relatedly that the concept takes different forms depending on the context.

We believe that an empirically grounded understanding of the ordinary notions of happiness and well-being can help cut through the fog, and in this paper discuss the results of several new studies to that end. In particular, we examine lay judgments about several examples employing a variety of well-being-related terms. Since well-being is often thought to depend not just on internal psychological states but also on the external conditions of people’s lives, such as whether they have healthy social relationships or meaningful jobs, our studies focus on the sensitivity of various terms like ‘happy’ or ‘doing well’ to internal and external factors. This approach has several virtues: focusing on relatively simple judgments and scrutinizing patterns across terms and cases reduces the “noise” that often attends unreflective judgments and allows us to tease out the key concepts employed by the folk as well as some features of what people value regarding well-being.

From these studies a fairly clear picture emerges: ‘happy’ predominantly takes a purely descriptive psychological meaning, while a cluster of terms such as ‘doing well’ and ‘enviable life’ appear to express a single evaluative concept corresponding to the philosophical notion of well-being. Ironically, ‘well-being’ appears not to be a good ordinary language term for this concept, though perhaps it expresses yet another concept. The concept of well-being looks to be something of a technical notion that, while it has counterparts in lay thinking, may have no straightforward translation into everyday English. ‘Happy’, by contrast, is deeply embedded in common parlance, and it would be surprising if no corresponding concept or concepts could be more or less clearly identified. As it happens, such an identification does seem to be possible, and academics, policymakers and other professionals trading in the language of happiness risk getting the concept wrong and misleading their audience if they aren’t mindful of what the terms refer to in ordinary use.

Through our investigations of the concepts of happiness and well-being, we also learn something about lay *conceptions* of well-being and hence about people’s values regarding matters of personal welfare.<sup>1</sup> In particular, we examine the relative importance of psychological (internal) factors and (external) life conditions for well-being, as the folk see it. Among other things, we find little support for hedonistic and other mental state views of well-being; life conditions fundamentally matter to most people. On the other hand, lay people seem to ascribe far more importance to the psychological aspects of well-being than to external conditions. Mental state approaches to well-being, then, may be out of step with the folk, but perhaps not *that* far out of step. These findings have implications not just for philosophical debates in ethical theory and empirical research on happiness and well-being but also for policy, insofar as policy should be responsive to citizens’ values.

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<sup>1</sup> We distinguish concepts and conceptions along lines that are familiar in the philosophical literature, and use uppercase to denote the former. Very roughly, one can think of the concept of X as a vehicle of thought, and claims about a concept have to do with the meaning and reference of ‘X’. Whereas a conception of X is a substantive theory about the nature of X, though in some cases the distinction may not be entirely sharp. To take a crude example, the *concept* WELL-BEING might be defined in terms of a person being a fitting object of attitudes like sympathy and envy, whereas an Aristotelian *conception* of well-being takes well-being to consist in virtuous activity. That is, a person merits envy or sympathy—has or lacks well-being—insofar as her life involves, or lacks, virtuous activity (e.g. Darwall, 2002).

## 2. Philosophical background

As already briefly touched upon, not only is there no philosophical consensus about the precise nature of happiness and well-being, there is significant disagreement about whether this subject area concerns one, two or three concepts or kinds. The concept of well-being refers to a kind of value, often called prudential value, and may be expressed by a variety of more or less interchangeable terms, including ‘welfare’, ‘flourishing’, and in one prominent sense of the term, ‘happiness’. There may, of course, be slight differences of meaning or at least connotation among these words, all are standardly taken to refer to matters of *benefit* or *harm*: what is good or bad for a person, is in her interest, makes her better or worse off, or makes her life go well or badly for her. We might also isolate the notion of well-being in terms of the sorts of attitudes and behaviors that are characteristically associated with it, such as sympathy or envy. Importantly, to ascribe well-being (or negatively, ill-being) to someone is to make a *value judgment*, namely that the person is doing well or badly.

On one common way of dividing up theories of well-being, there are three main approaches to the nature of well-being: hedonism, desire fulfillment theories, and objective theories (e.g. Parfit, 1984; Tiberius, 2018).<sup>2</sup> According to hedonism, well-being consists entirely in a person’s balance of pleasant versus unpleasant experience (e.g. Crisp, 2006; Feldman, 2004). Desire theories identify well-being with getting what you want, or with the satisfaction of some idealized variant of your desires such as what you would want given full information. Objective theories come in two forms. List theories take well-being to consist wholly in the possession of the items on some list of objective goods, with common list items including knowledge, friendship, achievement and pleasure, among others (e.g. Arneson, 1999; Fletcher, 2013). Nature-fulfillment views, also called “eudaimonistic” or “perfectionist,” are also objective, but don’t simply offer a list of goods. Rather, they conceive of well-being as the fulfillment of ideals that are grounded in an individual’s makeup—for instance, realizing your potential through objectively worthwhile activities. The paradigm of such a theory, Aristotle’s, regards well-being as a life of virtuous or excellent activity that fully realizes one’s potential as a human being. Some modern variants of the view, arguably found in writers like Mill, Maslow, or Haybron focus on the fulfillment of one’s individual versus species nature: self-fulfillment. While ‘flourishing’ strictly serves as a synonym for ‘well-being’ in most of the philosophical literature, it is most commonly associated with nature-fulfillment theories. ‘Happiness’ also makes a frequent appearance in philosophical work in this vein, and sometimes in reference to other conceptions of well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Many philosophers and most well-being researchers in the sciences employ the term ‘happiness’ quite differently, as a purely psychological term akin to ‘joy’, ‘satisfaction’, ‘anxiety’ or ‘depression’. Ascriptions of happiness in this sense do not entail value judgments; they simply describe a person’s state of mind. One might think of ‘subjective well-being’, oft-used in the psychological literature, as a blanket term encompassing the various psychological states referred to as happiness, though note that it does not refer to a species of well-being; it is, rather, a strictly descriptive, nonevaluative term. Theories of happiness in this sense include life satisfaction theories, hedonism, and emotional state theories. On life satisfaction accounts, happiness is an attitude of being satisfied with one’s life as a whole (Sumner, 1996). This can be understood in different ways, but the core idea is that happiness centers not on feelings but on a kind of judgment regarding how well one’s life is going by one’s own standards. Hedonistic theories of

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<sup>2</sup> In this discussion we list only a couple of representative examples of each sort. A definitive resource on philosophical theorizing about well-being is (Fletcher, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> References on the philosophical usage of ‘happiness’ are given in Section 3.

happiness, like their counterparts in the well-being literature, equate happiness with experiences relating to pleasure (e.g. Feldman, 2010a). The difference is that they entail nothing about the value of pleasure — ‘happiness’ is simply a term for pleasant states of mind. Finally, emotional state theories conceive of happiness as a matter of a person’s emotional condition, for instance whether one is generally cheerful, energetic and relaxed, as opposed to anxious and depressed (e.g. Haybron, 2008). Just as depression is not merely an experiential state but a broad psychological condition, so too is happiness on an emotional state conception. Indeed, depression would count as simply one pronounced form of unhappiness on this sort of view.

Unless otherwise noted, we follow a common practice of using ‘happiness’ in the purely psychological sense in this paper, and ‘well-being’ for the evaluative notion, though one question is precisely whether this practice finds support in ordinary language, so this is merely a notational convenience.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth clarifying how hedonism could be a theory of both happiness and well-being, where those are not simply the same thing. The answer is that even on a hedonistic theory of well-being, which identifies well-being with pleasure, WELL-BEING remains an evaluative concept.<sup>5</sup> The hedonist about well-being is not merely describing a state of mind but making a value judgment: the only thing that ultimately benefits a person is pleasure. Whereas in the psychological sense of ‘happiness’, a hedonist about happiness is merely characterizing a certain mental state as equivalent to pleasure, making no value judgment at all. A hedonist about happiness might reject hedonism about well-being, for example believing that the title character of *The Truman Show* is happy but nonetheless badly off, leading an unenviable life: his life is a sham, his loved ones merely actors paid to pretend. (This case is a variation of Nozick’s famous experience machine example (Nozick, 1974)). A hedonist about well-being, by contrast, would assert that Truman is no worse off for the deception, as long as it doesn’t make his experience worse. Whether that claim is correct is, of course, a question of values: do external conditions fundamentally matter for well-being, constituting benefits or harms for us? Most theories of well-being hold that they do, with hedonism being the chief exception.

These, in short, are the two main well-being-related concepts in the scholarly literature, and the main theories thereof. There may be others; in particular, various authors have suggested that we may need to distinguish multiple well-being concepts.<sup>6</sup> For example, the notion of how well a *person* is doing may be distinct from that of how well her *life* is going for her. Perhaps hedonism is correct as a theory of the former, but not the latter. So one question of interest is whether lay valuing employs multiple well-being concepts, or just one.

The role of external versus internal conditions in happiness and well-being is an important question for a couple of reasons. First, it is helpful in distinguishing the concepts: if a given concept tracks external conditions, for instance, then it cannot be a purely psychological concept, as HAPPINESS is often thought to be. More importantly, it is one of the prime questions in the philosophical debates about well-being: does anything other than the quality of our experience matter? Can something benefit or harm us even if it has no impact on our mental states? Hedonists and other mental state theorists answer in the negative. While such theories are distinctly in the minority these days they remain major contenders and have indeed are enjoying

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<sup>4</sup> This is the standard usage among philosophers employing ‘happiness’ in the psychological sense, though sometimes ‘welfare’ or ‘flourishing’ are used for well-being.

<sup>5</sup> We are following the convention of using upper-case letters when a term denotes a concept.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Alexandrova, 2017; Griffin, 2000; Kagan, 1992, 1994; Scanlon, 1999..

a resurgence of interest (e.g. Bramble, 2016; Crisp, 2006; Feldman, 2004; Smuts, 2017; Weijers, 2014).

Even if mental state theories of well-being are false, how far off the mark are they? Are states of mind just a small part of well-being, nearly the whole thing, or something in between? In recent years this question has become especially salient with the rise of subjective well-being or “happiness” research, positive psychology, and approaches to policy that rely on measures of well-being—which for the most part focus on subjective well-being and other psychological states.<sup>7</sup> These movements have met with considerable skepticism in some quarters, not least among philosophers, particularly in political philosophy, as well as among other researchers focusing on issues of development and poverty. The most prominent doubts include worries about *paternalism*—notably, usurping the individual’s role in looking after their own welfare and imposing the state’s notions of well-being on citizens—and secondly, *adaptation*: disadvantaged individuals might content themselves with “small mercies” and be happy in spite of grim external circumstances, yielding the specter of happy slaves and the like. Such concerns are prime motivators of the popular “capabilities approach” to policy, according to which states should promote, not well-being, but *capabilities* or freedoms to achieve valuable lives. This includes cultivating internal resources through means like education, but tends to focus on the improvement of external circumstances. In capabilities theory and perhaps among most political philosophers generally, the psychological aspects of well-being tend to receive a steep discount, with the primary metrics of advantage being external: wealth, opportunities, healthcare, etc. Even though most proponents of “happiness policy” allow that happiness is just one among the goals of policy, there does not appear to be much enthusiasm for the approach in political philosophy. To be sure, well-being generally, and not just its psychological aspects, is discounted for various reasons, as well-being is widely rejected as the “currency” of justice. But it would be singularly odd to maintain that it matters little for policy whether the citizenry thrives or languishes, whether their lives go well or badly, and it seems doubtful that many philosophers would take such an extreme view. But if well-being does have genuine importance for policy, then the neglect if not contempt toward subjective well-being concerns in the field is striking. It suggests that happiness is not viewed as a particularly important aspect of well-being, and at least one prominent author, Martha Nussbaum, has explicitly argued as much (Nussbaum, 2010).

One of us has argued in previous work that, insofar as we are concerned to avoid or constrain paternalism in policy, it would be unwise to ignore citizens’ views about what in fact matters to them. If most people care deeply about happiness, deeming it even more important than external success for well-being, then policymakers should be aware of that fact and take account of it in policymaking. To do otherwise—to neglect happiness in policymaking—may in fact be deeply paternalistic (Haybron & Alexandrova, 2013; Haybron & Tiberius, 2015). It is important, then, to understand what the folk take to be important for well-being.

What of the role of external conditions in major theories of well-being? This is not entirely clear, save to note that they plainly matter on all but mental state views.<sup>8</sup> But a central motivation for desire theories is precisely to correct the main deficiency seen in hedonism: people

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<sup>7</sup> The relevant literature is massive, but a few recent handbooks give a sense of the landscape (Adler & Fleurbaey, 2015; David, Boniwell, & Ayers, 2013; Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Stoicism might reasonably be lumped in with mental state approaches since virtue is arguably an internal state of the agent, and indeed part of the point of the theory is that it takes external conditions to be matters of “indifference” to well-being: only your own failings can harm you. While the doctrine was historically quite influential, e.g. gaining substantial popular currency in the Roman empire, we presume it is not currently a widespread view among the public, however, and set it aside.

seem to care about more than just their experience, notably being concerned with how their lives *actually* go, and whether the things they desire actually come about. A person might want actually to have friends and actually to succeed in their goals—not merely for it to *seem* that way. On a desire theory, well-being requires that the external conditions of one’s life actually conform to one’s desires. Some theorists have maintained that given sufficient reflection we would realize that only mental states really matter to us, *de facto* yielding a mental state theory (Brandt, 1979; Sidgwick, 1907). But this is a minority view.

On some related theories of well-being, success in one’s aims is a central part of well-being, or perhaps the entirety of it (Arneson, 1999; Keller, 2009; Raz, 1986; Scanlon, 1999). Given the plausible assumption that most of the important aims that structure our activity center on external conditions—succeeding at one’s work, family life, friendships, etc.—then we should expect such conditions to form a large portion of well-being given such a view. Another clue to the presumed role of external factors in desire-theoretic welfare is the way this view has played out in the field of welfare economics, which traditionally assumes a preference satisfaction theory on which our preferences are fully revealed by our choice behavior, which in turn can effectively be modeled by market behavior and hence money metrics—yielding a “mindless economics” that can dispense entirely with assessments of internal psychological conditions (Gul & Pesendorfer, 2008). We can know how well people are doing simply by knowing what choices are available to them, and whether they have more options or fewer. Since economic growth naturally increases people’s options—more money, more options—it has accordingly taken on a starring role in policy since the Second World War. While few philosophers have endorsed the economic view of well-being, and economists themselves are growing increasingly dubious, the fact that it has been taken seriously at all—and that the very idea of taking subjective well-being metrics seriously continues to elicit giggles in some quarters—suggests widespread acceptance of a view of well-being on which external conditions feature quite prominently. Our results suggest that the reality may in fact be the opposite.

In the case of objective theories of well-being—both list and nature-fulfillment accounts—external conditions again tend to feature prominently, but to an extent that isn’t clear. Such views typically accord some role to positive mental states, for instance counting pleasure as a list item. But among the most common list items are knowledge, achievement and friendship, and all three of these, as normally understood, essentially involve external conditions, particularly in the case of friendship. But the basic framework leaves it open what the relative importance of internal versus external conditions might be. We also do not place much weight on the precise interpretation of “internal” and “external,” but it is meant to be equivalent to the distinction between psychological/mental and non-psychological/mental factors. Unconscious mental states and psychological dispositions would thus count as internal states, while bodily health qualifies as external in the present sense.

Virtue is a common list item and figures centrally in Aristotelian theories and others in the ancient eudaimonistic tradition. Among Stoics, following Socrates, virtue is conceived as a purely internal state of the individual that is both necessary and sufficient for well-being, while external conditions are strictly matters of “indifference.” While not often characterized as such, this is effectively a mental state approach to well-being. Theorists following Aristotle, by contrast, understand well-being in terms of virtuous *activity*, and this is normally understood to have external conditions as a component, at least for many activities. Good parenting, for instance, is not simply a good state of mind. Yet external conditions appear to have secondary importance on this approach, and indeed Aristotle’s ideal of the contemplative life in Book X of the

*Nicomachean Ethics* at least comes close to a purely internal conception of well-being. Richard Kraut has recently extended this line of thought in a striking revision of Aristotle's views, "experientialism," that identifies well-being with purely experiential states, differing from hedonism only in counting a wide range of experiences beyond pleasure (Kraut, 2018).

While objective theories often place the emphasis on internal conditions, they still tend not to accord hedonic states or subjective well-being a very large role in well-being. In some authors, at least, subjective well-being appears to be a fairly minor player in well-being (e.g. Annas, 2004; Hurka, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010).

In short, scholarship on well-being in philosophy and some other fields varies in the importance assigned to internal versus external conditions, but most views allow at least some role for external conditions in constituting well-being. And internal states relating to happiness or subjective well-being often occupy a secondary role at best.

### 3. The need for empirical study

The traditional means of deciding the sorts of questions we have been discussing is good-old-fashioned philosophical reflection. Through some mix of armchair theorizing and the probing of philosophers' intuitions we develop and defend views about the nature of the concepts and kinds in question. It is not easy to see what could entirely supplant this method, and indeed one of us has spilled a good deal of ink theorizing about happiness and well-being in roughly this manner (e.g. Haybron, 2008). Sometimes philosophical theories are quite complex, and hence difficult to explore empirically with a lay population sample. Stoics, for instance, identify well-being with virtue, so that nothing can harm the truly virtuous agent. They were well aware that this view can seem counterintuitive, so no Stoic would expect a survey of lay intuitions to reveal that the folk already think that what's good for us is virtue, and virtue alone. Stoicism isn't supposed to be commonsensical.

But empirical studies of lay judgment also have a role to play, and here we employ them to inform one major aspect of the philosophical debate: to what extent happiness and well-being consist in states of mind, or also involve the external conditions of individuals' lives. To frame the discussion it will be convenient to employ a more or less familiar distinction between *concepts* and *conceptions* of happiness and well-being (Rawls, 1971), with two corresponding questions:

1. The conceptual question: What concepts are we concerned with?
2. The substantive question: What is the correct conception of each concept (or of the kind to which it refers)?

We do not commit to any particular understanding of what underwrites this distinction, and indeed one might hold that both questions are ultimately conceptual. But it is a helpful way of marking off two sets of philosophical concerns. Roughly, we can think of the first question as: *what's our subject matter?* Are we talking about a kind of value, or merely a psychological notion? Or perhaps we are dealing with a "thick" concept mixing descriptive and evaluative elements.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the second question draws the lion's share of theoretical attention: granting that we are talking about a kind of value (or state of mind, as the case may be), *what is the nature of that kind?* What substantive conception of it should we adopt? Put another way, the first question (again roughly) concerns the *reference* of terms like 'happy' or 'doing well', while the second question concerns the *nature* or essential character of what those terms refer to.

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<sup>9</sup> Williams (1985) introduced the term, for an introduction to thick concepts see Kirchin (2013).

When philosophers debate whether ‘happiness’ is an adequate translation of ‘*eudaimonia*’, they are asking whether these terms express the same concept or not (or so we shall suppose here). This is of course partly a linguistic matter, but it also and more interestingly concerns the identity of the concept(s) expressed by our words. By contrast, when we debate whether well-being consists in pleasure, as hedonists maintain, or a life of virtuous activity, as Aristotelians claim, the dispute concerns not which concept we are talking about—the disputants may agree that they are employing the same concept—but what is the *nature* of well-being: in what does well-being consist? What ultimately benefits a person? That is a substantive question about the character of a certain value. However one understands the metaphysics of such a query, it is different from asking whether WELL-BEING is an evaluative concept or a purely descriptive, psychological concept.

So what can studies of lay intuitions tell us about these matters? Regarding the first, conceptual question, philosophers writing on happiness and related topics purport to be shedding light on the very phenomena ordinary people are concerned with—happiness as most people would recognize it, for instance. But lay usage is surely relevant to determining what terms like ‘happy’ refer to, especially as philosophers’ intuitions may not be representative. If surveys reveal that the folk consistently ascribe happiness based on external criteria, while their judgments are insensitive to psychological information, then we have reason to think that ‘happy’ does not refer to a purely psychological kind. All the more so if philosophers are divided about the meaning of ‘happy’, as in fact they are (Haybron, 2011).

It is less obvious how studying folk judgments could help answer the second, substantive question. It might be part of the nature of happiness that it involves certain sorts of neural processes that the person in the street hasn’t got a clue about. Or perhaps the nature of well-being can only be grasped through a complex chain of reasoning that takes us far away from the pretheoretical appearances, as might be the case on the Stoic account. Be that as it may, the philosophical literature in this realm in fact relies heavily on philosophers’ intuitions, often about quite pedestrian matters like whether it is bad for someone to have a treacherous spouse even if they remain blissfully unaware, to spend one’s life in a virtual reality “experience machine,” or to have one’s mental capacities reduced permanently to those of a child (Nagel, 1970; Nozick, 1974). The seeming intuitive plausibility of an affirmative answer to this question is widely taken to count strongly against mental state theories of well-being like hedonism. But again, these intuitions may be unrepresentative, and it may not be the case that “we” think what the theorist claims we think. Should we find clear and robust trends in folk intuitions that we cannot write off as confused, those judgments need to be weighed as evidence, alongside expert intuitions—at least, if intuitions have evidential standing at all.<sup>10</sup>

Recent work has made significant inroads in understanding lay well-being concepts and conceptions, notably in studies reporting that lay thinking about happiness is influenced by moral considerations, suggesting the ordinary concept is evaluative, and not simply a descriptive psychological notion as widely supposed (Díaz, Rodrigo & Reuter, Kevin, forthcoming; Phillips, De Freitas, Mott, Gruber, & Knobe, 2017; Phillips, Misenheimer, & Knobe, 2011; Phillips, Nyholm, & Liao, 2014); see also studies testing lay intuitions about the experience machine case (Brigard, 2010; Hindriks & Douven, 2018; Olivola et al., 2013; Weijers, 2013). Psychologists and other social scientists have done various studies asking people how they define happiness, or what happiness means to them, but this research is severely limited by the abstract nature of the task

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<sup>10</sup> On the controversial question to what extent folk intuitions are of interest to philosophy, see *inter alia* (Horvath, 2010; Machery, 2017; Nado, 2016; Weinberg, Gonnerman, Buckner, & Alexander, 2010; Williamson, 2008).



and confusion, at least among participants if not investigators themselves, about what exactly participants are reporting: typically, just what they associate with happiness, or what they take to be important sources of happiness (“for me, happiness means hanging out with friends”). But this has no bearing on the philosophical question of what it *is* to be happy, such that things like hanging out with friends causes it.

A systematic examination of the contours of key well-being concepts remains to be done, and is not a trivial undertaking: the folk employ a variety of terms for matters related to well-being, and usage may differ across contexts and individuals in ways that can make it difficult to determine exactly what people mean by a given term. ‘Happy’, for example, is widely thought to be ambiguous in ordinary usage, and philosophers continue to debate whether it primarily expresses a psychological notion or an evaluative concept akin to ‘flourishing’.<sup>11</sup> A given person might use the term in both ways depending on context, and at times may have no well-defined concept in mind. And perhaps usage is sometimes influenced by factors such as mood that have no bearing on the definition of the concept.

Here we aim to get an initial fix on folk concepts of happiness and well-being through a series of experiments that deploy a variety of different terms and assess the sensitivity of participants’ judgments to internal factors (psychological states) and external factors (life conditions), respectively. Our reason for choosing this focus is that it is diagnostic of several philosophically interesting questions. If usage of a term like ‘happy’ or ‘doing well’ is completely insensitive to the life conditions of the person being assessed (e.g., whether they have a good job), tracking only the person’s state of mind (e.g., whether they feel good), that suggests the word may be merely a psychological term, or alternatively denotes a value for which external conditions aren’t thought important. Whereas if attributions of the term are strongly sensitive to life conditions, that suggests both that the concept in question is not merely psychological and that those external conditions are deemed to be important for the matter in question. Since well-being-related concepts are presumably used to refer to matters, psychological or otherwise, that people take to be important for a good life, such results tell us something both about the contours of the concepts and about what people value. Further, they can shed light on folk conceptions of well-being: if the evidence suggests a given term expresses the value concept WELL-BEING—and we will discuss evidence to that effect below—then the sensitivity of that term to external versus internal conditions can indicate the level of support for mental state theories of well-being, as opposed other views such as desire theories or objective list accounts, among laypersons. In short, knowing how lay judgments employing a range of well-being-related terms respond to information about internal versus external conditions can tell us about the concepts involved, the conceptions laypeople have of those concepts, and what people value.

Studies of the present sort are important for five broad sorts of reasons. First, a basic question for well-being research is how closely its results bear on the things people care about: is putative “happiness” research really about happiness as ordinary people know it, for instance, or merely what investigators found it convenient to measure? Are researchers studying the kinds that people care about? Are there important well-being-related concepts that researchers have failed to distinguish and study? To take an example, life evaluation and emotional well-being

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<sup>11</sup> This debate appears in most extended discussions in the literature. For reviews see Haybron (2008, 2011). Three monographs defending versions of the best-known views of happiness in the psychological sense include Feldman, 2010b; Haybron, 2008; Sumner, 1996. More recent monographs, most treating ‘happiness’ as an evaluative term, include Badhwar, 2014; Bloomfield, 2014; Cahn & Vitrano, Christine, 2015; Martin, 2012; Mulnix, Jennifer Wilson & Mulnix, Michael Joshua, 2015; Russell, 2013; Vitrano, 2013.

measures often yield different results, for instance with the former correlating more strongly with income, so that the same study may be reported as showing that happiness does, or does not, saturate after income reaches a certain level (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). People take happiness to be obviously important, so it matters whether such claims actually conform to ordinary usage. It bears remarking just how well-entrenched references to happiness are in empirical research and policy documents, despite the well-known difficulties with the term. An illustrative example is Martin Seligman, whose recent work argues against the use of ‘happiness’ in the literature given the confusion it engenders; and yet his book containing this argument nonetheless has ‘happiness’ in the subtitle (Seligman, 2011). Realistically, there’s no avoiding the term; it is too deeply embedded in the public imagination. We need to make sure, then, that we get it right.

Second, it can matter greatly for policy that we understand how laypeople think about well-being and what they take to be important. It may be problematic, for instance, if governments heed the prominent calls for policy to focus solely on the promotion of happiness, conceived as pleasure, though citizens’ own values are in fact decidedly non-hedonistic, and moreover their own understanding of ‘happiness’ is quite different from the state’s. If policy is going to be sharply at odds with citizens’ own language and values, that fact should at least be registered in policymakers’ deliberations, and perhaps regarded as more than a little problematic. Indeed, it is a fairly standard tenet of modern political philosophy that policy ought to be sensitive to citizens’ values, if not largely deferential to them.<sup>12</sup> Since the “experts” accept highly divergent conceptions of happiness and well-being, and cannot even agree on the ordinary meanings of well-being-related terms, this worry is hardly notional.

Third, as noted above, philosophers and others purporting expertise in matters of well-being trade heavily in claims about what their terms mean in ordinary language, as just noted, as well as what “we” think about what ultimately benefits people, and there is little consensus on these matters. Enough has been written in these debates to make plain that many philosophers care about whether their theorizing, or at least their vocabulary, comports reasonably well with lay thinking—consider just the ubiquity of references to what “we” think in philosophical argument, a practice that has helped to motivate empirical studies like our own—and the rest of us may reasonably care about whether Aristotle’s insights about the good life really had anything to do with happiness as we know it.

Fourth, there is a simple linguistic concern that researchers understand how the folk use the language so that questionnaires can be designed to elicit the information they seek (e.g., (Statistics, 2012)). And, moreover, that researchers can understand what participants are telling them. If one doesn’t know what people mean by ‘happy,’ then it is hard to interpret self-reports claiming to be so. And if lay usage of that term is obscure, then it would be helpful to know what clearer substitutes might suffice to get the information we seek: does ‘satisfied with life’ capture the lion’s share of what people mean by the term? Or must we ask various questions about the different aspects of participants’ emotional states, or something else altogether? And, noting that many researchers’ favored term, ‘well-being,’ for denoting the value of doing well, may not have such a familiar ring to the person in the street, we should inquire whether ‘well-being’ really has the same meaning in ordinary usage. In eliciting lay judgments about well-being, it is possible that ‘well-being’ isn’t the best term.

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<sup>12</sup> This idea is expressed variously, most notably in the endorsement of notions like liberal neutrality, which enjoins states to be neutral among conceptions of the good, or public reason, which requires state actions to be justifiable to all citizens (e.g. Dworkin, 1984; Fleurbaey, 2012; Gaus, 2009; Haybron & Tiberius, 2015; Klosko & Wall, 2003; Quong, 2011; Rawls, 1971, 1993).

Many philosophers take their primary task to consist in elucidating fundamental notions of our ordinary conceptual framework (Jackson, 1998). Philosophical accounts of concepts such as *intention*, *knowledge*, *happiness* and the like should thus be consistent with folk intuitions. Astonishingly, there is a considerable debate as to the relevance of lay intuitions for philosophy (for discussion, see e.g. Alexander, 2012, 2016; Alexander & Weinberg, 2007; Colaço, Kneer, Alexander, & Machery, 2016; Horvath, 2010; Machery, 2011, 2017; Schwitzgebel & Cushman, 2012, 2015; Weinberg, Gonnerman, Buckner, & Alexander, 2010).

Advocates of armchair philosophy have rejected lay intuitions, since non-philosophers apparently lack both the required *expertise* and the necessary *deliberative* care characteristic of philosophical inquiry (cf. *inter alia* Kauppinen, 2007; Ludwig, 2007; Williamson, 2008); for an overview, see Horvath, 2010. However, both the expertise defense and the reflection defense of armchair philosophy are subject to serious doubt. Tobia, Buckwalter, & Stich (2013) report that the actor-observer bias of professional philosophers is as pronounced as for laypeople (though the directionality is reversed); Schwitzgebel & Cushman (2012, 2015) found that philosophers fall prey to framing and order effects despite expertise, training and reflection. The reflection defense, too, is spurious: Colaço et al., 2016 show that encouraging extensive reflection via a battery of techniques from behavioral economics and social psychology has no effect on the responses to five well-known thought experiments.<sup>13</sup> At any rate, we think the proof is in the pudding: as we hope will be evident in what follows, it seems unlikely that our results could be explained away as misleading artifacts of unreflective practice; the data appear to be telling us something deep about the nature of the ordinary concepts.

#### 4. Previous research

Existing research in this area has centered on three questions. The largest body of work examines commonsense associations with happiness and well-being: what do people associate with terms like ‘happiness’? Such studies typically purport to reveal how the folk “define” happiness or the good life by asking participants explicit questions such as what happiness means to them, e.g., “What is happiness for you?” (Carlquist, Ulleberg, Fave, Nafstad, & Blakar, 2017; Delle Fave et al., 2016; Ip, 2011; Mogilner, Kamvar, & Aaker, 2011; Pflug, 2009; Sotgiu, 2016).<sup>14</sup> But there is little reason to think that laypersons typically understand such questions as queries about anything resembling conceptually or metaphysically necessary and sufficient conditions. A perfectly normal response to such a question might be “Happiness is good friends and good health,” but this could simply be the person’s theory about the most important or salient causes of happiness, not their view of what happiness *is*. (Perhaps they just think it’s obvious that to be happy is to be satisfied with one’s life, and take friendship and health to be important for life satisfaction.) Or maybe health and friendship are mentioned as prominent *effects* of happiness, or causes and effect both, or yet again, mere associations: happiness, friends and health just naturally go together, whatever the causal connections among them. Such lay “definitions” convey useful information

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, well-designed empirical studies can offer some approximation of philosophical reflection: while a single person’s response to a single question may have little evidential value, a large number of individuals’ responses to a variety of questions may be quite a different matter. Perhaps any one vignette or questionnaire item skews responses for this or that reason, say by generating strong feelings that obscure the issues. But given enough data points, such “noise” may fade and explicable patterns emerge, giving us some sense of what people would say if they really thought things through clearly—that is, if they were reflective about it. One might think of this sort of approach, which we pursue here, as a kind of *distributed reflection*.

<sup>14</sup> A related approach is to study the literatures of different populations to see how the term is used, or alternatively explicitly defined in dictionaries (e.g. Joshanloo, 2013, 2014; Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, & Galinha, 2013).

about commonsense associations with happiness, but unless carefully constructed they are not likely to illuminate the connections between philosophical theory and commonsense thinking.

Our studies do include items regarding explicit conceptions of happiness and well-being, but in a format that seems to us more likely to elicit the relevant information. But in general, the contours of lay concepts and conceptions will more reliably be gleaned from the study of judgments about particular cases rather than their attempts at giving abstract generalizations. Philosophy is difficult, in part, precisely because it is so hard to come up with explicit characterizations of the concepts and theories that drive our everyday judgments. The theories we endorse often clash with our actual practice, and often need to be revised when the discrepancy is noted. Thus do students often enter introductory philosophy classes believing simple generalizations like “happiness is all that matters,” but then quickly realize that they care about other things as well.

Another body of work focuses on the experience machine thought experiment, testing how far lay judgments agree with those of philosophers and whether irrelevant factors like status quo biases might undermine the evidential force of the intuitions that are widely taken to vitiate mental state theories of well-being (Brigard, 2010; Hindriks & Douven, 2018; Olivola et al., 2013; Weijers, 2013). While quite relevant to the present investigation, these studies have yielded mixed results and focus on a particular question regarding a specific sort of exotic science-fiction scenario: whether one would be willing to plug in to a virtual reality machine for the rest of one’s life, where one could have the (illusory) experience of any sort of life a person could want. But people might be unwilling to plug in for a variety of reasons unrelated to their conception of well-being, and it is generally not clear how reliable intuitions about such extreme scenarios are.

A third set of studies reports that moral factors drive ascriptions of happiness, concluding that HAPPINESS is partly a moral concept (Phillips et al., 2017, 2011, 2014). For instance, people are likely to judge a morally bad person as less happy than a good person, even when they are stipulated to have equivalently positive mental states like pleasure, life satisfaction, etc. These findings suggest that the folk concept of happiness may not be a purely psychological notion, corresponding more closely to the philosophical notion of well-being; and, moreover, that folk conceptions of well-being may be moralized, possibly lending support to Aristotelian and other theories that take well-being to consist in virtue (a view we refer to as *welfare perfectionism*). This is a provocative result that merits further study. We do not take it up directly here, though the present studies are certainly relevant: if we find that HAPPINESS is in fact a purely descriptive psychological concept, then it cannot also be a moral or otherwise evaluative concept, as the other studies appear to suggest. Like the experience machine research, these studies give us an unclear signal: perhaps the lay responses are contaminated by biases introduced by emotionally charged moral scenarios, or participants simply don’t accept the psychological descriptions and infer that immorality carries a psychological toll not accounted for in the vignettes they were given. As well, we only know how judgments of happiness were influenced, but perhaps other terms would have yielded different results.

We believe that further progress in this area requires a cautious, systematic approach to the study of lay concepts and conceptions of happiness and well-being, using relatively simple, familiar scenarios and studying how judgments vary with changes in the vignettes and the terms employed. The hope is that this will reveal patterns that give us an initial fix on the lay concepts and conceptions, laying the foundations for further study and helping to situate other results. Our vehicle for this undertaking is the question of how far different terms are sensitive to internal versus external conditions in lay usage.

## 5. Overview of the present studies

Three experiments were conducted to test the impact of internal and external factors on ascriptions of happiness and well-being, while controlling for a range of distinct formulations. We hypothesized that lay concepts and conceptions will roughly mirror those found among philosophers, with distinctions being somewhat blurred as one would expect among laypersons. Just as philosophers disagree about whether ‘is happy’ takes the evaluative or psychological meaning, we expect folk usage likewise to be somewhat divided, with stronger emphasis on the psychological meaning, which appears predominant for instance in popular writings on happiness. We also predicted that lay ascriptions of putatively evaluative terms like ‘doing well’ or ‘enviable life’ would be relatively sensitive to external conditions, again following the dominance of non-hedonistic theories of well-being in the scholarly literature, and also given prior findings that most people’s responses to experience machine-type scenarios are non-hedonistic, indicating a basic concern for life conditions in matters of well-being (Olivola et al., 2013). Preliminary research by Haybron gives some support for these expectations (Haybron, 2008): in a variant of the George vignette described below, 36 of 39 students in an introductory ethics course deemed an individual happy who was high in subjective well-being but only because unaware that his friends and family loathe him. Yet a majority of students refused to give positive verdicts using a variety of other terms associated with the philosophical notion of well-being, such as “enviable.”

Our experiments address the following questions:

Q1: Does the expression “happy” refer to a non-evaluative psychological kind, or does it contain evaluative elements?

Q2: Is it indeed the case, as commonly presumed in the philosophical literature, that the concept of well-being is evaluative?

Q3: Might there be multiple concepts each of happiness and well-being? Differently put, might it be the case that terms like ‘happy’ and/or ‘well-being’ are tied exclusively to mental states for some people, whereas for others it also has evaluative components?

Q4: In case the concepts of happiness and/or well-being are sensitive to both internal (mental) and external (life conditions) factors, is it possible to quantify the relative importance of these factors?

Our first experiment examines just one term, ‘is happy’, using two variants of a case of blissful ignorance of deception like that discussed by Nagel, to examine the sensitivity of happiness ascriptions to information about internal versus external conditions.

## 6. Experiment 1: “Is happy”

### 6.1. Participants

128 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a Qualtrics online survey for a small compensation. The IP address location was restricted to the US. Nonnative speakers and subjects failing an attention test, responding too quickly ( $t < 10$ s) or changing their response too often ( $N > 10$ ) were excluded. The final dataset comprised 73 participants (age  $M = 39.9$ ,  $SD = 13.4$ ), 35 of whom were female.

## 6.2. Method and Materials

Participants read the following vignette and question and responded on a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree):

George is generally very cheerful and relaxed. He is highly satisfied with his life and feels deeply fulfilled. He enjoys his life greatly and has a very pleasant experience on the whole.

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “George is happy.”

Subsequently participants faced the second part of the scenario on a separate screen and had to respond to the same question again:

What George does not realize is that his wife, children and friends can’t stand him, and ridicule him behind his back. They pretend to love him only because he is wealthy. If he knew these things, he would be devastated. But they all make sure that George does not become aware of it, and in fact, he never finds out.

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “George is happy.”

Whereas the two-step scenario aspired to reveal to what extent the respective folk concepts are sensitive to external factors in an *implicit* fashion, all subjects were also consulted to report *explicitly* how they used the expression ‘is happy’:

We are interested in how you use the word ‘happy’. In saying ‘Mary is happy’ some people mean that overall, Mary has a positive state of mind: She is satisfied, has mostly positive feelings, and so on. This use of ‘happy’ is independent of external factors such as whether Mary’s life is going well for her (for example she has good job, a healthy family and/or a rich social environment etc.). Others would only say Mary is happy if her life is going well for her. What, to you, is the most appropriate way of using the word ‘happy’?

- When I say Mary is happy I only want to say that she has a positive state of mind.
- When I say Mary is happy I want to say that her life is going well for her.

Here we contrasted ‘positive state of mind’ with ‘life is going well for’, which is familiar in ordinary usage and standardly used in the philosophical literature as a term for well-being. The latter expression has potential shortcomings since ‘for her’ could be understood mentalistically and descriptively, as equivalent to ‘from her point of view’; but we expected that the juxtaposition with ‘state of mind’ would make that interpretation less likely.

## 6.3. Results

At the first stage of evaluation, at which only the psychological states were known, the level of mean happiness was 6.60 (SD=.62). It significantly exceeded mean happiness at the second stage of evaluation (M=6.18, SD=1.06), at which the external factors had been revealed (paired-sample t-test,  $t(72)=3.98$ ,  $p<.001$ , 95% CI [.21;.64], Cohen’s  $d=.46$ , a medium-small effect), see Figure 1a. The results suggest that people are somewhat sensitive to external factors in their assessment of happiness. However, these results are driven by a minority of participants: 71% of

participants gave the *same* response at both stages – thus manifesting no sensitivity to external factors, see Figure 1b. The proportion of participants giving the same response significantly exceeded the proportion of those for whom external factors made a difference (binomial test,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed). We will discuss the results from the follow-up questions together with those from Experiment 2 in section 7.3.

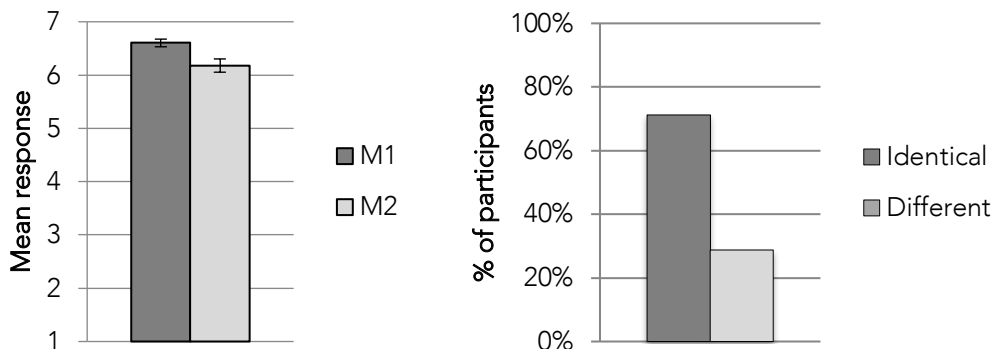


Figure 1a: Mean happiness ascription at stage 1 (M1) and stage 2 (M2), error bars denote standard error of the mean; Figure 1b: proportions of participants giving identical and different responses across stage 1 and 2.

#### 6.4. Discussion

Our first experiment suggests that ‘is happy’ largely tracks psychological factors in ordinary usage. They also suggest that the folk are divided: a substantial minority of people – about one third – do draw on external factors in making judgments about whether someone is happy, while about two-thirds employ the term in a manner that is insensitive to external conditions.

This result is consistent with the hypothesis that the term is ambiguous, with the dominant meaning being purely psychological, whereas some use the expression evaluatively, as a term for well-being. In short, there may be two concepts referred to by the expression ‘is happy’, so that (e.g.) Aristotelians and subjective well-being researchers each have some legitimate claim to the term.

There is another possibility, however: Perhaps the term is univocal, so that ‘is happy’ expresses the evaluative concept WELL-BEING. In that event, our findings suggest that the division has to do with lay theories of well-being: perhaps most laypeople are hedonists about well-being, or otherwise take our good to consist wholly in mental states. That is, perhaps calling someone happy really is making a value judgment about whether they are doing well, not merely describing their mental state; it’s just that (one might suppose) people regard only mental states as having that sort of value. Whereas a minority holds some other view, such as desire theory or some form of objectivism, on which external conditions also matter. (Of course, there are many possibilities consistent with the data, but barring evidence to the contrary we shall assume that philosophers are not wildly deviant from ordinary usage.) In this event, Aristotelians and others favoring a “well-being” reading of the term would stand vindicated: the word is not merely a descriptive psychological expression but an evaluative term akin to ‘*eudaimonia*’. And psychologists framing their results as data on “happiness” would either be misusing the language or else committing themselves in doing so to value judgments about which individuals are better or worse off than others.

One way to decide between these hypotheses is to collect data using a term that more clearly denotes well-being. For Experiment 2 we chose ‘doing well’, a familiar lay term that grammatically parallels ‘happy’—unlike ‘well-being’—and is standardly used in the philosophical literature for persons with a high level of well-being (e.g. Kraut, 2007; Sumner, 1996)). It also appears straightforwardly to be an evaluative term that, moreover, specifically concerns prudential value.

## 7. Experiment 2: “Doing well”

### 7.1. Participants

97 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a Qualtrics online survey for a small compensation. The IP address location was restricted to the US. Nonnative speakers and subjects failing an attention test, responding too quickly ( $t < 10s$ ) or changing their response too often ( $N > 10$ ) were excluded. The final dataset comprised 48 participants (age  $M = 39.4$ ,  $SD = 12.6$ ), 22 of whom were female.

### 7.2. Method and Materials

Methods and materials were identical as in experiment 1. The single difference was the target state ascribed, which regarded not whether George “is happy” but “is doing well”.

### 7.3. Results

#### 7.3.1. Sensitivity to External Factors

At the first stage of evaluation, at which only the psychological states were known, the level of mean wellbeing was 6.65 ( $SD = .60$ ). It significantly exceeded mean wellbeing at the second stage of evaluation ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ), at which the external factors had been revealed (paired-sample t-test,  $t(47) = 8.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI 1.46;2.41], Cohen’s  $d = 1.52$ , a very large effect), see Figure 2a. The results suggest that people are very sensitive to external factors in their assessment of whether someone is doing well. Nearly 80% of the participants gave different responses across the two stages, thus manifesting sensitivity to external factors, cf. Figure 2b. The proportion of participants giving the same response significantly exceeded the proportion of those for whom external factors made a difference (binomial test,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed).

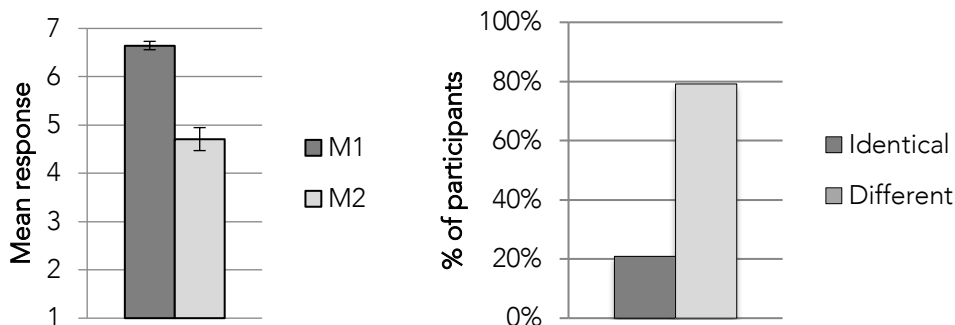


Figure 2a: Mean valuations of George doing well at stage 1 (M1) and stage 2 (M2), error bars denote standard error of the mean; Figure 2b: proportions of participants giving identical and different responses across stage 1 and 2.



### 7.3.2. The Folk Concept of Happiness (data combined for Ex.1 and Ex.2)

As regards the folk concept of happiness (framed in terms of ‘P is happy’), roughly two-thirds (67%) of the participants conceive of it as a mental state of P and about one third (33%) in terms of ‘P’s life going well for her’, see Figure 3. The distribution differs significantly from chance (binomial test,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed).

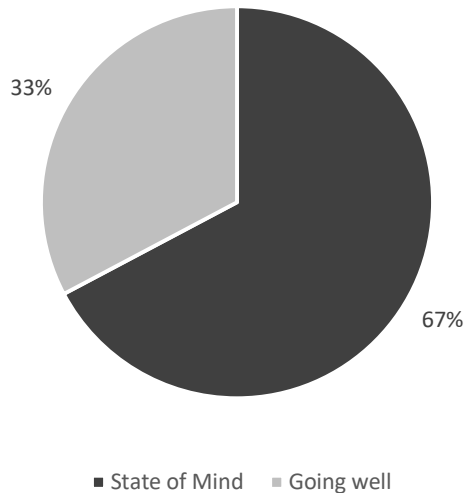


Figure 3: The folk concept of happiness (framed in terms of ‘P is happy’)

### 7.4. Discussion

These are the key conclusions from the first two experiments: *First*, there appear to be at least two concepts at play: a psychological notion (happiness, expressed by “is happy”) and an evaluative notion (well-being, expressed by “doing well”), though it is important to note that ‘happy’ is ambiguous between the psychological (happiness) and evaluative (well-being) notions. *Second*, lay conceptions of well-being are probably not for the most part mentalistic: in general, people take external conditions to matter for well-being apart from internal psychological factors. Mental state theories of well-being are not well-supported by lay intuitions. *Three*, as concerns the ambiguity of “is happy”, there is a near-perfect fit between the task-based findings of Experiment 1 (Figure 1a) and the more direct exploration of the folk concept of happiness in the follow-up questions (Figure 3). For about two thirds of the participants, revealing the external circumstances of George’s life (which are somewhat disparate from his internal situation) did not have an influence on the assessment of his happiness. Similarly, about two thirds of the participants responded that, on their view, happiness constitutes a mental state rather than someone’s life going well.

It is possible that these results are skewed by peculiarities of the specific terms used—“is happy” and “doing well”—or the scenario tested. Accordingly, in subsequent experiments we add further expressions and, later, vignettes to our investigation. As noted earlier, this allows us to look for patterns and reduces the chances that the peculiarities of a given word generates misleading signals about the underlying concepts. The terms added in Experiment 3, with their rationales, are as follows:

- ‘happy life’: disagreements about the meaning of ‘happiness’ may reflect differing emphases on the locutions ‘happy’ versus ‘happy life’, as the latter more naturally takes a broader meaning akin to well-being, a person’s “life” plausibly extending beyond internal to include external factors as well. Preliminary findings in Haybron, 2008 offer some support for this hypothesis.
- ‘good life’: a familiar term often used by philosophers for well-being (e.g. Bishop, 2015; Feldman, 2004). Plainly evaluative, though it may express a broader sort of evaluation than merely well-being, for instance encompassing moral goodness as well as prudential (Haybron, 2013). This may not affect the present results, however, since the cases tested appear to be morally neutral.
- ‘high degree of well-being’: this locution does not seem to be particularly common in lay usage, but it is the most common term used by philosophers and other researchers for well-being.
- ‘leads an enviable life’: this is a familiar and easily understood, if slightly stilted, way of denoting someone high in well-being: meriting envy, as opposed to sympathy or pity. These sorts reactive attitude expressions are sometimes used in the philosophical literature to distinguish well-being from other sorts of values (cf. ‘admirable’, which concerns virtue); see Darwall, 2002; Haybron, 2008.

This suite of terms was deemed sufficient to test our hypotheses. Other expressions were considered, such as ‘flourishing’, ‘thriving’, ‘going well for’, and ‘fortunate’, but we expect they would be redundant, misunderstood, or unnatural in the context of our vignettes, and that results would not be materially different.

## 8. Experiment 3: Six Expressions

### 8.1. Participants

444 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a Qualtrics online survey for a small compensation. The IP address location was restricted to the US. Nonnative speakers and subjects failing an attention test, responding too quickly ( $t < 10$ s) or changing their response too often ( $N > 10$ ) were excluded. The final dataset comprised 239 participants (age  $M = 42.7$ ,  $SD = 13.8$ ), 150 of whom were female.

### 8.2. Methods and Materials

We used the same vignette as in Experiments 1 and 2, though this time we tested six distinct expressions referring to happiness and well-being. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of expressions. On a 7-point Likert scale, participants had to report to what extent they agreed with one of the following claims:

- “George is happy.”
- “George’s life is a happy one.”
- “George has a good life.”
- “George leads an enviable life.”
- “George has a high degree of well-being.”
- “George is doing well.”

The principal task was again followed by a more abstract one, in which people had to report whether they consider happiness a mental state or a matter of someone’s life going well for them. All participants also completed a 10-item *Rational-Experiential Inventory* (Epstein et al. 1996), the 20-item *Moral Foundation Questionnaire* (Graham et al. 2007) and a demographic questionnaire.

### 8.3. Results

#### 8.3.1. Sensitivity to External Factors

A mixed-design ANOVA correction determined that, aggregating across the different types of well-being/happiness measures, participants evaluated the protagonist’s life more positively at the first stage than at the second stage ( $F(1,233)=3319.47, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.93$ ). Aggregating across stages, the difference in judgment type was insignificant ( $F(5,233)=1.41, p=.223, \eta_p^2=.03$ ). However, there was a significant *stage\*measure* interaction ( $F(5,233)=3.35, p=.006, \eta_p^2=.07$ ). To analyze this interaction, we conducted paired-samples t-tests for each measure and calculated effect sizes in terms of Cohen’s *d*. The results are given in Table 1, graphically represented in Figure 4.

<i>Measure</i>	<u>First Stage</u>		<u>Second Stage</u>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
	<i>M1</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>SD</i>					
is happy	6.64	0.61	5.89	1.34	3.95	44	<.001	[.37;1.14]	0.59
happy life	6.49	0.78	5.03	1.79	4.69	34	<.001	[.82;2.09]	0.79
high well-being	6.45	0.90	4.88	1.92	5.42	39	<.001	[.99;2.16]	0.85
doing well	6.62	0.49	4.26	1.73	8.4	38	<.001	[1.79;2.93]	1.34
good life	6.44	0.71	3.68	1.66	9.96	40	<.001	[2.20;3.32]	1.56
enviable life	5.95	1.26	2.15	1.41	12.08	38	<.001	[3.16; 4.43]	1.94

Table 1: Paired sample t-test results for difference in mean judgments across stages.

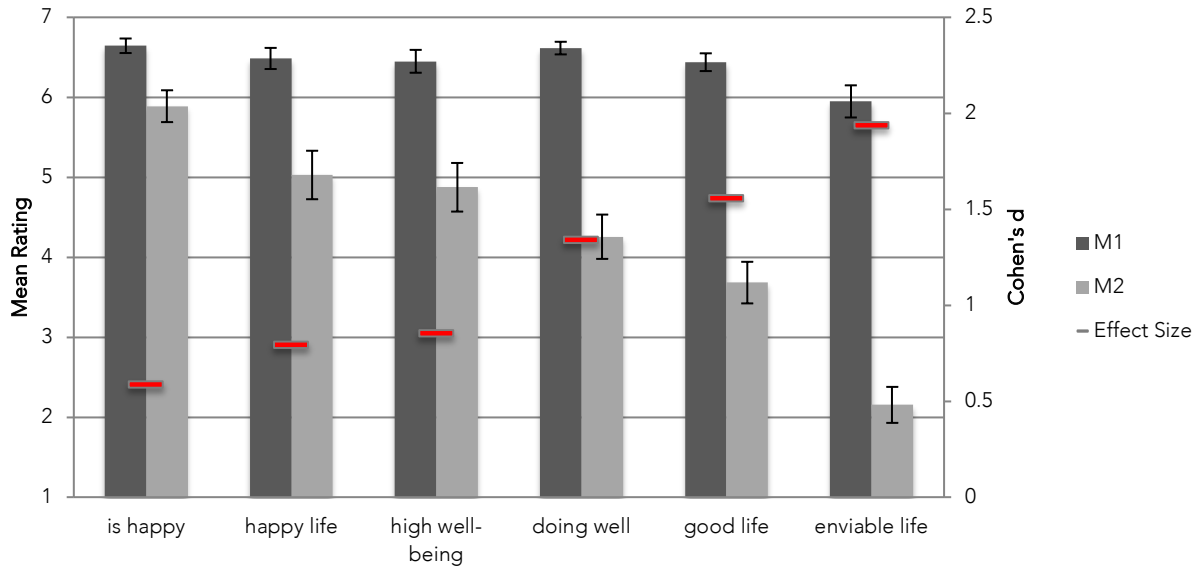


Figure 4: The bars designate mean ratings according to condition (left axis) in response to the first (dark grey) and second question (light grey), error bars standard error of the mean, red lines effect size in terms of Cohen's  $d$  (right axis).

The effect sizes were large ( $>0.8$ ) for all formulations except for 'George is happy' and 'George's life is a happy one'. Importantly, they varied drastically across conditions (the ES for *enviable life*, for instance is more than three times as large as the one for *is happy*), which shows that the tested expressions differ considerably in their sensitivity to external factors, see Figure 4. This finding is illustrated even more clearly by the percentage of participants who did not change their response after the external factors of George's life were made explicit across conditions, see Figure 5. A closer look at Figure 4 suggests a further finding: The use of 'good life', 'doing well', and 'enviable life' of the large majority of participants is sensitive to external factors (the proportion of different responses significantly exceeding chance, McNemar tests, all  $ps < .001$ , two-tailed). This implies that the folk use of these expressions – at least concerning sensitivity to external factors – is very uniform. As regards 'is happy', 'happy life' and 'high well-being', by contrast, the folk use does *not* seem to be uniform. For each expression, roughly half of the participants changed their answer once the external factors were revealed, whereas another half of the participants left it unchanged, suggesting insensitivity (the proportions did not differ significantly from chance, McNemar test for 'is happy',  $p = .22$ , for 'happy life',  $p = .50$ , for 'high well-being',  $p = .43$ , all two-tailed). The folk concepts denoted by these expressions, this might suggest, differ across people.

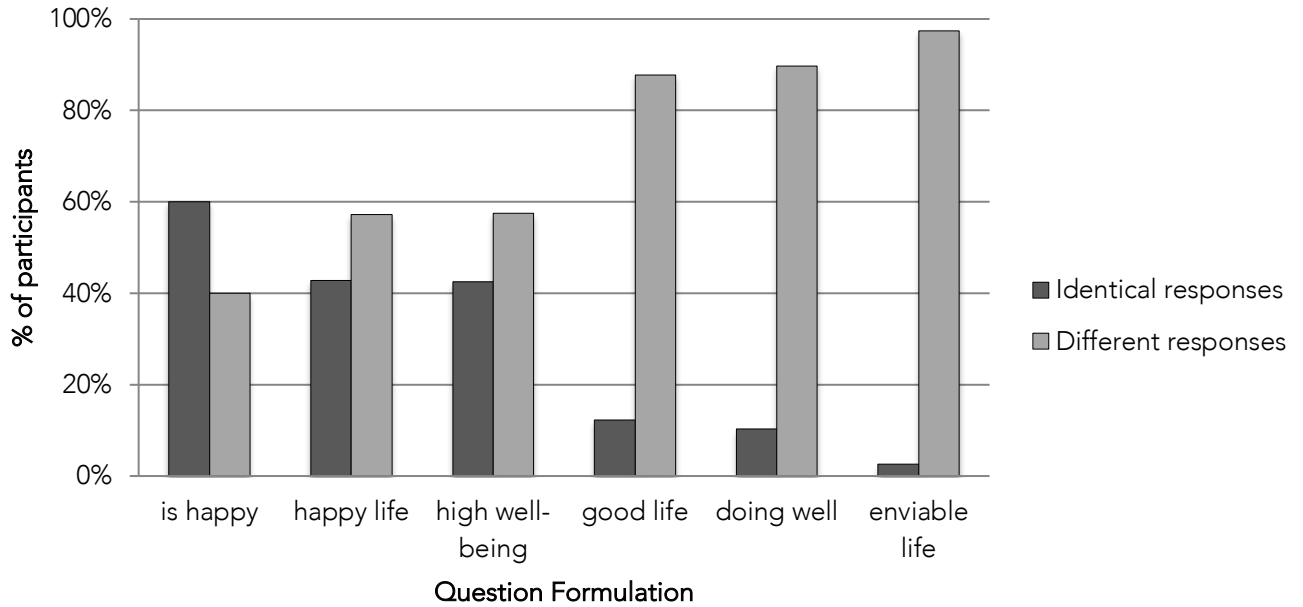


Figure 5: The bars depict the percentage of participants per condition who gave identical responses to both questions (dark grey) and distinct responses (light grey).

### 8.3.2. The Folk Concept of Happiness

As regards the folk concept of happiness (framed in terms of ‘P is happy’), roughly two-thirds (68%) of the participants conceive of it as a mental state of P and about one third (32%) in terms of ‘P’s life going well for her’, see Figure 6. The findings were near-identical with those from Experiment 1 and 2, and differed significantly from chance (binomial test,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed).

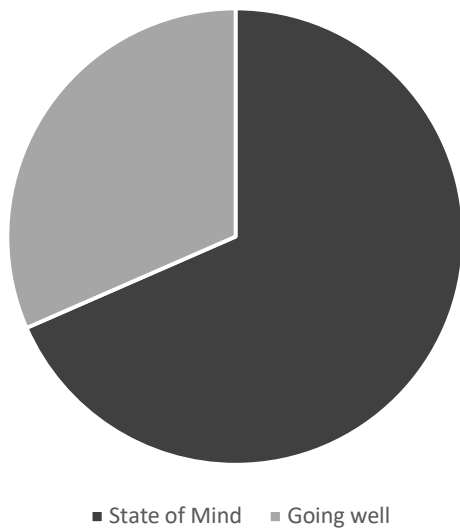


Figure 6: The folk concept of happiness (framed in terms of ‘P is happy’)

### 8.3.3. Correlations

We collapsed the data of expressions strongly sensitive to external factors (“good life”, “doing well”, “enviable life”, all Cohen’s  $ds > 1.34$ , irresponsiveness rate <13%) and those less sensitive to external factors (“is happy”, “happy life”, “high well-being”, all Cohen’s  $ds < 0.86$ , irresponsiveness rate >42%). For each participant, we calculated the *sensitivity* to external factors, i.e. the difference in attributions across the two stages (first rating – second rating) and ran correlations between this measure and the sub-scales of the moral foundation questionnaire, the rational experiential inventory (faith in intuition and need for cognition) as well as age and religiosity. Full results for all six expressions are reported in the Appendix. For the measures less sensitive to external factors, such as happy, the correlations did not reach significance. Sensitivity to external factors in the ascriptions of a “happy life”, however, correlated with harm ( $r = .41$ ) and fairness ( $r = .47$ ). Interestingly, the sensitivity to external factors in the ascription of well-being correlated negatively with age ( $r = -.35$ ) and religiosity ( $r = -.35$ ), meaning that the older the participants, and the more religious, the less they considered George’s external circumstances to matter for his well-being. Those measures more sensitive to external factors, by contrast, correlated with the MFQ subscales of *harm* ( $r = .32$ ), *fairness* ( $r = .27$ ) and *ingroup* ( $r = .19$ ). These results were particularly strong for “good life”, the ascription of which correlated positively with all subscales of the MFQ (*all*  $rs > .32$ ) except the composite *progressivism*. Those subjects who had more faith in intuition were more sensitive to external factors in their ascription of a good life ( $r = .37$ ). Among all six expressions, we found the sensitivity to external factors in the attribution of *happy life*, *good life* and *doing well* to correlate quite strongly with the two core moral categories of the MFQ, namely *harm* (*all*  $rs > .37$ ) and *fairness* (*all*  $rs > .32$ ). This suggests that people with stronger concern for morality tend to think that happiness/well-being are not all in the head.

Measure	MFQ							REI		Demographics	
	Harm	Fairness	Ingroup	Authority	Purity	Progr.	FI	NC	Age	Religiosity	
Measures less sensitive to external factors (N=120)	$r$	0.02	0.07	0.05	0.08	0.14	-0.06	0.10	0.14	-0.18	-0.05
	$p$	0.87	0.44	0.59	0.41	0.13	0.50	0.28	0.12	0.06	0.59
Measures strongly sensitive to external factors (N=119)	$r$	0.32	0.27	0.19	0.13	0.15	0.06	0.13	-0.15	0.06	0.03
	$p$	<.01	<.01	0.04	0.16	0.11	0.54	0.17	0.11	0.49	0.71

Table 2: Correlations of difference in happiness/well-being ascriptions across stages with sub-scales of the MFQ, REI, age and religiosity.

### 8.4. Discussion

Experiment 3 produced a number of findings. *First*, the folk uniformly interpret the expressions ‘doing well’ and leading a ‘good/enviable life’ as strongly sensitive to external factors. *Second*, the expressions ‘being happy’, ‘happy life’ and enjoying a ‘high level of well-being’ do not seem to be interpreted in homogeneous fashion by lay people. Roughly half of the participants

consider them sensitive to external factors, whereas half do not. *Third*, and consistent with the findings from Experiment 1, the expression ‘is happy’ is predominantly understood as independent of external factors (60%). In line with this task-based finding, about two-thirds of our participants consider ‘being happy’ a mental state rather than a matter of doing well when consulted in explicit fashion. There thus seems to be uniformity between explicitly held views regarding ‘being happy’ and experimentally revealed intuitions of use. *Fourth*, about two-thirds of those who understand happiness as a mental state opted in favor of an emotional state conception; among those who understand happiness in terms of ‘doing well’ hedonism, desire theories and objective theories all found roughly equal support. *Finally*, moralizers – people strongly sensitive to the MFQ – tend to rate external factors more strongly, and the expressions for which this trend is particularly pronounced are “happy life”, “good life” and “doing well”.

While the experiments thus far convey some sense of the degree to which various well-being-related expressions are sensitive to external versus internal conditions, it would be useful to have a clearer sense of the relative contributions of internal and external conditions in driving people’s judgments. Even if well-being is deemed to be partly a matter of external conditions, *how* important are they across expressions? Is a person’s mental state considered more or less important than their life conditions for how well they are doing? We examine this question in Experiment 4, by mixing and matching different combinations of internal and external factors to see how this affects lay ascriptions of the different terms.

## **9. Experiment 4: Relative impacts of internal/external factors**

### *9.1. Participants*

606 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a Qualtrics online survey for a small compensation. The IP address location was restricted to the US. Nonnative speakers and subjects failing an attention test, responding too quickly ( $t < 10$ s) or changing their response too often were excluded. The final dataset comprised 370 participants (Age  $M = 37.6$ ,  $SD = 12.0$  years), 186 of whom were female.

### *9.2. Methods and Materials*

In a between-subjects experiment, participants read a vignette which specified internal and external factors of potential relevance for the ascription of happiness, well-being and related attributes. The experiment employed a 2 (internal factors: positive v. negative) x 2 (external factors: good v. bad) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Below are the diametrically opposed positive/good and negative/bad conditions; the two mixed conditions paired the first half of the first vignette with the second half of the second and vice-versa:

George works as a red cross doctor and has cured many people. His family life is very harmonious and he has many interesting friends and acquaintances. George is generally cheerful, relaxed and feels fulfilled. He enjoys his life very much and has a pleasant experience on the whole.

George works as a human resources manager and had to fire many of the firm’s employees. His family life is not very harmonious and he does not have many interesting friends

and acquaintances. George is generally gloomy, tense and feels unfulfilled. He does not enjoy his life very much and does not have a pleasant experience on the whole.

Participants were then asked to report to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following claims on a 7-point Likert scale (the order was randomized):

- (1) George is happy.
- (2) George's life is a happy one.
- (3) George has a high level of well-being.
- (4) George has a good life.
- (5) George is doing well.
- (6) George leads an enviable life.

Having completed the first task, all participants were asked whether they thought 'P is happy' refers to P's mental state, or to P's life going well. Having taken a choice, the participants were presented with the same follow-up options as in experiment 1. In experiment 2, too, all participants completed a 10-item *Rational-Experiential Inventory* (Epstein et al. 1996) and the 20-item *Moral Foundation Questionnaire* (Graham et al. 2007).

### 9.3. Results

#### 9.3.1. Sensitivity to internal and external factors

A mixed-design ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction determined that, aggregating across the six different happiness and well-being measures, there was significant variation across scenarios ( $F(3,366)=2015.45, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.95$ ). It revealed further that, aggregating across scenarios, there was significant variation across measures ( $F(4.41,1613.22)=29.38, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.07$ ), see Figure 7. Post-hoc tests using Bonferroni correction revealed significant contrasts for all pairs except 'is happy' v. 'happy life' ( $p=1.00$ ) and 'enviable life' ( $p=1.00$ ); 'happy life' v. 'enviable life' ( $p=.43$ ); 'good life' v. 'doing well' ( $p=1.00$ ) and 'high well-being' ( $p=.06$ ). The two main effects were qualified by an interaction ( $F(13.22,1613.22)=31.50, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.21$ ). To analyze this interaction, we compared the difference in judgments across the four conditions for each of the six measures.



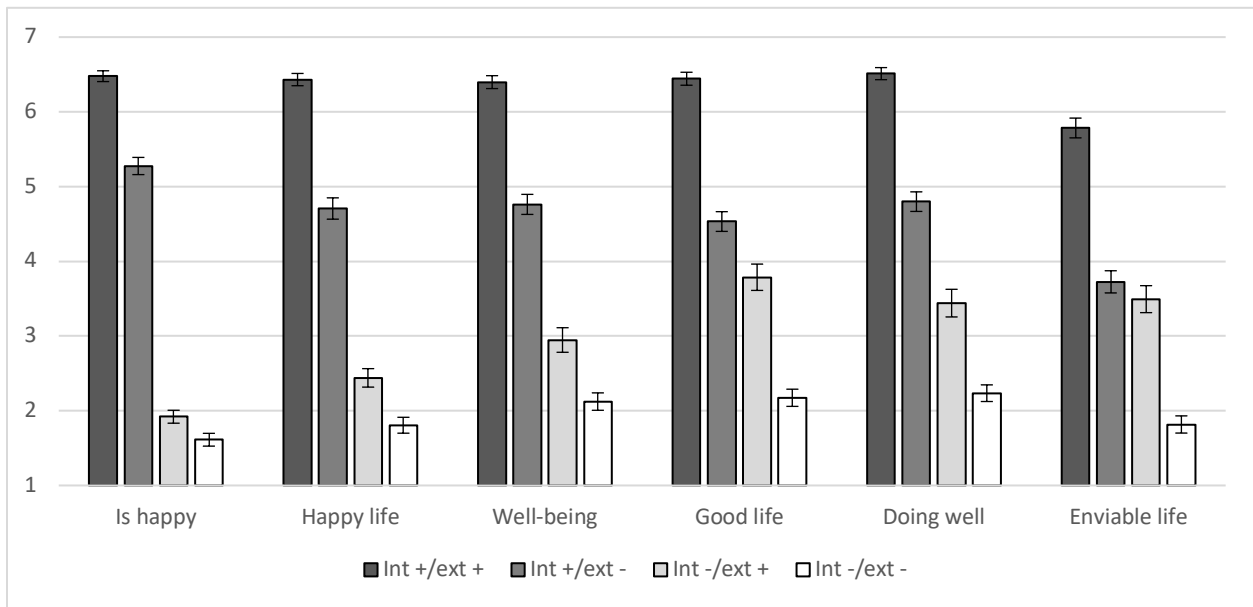


Figure 7: Mean agreement for all 24 conditions; error bars denote standard error of the mean

For each of the six expressions tested, an ANOVA reveals a significant main effect for *scenario* (*is happy*:  $F(3,366)=635.94$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta_p^2=.84$ ; *happy life*  $F(3,366)=309.93$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta_p^2=.718$ ; *good life*  $F(3,366)=189.05$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta_p^2=.61$ ; *doing well*  $F(3,366)=202.74$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta_p^2=.62$ ; *enviable life*  $F(3,366)=127.68$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta_p^2=.511$ ; *well-being*  $F(3,366)=221.89$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta_p^2=.65$ ). A two-factor ANOVA testing the impact of internal and external factors reveals a significant main effect for each on all six dependent variables (cf. Table 3). The interaction is only significant for *is happy*, *happy life* and *well-being*. Importantly, the effect size for internal factors is much more pronounced for *is happy* ( $\eta_p^2=.83$ ) than for other formulations, in particular *doing well* ( $\eta_p^2=.56$ ), *good life* ( $\eta_p^2=.50$ ) and *enviable life* ( $\eta_p^2=.36$ ). By contrast, the effect size of external factors for *is happy* ( $\eta_p^2=.14$ ) is considerably lower than for the other formulations, in particular *doing well* ( $\eta_p^2=.26$ ), *enviable life* ( $\eta_p^2=.31$ ) and *good life* ( $\eta_p^2=.33$ ).

	<i>Measure</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
internal factors	is happy	1, 366	1830.84	<.001	0.83
	happy life	1, 366	818.37	<.001	0.69
	high well-being	1, 366	562.85	<.001	0.61
	good life	1, 366	371.97	<.001	0.50
	doing well	1, 366	471.14	<.001	0.56
	enviable life	1, 366	209.16	<.001	0.36
external factors	is happy	1, 366	61.76	<.001	0.14
	happy life	1, 366	95.90	<.001	0.21
	high well-being	1, 366	91.87	<.001	0.20
	good life	1, 366	183.69	<.001	0.33
	doing well	1, 366	126.39	<.001	0.26
	enviable life	1, 366	165.59	<.001	0.31
interaction	is happy	1, 366	21.67	<.001	0.06
	happy life	1, 366	20.53	<.001	0.05
	high well-being	1, 366	10.01	0.00	0.03
	good life	1, 366	1.31	0.25	0.00
	doing well	1, 366	3.83	0.05	0.01
	enviable life	1, 366	1.73	0.19	0.01

Table 3: ANOVA Results for internal factors, external factors and the interaction of internal and external factors.

A Bonferroni corrected post-hoc test showed the means to differ significantly (all  $p < .003$ ) across all four conditions for all six expressions except for the two bad external factors conditions for *is happy* (mean difference = .31,  $p = .17$ ), and the pair of int pos/ext bad and int neg/ext good conditions for *enviable life* (mean difference = .23;  $p = 1.00$ ), see Table 4. This suggests that if George and John face equally bad circumstances, the mean ratings for ‘is happy’ do not differ significantly with internal factors, though a slight floor effect might somewhat exaggerate this finding. Interestingly the only case for which opposite internal and external factors are considered roughly alike is the formulation ‘P has an enviable life’.

	Is happy		Happy life		Well-being		Good life		Doing well		Envable life	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Int +/ext +	6,48	0,68	6,43	0,77	6,40	0,81	6,44	0,81	6,51	0,76	5,78	1,25
Int +/ext -	5,28	1,20	4,71	1,49	4,76	1,40	4,53	1,38	4,80	1,37	3,72	1,55
Int -/ext +	1,92	0,75	2,44	1,07	2,95	1,42	3,79	1,53	3,44	1,60	3,49	1,56
Int -/ext -	1,61	0,85	1,81	1,05	2,12	1,15	2,17	1,14	2,23	1,10	1,82	1,13

Table 4: Means and standard deviations for all six formulations

### 9.3.2. The Folk Concept of Happiness

As regards the folk concept of happiness (framed in terms of ‘P is happy’), roughly two-thirds (67%) of the participants conceive of it as a mental state of P and about one third (33%) in terms of ‘P’s life going well for her’. The proportion differs significantly from chance (binomial test,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed). The results replicate those reported above.

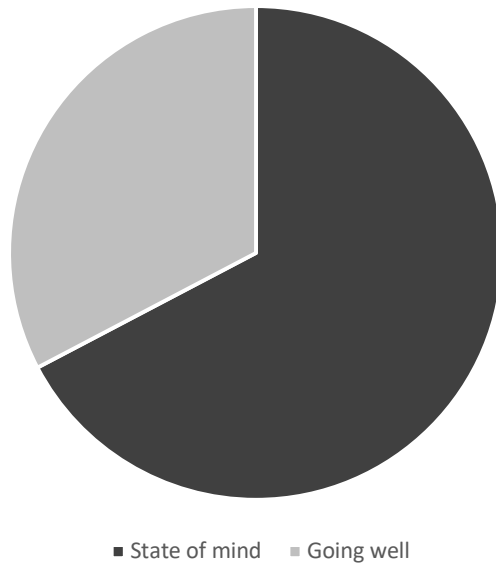


Figure 8: The folk concept of happiness (framed in terms of ‘P is happy’)

### 9.3.3. Correlations

We basically found no significant correlations between ascriptions of the target states on the one hand and, on the other, the sub-scales of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, the Rational Experiential Inventory, as well as Age and Religiosity. The results are reported in the Appendix.

### 9.4. Discussion

The results of Experiment 4 suggest, *first*, that the folk interpret *all* expressions as sensitive to internal and external factors to some degree. However, the influence of the two types of factors varies considerably. Roughly, we can discern two groups of expressions: ‘is happy’, ‘leads a happy life’ and ‘enjoys a high degree of well-being’ are strongly sensitive to internal factors, and less sensitive to external factors. For ‘good life’, ‘doing well’ and ‘enviable life’, by contrast, the pattern is reversed. Replicating the findings of Experiments 1, 2 and 3, we found, *second*, that two-thirds of our participants consider ‘being happy’ a mental state rather than a matter of doing well when consulted in explicit fashion. *Third*, across the four conditions tested, we failed to find consistent correlations between the various happiness and well-being measures on the one hand, and the MFQ and REI subscales, age and religiosity on the other.

The experiments thus far consider only non-comparative ascriptions of happiness and well-being. In practice, however, such matters are very often discussed in comparative terms, as when noting that a friend is happier than he used to be, or debating whether people are better-off today than they were several decades ago, or whether one would really be better-off in a new

occupation. Perhaps the most influential theories of well-being from the last century, especially in economics and policy circles, are desire- or preference-satisfaction accounts on which well-being consists in (actually) getting what one wants or prefers (see references earlier). But most such theories, especially preference views, make *only* comparative claims: for instance, economists traditionally claim that getting your preferred option makes you better off, but there's simply no fact of the matter about whether you're doing *well* or *badly* (Hausman, 2011). In practice, perhaps what matters most is just that people do as well as possible; whether they actually do well might even be an idle question.

A further reason to study comparatives is to see whether our previous results reflect robust underlying concepts that drive judgments across varying grammatical forms, and not simply the vagaries of the everyday connotations of highly specific expressions. We did not test the abstract noun 'happiness', for instance, as it tends to conjure thoughts of ideal scenarios not often realized, even if semantically it is perfectly appropriate for expressing at least one if not more of the concepts we are studying. (For the same reason, it is not easy to construct realistic vignettes that are diagnostic for the meaning of 'happiness', which would be an interesting question for future study. We conjecture that 'happiness' would be more sensitive to external factors than 'happy', perhaps paralleling 'happy life'.)

## **10. Experiment 5: Comparatives: 'happier' and 'better off'**

### *10.1. Participants*

947 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a paid online questionnaire. The IP location was restricted to the United States. The data-sets of participants failing an attention check, submitting their response in less than 15 seconds, changing it more than 10 times and those indicating they were not native English speakers were excluded. 716 participants remained (age  $M=35.2$  years,  $SD=11.3$ ), of which 309 were female.

### *10.2. Method and Materials*

We devised a number of vignettes which described both the external circumstances (positive v. negative) and the subjective or 'internal' situation (positive v. negative) of George and John's lives. After reading the vignette, participants had to assess which of the two men was happier or better off. (While 'doing better' is grammatically more similar to 'doing well', we chose 'better-off' as it appears to be a more common locution in discussions of well-being, as well as to increase the variety of terms while keeping the analysis tractable.)

The following example, in which George's external and internal factors are positive and John's external and internal factors are negative invokes all four potential constituents of the scenarios:

George works as a red cross doctor and has cured many people. His family life is very harmonious and he has many interesting friends and acquaintances. George is generally

cheerful, relaxed and feels fulfilled. He enjoys his life very much and has a pleasant experience on the whole.

John works as a human resources manager and had to fire many of the firm's employees. His family life is not very harmonious and he does not have many interesting friends and acquaintances. John is generally gloomy, tense and feels unfulfilled. He does not enjoy his life very much and does not have a pleasant experience on the whole.

The above scenario has a PPNN structure, where the first two letters stand for George's positive (P) external and positive internal circumstances, and the last two for John's negative (N) external and negative internal circumstances. If we use PPNN as a baseline, varying only John's external factors (PPPN) allows us to observe whether a change in external circumstances makes a difference in the comparative ascription of happiness and well-being. Varying only John's internal factors (PPNP) reveals to what extent comparative happiness and well-being ascriptions are sensitive to internal circumstances. We tested six variations of the scenario: NPNN, PNNN, PNNP, PPNN, PPNP, and PPPN.

The questions focused either on happiness or on well-being. Participants were asked to assess how happy/well-off George was relative to John on a 7-point Likert scale. The endpoint 1 was labelled 'George is much happier [better-off] than John', 7 was labelled 'John is much happier [better-off] than George'. The midpoint, 4, was labelled 'George and John are equally happy [well off].' In sum, the experiment took a 6 (scenario) x 2 (question focus) design, and each participant received only one of the twelve conditions.

### 10.3. Results

For the analyses of variance, we coded the situation in which George's internal factors were better than, equal to and worse than John's as 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Situations in which George's external factors were better than or equal to John's were coded as 1 and 2; questions focusing on happiness were coded as 1 and those focusing on well-being as 2.

We ran a three-way ANOVA with internal factors, external factors and state type as fixed factors. There was a significant main effect for internal factors ( $F(2, 708)=483.28, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.577$ ), a significant main effect for external factors ( $F(1,708)=11.73, p=.001; \eta_p^2=.016$ ), but none for state type ( $F(1,708)=.73; p=.394; \eta_p^2=.001$ ). Importantly, the interaction between internal factors and type of state was significant ( $F(2,708)=3.35, p=.036; \eta_p^2=.009$ ), the one between external factors and type of state was borderline significant ( $F(1,708)=3.79; p=.052, \eta_p^2=.005$ ).

To investigate the interactions further, we ran two distinct two-way ANOVAs, one for happiness, one for well-being ascriptions. As regards happiness, there was a significant main effect for internal factors ( $F(2,367)=262.89, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.589$ ), but none for external factors ( $F(1,367)=1.03, p=.311, \eta_p^2=.003$ ). As regards wellbeing, there was a significant main effect for internal factors ( $F(2,341)=225.10, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.569$ ) and for external factors ( $F(1,341)=15.47, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.043$ ). Hence, as expected, happiness and well-being ascriptions differ in important respects. The former are *exclusively* sensitive to internal factors, whereas the latter are sensitive to external factors *also*. Interestingly, while there is a sizeable effect of external factors on well-being ascriptions, the magnitude of the effect size of internal factors is once again much higher.

In a post-hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD we took the condition in which George's internal and external factors are preferable to John's as the benchmark (PPNN). Happiness ascriptions

were not responsive to a change of *external* circumstances, no matter whether George’s situation was made worse (NPNN,  $p=.67$ , 95% CI [-.83; .26]) or John’s improved (PPPN,  $p=1.00$ , 95% CI [-.61;.53]). All three tested changes in *internal* circumstances gave rise to a significant difference: A worsening of George’s internal circumstances, PNNN ( $p<.001$ ; 95% CI [-2.51;-1.45]), an improvement of John’s internal circumstances, PPNP ( $p<.001$ ; 95% CI [-2.09;-1.01]), and a combination of both, PNNP ( $p<.001$ , 95% CI [-4.75;-3.69]). Again using PPNN as the benchmark, well-being ascriptions differed significantly with changes in *external* factors, NPNN, ( $p=.009$ , 95% CI [-1.12; -.10]) and PPPN ( $p=.009$ , 95% CI[-1.16;-1.11]). Well-being ascriptions also differed significantly with changes in *internal* factors, PNNN ( $p<.001$ ; 95% CI [-1.91; -.83]), PNNP ( $p<.001$ ; [-4.32;-3.26]), PPNP ( $p<.001$ ; [-1.53;-4.46]). Detailed results for all individual conditions can be found in the Appendix.

#### 10.4. Instructive Comparisons

To illustrate the thrust of the results, let’s take PPNN as a baseline, i.e. the condition in which George’s life is positive with regards to both factors, and John’s is negative in both respects. Converting the 1-7 scale to a -3 to +3 scale allows us to clearly discern whom the participants deem happier/better-off. The midpoint (0) signifies that both men are equally happy/well-off. Negative ratings mean that George is worse off than John, positive ratings mean that George is better off than John. Leaving George’s situation the same (PP) we can now see what happens if we change only John’s external circumstances for the better (PPPN) and what happens if we change only his internal circumstances (PPNP).

Figure 9 represents the three conditions visually for both well-being and happiness judgments. Well-being ascriptions are sensitive to changes in external circumstances ( $t(113)=-3.89$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen’s  $d=0.73$ ) and internal circumstances ( $t(110)=-6.07$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen’s  $d=1.15$ ). Importantly, the sensitivity to a change in internal circumstances is much more pronounced. Happiness ascriptions, by contrast are *insensitive* to changes in external circumstances ( $t(108)=-2.91$ ,  $p=.771$ , Cohen’s  $d=.05$ ), yet even more strongly sensitive to changes in internal circumstances ( $t(120)=-9.23$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen’s  $d=1.69$ ) than well-being ascriptions.

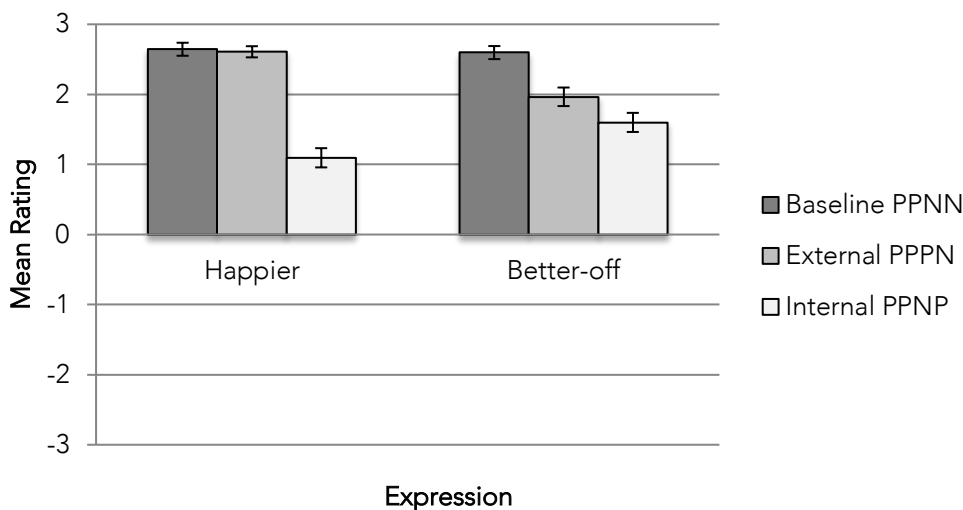


Figure 9: Positive ratings correspond to George being happier/better-off than John. Negative ratings correspond to George being less happy/well-off than John.

Another instructive contrast takes PNNN as its baseline, i.e. a situation in which George faces positive external and negative internal circumstances, whereas both are negative for John. Comparing these results with PNNP, i.e. a situation equal in all respects except that John's internal factors are positive allows us to see the relative impact of positive external v. internal circumstances. The results, graphically represented in Figure 10, show that George (positive external circumstances) is deemed happier/better off than John when John's situation is negative in both regards. Importantly, however, for both measures internal factors trump external factors: George is deemed less happy/well-off in a situation where his external factors are positive, yet John's internal ones are positive.

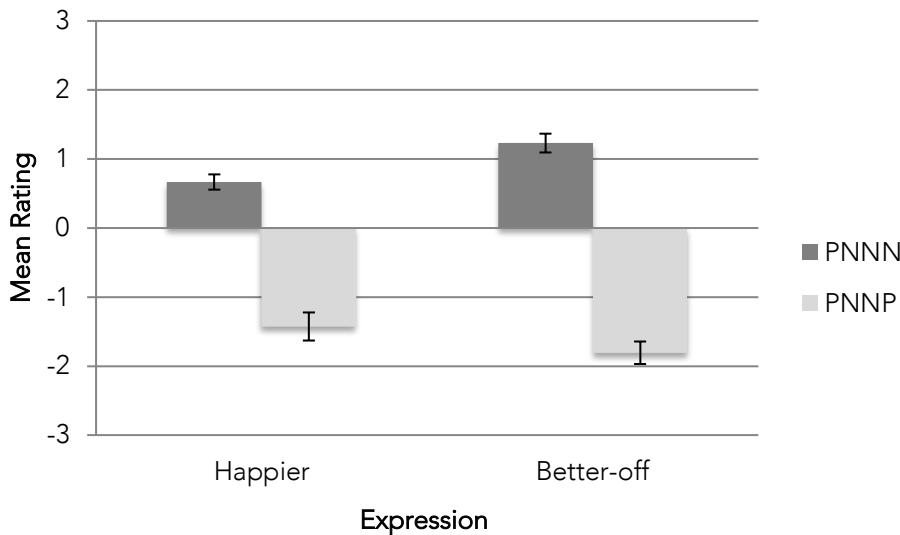


Figure 10: Positive ratings correspond to George being happier/better-off than John. Negative ratings correspond to George being less happy/well-off than John.

### 10.5. Discussion

Our findings suggest that comparative uses of ‘happy’ and ‘doing well’ are both strongly sensitive to internal factors. Happiness comparisons proved insensitive to external factors. Ascriptions of being ‘better-off’ were sensitive to external factors, however, much less so than to internal factors. The insensitivity of ‘happier’ to external factors reinforces and extends our findings regarding ‘is happy’, suggesting that there is a core concept of happiness that is descriptive and psychological, denoted by these terms. The non-comparative ‘is happy’ more closely resembles ‘happy life’, which is more sensitive to external factors and may express a different concept, as well as ‘happiness’, which we did not test but would conjecture is also more sensitive to external factors. It may be that ‘happier’ more purely and clearly expresses the psychological concept, while usage of ‘is happy’ exhibits some conflation with one or more other concepts that are linguistically quite similar.

## 11. Conclusion

### 11.1. Folk concepts of happiness and well-being and the meanings of everyday terms

Our studies found a clear divide among the well-being related terms tested. At one of the spectrum lies a cluster of terms—‘doing well’, ‘enviable life’, ‘better off’, and ‘good life’—that plausibly express one or more concepts akin to the philosophical notion of well-being. This is plausible both because it fits the commonsensical understanding of at least the first two terms and because it appears to be the best explanation of our results, which reveal substantially stronger sensitivity to external factors than was found for ‘happy’ and kindred terms. These expressions certainly do not behave like psychological terms, and are sensitive to external factors to a degree that is plausible given a variety of popular views of well-being, including desire theories and objective theories. Further investigation may uncover additional nuances, notably in the case of ‘good life’, which we suspect expresses a broader evaluation including moral considerations not tested here, but which behaves like well-being terms when moral factors aren’t salient.

Two terms, ‘happy’ and ‘happier’, exhibited very different behavior, being much less sensitive to external factors, in the latter case not at all. This striking discontinuity versus the more clearly evaluative terms strongly suggests that their insensitivity to external factors does not owe to a hedonistic lay theory of well-being, but rather stems from their being nonevaluative, descriptive psychological terms rather than terms for well-being. Furthermore, ‘happy’ did respond to external factors for a minority of participants, suggesting that the term is indeed ambiguous, perhaps being a suitable term for well-being as some of the folk use it.

Interestingly, ‘happy life’ and ‘well-being’ both fell in between, perhaps suggesting unclear or ambiguous meanings for these terms in ordinary use—or, perhaps they express some concept that is *neither* purely psychological nor equivalent to WELL-BEING. It may be that the ordinary meaning of ‘happy life’ is clouded by its similarity to ‘happy’, yet is also somewhat elastic and naturally allows a well-being reading depending on context, perhaps licensing Aristotelian and like-minded scholars’ use of that locution for the evaluative notion.<sup>15</sup> It may also be that ‘well-being’ expresses a different, more “internal” concept of well-being than the terms, perhaps reflecting Kagan’s distinction between how the *person* is doing versus how her *life* is going for her. For instance, ‘well-being’ might mean something like “well in body and mind.” This would not obviously explain the greater salience of external—including extra-bodily—factors for this term, however. Future investigations should shed further light on these questions, though we must not expect folk concepts, particularly relating to happiness, to be sharply defined in every case; as has been noted, it may take some degree of “reconstructive analysis” to make ordinary concepts suitable for philosophical theorizing (Haybron, 2003, 2008).

It is ironic, but perhaps not terribly surprising, that ‘well-being’ is not the best term for well-being from a lay perspective; it should be regarded as a technical term apt for academic contexts, but not ideal for broader use. Puzzlingly, however, there is not an obvious substitute, as ‘doing well’ and ‘enviable’ differ grammatically, and ‘good life’ may track moral factors more strongly – as e.g. the correlational analyses with the MFQ suggest. ‘Flourishing’ is a possible alternative and merits study, but seems apt only for positive extremes; one does not often hear talk of raising the “flourishing” of the poor, for instance. In some contexts, ‘quality of life’ may be another term to consider.

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<sup>15</sup> In preliminary research reported in (Haybron, 2008), ‘happy life’ did in fact cluster more clearly with the well-being terms like ‘doing well’. In that study, each participant was presented with all terms, which might have primed them to use ‘happy life’ differently from ‘happy’.



While the use of ‘happiness’ and cognate terms for well-being may be largely the province of academics, the academic debates over this question and the many texts directed at students and other lay audiences treating happiness as equivalent to well-being suggest that there is openness among many of the folk to this usage. But the dominant use of ‘happy’, at least, and apparently the sole meaning of ‘happier’, is to express a purely psychological concept. And this pattern of results suggests that the minority use of ‘happy’, which is significantly sensitive to external factors, itself reflects some confusion owing to the similarity of ‘happy’ to ‘happy life’ and (the untested but probably closer to well-being) ‘happiness’. Our results indicate that there is a folk concept of happiness, or at least a dominant one, and that it is a purely descriptive, non-evaluative concept. Being happy, in the dominant strain of contemporary American English, is not what Aristotle referred to under the rubric of ‘eudaimonia’. Scholars and others claiming without qualification that there is more to being happy than states of mind, or that historical authors like Aristotle offered alternative understandings of what it is to be happy, appear to be getting the concept wrong. Some people may understand it that way, but most simply do not. Happiness, in the sense of being happy as most people understand the term, is a purely psychological, descriptive matter. Among other things, this means that empirical researchers are warranted in regarding happiness as a descriptive phenomenon that is at least in principle amenable to scientific study—psychologists need not trade in tendentious value judgments about what ultimately benefits people to study happiness.

### *11.2. Folk values and conceptions of well-being*

Substantively, these experiments do not tell us what conceptions or theories of happiness and well-being are most prevalent among laypersons, an important question for further study. But they do tell us something important about people’s values: most people care about more than just states of mind, even when well-being alone is at issue. If usage of ‘enviable’ is any guide, then we find no one who doesn’t count external conditions as relevant for well-being. As the folk see it, things can benefit or harm you even if they never enter your experience. Hedonism about well-being, espoused by Bentham, Mill, the Epicureans and many others, finds little support among the folk—at least, among the American participants in our study. Desire theorists, objectivists and others who reject hedonism and other mental state views of well-being may find this a welcome result. But it is noteworthy that the psychological dimensions of well-being, the various aspects of subjective well-being, play a far larger role than external factors in driving judgments using all the expressions tested. Hedonism might be false in the eyes—or at least the practice—of the folk, but it is perhaps not so far off the mark in practice.

This may offer some vindication for the use of subjective well-being and related metrics for assessing well-being in policy and other contexts; so long as it is understood that they only capture part of what people care about, they might tell us most of what we need to know about how people are doing. This is significant in policy contexts especially, as it is widely thought that policy should focus largely or wholly on “objective” or external markers of advantage, for instance in welfare economics or in influential works of political philosophy such as Rawls’ (1971). Even where psychological metrics are given a major role, as in the World Happiness Reports published annually since 2012, it is often supposed that the best metrics will be those that best track external conditions, this being a common argument (in those reports for instance) in favor of life satisfaction measures: people’s judgments about their lives better track objective conditions like income, material goods, or corruption than affect-based measures. Our studies suggest that this style of argument might not fit well with most citizens’ sensibilities: perhaps it

is internal matters like enjoyment of life or emotional well-being, and factors more closely related to those, that people care most about in matters of personal welfare, not things like government corruption.<sup>16</sup> This is a complex and delicate question, however, and we don't try to resolve it here. Suffice it to say that findings such as those presented here should be of interest for policy deliberation: external life conditions may not be as important for well-being as is widely supposed. At the same time, they do matter, and our results suggest that proposals to base policy entirely on subjective well-being metrics also clash with ordinary views of well-being (Clark et al., 2018). Pluralistic approaches to policy that consider both psychological and external indicators of well-being likely offer a better fit with citizens' values (e.g. OECD, 2011).

### 11.3. *Summing up: answers to the main research questions*

In Section 5, four primary questions animating our research were posed. Here we briefly summarize the relevant findings, as discussed in Sections 11.1 and 11.2.

Q1: Does the expression “happy” refer to a non-evaluative psychological kind, or does it contain evaluative elements? *Answer: ‘Happy’ appears to be ambiguous, with ‘is happy’ more often taking a descriptive psychological meaning, a result reinforced by our finding that in its comparative form, ‘happier’, it may be an exclusively psychological term. ‘Happy life,’ by contrast, did not function as a psychological term for a majority of participants. In those cases it may serve as an evaluative term for well-being, as many philosophers have argued. However, ‘happy life’ is less sensitive to external factors than terms like ‘doing well’ or ‘enviable’, perhaps reflecting semantic bleed-through from similar expressions like ‘is happy’. Possibly, it expresses a different concept altogether.*

Q2: Is it indeed the case, as commonly presumed in the philosophical literature, that the concept of well-being is evaluative? *Answer: WELL-BEING appears to be an evaluative concept.*

Q3: Might there be multiple concepts each of happiness and well-being? Differently put, might it be the case that terms like ‘happy’ and/or ‘well-being’ are tied exclusively to mental states for some people, whereas for others it also has evaluative components? *Answer: We do not find clear evidence for more than two concepts, one each for happiness and well-being, though our results leave it open that there are. This would be a good avenue for further study.*

Q4: In case the concepts of happiness and/or well-being are sensitive to both internal (mental) and external (life conditions) factors, is it possible to quantify the relative importance of these factors? *Answer: It appears that internal psychological factors are quite a bit more important for all concepts related to happiness and well-being.*

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<sup>16</sup> For an interesting comparison, see (Diener, 2010). Life satisfaction judgments ideally track whatever people care about, but might in practice exhibit biases toward chronically salient items like material conditions and political issues (Haybron, 2008). And it is not clear that the judgments themselves are deemed all that important for well-being; perhaps they are mainly indicators of other things people care about. People may not in fact invest much in pursuing being satisfied with their lives, as opposed to *actually* having the sorts of lives they value. To be satisfied, one can just lower one's standards. Even if life satisfaction metrics are the best game in town, our point is that arguments for their use based on tracking of external conditions may not be the right sort of argument given what people value.

#### *11.4. Can people be mistaken about their own happiness and well-being?*

A further result of interest is that laypersons seem generally to allow that people might be *mistaken* about their own well-being, and perhaps even their own happiness. With the exception of ‘happier’, all terms exhibited some sensitivity to external conditions, though only for a minority of participants in the case of ‘happy’. Since it is uncontroversial that error about the external conditions of one’s life is possible, we should expect the folk to allow that error is possible regarding happiness and well-being, at least to the extent that those matters depend on external factors. Of course, error may be deemed possible even regarding one’s own mental states, a familiar refrain from psychoanalytic thought, and preliminary research suggests that laypersons allow that someone could be mistaken about their own happiness, life satisfaction and emotional condition (Haybron, 2013). The extent to which this is believed, and how reliable self-reports are taken to be, remains to be seen.

#### *11.5. Final remarks*

It is of course possible that the lay intuitions elicited in our studies do not really reveal the contours of the concepts of happiness and well-being, but rather something about how our participants responded to the particular questions posed to them. Further studies are needed to replicate and build on these. But we think the nature of the scenarios tested, and the variety of terms and setups employed, yields highly suggestive results that should be taken seriously. It is a significant development in the literature when a scholar employs philosophical reflection drawing on considerations they find plausible in the service of clarifying a concept and showing us something about its nature, and perhaps the nature of what it refers to. A new theory of happiness, for instance. But naturally, that process can go awry in various ways: the arguments may have holes in them or worse, the scholar’s intuitions may be unrepresentative, and there will be all manner of worthy ideas yet unexplored. There is something to be said for other methods: attempting carefully to construct a range of experimental setups to piece together a picture, through the judgments of not one or a few but hundreds of individuals, of the character of the concepts employed by ordinary people in everyday thinking about how to live.

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