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**RESEARCHING WELLBEING ACROSS THE  
DISCIPLINES: SOME KEY INTELLECTUAL PROBLEMS  
AND WAYS FORWARD**

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## **WeD - Wellbeing in Developing Countries ESRC Research Group**

WeD is a multidisciplinary research group funded by the ESRC, dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and draws on the knowledge and expertise from three different departments (Economics and International Development, Social and Policy Sciences and Psychology) as well as an extensive network of overseas contacts and specific partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The purpose of the research programme is to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of well-being in specific countries.

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# RESEARCHING WELLBEING ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES: SOME KEY INTELLECTUAL PROBLEMS AND WAYS FORWARD

## SUMMARY:

A research agenda into wellbeing requires multi-disciplinary research but this is notoriously difficult to achieve. This paper explores some of the barriers and proposes a route forward. Based on an independent research project which included the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) programme and other multi-disciplinary poverty research as its subjects, it develops what is labelled the Foundations of Knowledge Framework (FoKF). The FoKF identifies nine foundational elements of conceptual thinking in the social sciences as they attempt to study poverty: the domain or research question, the value or normative standpoint, the ontology or underlying assumptions about the nature of the world, the epistemology or ways of knowing about the world, the central theories and models, the associated methodologies and modes of analysis, the nature of the empirical findings, the rhetorical language in which the results are couched, and the implications for policy and practice. It is argued that these generate the intellectual barriers to successful multi or inter-disciplinary communication and work. All nine must be considered when academics from different disciplinary or sub-disciplinary backgrounds come together in efforts to collaborate effectively. The Framework makes explicit what assumptions, presumptions or blind spots are present in particular disciplinary contributions to the study of poverty or wellbeing. The final part builds on the framework to advocate ways of handling the nine elements to enable successful multi-disciplinary studies of wellbeing. This paper is a revised version of Chapter 13 of the forthcoming book, *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research*, edited by Ian Gough and J Allister McGregor, to be published by Cambridge University Press.

**Key Words:** Foundations of Knowledge, multi-disciplinary research, wellbeing, poverty, academic disciplines

## Key Reading:

Abbott, A. 2001. *Chaos of Disciplines*. London: University of Chicago Press

Myerson, G. 1994. *Rhetoric, Reason and Society: Rationality as Dialogue*. London: Sage

Sayer, A. 2000. *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage

Wallerstein, I. 1999. *The End of the World as We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century*. London: University of Minneapolis Press

'...it is generally not possible to ask all the interesting questions about any really significant phenomenon within the same theory or even within a set of commensurable, logically integratable theories. Noting this was one of the breakthroughs of modern physics, linked to the theory of relativity.' (Calhoun 1995: 8)

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Social science research into poverty, inequality and wellbeing has usually been conducted on a mono-disciplinary basis. The little cross-disciplinary research there has been has tended to take place within policy-related fields of study such as social policy and development studies, although even here true collaborations are rare. Since the early-1990s I have been involved, as a sociologist, in the theoretical and empirical study of poverty and related issues in Ethiopia and Uganda, and Africa more broadly. During this time I made a number of attempts to work with economists on these issues, recognising the potential synergies which could result from an interaction of the expertises. My failure to achieve a cross-disciplinary relationship with development economists is not unique, and I became interested in the underlying reasons; in particular in understanding the extent to which these are intellectual, rather than institutional, political and historical. This extended into a more general interest in cross-disciplinary collaboration, and, given the power of Sayer's argument for post-disciplinary approaches to 'concrete' issues, I was driven to enquire why there has been so little cross-disciplinary collaboration in researching poverty in developing countries:

'While all disciplines ask distinctive and worthwhile abstract (i.e. one-sided) questions, understanding concrete (i.e. many-sided) situations requires an inter-disciplinary, or better, postdisciplinary approach, which follows arguments and processes wherever they lead, instead of stopping at conventional disciplinary boundaries, subordinating intellectual exploration to parochial institutional demands.' (Sayer 1999: Abstract)

Five sets of barriers to multi-disciplinary collaboration in poverty research can be identified, four of which are not considered here in any detail:

disciplinary cultures, disciplinary habituses, and the histories and political economies of firstly the social sciences disciplines and secondly donor-related poverty research and policy. The fifth set of barriers explored here, the potentially conflicting intellectual assumptions which underpin different social science 'paradigms' or research models, seemed the most interesting and change-relevant, and in October 2002 I obtained a small ESRC grant<sup>1</sup> to finance a study entitled 'Towards a Post-Disciplinary Understanding of Global Poverty'. The aim of the project was:

'to explore the *intellectual* reasons why it is so difficult in practice to conduct 'poverty' research which integrates useful perspectives and methods from the disciplines of economics, sociology, social anthropology, political science and psychology. The analysis will generate practical ideas for improving inter-disciplinary dialogues in academic and practitioner contexts, producing a deeper understanding of global poverty in the process. The research will follow two interacting paths: comparative discourse analyses of key academic and policy publications, and an action research study with members of a multi-disciplinary team based at Bath University and in Thailand, Peru, Bangladesh and Ethiopia, as they launch an ESRC research programme on poverty, inequality and the quality of life in October 2002' (Bevan Research Proposal to ESRC, 2002).

The methodology involved refining a conceptual framework for the analysis of key intellectual aspects of social science disciplines, through a process of iteration between framework and research objects. The project had two aspects: production of the framework and its use in the two contexts described in the proposal. As part of the analysis of policy-related academic approaches to global poverty the framework was used in a critical analysis of the 'Q-Squared' or 'Qual-Quant' approach to multi-disciplinarity launched by Kanbur in 2002 (Kanbur, 2003) and to describe an alternative 'Q-Integrated' approach (Bevan, 2005). It was also used to inform an action research process with the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) ESRC research group researchers to enable those who participated firstly to reflect

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<sup>1</sup> ESRC Award number R000223987. It comprised eight months research time between October 2002 and January 2003.

privately<sup>2</sup> on the knowledge foundations underpinning their particular approach to poverty and subjective quality of life and secondly to engage in dialogue about such foundations with colleagues from other disciplines.

This paper is informed by the WeD research project.<sup>3</sup> The framework is put to use to analyse intellectual assumptions within the different niche approaches to wellbeing which have been brought to the multi-disciplinary programme. The aim is to identify which intellectual barriers are spurious and which must be negotiated or circumvented for multi-disciplinarity to bring added value. Section 2 describes the Foundations of Knowledge Framework (FoKF): a conceptual framework which identifies nine types of knowledge assumption which empirical researchers with a policy focus must make, either explicitly or implicitly. In Section 3 the framework is used to compare the wellbeing research models with which WeD is negotiating from social anthropology, sociology, political theory, psychology and economics across each type of knowledge assumption. In the process of these comparisons some key intellectual issues are identified and suggestions made of ways forward for the WeD programme. Section 4 concludes.

## **2. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING THE DISCIPLINES: THE FOUNDATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE FRAMEWORK**

While the framework described here was developed out of a wider reading programme, it draws particularly on four sources. The first is Andrew Sayer who, in two major works on social science methodology (1992, 2000), provided arguments to support a move to 'post-disciplinary studies' and tools to assist in the analysis of disciplinary ontologies, epistemologies, research methods and normative theories. The question at issue here is *how you know what you think you know*. Self-reflexivity in relation to this question can lead to a greater humility about one's own 'knowledge'.

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<sup>2</sup> Either through written responses to a questionnaire (see Appendix A) or through an interview based on the questionnaire.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is imbued with ideas I have picked up from the writings and talkings of WeD members over some years and non-WeD participants in the Hanse workshop. I am particularly grateful to Ian Gough and Allister McGregor for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Applied to the knowledge of others it provides a transparent basis for both appreciation and criticism.

The second is Wallerstein (1999) who argued that within the social sciences lie a number of persistent challenges. The most important are Freud's challenge to the operationality of the concept of formal rationality; challenges to Eurocentrism; problems associated with our dominant conceptions of time as nomothetic ('eternal time') and ideographic ('episodic time'); the challenges presented by complexity studies and their refutation of the most fundamental assumptions of Newtonian mechanics; the challenge of feminism; and the challenge of the idea that we have never really been modern.

Thirdly, post-modernism has encouraged more critical views of key categories of social thought, especially binary distinctions. However, much social science is based on binary oppositions; social phenomena are seen as either belonging to category A or category not-A. Some important examples of relevance to the analysis of global poverty are universal-relative, universal-local, universal-particular, global-local, objective-subjective, macro-micro, structure-action, qualitative-quantitative. 'Deconstructions' of concepts, sociological approaches developing 'complexity' and 'chaos' metaphors, and 'the new science of fuzzy logic' which recognises that sometimes phenomena are both A and not-A, all offer ways of thinking around and through oppositions which may no longer seem to be helpful.<sup>4</sup> Finally Myerson (1994) proposed and elaborated a definition of rationality as 'dialogue' which offers both theoretical and practical supports for FoK approaches.

The FoK Framework identifies the following nine types of knowledge assumptions: research domain and questions, values/ normative theory, ontology, epistemology, theories, methodological framework, types of empirical conclusion, rhetoric and praxis. In going through these aspects, I use examples from development-related poverty studies; this will help to clarify what each of the elements of the framework involves while simultaneously providing information about the wider context of the WeD research.

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<sup>4</sup> On 'deconstructions' see Sayer, 2000; on 'complexity' and 'chaos' metaphors Abbott 2001, Byrne 1998 and Eve *et al.* 1997; on 'fuzzy logic' Kosko 1994 and Ragin 2000.

### **i. Domain and problematic**

Within each (sub) discipline, the focus has usually been on a domain conceptualised as univocal; as having one meaning. In recent development-related empirical poverty research, identification of the domain, problematic and research questions has been strongly driven by political values and standpoints. Thus, for example, in the policy-dominant neo-classical economics approach 'poverty' has usually meant household-level income/consumption poverty and its reduction related to modernisation via market forces (e.g. Meier 1995), while in the post-structuralist tradition, it is a concept invented by modernising Westerners to 'label' in order to facilitate a 'development' agenda which will destroy local cultures and only benefit the developers (e.g. Escobar 1995). Other poverty discourses identifiable in the broader social science literature include the much-maligned culture of poverty discourse (e.g. Lewis 1967), the marxist focus on the power of capital (e.g. Hoogvelt 1997; Duffield 2001), populist 'participatory' approaches (e.g. Chambers 1983), social exclusion discourses (e.g. Rodgers *et al* 1995), and welfarist modernisation approaches focusing on human poverty and wellbeing (e.g. Sen 1999).

### **ii. Values/standpoints/normative theories**

Each of the empirical research approaches described above is based on a normative theory about the 'good life', and how it might be obtained, which is more or less coherent and explicit. In this area there also exist a range of explicit and coherent normative theories based on philosophical argumentation few of which have engaged directly with empirical evidence. Some examples include: democratic liberalism (e.g. Sen 1999; Alkire 2007), human need theories (e.g. Doyal & Gough 1991; Gasper 2007), communitarianism (e.g. Lehman 2000), feminism (e.g. Gilligan 1983), marxism (e.g. Sutcliffe 2001), post-colonialism (e.g. Escobar 1995).

### **iii. Ontology – what is the world assumed to be like?**

This is an area of much more interest to some disciplines than others, and goes with a recognition of the importance of conceptualisation as both a theoretical and a methodological exercise. The key bifurcation here has been between those who claim that reality equates with empirical reality (positivism) and those battling with the various problems for such a belief raised by scientific developments early in the last century and later post-modern understandings of relativism. Poverty research in poor countries has been dominated by neo-classical economists, some of whom, while



having little to say about ontology, have claimed a rigour resulting from their positivist research methods, mathematical modelling and statistical techniques, which are imagined as providing a scientific view of objective reality<sup>5</sup>. Extreme post-modernists claim there is no reality independent of people's ideas about it.

In recent years the positivist-relativist bifurcation has been challenged by the growing school of 'critical realism' (e.g. Sayer 2000) for whom ontology is very important. It is assumed that there is a reality which exists independently of what any researcher might think about it, and further that what the researcher thinks is a small part of reality<sup>6</sup>. Critical realists draw a distinction between 'the real', 'the actual' and 'the empirical'. The real consists of the structures and powers of objects deriving from their nature, which, depending on circumstances, may or may not be actualised. The actual describes what happens if and when the powers of an object are activated, while the empirical is the domain of experience or what is observed.

#### **iv. Epistemology – how can the world be known about?**

For positivists, reality is only accessible through direct sensory experience; the empirical is the real. Accordingly, the research objects they 'measure exist and measurements of them describe them as they are regardless of the context or character of the measurement process.' (Byrne 2002: 15). At the other extreme, purist post-modernists assert 'a relativism based on unique interpretation – meaning alone and meaning which may be different for every interpreter.' (*ibid*: 2). The critical realist approach to epistemology is one of 'fallibilism'; it is impossible to establish 'the truth' about what is real. The important questions for a piece of knowledge are 'is it practically adequate at this point in time?' and 'what research might be done that would increase adequacy?'. Such an approach enjoins a relaxed approach to epistemology, in the process removing one intellectual barrier to multi-disciplinary research. For example, it obviates any need to have abstract arguments about the relative merits of 'causal' and 'interpretive' approaches and opens a space for using them together in synergistic ways.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the contributions from economists to the first Q-Squared workshop (Kanbur 2003).

<sup>6</sup> The world is socially constructed, and, while each individual plays a tiny part in this, can be assumed to exist apart from any one individual's consciousness of it .

Four epistemological strategies have been identified by Blaikie. 'An *inductive argument* begins with singular or particular statements and concludes with a general or universal statement' (Blaikie 1993: 132). In relation to *deduction* '(r)ather than scientists waiting for nature to reveal its regularities, they must impose regularities (deductive theories) on the world and, by a process of trial and error, use observation to try to reject false theories' (*ibid*: 95). The *abductive strategy* 'is based on the Hermeneutic tradition ... Abduction is the process used to produce social scientific accounts of social life by drawing on the concepts and meanings used by social actors, and the activities in which they engage.' (*ibid*: 176). Retroduction is 'the process of building models of structures and mechanisms' (*ibid*: 168). These strategies are discussed further below when I argue that an 'interductive'<sup>7</sup> strategy involving a mix of the four sub-strategies is particularly appropriate to the research questions and disciplinary niches of the researchers of poverty, such as those in WeD.

#### **v. Theories, conceptual frameworks and models – understanding and explanation**

What constitutes a 'theory' and 'theoretical work' varies between, and within, disciplines often in ways which link to particular epistemologies. Mouzelis (1995) usefully identified three types of sociological theory: analysis of the theories of other scholars to provide raw material for further theoretical development (identified here as Theorising); conceptual frameworks to guide exploratory empirical research when not much is known about the particular topic (identified here as Conceptual Frameworks<sup>8</sup>); and sets of substantive propositions (Theories) sometimes formulated as models.

Frameworks are used to design research instruments which produce empirical findings that can be used in two ways. The first is to draw empirical conclusions about the case(s) that have been explored, while the second is as a basis for the development or testing of theoretical propositions. Theories are to do with understanding and explanation and may relate to structures, mechanisms, variables or cases. Different types of theoretical proposition require different methodological strategies. For example, the quantitative 'causal' tradition identifies dependent and

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<sup>7</sup> A concept coined by me.

<sup>8</sup> 'The purpose of [the WeD] research is to develop a conceptual and methodological framework for understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in specific societies.' WeD Research Proposal to the ESRC, 2002.

independent variables and usually relies on theories/models which are synchronic or abstracted from time and survey data collected at one point in time. In a different research space grounded theory starts with cases involving historically-located people whose actions, interactions and structured relationships in time are interpreted and interrogated for regularities and differences.

**vi. Methodological frameworks – research objects, research instruments and modes of analysis**

The research objects or cases in development-related poverty studies currently include (1) a set of open social systems such as people, households, communities, regions, countries (2) depending on discipline a variety of variables, for example, poverty, inequality, capabilities, resources, identity, subjective quality of life and so on (3) a set of relationships, mechanisms and processes such as social exclusion, exploitation, reciprocity, communal sharing, status inconsistency, adverse incorporation, vicious and virtuous spirals, and (4) a set of issues such as economic growth, development, famine, HIV/AIDS, government-people relations, racism, violence. To engage with these research objects there is a range of data collection methods such as questionnaires, document archiving, interviews, and observation and participation, and a matching range of modes of analysis including thick description, discourse analysis and various qualitative and quantitative modes of comparison.

In recent years most policy-relevant social science research on developing-country poverty has been done by economists driven by a particular set of research methods. The key research objects have been, under (1), the household, under (2) income/consumption poverty, and under (4) economic growth and 'structural adjustment'. Data is collected through household surveys and analysed using statistical methods, predominantly regression analysis. The focus and excitement at 'the cutting edge' comes in the analysis phase from technical advances in mathematical modelling or econometrics expertise rather than substantive knowledge about poverty. Away from the cutting edge, research 'bureaucracies' in academia and policy organisations such as the World Bank have produced a huge number of studies based on this research approach. Since the mid-1990s, household and demographic survey-based Poverty Analyses have been supplemented with 'Participatory Poverty Assessments' conducted in a few

'communities' using a suite of 'participatory methods' such as ranking, mapping, Venn diagrams etc<sup>9</sup>. These studies have helped to widen the definition of poverty since respondents have identified deprivation in a number of non-economic aspects of life as important.

### **vii. Conclusions – types of conclusion and substantive findings**

Researchers may be motivated to undertake research in this area in order to make empirical generalisations and distinctions and explain them, to increase understanding of a particular case, and/or to draw theoretical conclusions. Researchers employ various modes of comparison to establish regularities, diversities, structural location or internal dynamics. Tilly (1984: 83) described four polar ideal-types for making comparisons, which can be used in combination. A purely individualising comparison treats each case as unique, while a purely universalising comparison identifies common properties among all instances of a phenomenon. Variation-finding comparisons examine systematic differences among instances, while the encompassing approach 'places different instances at various locations within the same system, on the way to explaining their characteristics as a function of their varying relationships to the whole system.' Case-focused empirical conclusions relate to a particular case, identify different types of case, or locate the case in wider structures. Variable-focused empirical approaches usually draw general conclusions on the basis of identifying commonalities. In a post-disciplinary approach to poverty, all four modes of comparison and conclusion-drawing would be used interactively according to the problem in hand.

### **viii. Rhetoric – words, symbols and styles used to persuade others**

Academic scholarship depends on the development and use of special 'languages'. Such languages serve functions beyond the intellectual. They mark status-related lines of exclusion and inclusion and, depending on the context, contribute to the power of the propositions being made. Equations, diagrams and reports of regression coefficients come with the message 'this is science'. Analytic pieces written in English<sup>10</sup> are often full of 'development tropes': words or phrases with an aura of broader meanings and

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<sup>9</sup> Under the influence of economists these are becoming more formalised and linked to national-level data; for example the 2005 Ethiopia PPA conducted by Frank Ellis.

<sup>10</sup> In the world of cross-cultural research, matters are complicated by having to work in different languages. Some implications for the WeD programme are discussed below.

assumptions. Ethnographic accounts involve the creative use of language in ways that parallel literary endeavours. During multi-disciplinary collaborations, the meanings of words and symbols becomes exceedingly important and there is a need for people from each discipline to struggle to be clear about what they mean, and to try to understand what people from other disciplines mean. This might involve negotiating over a set of key concepts to produce multi-vocal definitions which everyone can sign up to, or working on 'translating' technical terms into shareable English. The reflexivity which proper cross-disciplinary dialogue and negotiation can engender is a precious research resource.

Rhetoric is also involved when researchers enter the policy arena and is particularly relevant when the main research goal is linked to normative theories. Successful development tropes, such as 'economic growth', 'participation' and 'good governance', mobilise donor resources for research and action.

#### **ix. Implications for action and practice**

Between and within disciplines there is considerable variation with respect to the meaning of 'praxis', or what is (to be) done and by whom. For example, development economists equate it with 'policy', interpreted by some as what the World Bank should tell recipient governments to do. Current recommendations are that economic growth depends on macroeconomic management of balances and restructuring through opening to the 'market', that governments should target 'safety nets' to the poorest, and that resources should be invested in good governance, civil society, building 'social capital' and 'empowering citizens'. At the opposite extreme, post-structuralists equate it with helping 'poor people' to refuse 'development' through participating in 'New Social Movements'. Those with a 'social policy' approach to anti-poverty action are linked with international and national donors who support the MDGs, especially the education and health goals, and are concerned with building partnerships with poor country governments, state support for markets and sustainable livelihoods. Marxists argued for raising the consciousness of poor people so that they understand that capitalism is the cause of their common plight and working with them to challenge the relevant owners and controllers of capital. Development practitioners working with NGOs committed to 'participatory' approaches have the 'empowerment of the poor' as a goal, while those convinced by culture of poverty arguments are most concerned to work on the next generation through family planning programmes and education.

## x. Relations between the elements

Poverty researchers from different disciplinary specialisations pay more or less attention to these nine knowledge elements. For some, methods and techniques dominate, while for others, moral philosophy or epistemological arguments are key. Some highlight the importance of ontology, while others pursue empirical conclusions. However, wherever the focus, the policy-relevant empirical researcher is bound to make consequential assumptions, often implicit and unexamined, about all nine knowledge elements. There are also unexamined assumptions about the necessity of links between the elements, for example that statistical analysis goes with positivism, and that thick description goes with relativism.

The disciplinary structure and dynamics of social science are a result of a regularly re-negotiated division of labour which to date has not been well-coordinated.

'..the larger, universal framework for social science is by no means the standard, often-parodied axiomatic structure. Rather it resembles what the Romans called the law of peoples (*ius gentium*), a law that applied to diverse groups at the edges of the empire and that they distinguished from the formalised law (*ius civile*). There is no universal social scientific knowledge of the latter kind – systematic, axiomatic, universal in a contentless sense. There is only universal knowledge of the former kind, a universal knowledge emerging from accommodation and conflict rather than from axioms, a universal knowledge that provides tentative bridges between local knowledges rather than systematic maps that deny them, a universal knowledge that aims, like the *ius gentium*, at allowing interchange among people who differ fundamentally.' (Abbott 2001: 5)

Currently knowledge about poverty in poor countries exists as a set of local knowledges with few bridges among them. Policymakers looking for research to assist in tackling poverty rely mainly on knowledge produced by economists using mathematical models to guide household survey research analysed using regression techniques. NGOs are more likely to turn to development anthropologists and 'participatory' researchers. Other research by 'noneconomists' tends not to travel far out of the academic domain. The

growing cross-disciplinary research interest and parallel policy interest in 'wellbeing', with its focus on people and communities as well as households, offers an opportunity for a much greater understanding of the mechanisms and processes involved in the production and reproduction of poverty. This is more likely to be achieved if there is reflexivity and debate about intellectual assumptions 'among people who differ fundamentally'.

### **3. RESEARCHING 'WELLBEING' ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES: SOME WAYS FORWARD**

In this section I use the FoK framework to analyse the main disciplinary approaches that have been brought to the WeD programme, to identify what I see as the most important intellectual cross-disciplinary disjunctures and challenges, and to suggest some ways forward for WeD and other interdisciplinary researchers. As a guide to the discussion in this section Table 1 presents an *ideal-typical* representation of the research models identified as being most important to WeD so far. They come from social anthropology, sociology, political theory, psychology and economics.

**Table 13.1 An ideal-type depiction of the some of the research models with which the WeD team is negotiating**

Questions	From social anthropology	From sociology	From political theory	From psychology	From economics
<u>Focus:</u> What are we interested in?	Local cultures and meanings; use of resources Local cultural repertoires	Unequal social structures, power, actors, and dynamics; access to resources Social mechanisms and processes	Universal human needs and intermediate needs satisfiers Country poverty	Values, goals, resources to meet goals, satisfaction with resources and with life in general	Household poverty; individual functionings; global happiness / satisfaction
<u>Values:</u> Why?	The agency of poor people should be recognised and respected	Social and human suffering should be eradicated.	Human needs ought to be met and capabilities expanded.	Subjective evaluations of wellbeing ought to be respected	Household poverty should be eradicated and human resources improved.
<u>Ontology:</u> What is the 'reality' of what we are interested in?	There are different realities associated with different standpoints or habituses.	Reality exists independent of our thoughts, is complexly constituted of things, people, relationships, structures, energy, and time, and much of it is unobservable.	One observable reality exists independent of our thoughts	One reality exists independent of our thoughts and only what is observable is real.	One reality exists independent of our thoughts and only what is observable is real.
<u>Epistemology:</u> How can we know about reality?	Through the interpretation of local meanings in an <i>abductive</i> research approach.	Truth should be understood as practical adequacy. Develop models of mechanisms/processes ( <i>retroduction</i> ) through an iterative process of conceptualising and fieldwork.	We can observe it using scientific methods ( <i>deduction/ induction</i> ) and we can establish truths/generalisations about human beings.	We can observe it using scientific methods ( <i>deduction / induction</i> ) and we can establish truths / generalisations about human beings.	Think about it using mathematical logic - <i>deductive</i> ; observe it using surveys - <i>inductive</i>



<u>Theorising:</u>	Hermeneutic interpretations and reflexive theorising	Conceptual frameworks to guide exploratory research; explanatory middle range theories out of research results.	Normative theories / critical theories Conceptual frameworks for taxonomising cases	Causal theorising through statistical techniques.	Causal theorising via mathematical modelling and statistical techniques.
<u>Research strategies:</u> How can we establish what is really happening?	<u>Data:</u> Ethnography: a range of research instruments <u>Analysis:</u> interpretation and comparison	<u>Data:</u> Integrated use of surveys, participant observation, and protocols. <u>Analysis:</u> retroductive; four strategies of comparison. Also discourse analysis of key documents.	<u>Data:</u> secondary sources or 'codified knowledge' and 'experiential knowledge' <u>Analysis:</u> inductive	A psychological instrument for country cultures. <u>Data:</u> exploratory, validation, use phases. <u>Analysis:</u> statistical	<u>Data:</u> household surveys <u>Analysis:</u> econometric analysis of household survey data
<u>Theoretical and empirical conclusions:</u> What (kind of) conclusions can we draw?	Understanding of people's actions, and relationships in cultural context.  Focus: community	Identify universal mechanisms / processes and show how they work in different local contexts.  Focus: (interactive) person, household, community, country.	Mapping objective wellbeing and analysing the contribution of different structures and institutions to it.  Focus: country and person.	Descriptions of subjective quality of lives in the research countries. Regularities with other non-psychological variables.  Focus: person	Descriptive statistics using economic variables. Explanatory: identification of regularities through regression analyses. Focus: household
<u>Rhetoric:</u> How can we inform others about these?	Interpret local cultures in academic writings; advise practitioners; feedback to research communities.	Academic papers and books; research and briefing papers for donors and other practitioners.	Academic papers and books and networking through conferences etc with people influential in social policy decision making.	Academic papers; networking with relevant practitioners	Academic papers; policy advice to donors; inputs to PRSPs.

<p><u>Praxis:</u> What to do?</p> <p>Who to do it?</p>	<p>Constructive criticism of development approaches which are oblivious to local culture; suggestions of better ways of doing things.</p> <p>Local inhabitants, NGOs, donors, government</p>	<p>Constructive criticism of development approaches which are oblivious to local power structures and how things actually work in local contexts; suggestions of better ways of doing things.</p> <p>Sympathetic national mega and meso actors, local inhabitants, governmentt, donors, NGOs</p>	<p>Good research helps combine top-down and bottom-up knowledges.</p> <p>International and national donors, governments</p>	<p>Understanding of subjective QoL has implications for policy and practice.</p>	<p>Identify the causes of household poverty in particular contexts and the contributing variables. Draw out policy implications.</p> <p>International and national donors, governments</p>
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The title of each column locates the research model within a particular discipline, though it is important to recognise that within each social science discipline there are a number of competing research models, that these change as time passes, and that researchers rarely spend a lifetime operating within just one of them. Furthermore some researchers are much less 'discipline-bound' than others. The table depicts my interpretation of the research models which have been most influential in WeD so far, rather than being a description of contributions from particular WeD members. In discussing each element of the framework I present potential contributions from each of the research models and discuss contradictions and how they might be handled. I refer to other chapters in the forthcoming volume *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: New Approaches and Research Strategies* edited by Gough and McGregor (2007)<sup>11</sup> and also draw on the contributors to the Hanse<sup>12</sup> workshop which preceded it.

#### **i. Mapping the domain and problematics**

The WeD domain is defined by the 'umbrella concept' of 'wellbeing', embracing objective wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, and access to the resources through which livelihood and wellbeing outcomes are pursued (Gough *et al*, 2007). With regard to the domain and problematics, the first row of Table 1 shows what each discipline brings to the research design.

Political theory provides reasoned arguments as to the constituents of objective wellbeing, based on the concept of human need, and describes the types of resources necessary to meet needs, recognising that the instantiations of these will vary across livelihood systems and cultures. The social anthropology focus on local meanings introduces local constructions or models of 'objective wellbeing'. The concept of cultural 'repertoires' opens a space for considering local contestations about what 'the good life' might be for different kinds of person (Dean 2003). Since each individual interprets and evaluates their experiences in her own way the relation between local models of wellbeing and subjective wellbeing is complex. Psychology brings an approach to the subjective wellbeing of individuals which explores their

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted versions of some of these chapters by WeD members (Copestake, Gough *et al*, McGregor, White & Ellison, Wood) are available as WeD working papers at <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/working.htm>

<sup>12</sup> WeD-WIDER International Workshop on 'Researching Wellbeing in Developing Countries' at the Hanse Institute for Advanced Study in Delmenhorst, Germany in July 2004.

values, their goals, the resources they think they need to meet their goals, and reported levels of satisfaction with those resources and with life in general.

The sociological perspective adds a focus on power and the unequal structures and dynamics to be found within communities and households. Unequal distributions of objective wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, and resources arise from institutionalised unequal power relationships between people in different roles which may involve exploitation, exclusion, domination, and/or violence against person and property (destruction). In the economics approach links between household human resources, assets and income and the objective and subjective wellbeing of household members are emphasised. From social anthropology comes the important insistence that all resources are culturally constructed.

Taken together these research models show how important interacting social, cultural and personal structures and dynamics are for personal outcomes in terms of survival and flourishing, and also the value of using the insights from all the models to inform study and analysis. Researchers working in each of the disciplinary niches can learn much from the rest. For example, the political theory definition of human needs has been enriched by readings in psychology. Sociologists can get a better handle on unequal power relations with the help of economists. Social anthropology teaches everyone else that life is lived in the round and in real time; it is meaningful action that is fundamental.

Our key research questions relate to the cultural and social construction of wellbeing in our country and community contexts. With regard to the *cultural* construction of wellbeing, we are interested in local and personal models of what it is desirable to have and to do, and explanations of why different kinds of people have what they have and experience what they do. We are also interested in comparing the meanings attached to wellbeing by social scientists, by policy makers, and the people under study and exploring related policy actions, reactions and outcomes (Gough et al 2007; White & Ellison 2007)<sup>13</sup>. Here we will need to make use of discourse analysis techniques as well as using hermeneutic approaches to interpret the values, beliefs and actions of our research subjects.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/workingpaperpdf/wed19.pdf>  
<http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/workingpaperpdf/wed23.pdf>

Identification of relevant social science, policy, local and personal models will also contribute to our analysis of the *social* construction of wellbeing. Our concern here is with *dynamic* distributions of wellbeing and its correlates and the underlying events, actions, relationships, structures, mechanisms and processes involved in the generation of those potentially unstable distributions. Since structures, mechanisms and processes are not directly observable, it is not possible to 'measure' them directly – we have to look for, describe and, where appropriate, measure observable 'traces' of their existence and operation. Such traces may be identified, for example, through the measurement of distributions of advantage and disadvantage at a point in time using survey methods, through observation and/or participants' accounts of events, through discourse analyses of documents describing established laws and other institutional forms, through descriptions of organisational structures and dynamics, through interpretation of the experiences of people occupying varying positions in local power structures. Establishing the distributions of resources, objective needs-satisfaction and subjective wellbeing and the connections between them requires a measurement approach; in this connection the contributions of Rojas (2007), McGillivray (2007), Bullinger and Schmidt (2007), Møller (2007) and Ryan and Sapp (2007) in the forthcoming WeD volume have given us some clues.

A major challenge is to make links with approaches which identify domains and problematics using other 'umbrella' concepts; importantly sustainable livelihoods (see Bebbington *et al* 2007), social exclusion (Copestake 2007<sup>14</sup>), security (Wood 2007<sup>15</sup>) and capabilities (Alkire 2007).

## **ii. Towards a simple normative framework**

Row two of Table 1 shows that the commitment of WeD researchers to poverty and inequality reduction comes from a number of angles, mostly focused on improving human wellbeing in terms of the meeting of objective needs, subjective quality of life, and access to economic and other resources. In addition sociology provides the idea of '*social* suffering', which is socially structured and collectively shared (Kleinman *et al* 1997), and, while the Hanse workshop was focused on human wellbeing, there were a

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/workingpaperpdf/wed24.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/workingpaperpdf/wed22.pdf>

number of voices which enjoined us not to forget that collective wellbeing is also important (Ryan and Sapp 2007, Møller 2007<sup>16</sup>). Given that in our research countries we find local cultural constructions of wellbeing which privilege the collective above the individual, this will emerge at least in our local models of wellbeing.

In relation to individual wellbeing, the WeD normative framework is concerned with the optimisation of human potentials (Doyal and Gough 1991) and currently, partly as a result of our encounter with Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000), we are considering four domains of experience as vital for such optimisation. The 'objective-need' candidates are context-relevant *competence*, which can include physical and mental health as well as an appropriate set of skills, *autonomy* or the personal ownership of decisions affecting the self, and *relation*, both intimate and more widely social. People also have a need for *meaning* which is the foundation of subjective wellbeing.

The normative theories discussed at Hanse have been constructed in developed country contexts and it is important that WeD develops a simple but striking normative framework that negotiates between the case for a scientifically-based universalist understanding and appreciation of all people's capabilities and needs and the case for respect for people's values and knowledge (See Sen 1999 and Gough 2003). There are resonances here with long-running arguments about 'development' and there are relevant development studies sources that have not yet been brought into collective WeD discussions (e.g. among many others Nederveen Pieterse 2001).

### **iii. The importance of ontology**

The first ontological issue relates to whether one 'reality' exists or not. The question is how does what goes on in our heads relate to what goes on 'out there'. Row 3 in Table 1 suggests that WeD has access to three main answers. The first privileges cultural habitus; variation in understandings of 'reality' mean that there are many realities. The second accepts there is one reality out there and it consists of what is accessible to our senses<sup>17</sup>. The

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<sup>16</sup> And Hetan Shah of the New Economics Foundation (nef) who participated in the Hanse workshop as a commentator.

<sup>17</sup> For social scientists in this mode this translates into data collected by experimenting or questioning people.

third is the critical realist approach described in Section 2. This approach compromises between the other two. The only reality we can in some way be sure of is what we access 'through our senses', but firstly there are hidden and unobservable realities related to the structuration of the world and secondly depending on social location, habitus and standpoint we access different bits of reality through our senses. One advantage of the critical realist approach is that it can happily accommodate empirical findings produced by 'relativists' and 'positivists' without accepting their ontological assumptions about reality.

A more important set of ontological questions concerns how to describe what exists. The question of what the objects of our study are *really* like is not the same as the question of how it might be sensible to conceptualise them for a particular theoretical purpose. How are our research objects structured and what are their causal powers and liabilities? This is an important issue since social scientists are regularly tempted to believe that people are really like the models built of them for particular analytical purposes. So, for example, we find arguments over whether people 'really are' rational, when the question should be which types of behaviour and context can be usefully analysed using particular rational action models, and which cannot.

The WeD approach is based on an agency/structure ontology, aspects of which are described by Gough *et al* (2007) and McGregor (2007). Some of the implications of such an ontology are described more fully in Bevan<sup>18</sup> (2004), the basic argument being that the material, peopled and historically evolving earth is a planet located in a space and time niche in the cosmos which determines concurrent environmental powers and liabilities to change. Key entities are people, social relationships and structures (societies), meanings, other forms of life, inanimate material things, time, and energy.

While the Hanse workshop contributors used a number of conceptual frameworks useful for approaching the study of human wellbeing, none of them related the framework to a human ontology. This would recognise that babies take nine months to develop in the womb before they are born, that they are born male or female, that they are dependent on adults for care

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<sup>18</sup> Bevan, P. (2004) *Studying Poverty and Inequality in Poor Countries: Getting to Grips with Structure*, unpublished paper.

and socialisation for many years, that they are biologically constituted according to genetic inheritance, that they have complicated brains and minds which develop through continuous interaction with their environment, that they have some basic drives related to their physical construction, that their personal and social being – personalities, consciences, memories, skills, habits, beliefs, values, attitudes, etcetera – involve ongoing culturally-grounded learning, that they have a potential lifespan of no more than slightly over 100 years, and that in that lifespan, they face a number of key physical, social and moral challenges as they develop, mature and decline. Lives are conducted in interaction with other people and individual actions and choices have consequences for them. An ontologically-grounded approach to human 'being' has many implications for the understanding and study of objective human needs, 'needs-satisfiers' and subjective experiences, as we recognise, for example, that the concept of the 'individual' applies to tiny babies, old women and male adolescents as well as 'economic man'.

We also have to develop ontologies which identify the causal powers and liabilities inherent in the social structures of societies and the passage of time.

#### **iv. Epistemological diversity – many routes to knowledge**

Earlier I argued for an acceptance of epistemological diversity; there are different routes to knowledge which need not be contradictory and can be brought into dialogue with each other<sup>19</sup>. Row 4 in Table 1 shows that WeD has access to the four epistemological strategies based on contrasting forms of reasoning for generating new scientific knowledge described in Section 2. From political theory, economics and psychology we have access to inductive and deductive reasoning based on linear logic. Inductive strategies start from observations on the basis of which empirical generalisations are made. These generalisations are used in a theorising process to form concepts and develop propositions as the basis for

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<sup>19</sup> Few of the contributors to the forthcoming WeD volume (Gough and McGregor, 2007) embody clear epistemological positions. One is Rojas (2007) who uses an 'analytic-Cartesian paradigm' associated with *deductive* theories which resonates with the WeD microeconomics approach.



theorising. Theories are the starting point for deductive methods; consequences are deduced and predictions made as a basis for constructing hypotheses for testing through empirical observation.

Social anthropology and sociology provide access to strategies less familiar to the other three disciplines. Abduction and retroduction 'are based on cyclic or spiral processes' (Blaikie, 1993: 162). From social anthropology comes an abductive strategy involving hermeneutic interpretations and reflexive theorising. 'Abduction is the process used to produce social scientific accounts of social life drawing on the concepts and meanings used by social actors, and the activities in which they engage (*ibid*: 176).' It is a relatively unknown strategy 'proposed as a method for generating hypotheses in the natural sciences, but is now advocated as the appropriate method of theory construction in Interpretive social science' (*Ibid*: 162). While the retroductive strategy has been discussed by philosophers for many years and practised by scientists from various disciplines it has only recently been articulated as a philosophy of science (Bhaskar, 1979). This strategy involves the 'construction of hypothetical models as a way of uncovering the real structures and mechanisms which are assumed to produce empirical phenomena' (Blaikie, 1993:168). Examples from science include 'atoms', 'viruses' and 'genes', all of which were hypothetical entities for some while before scientific technologies were advanced enough to observe them.

Given that expertises related to these four epistemological strategies are differentially distributed amongst the disciplines, our multi-disciplinary team is well-placed to use them all. The challenge of developing an interductive strategy is to negotiate and coordinate among and between them at the levels of analysis and the reaching of empirical conclusions. The risk is that the four strategies will be pursued separately within the disciplinary barriers earlier described.

#### **v. Theorising, frameworks and theories: the relation between ideas and evidence**

In Section 2 a distinction was made between Theorising, Conceptual Frameworks and Theories. The Hanse workshop was predicated on the assumption that Theorising, analysis of the theories of other scholars, is extremely valuable in providing raw material for further theoretical development and thus it has proved to be. Conceptual clarification and argumentation relating to existing literatures is important for being clear

about the ideas one wishes to confront with empirical evidence. Conceptual analysis is a process which should continue through the fieldwork, analysis and writing-up stages as encounters with the evidence change and enrich our ideas.

A number of conceptual frameworks underpinning the study of the 'being' of people and its structural and cultural generation in society were hinted at during the workshop. In the WeD framework, people are conceived of as 'active agents' with material, social and cultural dimensions (see White and Ellison 2007, Copestake 2007, McGregor 2007).<sup>20</sup> An important argument put by Ryan and by Bevan and Pankhurst, in a paper presented to the workshop but not included here<sup>21</sup> (2004), recognised that there are lifespan changes in wellbeing so that the components vary with age. Gender differences must also be taken into account. As argued above, we need to develop a more adequate human ontology to underpin frameworks designed for particular purposes, which, in our multi-disciplinary context, may vary from the modelling of market relationships, to the measurement of people's values, goals, and resources, to an interpretation of a child's story about her situation.

In the WeD framework, the wellbeing-relevant activities of an agent are seen as enabled and constrained by his/her location in local political economy and socio-cultural structures. In *dynamic* terms, livelihoods and attempts to secure wellbeing are forms of social practice in which interactions are constructed through power relations embedded in social and cultural structures (White & Ellison 2007). This perspective informs the welfare/insecurity regime framework (Gough and Wood *et al*, 2004) and the livelihoods framework described by Bebbington. To date these frameworks have contained little about the cultural construction of insecurity/wellbeing and this is something the WeD group is addressing. The structural/cultural arenas identified as important in the WeD framework are 'households', 'communities' and 'countries' with the recognition that these will be

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<sup>20</sup> Adapted versions of these are also available as WeD Working papers at <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/working.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Bevan and Pankhurst 2004, '*Gendering' and 'ageing' human needs and human harm: some evidence from rural Ethiopia*, WeD-WIDER International Workshop on 'Researching Wellbeing in Developing Countries' at the Hanse Institute for Advanced Study in Delmenhorst, Germany in July 2004.

constructed differently in the different countries and communities and that in some cases establishing the boundaries of the 'case' are likely to be problematic.

The main purpose of the WeD programme is to develop a conceptual and methodological framework for understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in specific societies and this Conceptual Framework will be shared across the disciplines. The process of iteration of ideas and evidence involved in the empirical programme will both contribute to the development of the final Conceptual Framework and produce contributions to Theory development. Such contributions will vary according to epistemological strategy and disciplinary niche and here we may find ourselves faced with some contradictions to negotiate.

**vi. Towards a methodological framework: de-linking epistemology and research methods and de-linking data collection and analysis**

Row six of Table 1 contains a range of empirical research strategies involving different assumptions and research skills which are usually not used together. They include ethnography, surveys, protocol-guided research, analysis of secondary sources, psychological measurement, and exploratory and confirmatory statistical analysis and interpretive analysis of survey data. Using such multi-level and multi-method data together successfully is a huge challenge; one which has rarely been taken on in development research. While multi-method approaches are becoming more popular in theory, they face many problems (Kanbur, 2003). Dialogue can be assisted if a conscious decision is made to de-link epistemology and research methods. For example, there are no good reasons why those with hermeneutic skills should not use them in relation to the design and administration of household surveys, or analysis and interpretation of the ensuing information (Byrne 2002), and this has already been part of the WeD process.

There is also a case for de-linking data collection and analysis. For example, given current computing power, appropriate statistical techniques can be brought to bear on hermeneutic data in a search for causes (Ragin 2000), while survey households can be purposively selected for in-depth 'narrative analysis' using all the survey datapoints together. The information being collected during the WeD programme includes: (1) country-level statistical data and qualitative discourses and secondary analyses from a

range of disciplines; and (2) for four rural and two urban research sites, community profiles and a household survey administered to up to 1500 households, followed by a fieldwork period of over a year during which studies of institutions, organisations, events, activities, and personal experiences and evaluations are being made. This will produce an integrated data set open to analysis in a range of ways. The household survey material can, for example, be used to analyse cases and produce household typologies as well as establish statistical relationships between variables. Life-histories can be interpreted and also submitted to qualitative comparative analysis across household types, research sites, and countries. To grasp and use this opportunity fully it is important to de-link as far as possible the data collection and analysis processes and to develop dialogues across expertises.

### **vii. Theoretical and empirical conclusions**

In relation to our research objects we will be able to draw country-relevant and more general empirical and theoretical conclusions relating to: (1) the open systems we have studied, namely people, households, communities, and countries and their global connections; (2) the key variables identified as important; (3) the key relationships, mechanisms and processes identified as important; and (4) the key issues facing each of our countries.

More broadly our conclusions will be threefold. Firstly, our conceptual and methodological framework for studying the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in any society will contribute to theory in terms of Conceptual Frameworks. Secondly we will produce a set of empirical conclusions through the use of the framework to produce four country studies mapping and explaining the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand at the beginning of the third millennium. Finally, we will be in a position to contribute to substantive theory development in, and perhaps across, the five disciplines, remembering Calhoun's injunction that it is generally not possible to ask all the interesting questions about any really significant phenomenon within a set of commensurable, logically integratable theories.

### **viii. Dealing with rhetorical diversity**

Under this heading, there are three important issues: communication across the academic disciplines; communication across the five WeD sub-cultures (Bath, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand); and communications with practitioners of various kinds.

Historically, WeD Bath outputs have been designed with our disciplines and RAE<sup>22</sup> criteria in mind making cross-disciplinary communication difficult. Some of us have difficulty with equations and regression coefficient tables, while others cannot grasp the subtleties of arguments couched using carefully defined concepts and argumentation. It must be good for us to try to explain the importance and relevance of our ideas and empirical conclusions in comprehensible English.

There is a more serious problem when it comes to historic cross-disciplinary disagreements and conflicts. For example in the development studies area there are some historic tensions between economists and 'non-economists'. The latter have spent much time and energy in critiquing the intellectual assumptions, styles and conclusions of the former, while many economists not seeing themselves as being part of 'development studies' at all, have found no need respond to these criticisms nor to familiarise themselves with contributions from other disciplines. Cross-disciplinary research requires mutual respect of skills and interests which will have to be worked for. One element of this relates to disciplinary claims implicit in the rhetoric. So, if a *theoretical* model, for example associated with assumptions about rational man, or about 'difference', or about 'universal needs', is presented as an *ontological* model about how the world really is arguments are likely to ensue. This is also likely if findings produced from a cross-sectional survey conducted in a particular population at a point in time, or from one or two case studies are used to make universal generalisations. There is a need for modesty in the rhetorical presentation of conclusions.

This paper has focused on research models easily accessible in Bath. Their accessibility to country teams varies according to the disciplinary mix within the team. Country team members, working within particular local research and policy cultures face the additional task of negotiating between WeD research models and those of salience at home. There is a further set of serious issues that WeD faces as a result of working in six other languages. The first is illustrated by experiences in Ethiopia where we have come up against the non-translatability of a number of English social science concepts and ideas into Amharic and Oromiffa and vice versa for local

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<sup>22</sup> The British Research Assessment Exercise is key for the allocation of funds to university departments. To date the attitude to cross-disciplinary research has been unfriendly.

concepts. Secondly, in Thailand and Peru local academic and policy networks work in their home language and have no need for English,<sup>23</sup> creating tensions between the needs of the centre and the needs of local WeD teams.

One of our goals is to establish the WeD framework as an important resource for international donors, NGOs and developing country governments. Here we have to challenge and negotiate with entrenched poverty research frameworks. In this context is 'wellbeing' a potentially effective development trope?<sup>24</sup> How do we package and present our 'products'? This leads into the final knowledge element.

#### **ix. Mapping and linking approaches to praxis: what to do and who to do it?**

The final row in Table 1 suggests that an important WeD policy message is that development policy and practice interventions by governments, donors and NGOs in any country or community context are unlikely to be effective unless based on a sophisticated understanding of local cultures and local power structures and dynamics, and that such an understanding requires social science knowledge which is both etic and emic, and variable-based and case-based. As described in Section 2 economists have been providing direct advice to donors for many years, while in the past those working in the other disciplines have either (in the case of psychology) done little in the development field, or have adopted a critical stance to donors and governments identifying the 'grass roots' or collective action organisations as key praxis actors with whom to try to communicate. However, there are signs of a growing donor interest in 'noneconomics' research, reflected in the way that the WeD political theory research model is currently being used by the World Bank to incorporate ideas from Western social policy and the sociology research model to produce more realistic approaches to 'empowerment' (Bevan, Holland, and Pankhurst, 2005).

The advantage of being multi-disciplinary is that our approach to praxis need not be an 'either-or' one. With appropriate strategies our writings can reach international and government policy-makers, international and national NGOs, civil societies at home and in our research countries, the

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<sup>23</sup> In both Bangladesh and Ethiopia English is well understood and often used in these circles.

<sup>24</sup> A question raised by Des Gasper at the Hanse Conference.

people we have been researching as well as academics all over the world. Networking in all these arenas will improve the efficacy of our praxis strategies as will developing a WeD strategy in relation to ongoing events and trends at global levels.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion I first document a continuing concern that the focus on 'wellbeing' might lead us to ignore some important instances and causes of harm and suffering. I then identify the most important intellectual barriers to cross-disciplinary collaboration in the study of wellbeing in poor countries and make some suggestions of ways forward for WeD. Finally I briefly comment on the four other barriers to cross-disciplinary collaboration which were described at the beginning of the paper.

#### **Flourishing, surviving, suffering and dying**

In justifying a research approach to poor people guided by the concept of wellbeing, Gough et al (2007) argued that 'even alongside deprivations, poor people are able to achieve some elements of what they conceive of as wellbeing ... without this, we would argue, their lives would be unbearable.' While agreeing that the 'fully rounded humanity of poor men, women and children in developing countries' should be acknowledged, it is also important to acknowledge that for many poor people life *is* unbearable and often ends in a painful early death. The suffering and the lost years must not be ignored as they are in most poverty studies<sup>25</sup>.

"Every man who lives is born to die," wrote John Dryden, some three hundred years ago. That recognition is tragic enough, but the reality is sadder still. We try to pack in a few worthwhile things between birth and death, and quite often succeed. It is, however, harder to achieve anything significant if, as in sub-Saharan Africa the median age of death is less than five years.' (Sen, 2005: xi).

Sen's quote comes from the preface to a book about the 'pathologies of

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<sup>25</sup> Because the conceptual frameworks behind household surveys and Participatory Poverty Assessments have little space in them for suffering and death, and because a certain degree of security is necessary for the administration of these research instruments.

power', in which Farmer argues that the nature and distribution of extreme suffering is associated with 'structural violence' arising from power disparities.

'The capacity to suffer is, clearly, a part of being human. But not all suffering is equivalent... Physicians practise triage and referral daily. What suffering needs to be taken care of first and with what resources? It *is* possible to speak of extreme human suffering, and an inordinate share of this sort of pain is currently endured by those living in poverty' (Farmer 2005: 50).

Structural violence involves harmful social action not only by rich and powerful social actors but also by the not so rich and powerful, including some who are poor themselves. 'Human beings do the most appalling things to each other, often in pursuit of lamentable ends. Cruelty and prejudice are far more widespread than benevolence and kindness..' (Harré, 1979: 31)

If we do not have the concepts, research questions and methods to help us to understand the social and cultural construction of extreme suffering we will be doing neither scientific nor humanitarian justice to many of the poor people we are studying.

### **Negotiating intellectual barriers to cross-disciplinary collaboration**

The intellectual barriers to cross-disciplinary collaboration in the study of the poverty and wellbeing take the form of 'disconnects' between the disciplines. Some of these can be explained by empty or skimpy knowledge-element boxes in one or both disciplines. Some are a result of parallel but separate activities which are never bridged. Some erupt in regular skirmishes. At issue is the importance of the different barriers; which are spurious? which can be circumvented or ignored? and which must be negotiated and how?

In Section 2 three resources for making bridges across disciplinary divisions were proposed: the 'deconstruction' of concepts; fuzzy logic; and open social system models. These resources are called on as I consider these barriers. Rather than go through each of the nine knowledge elements, I will focus on just three: values, ontology and rhetoric.

*Values.* There are two disconnects here. The first is between those with an



individualistic approach to wellbeing and those with a relational approach. From my (sociological) perspective our (laudable) concern to prioritise the wellbeing of the person<sup>26</sup> rather than the economic poverty of the household, risks downplaying the importance of the quality of social relations which is implicit in notions of collective wellbeing and suffering.

The second disconnect has already been raised; the disconnect between those whose language is hopeful, for example 'development', 'capabilities', 'wellbeing', and 'civil society', and those who call for a language of 'dismay, disappointment, bereavement and alarm' (Kleinman *et al*, 1997: xi) including recognition of starvation, disease, community violence, domestic violence, suicide, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and so on. Researchers in this mode focus on the poor quality of social relations. Personal problems are often related to political violence and community disintegration. '...social suffering ruins the collective and the intersubjective connections of experience and gravely damages subjectivity.' (*ibid*: x). The bridging of both of these disconnects should start with a 'both-and' approach; both human and collective wellbeing and suffering.

*Ontology.* Table 1 includes the relativist 'ontology' postulating different realities associated with different habituses and standpoints since this is a position we have to deal with. However, this position has not been advanced within WeD and I have argued that relativism is a matter of epistemology rather than ontology. I would also argue that social scientists from different disciplines engaged in studying the same topic should come to some agreement as to the powers and liabilities of their research objects, which have been identified here as societies, people, time, energy, other forms of life, and inanimate material 'things', the first three being the most important for us. The powers and liabilities of these entities arise from their nature or internal structures, and can be modelled from the perspectives of 'anatomy', 'physiology', and dynamics. The ontological depth that can be achieved at any point in time depends on the concurrent social/scientific knowledge.

The disconnect here is between those who have not appreciated the importance of ontology in relation to empirical research, and those

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<sup>26</sup> In terms of what they have, what they do, and how they experience and evaluate what they have and do.

who have used a deeper understanding of the parameters of social and human life to inform theoretical and empirical approaches to the cultural and social construction of well and illbeing. For example, and following up on discussions above, we must study *everything* that human beings are capable of being and doing (powers), and actually do, including the 'appalling'.

We also need to pay serious ontological attention to the social structures involved in the construction of wellbeing, and explore how time is involved in the structuring of individual lives and the structuring of social life. Those whose ontology box is empty or skimpy should be asked to think about it individually and collectively with the rest of the WeD group.

*Rhetoric.* Disconnects in terms of scientific rhetoric or style are a major problem, both when we are trying to understand what researchers from other disciplines are saying, and when we are trying to agree common statements. As we move into writing mode we will have to find ways of bridging these rhetorical disconnects; solutions are likely to vary according to which discipline is leading.

A second rhetorical aspect relates to the 'truth' claims made by different disciplines about their theoretical and empirical conclusions. This is an arena where skirmishes often occur. There are incentives for researchers in all the disciplines to use words that raise the relative status of their discipline and lower that of others. The economists who describe their own work as rigorous, scientific and universal and qualitative studies as 'anecdotal' and particular are matched by the social anthropologists and sociologists who claim a unique understanding of those they research, and dismiss variable analyses as 'reification'. Self-reflection and modesty would help to bridge this disconnect.

Finally, there is sometimes a fine line between reporting research results and 'policy-messaging' (Kanbur, 2001) particularly on the part of researchers committed to a particular normative theory or policy model. The relation between research outputs and praxis is discussed in the next section; here I note the potential disconnect between those whose primary commitment is to 'truth' and those whose primary commitment is to changing the world. Skirmishes are probably to be welcomed in this area.

## **Other barriers to cross-disciplinary research and its use**

In the Introduction I identified four additional barriers to cross-disciplinary collaboration: disciplinary cultures, disciplinary habituses, and the histories and political economies of the social science disciplines and of donor-related poverty research and policy structures. The WeD actor-structure model includes the assumption that, acting individually and collectively, social actors can make changes to structures and cultures. When a researcher's goal is involvement in a post- or multi- disciplinary approach to global poverty and wellbeing the first step is to be reflexive about personal disciplinary habitus with a view to making appropriate changes.

The FoK analysis suggests that many researchers of poverty in poor countries are 'boxed in'; not only are they confined within a disciplinary research model, but often their intellectual efforts are also confined within two or three of the nine knowledge element boxes, while the others are ignored or receive ritual and perfunctory attention. Progress towards a post-disciplinary approach to global poverty requires thinking out of the box; which in relation to Table 1 means both vertically and horizontally. According to Myerson (1994) cross-disciplinary research requires personal commitment, self-reflexivity, personal development of 'communicative character' and a 'dialogic orientation', and group development of a 'culture of intellectual encouragement'. He suggests the following conditions are necessary for fostering a wide dialogue:

1. People being disposed to communicate ideas, and therefore contexts in which it is safe and easy to do so.
2. Ways of thinking which favour comparisons, which are relative in that sense, not necessarily relativistic.
3. Creative forms of negation, which present new possibilities, or which supplement previous propositions.
4. Active tolerance of difficult emotions involved in the exchange of ideas and opinions.' (*ibid*: 151)

These remain the essential codes of good practice for post-disciplinary research.

## **Appendix A: FOUNDATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name:

Would you like this to be kept confidential? [yes or no] :

Discipline or study area (as you would describe it):

Date:

*I would be very grateful if you would answer the following questions as at much length as you like. You can complete the questions in any order. If you need clarification please email me P.G.Bevan@bath.ac.uk*

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### **I. Domain, focus, problematic**

1. We are talking about the related areas of poverty, inequality, and personal experience of being (well and ill) or subjective quality of life. Within this space what have been, are, and will be your particular interests and focus?
2. What are the bigger research questions or goals which lie behind your interest (if any)?

### **II. Values**

1. What values do you think are driving your interest in poverty, inequality, quality of life, and well/ill being?
2. Where do they come from? (e.g. a particular religious or ideological framework)
3. Are there any contradictions?
4. How do you envisage 'the good life'?
5. How do you envisage the 'good society'?
6. How do you envisage the relation between the search for 'truth' and the pursuit of 'the good'?

### **III. Ontology – theories of existence**

1. Describe in as much detail as possible your response to the assumptions that there is/is not a reality 'out there' separate from people's thoughts about it?
2. Assuming a 'reality' what for you as a social scientist are the important features of the following?
  - people
  - social relations and structures
  - material things
  - social change
  - other important aspect(s)
3. How do you conceptualise the reality of?
  - poverty

- inequality
- being
- quality of life

#### IV. **Epistemology – theories of knowledge**

1. *How* do you know what you think you know?
2. What are the philosophical foundations of your knowledge about whatever kind of social reality/ies you recognise as existing?
3. Would you describe yourself as a positivist, empiricist, logician, hermeneuticist, critical theorist or something else?
4. Does your approach come from a well-established tradition of research? Describe.
5. How is social science knowledge generated and accumulated through time?
6. In what ways does power affect social science knowledge?
7. How does social science knowledge work as source of power?
8. What do you think you can learn about the WeD domain from other social science disciplines?

#### V. **Theories and explanations**

1. What theories or theoreticians have inspired or lie behind your work in this area?
2. How would you describe ‘theorising’ in your particular disciplinary approach?
3. How important is abstraction to your work and what form does it take?
4. What do you think an explanation consists of?
5. In what ways is it useful to think of ‘causes’?
6. What do you make of the ‘quantitative-qualitative’ distinction?
7. In what ways are empirical generalisations useful?

#### VI. **Research methods**

1. Describe the research methods you have used in the past to collect data.
2. Describe the ways in which you have analysed data you have collected or had access to.
3. What methods are you keen to use in the WeD programme?
4. What aspects of other WeD people’s methods do you appreciate?
5. What aspects make you apprehensive?

#### VII. **Rhetoric (persuasive discourse)**

*‘...the social sciences float in warm seas of unexamined rhetoric.’ Nelson et al, p16*

1. How do you usually communicate and disseminate the conclusions of your research?
2. What particular special devices do you use?

3. What audiences do you write for?
4. What does it demand to be able to understand what you write?
5. To what extent do you see the claims you make in your academic output as 'findings' and to what extent as arguments'?
6. When should we 'change our minds'?

**VIII. Empirical conclusions – re poverty, inequality, being, and quality of life.**

1. What general form(s) do you think empirical conclusions in this area should take?
2. What empirical conclusions have you drawn from past research in your bit of this area?
3. What kinds of empirical conclusion should we be able to reach as a result of WeD programme?

**IX. Praxis**

1. In what ways do you think the WeD research should be used to generate advice about practice?
2. What do you mean by practice?
3. Who should act?
4. What should/do they do?
5. Why should/do they do it?
6. What do you think the real consequences of this action would be?

Thank you very much for your time.

**Comments**

If you think there are other things of interest which you would like to say that are not covered by these questions please add them here – plus any other comments you might like to make.

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