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ARTICLE

Dialogues on happiness with the Guarani Mbyá in South America and the limits of the science of well-being

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Abstract: Engaging with indigenous peoples challenges the assumptions deeply embedded in traditional scientific approaches. This paper critiques the science of well-being's (WBSci) large-scale measurement instruments considering *teko porã*, an expression from the Guarani Mbyá people that loosely translates to happiness and encompasses the discussion about the best way to live. Over two years, our research employed a triangulation method involving a literature review, participation in the Indigenous Support Network at the University of São Paulo, and four interviews with Guarani Mbyá leaders. We uncovered three key aspects of *teko porã*: (1) its variability, (2) its reliance on immaterial/spiritual elements, and (3) its communal rather than individual focus. These findings reveal the limitations of WBSci's individual-centric measurement instruments, which rely heavily on personal experiences, self-reports, and cognitive life evaluations. We propose four parameters for a more inclusive happiness/well-being assessment framework to address these shortcomings. First, defining the spatial and social perimeter to which the idea of happiness will be defined and to which it will refer. Second, understanding the roles of those within these boundaries in the assessment. Third, allowing community members to set the assessment's purpose. Fourth, periodically revisiting both the happiness construct and its evaluation process. These parameters advocate for a participatory assessment of happiness tailored to a specific community, highlighting the insufficiency of many WBSci methodologies in capturing the full spectrum of human ontologies and epistemologies. In conclusion, it is essential to recognize the limitations of traditional WBSci approaches focused on universal characteristics of happiness and integrate new theoretical perspectives and actors into the debate. Such dialogue is timely and necessary for the maturing of the field.

Keywords: *Guarani Mbyá, teko porã, well-being, happiness, science of well-being*

1. Introduction: Five guidelines on how to assess happiness/well-being

Happiness is a historically valued and discussed object (McMahon, 2006; White, 2009; Bok, 2010). In the last century, however, the inquiry about happiness changed, becoming an object of scientific research (Davies, 2016). American psychologist Ed Diener, who wrote the seminal article "Subjective Well-Being" in 1984, is among the many actors responsible for this change, which includes nomenclature. In his article, Diener presented a daring project of transposing the scientific interest in happiness to another term, well-being, or subjective well-being, for his experimental purposes (Diener, 1984). By presenting "happiness" as "well-being", Diener put forward an approach focused on the subjective experience of someone that would become

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dominant in the field, offering bases, both instrumental and theoretical, for its development (Ng et al., 2021; Sewaybricker & Massola, 2022a). Happiness became a "scientific" object by its relation to well-being. As the field is far from reaching a consensus about the differentiation between happiness and well-being (Flanagan et al., 2023), we will use "happiness" as a broader and more consistent term. We explored the historical and etymological arguments in another paper (Sewaybricker & Massola, 2022b).

Regarding the instrumental base, Diener and his team introduced the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) a year after his foundational article. The easy-to-complete questionnaire aimed to measure well-being from a subjective perspective based on what was believed to be its universal and consistent feature: a comprehensive self-assessment of life by one's personal criterion. For the theoretical base, the 1984 article also set forth guidelines that would greatly influence subsequent research in the science of well-being (WBSci).

The expression "science of well-being" is not recent, as it appears in works as early as psychologist Carl Emil Seashore's 1941 paper titled "The Term' Euthenics'". However, over the past two decades, the usage of "science of well-being" has grown considerably, as seen in the book "The Science of Well-Being" by Huppert et al. (2015) and the compilation of Ed Diener's works with the same title (Diener, 2009). The expression also transcended the boundaries of Psychology, being growingly discussed in economics (see Graham, 2017; Stiglitz et al., 2009), artificial intelligence (see Jaidka et al., 2020; Oparina et al., 2022), neurosciences (see Alexander et al., 2021; Rosenfeld, 2019), and political sciences (see Stutzer, 2020; Fabian & Pykett, 2022; Frijters et al., 2020). Concomitant to its spread, the field of the WBSci developed a particular identity not only in terms of object of interest but also in ways of doing research that are considered relevant to the field.

Under the influence of Anna Alexandrova's (2017, p.xx-xxviii) work, we will summarize these "ways" of doing WBSci research in five general guidelines. Although not uniformly adopted by all researchers in this field, these guidelines are commonly reproduced and vocalized in psychological research, which, in turn, greatly influence the definition of the object and its measurement throughout WBSci, either in its subjective (Seligman, 2019, p.21) or objective form (Voukelatou et al., 2021). These guidelines will be later scrutinized in this work and form a core component of our expansive critique of the WBSci.

The WBSci guidelines include: (1) research results are generalizable beyond the context of the experiment. An illustrative example is a five-year study involving nearly a million American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan (Lester et al., 2022a). In correlating the number of awards with self-assessed happiness, the authors deduced, "In short, not only do happiness and optimism matter to employee performance, but they significantly influence how well employees perform" (Lester et al., 2022, p.58b).

(2) Researchers should aim for impartiality. Their role is to describe happiness rather than prescribing what it should be. As Diener and the American psychologist Martin Seligman (2004, p.24) explained, "measures of well-being are—and must be— exactly as neutral politically as are economic indicators." (3) Any inquiry into happiness should be rooted in an individual's lived experiences. It is through understanding someone's life as the focal point that happiness can be effectively examined (Diener, 1984, p.543). This principle applies to the broad categories of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being or to subjective and psychological well-being (which differentiate the emotional or felt experience from the cognitive or reflected experience – based or not on a given ethical perspective) (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff et al., 2021). These forms are regarded here as manifestations of lived experiences.

It is essential to highlight that many researchers, especially those focused on policy-making and governmental development, frequently use the term "objective well-being" in their investigations. This may contrast with an individual's self-assessment of their life, such as the difference between having access to basic sanitation and expressing that one feels "very happy" with their life (Voukelatou et al., 2021). Notable examples of this more objective approach include the UK Measures of National Well-being (Office for National Statistics, 2025) and OECD's Better Life Index (OECD, 2011), which have philosophical roots in the discussion of welfare.

However, while objective well-being is centered on what is perceived as external and objective factors influencing happiness, its starting point lies in its subjective aspects: objective well-being depends first on theories and hypotheses centered on well-being as an internal object to, later, point to external correlations and causes (Wilson, 1967, p.294). For example, the OECD Better Life Index developers could only propose "Voter turnout" as a key indicator of well-being after concluding that this kind of civic engagement is good and valuable to each individual.

(4) The central object, happiness, is measurable, as evidenced by the innumerous constructs of happiness and well-being (such as objective, subjective, psychological, eudaimonic, hedonic, existential, and ecological), and the almost one thousand measures for a general assessment of happiness registered in the World Database of Happiness in February 2024 (Veenhoven, 2024; see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Finally, (5) surveys aim to generate practical consequences, influencing people, organizations, and governments (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

2. Criticism of the science of well-being

While the WBSci thrives on its impact and reputation, it is not without criticism. The first set of criticisms concerns the measurement of happiness. English psychologist John Cromby (2011, p.845) questions, for example, the adequacy of commonly used instruments: "...we must recall that what is at stake here is self-reported happiness, measured using a questionnaire or survey – and this is not, and never could be, simply identical to lived emotional experience". Questions presented in questionnaires, such as "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?" assume that respondents can adequately access and assess their inner world thoroughly. They must also rigorously translate their complex reflections on life, events, and feelings into simple and standardized answer alternatives. Researchers, as far as they are concerned, must ignore the many caveats regarding introspection, our access to memory, and the complexity of emotions (see Ahmed, 2010; Harré, 2002).

Furthermore, for the quantification of happiness from a subjective standpoint to be carried out, the answers given in the questionnaires need to be taken from the context of the respondent and generalized (Tolman, 1994, p.53-4). Alexandrova (2017, p.122) draws attention to the fact that, in carrying out this generalization, researchers are distorting the meaning of a particular answer, transforming an ordinal value into a cardinal one without due evidence: the "value" of the distance between the options to be marked (for example, between happy and very happy, or between five and seven) is not equivalent between people (Prati, 2017; Fabian, 2022). As Bond and Lang (2019, p.1630) point out, "...there are an infinite number of arbitrary cardinalizations…" making a rigorous, without limitation comparison between different samples impossible.

Cromby (2011, p.848) contends that what appears to be a face validity of happiness measurement instruments can be explained as the by-product of a shared understanding of principles underlying everyday conversations. For example, when someone wishes us "Happy birthday", we know that it is a good thing and answer accordingly, even though we do not precisely know what is being wished. In another example, we know that at a funeral, it is not

appropriate to wish someone or to say that you are happy; in a celebration after being promoted, it is. Cromby's point is that when questioned about happiness or having to answer a questionnaire, we do not know exactly what the assessed object is, but we understand what is expected of us and what is appropriate to answer (Flanagan et al., 2023; Alexandrova, 2017; Fabian, 2022).

Another set of criticisms towards the WBSci is aimed at its theoretical foundations, as addressed by the so-called second and third waves of Positive Psychology (Wong, 2011; Ivtzan et al., 2015; Lomas et al., 2021). The main criticism in the second wave, at the beginning of the last decade, was that people's experience with the object of the WBSci would not be stable but variable. The positive-negative polarity in the relationship with this object would fluctuate depending on the context (see Lomas, 2018). For example, dissatisfaction, generally understood as negative, would be positive in certain circumstances, such as when catalyzing actions contrary to authoritarian rule. The third wave argues for expanding the set of epistemologies and methodologies contemplated in the WBSci, going beyond the dominant (post) positivist paradigm. Lomas et al. (2021, p.664) point out that, for this expansion to take place, it is necessary to consider the person as part of a complex sociocultural system and not as an isolatable individual (see Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; and Christopher, 1999).

The point that will be made in this paper is that these calls for greater theoretical rigor have yet to be incorporated into the central practices of the WBSci. Key limitations persist in the field and should be recognized for its maturity. This paper points out these limitations and their possible consequences by contrasting the five guidelines with the Guarani Mbyá expression *teko porã*, sometimes translated as happiness.

3. *Teko porã* and the inevitable mistranslation

The expression *teko porã* is not unusually used closely related to the Portuguese word "felicidade" [happiness] as in the bilingual work of the Guarani Mbyá poet Brígido Bogado (2009) and the research from the Brazilian psychologists Gabriel Siqueira and Alessandro Santos (2018). More literally, *teko porã* can be translated, also with reservations, as a "beautiful way of living" (Melià, 2015; Takuá, 2018).

These translations are inevitably rough since transposing Guarani Mbyá ideas (or indigenous ideas in general) into non-indigenous terms will always be part of a "mistranslation", given the differences in discursive referents (cosmologies, ontologies, epistemology, and experiences) (Waddington Achatz & Guimarães, 2018, p.600-1). In his poetry book, Ayvu'I, Borgado (2009) exemplifies this difficulty when translating his work from Guarani to Castilian. In the text, *teko porã* is translated as "prayer" (p. 14), "balanced life", "happy life" (p. 21), "the principle of life" (p. 25), and "life" (p. 31). For example, in addition to happiness, sometimes *teko porã* is found to be translated as good living (Acosta, 2016). Also, other Guarani Mbyá words, such as *vy'apa* and *yva'a*, are sometimes translated as happiness (Gabriel & Checcucci Gonçalves, 2018; Yxapy, 2022), making the achievement of a general translation hard, if not impossible (and undesirable).

However, we take the "controlled mistranslation" proposal from Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004). Viveiros de Castro seeks to identify translation problems while understanding their inevitability: "mistranslation is at the same time the limit and the possibility of comprehension in an inter-ethnic dialogue." (Waddington Achatz & Guimarães, 2018, p.601). Thus, aware that we will inevitably make mistakes, we will present one of the possible descriptions of the idea of *teko porã* and the Guarani Mbyá cosmology. Therefore, we do not intend to describe them extensively but rather to make a description sufficient for the

proposed investigation. Also, although we refer to the WBSci, it is important to stress that we will compare *teko porã* with happiness as presented in a previous paper (Sewaybricker & Massola, 2022b).

The structure of this article will be as follows: first, we will present the Guarani Mbyá indigenous people and the used method. Second, we will describe both the idea of *teko porã* for the Guarani Mbyá and some arguments in defense of comparing it with happiness. Third, despite the inevitable mistranslation and the limited space of an article, we will deepen the idea of *teko porã* and introduce the Guarani Mbyá cosmology. We will present and confront them both with the adequacy of the five guidelines of the WBSci and the range of supposedly universal assessment instruments. Finally, we will outline the characteristics of a possible (and coherent) assessment of *teko porã* that could also serve as a more comprehensive framework for the WBSci.

4. Method

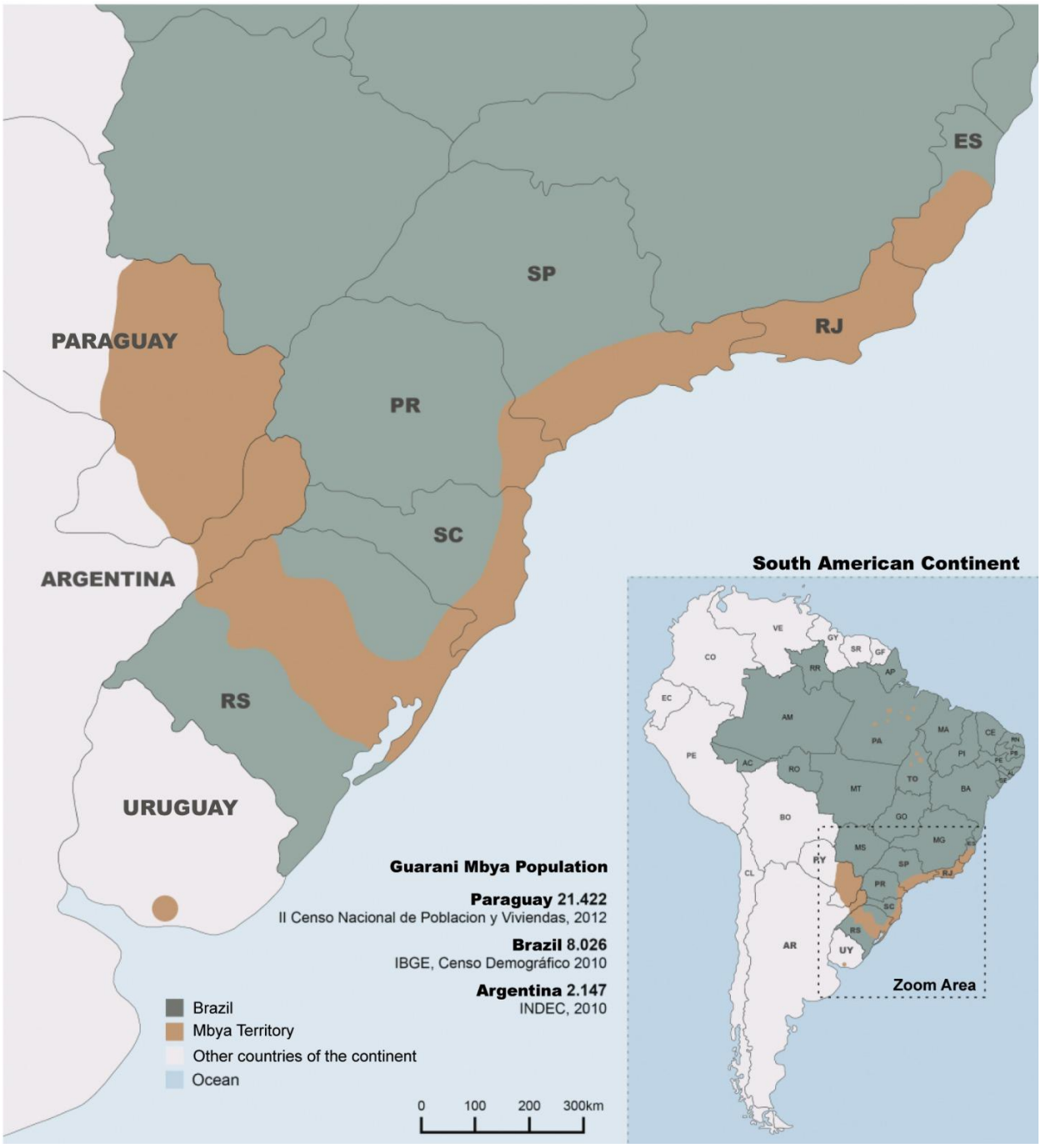
Engaging with indigenous people requires special attention to their particularities. First, there are extensive studies on the complexities and differences of the various Latin American indigenous cosmologies (see Kopenawa & Albert, 2013; Levi-Strauss, [1973] 2017; Viveiros de Castro, 2018). One can commonly observe broad categorizations like forest peoples and Andean (or highland) peoples. However, there are also more nuanced distinctions, such as variations among communities of the same ethnicity. Given these intricacies, broad generalizations can often result in oversimplified representations. These complexities are part of cultural dynamics and challenges inherent in interethnic interactions (such as "culture shock", Wagner, 1981), particularly between indigenous and non-indigenous individuals (see Guimarães, 2020, p.15).

Second, indigenous peoples are often excluded from politics and academia (see Takuá, 2018; Alcantara & Sampaio, 2017; Blue Bird Jernigan et al., 2021), thus participating little or not in the development of science and public policies. Particularly in Brazil, contact with indigenous peoples is sensitive, given the history of exploitation of the territory and indigenous knowledge by non-indigenous people (Waddington-Achatz & Guimarães, 2018; Acosta, 2016; Conselho Indigenista Missionário, 2023). The sociopolitical context during former president Bolsonaro's government in Brazil threatened the way of living of many indigenous peoples, either because of the risk of reversing the demarcation of their lands (Bittar, 2021), by the constant invasion of these lands for the exploration of ore, wood or the expansion of farms (Diaz, 2021), or the weakening of government bodies responsible for protecting and supporting these peoples (Silveira et al., 2022). During Bolsonaro's four-year term, indigenous peoples in Brazil saw an increase of 54% in cases of suffered violence, including almost two hundred people murdered and nine hundred children up to four years old dying a year (Conselho Indigenista Missionário, 2023). This background and the Covid-19 pandemic are essential to be taken into consideration since the Guarani Mbyá territory (*tekoha*) and their traditional way of living (*nhanderekó*) are commonly related to *teko porá* (Takuá, 2018; Siqueira & dos Santos, 2018; Melià, 2015; Chamorro, 2004).

5. The Guarani Mbyá

In this research, as non-indigenous people, we chose to collaborate with the Guarani Mbyá, one of the Guarani ethnic subdivisions alongside the Kaiowá and Nhandeva. These groups inhabit regions spanning Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, and Uruguay, unified by their shared language lineage, the Tupi. The Mbyá community consists of approximately 7,000 members in Brazil or, as they call it, Pindorama. While they are distributed across various states, there is a significant concentration in São Paulo (Grünberg, 2012).

Figure 1. *Guarani Mbyá territory in Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay*



Note. English translation from Radünz & Nerbas (2023, p.199).

Our affiliation with The Indigenous Support Network (ISN), a research and extension group at the University of São Paulo, proved beneficial. The ISN has partnered with Guarani Mbyá communities and their leaders on various projects since 2012 (refer to Guimarães et al., 2019). Our existing involvement with the Mbyá community, facilitated by ISN, paved the way for building mutual trust and understanding.

This research lasted two years, being conducted on three simultaneous fronts: (1) Theoretical research on the Guarani Mbyá cosmology and the notion of *teko porã*. Our main goal for this research was to compare *teko porã* with happiness so that the implications of this comparison to

the WBSci could be analyzed. To achieve this goal, we organized the dispersed and diverse content available on *teko porã* and considered the adequacy of comparing a Guarani Mbyá expression with a non-indigenous one. These points will be addressed later. (2) In-depth, semi-structured interviews with four political and spiritual Mbyá leaders on happiness for indigenous and non-indigenous people, *teko porã*, and the Gallup World Poll well-being questionnaire. (3) Experience with the Guarani Mbyá from ISN initiatives that included: funding and delivering food supplies for *tekoha* Tangará (Itanhaém/SP) and Yyrexakã (Marsilac/SP) during the pandemic period; funding and producing t-shirts with the young leaders' group at *tekoha* Guyrá Pepo (Tapiraí/SP); supporting financially and logistically the execution of two ceremonies in *tekoha* Tangará; supporting the development and kick-off of a food sovereignty project in *tekoha* Takuarí (Eldorado/SP); organizing eight meetings of knowledge exchange on various topics (including *teko porã*) with Vitor Karaí Mirim and Silvio Karaí Tukumbo (political leaders – *cacique* - from Guyrá Pepo and Tangará, respectively). The latter, Silvio, also offered and gave Guarani Mbyá language classes for a small group of people, including us (authors), for almost a year.

Throughout these actions, we were able to not only maintain intense contact with the indigenous participants in the ISN but also visit these *tekoha*, sometimes staying there for up to four days. Thus, our experience with the Guarani Mbyá and *teko porã* goes beyond the formal interviews. It includes participating in ceremonies, cultivating crops with them, and informally discussing various subjects, including *teko porã*.

Figure 2. *Guarani Mbyá community Ka'aguy Porã, located in the city of Maquiné, Brazil*

Note. Photograph by Douglas Freitas, 2018. Conselho Indigenista Missionário.

6. Interview, participants, and content analysis

In this article, we will limit ourselves to a brief presentation of the method. Process details are available in the public research report (Sewaybricker, 2022). Here, we chose to dedicate more textual space to introducing *teko porã* and the Guarani Mbyá cosmology. Throughout the article, excerpts from the interviews will illustrate the arguments presented, referred to as belonging to the interview with Participants A, B, C, or D, to preserve their anonymity.

When formulating our method, we initially anticipated conducting five interviews with Mbyá individuals recognized as leaders within and representatives of their community. We selected participants through convenience sampling and extended invitations to seven individuals. Notably, reaching out to Guarani Mbyá leaders and securing their consent for interviews was more unpredictable than we had anticipated. Initially, we contacted two young Mbyá leaders who were actively vocal on Instagram and with whom we had prior brief interactions. We thought that, since they were outspoken, they would be more accessible. However, both declined our invitation, expressing that they were too young to discuss *teko porã*. They believed that *teko porã* was a profoundly sacred concept, best spoken about by the elders. Learning from this, we proceeded with greater care in our subsequent outreach, ensuring we established a robust connection with an elderly leader before extending an invitation. We took over one year to invite another participant.

The first two people to accept the invitation and be interviewed are members of the same *tekoha*, the *cacique* of the village (Participant A) and his wife (Participant B), who is recognized as an important community leader in the coastal region of the state of São Paulo. Another interviewee is a Guarani writer (Participant C) who has published several books about the Guarani way of life and cosmology for children and adults. Lastly, the fourth person is a significant community health leader in the Guarani region of his *tekoha* (Participant D). A fifth person, the *cacique* of an important *tekoha* in the State of São Paulo, accepted the invitation. However, we could not conduct a formal interview before the research conclusion due to internet connectivity issues.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Portuguese (which, we must highlight, is not the interviewees' first language) with an average time of 73.5 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a method inspired by Content Analysis (Bardin, 1977). The well-being questionnaire used in the Gallup World Poll was presented at the end of each interview as another stimulus for our conversation. When presenting the questionnaire, our intention was not to formally use it but to understand how the interviewees understood questions and the structure of answers.

In the stage of inference and interpretation of the interview content (see Silva & Fossá, 2013), recurrent triangulation of information between the experience in ISN initiatives, the transcripts, and the theoretical research on happiness, well-being, and *teko porã* was fundamental. It helped us to approach the interviewees' point of view (Viveiros de Castro, 2018, p.72) and achieve a "plausible and coherent" translation of *teko porã* for our desired reflection (Bettoi & Simão, 2002, p. 613).

7. The comparison of *teko porã* and happiness

To analyze the adequacy of the WBSci concerning *teko porã*, it was first necessary to understand whether this Guarani expression would be, despite the inevitable mistranslation, comparable with the idea of happiness. There is no doubt that *teko porã* is different from what is generally understood as happiness in Western tradition and science. Nevertheless, without ignoring differences, it is possible to look for shared structural elements that allow us to recognize these ideas (at least provisionally) as part of the same semantic field. Two positive pieces of evidence

for this approximation were the interviewees' confirmation that *teko porã* could be translated as happiness and that they sometimes used *teko porã* and happiness as synonyms in their speech. However, to what extent do these ideas come together?

As we have argued in other works (Sewaybricker & Massola, 2022a; Sewaybricker & Massola, 2022b), a possible and comprehensive understanding of happiness refers to what is understood as "the best way of living". This broad idea makes it possible to connect happiness's erratic and elusive history, justifying why many different propositions are recognized as part of it (see McMahon, 2006). When Aristotle wrote about *eudaimonia*, Epicurus about *makario*s, Seneca about *beatitudo*, or Bentham about *happiness*, they were all offering a proposal on what they understood to be the best way of living: developing the virtues, promoting the right pleasures, minimizing the effects of emotion over reason, or maximizing the ratio of pleasure to suffering. In this sense, recent scientific definitions of happiness or well-being, like psychological or subjective well-being and hedonic or eudaimonic happiness, add to the long list of propositions about the best way of living we know. The recent translations of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* to flourish or well-being (see Aristotle, 1900) and the changes in the meaning of the word "happiness" (e.g., significant changes in Webster's dictionary in 1961; Oishi et al., 2013) exemplify the dynamic nature of this debate.

Thus, to compare *teko porã* with the central object of the WBSci, we need *teko porã* to be about "the best way of living" for the *Guarani Mbyá*, which implies having at least two characteristics: first, that *teko porã*, like happiness, is about the "best" life and not just a good life. This differentiation is fundamental since something considered better requires a hierarchy of values and consideration of the quantity, intensity, and combination of elements. Life can be good but has little in common with the best life; something can be good but not part of the best things. The focus on the best life is still valid for many of the times philosophers and scientists mention investigating the "good life". It is not just a good life among many other good lives that is of their interest, but one that distinguishes itself, one that is better than others. In this sense, the expression "good" could be parallel with the *summum bonum* (highest good) present in texts from Saint Augustine (2006) and Latin translations of Aristotle (Christopher, 2015).

The second characteristic that *teko porã* must have to be parallel with happiness is that it must refer primarily to a person and not to a collective. This characteristic is a derivative of the first one. If happiness is about the "best life", it takes a single life as its primary unit of consideration and starting point. It is not by chance that all the previously mentioned philosophers first delved into the nature of human existence before exploring the idea of happiness. This order may be seen as logical since life is always particular: each person needs to be particularly assessed when deciding who is alive and who is not. In its pure sense, life is not shared as nobody lives someone else's life..

However, this focus on a person's life does not exclude concepts like Relational Well-Being (McCubbin et al., 2013) and Ecological Well-being (McGregor et al., 2003), which emphasize the importance of external factors like community, divine entities, and environment. While highlighting the interdependence with others and the world, these concepts still originate from an understanding of what it means to be human and how to lead a fulfilling life emphasizing a personal perspective (rather than strict individualism – that is the reason for the construct's name).

This person-centric view implies that discussing the happiness of a community, city, country, or organization would not be rigorous. The terminology used in these contexts differs; we speak of a well-run city or an organization functioning effectively, but we do not typically use the term "living" for these entities. Even though phrases like "happy city" or "a country's happiness" are

used, their focus is not on personal lives but on collective goals, which may include lowering crime rates, preserving traditions, adhering to laws, boosting productivity, reducing the perception of corruption, or ensuring equal opportunities. It seems crucial that these aims intersect with happiness, but they should not be exclusively constituted by it, as they have different natures (as Bentham's attempt to achieve a "fabric of felicity" has shown). For instance, in many cases during the COVID-19 pandemic, the goal of a city required essential workers to take risks, a situation that might not align with the best way for a person to live. The best way for a person to live and the best way for a group to live together are different objects.

While recognizing the limitations in discussing collective happiness, it is noteworthy to mention its benefits, as highlighted by economist Lord Richard Layard (2022). The concept of "happiness" can attract interest, increase project visibility, and enhance public policy implementation.

Further, this article will argue that *teko porã* aligns with the two posed criteria: it is about the best way of living and having a person's life as its starting point.

8. First criterion: *Teko porã* and the best way to live for the Guarani Mbyá

As narrated by Participant A, *teko porã* is a way of living transmitted by Nhanderú (generally understood by the Guarani as the divine creator entity and translated by some as the "true god", Pierri, 2013, p.31). He sent his son, Tupã, to Earth to teach the Guarani how to live: what foods to eat to get strong and healthy, how to live with other forest beings, what rituals to practice, and so on. This story shows the importance of *teko porã*, also reinforced in the speech of Participant B:

> "For us, *teko porã* is everything, for me, for us it is everything"; and from Participant D: "[You notice *teko porã*] feeling in your heart that you did something through the strength of Nhanderú, which is so great that it is a force greater than the universe."

Teko porã thus seems to serve as a way for the Guarani Mbyá to transmit their moral values. Doing the right thing means following the teachings of Nhanderú and Tupã, living according to the Guarani tradition. Participant A used a path metaphor to explain this expression: doing evil or acting wrong would mean that the person is out of the *teko porã* "path". It is not difficult to see that *teko porã* is a way for the Guarani to represent the ideal life and thus meets the first criterion presented. Living more and more like the life of Tupã would be the best way to live. However, contrary to what it may seem, it is unclear what the concrete expression of this ideal life would be, this "being on the path". The anthropologist and Jesuit priest Bartomeu Melià (2015, p.7-8) warned researchers that *teko porã* is an expression widely used by many Guarani peoples and other peoples of the Tupi linguistic family in such a way that it is not "...a philosophy with narrow limits", it is an object "...more sensed than philosophized". This warning from Melià refers, more specifically, to the fact that the Guarani have a tradition of transmitting knowledge orally, which is less formalized and hierarchical than a written tradition and, therefore, more receptive to intracultural heterogeneity (Valsiner, 2007; Pierri, 2013).

> "...each person will speak differently. Our stories are never the same because when one Guarani tells a story and another Guarani tells the same story, he tells it differently. There is no true story; they are all the same, but each one explains it in a way and adds something. It is oral history; it is repeated. Because it is created as the teller tells it." (Participant C)

The importance of oral transmission also helps us to understand the importance of elders (as well as political and spiritual leaders). They are the most respected people when it comes to

transmitting ancestral knowledge and connecting the dilemmas of contemporary life with tradition.

Even so, it is noteworthy that there are no clear indicators of whether someone lives in *teko porã*. Physical or psychological aspects, such as health, vitality, and pleasure, are essential but not enough to define *teko porã*. Its ephemerality probably explains why, for those interviewed, *teko porã* is accompanied by the idea of hope: it is not a matter of someone being sure that they live *teko porã*, but of having (spiritual) confidence that they are living it, that they are on the right path. When questioned about how *teko porã* is perceived, Participant D pointed to its immateriality: "You feel it in your heart… you feel a force greater than the universe".

9. Second criterion: *Teko porã* and the Guarani Mbyá person

The confidence of living in *teko porã* also highlights an especially complex element of this idea. *Teko porã* is commonly referred to as transcending the person. It does not depend only on the person's agency but also, among other things, on Nhanderú's will, on the health of the forest beings, on being in the sacred territory, and on the strength of the community. This transcendence requires us to present some elements of Guarani cosmology.

Viveiros de Castro (2004; 2018) proposed the idea of "perspectivism" to translate Amerindian cosmology into non-indigenous terms. Even though this idea oversimplifies indigenous peoples living in the Americas, it is helpful for a glimpse of the cosmological characteristics of the Guarani Mbyá and the complexity of *teko porã*. We will start from the "unity of the soul and multiplicity of bodies" (Maciel, 2019).

Unlike the modern "Western" understanding of "many cultures and one reality," for Amerindian peoples, there are "many realities and one culture" (Viveiros de Castro, 2018). For them, humans share the same spirit with all beings (like trees, rivers, animals, and mountains), which confers a cultural commonality to all beings. This spirit-culture is shared between beings but expressed differently, as it is incarnated in different body materialities. It is the physical characteristic of the body and its spatial location (concerning other bodies) that lead this entity to experience a particular reality, or, in Viveiros de Castro's expression (2018, p.64), a particular "perspective" of reality.

In this sense, different perspectives do not represent "the plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds" (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, p.6). This idea can be seen as the opposite of cultural relativism, which assumes different subjectivities representing an external objective reality as best they can. Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism assumes that different beings live in different "worlds" or realities. There is no "truth out there".

An anecdote told by Lévi-Strauss ([1973] 2017, p.343) helps us to illustrate the particularity of Amerindian cosmology, although here we will focus on a brief appreciation of its implications (see Guimarães & Simão, 2017, p.9- 10; Viveiros de Castro, 2004, p.9,). In the early 16th century, when European explorers reached South American lands, they asked themselves if indigenous people had a soul. The explorers' concern was not with objective aspects, taken as self-evident, but with aspects we might today call subjective. For the natives, it was obvious that the explorers had a soul (or spirit) since all beings have and share it. However, given the differences in their ways of living, it was unclear whether their souls incarnated in similar bodies or shared a similar perspective on the world. The central problem for indigenous peoples was not the soul or subjectivity but the body and lived realities. For indigenous people, the self-other differentiation would not be in subjectivity but in corporeality.

Thus, if, in Amerindian perspectivism, there is not one actual reality but a multiplicity of them, the process of knowing is not about getting closer to the truth but about going beyond

one's own perspective. It is not a matter of distancing oneself from the investigated object but of approaching it and experiencing it from different perspectives in the best possible way. This process requires an entanglement of the person and the object, as they contain the same spirit. One knows more and is known better the more involved one is with that which transcends one's body (Viveiros de Castro, 2018, p.50-51; Guimarães, 2020, p.6). The excerpt from Participant A's interview illustrates this reflective process:

> "Because imagine this: the stone that has been there for millions of years, the spirit there has seen all the events of the various generations of men. This spirit of the stones saw all things, it knows everything that has happened since the beginning. For years and years, it has been witnessing those generations and generations of humanity... So we must, we must also respect it as an elder; it is immortal too."

By extrapolating this cosmological characteristic to the Guarani Mbyá, we point out the problematic adequacy of "generalization", the first guideline of the WBSci. If there is no truth, *teko porã* must always be understood in a particular way. It will always refer to the context and perspective of those involved. As we do here, there is a kind of generalization of *teko porã* that allows its generational transmission through conversations. Nevertheless, it is a generalization that differs from the one sought by the WBSci, which assumes that we all (or many of us) deal with the same referent.

Returning to the problem of this section, we must emphasize that, despite the commonality of the spirit, *teko porã* deals primarily with the person and not with the group. The "spreading" of the person in the process of knowing does not prevent the Guarani from being able to adopt a "functional" attitude of not being confused with the "other" (Dennett, 1978). The Guarani talk about themselves and others by linguistically differentiating themselves into "I", "they", and "we". Thus, although the reflection on *teko porã* involves the idea of a person fundamentally entangled with the community and its surroundings, its use seems to be about a person's life (in its functional sense). In the interviews, for example, expressions such as "the community lives *teko porã*", "we reached *teko porã*", and "the *teko porã* of the village" were not used. *Teko porã* is the way of life taught by a god-person, Tupã, so that every Guarani person could emulate it; *teko porã* refers to whether a person is on the path indicated by Tupã.

If *teko porã* meets both criteria (referring to the best life and the person, not the group), at least circumstantially, we can go deeper into it: analyzing its adequacy to the other guidelines of the WBSci. We will present these points in two stages: the first will be guided by understanding what a person is, and the second by the possibility of measurement.

10. Difference between *teko porã* and the object of the science of well-being: The person

In most WBSci research, especially in its psychological strand, the person is understood as an individual: an isolatable and self-sufficient entity (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). From this definition, investigating happiness implies investigating an "object" contained in this individual entity; this is made clear from the interest in the subjective aspects of happiness and all the individualized efforts to assess it: self-assessment questionnaires or physiological tests, such as electroencephalogram (Jatupaiboon et al., 2013), MRI scan (Sato et al., 2015), and heart rate (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2022). The second guideline of the WBSci, "focused on lived experience" refers precisely to this type of experience, the individual one, whether narrated, thought, felt, or physiologically expressed.

Teko porã, on the other hand, is based on the idea of a person ontologically dependent on their surroundings. For the Guarani, if we are all connected by the same spirit, it would not be rigorous

to think of a person as isolated, containing what is most relevant to life. In the Guarani perspective, the network in which someone is connected actively participates and has much to say, even about what is usually understood as "subjectivity" (Moraes, 2017, p.78). In this sense, the relevant experience to talk about and explain *teko porã* is not restricted to the person who might or might not live it. We can go beyond and think that if there is interdependence, the bodily experience will only be a part of understanding and explaining *teko porã*. That is why sensations are not sufficient to explain *teko porã*. As Participant A stated, "You don't feel *teko porã*, you live *teko porã"*. That is, the second guideline does not seem fit in this case. We would need to expand the universe of experiences considered.

Confronted with these characteristics of *teko porã*, the third guideline of the WBSci, "seek impartiality in research", proves inadequate. There is no reasonable distance for knowledge in Guarani cosmology; there is no impartiality but positioning and implication in the field of relations-perspectives.

11. Difference between *teko porã* and the science of well-being: Measurability

If, as presented in previous chapters, both self-assessments and assessments of physiological changes would not be sufficient to assess *teko porã*, it is not strange to question whether the fourth guideline, "happiness is measurable", would be adequate. This questioning was even made explicit in the story told by Participant D: "[When] this doctor said: are you not going to measure [*teko porã*]? I said: no, it is not necessary. You do not have to [measure it]. You can count it in here" (while gesturing, placing his hand on his chest). Participant D's statement seems to go against an important idea of the WBSci, as Diener (1984, p.543) presents: "Nevertheless, as measurement and other work proceeds, the most scientifically useful concepts will be those that can be measured…"; and which is also contained in the mantra "if you treasure it, measure it", reproduced in the defense for the assessment of happiness in the political field (O'Donnell, 2022).

Discomfort with measurement, a general feeling among the four participants, was made explicit when we presented them with a copy of the Gallup World Poll well-being questionnaire: the questions we asked them (guiding them through the questionnaire) did not seem to make sense. For example, assessing "life as a whole" on a scale of zero to ten was a far cry from their usual way of reflecting on their lives and experiences. In any case, amidst confused facial expressions and questions about our intention with such questions, the participants offered numerical answers, even if they seemed more like an attempt to adjust to what they understood to be our expectations. In addition, the participants politely voiced some disappointment with us, as filling out the form went against the grain of what they had just shared about their cosmology. As the cultural psychologist Ernest Boesch (1996) warned, research questions and their formulations come from a specific culture that values a particular object and problematizes it in a certain way, needing to be revised when transposed to another culture.

Still, we can argue that the problem with the fourth guideline is not the measurement *per se* but how it is traditionally understood and applied in the WBSci (Cromby, 2011; Prinzing, 2020). Alexandrova and the economist Mark Fabian (2022), for example, argue that a complex concept, such as *teko porã*, must be measured not with naturalistic pretensions (very common in the WBSci) but by recognizing its intrinsically evaluative (and political) content. They refer to concepts with this type of complexity as "thick concepts": concepts that, when describing a particular phenomenon, inevitably prescribe conduct deemed right or better. When dealing with such thick concepts, Alexandrova and Fabian (2022) suggest developing an assessment that derives its legitimacy not only from scientific knowledge but also from community participation: contours of the object should be stipulated from a democratic-participatory process. In other words, it

would not be a matter of the impossibility of measuring happiness but of the need to consider the limitations of the objective assessment of it. We could assume the motto "If you treasure it, measure it" seems strange to *teko porã* not because it cannot be measured but because, in the Guarani Mbyá tradition, one does not perceive, *a priori*, the reason for measuring it.

Considering mistranslations and investigative limitations, would it be appropriate to measure *teko porã*? If so, how could we measure it properly? For this, we need to return to the central characteristics of this idea and seek parameters for a possible assessment. We will address that next.

12. Characteristics of *teko porã*

We will highlight here three characteristics of *teko porã* discussed throughout this article that seem to be the pillars for assessing this idea. The first is understanding that *teko porã* varies between people and even for the same person over time. For example, sometimes the interviewees seemed to contradict each other when talking about *teko porã*, which may seem strange to a non-indigenous researcher. However, in the Guarani Mbyá tradition, words are not supposed to contain the meaning of ideas. There is, as already mentioned, a receptivity to intracultural heterogeneity. The openness of meaning is natural to *teko porã*.

The second characteristic of *teko porã* is related to the forms of "best way of living" expressed by the Guarani Mbyá. There are multiple understandings of the expressions of *teko porã* (as the previous characteristic already suggests). However, in contrast to the traditional practices of the WBSci, we can point to the importance of the immaterial in the expression of *teko porã*: references to the divine ("feeling Nhanderú's strength), references to what transcends the body and oneself ("you don't feel teko porã, you live teko porã") and abstract references to experience ("a force greater than the universe", "you feel it in your heart"). This characteristic does not mean that *teko porã* has no space for the material, as health (physical and emotional), possessions, and pleasures are relevant. However, an assessment would need to incorporate immateriality in some way.

The first two characteristics, variability and the importance of the immaterial, prepare together a fertile ground for the third: *teko porã* is not restricted to the person, although it refers to a person's life. In Guarani Mbyá cosmology, the entanglement with the plurality of perspectives enables someone to know more and better. The idea of "perspective" suggests that there is no reason to suppose that anyone holds the truth about living or not living *teko porã* or that someone knows so much as to make the knowledge of others irrelevant. Also, "perspective" suggests the importance of considering the person's (and what they do, feel, and think) utterance always in a position: a place, a moment, and a universe of relationships with other beings (Wertsch, 1993).

Considering these three characteristics as the basic structure of *teko porã*, we can extrapolate four parameters for developing its possible assessment (and a comprehensive assessment framework for the WBSci).

13. Parameters for *teko porã* assessment

The first parameter is the importance of mapping and considering the symbolic perimeter of *teko porã*. That is, the "perimeter" in which the meaning of this idea has a minimum of stability and consensus. Here, we take the idea of geometry to refer to a particular physical and temporal space, not necessarily continuous, in which people interact with specific ideas (such as *teko porã*). In this space, we presuppose that the longer the (symbolic) distance between those who talk about *teko porã*, the bigger the difference in its meaning will be, as well as the uncertainty of referring to the same "object". We can give as examples the distance between generations,

between very distant moments in time, between different spiritual leaders, or, more intensely, between a non-indigenous person and a Guarani Mbyá.

The characteristics of the object and the Guarani cosmology make the cohesion and stability of the meaning of *teko porã* have a small spatial and temporal "perimeter". Within this small perimeter, it is important to establish the specific characteristics of *teko porã*, its representation (construct), and the procedures for its assessment (Bradburn et al., 2017). A good starting point would be the perimeter of a village and its inhabitants since it presupposes, by definition, a recognized integration-unity.

The second parameter is related to the role of each person who integrates this perimeter throughout the characterization, representation, and assessment of *teko porã*. If the person, for the Guarani, is fundamentally collective and there is no truth but perspectives, all those who are part of the perimeter are potential experts on the subject; all are potential participants in constructing what *teko porã* is and its assessment process. This parameter proposes a replacement for the figure of the scientist-specialist in happiness/*teko porã* or the development of an assessment process. Who participates, how much, and how they participate will depend on communitarian agreements, reputation, interest, and deliberation methods. A non-indigenous scientist would thus have, for the most part, the responsibility of translating the experience to different audiences and supporting interethnic dialogue. This role will be clarified next.

The third parameter addresses the need to set a purpose for assessing *teko porã*. We assume that the measurement and formalization of an assessment are not current practices among the Guarani Mbyá, who do not share the motto "If you treasure it, measure it". This fact requires some level of concession of the people's tradition in favor of the evaluation process's usefulness, such as receiving governmental resources. This concession, in turn, can only be made if those within the perimeter perceive the importance of *teko porã's* assessment; if the group of people reflects on the use that can be made of the assessment and the impacts for those who are part of the stipulated symbolic perimeter.

To fulfill this third parameter, we must consider the probable participation of other actors in the debate, such as government agencies and NGO representatives. They are the ones who, most likely, will use the results of the *teko porã* assessment to guide actions to support the Guarani Mbyá and, therefore, could say about the type of result that would enhance their actions. The researcher-translators, in turn, would have much to contribute to promoting dialogue between the members of the perimeter and these other actors and to facilitate the characterization, representation, and assessment process within the community.

We should highlight the possibility that those included in the symbolic perimeter do not find reasons for the assessment of *teko porã*. However, in informal conversations at villages we visited, leaders expressed an interest in such an assessment. Furthermore, we recognize that other thick concepts in the Amerindian context, such as "health" and "food sovereignty" (Sandes et al., 2018; Athila & Leite, 2020), are already taking place and can serve as inspiration for the case of *teko porã*. Also, in other regions of the world, ways of assessing happiness and well-being for indigenous people are already being used and developed (Yap, 2017; McCubbin et al., 2013; Te Puni Kōkiri and the Treasury, 2019).

The need to set a purpose for the assessment allows us to return to the five guidelines of the science of well-being and analyze the fifth, "having practical implications". In this case, it seems clear that such an implication would also benefit the Guarani Mbyá, who currently face obstacles to living according to their traditional way of life.

Finally, the fourth parameter concerns the provisional character of the construct and its assessment method. Given the volatility of the meaning of *teko porã*, including within the

perimeter, the assessment method would need to be reviewed regularly to adjust to changes in the understanding of *teko porã* and the symbolic perimeter considered. Changes in the roles of those who integrate the perimeter, the main characteristics of *teko porã*, and the best assessment method should also be considered. This provisionality makes results difficult to compare (between villages or for the same village longitudinally). Even if the quantification of *teko porã* is considered adequate and carried out at a particular time, its result will always be context-specific. It should not be assumed (without loss of rigor) as referring to the same object as another assessment.

In summary, the assessment of *teko porã* must be developed with the Guarani Mbyá, and for the Guarani Mbyá to be coherent; it must result from a participatory, inclusive, contextualized, and temporary process. This systematization shows considerable similarities with the participatory democratic process proposed by Alexandrova and Fabian (2022) and conducted at the NGO Turn2us (see Fabian et al., 2021). However, in the case of *teko porã*, there is a need to incorporate the inevitability of mistakes, the lack of definition of the role of the researcher, and the need to set a purpose for the assessment.

14. Conclusion: Suggestions for maturing the science of well-being

Working with indigenous peoples, in general, makes it possible to test and strain the limits of science by transposing scientific theories and instruments to a very different context from which their formulations occur. Given the differences between *teko porã* and the main object of the WBSci, we can say that the traditional way of operating this science (illustrated here by the five guidelines) does not encompass all the diversity of ideas about happiness. The project of achieving measurable universal aspects of happiness fails in the face of the extension of ontologies and epistemologies. This scenario leads us to conclude that, when presenting results from the application of large-scale measurement instruments, such as the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2023) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), the Guarani Mbyá are, most probably, not represented.

Given their ontological and epistemological particularities, we understand that the Guarani Mbyá case might be extreme. However, the inadequacy of the first three guidelines (generalizable results, impartiality-seeking, and focus on individual experience) suggests that other peoples and groups with more subtle differences in their understanding of the "best way of living" might be poorly represented in these large-scale instruments. What would be the "symbolic perimeter" represented by the assessments of the WBSci? Who is included, and who is excluded from this perimeter? What would be the consequence of the WBSci thriving while certain people are left out of its research about the "best way to live"?

We do not mean to suggest that research carried out lacks merit. In other words, there is no prior problem when instruments fail to represent all people adequately: none will ever be able to do that. Nevertheless, not recognizing the limitations of theories and approaches is a problem, as well as not proposing new initiatives aimed at complementing or correcting these limitations (see Boesch, 1996; Alexandrova, 2017). A closer look at these points will favor a greater diversity of people, knowledge, and approaches in the debate on the WBSci. Greater diversity is an opportunity and a need that Lomas et al. (2021) also point out as crucial for the maturation of this science.

Here, we systematize an assessment framework based on three characteristics of the Guarani Mbyá idea of *teko porã*: (1) its variability, (2) the importance of the immaterial for understanding it, and (3) the fact that it is not restricted to the person. These characteristics support four parameters that should guide an assessment of this object and other potentially similar ones: (a)

the need to define the symbolic perimeter; (b) the need to define the roles of those who integrate this perimeter in the development of the assessment; (c) the need to find a purpose for the assessment; (d) and the need to periodically update the three previous parameters. It is important to note that this proposal agrees (not without reservations) with the last two WBSci guidelines, its central object's measurability, and the objective of generating practical consequences.

Finally, we recognize that there is a long way to go: including a greater diversity of ontologies and epistemologies implies valuing them, either by offering space in academic meetings and scientific journals or with more resources for research. Furthermore, a greater diversity of people must participate in spaces where knowledge about happiness and well-being is produced and its practical implications are determined. There is an opportunity, for example, for academia to become more accessible and for science, in general, to better dialogue with indigenous knowledge. This article, therefore, is one step among others already taken, and many are still necessary for the advance of the WBSci.

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