

# 1. New theories and policies for well-being: introduction

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What are the essential attributes of a person? What is it to be human? These eternal questions are of course the domain of philosophy, literature and religion, but implicit answers to these questions also drive the real-world business of policy making.

The urge to provide new answers to these questions underpins the ever more prominent discussions about the concept of well-being. Such discussions seek to provide an answer from the point of view of what makes human lives *go well*.

The motivation for suggestions that improving human well-being should become the primary focus of modern societies is the view that policy making currently takes too narrow an approach to answering these fundamental questions and, in particular, that policy making ought to widen its scope beyond an overarching focus on economic success. The economics discipline has had great success in getting its own models, notably that famous abstraction of rational self-interest, *homo economicus*, to be those which policy makers use by default. Turning the discussion to well-being opens the door to the understanding gained by a much broader tranche of those researching human lives across the social and health sciences.

The sense that our lives and societies are more complex now than at any other time in the past is a key reason why many are seeking new means of explaining them. And, with ongoing global economic and environmental crises – and signs of growing social distress – posing seemingly insurmountable challenges to existing policy frameworks, there is considerable urgency for the task of constructing a broader, more holistic framework.

The contributions in this volume represent a multidisciplinary attempt to work towards a new set of models for policy, which represent what is required to achieve good lives.

## WHY WE NEED NEW MODELS

The success of economic models in policy making rests to a large extent on the appealing simplicity of being able to value potential costs and benefits of any course of action in a common unit, those of a currency. Economic theory acknowledges that monetary wealth is ultimately a means to the end of human welfare: the economic concept of *utility* acknowledges that the monetary value of a gain to an individual merely proxies for her ability to use the money to satisfy her preferences, with satisfaction of one's preferences treated as equivalent to well-being (Dolan et al. 2006).

However, a wealth of evidence now suggests that this approach represents an over-simplification – that reducing policy focus to monetary gains risks excluding a wealth of both costs and benefits that cannot be adequately represented in economic utility models.

Diener and Seligman, who between them have pioneered much of the field of well-being research, argue that a concern with economic issues was 'understandably primary' when '[m]eeting simple human needs for food, shelter and clothing was not assured, and satisfying these needs moved in lockstep with better economics' but that, while 'economic progress can enhance the quality of life even in industrialized nations, it no longer serves as a strong barometer of well-being because there are substantial discrepancies between economic indices and other measures' (Diener and Seligman 2004).

Such discrepancies are highlighted by now considerable evidence within well-being research. Most commonly, this uses large-scale survey data that includes subjective measures of well-being – which directly capture people's experiences of their lives – to identify the factors which result in lives going well. The evidence shows, for example, that there are diminishing returns to well-being from increased income and that the strength of the relationship between national income and well-being is 'substantially reduced once quality of government, democracy and social capital is controlled for' (Stoll et al. 2012). Hence these factors explain much of the variation in well-being which income does not. Even factors usually regarded as firmly in the economic sphere have impacts on well-being that go beyond money – for example, research on unemployment shows that the loss of well-being from being unemployed far exceeds the reduction that would be expected from the loss of income (Carroll 2007), and that negative effects on well-being remain even after re-employment (Louis and Zhao 2002). There are also discrepancies which arise from the focus on aggregate national income, which masks differences in the distribution of income, consumption and wealth (Stiglitz et al. 2009). Furthermore, research from psychology and other fields provides reasons to doubt a

number of the assumptions of standard economic models, for example that more choice is always good for well-being (Schwartz 2004).

## BEYOND ‘BEYOND GDP’

The recognition of these flaws in old models has instigated a turn towards well-being within policy circles. Much of the policy attention to date has focused on the issue of measurement. There is now a broad consensus that producing new headline political measures is a necessary first step in going beyond economic models of human welfare in policy making. The body of evidence which establishes that subjective measures of well-being, which capture directly people’s experiences of their lives, are robust, valid and useful to policy (see for example Helliwell and Wang 2012) has been crucial in establishing that there are viable means of creating such new measures.

Hence the emergence of the ‘Beyond GDP’ agenda to establish new measures of national progress, which, since 2007, has been given serious attention by international bodies including the OECD and the European Commission, and by national governments, including France’s ‘Stiglitz Commission’ in 2009, the UK’s Measuring National Well-being Programme launched in 2010, and Finland, which is one of the other European countries collecting subjective well-being measures in official surveys (Abdallah and Mahony 2012). The United Nations has demonstrated that it too places importance on this issue, with a High-level Meeting on ‘Happiness and Well-being’ in April 2012 followed closely by the Rio Conference on Sustainable Development, whose outcome document recognized ‘the need for broader measures of progress to complement GDP in order to better inform policy decisions’ (UNCSD 2012, p. 6). These initiatives encompass new measures of progress based on adjusted versions of standard economic indicators, subjective measures of well-being, objective measures of well-being within a variety of life and policy domains, and measures relating to the natural environment, resource use and sustainability.

Providing new headline measures by which the success of governments is judged has the power to reframe ideas of national success and to provide new incentives for political action (Michaelson et al., forthcoming). But measurement in fact sits between two other key areas. First, knowing what and how to measure relies on the existence of strong theoretical *models of what it is that one intends to measure*. For example, in their influential review of approaches to well-being measurement, Dolan et al. make clear that their starting point is ‘concepts of well-being’ (2006, p. 14). The first

aim of this volume is therefore to explore different conceptual approaches to well-being. In doing this, it takes a deliberately multidisciplinary perspective, including contributors whose work has not previously been seen as part of the 'well-being discourse'. The concepts discussed here therefore go beyond the approaches which Dolan and colleagues set out, which are tied closely to established well-being measurement approaches. One implication from the breadth of conceptual approaches included here, therefore, is that current well-being measurement initiatives may need to be revised to take account of them.

Ultimately, of course, measurement exists to produce evidence about what is being measured. In the case of well-being measurement, the salient evidence relates to the aspects of people's lives and broader conditions which promote or detract from their well-being. The *implications of this evidence for decision-makers* are therefore the second key area to which this volume relates. It is certainly not the first effort to draw out such conclusions from well-being research. Notable publications which have made useful contributions in this area include Diener et al. (2009) and Bok (2010), with others forthcoming (e.g. Huppert and Cooper, forthcoming) as the research in the field continues to grow. The current volume adds to these through its multidisciplinary approach which draws on a wider range of both sources and forms of evidence than these others. It also includes shorter contributions from commentators working in policy-facing settings who reflect deliberately on the extent to which the evidence can and should change policy processes and decisions. But there is no hard-and-fast distinction between the different types of contribution included here, with those writing from the research perspective also delineating clear policy implications.

## A RANGE OF STARTING POINTS

Our claim that this book takes a multidisciplinary approach may seem strange given that well-being research is itself a relatively new, and far from homogeneous, discipline. What has come to be regarded as 'mainstream' well-being science – as practised, for example, by contributors to the *Journal of Happiness Studies* – has a number of roots.

One strand comes from the economics discipline, specifically 'the rediscovery within economics of [subjective well-being] accounts, by Easterlin (whose 1974 paper is often cited as a beginning of this process)' (MacKerron 2011). This rediscovery and Easterlin's paper, titled 'Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence' (Easterlin 1974), sparked an interest among economists and social scien-

tists in exploring the range of factors which do contribute to the human lot, leading to the 'extraordinary growth' in journal articles on the topic, particularly from the mid-1990s onwards (MacKerron 2011).

The other key root of modern well-being science is work within the psychology discipline, particularly the advent of the positive psychology movement, which sought to move beyond an understanding of 'how people survive and endure under conditions of adversity' and focus on 'how normal people flourish under more benign conditions' (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Psychologists who are more or less closely associated with the movement have worked on issues including: the extent to which mental illness and health form a separate dimension from positive and negative well-being (Keyes 2002); how epidemiological models can be applied to the promotion of positive well-being across a population and result in a reduction of the incidence of mental disorders (Huppert 2009); how experiencing positive emotions expands horizons for action and over time builds personal resources (Frederickson 2001); and the identification of basic psychological needs (Deci and Ryan 2000). Many of these psychologists have been associated with a 'eudaimonic' approach to well-being, in which well-being is viewed as the life well lived, with an emphasis on how well people function in, or interact with, the world around them, in addition to the positive feelings and judgements about life that are emphasized by other approaches.

This volume contains research contributions from authors working within both the economic (Helliwell, Bartolini, Seaford) and the psychological (Csikszentmihalyi, Cooper and Flint-Taylor) strands of well-being research. But its aim has been deliberately to extend more broadly than this to bring a range of other disciplinary perspectives, although many explicitly draw on and complement the 'mainstream well-being approach' while bringing in other strands of thought. The interest which some economists have taken in subjective well-being sits in parallel with other economists' exploration of more objective aspects of human welfare and capacities, particularly in the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum, which is the starting point for Hämäläinen's chapter (Chapter 2). Other complementary perspectives included in the volume are Antonovsky's medical sociology (Chapter 3 by Eriksson and Lindström and elsewhere) and the field of environmental psychology (Chapter 7 by Basu, Kaplan and Kaplan). And the contribution by O'Hara and Lyon (Chapter 4), written from the perspective of holistic complexity, aims to challenge some elements of well-being research.

In setting out to produce this book we have deliberately aimed to establish a dialogue between these perspectives. During the writing process we convened two workshops, in London and Helsinki, to bring together the

authors of the different chapters and allow them to probe each other's ideas and uncover themes and tensions.

The key theme that emerged as common to all the research contributions has already been mentioned – the need to overturn old models of what makes human lives go well. A number of these 'new takes' directly challenge elements of the dominant models from economics. Bartolini (Chapter 6) and Seaford (Chapter 8) both challenge the notion of economic growth as an unproblematic primary policy aim. Helliwell (Chapter 5) contests the assumption of economic models that humans are inherently selfish and individualistic. Hämäläinen (Chapter 2) challenges the economic tenet that choice is always good for people. And Flint-Taylor and Cooper (Chapter 9) call into question the idea that having a concern with employee well-being is an expensive luxury for employers.

Other contributions address models within other policy spheres. Eriksson and Lindström (Chapter 3) challenge the notion that health policy is a matter of combating disease. O'Hara and Lyon (Chapter 4) go as far as questioning basic Enlightenment models of human beings as individual autonomous agents and of our ability to discover regular, reliably predictable causal relationships within the social sciences.

Of course, while such challenges are of theoretical interest, viewed on their own they do nothing to help policy makers in their role of taking practical decisions about the generation and allocation of public resources. Such help comes in providing new, workable models which can be genuinely useful in policy making. The contributions in this volume do just this – providing a range of alternative models (which complement each other to different degrees). We now describe the key themes around which these new models cluster.

## THE NEED FOR COHERENCE

The first strong theme is that people – and societies – have a need to make sense of the world around them. A sense of rapid change and the multiple pressures of modern life contribute a sense of urgency to the need to produce societal conditions which address this fundamental need.

This analysis of what is wrong is very much the starting point of Timo J. Hämäläinen's contribution (Chapter 2). He focuses on the problems of market-oriented industrialized societies, which, he argues, often provide 'too much choice' for people's decision-making capacity. Critiquing the capabilities approach, he argues that an individual's well-being arises from the physical, institutional and cultural environment together with material and mental resources, which impact on everyday activities and

roles (as worker, consumer, family member, etc.), which in turn determine the extent to which a range of physical and psychological needs are met. All this, he concludes, suggests a required reduction in the complexity of modern life through a new cultural paradigm which can restore balance and what Antonovsky called 'coherence' to daily activities.

Antonovsky's sense of coherence theory forms the basis of the chapter by Monica Eriksson and Bengt Lindström (Chapter 3). They describe evidence which suggests that coherence – viewing the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful – is a crucial element in what promotes physical and mental health, and ultimately well-being. In their view, health policy, and public policy more generally, should adopt a 'salutogenic orientation', which asks how health and well-being can be promoted, rather than how disease and risk can be avoided. This involves promoting the resources – material, cognitive, emotional, social, cultural – which protect from countless stressors encountered through life. With applications in educational settings and workplaces as well as health services, this approach involves creating the conditions which allow people to understand, cope with and see meaning in their everyday situations.

Maureen O'Hara and Andrew Lyon (Chapter 4) go even further in describing both the extent of current incoherence and the degree of transformation required to escape it. They raise doubts about the adequacy of the standard science model in the social sciences to describe the current 'change of eras'. In particular, they question the ability of subjective measures of well-being to genuinely represent internal states rather than reflect the biases of the researchers (arguments which readers should consider during presentations of such results in later chapters). O'Hara and Lyon urge a move beyond a focus on the aggregated well-being of individuals, towards a holistic view where well-being is seen as a 'function of whole systems'. They argue that interlocking problems such as growing rates of mental distress, increasing inequalities, climate change and economic crises require moving beyond the defensive strategies, such as denial and distortion, which are commonly used to restore coherence and reduce complexity. Instead, they describe the need for a 'learning culture' that enables learning to be disruptive of the status quo to allow new forms of action.

## RESTORING THE CENTRALITY OF THE SOCIAL

Each of the contributions which focuses on the need to promote coherence as a crucial element of well-being highlights social relationships and collective solutions as a key means of achieving this. Thus it is no surprise that

the volume's second major theme is the need to restore our social nature to the centre of the picture of human well-being.

Redressing the bias within the theory and practice on well-being which treats people as individuals is the explicit starting point of the chapter by John F. Helliwell (Chapter 5). He describes the evidence which establishes, first, that humans are fundamentally social beings – with our big brains arising from the complexities of social groups, and, second, that the enjoyment of social relationships leads to an evolutionary advantage so that people benefit from their practical outcomes such as physical health and alertness to threats. Furthermore, Helliwell argues, humans are inherently *pro-social* and altruistic, receiving a bigger boost to well-being from giving than receiving. Helliwell outlines a number of practical policy implications, particularly the 'how' of policy delivery and the way that institutions are managed. For example, he argues that considerably greater importance for well-being of the social context within workplaces than salary and bonuses has real-life consequences for what employers prioritize. He also argues that the findings have applications at the macroeconomic level, for example in the priority which national governments give to avoiding unemployment.

This idea, that macroeconomic conditions can influence social relationships, with resulting impacts on well-being, is core to the chapter by Stefano Bartolini (Chapter 6). He describes how a decline in common goods – crucially including networks of relationships – can cause the defensive response of additional consumption of private goods, while economic growth that is based on high levels of consumerism can itself be a cause of the decline in relationships, particularly through the isolating nature of modern cities and emphasis on materialistic values. He produces evidence to argue that the US economy has many of these characteristics, with high expenditure on home entertainment and means of social control, deteriorating experienced well-being and social capital, and increasing inequality and working hours. Hence he argues that a primary cause of the economic crisis of recent years, which began as a debt crisis in the USA and was exported to the rest of the world, was the USA's relationship-damaging form of economic growth.

Another take on the centrality of the social – and its link to surrounding environments – is provided in the chapter by Avik Basu, Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan (Chapter 7). They describe the concept of 'reasonableness', which 'addresses the issues that help (or hinder) us in being civil and sociable, developing trust, and cooperating with one another in the face of shared challenges'. In their conception, reasonableness rests on the ability to build mental models to make sense of the world, function effectively with a sense of competence, and take meaningful action – a



framework with strong parallels with both the sense of coherence model (discussed by Hämäläinen in Chapter 2 and Eriksson and Lindström in Chapter 3) and Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. Basu, Kaplan and Kaplan describe the environments – physical, but also rule and custom based – which, they argue, support these types of elements of reasonableness: those which can restore depleted mental capacity, particularly natural settings; environments that promote social connectivity, such as the walkability of cities; and social contexts designed to enable community participation and involvement, from community gardens to microcredit schemes.

## REVISING ECONOMIC PRINCIPLES

The chapters by Helliwell (Chapter 5) and Bartolini (Chapter 6) demonstrate that well-being evidence produces implications both for economic policy making and for businesses. This theme is examined further in the following two chapters.

In Chapter 8, Charles Seaford questions the traditional policy distinction between supposedly neutral 'economic' objectives, such as maximizing GDP, and more 'political' objectives, such as reducing inequality. He argues that, in fact, all major objectives for governments can and should be justified with reference to the evidence about what promotes well-being. Reviewing findings from well-being research such as the diminishing well-being returns of income, and beyond-economic damage from unemployment, Seaford derives a set of economic policy principles. Focusing on the first of these – that there should be a target band of income for all – and using the UK as an example case, he identifies the need for strategies to improve pay in non-graduate sectors: paying more than current market rates where the government is the key employer, putting in place a strong minimum wage and encouraging unionization. A coherent programme for well-being across government departments, he argues, will require a set of simple, evidence-based principles which can replace those such as 'Find a market solution', 'Increase choice' or 'Cut spending' which have been so effective in guiding policy under conventional economic theory.

Businesses as well as governments should revise conventional thinking about key economic principles: instead of a focus on employee well-being being seen as desirable but costly, it should be recognized as contributing to a range of positive business outcomes, including improved productivity, customer satisfaction and staff retention. This is the case made by Jill Flint-Taylor and Cary L. Cooper (Chapter 9), who describe why businesses should seek to actively manage employee well-being. This is not,

they say, a matter simply of schemes promoting physical health or eliminating sources of stress. Instead, businesses should recognize that employees experience different sources of workplace pressure – both negative and positive – and of support, and therefore seek to create an appropriate balance between them. Practical means towards this include: auditing exercises; considering well-being in employee assessment and selection; paying close attention to the impact of leaders and managers on workgroup well-being; and national guidance and policy action on employee well-being.

## POLICY RESPONSES

The first nine chapters clearly do not present a single conceptual view of well-being, despite their many overlaps, nor do they examine the same sorts of evidence or draw a unified set of conclusions. Hence the job of policy makers required to make sense of and respond to this sort of research may well seem daunting. The key themes which we have identified here provide a starting point: the need for coherence, the centrality of the social, and the importance of reviewing economic principles. As well as these broad thematic strands, the volume contains five contributions that explore policy responses to the evidence and arguments of the preceding chapters. All of these contributions are shaped by the different perspectives of their authors.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Chapter 10) discusses what is required to bring about social and political change, asking how so many communist governments of the twentieth century, despite almost total control of their populations, fell in the face of popular uprisings. His answer is human ‘consciousness’ – the ability to organize one’s own previous experience in order to imagine existing alternatives to reality – which is the basis of autonomous action. He argues that governments that do not do enough to help people achieve what (they think) will make them happy risk falling in similar ways. Good governance, he says, consists of promoting the conditions which allow consciousness to flourish: freedom to hear and express the truth; hope – societal goals to which citizens can aspire; and enjoyable activities – not just pleasant distractions, but experiences which allow challenge and mastery of skills, and ultimately the experience of ‘flow’ – the concept of losing oneself in an appropriately challenging task, which Csikszentmihalyi famously introduced into the psychological discourse.

Geoff Mulgan (Chapter 11) has been a key figure in introducing the concept of a focus on the good life and well-being into the policy discourse in the UK and beyond. Despite this, his perspective is one of relative caution about the extent to which well-being evidence can inform policy

making. He points to the lack of ability to confidently predict a direct link between the implementation of any specific policy to a measurable improvement in well-being, and to the trade-offs which remain to be made once well-being has been adopted as a goal, for example between well-being now and in the future. But he notes that there are some *overall* features of social systems we do know are related to well-being, such as peace, the rule of law and democracy. And he is more optimistic about using disaggregated and granular-level information to explore the effects of particular programmes and services, as well as issues covered in this volume such as the effects of environments, the salutogenic approach, the nature of workplaces, and consumption. His conclusion is that governments should adopt a ‘partial planning’ approach to well-being – arguing that, while well-being should not override everything else as a goal, there is currently too little rather than too much serious attention on the issue.

The contribution by Agnès Hubert (Chapter 12) is written from the perspective of a genuine Brussels insider examining the European Union’s response to the well-being agenda. She notes that, while the EU stated an explicit aim of ‘promoting well-being’ in the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, the economic crisis has since brought an intensive focus to the question of how to restore growth. But, she argues, it has also demonstrated that business as usual is not an option – further questions which remain to be answered are ‘What type of growth?’ and ‘How can we enter the virtuous circle of happiness that produces growth?’ Hubert notes a range of existing European initiatives likely to contribute to promoting well-being, but cites reasons why well-being should be given even greater emphasis. Better frameworks guiding the use of scarce financial resources are required, and the need to strengthen Europe-level democracy points to a role for well-being in building a narrative which resonates with citizens. Hence, she argues, EU action is most needed to develop political take-up of the agenda to ‘allow well-being to “count” in policy making’.

Pekka Puska (Chapter 13) discusses the well-being agenda from the viewpoint of his considerable contributions to the field of public health, asking what lessons it holds for health policy. He suggests that the salutogenic approach, where the question is not about determinants of risk factors but what creates health (as described in Chapter 3 by Eriksson and Lindström), is a consequence of applying a well-being perspective to health policy. However, he describes this as sitting on a spectrum of focal points for health policy, all with potentially useful applications: disease prevention and treatment; risk factors for diseases, particularly behaviours and lifestyles; the socio-economic determinants linked to those risk factors; and (relatedly) welfare policies. But, Puska argues, developing policies for well-being also has implications for economic policy. Echoing Hubert,

he emphasizes the need to encourage the *kind* of economic growth that improves rather than damages health and well-being. This, he says, will require grassroots action and legislation to restrict intensive commercialism, marketing and consumerism, support social interaction, increase the flexibility and control of employees and deepen the democratic process.

In the final chapter (Chapter 14), Juliet Michaelson reflects on the book's contributions through the lens of the well-being policy frameworks devised by the new economics foundation think tank. Its dynamic model of well-being describes an individual's well-being arising from a dynamic interaction between her external conditions, both material and social, and her inner resources, such as optimism and self-esteem; together these enable her to experience eudaimonic good functioning as well as good feelings. Michaelson makes the case that this model can help guide thinking about different levers to influence well-being, particularly when linked to approaches such as co-production, which provides means to improve meaning, autonomy and relationships through the design and delivery of public services. But, she warns, policy makers should be wary of substitutes for some of the model's core concepts, for example choice rather than control. Instead, she argues, they should turn to deliberately designed heuristics, such as the Five Ways to Well-being messages, which bring together many of the book's themes around social connection, paying attention to environments, and acting for and with other people.

## SUMMING UP THE THEMES

At the end of the second workshop held with the book's contributors, we asked the authors to sum up in a few words the key themes they felt were emerging from the discussions of the different chapters. The key common themes which emerged from this exercise provide a summary that might be helpful in further guiding readers through the contributions in this volume. They were: the importance of empowering people and enabling them to create good lives; the significance of participation, cooperation and belonging; and the need to comprehend complex environments to create coherence and meaning in everyday life.

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