Social Structural Differences in Qualitative Perspectives on Well-Being

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Abstract

Well-being (WB) is associated with healthier and longer lives, more social connections, and workplace success. However, assessment of WB is primarily based on self-report measures. This mixed-methods research examined how diverse adults described the sources of their WB and whether such views differed by education, race, and gender. Data came from midlife and older adults from the Midlife in the United States Study who responded to the question "What do you do to make your life go well?" ($N=2,118$; 54% some college or less; 19% Black). We used directed content analysis to develop a codebook comprising 20 code groups. Three judges evaluated the presence of each code group within each open-ended response. Percent agreement among judges was strong (M=0.91; range=0.80-0.98). The most frequently mentioned sources of WB were Relationships, Positive Attitude, and Faith. Self-Awareness, Work, Coping, and Health themes were also common. Those with a bachelor's degree or higher endorsed all code groups more than those with less education ($ps<0.01$), except for Faith ($p=.41$). White adults endorsed all code groups more than Black adults ($ps<0.001$), except Black adults endorsed Faith more than White adults ($p<.001$). Gender differences in WB code groups and correlations between code groups and self-reported WB are also reported. Findings point to key sources of WB and patterning by social structural forces, suggesting that social structural factors relate to how WB is experienced and described.

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Well-being is a multidimensional construct composed of correlated, yet distinct, facets such as positive emotions, life satisfaction, life purpose, and optimism. Beyond just feeling good, people who positively evaluate their lives tend to be healthier, more socially connected, and more successful in the workplace (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Steptoe, 2019; Walsh et al., 2018). Despite these favorable outcomes, the assessment of well-being remains inconsistent, debated by researchers, and primarily based on self-report measures (Ryff et al., 2020; VanderWeele et al., 2020). Self-reported well-being is often considered the gold standard assessment method (Diener, 2000), but the most frequently used measures of well-being have been developed in the U.S. (e.g., Diener et al., 1985; Scheier et al., 1994) and validated with individuals from relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, existing self-report measures may include certain perspectives or assumptions that do not apply to everyone. Less attention has been paid to how self-reported well-being measures may reflect the well-being experiences of people from historically disadvantaged backgrounds such as racial/ethnic minorities or people with lower socioeconomic status (Lomas et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2024; van Zyl et al., 2024; Willen et al., 2022). Using qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of adults from the Midwestern United States, a recent study revealed that understanding of, and opportunities for, well-being and flourishing were closely tied to structural inequalities in health (Willen et al., 2022). In the present study, we assess various sources of well-being among a large and diverse sample of midlife and older adults who answered the question, "What do you do to make your life go well?" Therefore, we gain insights into the sources of well-being from the words of individuals themselves, and we examine whether the sources of well-being mentioned differ depending on sociodemographic factors like educational attainment and race/ethnicity.

Initial evidence suggests that well-being may be patterned by the broader social structural contexts in which people live. For example, in one study of U.S. midlife and older adults, higher levels of optimism and life satisfaction were associated with markers of societal advantage such as being White, being college educated, having higher income, and having higher occupational status (Boehm et al., 2015). However, the same pattern was not evident for positive emotions, suggesting that experiences of well-being may differ depending on social structural factors and the specific well-being dimension under consideration (see also Ryff et al., 2021).

To improve understanding of well-being for people across different social structural groups, we sought to go beyond self-report measures and examine unique themes of well-being as described by individuals themselves. To this end, we capitalized on data from midlife and older adults within the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) Study, in which a subset of participants provided a written response to the question "What do you do to make your life go well?" Analyzing the text people provided gives insight into their personal perspectives because the language that people use reflects their thoughts, feelings, interests, and priorities (Boyd & Schwartz, 2021; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010; Vine et al., 2020), thus complementing and enriching self-reported well-being (Cousineau & Shedler, 2006). At present, there is a paucity of qualitative research on well-being, especially among diverse populations (cf. Markus et al., 2004; McKinlay et al., 2021; Ratner et al., 2021).

Taking a mixed methods research approach, the first aim of this research was to develop a codebook to evaluate the open-ended responses for key themes of well-being (organized as broad code groups as well as more specific codes nested within code groups). Qualitative data provide rich insights into the factors that midlife and older adults view as central to their well-being and provide more breadth and depth on the topic than quantitative data alone (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This approach afforded participants the opportunity to describe their well-being in their own words, unconstrained by dimensions and definitions captured by self-reported scales. Prior work using mixed methods demonstrates that different conclusions about sources of flourishing arise from survey methods as compared to interviews (Willen et al., 2022). The second aim was to examine the frequency of code group endorsement and refine the codebook to prevent deductive disclosure of participants' identities. The third aim was to investigate code group endorsement by the social structural factors of education, race, and gender. Exploratory analyses also validated each code group in relation to self-reported well-being and distress (Zohrabi, 2013).

Methods

Transparency and Openness

De-identified MIDUS data are publicly available via the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) website (*Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) Series:* https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/series/203). However, the open-ended text response data are only available via special request (described in *Guidelines for requesting unpublished MIDUS biomarker data*). Analytic code to reproduce analyses and study materials are available at https://osf.io/jqsmh/. The study design, hypotheses, and analytic code were not preregistered.

Sample

Participants were from the MIDUS Study, a national longitudinal survey that began in 1995 to investigate biopsychosocial aspects of health and aging among non-institutionalized, English speaking U.S. adults who were ages 25–74 (Brim et al., 2004). The MIDUS core sample has been interviewed three times: in 1995–1996, 2004–2006, and 2013–2015 (Radler & Ryff, 2010; Song et al., 2021). At the second wave (M2), a sample of African Americans from Milwaukee, Wisconsin was added to the survey. A subset of M2 respondents ($n=1,255$; 16% from Milwaukee) participated in biological data collection (Love et al., 2010). In 2011–2014, a new cohort was recruited (MIDUS Refresher; MR) to parallel the age and gender distribution of the baseline core sample, and a new cohort of African Americans from Milwaukee was also recruited. A subsample of MR respondents ($n=863$, 14% Milwaukee respondents) provided biological data. All respondents provided written informed consent and data collection was approved by Institutional Review Boards at relevant institutions.

The analytic sample combined the M2 and MR biological subsamples (*N*=2,118; Boylan et al., 2020). The average age was 54.7 years (SD=12.7 years; range=25–86 years), and 54.9% were women. Nearly half of participants had a bachelor's degree or higher (46.1%), 30.1% had some college education, and 23.6% had a high school diploma or less. In the analytic sample, 18.6% identified as Black and 74.5% identified as White. Remaining participants did not specify their race/ethnicity or responded with another race/ethnicity.

Research Design

During the overnight clinic visit for biological data collection, participants completed a self-administered questionnaire. On the final page of the questionnaire, respondents were asked the open-ended question "What do you do to make your life go well?" On average, individuals wrote 60 words (median=46), although response lengths varied (SD=55.9; minimum=1; maximum=457).

Aim 1: Qualitative Data Coding

Directed content analysis was used to code the open-ended responses. Directed content analysis is a deductive method that develops codes from theory and involves building a codebook prior to data analysis, with new codes added to the codebook throughout the data analysis process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This process started with a draft codebook drawn from other researchers (Markus et al., 2004) who highlighted 11 themes including relations with others, health, family, enjoyment, financial security, self, job, faith, peace and satisfaction, positive outlook, and not materialism. We then used our knowledge about theories of well-being to further revise the codebook in an iterative process that involved reading randomly selected responses, adjusting the codebook to capture new themes that emerged from the data, and repeating this process over the course of several months. Drawing on both deductive and inductive practices to revise the codebook allowed for a rigorous and thorough understanding of the data and the relevant themes within them (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Daly, 2024; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2014). Within the codebook, each code group had a definition and an example quote from the open-ended responses.

We then trained a team of six undergraduate coders, and the codebook continued to evolve. Over time, we developed a clearly defined, predetermined coding scheme that coders could apply to each open-ended response to evaluate the presence of broad code groups and specific codes. Codes were applied at the sentence level, and each sentence could be labeled with as many codes as relevant. As an example, we labeled the relevant code group followed by a specific code (where relevant) in brackets after each sentence in the following response: "*I try to remain positive about things* [Positive Attitude: Optimism]. *I always try to enjoy the beauty in the daily world, such as sunrises and notice trees & nature* [Enjoyment: Outdoors in Nature]. *I enjoy learning new things* [Learning]. *Think happy and smile* [Positive Attitude: Positive Emotions]." Each of the undergraduate coders separately coded a set of approximately 1,000 randomly assigned responses, which meant that each response

was coded by three independent judges. Importantly, no debriefing with peers was allowed during this time. If at least two of the three coders indicated the presence of a specific code in the response, the code group was considered endorsed for that participant. Percent agreement among judges at the code group level was excellent ($M=0.91$; range$=0.80$-0.98; Graham et al., 2012).

The original coding our team completed assured methodological integrity in a variety of ways. We initially developed a draft codebook informed by past research (Markus et al., 2004). We then brought in different perspectives (e.g., expert researchers knowledgeable about theories of well-being and trainees without a deep understanding of existing well-being research) who collaborated to revise the draft codebook. As part of the training, each coder would code select data on their own and then everyone would discuss the relevant codes to reach a common understanding, more clearly distinguish between alternative codes, and combine overlapping codes. This process was done repeatedly to refine the codebook.

The codebook used in all subsequent analyses differed slightly from the codebook used by the undergraduate coders. Code groups that were endorsed by less than 10% of the sample were combined with other code groups in ways that preserved the meaning of the codes, matched relevant theoretical perspectives, and allowed for subsequent analyses while minimizing risks of deductive disclosure. Specifically, the Agency code group was moved to be a code under the Self-Awareness code group, the Purpose and Fulfillment code group was moved to be a code under the Positive Attitude code group, the Work and Retirement code groups were combined, the Outdoors in Nature code group was moved to be a code under the Enjoyment code group, the Meditation code group was combined with the prayer code under the Faith code group, the Pets code group was added as a code under the Type of Relationships code group, the Aesthetics code group was dropped, and several administrative code groups were combined that will not be used in analyses. This consolidation yielded 12 code groups or themes for consideration in subsequent analyses.

Social Structural Measures

Educational attainment was collected as part of the M2 and MR surveys. Twelve response categories ranged from "No school or some grade school" to "PhD, MD, or other professional degree." To facilitate comparisons, we categorized educational attainment into three groups: (1) high school education, GED, or less (reference group), (2) some college education, and (3) bachelor's degree or more.

Gender (men, women) and race (White or Black and/or African American) were self-reported as part of the M2 and MR surveys. Respondents ($n=145$) who identified as a race other than White or Black and/or African American or who were missing data on race were excluded from analyses of racial differences in code groups.

Statistical Analysis

Atlas.ti software (version 22) was used to help organize the coding process; quantitative analyses were run with SPSS software (version 28). To begin, we examined the frequency of endorsement for each code group. Then, to examine whether there were

differences in the endorsement of each well-being code group by social structural measures, we ran chi-square analyses. Education (three categories), race (binary), and gender (binary) were crossed by the endorsement of each code group (yes, no). Alpha was set at 0.05. Supplemental analyses compared scores on 14 quantitative well-being scales by code group endorsement using independent samples t-tests (see Supplemental Online Materials). Alpha was set at 0.01 for supplemental analyses.

Results

Aim 2: Synthesis and Interpretation of Well-Being Themes

On average, MIDUS respondents endorsed 4.4 code groups in their responses (SD=2.3; range=0–12). Table 1 shows the frequency of endorsement for each code group, as well as example responses from participants that correspond to each code group. Positive Relationships was the most highly endorsed code group, with 71.8% of the sample mentioning it. Positive Relationships was a broad code group that included positively evaluating social connections, being emotionally and/or physically intimate with others, spending time with and helping others, and communicating. Connections with family members, friends, colleagues, and other community members were all relevant as well.

Positive Attitude (41.3% endorsement; e.g., "happy" and "grateful"), Faith (39.9% endorsement; e.g., "pray" and "belief in God"), Self-Awareness (36.1% endorsement; e.g., "reflect" and "accept"), Work (33.8% endorsement; e.g., "work hard"), Coping (31.1% endorsement; e.g., "flexible" and "balance"), Health Maintenance (30.1% endorsement; e.g., "eating well" and "exercise"), and Enjoyment (27.2% endorsement; e.g., "hobbies" and "vacation") were likewise frequently endorsed. In addition, code groups about Planning and Organization (16.4% endorsement; e.g., "set goals"), Learning (15.6% endorsement; e.g., "reading"), Integrity (15.0% endorsement' e.g., "honesty"), and Personal Finance (9.6% endorsement; e.g., "pay bills") were identified in responses.

Aim 3: Education, Racial, and Gender Differences in Well-Being Themes

Tables 2, 3 and 4 display the percent endorsement of each code group by education, race, and gender, respectively. Regarding education differences (Table 2), those with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to endorse nearly all code groups relative to those with some college education or a high school degree or less. The only code group where endorsement did not differ by level of education was Faith. Regarding race differences (Table 3), White adults endorsed all code groups more frequently than Black and/or African American adults, except for the Faith code group. Black and/or African American adults endorsed the Faith code group significantly more than White adults. Regarding gender differences (Table 4), women endorsed the Positive Relationships, Faith, Positive Attitude, Health Maintenance, Learning, and Planning and Organization code groups more often than men. Men endorsed the Integrity and Personal Finances code groups more often than women. There were no

Table 1 Endorsement of Major Code Groups and Example Responses to "What do you do to make your Life go well?"

Code Group	Percent Endorsement	Example
Positive Relationships	71.8%	A good loving relationship with my two sons & their wives and my grandchildren Caring & support & friendship & love between myself & my husband of 50 years Close friendships with several couples who are like family Love to travel & see other places & peo[p]le & history Relationship with God & my church family Enjoy my home & working in the yard & nature Read & enjoy time alone Have a healthy lifestyle.
Positive Attitude	41.3%	I try to remain positive about things. I always try to enjoy the beauty in the daily world, such as sunrises and notice trees & nature. I enjoy learning new things. Think happy and smile.
Faith	39.9%	I spend time in prayer and Bible Reading, go to church on a regular basis and surround myself with good Christian friends and family.
Self-Awareness	36.1%	I meditate. I try to be compassionate, considerate, helpful. I work at self- awareness in psychotherapy. I work hard at projects I enjoy. I play with my friends. I read, and learn new things. I am grateful for what I have and what I am. I cook for myself and others.
Work	33.8%	Work hard and be good at my job. Playing with my grand-kids. Try to stay positive.
Coping	31.1%	I respond positively to the events that occur on a daily basis at work and at home. I accept what I have control over & make the changes necessary. I also accept things that are out of my control. I keep an open mind. I try to follow: "treat others the way you want to be treated." Think positive. Love life. Moderation. Roll with the punches!
Health Maintenance	30.1%	Pray, enjoy life, take care of myself by trying to eat right and exercise and be healthy. So I can look good and feel good.
Enjoyment	27.2%	Try to enjoy my day. Spend time with my wife and kid because time can't be gotten back.
Planning and Organization	16.4%	To make my life go well & in the direction I want it to, I look ahead, plan, and set goals.
Learning	15.6%	Educate myself to obtain the information I need to make appropriate decisions considering both short term and long term results. Draw on what I've learned from past experiences. Emotionally live with an idea to see how it feels before making a decision. Discuss issues with friends and family whose opinions I value.
Integrity	15.0%	Living a life with values, integrity, and honesty. Live life with no regrets. Honesty is the best policy, you never have to try and remember the lies and deceit. Count your blessings daily and strive to do the best you can with the talents, abilities, and gifts God has given.
Personal Finances	9.6%	I try to keep a job and pay all my bills, also be a good husband and father.

Note. In the examples, all spelling and grammatical errors are maintained from transcription of the original source

Table 2 *Education Differences in Well-Being Code Group Endorsement*

Code Group	Endorsement	≤ High School Diploma, GED	Some College	≥ Bachelor's Degree	χ^2	p
Positive Relationships	No	33.7%	29.6%	24.7%	13.99	<0.001
	Yes	66.3%	70.4%	75.3%		
Positive Attitude	No	66.9%	61.3%	52.8%	29.67	<0.001
	Yes	33.1%	38.7%	47.2%		
Faith	No	60.2%	58.0%	61.3%	1.77	0.41
	Yes	39.9%	42.0%	38.7%		
Self-Awareness	No	75.0%	67.6%	55.9%	57.32	<0.001
	Yes	25.1%	32.5%	44.1%		
Work	No	75.6%	70.9%	58.3%	52.6	0.009
	Yes	24.5%	29.2%	41.7%		
Coping	No	77.2%	70.5%	63.8%	28.71	<0.001
	Yes	22.9%	29.5%	36.2%		
Health Maintenance	No	77.2%	71.3%	65.2%	23.33	0.001
	Yes	22.9%	28.7%	34.8%		
Enjoyment	No	79.4%	75.1%	67.9%	24.52	<0.001
	Yes	20.6%	24.9%	32.1%		
Planning and Organization	No	89.4%	84.5%	79.9%	22	<0.001
	Yes	10.6%	15.5%	20.1%		
Learning	No	92.4%	87.0%	78.5%	53.03	<0.001
	Yes	7.6%	13.0%	21.5%		
Integrity	No	88.4%	86.1%	82.6%	9.41	0.009
	Yes	11.6%	14.0%	17.4%		
Personal Finances	No	92.8%	90.9%	88.7%	6.53	0.038
	Yes	7.2%	9.1%	11.3%		

Note Educational differences were present in the number of total code groups endorsed. Those with a high school education or less (M (SD)=3.6 (2.3)) endorsed fewer codes than those with some college education (M (SD)=4.2 (2.2)) and those with a bachelor's degree or more (M (SD)=5.0 (2.3)), F(2, 2,111)=69.3, p<.001

gender differences in the frequency of endorsement of the Self-Awareness, Enjoyment, Coping, and Work code groups.

Supplemental Validity Analyses

To validate the code groups identified in the qualitative content analysis, we compared those who endorsed each code group to those who did not on 14 quantitative measures of psychological functioning. Supplemental Tables S1-12 display these results. Briefly, scores on the quantitative well-being measures differed by code group endorsement in ways that were consistent with the topics identified in the qualitative coding. Such results support the specificity and validity of the qualitative coding strategy (Zohrabi, 2013).

Table 3 *Racial differences in Well-Being Code Group endorsement*

Code Group	Endorsement	White	Black/African American	X^2	p
Positive Relationships	No	23.9%	42.0%	52.08	<0.001
	Yes	76.1%	58.0%		
Positive Attitude	No	56.2%	68.4%	19.4	<0.001
	Yes	43.9%	31.7%		
Faith	No	62.2%	51.9%	14.07	<0.001
	Yes	37.8%	48.1%		
Self-Awareness	No	61.0%	75.7%	29.73	<0.001
	Yes	39.0%	24.3%		
Work	No	61.8%	81.0%	51.77	<0.001
	Yes	38.2%	19.0%		
Coping	No	66.4%	79.2%	24.29	<0.001
	Yes	33.6%	20.8%		
Health Maintenance	No	67.4%	80.8%	26.79	<0.001
	Yes	32.6%	19.2%		
Enjoyment	No	69.3%	84.8%	38.19	<0.001
	Yes	30.7%	15.2%		
Planning and Organization	No	81.9%	89.4%	12.79	<0.001
	Yes	18.1%	10.6%		
Learning	No	82.5%	92.2%	22.59	<0.001
	Yes	17.6%	7.9%		
Integrity	No	83.5%	91.1%	14.61	<0.001
	Yes	16.5%	8.9%		
Personal Finances	No	89.2%	95.2%	13	<0.001
	Yes	10.8%	4.8%		

Note Racial differences were present in the number of total code groups endorsed. White adults (M (SD)=4.7 (2.2)) endorsed more codes than Black/African-American adults (M (SD)=3.3 (1.9)), $F(1, 1,971)$=139.5, $p<.001$

Discussion

Qualitative data in psychology and, more specifically, in the well-being literature is uncommon (LaMarre & Chamberlain, 2022; cf. Willen et al., 2022). This limits understanding of how well-being operates in whole lives and how opportunities for well-being may be unevenly shaped by social structural forces. The open-ended responses investigated here provide rich insight into aspects of well-being among midlife and older adults that may be ignored in conventional self-report measures, while also amplifying the voices of disadvantaged individuals who have historically not contributed to conceptualizations of well-being. The approach used herein is consistent with pioneering research using text analysis to deepen insights about well-being (e.g., Danner et al., 2001; Pressman & Cohen, 2012).

Findings from the current study identify key themes as important for people's sense of well-being across the life-course. Positive social relationships were mentioned by more than 70% of participants as contributing to their well-being, which is in line with past theorizing and empirical evidence about the centrality of social connections for well-being (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Myers & Diener, 1995; Saphire-Bernstein

Table 4 *Gender differences in Well-Being Code Group endorsement*

Code Group	Endorsement	Men	Women	X^2	p
Positive Relationships	No	31.1%	25.9%	7.05	0.008
	Yes	68.9%	74.1%		
Positive Attitude	No	63.1%	55.0%	14.23	<0.001
	Yes	36.9%	45.0%		
Faith	No	67.3%	54.2%	37.87	<0.001
	Yes	32.7%	45.8%		
Self-Awareness	No	64.2%	63.6%	0.071	0.79
	Yes	35.8%	36.4%		
Work	No	65.7%	66.6%	0.23	0.63
	Yes	34.4%	33.4%		
Coping	No	70.3%	67.8%	1.54	0.22
	Yes	29.7%	32.2%		
Health Maintenance	No	74.1%	66.4%	14.99	<0.001
	Yes	25.9%	33.6%		
Enjoyment	No	74.8%	71.1%	3.54	0.06
	Yes	25.2%	28.9%		
Planning and Organization	No	86.3%	81.3%	9.33	0.002
	Yes	13.7%	18.7%		
Learning	No	87.1%	82.1%	9.96	0.002
	Yes	12.9%	17.9%		
Integrity	No	82.1%	87.4%	11.4	<0.001
	Yes	17.9%	12.6%		
Personal Finances	No	88.5%	91.9%	7.11	0.008
	Yes	11.5%	8.1%		

Note Gender differences were present in the number of total code groups endorsed. Women (M (SD)=4.6 (2.3)) endorsed more codes than men (M (SD)=4.2 (2.2)), $F(1, 2,116)$=22.0, p<.001

& Taylor, 2013). Maintaining positive attitudes, faith, self-awareness, engaging in work, implementing coping strategies, prioritizing health, and finding joy were also frequently cited. These topics have been noted as correlates of well-being in prior research (e.g., Blustein, 2008; Masters et al., 2023; Pressman et al., 2009; Steptoe, 2019).

There is also substantial overlap between the themes identified and recently published qualitative research on flourishing, a term often used interchangeably with well-being (Willen et al., 2022). In a small, diverse sample of Midwesterners in the United States, key themes of social relationships, feelings of self-worth, and engaging work were also apparent. One major theme that was notable for Willen et al's participants but less so for MIDUS Study participants was an explicit focus on the structural and material contexts in which people live. This may be because MIDUS participants were asked specifically "What do *you* do…" (emphasis added), which is targeted to the individual and their particular actions rather than the general conditions that support flourishing/well-being, as in Willen et al. Further, the importance of social connections and coping were noted among older adults when asked about protecting their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (McKinlay et al., 2021). The commonalities among themes are noteworthy and point to potential targets for policy and interventions seeking to improve well-being among diverse adults across

the life-course. For instance, efforts to measure population well-being may benefit from highlighting social connectedness, coping resources, and personal fulfillment in addition to life satisfaction, financial strain, and physical health (e.g., Office for National Statistics, 2024). Assessing well-being within healthcare settings is another possible intervention that may promote mental and physical health outcomes (Topp et al., 2015).

Other findings from the present research showed that those with lower levels of education and those from minoritized racial backgrounds wrote about fewer themes of well-being compared with their more advantaged counterparts. This may be because individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds may have fewer opportunities and encounter more barriers to individual action (Assari, 2017; Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Mirowsky & Ross, 2007, 2015; Shaw & Krause, 2001). In addition, the patterns looked somewhat different for endorsement by women versus men. Women endorsed more themes of well-being than men (e.g., social relationships, faith, positive attitude, health, learning, and planning). In contrast, men mentioned integrity and personal finances more frequently than women. This suggests that although well-being itself does not seem strongly patterned by gender (Boehm et al., 2015), sources of well-being may vary by gender and these may map onto conventional gender norms.

This current study should be interpreted considering certain limitations. First, racial/ethnic groups beyond White and Black adults were not considered in race-based analyses because of small sample sizes. Future work should consider how people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds identify sources of well-being and how closely they align to themes reported here. This limitation is balanced by having unique perspectives from a very large sample size comprised of a range of educational backgrounds. Another limitation is that only major code groups of well-being were examined, precluding an in-depth understanding of how education, race, and gender affect sources of well-being among midlife and older adults. As such, the current project represents an initial step toward understanding how social structural factors may constrain sources of wellness that are accessible and effective, but future research should interrogate the finer-grained themes (i.e., codes) that emerged in responses. Nonetheless, the current approach is informative, in part because it demonstrated the reliability and validity of the coding of these text data within a longitudinal, national study. The team of research assistants reliably applied the codebook we developed to the open-ended responses. Not only was percent agreement across judges high, but code groups were also related to self-reported questionnaires of health and well-being, supporting the reliability and validity of this approach.

Future research at the detailed code level will allow for more focused conclusions about how individuals from varying social structural groups differ in their expression of well-being. For example, the code group of Faith was equally important to individuals from all educational backgrounds. However, it may be the case that specific codes related to faith - for example, prayer or meditation, attending religious or spiritual services, or even reading or studying faith-based texts - may be differentially endorsed by people with varying education levels. Prior research has demonstrated that individuals with higher education report greater influencing, whereas those with less education report more adjusting to the world (Markus et al., 2004). Analyses of

specific codes (e.g., agency, capitalizing on luck, managing expectations) may shed light on such differences in agency and coping styles.

Taken together, findings highlight that well-being is not merely an individual pursuit but rather is intimately situated in social contexts. Who you are connected with, what others do for you, and what you do for others matters considerably to a sense of well-being. Well-being has historically been considered and assessed as an individual characteristic (Willen et al., 2022), especially within psychological science (cf. Ryff, 1989). However, power, resources, and barriers are shaped systematically within larger social structural contexts. Thus, while individual perspectives and attitudes matter for a sense of well-being, social structural positions within the larger society may optimize or constrain what sources of well-being may be available to individuals. In applying the current findings to future policy or intervention efforts, it is important to be mindful that well-being is derived from multiple sources. As such, definitions of well-being and flourishing should not ignore the multidimensional nature of this construct. Most importantly, the current findings emphasize the need to center health equity and consider structural influences on health among any efforts to promote well-being via policy and intervention (Qureshi et al., 2024; Willen et al., 2022). This approach helps to avoid increasing disparities and only promoting health and well-being among the most privileged members of society, which is a risk when focusing on individual level well-being and ignoring the structural influences on well-being. In conclusion, using the words and perspectives from a large, diverse sample of midlife and older adults, the current project offers a window into sources of well-being as it is experienced in whole lives.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors have no competing interests that are relevant to the content of this article and no financial interests to disclose.

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