

Conception and experience of well-being in two Ghanaian samples: Implications for Positive Psychology

Annabella Osei-Tutu · Glenn Adams · Vivian A. Dzokoto · Adjeiwa A. Affram
Abraham Kenin · Nilay Vural · Syed M. Omar

Abstract: We conducted two studies to explore Ghanaian understandings of well-being through a situation sampling method in which participants described situations that increased and decreased their well-being. Participants in Study 1 were 80 community members (Mean Age = 41.962; SD=13.900; 40 women, 40 men) who responded in the context of interviews through the medium of local languages. Coding analyses revealed that these situation descriptions emphasized sustainability-oriented themes of *materiality* (tangible support, economic hardship) and *peace of mind* (presence or absence of worry or strife) with greater frequency than growth-oriented themes of *psychologization* (growth, meaning, achievement) and *affect* (happiness, sadness). Participants in Study 2 were 125 students (Mean Age = 21.592; SD=2.759; 68 women, 57 men) at three universities in Ghana who responded via questionnaire in the medium of English. In contrast to the community sample, coding analyses revealed that the students' situations emphasized growth-oriented themes of *affect* and *psychologization* with greater frequency than sustainability-oriented themes of *materiality* and *peace of mind*. We interpret these results within a theoretical framework that emphasizes the cultural-psychological foundations of well-being, and we consider implications for hegemonic perspectives of positive psychology.

Keywords: Well-being, peace of mind, materiality, sustainability, collective well-being

1. Introduction

Wellbeing has been a focus of study in the social sciences for decades (Diener & Tay, 2015; Suh & Choi, 2018). It has become increasingly important in recent years for its role as an economic indicator (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Schyns, 1998; Sirgy, 2021). Critics (e.g., Kryszewski et al., 2020) have argued that standard conceptions and measures of well-being—which tend to valorize self-acceptance, personal growth, and happiness—have their foundation in modern individualist lifeways of the Western, educated, industrial, rich, and (purportedly) democratic (in a word, WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) settings that disproportionately inform hegemonic forms of psychological science. Such conceptions and measures can be problematic if researchers impose them as a context-general standard and interpret variation in ways that misrepresent or pathologize experience of well-being outside WEIRD settings (see Teo, 2010 on *epistemological violence*). For example, researchers have suggested that the imposition of an individualism-biased measure of life satisfaction—rather than something pathological about East Asian ways of being (e.g., pressure for academic success)—may explain why students in East Asian countries scored the lowest in life satisfaction in the most recent wave of the Programme for International Student Assessment survey (Rappleye et al., 2020). More generally, such individualism-biased

conceptions of well-being can cause harm if they orient people toward personal growth and high-arousal happiness at the expense of broader solidarities and ways of (well-)being oriented toward sustainable existence (Osei-Tutu et al., 2021).

As one alternative, researchers in Japanese settings have developed a conceptual model and corresponding measure of interdependent happiness oriented toward the experience of embeddedness and interdependence (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015). Such settings, which afford an experience of self as inextricably linked with others (Markus & Kitayama, 2010), foster understandings of happiness that center on qualities such as interpersonal harmony, low psychological arousal (quiescence), and ordinariness (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2018). Consistent with the argument about variations in conceptions of well-being, a recent investigation of happiness across 63-countries observed that a standard measure of independent happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) performed better—that is, was more reliable and showed stronger relationships with hypothesized correlates—in WEIRD settings, but the measure of interdependent happiness (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015) performed better in East Asian countries (Gardiner et al., 2020). At the same time, the researchers observed that measures of both independent and interdependent happiness were least reliable in the African and Southwest Asian countries in the sample. This observation suggests that these two measures might not provide a globally comprehensive operationalization of happiness or well-being.

With specific reference to the West African settings that inform the current work, researchers have placed a similar emphasis on affordances for embeddedness and interdependence in experience of self and well-being (e.g., Adams & Dzokoto, 2003; Adjei, 2019). However, rather than values of harmony, this work understands the core of interdependent self as an experience of fundamental embeddedness—for better or worse—in networks of ontologically prior relationship that come with corresponding duties and obligations for material support (see Adams & Plaut, 2003; Adams, 2005).

What implications do these constructions of the self have for the experience of well-being? Initial evidence comes from a study of cultural models of well-being implicit in four Ghanaian languages (Osei-Tutu et al., 2021). Members of our research team conducted interviews with 34 leaders from three religious groups. Responses indicated some features of local models, including good health and positive affective states, that resemble the standard conception of well-being in mainstream psychological science. At the same time, they provided evidence for what we refer to as a sustainability orientation to well-being. In contrast to the mainstream emphasis on personal psychological growth, this orientation emphasizes material sustenance, acute sensitivity to interpersonal embeddedness, and corresponding attention to social obligations (Coe, 2011; Esiaka & Adams, 2020; Wilson Fadiji et al., 2021). In contrast to an emphasis on high-arousal happiness, this orientation emphasizes the low-arousal positive affect that people refer to in English as “peace of mind” (Tsai, 2007). The literal translations of these words refer to a sensation of coolness—associated with body, heart, and especially ears—that suggests an experience of relief that one has met social expectations.

1.1 The present work

To grow our understanding of well-being in Ghanaian settings, we adopted a novel methodological approach in the current study. Rather than ask local cultural experts about words for well-being or analyzing responses to Likert scale items, we assessed understandings of well-being indirectly by asking ordinary people—community members who responded to interview questions in local Ghanaian languages (Study 1) and students at three universities in Ghana who responded to a questionnaire in English—to generate situations that increase or decrease well-

being. Our original purpose was to sample these situations to use as stimuli in a subsequent study (e.g., situation sampling technique; see Kitayama et al., 19997). For the present article, we analyzed responses to assess the relative importance (gauged by frequency) of sustainability-oriented themes, versus the mainstream standard emphasis on growth- and promotion-oriented themes, as a function of valence (increase/decrease) and sample.

1.2 Hypotheses

The primary hypothesis (H1) concerns the distribution of themes within participants. Specifically, it suggests that the sustainability-oriented themes we observed in research on Ghanaian cultural models would emerge more prominently in situation descriptions than would the promotion-oriented themes that inform standard conceptions of well-being in mainstream psychological science. A second hypothesis (H2) concerns the distribution of themes across samples. Given the association of university settings with modern individualist lifeways that afford an emphasis on personal growth and high arousal happiness (e.g., Adams, et al., 2018), this hypothesis suggests that the pattern associated with H1 would be less evident among the student sample than the community sample. A final interest, more of a research question than a hypothesis, concerns distribution of themes as a function of situation valence. That is, we considered whether the distribution of sustainability themes versus growth themes would be different for situations describing decrease than increase in well-being.

2. Study 1: Community sample

2.1 Participants

Participants were 40 men and 40 women, aged between 22 and 75 years ($M = 41.962$; $SD = 13.900$), with a mix of education levels: no formal education ($n = 3$), basic ($n = 35$), secondary ($n = 16$), and tertiary/college ($n = 12$), plus 10 participants who did not indicate education level. The majority of the participants were married ($n = 45$); 25 were single; 2 were cohabiting, 3 were divorced; and 5 were widowed. There were equal numbers of participants (i.e., 10 men and 10 women) in each of the ethno-linguistic regions.

2.2 Procedure

One of the authors (AO-T) supervised interviews between August 2019 and February 2020 in four regions of Ghana—Ashanti, Greater Accra, Northern and Volta—using respective local languages of Akan, Ga, Dagbani, and Ewe. In each region, the researcher identified a native local language speaker who could assist with recruitment and conduct interviews in the local language. We approached prospective participants in their homes or public spaces (shops, bus stations) and invited them to take part in a study on well-being. Those who agreed to participate provided verbal consent. A research assistant conducted individual interviews using a guide developed by the research team. Using local language well-being terms, we asked participants to explain their personal understanding of well-being, to describe two situations in which their well-being increased, and two situations in which their well-being decreased.

2.3 Coding

Research assistants transcribed interviews into English. We reviewed transcripts and developed a coding frame that included main themes (e.g., *material*, *relational*, *peace of mind*, *affect*), definitions of each theme, and examples (Table 1). Next, one of us (AO-T) trained two undergraduate students (one of Ghanaian ancestry, the other European American) to apply the coding frame to

the situations. The coders worked independently to indicate presence (1) or absence (0) of a code, using multiple codes if necessary. Inter-coder agreement was fair to very good ($\kappa = .250-1.000$). All kappa values were significantly different from zero at the level of $p < .001$, except for the theme *peace of mind* in situations of well-being decrease ($\kappa = .250$, $p = .024$). We resolved disagreements via collective discussion.

Table 1. Themes, definitions, and sample well-being situations.

| Theme | Definition | Community sample: Study 1 | Student sample: Study 2 |
|----------------------|---|---|---|
| Material | | | |
| (-) | Poor material condition including unemployment, low or reduced income, finances, food supply, and other material resources limitations. | <i>Just this year I am not able to cultivate the number of acres of maize as I usually cultivate every year because I don't have enough money (T14)</i> | <i>My well-being decreased once when I used all my money to buy something I really needed which meant the rest of the month I didn't really have money to rely on for my upkeep which resulted in me borrowing a lot of money from people. (#122)</i> |
| (+) | Materiality/good material condition/Financial/business improvements/ Material abundance/excess/comfort | <i>I stayed a long time without work and food until I got a work here... (H15)</i> | <i>When I am financially stable (#51)</i> |
| Relational | | | |
| (-) | Presence of bad/strained/conflictual relations; absence of relationships; loss/death/end of a relationship; unfulfilled relational expectations and roles of others | <i>I love people a lot, but people don't love me in return (H09)</i> | <i>Socializing with negative friends. (#125)</i> |
| (+) | Good relationships/ peaceful relations/absence of bad relationships | <i>I was single and searching for a woman to marry. Then God gave me a wife and children... (T19)</i> | <i>Being around people I'm comfortable and close to, willing to listen to me, converse with and make me laugh increases my social wellbeing. (#4)</i> |
| Peace of mind | | | |
| (-) | Presence of high-arousal negative affect; presence/active disruption in the social/physical environment | <i>I was thinking of how to get money and build my own house and leave a rented house and take myself from the quarrels and misunderstanding in a compound house. (H12)</i> | <i>When my roommates disturb me with their noise when am trying to sleep. (#103)</i> |
| (+) | Presence of low-arousal positive affect of internalized nature; absence of worry/problems/without stress; freedom from constraints (obligations to family) and external pressures/social pressures/social demands | <i>It was my brother that bought a house for me and my children, so now we don't think of rent, we have our own water, our own electricity... (H02)</i> | <i>My wellbeing increased when I started selling and making money on my own as I didn't have to worry about what to eat or wear next. (#108)</i> |

| Theme | Definition | Community sample: Study 1 | Student sample: Study 2 |
|--------------------------|--|---|---|
| Affect | | | |
| (-) | Presence of low-arousal negative affect | <i>I had a police case for instance which made me very sad (A01)</i> | <i>A few months ago, my emotional and psychological state was disrupted. Too much stress, anxiety and loneliness. (#22)</i> |
| (+) | High-arousal positive affect | <i>I was happy when [I got] married (AC13)</i> | <i>When I had admission to the university. I was really happy because nobody has been to the university among my female siblings. (#103)</i> |
| Social validation | | | |
| (-) | Diminished social standing/social mattering/social worth/social status/social concern/social credibility | <i>Someone lied against me that I impregnated a woman [...] I was so ashamed that I couldn't even walk on the street (H01)</i> | <i>When I was disrespected by a female friend I was correcting about her attitude towards me. [...]. Trying to correct her, she ended up disrespecting me ...</i> |
| (+) | Improved social standing/social mattering/social worth/social status/social concern/social credibility. Social worth measured against an internalized social standard. | <i>I lost my grandparent I was asked to talk on behalf of the grandchildren since I was the eldest. [...]at the end of the day everyone called me for suggestions because they didn't understand how I was able to handle the situation. That particular thing made me very happy because they gave a lot of respect to me because I gave them some instances and they all complied with it. So now they call me for everything. (AC11)</i> | <i>My well being increased when I went for a social gathering when I was well dressed and felt good among my peers. (#40)</i> |
| Physical health | | | |
| (-) | Presence of poor physical health (for self or others in one's social circle); negative health behavior (for self or others in one's social circle) | <i>My husband's sudden sickness, ++++ I never expected something like that in my marriage. [...] I had to struggle to take care of my sick husband and the entire family...(A03)</i> | <i>My well-being decreased when I got so ill. (#120)</i> |
| (+) | Good physical health (for self or others in one's social circle)/recovery of lost health; Positive health behavior (for self or others in one's social circle) | <i>I had a job as a waitress [...] I bought good body products and went for check up at the hospital. You could see I was healthy (AC18)</i> | <i>This is when I'm healthy. I was able to perform all necessary activities that will bring about healthy living. (#75)</i> |

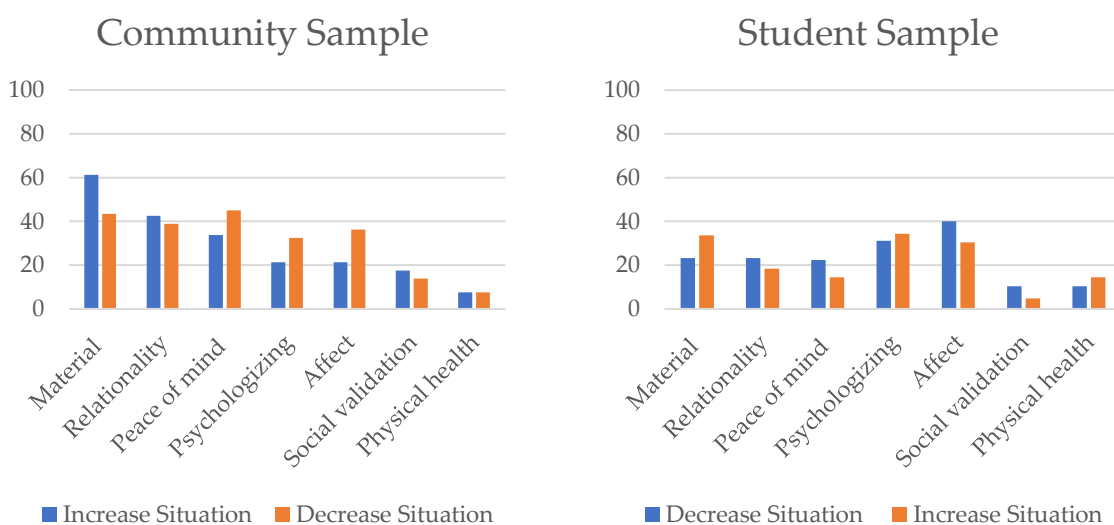
| Theme | Definition | Community sample: Study 1 | Student sample: Study 2 |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| Psychologizing | | | |
| (-) | Challenges/Obstacles to past or current work/career; Hindrances to future work/career aspirations; failure to achieve life goals/being short of personal standards | <i>Since I didn't have money, I couldn't further my education and it was difficult for me. I bought university forms went for interview and had been called but no money to pay for the tuition fee...(H17)</i> | <i>I couldn't achieve all my goals. (#69)</i> |
| (+) | Academic/work/career-related achievements; freedom to be who one want's to be/have own opinions/do whatever one wants without regard for what others think/seek one's own values not social ideals. Seeking new experiences/ discovery of self/self-development/search for personal identity | <i>I will say that when we were born our father didn't look after us; it was our stepfather who sponsored us to go to school and so I can also write my name today. (H14)</i> | <i>...My first month in university when my dad actually decided on giving me money to cater for myself. Now, I get to buy whatever I want, and I get to do anything. I like due to the fact that I don't have any relative monitoring my movements in school. Freedom. (#6)</i> |

Notes. (-) means decrease situation; (+) refers to increase situation. We use [...] to indicate that portions of the sentence have not been presented

2.4 Results

Reflecting the psychological character of well-being, relatively few participants ($f = 10, 12.5\%$) mentioned physical health. Consistent with the primary hypothesis (H1) and our earlier work on local conceptions of well-being (Osei-Tutu et al., 2021), the most prominent themes to emerge from analyses of situations were sustainability-oriented (Fig. 1; and Table 2, second and third columns from the left).

Fig. 1. Relative frequency of themes.



More than two-thirds of participants mentioned the sustainability-oriented themes of materiality ($f = 61, 76.3\%$) and peace of mind ($f = 54, 67.5\%$) in the context of either increase or decrease situations. Indeed, coders noted these with significantly greater frequency than all other all themes except the sustainability-oriented theme of relationality ($f = 49, 61.3\%$), McNemar $\chi^2(1, N = 80) > 5.11, p < .025$. In contrast, fewer than half of participants mentioned growth- or promotion-oriented themes of affect ($f = 38, 47.5\%$) or psychologization ($f = 38, 47.5\%$) in either increase or decrease situations. The prevention-oriented theme of social validation was somewhat less frequent, but still common, present in responses of more than one-quarter of participants ($f = 22, 27.5\%$) in either increase or decrease situations.

Table 2. Relative Frequency of themes within samples and valance dimensions.

| Rank | Community increase (N=80) | Community decrease (N=80) | Student increase (N=125) | Student decrease (N=125) |
|------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Matl (61.3%) | PM (45.0%) | Psych (44.4%) | Affect (40.0%) |
| 2 | Rel (42.5%) | Matl (43.4%) | Matl (33.6%) | Psych (31.2%) |
| 3 | PM (33.8%) | Rel (38.8%) | Affect (30.4%) | Matl (23.2%) |
| 4 | Affect (21.3%) | Affect (36.3%) | Rel (18.4%) | Rel (23.2%) |
| 5 | Psych (21.3%) | Psych (32.5%) | PH /PM (14.4%) | PM (22.4%) |
| 6 | SV (17.5%) | SV (13.8%) | PH/PM (14.4%) | PH (10.4%) |
| 7 | PH (7.5%) | PH (7.5%) | SV (4.8%) | SV (10.4%) |

Note. Matl = Material; Rel =Relational; PM= Peace of Mind; SV= Social Validation; PH=Physical Health. Shades of blue and green indicate sustainability-oriented themes. Shades of orange indicate growth- or promotion-oriented themes.

An analysis of the distribution of themes as a function of situation valence revealed statistically significant differences in proportions for two out of seven themes. Participants mentioned the sustainability-oriented theme of materiality more frequently in situations that increased ($f = 41, 61.3\%$) versus decreased ($f = 35, 43.8\%$) well-being, McNemar $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 4.45, p = .035$. Conversely, participants mentioned the promotion-oriented theme of affect more frequently in situations that decreased ($f = 29, 36.3\%$) versus increased ($f = 17, 21.3\%$) well-being, McNemar $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 4.03, p = .045$.

3. Study 2: Student sample

3.1 Participants

A total of 125 undergraduate students (57 men and 68 women, Mean Age=21.592; SD=2.759) at three universities in southern Ghana participated in the study.

3.2 Procedure

Two of the authors (NV and AAA) approached undergraduate students on the three campuses between January and February 2020. They invited students to complete a paper questionnaire about well-being. Students who gave verbal consent to participate completed the questionnaire on the spot. After providing demographic information and responding to a question about the meaning of well-being, participants responded to prompts instructing them to describe one situation where their well-being increased and another where their well-being decreased. We

excluded psychology students from the study because of concern that they may be familiar with concepts of well-being in mainstream psychology.

3.3 Coding

Sample responses appear in Table 1. One of us (AO-T) trained a new pair of coders (a Ghanaian woman and an African American woman) who applied the same coding frame and followed a similar coding process as described in Study 1. Inter-coder agreement was again fair to very good ($\kappa = .292$ and 1.000), except for the theme for social validation for situations of well-being decrease ($\kappa = -.015$). We resolved disagreements using the same strategy described in Study 1.

3.4 Results

Results for the student sample deviated in hypothesized (H2) fashion from the pattern of results for the community sample. In particular, the most prominent theme across either increase or decrease situations was the growth-/promotion-oriented theme of affect ($f = 73$, 58.4%), which coders noted with significantly greater frequency than all themes except the other growth-/promotion-oriented theme of psychologization ($f = 59$, 47.2%), McNemar $\chi^2(1, N = 125) > 6.49$, $ps < .012$ (Table 1, two right-most columns). A minority of participants mentioned the sustainability-oriented themes of materiality ($f = 51$, 40.8%), relationality ($f = 44$, 35.2%), peace of mind ($f = 39$, 31.2%), or social validation ($f = 17$, 13.6%) for either increase or decrease situations. Nearly one-quarter of participants mentioned physical health ($f = 27$, 21.6%) for either increase or decrease situations.

The analysis of the distribution of themes as a function of situation valence revealed a statistically significant difference in proportions for one of seven themes. As for the community sample in Study 1, students in Study 2 mentioned the theme of materiality more frequently in situations that increased ($f = 42$, 33.6%) versus decreased ($f = 29$, 23.2%) well-being, McNemar $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 4.65$, $p = .031$.

4. Comparative analysis of Study 1 and 2

Our original purpose in conducting both studies was to produce material for a situation-sampling paradigm, whereby we randomly select responses of participants to use as stimuli in future studies (cf. Kitayama et al., 1997). As one might infer from the differences in procedure across study—oral responses in Ghanaian languages for Study 1, written responses in English language for Study 2, and different coders within each study—we did not embark on this research with the intention of comparing across studies. Rather than equate procedures across studies with the intention of direct comparison, we selected the procedure that worked best within each sample, separately. Still, a comparison of results across studies is useful as a test of hypothesis (H2) about variation in experience of well-being as a function of variation in engagement with Eurocentric global modernity. To the extent that engagement with Eurocentric global modernity is greater among (A) university students who respond to a written survey in the medium of English than among (B) community members who respond in an oral interview via the medium of a local Ghanaian language, our theoretical framework would suggest that the former (compared to the latter) would show more evidence of growth-oriented conceptions of well-being characteristic of WEIRD settings and less evidence of the sustainability-oriented

conceptions of well-being that emerged from our early research on local Ghanaian conceptions. Accordingly, we proceed with comparisons across samples mindful of caveats about potential confounds from differences in procedure, which we consider again at length in the General Discussion.

First, an informal comparison of rank order in relative frequency of themes within each sample provides some evidence of hypothesized variation in priority of themes across samples (Table 2). Among participants in the student sample, growth-oriented emphases on affect and psychologization were the most frequent themes, with affect significantly more frequent than sustainability-oriented themes of responsibility and peace of mind. Among participants in the community sample, sustainability-oriented themes of materiality, peace of mind, and relationality were the most frequent, and—at least for materiality and peace of mind—were significantly more frequent than growth-oriented themes of affect and psychologization.

A more formal, direct comparison of relative frequency provides additional evidence of hypothesized variation in priority of themes across samples. In particular, we used log-linear modeling to simultaneously assess two-way partial associations for each theme (absent, present) with sample (community, student) and valence (decrease, increase).¹

The analysis revealed several significant differences as a function of valence. Consistent with results that we observed in analyses within each study separately, coders noted the theme of materiality more frequently in situations that increased (44.4%) versus decreased (31.2%) well-being, $\chi^2(1, N = 410) = 8.07, p = .004$. In contrast, coders noted the themes of affect and peace of mind more frequently in situations that decreased (38.5% and 31.2%) versus increased (26.8% and 22.0%) well-being, $\chi^2s(1, N = 410) = 6.44$ and $4.77, ps = .011$ and $.029$.

More relevant to the current interest, results also revealed several differences as a function of sample. Consistent with the hypothesis (H2), coders noted sustainability-oriented themes of materiality (76.3% and 40.8%), peace of mind (67.5% and 31.2%), and relationality (61.3% and 35.2%) more frequently among responses of participants in the community sample than in the student sample, $\chi^2s(1, N = 410) > 18.52, ps < .001$. Similarly, results revealed a somewhat weaker difference whereby coders noted the sustainability-oriented theme of social validation more frequently among responses of participants in the community sample (27.5%) than in the student sample (13.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 410) = 6.39, p = .011$. There was no evidence of differences across settings in the frequency with which participants noted growth-oriented themes of affect or psychologization.

As one might expect, participants were older in the community sample ($M = 42.0$ years, $SD = 13.90$) than the university student sample ($M = 21.6$ years, $SD = 2.76$), $t(202) = 15.92, p < .001$. This raises a plausible alternative explanation for observed differences in frequency of well-being themes across samples. Specifically, differences may be due to age-related variation in well-being rather than cultural ecologies associated with university and off-campus realities. Two sources of evidence argue against this alternative explanation. First, correlation analyses within each sample revealed no significant relationships between age and frequency of any theme. Second, logistic regression analyses with sample and age as simultaneous predictors of the presence or absence of each theme revealed the same pattern of differences across samples in frequency of

¹ The three-way partial association, corresponding to the two-way, sample X valence interaction in ANOVA, was not statistically significant for any of the themes.

sustainability-oriented themes (materiality, peace of mind, relationality, and social validation) as did loglinear analyses. In no case did age emerge as a significant predictor of theme frequency.²

5. General discussion

Theory and previous research in many Ghanaian and other West African settings have described a sustainability orientation to well-being that contrasts with the growth- or promotion-oriented conception that prevails in hegemonic psychological science (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020; Wilson Fadiji, 2021). The current research replicates and extends the conclusion of earlier research with evidence from a situation sampling procedure. Mainstream themes of personal growth and high arousal happiness were not completely absent from responses of Ghanaian participants in the community sample. However, consistent with the primary hypothesis (H1), these themes were much less prominent than sustainability-oriented themes of materiality, relationality, and peace of mind. In contrast, and consistent with hypothesis (H2), mainstream themes of personal growth and high arousal happiness were relatively more prominent than sustainability-oriented themes in responses of participants in the university sample. This is consistent with theory and research in modernization theory (e.g., Inkeles, 1969), which holds that engagement with formal education, the cultural milieu of university settings, and other affordances for modern individualist subjectivity will be associated with an experience of freedom from material constraint and a corresponding experience of well-being in terms of personal growth and fulfillment (Adams et al., 2018). In turn, one can understand the emphasis on personal growth and fulfillment as part of a larger process of psychologization by which people experience well-being, love, and care in terms in an affective or psychological support rather than tangible, material support (Coe, 2011; Esiaka & Adams, 2020; Osei-Tutu et al., 2021).

The theme of materiality was prominent in both samples (although significantly more so in the community sample versus student sample). Our respondents noted a variety of financial constraint situations as a source of well-being decrease, and they noted income-augmenting situations and financial stability as a source of well-being increase. The prominence of materiality is consistent with previous work (Wilson-Fadiji et al., 2021) and suggests that increased access to material security might contribute to improved subjective well-being. At the same time, an influential body of research (e.g., Brickman et al., 1978) suggests that people easily habituate to material improvements in life conditions, especially beyond a level of basic comfort. It is likely that people would require fulfilment of additional needs, beyond material sustenance, to maintain a sense of subjective well-being. Even so, results of the current work resonate with other research that emphasizes the importance of meeting basic needs and living conditions as the primary site of government policy to increase well-being.

Besides the procedural innovation of inferring conception and experience of well-being from descriptions of relevant situations, another novel feature of the study was the comparison of themes in situations that increased versus decreased well-being. In this case, the relevant differences were not in terms of the distinction between sustainability and growth/promotion orientations, but instead reflected a distinction between more and less material determinants of well-being. Specifically, the theme of materiality was more frequent in situations that increased

² We also conducted exploratory analyses of loglinear models including gender and sample as predictors of theme frequency. These analyses indicated gender differences in frequency of two categories. Coders noted the theme of relationality more frequently among responses of women ($f = 56, 59.1\%$) than men ($f = 37, 38.1\%$), $\chi^2(1, N = 410) = 4.88, p = .027$. In contrast, coders noted the theme of social validation more frequently among responses of men ($f = 25, 25.8\%$) than women ($f = 14, 13.0\%$), $\chi^2(1, N = 410) = 5.15, p = .023$. In no case did gender moderate or otherwise qualify differences across sample that we report in the main text.

(versus decreased) well-being, but the themes of affect and peace of mind were more prominent in situations that decreased (versus increased) well-being. The robustness of this pattern—and potential explanations for it—constitute interesting directions for future research.

6. Implications for positive psychology

This current work provides a foundation for denaturalizing the psychologization of well-being in both hegemonic psychological science and the WEIRD settings that disproportionately constitute its knowledge archive. Results suggest that a conception of well-being in terms of psychological growth, personal meaning, and high arousal positive affect is not the just-natural expression of some inborn program. Instead, this experience of well-being reflects a history of engagement with modern individualist lifeways and cultural ecologies of material affluence that enable them. Similarly, if this mainstream model of well-being might sometimes be conducive to optimal experience, its optimality is not necessarily a general truth of human psychology. Instead, the mainstream model is optimal to the extent that it is adaptive for flourishing within the WEIRD cultural ecologies of the Eurocentric modern order.

The move to locate mainstream models of well-being in cultural and historical processes of Eurocentric modernity provides a standpoint from which to contemplate their relationship to the coloniality that decolonial scholars associate with Eurocentric modernity (e.g., Adams et al., 2020; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). Psychological approaches tend to consider questions about the optimality of well-being with respect to individual actors abstracted from social and historical context (Bulhan, 1985). That is, a practice or way of being is good to the extent that it affords a target person optimal outcome. Psychological approaches rarely consider the broader social implications of those supposedly optimal ways of being, other than to assume an aggregation of individual effects would result in greater collective well-being. In contrast, epistemic perspectives of African and other Global South settings direct attention to the conditions of possibility for those supposedly optimal ways of being. What if the self-expansive personal growth and high arousal affect associated with modern individualist ways of being are dependent on baseline levels of affluence acquired and sustained through (neo)colonial extractions (Bulhan, 1985; Mignolo, 2011; Rodney, 1973)? What if these ways of being are necessarily available to only a privileged few, unsustainable if “scaled up” to the marginalized global majority, and dependent on heavily policed borders—at municipal, national, and even continental levels (Besteman, 2019; Gordon, 2022)—to maintain modern individualist standards of living within gated-community enclaves? If the answer to these questions is yes, then some re-thinking of standard models is in order. By raising such questions, epistemic perspectives from the Global South prompt consideration of possible downsides of prevailing models of well-being that often pass without reflection.

7. Conclusion

Besides revealing the cultural and historical foundations of the growth-oriented models of well-being that inform hegemonic positive psychology, the shift in epistemic perspective to an African or Global South standpoint makes it easier to appreciate the adaptive value of an emphasis on materiality, relationality, and the peace of mind or relief that comes from satisfaction of obligations and expectations. Although such an emphasis may not be conducive to high-arousal positive affect and personal fulfillment, its benefits lie in the broad assurance of support and possibility for a viable existence sustainable at the level of humanity in general. As the existential threat of anthropogenic climate change makes clear, we do not inhabit a world of unlimited possibility; instead, we share (unequally, to be sure) interdependent fates on our solitary planet.

The sustainability-oriented models of being and well-being that we consider in this and other work, may provide optimal pathways for viable existence in recognition of our global reality of embedded interdependence (Adams et al., 2020; Keller, 2019). This may explain patterns observed in recent research indicating that people across a variety of settings (but perhaps especially various African, Asian, and Latin American settings relative to European or White settler societies) express a preference for low-arousal calmness over high-arousal excitement (Crabtree & Lai, 2021). Rather than suboptimal forms that require intervention, sustainability-oriented models reflect important insights about the human condition that are worthy of emulation in hegemonic psychology.

Conflict of interest statement

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Authors

Annabella Osei-Tutu
Department of Psychology, University of Ghana
aopare-henaku@ug.edu.gh

Glenn Adams
University of Kansas, USA

Vivian A. Dzokoto
Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

Adjeiwa Akosua Afram
University of Ghana

Abraham Kenin
University of Ghana

Nilay Vural
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Syed Muhammad Omar
University of Kansas, USA

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