Since the Second World War, the psychological study of human emotions and mental health has focused primarily on negative moods and pathological states, rather than on positive ones (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Recognizing this imbalance, researchers have been showing increased empirical interest in topics such as positive emotions, human strengths, and normative functioning. Yet a focus on negative and maladaptive behavior continues to persist. For example, entering “depression” as a keyword into PsycINFO, a popular search engine for the psychological sciences, yields well over 85,000 entries. The same search using “positive affect” as a keyword generates a comparatively paltry 4,000 results and “happiness” only about 2,000 results. Although researchers may never lose the undoubtedly natural and valuable inclination to study what is wrong with human behavior, they should not overlook the equally important question, “What is right with human behavior?” After all, the vast majority of individuals, including girls and women, report positive feelings most of the time (Diener & Diener, 1996).

One of the domains of this long-overdue and more optimistic approach is the study of subjective well-being (SWB). SWB, which is commonly termed “happiness” or “well-being” by the layperson, concerns people’s day-to-day feelings and evaluations of their lives. With this in mind, the central goals of this chapter are to broadly define what is meant by SWB, to describe the central findings in this field, to provide a perspective of SWB as it relates to the unique lives of girls and women, and, finally, to briefly discuss the mechanisms by which women can increase their personal SWB levels.

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

As mentioned previously, SWB is a construct that turns the spotlight away from dissatisfaction with life and undesirable emotional states, such as anxiety and stress, to satisfaction with life, happiness, and desirable emotional states, such as joy and excitement. SWB is defined as comprising both cognitive (judgmental) and affective (emotional) components (Diener, Suh, Lucas, &
The cognitive component consists of a person's judgments of her satisfaction with life in general, as well as judgments about specific areas of her life (e.g., marital satisfaction or satisfaction with education). The affective component, on the other hand, involves both a person's pleasant and unpleasant moods or emotions. Thus, a woman who judges herself to be very satisfied with life overall and who experiences frequent pleasant or positive emotional states, while experiencing infrequent unpleasant or negative emotional states, can be said to harbor high SWB. In contrast, a woman who is generally dissatisfied with her life and who experiences relatively few pleasant or positive emotional states, while experiencing many unpleasant or negative emotional states, may be said to have low SWB.

Several other defining characteristics of SWB should be noted. The first characteristic relates to the uniqueness and importance of the evaluator's perspective—that is, the perspective of the person whose well-being is being judged. Thus, well-being is assessed by the target individual, and not by some objective measure, such as a physiological indicator or the report of a clinician or peer (Diener & Diener, 1996). This being the case, it is possible (although unlikely) for an individual with high SWB, who feels very satisfied and happy, to meet clinical criteria for a psychiatric disorder. At the same time, SWB cannot always be equated with superior functioning. Whereas authors such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath made significant contributions to the world through their writing, neither of these women could be said to have had a high level of well-being. Therefore, SWB is neither an adequate assessment of psychological mental health nor a reliable indicator of who will or will not be a productive member of society, but it does provide us with a very important piece of the well-being puzzle—namely, the respondent's point of view.

Another distinctive characteristic of SWB is that it is experienced unconsciously and continuously (Diener & Lucas, 2000). Every individual, at any particular moment in time, is experiencing some type of emotion. These states are usually maintained just outside of the realm of awareness and, indeed, must be called to a person's attention when a particular mood is being assessed. However, once a person is made aware of her emotional states, a measure of her well-being can presumably be acquired anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, the study of SWB is characteristically concerned with long-term evaluations of a person's life (Diener & Diener, 1996). Researchers in this field do not just want to know how a woman feels at any given moment; they want to know how she feels over a more reliable span of time. This distinction is important, because an assessment of well-being made during a particular moment in time (e.g., immediately after a tense conflict with her husband) may be entirely atypical of a woman's aggregated self (e.g., she may be upbeat and easy-going most of the time).

**THE MEASUREMENT OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING**

The construct of SWB is typically measured with self-report scales. The consensus among researchers is that, while not entirely unbiased, self-reports of SWB are generally valid (Diener & Lucas, 2000; Sandvik, Diener, & Seidt, 1993). For example, three commonly used scales that measure SWB—the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), and the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB; Ryff, 1989)—have all been found to display excellent psychometric properties (Pavot & Diener, 1993; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Watson et al., 1988). The SWLS, which assesses the cognitive component of SWB, asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree with the following items: (a) In most ways, my life is close to my ideal; (b) The conditions of my life are excellent; (c) I am satisfied with my life; (d) So far I have gotten the important things I want in life; and (e) If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing. In contrast, the PANAS, used to assess the affective component of SWB, comprises 10 positive and 10 negative emotions that describe the self (e.g., enthusiastic, inspired, distressed, upset). Respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they have recently felt these emotions on a scale from 1 (i.e., very rarely or not at all) to 5 (i.e., very often).
Finally, a third commonly used measure of well-being, the PWB scale, assesses both cognitive and affective aspects of subjective well-being and can be used to show that women can differ in their levels of well-being in particular life domains. Based on a theory-driven conceptualization of well-being, this 84-item measure taps six dimensions of SWB found to characterize positive psychological functioning: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Sample items on each of these scales include, “People rarely talk me into doing things I don’t want to do” (autonomy), “In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live” (mastery), “I feel like I get a lot out of my friendships” (growth), “Most people see me as loving and affectionate” (relations), “I have a sense of direction and purpose in life” (purpose), and “In general, I feel confident and positive about myself” (self-acceptance). Respondents select the degree to which they disagree or agree with each item on a scale from 1 to 6.

The assumption behind these and other self-report measures of SWB is that the respondent—the person making the judgment—is uniquely situated to provide a useful and accurate report of her cognitive and affective life experience. Yet, while it is intuitive that the respondent is in the best position to report on her private, internal emotions, this “subjectivist” perspective has been criticized for its potential biases (Freund, 1985). Of course, biases in self-report measurement are not specific to the study of well-being. Whenever self-reports are used, growing concern and pressure exist to adopt a wider variety of methodologies, such as observer/peer reports and physiological assessments. The primary concern regarding error in the measurement of SWB is related to response biases—for example, the effects on well-being ratings of a woman’s current mood (e.g., due to a cloudy vs. sunny day, or a particularly stressful vs. fulfilling day at work) or of social desirability (e.g., the wish to appear normal, healthy, and happy). However, many studies have found that neither current mood nor social desirability have discernible effects on well-being measurement (Diener, Sandvik, Pavot, & Gallagher; 1991; Kozma & Stoner, 1988). In light of these findings, and given the fact that self-report measures are both practical and economically feasible for use in research, it is wise to continue employing them in conjunction with additional non-self-report assessment tools (Diener & Larsen, 1995). Such supplementary measures might include experience sampling (e.g., obtaining multiple evaluations of a woman’s well-being over a single day, week, or month; see Larsen, Diener, & Emmons, 1986) and observational study of affective expressions (e.g., using judges to assess the sincerity of women’s smiles in yearbook pictures; see Harker & Keltner, 2001).

**THE CORRELATES OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING**

What characterizes people who have high levels of well-being versus those who have low levels of well-being? The first review of the correlates of happiness and SWB was conducted over 35 years ago (Wilson, 1977). This preliminary investigation made several bold yet premature statements about what variables are related to well-being. According to Wilson, “The happy person emerges as a young, healthy, well-educated, well-paid, extraverted, optimistic, worry-free, religious, married person with high self-esteem, high job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex, and of a wide range of intelligence.” Since this initial review, researchers have not determined the characteristics of the happy individual definitively; however, they have discovered that this conclusion was not entirely correct. For example, although Wilson proposed that income is important to well-being, a large body of research now indicates that income is not necessarily the root of happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Myers, 2000). In one oft-cited study supporting this conclusion, researchers found that a group of lottery winners were not any happier than a group of non-lottery winning controls (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Furthermore, among a sample of 49 very rich people, wealthy individuals were only slightly happier than the average American (Diener, Horwitz, & Emmons, 1985).

Additional studies have also revealed that once a person’s basic human needs have been met (as they commonly are in industrialized na-
tions), wealth and SWB are only trivially correlated with one another (Argyle, 1993; Inglehart, 1990). Furthermore, gender has been shown to moderate the effect of income on well-being. For example, Adelmann (1987) found that income was positively correlated with happiness for men, but not for women. Likewise, among a sample of married women, earnings did not affect a woman's likelihood of depression; however, among married men, income directly decreased the odds of becoming depressed (Ross & Huber, 1985). Such findings suggest that money may be relatively more likely to bring satisfaction and well-being to men because men are still more likely to assume the role of breadwinner and, as such, rely on their salaries to support their families. Yet, even given this result, it would appear that the common-sense perception that "money can buy happiness" is not typically borne out in the empirical findings, although many factors must be considered (e.g., a nation's economic growth status) before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

In addition to the lack of evidence supporting a strong link between income and well-being, another variable whose association to SWB appears to have been overstated is health. Although past research suggested that happier people are more healthy, more recent studies have not replicated this finding. First, the positive correlation between health and SWB seems to hold up only when the respondent rates his or her own health subjectively (Okun & George, 1984). When a physician's ratings of an individual's health are used, the correlation between health and SWB is found to be much smaller. Whereas a strong case has been made for the importance of using subjective assessments of well-being ("Shouldn't the respondent know best how happy she is?"); the same case for subjective assessments of physical health may not be so easily defended ("Should a patient's assessment of her physical health be considered over a doctor's?").

Along with the mixed findings concerning the relation of well-being to income and health, an association between well-being and age has also not been upheld since Wilson's 1967 review. Whereas, in the past, researchers believed that younger individuals are typically happier than older individuals, a brief overview of the current literature reveals that the young are not necessarily the happiest people after all (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Diener & Subh, 1998).

What about ethnicity and well-being? Although this variable was left out of Wilson's initial review, many studies have focused on the question of whether or not an individual's ethnicity is correlated to her SWB. Within the United States, for example, Whites are almost always found to be happier than their African American counterparts (Aldous & Ganey, 1999). Furthermore, a sample drawn from South Africa (Moller & Schlemmer, 1989) demonstrated that happiness could be ordered from White participants (who were the "happiest") to Indians, to "Coloreds," and then, finally, to Blacks. These findings are not particularly surprising, given the benefits known to be associated with majority group affiliation. Indeed, the primary explanation as to why Whites are generally more subjectively happy than ethnic minorities is that these minorities typically have less education, less income, and less access to desirable jobs (Argyle, 1994). After controlling for these variables, the effect of ethnicity on well-being becomes fairly weak (Veenhoven et al., 1994).

Although many of the original claims about the links between SWB and other variables have since been found to be erroneous, a few findings continue to withstand the test of time. One example is the link between well-being and personality. That is, individuals with high levels of SWB have still consistently been found to be relatively more extraverted and optimistic, to have higher self-esteem, and to be less neurotic (Diener & Lucas, 2000). Extraversion, optimism, and high self-esteem have all been shown to positively correlate with pleasant affect, whereas neuroticism has been shown to positively correlate with unpleasant affect. Further, life satisfaction, the cognitive component of SWB, has been found to be correlated with self-esteem across many Western nations (Diener & Larsen, 1993).

Another one of Wilson's (1967) conclusions that appears to have been accurate was the assertion that gender has no effect on a person's well-being. Can it truly be the case that women are no less happy than their male counterparts given the androcentric world in which they live? Although this notion challenges what is commonly understood about women and their historical role in nearly all societies, much empiri-
cal work continues to report that gender is unrelated to well-being (Francis, 1999), and some studies have even found that women are happier than men (Aldous & Ganey, 1999). Along with the appealing and intuitive belief that younger people should be happier than older people, the question of whether or not women are actually as happy or happier than men will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

THE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING OF WOMEN

Throughout history, women have faced a broad spectrum of discrimination, ranging from the once commonly held belief that females are intellectually inferior to males, to the still prevalent objectification of women in all types of media. In addition to battling these ever-present sexisms, on a global level, women continue to make less money than men; women experience greater poverty and lack of power in their families and communities; women endure violence specific to their gender; and women are more likely to suffer a variety of poor reproductive and mental health outcomes, such as unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, maternal mortality, and sexually transmitted disease (Murphy, 2003). Indeed, the 1995 Human Development Report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1995) stated that, “In no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men.” Given these facts, it seems intuitive that women should not be as happy overall as men. Yet research on well-being has consistently found that not only are women as happy as their male counterparts (Francis, 1999), but in some samples they appear to be slightly happier (Aldous & Ganey, 1999).

One explanation for the lack of gender differences in well-being applies more broadly to understanding why many demographic variables (e.g., income, gender, ethnicity, education, etc.) are not strongly correlated with SWB. Researchers have attempted to account for such findings by referring to the concept of hedonic adaptation (Diener et al., 1999). The process of adaptation involves an initial reaction—either positive or negative—to new life circumstances (e.g., moving to a desirable new location or becoming unemployed); however, over a period of time, individuals become habituated to these new circumstances and ultimately return to their baseline level of well-being. One study, for example, revealed that paraplegics and quadriplegics experienced high levels of unpleasant affect immediately after their initial paralysis; but, a mere two months later, these same individuals showed more pleasant than unpleasant affect (Silver, 1982). Furthermore, Brickman and colleagues’ (1978) study of the well-being of lottery winners versus nonwinners suggested that even extremely desirable events can ultimately produce adaptation. Although participants in this study had recently won between $50,000 to $1 million, they were only slightly more satisfied with their lives than nonwinners. Along these lines, perhaps because demographic status is typically stable throughout life, an adult would have long since adapted to the effects on her well-being of being young or old, female or male, and Black or White (Inglehart, 2002). Thus, it may be the case that adult women have adapted to the disadvantages of being female by the time of childhood or adolescence and, consequently, show no effects of these disadvantages on well-being through the course of their lives. This argument explains why exposure to a set of distinctive life stressors (e.g., gender discrimination and inequality) appears to have little to no effect on women’s well-being.

However, although it is plausible that women have simply adapted early on to many of the societal drawbacks of being female, this notion cannot account for one robust finding in the literature—that is, that not only are women equally as happy or more happy than men, but they are also twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with clinical depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). Given this paradoxical result, the question arises, “How can women be both more depressed and happier than men?” Hedonic adaptation cannot adequately explain these apparently divergent findings. A more persuasive account is provided in research on “affect intensity,” defined as a person’s degree of response to emotion-provoking stimuli (Larsen & Diener, 1987). Interestingly, people who experience high levels of negative affect have been found also to experience high levels of positive affect (Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991; Larsen & Diener, 1987). Thus, it is
conceivable that an individual can simultaneously report both depressive affect and high levels of well-being. For example, in one study, researchers demonstrated that, while women are no happier than men, they are significantly more affectively intense than men (Fujita et al., 1991). Thus, the finding that women are twice as susceptible to depression as men is not necessarily inconsistent with the finding that women are also as happy or happier than men. That is, women may be both more depressed and happier than men because they experience both positive and negative emotions more intensely. Alternatively, men may simply be relatively more emotionally inhibited. Further research is needed to clarify the mechanisms by which affect intensity accounts for gender differences in well-being, as well as in depression.

WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

As noted previously, early research on well-being and age reported that younger people were generally happier than older people (Wilson, 1967), a result that is consistent with most people's expectations. After all, one need only turn on a television to capture a glimpse of Western youth-obsessed culture. For example, plastic surgery, which essentially attempts to recover an individual's youth, is more popular than ever and many pop stars' careers (e.g., Britney Spears and Mandy Moore) now peak before they are even old enough to drink legally. Meanwhile, at least in the United States, a continued devaluation and disinterest in older Americans persists (Inglehart, 2002). Given these facts, one is surprised to learn that cross-sectional research has found negligible age differences in well-being (Diener & Suh, 1998). Furthermore, evidence that older people may be happier than younger people is now growing (Charles et al., 2001). Why might older women and men be happier than younger women and men, given the media's overt message that youth is so desirable? One explanation, based in socioemotional selectivity theory, proposes that older people are essentially emotionally wiser—that is, they learn to structure their lives and to pursue goals that increase positive emotions (Carstensen, 1995). As Lang and Heckhausen (2001) note, individuals are happy and satisfied to the extent that they believe they can successfully master the goals and tasks of their everyday life.

Some researchers have focused on studying how positive and negative affect change over the life course (Charles et al., 2001). For example, do older people experience more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions than younger people, or is it the reverse? With regard to positive emotions, the evidence is mixed—sometimes studies show that positive affect increases across the life span (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998), while other studies show that positive affect decreases with age (Diener & Suh, 1998) or does not change at all (Barrick, Hutchinson, & Deckers, 1989). Given these results, little overall evidence exists to indicate definitive age differences in the experience of positive emotions (Charles et al., 2001).

With regard to negative emotions, the empirical evidence has been more decisive. The general finding is that negative affect is reported less frequently by older persons than by younger persons (Charles et al., 2001; Gross et al., 1997), although this effect may reverse around the age of 60 (Diener & Suh, 1998). Interestingly, just as gender differences in affect intensity have been used to explain why women report both more depression and possibly more happiness than men, age differences in affect intensity have been used to explain why older persons may sometimes express both less positive and less negative affect than younger persons. For example, one study showed that emotional intensity decreases somewhat as people age (Diener, Sandvik, & Larsen, 1987). Furthermore, challenging the possibility that such findings may be a result of a cohort effect, a longitudinal analysis indicated that both positive and negative affect are reduced across individuals' lives (Charles et al., 2001). In this study, negative affect decreased continuously with age, while positive affect remained relatively stable among the young and middle-aged, decreasing only slightly among the oldest group. It may be that, as people grow older, they adapt to life's ups and downs, and this adaptation results in a smaller range of high and low emotional responses. Further research is needed to better understand how well-being changes as people move from youth into old age. This research is particularly relevant
to women, whose estimated life expectancy in the last decade has been about 79 years, from 5.5 to 7 years longer than that of men (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). In any case, at present, the outlook is considerably more optimistic for older individuals than once thought. One can no longer assume that youth is the key to happiness and, as people grow older, this is certainly something in which they can take comfort.

**ENHANCING WOMEN’S SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING**

As mentioned previously, positive psychological functioning and well-being were not always of focal interest to students of human behavior. However, as this tide changes, researchers are beginning to ask not only, "What characterizes a happy individual?" but more applicablely, "How can people be made happier?" Initially, many psychologists believed that a woman with low SWB might be doomed to accept her unhappy fate. One reason for such pessimism about the possibility of boosting well-being is the assumption of a genetically determined set point for happiness. That is, many researchers accept the notion that each person has a characteristic level of happiness to which they will inevitably return, regardless of changing circumstances or any effort to the contrary. This concept has been supported by evidence suggesting that the heritability of well-being may be as high as 80% (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Another reason that many researchers are pessimistic about people’s ability to actively increase happiness is the notion of hedonic adaptation. As discussed previously, hedonic adaptation suggests that gains in SWB will be temporary because humans quickly adapt to new positive life circumstances. This adaptation is thought to cause initial increases in happiness to dissipate once the novelty of a positive circumstantial change wears off.

Yet, even though a woman’s level of SWB may be highly heritable and prone to adaptation, new research is beginning to provide empowering evidence that women can increase and maintain their personal psychological well-being—through their own physical and mental efforts. For example, maintaining an exercise program has been repeatedly shown to have a positive impact on people’s moods (Arent, Landers, & Etter, 2000). Additionally, studies that have induced participants to practice particular intentional activities with effort and commitment have demonstrated that such activities as regularly counting one’s blessings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), committing systematic acts of kindness (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005), engaging in daily thoughtful self-reflection (Sousa & Lyubomirsky, 2003), and practicing optimistic thinking (King, 2001) can boost people’s happiness levels. Furthermore, it appears that setting and achieving "self-concordant" life goals (i.e., goals that match one’s interests and values) can help to increase well-being as well (Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002). These and other research programs are suggesting that increasing women’s SWB is not only possible but readily accessible to most people who are willing and able to put forth the effort. Women either unwilling or unable to improve their well-being may be those experiencing negative life circumstances (e.g., recent lay-off, divorce, or unpleasant living quarters) or those habitually engaged in self-destructive, self-denigrating, or maladaptive practices (e.g., drug abuse, excessive self-criticism, or obsessive rumination); these individuals must address their pressing problems to immediately relieve their depression or unhappiness before attempting to bolster their happiness levels from the neutral to the positive range.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this chapter was fourfold. We began by introducing the concept of subjective well-being and discussed how SWB is characterized and measured in the literature. Next, we briefly reviewed a number of variables that correlate with well-being. The remaining portions of the chapter were dedicated to three subtopics. The first, an overview of how well-being is related to gender, discussed the finding that women are often as happy or happier than men while being twice as likely as men to be depressed. An explanation for this seemingly paradoxical, but robust, finding was provided. The second topic, a summary of how well-being changes across the life
span, addressed another surprising result—namely, that well-being often appears to increase as women and men grow older. This research challenges commonly held notions that the quality of one’s life will be reduced with age. Finally, we broached the topic of how to increase women’s SWB. Although there may be limitations to this emerging line of research, initial attempts to increase well-being via effortful, intentional activities (e.g., expressing gratitude, committing kind acts, pursuing valued goals) have been promising in samples of relatively healthy, nondepressed individuals.

Given the complicated and unique life circumstances that girls and women have faced for centuries, it is important to understand how they subjectively view the quality of their lives and how they experience positive and negative emotions. All in all, the study of SWB is showing that many women are happy, contented individuals. It is a testament to female resiliency that, in spite of numerous life obstacles, injustices, and prejudices, women—and especially older women—appear to be just as happy and satisfied as men.

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