1. Introduction to wellbeing research

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We are producing this volume at a productive and pivotal time for wellbeing researchers and practitioners. There has been burgeoning interest in wellbeing measurement and analysis, and decades of investment in wellbeing research promises to provide policy makers with data, evidence and blueprints needed to secure more sustainable futures, placing the ‘happiness’ of people and planet at centre stage. As a focus on personal, national and global wellbeing becomes central to policy and industry alike, wellbeing research plays an ever more important role. Knowledge, understanding and evidence of the necessary conditions for supporting wellbeing, shaping our collective goals and prioritising action are needed.

At the same time, our experiences of global catastrophes; the threat of global terror, the global financial crisis of 2008, increase awareness of the gravity and urgency of the climate crisis, the rise of mental ill-health, and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 reinforce the scale and accumulation of challenges we collectively face. These crises are of course experienced differently across the globe. For many, crisis and insecurity has long been a fact of life. But for others, they bring into sharp relief the fragile nature of our everyday security and our economic systems. They open up a new lens on the adequacy of public health and welfare infrastructures, the resilience of communities, and the ways in which we relate to the environment. Governments worldwide have struggled to cope, to organise, to collaborate and to lead. It is in this context that in 2018 at the World Government Summit in Dubai, UEA that the Global Happiness Council launched the first Global Happiness Policy Report, asserting that for governments to pursue happiness ‘is the world’s best and perhaps only hope to avoid global catastrophe’ (Sachs, 2018, 4). Moments of crisis can also act as a reminder that the way in which we have often come to subordinate social relationships to economic ones is problematic. The Covid-19 pandemic in particular brought public debate on welfare, anxiety, social isolation, need and inequalities, and on kindness and actions of care to the fore. These debates have long histories which remain far from resolved.

In this introductory chapter, we explore what is meant by happiness and wellbeing across a range of research disciplines which have been instrumental in shaping global debates about wellbeing policy. We set out what kinds of definitions, measurements and evidence of wellbeing are proposed, and think about what their ‘inward’ or ‘outward’ looking approaches say about what aspects of personal, social and planetary life should be valued. Wellbeing is often seen as a goal to be pursued, in which case research is focused on the factors which drive wellbeing and the mechanisms for improving it. Yet wellbeing is also a driver of activity, policy, personal behaviour and social action. As a result, wellbeing can be seen by some as a guiding principle for setting research agendas, whereas for others it can be seen as a distraction from matters of ‘deeper’ concern, or worse still, as a suspect means of psychological governance (Greco and Stenner, 2013), obscuring the destructive effects of the hyper-individualist account offered in much contemporary wellbeing research (Atkinson, 2020). By navigating through these differences and tensions, we set out our own framing of an inclusive wellbeing which offers a focus on the *situated and socially differentiated practices of wellbeing*.

Such a focus is necessary because a global wellbeing agenda and calls for post-crisis forms of governance are increasingly challenging established approaches to societal and economic organisation (Joseph and McGregor, 2020). This has involved rethinking the purpose of government and over-reliance on simplistic economic metrics such as GDP. The failure of political and economic systems to ensure stability, sustainable growth and social equality has been met with calls for a political focus on shaping the circumstances in which human life can flourish in harmony with the environments in which we and future generations will live (Trebeck and Williams, 2019).

We contribute to this call through bringing together contributions from across the social sciences to demonstrate how understanding the ways in which wellbeing is mobilised as a concept in research, practice and policy is central to these endeavours. In this edited collection we highlight practice-based approaches. These provide a contrast to the dominant psychological and economic perspectives on wellbeing. We foreground an inclusive perspective on how people living in diverse circumstances experience wellbeing. We examine where it takes place, and how it is conceptualised, constructed and contested. Our contributors offer plural methodologies and engage to different degrees in a research process based on explaining, understanding and re-thinking wellbeing. They are interested in issues such as political turmoil and crisis, wellbeing metrics, economics and policies, individualised and societal values, diverse knowledge practices and standpoints (for example, feminist, queer, indigenous), the intersections of nature and culture, and a future orientation to action and transformation. They elaborate on how these issues play out on the ground and provide detailed expositions of what a wellbeing policy agenda

does or would look like in different sectors. Providing a stimulating guide to the current research landscape on wellbeing, the volume also aims to address the provocative questions of what wellbeing is for, and where next for wellbeing research and action. In particular, we are keen to advance interdisciplinary research debate on the connections between wellbeing and welfare, and to elaborate on the practices, routines, institutions, objects, techniques and spaces associated with the contemporary governance of specific emotions.

WELLBEING RESEARCH AND POLICY

At a national level wellbeing is being embodied in government policy in a number of ways. In Europe, a framework to guide national policy development in reducing health inequalities and improving governance for health and wellbeing was introduced in 2020 (WHO, 2020). In the same year the Wellbeing For Future Generations Bill was put before the House of Lords in the UK, requiring public bodies to meet wellbeing objectives and consider the impact of policies on future generations. This followed a similar Act in Wales passed in 2015, the Scottish Government's Performance Framework of 2016 (Wallace, 2019), and the high-profile 'Wellbeing Budget' approach launched by the New Zealand Government in 2019. These initiatives are supported by an increased global standardisation of social wellbeing indicators (OECD How's Life Survey (2011); European Social Survey since 2002 (ESS, 2015)) and life satisfaction measures (World Happiness Reports since 2012 (Helliwell et al., 2012)).

Both psychologists and economists have been integral in making the case for wellbeing as a goal of government (Diener et al., 2015; Frijters et al., 2020; Helliwell et al., 2012), and have often found themselves on influential advisory committees and panels for national governments. Happiness economists, Frijters et al. (2020, 126) argue that placing wellbeing as a central goal of government can lead to the 'gradual optimisation' of public services, a culture of local experimentation and learning, and international policy transfer. They argue that governments should adopt life satisfaction measures, supported by a set of quantified 'believed effects' (that is, agreed in the scientific community). These, they argue are the best currently accepted metrics of wellbeing to guide policy evaluation, judge policy trade-offs and aid strategic government decision making (Frijters et al., 2020).

In contrast to this global standardisation and public policy agenda-setting, wellbeing research is troubled by definitional crises, disciplinary divisions and methodological impasses. There are often fundamental disagreements about what wellbeing is, whether it can be quantified, how, and if, it is distinct from happiness, thriving or flourishing (Alexandrova, 2017; Dodge et al., 2012; Dolan et al., 2017). So too, wellbeing is implicated in the increasing

instrumentalisation of social research towards narrow policy goals as opposed to independent enquiry. As such, critics have highlighted a culture of ‘optimal functioning’ and a potentially crushing drive towards optimism and unattainable life goals (Atkinson, 2020; Davies, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2010). The ideas of workplace wellbeing and human capital, ecosystem services and privatisation of health behaviours are indicative of the strategic placement of wellbeing as an economic goal – in these cases, to prevent burnout and improve productivity, to mobilise the value of natural resources for enhancing human wellbeing, or to align personal and public health in the service of population management and a for-profit wellness industry.

Behind these more recent debates and trends, there lies a much longer history of wellbeing research. Wellbeing researchers often search for an enduring and universal account of happiness. They reach for the Ancient Greeks, Asian philosophy or nineteenth-century British Utilitarian thinkers for confirmation that wellbeing, the good life, and happiness are of the highest moral virtue and social value, or central to economic thinking. With any philosophical dispute thereby apparently resolved, researchers are swiftly driven to establish ways to define, measure and compare conditions for wellbeing (Diener, 2009, 12). This has given rise to a wealth of research based on subjective wellbeing, happiness, life satisfaction, and social indicators (Myers and Diener, 2018).

With the imperatives towards standardisation, objectivisation and generalisability, the psychological perspective on wellbeing also comes a well-trodden path of methodological individualism which many social researchers find deeply problematic, in the sense that it decouples people from the environments in which they think and feel (Smith and Reid, 2018). That is not to say that such research is not of societal or political relevance. Indeed, wellbeing researchers in the psychological and health disciplines are commonly interested in the social determinants of mental health (for example, Allen et al., 2014; Currie et al., 2012). But psychological research on wellbeing often aims to identify demographic correlations, behavioural characteristics, components and valid measures of wellbeing (for example, Winefield et al., 2012). The focus is less frequently on the systems, social structures and community bonds which support positive wellbeing – and indeed, for psychologists, wellbeing is often equated with health. As scholars in the medical humanities and social psychologists have noted, this unhelpfully shifts attention from systems of welfare to components of individual wellbeing (Atkinson, 2011; Greco and Stenner, 2013).

The dominance of psychological and economic approaches to wellbeing research, and their disproportionate influence on the policy debates generates questions about what can be gained from drawing on a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. Economics and psychology have indeed become very closely entwined in driving wellbeing research, through happiness economics

and behavioural economics. But they have limitations in terms of their tendency to centre on the individual mind, to aggregate levels of life satisfaction, to mistrust human experience, and to examine correlation coefficients as opposed to causes. A review of current literature in this field suggests that the future research agenda should bring in the neuroscientific and biological dimensions of subjective experience. These are valued, we would argue, erroneously, because they are deemed to be more objective: ‘well-being measures here come straight from the horse’s mouth’ (Clark, 2018, 263). Despite the methodological sophistication and advances in evidence, it is perhaps ironic that the field recommends some fairly traditional policy implications: a focus on wellbeing cost-effectiveness, and on self-help, educational and therapeutic interventions to boost pro-social behaviour and emotional ‘skills’. Wider disciplinary perspectives and more pluralistic methodologies are largely absent from these policy debates. In the following sections, we consider why this matters, and outline how this has informed the approach we take in this book.

METHODS, METRICS AND DEFINITIONS USED IN WELLBEING RESEARCH

Despite its growing relevance, wellbeing remains ‘a complex multi-faceted construct that has continued to elude researchers’ attempts to define and measure’ (Pollard and Lee, 2003, 60). Yet as wellbeing continues to transcend beyond academic spheres into lay debates, and as wellbeing inequalities persist, it becomes a duty to find an adequate and understandable way to communicate what it is (Dodge et al., 2012).

The drive amongst wellbeing researchers, government statisticians, policy makers and government leaders has been somewhat contradictory. On the one hand there has been an emphasis on inward looking psychological definitions, such as identifying four aspects of personal wellbeing (ONS, 2020), or searching for single question measures, for instance of life satisfaction (GHC, 2018). On the other hand, recent decades have seen a more outward looking approach, whereby wellbeing is considered as a multi-dimensional concept (Diener, 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009). Social indicators research, for instance, has continued to focus primarily on wellbeing as an integrated, umbrella term. In addition, the notion that wellbeing can be universally defined via a narrow range of European and American disciplinary perspectives has been increasingly challenged (e.g. Yen, 2010), and attempts to develop more geographically and culturally situated ways of defining wellbeing are rising to the fore.

Psychologists have focused on the subjective dimensions of wellbeing, in particular developing measures of ‘global subjective happiness’, testing and refining scales for consistency, validity and reliability across a range of national contexts (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). This inward-looking

emphasis has been intellectually rooted in ancient Greek philosophical debates on distinctions between hedonia and eudaimonia. Hedonia highlights constructs such as positive affect, low negative affect, life satisfaction and happiness (for example, Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999). It is concerned with the outcome of pleasurable moments seen as a result of a person's experiences and actions. Eudaimonia pays attention to a life lived well in which wellbeing is achieved through purposeful actions (Joseph and McGregor, 2020). It highlights human development and behaviour (Ryff, 1989; Waterman, 1993).

The 'science of positive subjective experience' (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 5) emanating primarily from American schools of psychology has become a well-established field, based on the potentially contradictory objective measurement of subjective experiences. It may therefore seem surprising that the core method remains 'simple survey questions that asked people, for example, if they were "very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy"' (Myers and Diener, 2018, 218). As a counterbalance, these measures are increasingly complemented by more momentary assessments of happiness, such as Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) and the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) (Kahneman et al., 2004; MacKerron and Mourato, 2013; Shiffman et al., 2008), as well as looking for 'hardwired' biological answers, through affective neuroscience (Tanzer and Weyandt, 2020) and genetics (Pluess, 2015). Much influential research – informing, for instance, the Global Happiness Policy Report and the Sustainable Development Goals – is based on global surveys of individual subjective wellbeing with relatively small national sample sizes, designed for international comparability rather than detailed understanding of the important pathways of positive mental health.

In contrast to this individualistic approach, a more unifying understanding of wellbeing has emerged around human needs and social equality, embracing both individual and collective aspects. Social equality is defined as 'the extent to which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life in their communities under conditions which enhance their wellbeing and individual potential' (Beck et al., 1997, 3). This more social approach to wellbeing research can be traced to European and Germanic concerns for social indicators able to measure the 'quality of life' within their societies (Noll, 2011), connecting 'strongly with the European Union concerns for social inclusion and social cohesion' (Joseph and McGregor, 2020, 20). Notably this approach has also resonated in East Asia (Lin and Ward, 2009).

In this more outward-looking approach, wellbeing is seen to comprise of a large number of factors concerning what is needed for a good life whilst dealing with a wide set of economic and social elements which determine individual experiences of quality of life including health, wealth and freedom domains (Joseph and McGregor, 2020). This creates an expansive set of elements to examine which potentially makes the quest for reaching a universal

definition even more elusive. The relative merits of both approaches for application in public policy has been the matter of extensive debate (Atkinson, 2013; Maasoumi and Yalonetsky, 2012). Some regard the multi-dimensional components approach as leading to both cherry-picking and oversight on the part of government departments, given the remit to enhance wellbeing (Frijters et al., 2020). Meanwhile others argue that governments should work with dashboards of wellbeing indicators which are more sensitive to the multiple drivers of wellbeing and the effects of current policies on future generations (Durand, 2020).

Whilst developed and wealthy western nations have dominated academic and policy research, there is an increasing body of research from different cultural contexts, providing alternative perspectives on what matters in terms of experiences of wellbeing. Bhutan might be one of the most prominent examples in this regard. Embedded within a specific set of religious values and national culture that are usually overlooked, in the 1970s the Bhutanese government developed the concept of ‘Gross National Happiness’ to measure levels of human fulfilment (GNH Centre Bhutan, 2020). This was later to inform the UN resolution on happiness passed in 2011, emphasising the importance of inclusion, equity and balance in economic development. Likewise, in Bolivia and Ecuador, policy makers have been attempting to translate the indigenous notion of ‘buen vivir’ (good living) into government initiatives which place particular emphasis on living well with nature (Joseph and McGregor, 2020).

Indigenous knowledge is also influential in consideration of the situated and relational effects through which wellbeing emerges (Spiller et al., 2011). Atkinson (2013) and Gergen (2009) propose a relational framing of wellbeing which encompasses a mosaic of relations between people, and between people and places, where wellbeing is an effect ‘of mutually constitutive interactions amongst the material, organic and emotional dynamics of places’ (Atkinson, 2013, 142). This relational approach, which we explore in more detail below, encourages a wider inclusive social vision (White, 2017) and challenges the binary between ‘individualist’ and ‘collectivist’ societies, celebrating multiplicity. By acknowledging the openness and fluidity of the term wellbeing, in this book we seek to recognise wellbeing as an important rationale for pursuing social research. At the same time, we aim to set out its shortcomings as a concept, show how it has been contested, and contribute to a more situated, inclusive and socially differentiated approach to undertaking social research through a wellbeing lens.

This openness is relevant to long-standing debates on the reliance on social surveys in which the inherent biases, emotional states and perceptions of individuals are ignored, and the assumption that the sum of many individuals’ personal wellbeing is equivalent to societal wellbeing (Noll, 2013, 2). To challenge this, wellbeing measures aimed at inclusivity should aim to gather

what really matters for the population in terms of a good life, whilst considering sources of bias likely to emerge from uncertainty and memory (Allin and Hand, 2017). The so-called global measurements, as well as the more local ones, should aim for an integrative approach combining both objective and subjective measures. They should aim to trace the diversity of interests that constitute what living a good life means, not only within different cultural backgrounds, but also within often overlooked populations; for example, minorities and groups who may lack voice and agency to express themselves through standard wellbeing metrics. Inclusive wellbeing measures would need to adopt a pluralistic approach reflecting both the individual within their social and environmental context as well as the relations that emerge from this.

In this volume we demonstrate that a focus on wellbeing has seen developments in measures of human welfare, notably shifting from what has been the dominance of a single measure (GDP), to a dashboard approach using a range of indicators to identify differing aspects of human flourishing and suffering (Grimes, Chapter 17 in this volume). Such wellbeing measures are often linked back to individual circumstances and lifestyles. However, wellbeing is impacted by wider systems and the circumstances in which those individuals live (Alfaro-Simmonds, Azmi, Cieslik, Kapinga and Bock, Tartarini, Zielke, this volume). Indeed, what most measures actually record are the responses or reactions to those broader contextual circumstances – and that individuals are not the cause of their own wellbeing, in spite of interpretations to the contrary. Whilst recognising the value of quantitative wellbeing measures in identifying patterns, relationships and the extent of human suffering or flourishing, the reasons behind why those patterns emerge and what impact they have on societies and the communities and individuals that live within them are best supported by a mix of methods that provide qualitative narratives to explain them. This volume includes the voices of individuals as agents of their own social experiences, reporting on research that has involved groups that are victimised, marginalised in some societies or mainstream research, such as prisoners (Tartarini), war widows (Azmi), Muslims (Kapinga and Bock) and children (Alfaro-Simmonds). Our contributors also recognise the relational aspects, including human–nature interactions (Gittins et al.) and the importance of monitoring environmental as well as human wellbeing (Biedenweg and Trimbach).

WELLBEING AND KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES

The predominant psychological and economic modes of understanding wellbeing have been essentially driven by data and evidence. These are used to develop individualised and/or econometric methodologies which can identify the correlations between wellbeing as an outcome, and its driving forces –

putting the measure before any firm and mutually agreed conceptualisation of wellbeing (Alexandrova, 2017). The explicit aim is to influence government policy informed by expert knowledge to improve wellbeing – the meaning of which is delegated to the unspecified evaluations of people’s individual life-satisfaction scoring. What is often missing from this wellbeing research is a recognition that our own scientific and knowledge practices matter.

These knowledge practices are said to be indicative of the imperialist and technocratic appeal to expertise which underpins the modes of knowledge production pursued in happiness economics (Singh and Alexandrova, 2020). In this sense, the scientisation of happiness and subjective wellbeing research has been a notable knowledge practice worth unpicking here. By knowledge practices, we mean the ways in which particular ways of seeing, talking about, measuring and writing the world become codified as scientific truths and are made to appear universal. Recognising the contested nature of definitions of wellbeing, happiness, and life satisfaction, in this book we focus on the *situated and socially differentiated practices of wellbeing*. This incorporates several inter-related dimensions which are often overlooked in mainstream psychologies and economies of wellbeing (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 *Dimensions of wellbeing as situated and socially differentiated practices*

Situated subjective wellbeing	Multiple and sometimes contradictory felt experiences including our sense of who we are in the world
Social wellbeing	Relationships with others, with prevailing social values and cultural norms in specific places
Relational wellbeing	Emerges from specific environmental and social relationships and practices which collectively shape individual felt experiences, rather than vice versa
Political wellbeing	Contextually grounded in relations of power, recognition and inequalities

This provides an integrated perspective on wellbeing, which intentionally blurs the lines between emotional experiences and material life chances – or between subjective and objective wellbeing. It addresses a gap in mainstream wellbeing research which treats subjective wellbeing as a black-box phenomenon – only knowable to the subjects addressed in self-report surveys. Rather, it defines wellbeing relationally, in terms of the social and environmental contexts within which it emerges. It acknowledges that the definitional, measurement and research challenges of wellbeing are also political challenges. It defines wellbeing as a set of *practices*, rather than as a goal to be attained, a psychological trait, or a personal evaluation of life. This open definition shapes the organisation of the book, which focuses on approaches, practices and futures for wellbeing research. By bringing these dimensions together we

hope to be able to address urgent contemporary concerns about inequalities in wellbeing which go beyond the rhetoric of promoting happiness.

In compiling this book, we build on previous research which has advanced situated, experiential and practice-based accounts of wellbeing. For example, in *Wellbeing and Place* (Atkinson et al., 2012), human geographers explore the intersections of identity, discourses of wellbeing, the conflict and tensions between people's ethical values and the characteristics of modern individualistic culture. They consider the ways in which particular local places and landscapes can become therapeutic, connected to global wellbeing and environmental concerns, and evident in community conflicts over place. Exploring further how subjective wellbeing is situated, anthropologists too have focused on the intersections of **culture, place and wellbeing**. Ferraro and Sarmiento Barletti (2016) for instance argue that ethnographic methods are essential for understanding the nature, discourses and practices of wellbeing, as opposed to treating it as an outcome of specific measures. They maintain that wellbeing(s) should be researched in terms of a multiplicity of meanings, place-based imaginaries and creative practices. 'Place' cannot be reduced to context or country, as is common in wellbeing research (ibid., 2016).

One key advancement in recent wellbeing research has been the increased focus on **wellbeing as a social phenomenon**. That is not simply to say that people's personal wellbeing is socially determined, but that wellbeing itself is a sociological construct of emotions and relationships. In this vein, Neil Thin (2012, xi) argues that happiness is about 'love, empathy, engagement in the workplace and in communities, and about collective aspirations for a world that could be even better than it already is'. Thin adopts a 'meso-scale' analysis which is neither focused on the individual or on national policies, but on everyday interactions in particular social contexts (families, schools, neighbourhoods, social networks, media and workplaces). This social understanding of happiness informs many of the chapters in this book. It is part of broader developments in which emotions are increasingly viewed as central to the reproduction of social life, the shaping of subjectivity and as essential to reflexive practice in the construction of social worlds (Holmes, 2010).

In sociology, geography and development studies, this focus on the inter-subjective and on social relationships has commanded more **relational definitions of wellbeing and happiness**, which maintain that wellbeing emerges from living well together, or the common life (Atkinson et al., 2019; White, 2017). In this sense wellbeing can be defined as 'an effect of mutually constitutive interactions amongst the material, organic and emotional dynamics of places' (Atkinson, 2013, 138). This definition addresses the limitations of disambiguating or aggregating 'components' of individualised wellbeing as described earlier. It enables cross-sector integration and collaboration in developing effective and long-term policy solutions and change, and enables

flexibility in practice (Atkinson, 2013). It also captures the sense of wellbeing as an unfinished process or practice, which is open to contestation and subject to change over time. Atkinson (2013) preserves a crucial role for wellbeing researchers to focus on relationality itself rather than relations as a resource for enhancing wellbeing. Such ideas are now informing novel measures of intersubjective or community wellbeing (Choi et al., 2020; Cloutier et al., 2019). These will potentially enable closer attention to be paid to the dynamics of inequality, scale and time in which wellbeing is embedded. They will highlight how the drivers and outcomes of wellbeing are unevenly distributed, how material and non-material legacies and meanings of wellbeing can be transferred through generations, and how multiple scales (e.g. individual, global, national, regional, local) interact to produce ‘community wellbeing’ (Atkinson et al., 2019, 7; Bagnall et al., 2018).

This relational approach has been pursued by a number of researchers who want to emphasise the **political struggle for wellbeing**. To date, however, there has been limited engagement with wellbeing research from the discipline of politics (Bache and Scott, 2018, 3). But political scientists have now begun to investigate how particular values and interests are represented in debates focused on wellbeing for policy – including how wellbeing is framed, how power relations shape wellbeing, legitimacy claims and public deliberation, who gets excluded, and how it is used to shape both policy decisions and political ideologies (Bache and Scott, 2018, 3, 6). Thus, they emphasise wellbeing as a fluid, rather than a fixed concept. Human geographers have also provided critical analysis of the politics of wellbeing, emphasising the primacy of the intersubjective above the individual account of wellbeing, to reveal ‘the embodied sense of self as deeply embedded within wider systems of recognition and misrecognition’ (Atkinson, 2013, 142). Sociologists have set out to demonstrate how this politics of recognition and distribution can be useful in explaining why equality is a more powerful factor than wealth in shaping happiness. Defining happiness as a set of ‘emotions [which] are individually felt but also intersubjectively achieved’, Holmes and McKenzie (2019, 440) open up scrutiny of the impact of political processes of marginalisation, discrimination, disrespect and socio-economic polarisation on socially differentiated experiences of happiness.

These considerations have long been the concern of development economists who have adopted a capabilities approach to wellbeing. This is characterised as the potential people have to realise their own goals through the material and symbolic resources available to them (Sen, 1999). For White, this definition remains too individualistic, failing to acknowledge how such goals and values are always already relational, and subject to unequal power relations (White, 2017). One of the key insights here is that the contemporary research and policy interest in wellbeing is produced within a political-economic

context which has itself prioritised the individual and cumulatively destroyed the value of the relational, social and civil society. Yet it is these very same modern forms of subjectivity which are measured through mainstream wellbeing research, rather than any essential or universal attribute (White, 2017). As Singh and Alexandrova (2020) have recently argued, there is thus a pressing need to decolonise wellbeing research, in particular the happiness economics approach described in the first section. In this way, happiness economists ‘are set on a universal range of factors and on estimating their context-free average coefficient’ (Singh and Alexandrova, 2020, 240; see also Pykett and Cromby, 2017). It is no coincidence that much of the relational account of wellbeing has been forwarded by scholars experienced in social research in non-Western, economically and culturally diverse contexts, where the modern idea of the individual self may not be so domineering. This strand of research has also long criticised the colonising knowledge practices of economics more broadly (McGregor and Pouw, 2017, 1124).

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this edited collection is to try to include these many different components and narratives of wellbeing in an account of why wellbeing matters in social research. The chapters cover a range of empirical sites, and are organised into three broad themes: Approaching Wellbeing; Practicing Wellbeing; and Where Next for Wellbeing. Each section starts with a commentary from globally leading researchers with expertise on wellbeing, followed by the chapter contributions.

Part I on Approaching Wellbeing outlines the state of the art for current wellbeing research, asking what do we know about wellbeing? Sarah Atkinson starts in a provocative style, setting out the disadvantages of wellbeing research, questioning the usefulness of the application of the concept as a means for changing the status quo. She emphasises how the chapters in the first part offer a point of entry for breaking out of engrained ways of thinking about wellbeing and entrenched assumptions about human nature. Julia Zielke offers a feminist and queer epistemological framework to critique the politically charged, persistent and deep-rooted structural injustices that are often ignored in contemporary policy discourse of wellbeing. The key premise being that the master’s tools (the practices of powerful institutions) perpetuate rather than challenge the way resources and power are distributed in society, thus creating the very inequalities that undermine wellbeing.

Moving on to Marxist theory, David Watson explores alienation and paradox of capitalism, which violates opportunities to realise a way of life in line with human nature and enables wellbeing, whilst creating new opportunities to expand the economic system out of which the wellbeing crisis has

emerged. Watson argues for extending a Marxian understanding of species being, to include use value, as the basis for an open-ended approach to human wellbeing. Mark Cieslik considers wellbeing as a cultural practice, shaped by social structures, and embedded in the myriad shifting relationships and roles that constitute people's lives. This rare longitudinal qualitative study shows us wellbeing is a dynamic process, which reinforces the importance of not just looking at the objective conditions of people's lives, but understanding the subjectivities of wellbeing as they unfold across life stories. The first part finishes with Thomas Smith and Kelly Dombroski's postcapitalist call to reclaim wellbeing from a narrow individualistic, psychological understanding, and reframe it as a socio-economic concept. As such the wellbeing emphasis is on care and 'commoning', embedded in economic practices of surviving well together.

The focus of Part II is Practicing Wellbeing. Here we consider what wellbeing is for and what it means for specific groups or spaces. Building on some of the themes in Part I, the chapters in this section show wellbeing consists of individual material, subjective and relational dimensions, but is also impacted by social structures and systems, compounded by socio-cultural norms and gendered inequalities. Neil Thin starts by reminding us that a wellbeing lens implies positivity, lives which are going well. This, as he points out, clashes with the often negative context of the situated experiences recorded in the chapters in this section. Yet by focusing on suffering and marginalisation, he highlights how the authors give voice to people in diverse places who aspire to live well, moving them beyond being a victim or sufferer. Marginalised groups are the focus of several chapters in this section. Fabio Tartarini considers the wellbeing of prisoners. Whilst being in prison is not expected to be a good experience, neglecting prisoner wellbeing can be severely detrimental to the individual and society. Drawing on prisoners' experiences Tartarini argues that a focus on protective practices in prisons rather than risk factors could be a more effective strategy in reducing negative behaviours and outcomes, such as reoffending or suicide. Fazecha Azmi exposes stories of war widows in post-war Sri-Lanka and how they negotiate their wellbeing. The research demonstrates how wellbeing is a dynamic, multi-dimensional concept that is context-specific with intergenerational implications. The agency of widows to manage their and their children's wellbeing is unevenly distributed between the household level, where they have power and influence, and the community level where they mediate wellbeing in a 'silent way'.

Against a background of increased Islamophobia in Europe, Laura Kapinga and Bettina Bock argue that wellbeing research in the field of urban planning needs to engage with the post-secular nature of society. They explore how being situated in different urban places can engender feelings of being in or out of place among Muslim university students in the Netherlands. They highlight

the complexity and contradictions of in/materiality, in/visibility and il/legitimacy, arguing for more inclusive religious spaces to enhance wellbeing. Maria Jesus Alfaro-Simmonds' research explores children's wellbeing in urban settings in Lima, Peru. She uncovers the complexity behind the way in which children and adolescents experience happiness, as being situated in the nature and quality of public spaces in the city. Issues of perceived social dangers, insecurity as well as economic accessibility differentiate experiences of young children and adolescents. Similar to Kapinga and Bock, Alfaro-Simmonds argues for more inclusive urban design. This needs to go beyond child-specific spaces to consider young people's engagement with all aspects of their urban settings.

Staying with an urban context Magdalena Górczyńska-Angiulli and Elise Machline look at housing policy in Luxembourg, to explore inequalities in access to affordable housing and the consequences for wellbeing. The research shows how policy goals to link quality housing and wellbeing are artificial. A paradox exists in that rents for affordable homes are beyond the means of eligible populations, and lets are based on meeting income thresholds, rather than priority needs. A way forward is suggested by empowering tenants through tenant-led housing projects (similar to other nations) as a means of meeting housing needs and enhancing wellbeing. To complete this Part, we move from the built to the natural environment. Heli Gittins, Sophie Wynne-Jones and Val Morrison look to Nature Based Interventions as a means of harnessing local environmental resources for wellbeing benefits of marginalised social groups in Wales. Their research shows that participation in an active woodland initiative was not only beneficial for mental wellbeing, but also provided the catalyst for positive changes in habits and behaviours of participants beyond the programme.

The third Part of the book looks towards future directions asking Where Next For Wellbeing Research? To what extent can wellbeing guide the future of people and planet? For Susan J Elliott the concept of wellbeing is quite simple, occupying the space between expectation and reality. What is more complex, and reflecting the discussions throughout this volume, is how this concept is theorised, conceptualised and operationalised. This is not only relative to human-human relationships but also relative to place and the context within which wellbeing happens. Wellbeing offers the means, rather than the ends, by which we can move to a new future. The first step, however, is defining the future to which we aspire.

Martijn Hendriks considers the global wellbeing potential of migration. Whilst the impact, as demonstrated in chapters throughout this volume, is individual and context-specific, overall it seems that international migration does contribute to human happiness across the globe. Whilst opening international borders could facilitate global happiness, it needs to be supported by better

integration policies and improved communication about immigrant life in host countries. Kelly Biedenweg and David J Trimbach suggest integrating wellbeing with natural resource management to provide a progressive worldview that recognises how social systems are inextricably a part of natural ecosystems. They argue for a focus on capabilities and a more human wellbeing centred understanding of international conservation and development. In particular the chapter presents a case for ‘buen vivir’ (good living) as a post-growth development alternative.

Turning to another set of international developments, Arthur Grimes, the former Chairman and Chief Economist of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand, also considers the capabilities approach. He contrasts this with utilitarian approaches and the incorporation of wellbeing into public policy and budgetary decision making across six nations. The country examples suggest that overarching wellbeing frameworks, whilst expanding the field of economics, have not (yet) been successful in modifying policy-making towards a greater focus on residents’ wellbeing; instead, micro-oriented approaches appear to offer a more coherent way forward. Beverley A Searle finishes the collection with a consideration of the potential for wellbeing to be part of the process for achieving a different kind of future. Despite 30 years of sustainability policy agendas, addressing global inequalities and injustices remains an urgent challenge. What is needed is a fundamental change, or transformation, across many systems of processes, practices, beliefs and behaviours. The chapter builds a framework to show how changes in systems of subjective wellbeing are an important co-evolving part of the process contributing to the whole systems transformational change that is needed.

CONCLUSION

As is by now clear, wellbeing research is diverse in its approaches and extensive in the ranges of sites, practices and phenomena studied, highlighting its complexity. One can no longer, if it were ever possible, hope to provide a comprehensive review of the now immense volume of contemporary research on wellbeing. Instead we offer some thematic and practical pathways through which to **adopt a wellbeing lens on social research more broadly**. The central claim is that the way we think and talk about wellbeing matters. It matters to the kinds of research questions we ask, the scope, scale and remit of research enquiry, the cases we select and the methodological approaches we pursue. How we think about wellbeing shapes the impacts, policies and actions which follow on from, or indeed co-constitute wellbeing research. As we have alluded, a key part of this debate is whether wellbeing is seen as an outcome or process. This raises further questions of whether wellbeing should be the goal of policy or the means of challenging existing systems and overturning

the status quo. Our aim is therefore to explore the links between wellbeing research and transformational change, noting that good wellbeing supports transformation and transformation supports good wellbeing (Searle, Chapter 18 this volume).

Through this volume we call for different ways of knowing. A process-based account of wellbeing generates a focus on value, empathy, sharing, and caring for the common good. The dynamic and social nature of wellbeing demonstrates that declines in empirically measurable wellbeing need not be debilitating but can provide the catalyst for positive political change. Importantly, these perspectives demonstrate that wellbeing is not only something out there to be discovered, measured and assessed, but is embedded in cultural practices and structures. Collectively, we demonstrate that the situated physical environment of particular wide-ranging empirical sites (prisons, forests, housing, urban design) is important. But also that there are key social and political dynamics to attend to, such as the social construction of those places, how we are treated or perceived by others, the right to have one's claims for living well heard and acted upon.

Engaging in research based on this situated and socially differentiated sense of wellbeing is not about an unrealistic ideal of promoting perpetual happiness, but a realistic understanding of life experiences and challenges. Adopting an inclusive wellbeing approach, the focus shifts to understanding how particular dimensions of life come to matter, to be valued, to particular groups of people in specific situations. In this sense, researching wellbeing as a process is about gaining a sense of how particular beliefs, motivation and capability are put to work to shape outcomes. Furthermore, applying relational wellbeing ensures we recognise wellbeing is simultaneously an individual and shared experience – of our relationships with each other as well as with the physical and natural environment. Relational wellbeing requires the consideration of multiple knowledges and a sense of how they are ascribed value. Many chapters in this volume highlight the detrimental effect to wellbeing of existing systems and power structures, conflict, and cultural practices. Wellbeing research can also provide the means through which the changes needed can be achieved. The more inclusive and plural disciplinary approach to wellbeing research we envisage is helpful in establishing whose knowledges come to matter, what values and goals are pursued in the name of wellbeing, and how more diverse methods and standpoints can contribute to wellbeing research and global policy debates.

The complexity of wellbeing makes it challenging to pin down, but it is this very multiplicity of wellbeing that provides the basis for transformation. The transformational potential of wellbeing lies in a new focus not on 'what works' but 'how and why things do (or do not) work', 'how and why we behave the way we do' and 'why things are the way they are'. This means engaging with our

histories, understanding how we got here, as well as our futures; understanding where we want to go. A research focus on transformation means moving beyond incremental change or reform at the individual or organisational level. Changing one element in the system is not enough. We need greater ruptures to penetrate across multiple existing systems of practices, beliefs, behaviours and narratives. The fundamental changes necessary to overcome global challenges need to occur at a whole systems level, and wellbeing research is one element of the imperative to generate change.

This transformational change is not something that can be assessed exclusively via the kinds of programmes or projects represented in many chapters in this volume. Indeed whole systems evaluation is an area that is still in the early stages of development (Quinn Patton, 2019). Nonetheless this volume collectively points us in the direction for shaping the sometimes far-reaching and enduring changes which are envisaged by social researchers and others. Transformative potential lies in shifting cultures of practice that break negative feedback loops and promote positive wellbeing. Enabling a shift in culture away from othering, exclusion, environmental degradation and punishment, and towards acceptance, inclusion and empowerment could aid the promotion of human flourishing, collective action and planetary wellbeing.

What wellbeing research offers that is unique is a co-evolving transformation of the self with the transformation of the multiple systems of society. Zielke (Chapter 3) for example challenges us to think of our own knowledge as partial, making space for multiple integrated perspectives, and breaking down the walls that exclude marginal voices. This raises questions about what different ways of understanding wellbeing would we research. What different solutions, policy recommendations and interventions may we find if we allowed a more diverse range of perspectives and more open definitions of wellbeing to be heard?

At the time of writing (October 2020) the world is still experiencing its greatest health pandemic, Covid-19. This has not only upended economic and social systems but has exposed deeply ingrained inequalities and injustices. A palatable sense of possibility and transformational change seems to be within grasp. The research in this volume demonstrates how wellbeing could form the foundations of a new post-pandemic world. Fundamental questions of social difference, interconnection, inequity, common values and diverse wellbeing needs are cast in a new light. Wellbeing research has the potential to inform how we can best support each other towards the kind of future we collectively envision. Researching wellbeing provides the means for actively being, engaging, imagining and forming new worlds. To borrow from Gibson-Graham (2008), the opportunity arises not only in terms of what wellbeing *says* about the world, but what it can *do* to the world and *how* it can do it, namely, the identification of what *could be*. This sense of imagination

is not well-served by wellbeing metrics and evidence alone. Where wellbeing research contributes to a different worldview, we can see existing problems from a different perspective. This opens up the tantalising potential for identifying different solutions and making alternate futures possible.

But there is no magic bullet here. Wellbeing research will only be of value where it is put into practice. This means not only putting wellbeing evidence to work, but examining the politics of how knowledge about wellbeing is produced and acted upon. It is only through navigating this sense of contestation that we can think about wellbeing as a transformative lens for action. We hope this volume takes us a step closer.

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