Well-being as being well—a Heideggerian look at well-being

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Abstract

The background of this study was a critique of definitions of well-being and quality of life since they implied a view of human beings as either divided into parts or were too narrowly focusing on the subjective experience of feeling good. The aim was to deepen the understanding of human well-being by exploring the concept from the viewpoint of human being. The method can be characterized as philosophical, since it dealt with questions on the ontological level. The strategy was based on Heidegger's philosophy of Being, which has previously been utilized as a basis for qualitative methodology in health and caring research. The landscape of well-being sketched out from this viewpoint included being well as the everyday unfolding of life, as alternating between a sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity in the world, between authentic and unauthentic. The landscape also included being well as orientating towards the future and realizing one's potentialities as well as confronting anxiety and death. This view can be used as an ontological understanding, which can indirectly point out a strategy for a scientific understanding and conceptualization of human well-being.

Key words: Wellness, health, quality of life, philosophy, ontology, Heidegger

Introduction

Well-being, health and quality of life may be seen as three basic concepts – maybe the basic concepts—in public health and other health sciences. There are, however, neither any unanimous definitions of these concepts nor a common view of how they relate to each other. An overview of different definitions and models of the three concepts, however, indicates that well-being may well be conceived as a unifying concept and a characteristic of both health and quality of life.

In all empirical research the definitions, models and measurements have philosophical underpinnings. Definitions of health, for instance, imply a view of what it means to be a whole human being, and definitions of quality of life imply a view of what is worthwhile and how we ought to live. In the same way, definitions of well-being have philosophical underpinnings and implications. This study illuminates some traits in common views of well-being, points out their philosophical underpinnings and lays the foundation for an alternative way of approaching well-being.

Health as well-being

Both health and quality of life have commonly been defined as well-being. In its classical definition of health, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1946) equalled health and well-being by defining health as physical, mental and social well-being. Later health was defined as a resource for everyday life (WHO, 1986). In accordance with the latter, Berntsson (2000) characterized health as the ability to resist stress so that reduction in well-being can be avoided. In Eriksson’s (1984) definition of health, well-being was seen as one aspect of health. Well-being, in turn, was characterised as a phenomenological concept referring to a feeling or experience. Bowling (2005), again, seemed to define health in terms of quality of life. In her book on measuring health and quality of life a considerable amount of the instruments presented are measures of psychological well-being.

Quality of life as well-being

Ferrell, who has carried out a large research programme on pain and quality of life, defined quality of
life as well-being covering four areas: quality of life is physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being (Ferrell, 1995; Ferrell, Grant, Padilla, Vemuri & Rhiner, 1991). Lindström (1994) has presented a model where quality of life was divided in a different way into four life spheres—the global, external, interpersonal and personal sphere—where the last one was represented by the physical, mental and spiritual dimension. Empirical support for the conception of well-being as a constituent of quality of life has been offered by e.g. Gabriel and Bowling (2004), who studied 80 older persons’ own definitions of the quality of life. Psychological well-being was mentioned as a constituent of the quality of life by 99% of the informants. Social relationships and health had the same status. Only home and neighbourhood were mentioned more frequently (100%). Rapley’s (2003) critical overview of quality of life research also showed that quality of life has commonly been associated with well-being. Both concepts seem to have an objective aspect referring to socioeconomic and material circumstances and a subjective aspect referring to personal experiences. Bond and Corner (2004), who have examined quality of life research in social gerontology and health and social science, concluded that we should make a clear distinction between objective indicators and psychometric measures on the one hand and subjective experiences of well-being on the other. Their suggestion is that quality of life should be used as a sensitising concept and a heuristic device in investigating everyday discourses. Hendry and McVittie (2004) have also pointed out that when people are given the opportunity to describe their quality of life they do not organize their experiences into separate domains. Assessment tools built on separate domains, they say, “have insufficient regard for the social and everyday situations in which people make sense of their lives” (p. 971).

Thus, the quality of life has commonly been defined as well-being, but while some definitions clearly divide well-being into separate areas, others put the focus on psychological well-being. There have also been critical voices against the whole effort of dividing well-being into separate areas.

Well-being as the ultimate criterion of quality of life

In addition to the definitions of health and quality of life as well-being, models have been presented that describe the relationships between these three crucial concepts. One such model is Lawton’s (1991) multidimensional view of quality of life. According to Lawton, quality of life consists of four main areas: objective environment, behavioural competence (including health), perceived quality of life, and psychological well-being (including life satisfaction). He suggested a loose causal model, in which the objective environment influences behavioural competence, which, in turn, influences perceived quality of life. Psychological well-being is the ultimate outcome. Nordenfelt (1991a,b) has argued along the same lines. In his discussions of health, quality of life and well-being, he suggested that health is a resource for quality of life, but not a necessary condition. Well-being, in his view, is an aspect of quality of life and may well be seen as the ultimate criterion of a good quality of life. He referred to well-being as the hedonistic criterion, thus associating well-being with a philosophical tradition emphasising pleasure, pleasantness and enjoyment as the good things in life (Frankena, 1973).

As was previously pointed out, well-being can be characterized in objective as well as subjective terms (Bond & Corner, 2004; Rapley, 2003). Furthermore, well-being is described as belonging to all dimensions of a human being: physical, mental, social and spiritual (Ferrell, 1995; Lindström, 1994; WHO, 1946). There seems, however, to be a strong emphasis on one of these four dimensions: well-being as a subjective experience or psychological well-being (Eriksson, 1984; Gabriel & Bowling 2004), which is seen as the ultimate criterion of quality of life (Lawton, 1991; Nordenfelt 1991a,b). In this sense, we could say that there is a tendency to define well-being in terms of subjective experiences as feeling good and being satisfied.

Identification of the problem

Every definition of well-being rests on an implicit view of what it means to be a human being—a whole and well human being. The definitions of well-being as physical, mental (psychological), social and spiritual that have been presented here imply that a human being is made up of these four “parts” or can be studied from these four aspects. As a criticism of this view, Heidegger (1978) claimed that the Being of human beings is not the sum of body, soul and spirit. If Being is the sum of separate parts, it is not conceived of as a whole being. These “parts” may constitute the foundation for empirical science, he said, but they need to be problematized on the ontological level. In Heidegger’s spirit we can say that for the purpose of empirical research, well-being may well be conceptualized as physical, mental, social and spiritual, but in order to gain a deeper understanding of well-being we have to transcend the division of well-being as corresponding to four parts of the human being. The conceptualization of well-being as feeling good and being satisfied, again, seems to offer a very limited view of well-being.
Aim

The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of human well-being by exploring the meaning of well-being from a philosophical viewpoint of human being. The questions guiding the exploration are:

- How can the being of human beings be characterized?
- In the light of this characterization, what does “being well” mean?
- What are the implications of “being well” for our understanding of well-being?

Method

The method can be characterized as philosophical. The philosophical questions and methods aim at revealing, problematizing and criticizing values, conceptions and modes of thought that underpin our thinking (McClellan, 1976; Niiniluoto, 1980). They also aim at forming consistent and coherent views of the world, human beings, human knowledge, ethics, etc. that is, world-views, views of man, theories of knowledge and ethical theories (Sarvimäki, 1988). The philosophical questions are answered by philosophical methods, which cover a wide variety of methods and techniques ranging from formal, logical analysis to conceptual investigations, argumentation, discourse and more aesthetic texts (Sarvimäki, 1999). In this study, the philosophical method used can be characterized as an ontologically based discourse and analysis of human well-being.

Since the starting point of this exploration is the question of being of human beings, I will turn to philosophies of being for material. The question of being is the paramount question in the area of philosophy called ontology. Since this study does not deal with being as such but with the being of human beings, the existentialistic thinkers seem to provide the most suitable material. The whole purpose of the existentialistic endeavour, namely, is to explore the meaning of human existence or being. The question of being of human beings has been thoroughly investigated by Martin Heidegger in Being and Time (1978) and by Jean-Paul Sartre in, Being and Nothingness (1966). Since Sartre in many respects can be seen as a follower of Heidegger, Heidegger will be used as the primary source of material. Another reason for choosing Heidegger as the point of departure is that Heidegger’s philosophy forms one of the basic philosophies behind interpretive phenomenology and hermeneutics. There is already a tradition in qualitative health research based on these philosophies (Benner, 1994; Benner & Wrubel, 1988; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Therefore, it seems reasonable also to investigate the possibilities of using this philosophy as a point of departure for the understanding of well-being.

The idea with using Heidegger’s texts is not to carry out some kind of Heidegger-exegetics. Rather, the idea is to illuminate being, being well and well-being, and for this Heidegger will provide the light. Metaphorically, the process can be described as entering a dark landscape, illuminating parts of the landscape with Heidegger’s light, and finally coming out of the landscape with a clearer vision of what it contains. Some parts of the landscape will, however, be left in darkness, and some will be dimly lit. The picture will be influenced by how the torch is pointed and how far the light will reach.

The being of human beings

As was pointed out above, Heidegger (1978) criticises the concept of human being as a substance made up of three parts—body, mind and spirit. For him human being is Dasein, existence. Dasein, again, is not a substance with properties but the temporal unfolding and creating of a life course.

Human being or existence is Being-in-the-World in ordinary everydayness. This may seem self-evident, but according to Heidegger (1978), existentially and ontologically existence is full of enigmas. He derives Being-in-the-World from residing, dwelling and being familiar with and characterizes this unitary phenomenon in the following way: “The expression ‘bin’ is connected with ‘bei’, and so ‘ich bin’ [‘I am’] means in its turn ‘I reside’ or ‘dwell alongside’ the world, as that which is familiar to me in such and such a way” (p. 80). Everydayness refers to a mode of Being-in-the-World. It means being caught up in the practical affairs of life and acting in an ordinary pre-reflective way. Everydayness is that which is more or less the same every day, “... the accustomed, the ‘like yesterday, so today and tomorrow’, and the ‘for the most part’—...” (p. 423).

Being-in-the-World could thus be interpreted as being at home in the world and knowing one’s way around while going about one’s ordinary practical affairs, day after day. Being-in-the-World, according to Heidegger (1978), involves confronting things, tools and equipment that are there ready-to-hand, and nature, which is present-at-hand. However, it also involves the existence of other human beings and the being of oneself. This part of Heidegger’s analysis addresses the question of who exists in the world.

Heidegger (1978) characterizes the existence with others as Being-with and Dasein-with. The other
persons that the Self encounters in the world differ from equipment and nature in that they are also Daseins. The world of Dasein is thus in a very profound meaning a with-world. Being-in-the-World is Being-with-others, Dasein-with. This with-world of Daseins exceeds the mere existing side by side as separate beings, Being-with. In the with-world of Daseins, Dasein is defined as care.

In Heidegger’s (1978) philosophy, care (Sorge) is not to be understood as a feeling or an attitude towards others. Care is an existential a priori, Being’s existential meaning, which encompasses the unity of the ways in which Being can be characterized. In that sense, care is rather a presupposition for different kinds of involvement, like concern and solicitude. Concern (Besorgen) involves having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, coming near something, and preserving something. The opposite is the ‘not-I’, which is also a kind of Being. Heidegger mentions losing oneself as one example of this kind of Being and in doing so he reveals his debt to Kierkegaard (1881). Inauthenticity can be a consequence of drifting along with the others, to exist as presence-at-hand, that is, thing-like, or as “They” in the world of the others.

In inauthenticity, Dasein is in a state of tranquillized self-assurance and becomes too at-home in the average everydayness. Heidegger (1978) calls this state “falling”, we flee into the at-home of publicness. The world and the authentic Self; however, can be disclosed by anxiety, an ever-latent primordial state of mind. In anxiety, one feels uncanny or “unhomelike”: “Everyday familiarity collapses” (p. 233). Anxiety individualizes Dasein, it makes manifest Dasein’s Being-free-for the choosing of itself and taking hold of itself, i.e. the authenticity of its Being.

One central determinant of Dasein is temporality. Temporality reveals itself in the everydayness of Dasein, in the “day after day”, “yesterday, today and tomorrow” (Heidegger, 1978, p. 423). Temporality is also associated with the central aspect of care as “Being-ahead-of-itself”, projecting one’s possibilities into the future. As long as there are unfulfilled possibilities, the Self is unfinished. Death, which means that there are no more possibilities, the future is no more, completes the Self. Thus, being is Being-towards-Death, towards Being-a-whole.

The main points in Heidegger’s philosophy that are used in this context can be summarized as follows. The Being of human beings means being caught up in everyday affairs with nature, things and other people while at the same time orientating towards the future and realizing one’s potentials until death completes the Self and the life course. The meaning of human existence is defined as care, the existential a priori for different kinds of being and involvement, like concern and soliciting. These have a positive aspect—like producing, attending and doing things for others—as well as a deficient and indifferent one—like neglecting, being alone and not mattering. The self that exists can seize itself and define itself (the authentic Self) or being caught up in the stream of publicness and feeling too much at home in everydayness (the inauthentic Self). Anxiety discloses the authentic Self.

**Being well**

Can we, from Heidegger’s philosophy of being, draw any conclusions about being well? One caution has to be mentioned. Heidegger’s philosophy is an analysis of the meaning of human existence—it is not a normative recommendation about how people should live. Being well, however, is a normative or
value-laden idea, since it refers to something good, in contrast to being ill, which refers to something bad.

There are, in Heidegger’s (1978) text, distinctions and dichotomies that might easily be understood in terms of good and bad. One is the distinction between the authentic Self, the I, and the inauthentic Self, the not-I. There are also the distinctions between the positive and the deficient modes of concern as well as between positive modes of solicitude and the deficient and indifferent ones. Being-with also holds the possibility of Being-alone. About Being-with he says:

Thus as Being-with, Dasein ‘is’ essentially for the sake of Others. This must be understood as an existential statement as to its essence. Even if the particular factual Dasein does not turn to Others, and supposes that it has no need of them or manages to get along without them, it is in the way of Being-with. (Heidegger, 1978, p. 160)

Thus, the not-I is a possibility of the I, Being-alone and being indifferent are possibilities of Being-with, and leaving undone is a possibility of Being alongside the ready-to-hand, concern.

It might be tempting to interpret these distinctions in the way that the positive modes represent the good while the deficient and indifferent modes represent the bad. Authenticity would then stand for being well and inauthenticity for being ill. Heidegger (1987) says, however:

As modes of Being, authenticity and inauthenticity /.../ are both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness. But the inauthenticity of Dasein does not signify any ‘less’ Being or any ‘lower’ degree of Being. Rather it is the case that even in its full concretion Dasein can be characterized by inauthenticity—when busy, when excited, when interested, when ready for enjoyment. (p. 68)

In holding this view Heidegger (1978) seems to agree with Buber (1985), something that has also been pointed out by Macquarrie (1976). Buber characterized the two attitudes to the world and other human beings as I-Thou and I-It. The I-Thou attitude means being in relation and being open, while I-It means objectifying the world and other people. Buber claims that living in constant I-Thou relationships would be too consuming. Therefore, it is natural to encounter other human beings with the I-It attitude in some situations.

Sartre (1966), in building his philosophy upon Heidegger’s, used the concept “bad faith” to refer to the not-I. Living in bad faith means being who one is not, that is, pretending, and not being who one is, that is, concealing oneself. Sartre gives many examples of bad faith, like the waiter playing the role of the perfect waiter. Sartre, however, seems to apply a more normative stance to good and bad faith. He sees bad faith as corrupted being, a state we can recover from although we cannot completely escape from it:

If it is indifferent whether one is in good or in bad faith, because bad faith reapprehends good faith and slides to the very origin of the project of good faith, that does not mean that we cannot radically escape bad faith. But this presupposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, ... (Sartre, 1966, p. 116.)

Thus, in using words like “corruption” and “recovery” Sartre expressed the view that authenticity, the authentic I, represents something healthier and better than bad faith, the not-I.

To conclude, as a mode of Being, being well can be described and understood in terms of:

- the way in which the life-course is unfolded in everydayness, day after day
- being caught up in life
- being at home in the world and being familiar with nature, tools and other human beings
- not being-at-home to the extent of loosing oneself in publicness
- facing the world and oneself in anxiety
- managing to project oneself into the future, unto death, and realising one’s possibilities
- being involved, which accounts for doing as well as leaving undone, turning to other human beings as well as being alone, being the authentic I and defining oneself as well as being the inauthentic not-I—thus not indulging in self-consuming authenticity.

Well-being re-visited

A Heidegger-inspired way of studying well-being would involve the abolishment of the division of well-being into physical, mental, social and spiritual. Nor would ‘feeling good’ cover well-being in terms of Being well. On the contrary, the unfolding of the life course, being caught up in life, and alternating between authenticity and inauthenticity would probably include some amount of anxiety, “feeling bad”.

Would it, then, be possible to describe well-being in terms of Heidegger’s philosophy of Being and then use this understanding in health sciences, for
example, as a basis for empirical research—research that would construct well-being in a more holistic way than the physical-mental-social-spiritual well-being or the feeling-good model? Yes, but only indirectly. Heidegger's philosophy is an ontological analysis, and it is not possible to draw straightforward conclusions from ontology to empirical sciences and empirical research. Heidegger (1987) says:

> Ontology can contribute only indirectly towards advancing the positive disciplines as we find them today. It has a goal of its own, even if, beyond the acquiring of information about entities, the question of Being is the spur for all scientific seeking. (p. 77)

It is possible, that a Heidegger-inspired description of well-being would fit badly into a clear-cut definition. Rather, researching well-being inspired by this philosophy might be better carried out as a strategy focusing upon human beings caught up in their life course in everydayness, in their doings and not-doings, projects and anxieties. This strategy resembles the one recommended by Bond and Corner (2004) for investigating quality of life.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This study took its starting point in definitions of well-being and quality of life that divided well-being into separate parts or focused solely upon the subjective experience of feeling good and satisfied. The argument against the first ones was that these may work well within the psychometric area, but that they, nevertheless, have to be problematized on the ontological level, because they imply a view of human beings and life as divided into separate parts. This view seemed to fit badly with how people themselves described their lives. The argument against the second type of definitions was that they offer a very one-sided and limited view of human well-being.

The alternative strategy was based on Heidegger's philosophy of Being, which has previously been utilized as a basis for qualitative methodology in health research, interpretive phenomenology. The aim was now to use this philosophy as a basis for deeper understanding of human well-being. The landscape of well-being sketched out from this viewpoint included being well as the everyday unfolding of life, as alternating between a sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity in the world, between authenticity and inauthenticity. The landscape also included being well as orientating towards the future and realising one's potentialities as well as confronting anxiety and death. This view can be used as an ontological understanding, which can indirectly point out a strategy for understanding and researching human well-being in health sciences.

Heidegger's philosophy can thus be used for two purposes. Firstly, it can be used to advance the understanding and problematization of Being and well-being on an ontological level, and secondly, to inspire health sciences and empirical research to seek alternative ways of describing well-being. These two tasks are both legitimate in themselves. The ontological work holds a specific interest for philosophers, since ontology is a sub-discipline of philosophy, but it can also help health researchers become aware of possible limitations in their way of understanding well-being. The second task is a task for empirical researchers who, inspired by Heidegger, want to re-describe well-being.

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