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Original Manuscript

Public Policy Implications from Research on Well-Being in Daily Life

Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences
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DOI: 10.1177/23727322251399160
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Abstract

Individual well-being often plays a role in shaping public policy, yet much of the evidence that informs decisions and policy is based on cross-sectional and experimental research that fails to account for the dynamic nature of well-being. Research that utilizes Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) and daily diary methods highlights how within-person variation in well-being can yield insights distinct from between-person analyses and laboratory-based designs. Highlighting distinct areas of research across domains of climate anxiety, meaning in life, values, empathy, nostalgia, and alcohol use, the review illustrates how within-person processes offer unique policy implications. Findings suggest that policies may be more effective when they account for temporal fluctuations, daily contextual factors, and differences between remembered and lived experiences. EMA research underscores the importance of tailoring interventions to specific moments, whether by supporting closer human-nature connections, fostering daily meaning-making practices, or addressing the anticipation of alcohol use. Ultimately, integrating research on dynamic states of well-being into policy may enhance both individual and societal outcomes.

Keywords

well-being, public policy, health, daily diary, ecological validity

Social Media

Our happiness changes from moment to moment. Research tracking daily life shows that policies on mental health, environment, and education could be more effective when they address real-time experiences and emotions in addition to broader reflections on life.

Key Points

- Much of the well-being and health research that has informed public policy has relied on cross-sectional and experimental methods which miss the temporal fluctuations of well-being. Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) methods capture within-person change and offer more ecologically valid insights that can inform time-sensitive and context-specific policy design.
- EMA studies can examine within-person relationships which are distinct from between-person relationships and can offer unique insights. For example, searching for meaning in life and empathy are both negatively related to well-being between individuals, but they are positively related to well-being within individuals. This implies that policies and interventions should target momentary or daily experiences and context-specific states rather than static traits.
- EMA methods focus on daily or situational judgments as opposed to broad global reflections on life that tend to overestimate daily experiences and are influenced by peak and recent experiences. Utilizing EMA methods can reveal nuanced associations; for example, income is a stronger predictor of daily states of well-being, whereas education is a stronger and more consistent predictor of daily states of health. These findings suggest that policies should consider both remembered and lived experiences when designing programs that promote sustained engagement and equitable well-being.
- EMA studies can reveal patterns that diverge from conclusions drawn from lab-based experiments. Whereas experiments show that induced nostalgic states can improve well-being, and negative affect can influence alcohol use, real-world EMA studies find that everyday nostalgic feelings can lower well-being, and people tend to drink more on days when they experience more positive affect, often in anticipation of social rewards. These contrasts underscore the

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need for policies and interventions to address real-world emotional contexts and anticipatory behaviors rather than relying on artificial lab paradigms.

Individual well-being is a critical consideration in public policy decisions. Recognition of its importance has led to research that provides valuable insights for guiding policy, particularly in areas pertaining to taxation structures, education policies, unemployment solutions, and other domains (Diener, 2009; Dolan & White, 2007; Layard, 2021). Much of the research that has informed policy decisions concerning well-being has relied on cross-sectional studies and experiments. Though informative, these methods fail to account for the fact that well-being states change from one time to the next. Studies that have measured well-being over time in naturalistic contexts have sometimes yielded conclusions that may differ from other methods. Thus, it is important to evaluate studies that have captured within-person fluctuations in well-being and consider their implications for public policy. The goal of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive list of policy recommendations. Rather, it aims to complement existing reviews of well-being research and offer some unique perspectives and considerations.

Because well-being has been defined and operationalized in many ways, consider first an overview of the measurement of well-being. Three broad types of well-being have often been studied: evaluative, experiential, and eudaimonic (Kahneman, 1999; Schwarz & Strack, 1999; Steptoe et al., 2015). *Evaluative well-being* refers to judgments of life satisfaction. Common measures include the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) and the Cantril ladder (Cantril, 1965). Participants are asked to assess their life as a whole when forming these judgments. *Experiential well-being* refers to affect or emotions, often measured in people's daily lives. Among some researchers, experiential well-being is considered a type of hedonic well-being (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; National Research Council, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Finally, *eudaimonic well-being* typically centers on constructs of meaning and purpose in life. These measures come from a tradition of well-being that differs from evaluative and experiential well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). These different types of well-being are unsurprisingly related to each other; yet, they are distinct and often have distinct antecedents and/or consequences (e.g., Tov & Lee, 2016).

Though evaluative and eudaimonic measures of well-being are often assessed by asking participants to consider their lives as a whole at one point in time, they can also be tailored to assess daily or momentary states. For example, in some studies, participants are asked at the end of their day about how satisfied they were with their lives or how meaningful they found their lives to be on that day. These questions are often repeated over the course of several days or weeks to capture varying states of well-being. Thus, each type of well-being (evaluative, experiential, eudaimonic) can be studied in a manner that captures dynamic processes that unfold in daily life.

Measurement of Well-Being in Daily Life

Before describing specific studies and their policy implications, this section overviews Ecological Momentary Assessment methods (EMA; Shiffman et al., 2008) and outlines their potential usefulness. This is an important step in understanding why certain studies may be valuable when considering policy implications. EMA methods are a class of methods used to measure experiences in naturally occurring situations, thus enhancing ecological validity (Brunswik, 1956). The goal of EMA studies is to assess thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as they occur, without much use of recall. Questionnaires must also be repeated at various times to capture a sample of timepoints from a person's life. These methods include experience sampling and ambulatory assessment. In some cases, daily diary and Day Reconstruction Methods (Kahneman et al., 2004) can also be considered a version of EMA even though they require some recall as participants typically reflect on their day at the end of the day (Newman & Stone, 2019). Generally speaking, EMA methods capture thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in daily life as they naturally occur.

EMA methods can be complemented with other methods and often extend research and theories. For instance, because people are assessed multiple times throughout the day or across days, researchers can examine within-person relationships, a level of analysis that is psychologically distinct from and mathematically orthogonal to between-person relationships (Affleck et al., 1999; Nezlek, 2001). Additionally, because participants in EMA studies are typically asked to complete questionnaires at one specific day or moment of their life, the findings might differ from studies that ask participants to complete questionnaires at one time by reflecting on their life quite broadly. These different types of judgments often reflect different processes. Finally, the naturally occurring situations that are sampled in EMA studies might differ from situations created in the laboratory or via experimental manipulation. Examples from each of these scenarios show how EMA methods offer insights beyond those from other methods while drawing attention to their unique public policy implications.

Between-Person and Within-Person Relationships Are Distinct

The Science. Consider research on the topic of eco-anxiety, defined as "persistent feelings of worry, anxiety, dread, or doom regarding environmental degradation and the impacts and implications of climate change on our planet as a whole" (Passmore et al., 2023, p. 140). Individuals who experience higher levels of eco-anxiety also report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, which represents between-person relationships (Clayton, 2020; Hogg et al., 2021). Extending this work beyond between-person relationships (Lutz et al., 2023), a daily diary study found that on days when people experienced higher levels of eco-anxiety

than their typical amount, they reported higher negative affect. Moreover, lagged analyses showed that eco-anxiety predicted greater negative activated affect (e.g., stress) on the following day. This is a within-person relationship and differs from between-person relationships. It means that for the average person, they feel more negative affect when they feel more eco-anxiety, relative to how much eco-anxiety they typically feel.

As a separate example, consider research on the topic of searching for meaning in life, which has been negatively associated with well-being at the trait level (Steger et al., 2006, 2008). The conclusion from this work is that it might be beneficial to refrain from searching for meaning because it might be harmful to one's well-being. While that may be true when people reflect on their life broadly, searching for meaning in the day while reflecting on the present circumstances may actually help. Two daily diary studies (Newman et al., 2018) found that daily states of searching for meaning in life were positively related to daily states of well-being, and searching for meaning in life predicted greater presence of meaning in life on the following day. The positive within-person relationships stand in contrast to the negative between-person relationships.

Finally, additional examples come from research on two other-oriented constructs: values and empathy. Values have traditionally been conceptualized as decontextualized life goals that guide behavior across situations (Schwartz, 1992), but more recent work suggests that they can also operate as states, reflecting momentary goals that guide situation-specific behavior (e.g., Skimina et al., 2018). In an event sampling study, participants completed daily surveys reporting on their value states and well-being during the preceding 15 min (Fischer & Karl, 2023). Distinguishing levels of analysis was especially revealing for self-transcendence values, which reflect concern for the welfare of others. At the within-person level, greater momentary importance placed on these values predicted higher well-being on the same occasion and the following one. In contrast, at the between-person level, individuals who consistently prioritized self-transcendent values over the study period reported lower well-being. A related pattern of divergence across levels of analysis was observed in an experience sampling study on the topic of empathy and well-being (Depow et al., 2021). Though there were some nuances across different measures of empathy and well-being, one of the key takeaways was that certain aspects of empathy predicted greater well-being within persons, yet trait empathy assessed via questionnaires negatively predicted well-being between persons.

Policy Implications. The analysis of within-person relationships in daily life offers several policy implications. For example, the policy implications from within-person relationships involving eco-anxiety indicate that mental health messages and education efforts should recognize that people likely feel greater levels of eco-anxiety at some times (e.g., during natural disasters) than others. Policy efforts could assist people in fostering closer connections with nature, ensuring that these opportunities remain available during times of heightened eco-anxiety, such as by supporting access to settings with restorative natural features, ranging from indoor areas with plants to large green spaces, when feasible and safe. These efforts may not only help individuals cope with eco-anxiety but also provide broader benefits to both people and the environment (e.g., Barragan-Jason et al., 2023).

In areas related to the process of searching for meaning in life, findings from within-person analyses suggest that it would be prudent to integrate acts of searching for meaning in one's day with journal exercises and interventions. This could be implemented in school settings, workplace environments, and counseling programs. Government agencies could also create programs that would foster the act of searching for meaning in daily life specifically through volunteer activities, community outreach, or storytelling groups. Searching for meaning is associated with greater civic and pro-environmental engagement, particularly when people hold views of open-mindedness (Lin, 2019).

Finally, the findings from within-person associations involving values and empathy highlight the potential benefits of cultivating practices and settings that encourage momentary expressions of other-focus. In mental health contexts, this suggests that interventions that activate self-transcendence values and empathic engagement, potentially including compassion-based activities (e.g., Kirby et al., 2017), may help individuals connect with the well-being of others in ways that enhance their own. In occupational contexts, initiatives such as volunteer days, mentorship activities, and team-based tasks may similarly encourage other-focused states that are conducive to well-being. Although the between-person relationships in these studies capture different phenomena, some of the findings collectively imply that a chronically heightened focus on others may carry unintended costs for one's own well-being. Individuals in high-demand relational roles (e.g., healthcare workers, human resources personnel) may be susceptible to burnout without sufficient support. To reduce chronic strain and foster a more sustainable balance of responsibilities, organizational policies could aim to distribute relational duties more evenly (vs. relying disproportionally on a few "go to" individuals) or provide supports, such as workload adjustments and well-being resources. Ultimately, fostering moments of other-focus, while putting safeguards in place to mitigate potential overload, may be essential. After all, one cannot pour from an empty cup.

Global Reports Differ from Daily or Momentary Reports

The Science. The preceding examples represent how EMA methods can address unique levels of analysis. An additional

distinction concerns the timeframe in which people make judgments. For example, in the studies of searching for meaning, the key factor is that the search for meaning should reflect the current day and not a longer period of life. People focus on different aspects of their life when reflecting on their life quite broadly as opposed to their day. In one study, participants were asked to reflect on their life quite broadly when answering questions about their levels of searching for meaning in life (Newman et al., 2021). They also completed a two-week daily diary study by answering questions about how much they were searching for meaning in their day. Average levels of daily searching for meaning were lower than global levels of searching for meaning. This implies that people reflect on different types of experiences when answering these questions.

This pattern of results reflects a broader psychological process that distinguishes the experiencing self and the remembering self (Kahneman & Riis, 2005). When reflecting on past experiences, people often remember the peak moments and forget the more mundane ones (Schwarz, 2012). For example, in a study of people on a spring break trip, participants first predicted their levels of well-being, then completed online reports of their well-being during the trip and finally answered questions about their recalled well-being after the trip ended. Predictions and recalls were more extreme than their online experiences (Wirtz et al., 2003). Furthermore, at the end of the study they were asked how likely they would do a similar trip in the future. Recall reports were a stronger predictor of future intention than their online reports.

Distinguishing longer recall judgments from shorter ones can point to different psychological processes. Related to this, asking participants about their health and well-being in daily life as situations naturally occur can provide additional helpful insights into distinct psychological processes. For example, in a study of more than 70,000 participants from more than 10 countries, participants completed up to three short questionnaires each day for 21 days (Newman, Gordon et al., 2025). At each check-in, they recorded their heart rate and blood pressure, and they answered several questions about their emotions. They also completed measures of income and education. Results indicated that income predicted better well-being, whereas education more consistently predicted better health. As one example, when participants indicated that nothing particularly stressful had happened recently, those with higher incomes reported lower stress than those with less money, but more highly educated people reported higher stress than those with lower levels of education. In contrast, when something stressful had occurred recently, highly educated people dealt with the stress better than those with less education. Capturing these situations as they occurred offers insights that could not have been gained with other methods.

Additionally, participants in the United States provided their ZIP Codes, which allowed the researchers to examine how community levels of income and education predicted health and well-being in daily life. The results at the community level mirrored those at the individual level. However, when compared together, individual levels of income and education were stronger predictors of health and well-being than community levels of income and education.

Policy Implications. Recognizing that long-term recall judgments differ from those captured in daily life has implications not only for psychological processes but for policy decisions as well. For instance, government sponsored educational programs should aim to include positive, memorable experiences throughout and particularly at the end of the program so that people will be more likely to continue to participate. A similar strategy could be used for events that require ongoing participation, such as volunteer programs, chronic disease management, and annual tax-filing seminars. In these experiences, it is crucial to make sure that participants remember the program in a favorable way even if their experience during the program was mediocre or ordinary.

Moreover, asking participants about their health and well-being in daily life has implications concerning socioeconomic status. First, research outlined above showed that socioeconomic status should not always be treated as a uniform construct but may need to be considered as separate indicators (Newman, Gordon et al., 2025). Though income and education are correlated, policies aimed at improving societal levels of income may differ from those aimed at improving education levels. It would thus seem prudent to try to align intersectional policies, such as those involving education, labor, health, and social welfare programs. For instance, policies aimed at reforming education should also incorporate mental health awareness and training. Relatedly, urban development plans should focus not only on building infrastructure to improve income levels but should strive to enhance community educational opportunities.

Second, some of the results dovetail with prior research that calls for boosting educational opportunities (Ainscow, 2020). Doing so would not only potentially improve economic productivity, but it appears it would also improve public health. While it is important to target efforts at increasing education opportunities for individuals, community levels of education are also important. Thus, investing in educational infrastructure by improving schools and adult learning centers could be beneficial.

Third, because highly educated people experience greater stress than those with less education, it would be worthwhile to offer stress management training and other mental health services to those obtaining advanced degrees and those in highly educated professions. Fourth, echoing calls from other research in this area, these findings stress the importance of equity considerations, namely by ensuring that

improvements in educational opportunities are afforded to those from marginalized groups.

Conclusions from EMA Studies may Contrast with Experimental Findings

The Science. The studies summarized so far have highlighted two ways in which EMA studies may extend research and offer new practical insights. In addition, EMA methods capture naturalistic situations which may differ markedly from experimental settings. Memories and elicited emotions that are induced in laboratory settings may differ substantively from naturally occurring states. For example, consider some ongoing research on the topic of nostalgia. Much of the experimental research has documented mostly positive effects in which experimentally induced nostalgia can increase perceptions of meaning in life, self-esteem, positive affect, and social connectedness (Leunissen et al., 2020; Sedikides et al., 2015). In contrast, recent studies that have measured naturally occurring nostalgic states in daily life have shown that nostalgia is negatively associated with various states of well-being and that nostalgia can lead to lower levels of well-being on the following day (Newman et al., 2020; Newman, Lutz et al., 2025). To understand the reason behind the discrepancy between experimentally induced states and naturally occurring ones, Newman et al. (2020) asked participants to write about their most nostalgic feeling and their daily naturally occurring ones in a daily diary study. People's most nostalgic feelings were rated as more positive and less negative than daily nostalgic feelings. Moreover, subsequent daily diary studies have shown that the associations between nostalgia and daily states of well-being depend on the types of daily states that elicit nostalgia (Newman & Sachs, 2023). Taken together, these studies show that nostalgic feelings can vary considerably, and they can affect other emotions and states of well-being in complex ways.

Experimental and EMA studies have also yielded divergent findings regarding the relationship between affect and alcohol use. Considerable experimental research has shown that people consume more alcohol following negative mood inductions (Bresin et al., 2018). In contrast to these findings, an individual participant data meta-analysis of 69 EMA and daily diary studies ($N = 12{,}394$; 353,762 days) found that people were not more likely to drink or drink heavily on days when they reported higher negative affect than usual, but rather on days when they reported higher positive affect than usual (Dora et al., 2023). One explanation for this discrepancy is that laboratory drinking paradigms may create a unique set of conditions; for example, affect is induced immediately before a drinking opportunity, alcohol is readily available, and drinking in this context typically accompanies few real-world consequences, as participants are typically required to remain in the laboratory until their blood alcohol concentration falls below a certain threshold (e.g., Dora et al., 2023). These circumstances differ substantially from daily life, where alcohol is often less immediately available or typically conflicts with responsibilities, reducing its utility for affect regulation (e.g., King et al., 2025). *Intentions* to drink, however, appear to be less contextually constrained and may serve this regulatory role. Indeed, a registered report of two large EMA studies (King et al., 2025) found that positive affect was higher (and increased more) on days when participants reported intending to drink more than usual. The authors argue that the observed link between positive affect and subsequent drinking episodes in daily life might be partly driven by anticipatory affect. As people form intentions to drink, they experience increases in positive emotions while anticipating alcohol use and the accompanying contexts.

Policy Implications. Diverging conclusions across experiments and EMA methods in the area of nostalgia has important implications for various policy relevant domains. In areas concerning mental health, clinicians and therapists should be aware that techniques that involve nostalgia may have different effects on one's well-being, depending on the contexts in which they are elicited. In advertising and marketing, agencies should be aware that advertisements designed to elicit nostalgia to sell a product may have some unintended negative consequences. The products may induce certain negative emotions in addition to positive ones. Moreover, because nostalgia may be more negatively associated with well-being among members of lower-income households than higher-income households (Newman, 2022), regulating agencies should consider the ethical implications of such advertisements, particularly when targeted to vulnerable populations. Similarly, nostalgic content is often shown on social media through throwback references and resurfacing older photos (Brown et al., 2024). Though such images may induce some pleasant emotions and memories, certain sad ones that have other negative consequences may emerge as well. Of course, there are numerous factors worth considering when designing laws involving social media content and regulation, but government agencies should be aware of such effects when implementing regulations. Finally, in the workplace, companies may choose to use nostalgic messages or activities such as team-building stories to promote group cohesiveness and bonding (Kawasaki et al., 2023). These practices may help support the company, but they may have some negative unintended consequences on the individual. Regulating agencies should take these possibilities into account.

When considering research on alcohol use, findings suggest that interventions targeting days of heightened negative affect are unlikely to be effective for the typical person (Dora et al., 2023). Instead, policy and intervention efforts may benefit from recognizing the anticipatory and planned nature of many drinking episodes, which often involve at least some level of forethought about what, where, when, and with whom to drink, along with some consideration of potential consequences (King et al., 2025). This underscores

the importance of addressing both the anticipation of drinking and the contexts in which it occurs. For example, interventions could prompt people to reflect on whether it is the alcohol itself or the surrounding social context that is most reinforcing and adopt protective behavioral strategies accordingly (e.g., King et al., 2025). Ultimately, intervention efforts that try to account for both the anticipated and actual contexts of drinking episodes may be better positioned to identify periods of elevated risk and deliver timely, context-sensitive support to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Final Considerations and Policy Insights

The examples presented here highlight the importance of assessing well-being in daily life. The fact that EMA methods can offer unique insights compared to other methods is well established and robust. The extent to which findings diverge from other methods varies depending on the specific area of research, and some findings have been replicated and generalized across diverse populations more than others. Our general recommendation for policy makers is to consider how findings from EMA methods might alter policy designs. How this is specifically implemented will depend on the areas of research and how robust particular EMA findings are. As our examples illustrated, findings from daily life apply to various avenues of policy, including politics, education, health, environment, and mental health.

Because findings from EMA methods point to nuanced policy implications that would not have been gleaned from studies that have relied on other methods, researchers and policy makers should invest in projects that utilize EMA methods in large, nationally representative samples. Of course, several efforts along these lines currently exist. For example, the National Study of Daily Experiences was fielded as a subset of the MIDUS and includes a national probability sample of adults in the United States who completed an 8-day diary study. The American Time Use Survey is a nationally representative sample that includes a module that asks participants to report on emotions of various events that occurred during the day as they reflect on the prior day. Other projects like the Health and Retirement Study, the Understanding America Study, and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics have similar features that include assessments of daily experiences in naturalistic contexts. These projects have led to valuable insights with policy implications.

Our recommendation is to continue to invest in these types of projects and expand them. Because EMA and daily diary methods are burdensome on participants, each individual study is limited in the number of measures it can include. With the addition of more studies of this nature, researchers can expand the range of constructs measured, which will yield new insights into daily experiences. Such advances will lead to insights that can inform policy makers and ultimately lead to a happier and healthier society.

Acknowledgments

We thank Laura Kubzansky for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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