

Service research on well-being has proliferated in the past decade, mainly induced by Transformative Service Research. However, various studies include well-being as a central concept without clearly defining it. Furthermore, there is little agreement or guidance on how well-being should be conceptualized or measured since a large variety of perspectives exist.

The aim of this paper is to review and synthesize the literature on well-being to identify what we know about the well-being concept from different research disciplines and what service researchers can learn from this. To achieve this, we use a meta-narrative review, which is specifically developed for reviewing topics that have been conceptualized and studied in different ways and in multiple research disciplines. A meta-narrative review is a semi-systematic approach that collects and organizes insights from different literature streams to get a more complete picture of the topic under study. The objective of a meta-narrative review is not to cover every paper ever published on the topic, but to provide a review of diverse conceptualizations and to illuminate a complex topic from various angles. We followed the RAMESES standards (Realist And Meta-narrative Evidence Syntheses: Evolving Standards) and guidelines presented in prior meta-narrative reviews. NVivo 14 is used to code the papers included in our study.

Based on our preliminary results – after coding and analyzing 150 papers – we identified and described 12 meta-narratives, including their roots, key authors, seminal papers, research areas, main disciplines, and prevalent measurement instruments. Some meta-narratives focus on the process of well-being (i.e., how well-being is formed), while others focus on the meaning of the concept (i.e., what well-being is).

Additionally, we discerned six general insights related to well-being. First, there is agreement that well-being is not just the absence of ill-being. Second, well-being can be examined and measured at the individual level (i.e., the well-being of a person) or the collective level (e.g., the well-being of people living in a particular region or community). Third, various studies use different concepts interchangeably and, for instance, refer to subjective well-being while building on psychological well-being literature. Fourth, several studies use the term ‘well-being’, but operationalize it in terms of ‘ill-being’ by examining concepts such as depression or anxiety. Fifth, some meta-narratives are highly intertwined (e.g., psychological and eudaimonic well-being). Sixth, various empirical studies combine multiple well-being concepts in the same study. The latter four points indicate that the literature is even more fragmented and complex than expected.

This paper concludes with guidelines for service researchers with regard to the conceptualization and measurement of well-being. Researchers should think carefully about the well-being conceptualization and measurement used in their own study. There is no one right way to conceptualize well-being, but each conceptualization has its own assumptions and foundations. Researchers should understand that the results of a study might vary significantly depending on the chosen conceptualization and measurement. Overall, this paper provides a more comprehensive understanding of well-being and offers actionable guidelines for service researchers.