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PERMA and the building blocks of well-being

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ABSTRACT

Seligman (2011) hypothesized that PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) are the elements of well-being. Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan & Kaufmann (2017) reported strong evidence that subjective well-being is the final common path of such elements and their data are entirely consistent with Seligman's hypothesis. They argued, incorrectly however, that he suggested that PERMA constituted a different kind of well-being rather than just its building blocks. The complicated issue, one that transcends psychometrics, of how to decide on elements of well-being is discussed.

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In 2011, I suggested that PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) are five measurable elements that make up well-being (Seligman, 2011, pp 16–25). Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan, and Kauffman (2017) measured PERMA and subjective well-being (SWB) for 517 Mturk'ers. For measures they used the PERMA-profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016), and they combined three scales, Satisfaction with Life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), plus a single item happiness measure, and a three item negative emotion scale to form the SWB variable. The PERMA-profiler includes the three negative emotion items and one overall satisfaction with life item.

Here is what they found: First a latent correlation of .98 between the PERMA-profiler and SWB. This convinces me that SWB probably is the useful final common path of the elements of well-being. I had not made my mind up about this until I saw the .98 correlation, and I had previously worried that there might be no single indicator of overall well-being (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, and Seligman (2011). Having a single indicator which is a good first approximation of well-being is a boon for measurement and this confirms Layard's (2006) theory that well-being simply amounts to happiness.

Secondly, Goodman et al. (2017) found that each of the elements of PERMA correlated moderately highly (range .37 to .79, mean = .61) with each other. They concluded from these two findings: that PERMA does not yield a new type of well-being, and PERMA does not offer any insights beyond SWB. In a related polemic Kashdan (2017) argued that PERMA is redundant with SWB.

Since I claimed that PERMA constitutes the *elements* of well-being, not that it forms a *new* kind of well-being, I find their data completely consistent and confirming of the claim that PERMA constitutes (at least some of) the elements of well-being. Their conclusion that PERMA is redundant with SWB and theoretically arbitrary is, I believe, incorrect.

Imagine that we are interested in the psychometrics of baseball pitching. We measure 517 fans' overall subjective ratings of pitching excellence for pitchers. Someone proposes that pitching is made of three elements: the fast ball, the curve ball, and the knuckle ball. So we also measure the fans' subjective ratings of these three elements of pitching as well. We find that the overall goodness of pitching rating correlates .98 with a statistically fancy combination of the ratings of each of the three proposed elements. Further we also find that the three elements correlate about .61 with each other.

What should we conclude? First that the theory of the elements was correct and these three pitches are three of the elements of pitching. Secondly that pitchers who pitch one element tend to pitch all three elements at roughly the same level of rated quality.

For this reason the Goodman et al. (2017) data exactly confirm that PERMA constitutes (at least some of the) elements of well-being and that people who have one of the elements tend roughly to have the other elements to a similar degree.

Why do I find their conclusion that PERMA is therefore redundant incorrect? Because *building* happiness is not primarily a psychometric issue, even though measuring

happiness is (in large part) a psychometric issue. Let's say I am a pitching coach and I only take the overall rating of goodness of pitching seriously, disregarding the elements of pitching because they correlate perfectly with the overall rating. What do I tell my pitchers to do? 'Pitch well!' Not very useful. But taking the elements seriously, in contrast, tells me to work on the curve ball, and the fast ball, and the knuckle ball, and even which pitch to concentrate on improving.

As someone who works on interventions to build happiness, what should I do if I were to take seriously the conclusion that PERMA is redundant, or indiscriminable from, SWB. I would ignore PERMA because it adds nothing and tell my clients 'Be more satisfied with your life,' and 'have more positive emotions,' and 'have fewer negative emotions.' And then when they do not pay their bills I would gripe because I am just following the psychometrics. On the other hand, if I understand that PERMA is a theory of the building blocks of well-being, we can work together on gratitude visits, or three blessings, or active-constructive responding or any of the other validated positive interventions that build these elements (e.g. Bolier et al., 2013).

All this is to say that a good theory of the elements of well-being helps to build well-being and that the psychometric findings that the elements correlate perfectly with overall well-being and that the elements correlate well with each other is not very instructive when it comes to building well-being.

So how do we decide what the elements of well-being are? This is not an easy question, but it is clear that Kashdan does not think PERMA useful because he claims (a) it emerges from a 'trade' book (b) it is prematurely used too widely by clinicians, businesses, and others (c) the elements are arbitrary (d) there is no way to choose between PERMA and other theories that postulate 196 or more alleged elements.

While I do not agree with Kashdan's indictment, he does raise the important issue of what criteria can evaluate a theory of the elements of well-being. This is a complicated questions and here I propose several (and their applicability to PERMA):

- (1) The elements contribute to well-being (The .98 correlation with SWB strongly confirms that for PERMA)
- (2) Many people pursue each element for its own sake and not just to serve another element (PERMA modestly satisfies this, see pp. 16–20 of Seligman (2011).
- (3) The list of element is exclusive and exhaustive (PERMA may be exclusive, but it is certainly not exhaustive., e.g. health, vitality, and responsibility are additional candidates elements)

- (4) The elements lead to specific interventions to build each element and SWB (PERMA meets this modestly).
- (5) The list is parsimonious (five does rather better than 196).
- (6) Each element can be defined and measured independently of the other elements.

This last criterion requires discussion. Each element of PERMA can be defined independently of the others and each can be measured independently. So far so good. But the measures are not remotely orthogonal, since the measurement of each element correlates strongly, although imperfectly, with the measurement of each other. Does non-orthogonality disqualify elements?

Let's look more deeply. One possibility is that each element is in reality the same thing as each other and as SWB and that would indeed render them redundant, disqualifying them as elements of SWB. But there are other more likely explanations for the strong cross-correlations. In the Goodman et al. (2017) study, the measures are self-reports by MTurkers, and there is likely a halo effect that inflates each cross-correlation, their 'common method variance.' Even deflating for the halo to find the true underlying cross-correlations, there are likely causal connections and third variable connections among the elements, e.g. people who find their work meaningful likely accomplish more and people who had a warm childhood likely have better relations and more positive emotions. But such connections among the elements do not disqualify them as elements. A strong throwing arm, for example, would produce a robust cross-correlation between the fast ball and the curve ball.

The decision about useful elements of SWB should take reality, as well as the psychometrics of self-reported measures, into account. Good relationships, meaning and accomplishment are not after all exhaustively measured by self-report. We also want to know how your husband rates your marriage, how your bosses and employees rate your self-reported accomplishment, and how others rate the amount of meaning in your life. We also want to know about the relationships of the elements longitudinally, not just cross-sectionally. Might PERMA predict SWB later over and above SWB now? Supplementing self-reports with more objective measures would likely drive down the cross-correlations. Further the effectiveness of interventions primarily directed toward single elements should inform the usefulness of the proposed elements (McQuaid & Kern, 2017): does building patience, for example, increase engagement, without much influencing meaning? At present little is known about which interventions impact which elements of PERMA the most and which interventions merely impact global SWB. Finally we

want to compare different theories against each other to decide which elements are most predictive of SWB.

So the investigation of what are the best elements of SWB is in its infancy. Inter-correlating self-report measures, as Goodman et al. (2017) did, is a good start. In addition, however, measuring objective indices, longitudinally as well as synchronously, and testing the influence of interventions will help in this difficult theoretical task. Laying out and testing the causal and third variable connections among the elements will also help. So I conclude that PERMA is merely a good start on the complex work-in-progress that will result in an adequate theory of the elements of well-being.

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