

# Well-being of Educators: A Functionalist Perspective

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*Well-being is closely related to health issues and thus has attracted a lot of research. As a member of society, the well-being of educators has been a common target of the study. Nonetheless, the well-being of educators has always been perceived from an individual perspective. From a macro perspective, well-being is relevant to functionalism and can be further linked with manipulating an individual body. Nonetheless, studies connecting well-being with these two areas are inadequate, especially in the context of educators. Therefore, this theoretical article aimed to bridge the academic gap by examining the relationship between well-being, functionalism, and control. This article argued that members of society, including educators, are inclined to be unconsciously manipulated by well-being. While educators at all educational levels should be alert of the impacts of their well-being on students, this article also urged them to recognize more on the importance of pursuing well-being at an appropriate level and show more concern toward others' well-being.*

*Keywords: well-being; functionalism; body manipulation; control*

## Introduction

One of the understandings of well-being is associated with individuals' concerns. The World Health Organization (2021) defines well-being as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies” (p. 10). As a component that constitutes health, neglecting well-being status is undesirable. Well-being has aroused keen attention within academia, partly because it is also relevant to educators. However, many studies on the well-being

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of educators depart from a personal level and focus on how well-being relates to the practices and health of educators in different manners. For instance, Aldrup et al. (2018) looked into the correlation among the relationship between educators and students, students' misbehavior, and the well-being of educators. Kiltz et al. (2020) drew their attention to the way of interaction between educators and students in shaping their well-being. At the same time, by using the concept of social support, Lam (2019) discussed how it associates with professional development and the well-being of educators. McIntyre et al. (2017) explored the well-being of educators through occupational health. Meanwhile, Tebben et al. (2021) attempted to locate different threats to the well-being of educators and the adopted strategies to cope with them. Zee and Koomen (2016) reviewed the linkage between the idea of self-efficacy and the well-being of educators. Nevertheless, an individual level is not the only way to approach well-being. As Davies (2015), Henderson (2015), Miller and Rose (1994, 2008), Murphy (2021), Nettleton (1997), and Shilling (2012) proclaim, well-being can be attached to society and control. In this regard, departing from a macro perspective, the well-being of educators is more than just an individual issue. Still, it is also a matter that deserves consideration from society.

Inspired and justified by the above discussions, a research question for this article was set: In what way can well-being be conceptualized with the manipulation of individuals, including educators, in a society? Since functionalism is one of the macro theories to explicate the operation of society, in a sense, well-being is related to functionalism and also be further linked with the manipulation of an individual body. Nonetheless, preceding research connecting well-being with these two areas are inadequate, especially in the context of educators. Therefore, this short theoretical article aimed to bridge the academic gap by offering an initial, unconventional, and concise examination of the relationship between well-being, functionalism, and control. Instead of abiding by traditional discussions on well-being from an individual position, this article offered an unconventional and noteworthy dimension of well-being from the societal level, and argued that bodies of individuals, including educators, are inclined to be unconsciously manipulated by society through incessantly pursuing their well-being.

In the following sections, different interpretations of health and well-being will be made first. After that, an association between functionalism, well-being, and body manipulation will be outlined, followed by an examination of well-being and panopticon. Before concluding, a discussion on well-being and educators, which also serve as a contribution to this article, will be presented.

## **Interpretations of Health and Well-being**

As aforesaid, well-being is usually connected with health. However, health can be perceived from different lenses, leading to different imaginations. In accordance with the World Health Organization (1946), health can be understood as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 1). This understanding of health departs from a personal perspective and focuses mainly on an individual level. Nonetheless, health can also be interpreted as “the state of optimum capacity of an individual for the effective performance of the roles and tasks for which he has been socialized” (Parsons, 1972, p. 117). In other words, health is more than just a personal issue but is associated with the performability of a society. In this regard, this interpretation is in line with functionalism. For the sake of the whole society, as Amzat and Razum (2014), Bissell et al. (2002), Dew (2015), Link and Phelan (1995), and Willis (2015) illustrate, intervening health of an individual becomes both desirable and necessary. Regardless of the lenses that are adopted, well-being thus occupies an unparalleled position in health.

A conclusive understanding of well-being has yet to be reached (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 222). Various understandings of well-being have been proposed. For instance, on top of the definition from the World Health Organization (2021), which is aforementioned in the introduction of this article, Diener and Suh (1997) pointed out that well-being “consists of three interrelated components: life satisfaction, pleasant affect, and unpleasant affect. Affect refers to pleasant and unpleasant moods and emotions, whereas life satisfaction refers to a cognitive sense of satisfaction with life” (p. 200). Even though the two definitions are not the same, they both perceive well-being from a personal level. On the other hand, Scaria et al. (2020) believed that well-being is an “ability to appropriately respond to expected and unexpected stresses in order to be healthy, happy and prosperous in work and in life” (p. 8). Shah and Marks (2004) indicated that well-being “is more than just happiness. As well as feeling satisfied and happy, well-being means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community” (p. 2). Through accompanying the idea of health from Parsons (1972), Scaria et al. (2020), and Shah and Marks (2004), it further pinpoints that understanding of well-being can be extended to a societal level. Based on the above portrayals, even though canvassing a consensus on a definition of well-being is beyond the scope of this article, as Bauer and McAdams (2004), Pap et al. (2021), and Salinas-Jiménez et al. (2010) expound, well-being can be translated as an intrinsic motivation or effort to

maintain or actualize desires of oneself. This further triggers a discussion on the relationship between an individual and society.

## **Functionalism, Well-being and Body Manipulation**

Functionalism offers one of the perspectives on the relationship between an individual and society. Functionalist focuses on society as a whole. To functionalist, as Rescher (2001) and Tetlock (2002) suggest, everything that happens in society must come with purposes and reasons. In addition, functionalists value society as a whole more than just an individual. The place of an individual in a society is to ensure the smooth operation of the society. An individual is restricted and constrained by all forms of an external observable phenomenon that can place a constraint, namely social facts, on him.

Functionalist Émile Durkheim proposes mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity to capture how individuals are organized in a society (Hornsby, 2007, p. 4623). Mechanical solidarity generally refers to a context where almost all individuals assume homogeneous societal duties and functions. On the contrary, organic solidarity connotes a setting where individuals bear various functions as they perform diversified societal responsibilities (Hornsby, 2007, p. 4623; Ritzer, 2010, p. 16). While mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity signify a simple and complicated way of organizing a society, Durkheim propounds that the former and the latter represent societies at the pre-industrial stage and industrial stage respectively (Royce, 2015, p. 72). Meanwhile, mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity can also be associated with unity and diversity. Since individuals under mechanical solidarity carry out similar duties, they tend to be unified with similar livelihoods and collective consciousness (Baert, 1998, pp. 13–14). Durkheim (1984) defines collective consciousness as “totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own” (pp. 38–39). In other words, it is the common adherences and principles recognized among individuals (Royce, 2015, p. 70). Nevertheless, it is not the case in organic solidarity. When a society evolves into an industrial or modern stage, it demands individuals to assume various responsibilities to sustain a smooth operation of the diversified society. Therefore, unlike their counterpart under mechanical solidarity, individuals under organic solidarity are inclined to live with different livelihoods and cannot share collective consciousness (Ritzer, 2010, p. 19; Royce, 2015, pp. 72–73). An effective organization of a society under organic solidarity is now depended on the cooperative efforts of different individuals’ talents and

skills performed at different positions, which formed a concept of division of labor (Bailey & Gayle, 2003, pp. 115–121, 126–127; Merton, 1934, p. 320).

The concept of division of labor then helps to constitute different core structures and institutions, which are essential to the smooth operation and sustainability of society. Examples of institutions include child care centers, kindergartens, and primary schools, as they are responsible for nurturing the next generations of society with desirable skills and knowledge. With a view of facilitating cooperation among institutions and individuals in a society, different sets of constraints in the forms of widely recognized thoughts and deeds, which are known as social facts, have been established. For instance, an educator is liable to prosecution if he administered corporal punishment on his/her students, which is unlawful in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Government, 1971, 1976). As a social fact, the purpose of the laws aims to guide the behavior of educators to be consistent with recognized thoughts and deeds in society.

As outlined in the aforementioned depiction, functionalists focus mainly on society as a whole rather than on an individual. An individual in a society acts just like a component inside a machinery. Although his/her role is not manifest, the malfunctioning of an individual in terms of deviance from widely accepted norms can bring different magnitudes of disturbing and undesirable consequences to society. As Foucault (2008) revealed, to ensure that an individual will not shape the running of a society based on his/her own preferences, which can be deviant from the benefits of a society, an individual has to be controlled or manipulated. One of the adopted strategies is to control an individual's body, including physical and mental manipulation. Imprisonment is one of the examples of using disciplinary force in physically controlling an individual's body so that he/she dares not to challenge recognized thoughts and deeds in a society, or if he/she does, try to prevent him from having the same misbehavior again. Foucault (1995) further proposed that prison is just one of the symbolic icons created by an authority to control an individual's body in a society.

Nonetheless, in a sense, physically controlling an individual's body is passive. The measure may effectively discourage an individual from behaving beyond recognized thoughts and deeds in society. In general, an individual will be expected to comply with the laws and regulations, for instance, and the crime rate in a society can be under control. However, physically controlling an individual's body may not be a rewarding approach to promoting a society's positive, thriving, and dynamic development. Complying with laws and regulations in a society does not mean an individual will be self-motivated to overcome

all of his/her constraints and strive for better achievement. When an individual in a society is passive in improving one's condition and cooperating with others, the smooth operation and even the development of the society will be under threat. To address this risk, an individual's body must be better controlled in a more comprehensive, skillful, and even intangible manner. Apart from adopting measures to control the physical body, sophisticated techniques must be utilized to manipulate its mental segment. One of the tactics is intervening in an individual's health, especially through the channel of well-being (Foucault, 1982, p. 784).

Meanwhile, Linton et al. (2016) documented 196 aspects of well-being under six areas, including "personal circumstances," "physical," "mental," "spiritual," "social," and "activities and functioning" (pp. 10–11). It is impractical for this article to discuss how the intervention is induced in numerous aspects of well-being. Instead, the discussions are in line with the fore-cited understanding of well-being, that is, intrinsic motivation or effort to maintain or actualize desires of oneself.

## **Well-being and Panopticon**

Well-being can be utilized as a social fact to facilitate the operation and sustainability of society. Well-being helps an individual to positively encounter and actively overcome his/her constraints and facilitates the individual to get along with other members of society. As proclaimed by Merton (1938) and Simmel (1949), well-being enhances the sociability of an individual, which help not only to consolidate the solidarity of society but also to undermine risky elements in society like a stigma and anomie. On the one hand, a society can flourish from lesser internal instabilities and can be easier to coordinate a harmonious and cooperative setting toward better development. On the other hand, a society can acquire financial benefits by concerning an individual's well-being (Nozal et al., 2019, p. 8; World Health Organization, 2022, pp. 99–100). Moreover, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development further ascertains that well-being can be associated with economic growth (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020, p. 18; van Zanden et al., 2014, p. 20). In other words, as D'Acci (2011) and Wright (2014) suggest, well-being is more than just a personal issue; it is implanted with economic implications.

Ideologies such as capitalism and neoliberalism have also been well aware of the potential contributions of well-being toward solidarity and the economic progress of a society. With a view of consolidating and fostering their ideologies, certain beliefs or even

stereotypes like wealth and fame being equivalent to successful and happier life have been instilled and promoted to sophisticatedly manipulate thoughts and deeds of an individual in a society within predetermined desirable directions (Hagerty & Veenhoven, 2003, p. 1). Members of society are thus encouraged to achieve those beliefs, and if they do, their efforts are recognized and reinforced. For example, the names of individuals who can accumulate a certain quantified amount of wealth will be proudly on a list, and the quantified wealth of individuals will be reported almost instantly (Dolan & Peterson-Withorn, 2023; Forbes, 2023). Moreover, names or palm prints of particular widely recognized celebrities are marked splendidly on streets for public approbation (The Avenue of Stars Management Ltd., 2020; The Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). As those beliefs may facilitate a society to achieve certain economic development, similar beliefs in return not only be further constructed, gained its popularity and are approved in society, but also be transformed into a different part of elements or components that shape the well-being of an individual (Davies, 2015, pp. 251–252). For instance, an individual wishes to pursue a happier and more successful life in terms of a better living environment. In a capitalist society, a belief in accumulating wealth is widely approved as one of the legitimate approaches to fulfill the target. Furthermore, under ideological settings, an individual is convinced to construct his/her identity to seek approval and recognition from other members of society (Žižek, 1989, pp. 2–3). Thus, when aspiring for a better livelihood and, more importantly, an identity, the well-being of an individual will inevitably be modeled and shaped. While discussing the validities of those beliefs is beyond the scope of this article, as Johnson (2014), Keyes (1998) and Wallace (2018) assert, well-being becomes a motivational force of an individual to surmount his/her various constraints, work harder and perform better. By doing so, an individual will incline to comply with his/her behaviors and thoughts with socially acceptable norms. In return, this is in line with functionalism, as conformity of different individuals empowers and consolidates the totality of the capitalist society to sustain and further develop.

What is more, as a member of society, different institutions also share their beliefs and expect their employees to be equipped with those competencies. In a society that is powered by ideologies like capitalism or neoliberalism, employees who fail to accompany the institutions' expectations are likely to be in a position of comparative disadvantages when competing with others and even end up with job insecurity (Davies, 2015, pp. 105–108). In this regard, the beliefs, in turn, constitute an unconscious and intrinsic driving force for an individual serving the institutions to make improvements and excel in his/her efforts. In

addition, during the process of striving for those recognitions and securing the possessions of an individual, he/she is likely to conduct constant reviews and comparisons not only on the variances between the current stage and the oriented targets but also on the differences between himself/herself and other members within the institution or in society (Bauman, 1992, p. 10). In return, well-being acts as an invisible force to push an individual to voluntarily adjust his/her attitude and performance, even without imposing explicit requests, as he/she cannot afford to be inactive and passive. Since personal desires can be unlimited, according to Foucault, an individual by then has initiatively and willingly converted himself/herself into “a slave to his desires” (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, p. 119). Eventually, a society is energized as most individuals are stimulated or even compelled to react ceaselessly.

Based on the previous portrays, well-being has thus been utilized as an intangible panopticon and facilitates a carceral society to ceaselessly manipulate an individual’s body so that he/she is unconsciously willing and even self-motivated to serve and contribute to the ideologies (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). Therefore, by the time when an individual chooses to concern with his/her well-being, as Davies (2015) and Foucault (1975) declare, actually he/she has already begun to sentence himself/herself to a panopticon and has been subjected to an incessant body manipulation and surveillance of his/her own accord.

Apart from its intangible and invisible natures that help to undermine precautions and resistance, well-being has been identified and chosen as a sophisticated tool of body manipulation that can be attributed to its ascendant influential capability. As a component of health, well-being can apply on and shape almost every individual so that eventually, based on the above elucidation, different institutions in society can collaborate effectively for the sake of smooth operation and sustainability of the society. In other words, almost no one can evade a domain of well-being.

Nonetheless, when most individuals in a society pursue well-being interminably, its nature of personal focus may not be compatible with others which can then further nurture unappealing results, including the deterioration of interpersonal relationships. The following is an illustration based on a real story that happened in a self-financed higher education institute in Hong Kong. The person names are pseudonym.

Susan teaches a course on General Studies, which is offered to all non-majored students in an institute. Susan discovers that a student committed plagiarism and, based on the institutional policies, she needs to deduct his mark. By making the decision, Susan believes that her performance will meet her supervisor’s expectations as she complies with all



guidelines and does not perpetrate mistakes. However, with a view to getting rid of the penalty, the student seeks help from his department. Owing to various pragmatic considerations, the departmental program leader, Mary, wants to override the decision. One of Mary's calculations is that she aspires to consolidate recognition from her department by maintaining designated images of the program that she is responsible for to the current and potential students. In return, it relates to the departmental revenue, her prestige, and her job security. After realizing that Susan is a contract staff, Mary threatens Susan that the whole issue will be discussed in a committee board meeting among senior members of the institute. Mary also expresses her discontent to Susan's supervisor. At last, under the "advice" from her supervisor, Susan distressingly, helplessly, and disconsolately adjusts her decision. The story shows that Mary successfully satisfies and enhances her well-being at the expense of Susan's well-being. While judging on either side is beyond the objective of this storytelling, Mary still has plenty of room to realize her desires even if she adopts other alternatives. This illustration, therefore, unveils the possibility of incurring incompatibility when an individual pursues well-being perpetually.

Educators can play a vital role in helping individuals in a society, including themselves, to establish better interpersonal relationships with others, minimize the extent of being manipulated, and enjoy a higher degree of authentic autonomy when pursuing well-being.

## **Well-being and Educators**

Well-being is also relevant to educators. As suggested, well-being is more than just an individual concern, and can affect others as well. A significant contribution of this article is that educators at all educational levels should stay more alert to the impacts of well-being on them and their students. While this article does not suggest that well-being has to be negative and undesirable, some well-being can reflect and embody certain social values at the time which deserve much consideration if the next generation should inherit them. For instance, the well-being of educators can be mediated by social norms of perceiving the joyfulness and success of a person through the quantification of wealth and measurable achievements. While Bok (2010) and James (2007) question its validity, this notion of joyfulness and success is at least controversial, if not inappropriate, as it is incomprehensive and only represents a single interpretation. Nonetheless, being a member of society, it is possible that the well-being of educators can be shaped by those social norms as well. As one of the important figures of students, social norms behind the well-being of educators can

likely shape students through their daily thoughts and deeds in both tangible and intangible manners. In other words, the well-being of educators is not entirely an individual concern, but that can invigorate far-reaching intended or unintended educational impacts on students as well. For the sake of students, primary, secondary and tertiary educators should therefore keep a close vigilance on their well-being and inspect potential educational consequences on their students.

In practice, one of the feasible strategies to address an unconscious manipulation of well-being is to pursue it at an appropriate and attainable level. On the one hand, this article does not cross out positive effects on well-being. On the other hand, to avoid being a subject of manipulation, an individual is advised to pursue his/her well-being at a satisfactory and achievable scope. For instance, hardworking is promoted as a desirable deed in society. Nevertheless, Andreassen et al. (2011), Gordon and Shi (2021), and Robinson (2014) call forth for a work-life balance to minimize the negative impacts of being a workaholic. Similarly, despite its essential and beneficial natures, Losonczy et al. (2016) and Thomson and Paton (2014) point out that consuming inappropriate volumes of water or oxygen can lead to unpleasant and even fatal consequences such as water intoxication or oxygen toxicity. In the same vein, as previously described, an individual pursuing well-being impulsively and even frantically may not be in his/her best interest but finds himself/herself being manipulated unconsciously. Therefore, while educators must act as role models and stay vigilant about the impacts of well-being, they should also encourage and instill in their students a mindset of pursuing well-being at a reasonable level. This can be done, for example, through developing a designated curriculum embedded with appropriate pedagogical approaches like experiential learning.

Furthermore, after drawing circumspections toward well-being, educators are in a better position to care for other individuals in society, including their colleagues and students. As Foucault proclaims that care for others comes with care for oneself, caring for others' well-being can become a measure for an individual to get rid of being "a slave to his desires" (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, pp. 117–119). When an individual manages to pursue well-being in a sensible manner, he/she inclines not to envisage his/her surroundings personally or even narcissistically. Instead of focusing solely on himself/herself, an individual can enjoy more autonomy and is much readier to show his/her care for other individuals, including concern for their well-being, and thus is more prepared for developing an even proper and comprehensive interpersonal relationship with others. In other words, pursuing well-being is more than just a personal business; it also involves interpersonal

relationships and mutual love. When everyone pursues well-being sensibly and shows care for others, precious, noble and magnificent humanity can be illuminated. By doing so, since an individual does not incessantly pursue his/her well-being and can form proper interpersonal relationships with others, he/she is less likely to be manipulated and surveilled by society.

Two remarks have to be made. First, being a member of society, as aforesaid, it is almost unfeasible to elude from various vibrations from the society, including the sphere of well-being. In this regard, it is unimaginable for an individual to be absolutely freed from manipulation when pursuing well-being. Nonetheless, by pursuing well-being prudently and thoughtfully, an individual can retain his/her autonomy as his/her mind can be emancipated from extrinsic shackles. By doing so, an individual is readier to choose to perceive his/her surroundings from different non-predetermined perspectives. An individual is thus less likely to be “a slave to his desires” and being manipulated (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, pp. 117–119). Second, it is notable that solely developing interpersonal relationships does not sufficiently and effectively relinquish inconsiderate, acquisitive, self-centric, and even narcissistic features of being “a slave to his desires” (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, pp. 117–119). The features are likely to arouse various adverse and destructive elements, including disappointment, disagreement, incredulity, disenchantment, and conflict that shape human bonding. A reliable, trustworthy, and sustainable interpersonal relationship with others cannot be formed unless an individual is willing to sensibly discard his/her own interest by pursuing well-being at a reasonable and manageable level. When those inconsiderate and self-centric features are vacated, an individual will have no incentive to manipulate people and is really in a position to consider others’ well-being genuinely.

The above delineations imply that educators should be more willing to care for others’ well-being, including their colleagues and students. In addition, educators should educate the public on the necessary attitudes and skills of concerning and even serving others, such as empathy, reflexivity, commitment, collaboration, and ministrations. Educators are further suggested to work more closely with other concerned parties, such as medical practitioners and psychologists, to exchange and update their understandings of well-being.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, this article offers sketches that well-being is more than just a personal concern; it can be associated with manipulating an individual’s body in a society. To answer

the research question, one of the approaches that well-being can be conceptualized with manipulation of individuals in a society is through influencing the magnitude of the willingness of an individual to dwindle or transcend the discrepancy between individual desires and socially recognized beliefs. Even though theoretically almost everyone in a society is subjected to being manipulated and surveilled unconsciously, educators at all educational levels should always stay alert to the negative impacts of well-being. Particularly, they need to understand and promote the importance of wisely pursuing the well-being of students and the public. However, with a view of drawing a more comprehensive understanding and achieving more sociological imaginations on this issue, more research on relevant areas like how the well-being of educators shapes their pedagogies and how it shapes educational outcomes of students are desirable and should deserve more attention.

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## 從功能主義的角度詮釋教育工作者的幸福感

趙瑞球

### 摘要

由於幸福感與健康有緊密的關係，不少相關研究應運而生。身為社會一員，教育工作者的幸福感自然成為研究對象之一，而大多數有關教育工作者幸福感的研究只是從個人層面開展。宏觀而言，幸福感與功能主義和操控個人身體是相連繫的。然而，從這兩方面落墨，並且專注於教育工作者幸福感的相關研究並不足夠。有鑑於此，本理論文章旨在透過精簡分析「幸福感」、「功能主義」和「控制」三者的關係，期望縮窄此學術上的缺口。本文指出，包括教育工作者在內的社會各員均傾向被幸福感無意操控。除了各教育層面的工作者均需要對由自身幸福感所產生對學生的影響保持警醒外，本文還認為他們要更認識恰當地追求幸福感的重要性，並更關顧別人的幸福感。

關鍵詞：幸福感；功能主義；操控身體；控制

