

Commentary

Best news yet on the six-factor model of well-being ☆

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Abstract

This study provides a response to Springer and Hauser's claim that the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being do not comprise six dimensions. We show that their analyses support the theory-guided six-factor model, although their interpretations of the data reveal a lack of understanding of the construct-oriented approach to personality assessment. We also review evidence from five categories of studies (i.e., factorial validity, psychological correlates, sociodemographic correlates, biological correlates, and intervention studies) that document the distinctiveness of the six dimensions of well-being, including among subscales that are highly correlated. We conclude with an examination of the methodological corrections (negative items, adjacent items, and redundant items) employed by Springer and Hauser, finding all to be problematic, either in terms of scientific rationale or method of implementation, or both. Correlations among latent constructs resulting from these analyses are thus highly questionable.

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1. Introduction

Because the study of well-being has gained prominence across the social sciences, investigations addressing what it is and how it can be reliably and validly measured are important. Toward that end, Springer and Hauser present data from three large samples, including two national surveys. Their conclusions from these analyses are, however,

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unwarranted and reflect a failure to understand the construct-oriented approach to personality assessment. Their summary of evidence regarding the dimensionality of well-being is also incomplete, and their analytic procedures to correct for method artifacts are problematic on multiple grounds. We elaborate these points below.

2. Key take-home message: the six-factor model works

The final word from Springer and Hauser's lengthy exercise focuses on what PWB is *not*, rather than what it *is*. The claim that "RPWB does not measure six distinct dimensions of psychological well-being" (p. 1100) is not helpful for those who want to study well-being. Is the message that the six-factor model be replaced with something else, such as a three-, or four-, or five-factor model, and more importantly, what should the substantive content of the reduced factors be? On these questions, Springer and Hauser offer no guidance. Rather, they invest much effort in trying to discredit what their own analyses show—namely, that the best fitting model (#3–7 in Table 3) was, in fact, the theory-driven six-factor model originally proposed by Ryff (1989). This result held after fitting ten different models, including those with methodological corrections and those with constraints on the number of factors. Model 3–7 was nonetheless dismissed due to the high intercorrelations among the latent constructs—"there is almost complete overlap between the subscales after taking into account methodological confounders." As such, the authors report being surprised that a reduced factor model did not improve the fit indices—"given the extremely high factor correlations, we expected that models constraining self-acceptance, purpose in life, and environmental mastery to reflect only a single factor would fit better than the unconstrained models." Their expectation was not supported.

Springer and Hauser then provided a convoluted argument to explain how it is that a six-factor model can somehow best fit the data, while simultaneously not indicate that the six factors are distinct. The first explanation pertained to the large sample size, which though touted as a strength of the study in the introduction, becomes a reason for dismissing the lack of evidence in support of a reduced-factor model: "With a sample this large, almost any deviation will produce a statistically significant difference in chi-square, whether or not the difference is substantively meaningful." Their second reason pertains to the scale construction process, where they state that the "way the RPWB subscales were originally created may make it impossible to find that the scales/constructs are identical statistically, even if the substantive differences between them are truly negligible." Specifically, they quote from Ryff (1989): "items that correlated more highly with a scale other than their own or that showed low correlations with their total scale were [not included in the RPWB]" (p.1072), and then they elaborate with the following statement: "In other words, it is possible that the design of the RPWB model capitalized on *incidental*, but persistent differences among items." This observation reveals a singular lack of understanding of the construct-oriented (i.e., theory-driven) approach to assessment of psychological phenomena, which we elaborate below.

3. The construct-oriented approach to scale construction

The central purpose of the original study (Ryff, 1989) was to generate a theory-based empirical approach to what it means to be mentally healthy. Although social scientists had long studied subjective well-being, key indicators (e.g., life satisfaction, happiness,

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