THEORIES OF WELLBEING

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Social Policy Association conference
29 June 2005

Wellbeing and Social Policy

- The emergence of 'wellbeing' in academic research as well as Colour Supplements
- Treasury workshop, October 2004: *Redefining Prosperity: Delivering Well-Being*
- A political economy agenda, but a fertile idea
- So what is wellbeing?
- Does it help rethink social policy?
- A selective survey of some conceptual thinking
- Nic Marks looking more at policy implications

Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD)

ESRC Research Group at Bath: *'To develop a conceptual and methodological framework for understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in developing countries'*

Three challenges:

- To combine *universal* and *local* perspectives
- To combine *objective* and *subjective* approaches
- To combine research into *outcomes* and *processes*

Building on previous intellectual currents moving from studying *means* to the *ends* of development policy

This builds on WeD but represents a personal view

DEFINITIONS: WELFARE

- Welfare: 'faring well'. From 14c: happiness or prosperity ('wealth')
- In 20c, tendency to objectification of needs associated with welfare state
- But later 20c: multi-dimensional poverty, embrace of participation, experiential knowledge, cultural difference etc, paved way for a broader term 'wellbeing'

DEFINITIONS: WELLBEING

Wellbeing: 'living and faring well', 'flourishing', 'bound up with ideas about what constitutes human happiness and the sort of life it is good to lead' (Oxford Companion to Philosophy)

PLAN:

- Subjective wellbeing
- Objective wellbeing
- Eudaimonic wellbeing

1. SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING: HAPPINESS

Theme of the moment

Richard Layard: *Happiness: lessons from a new science:*

Back to Bentham: pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number, each person counting for one.

Happiness provides
- an overall motivating device
- a unifying principle to guide policy – and social policy

Hedonic psychology

1999 Daniel Kahneman: *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*.

'What makes experiences and life pleasant or unpleasant'

Distinguish :

1. momentary feelings – positive and negative
2. evaluation of satisfaction over a period of time – entails some cognitive processing even if brief.

Eg: 'Taking all things together, would you say you are very happy, quite happy, or not very happy?'

Not the same as domain-specific satisfaction

Hedonic psychology: some findings

- Income and wellbeing across countries
- Relative income matters for winners and losers
- Reverse effects: happiness leads to success in major domains of life (love, work, health) - Diener
- Startling findings: happiness can add 7 years to life expectancy
- Ideas of life-satisfaction, balance of affect and happiness appear to be coherent, important and principled

SWB: problems of adaptation

- *Adaptation* or the hedonic treadmill: upwards and downwards, individually and collectively
- Confounding effect on intra-personal comparisons of SWB over time.
- Undermines its usefulness as a comparative yardstick across groups
- But limits of adaptation and variable adaptation

SWB: cultural bias and preferences

- Cultural bias: SWB and happiness appear to be a more salient concepts for individualists
- 'Positivity bias' v.'Modesty bias'
- But few studies in non-Western environments
- Cultural shaping and internalisation of harmful preferences
- Huxley's *Brave New World;* Nozick's experience machine…

2. OBJECTIVE WELLBEING

Objective, external, universal notions of wellbeing, eg.basic needs

Fall and rise of needs theory in development discourse:

- Fall in 1980s
- Rise in 1990s: changed global political economy and new theory, especially Amartya Sen

Influence on Human Development Index and Millennium Development Goals

But in social policy in Britain: fall and fall of needs theory?

Approaches to objective wellbeing

Amartya Sen: critique of utility and the case for capabilities:

Commodities → *Characteristics* → *Capability to function* → *Functioning* → Utility

Functionings: What a person manages to do or to be

But no 'methodological side-car': how measure functionings, let alone capabilities?

Sen's unwillingness to name a list of basic functionings

Martha Nussbaum: 10 'central human functioning capabilities'

A Theory of Human Need

Doyal-Gough THN (1991): hierarchical (but not like Maslow).
- There are universal goals to avoid harm and participate in a social form of life
- Identify basic human needs for health and autonomy. Critical autonomy as higher-order need for critical participation
- Needs are universal; need-satisfiers (goods, services, activities, relationships, policies) are relative to time and place
- Use codified and experiential knowledge to identify 'universal satisfier characteristics' (eg. nutriments, significant primary relationships)

THN: problems
- Notion of harm as conceptual starting point, but happiness/ enjoyment absent
- Sharp distinction between objective need satisfaction and subjective happiness or satisfaction with life. Yet..
- Autonomy entails positive feelings of eg 'self-confidence'
- Happiness contributes to some need satisfaction: is happiness a universal satisfier characteristic?

THN: who decides on needs?
- Who decides on needs?
- Paternalism. But an 'external' viewpoint can include the person(s) or group(s) under consideration.
- Distinguish individual responses and a collective process: dialogic democracy
- Alkire on the four merits of 'participatory processes': Intrinsic, Instrumental, Constructive and Reflexive
- But always iterate back against evolving notions of a life of human dignity

3. EUDAIMONIC WELLBEING

- Aristotle on *eudaimonia*
- Eudaimonism: well-being consists of fulfilling or realizing one's *daimon* or true nature through the actualization of human potentials
- Eric Fromm: distinguish 'those needs (desires) that are only subjectively felt and whose satisfaction leads to momentary pleasure, and those needs that are rooted in human nature and whose realization is conducive to human growth and produces eudaimonia, i.e. "well-being"'.
- Concerns feeling, thinking and acting – but not in simple hedonic way

Deci and Ryan: Basic psychological needs

Basic psychological needs universally necessary for human growth and integrity

Basis in self-determination theory: humans as inherently active, relational beings with intrinsic motivation to explore, manipulate and understand environment

Three basic psychological needs:

- *Autonomy:* self-regulation, self-endorsement*; not '*independence'
- *Competence*: ability to operate effectively within environment
- *Relatedness*: feeling significant for others, feeling integral to social life

Eudaimonic psychology

Can use this to evaluate social contexts.

Cultures are not the 'absolute sculptors of human behaviour'

Eg1: materialism as dominant extrinsic goal is harmful not only to hedonic wellbeing but to basic psychological needs

Eg2: Rahman and Rao: Practices which restrict the mobility of women or their control over vital decision-making harm their autonomy but not necessarily their SWB

Happiness and Autonomy

- Happiness not necessarily helpful in hostile environments: depressive realism - being 'sadder but wiser'.
- Distinguishing caution and adventurousness: a) adaptation to or b) attempts to change environments
- Critical autonomy essential in navigating through life and in making these judgments
- This especially so when environments changing rapidly and cultural repertoires cannot keep up
- Such enduring dilemmas in life cannot all be resolved by studying happiness

Researching wellbeing: WeD

Research wellbeing in poor communities as the discrepancies between goals and achievements:

- OWB: The gap between basic needs and material and relational resources

- SWB: The gap between actors' goals and community values, and their perceived resources
- Wellbeing-as-process: The actions (individual and collective) undertaken to narrow these gaps – and the extent to which the wider environments impede or facilitate such actions

Happiness, Wellbeing and Social Justice (the other conference theme)

- Bentham's utilitarianism: the greatest happiness principle
- *Some* implications for justice, but consequentialist
- A stronger foundation for social justice requires some notion of primary goods (Rawls), capabilities (Sen), basic needs (THN)
- Thus concept of objective wellbeing or 'welfare' also remains central to the search for just social policies

SOME CONCLUSIONS ON WELLBEING

- Wellbeing a useful umbrella concept, sheltering at least OWB and SWB
- The dividing line is blurred
- But inherent problems in a purely subjective approach
- Critical autonomy both desirable and instrumental
- Informed collective decision-making permits critiques of preferences and practices
- Wellbeing returns us to issues of the good life but does not ignore subjective wellbeing