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Relational Wellbeing: A Theoretical and Operational Approach

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Abstract:

Relational wellbeing is an emergent construct grounded in the interpretivist tradition in social science. It approaches people as subjects, and aims to understand the ways they see the world in as near to their own terms as possible. This contrasts with mainstream approaches to subjective dimensions of wellbeing in psychology and economics, which take a positivist approach, positioning people as objects, whose variability is to be investigated through observation rather than inter-locution. Since the recent upsurge in interest in wellbeing has focused on its subjective dimensions, or 'happiness', it seems paradoxical that the social science traditions that emphasise subjectivity should thus far have been marginalised in wellbeing debates. This paper draws together recent contributions which take a more relational, qualitative approach, as a step towards reversing this trend. The final section considers how relational wellbeing may be operationalised in policy and practice.

'We are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.'
(Hannah Arendt 1958:7-8 in Scott 2012:15)

Keywords

relational wellbeing; subjective wellbeing; subjectivity; qualitative methods; policy and practice

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1. Introduction

A recent newspaper interview with Daniel Kahneman gives the following account of his current project:

‘The next problem on his list is “noise”, or random variability: the fact that different people in the same situation make very different judgments. Random error is a very different phenomenon from the systematic biases he’s been studying for several decades. It’s the kind of error you can’t reliably predict. Noise, he says, applies to people approving loans, to underwriters, to radiologists. One worker might be more optimistic than another, say, and it becomes difficult to ensure uniformity. “Mood is noxious. Noise is costly to organisations, which are essentially factories for making decisions. If another underwriter had seen that case he would put a different premium on it ...”

Shariatmadari (2015)

This is, by any standards, a remarkably ambitious project. The idea that one should seek to eliminate the ‘noise’ of individual mood and personality in order to improve company performance is understandable in terms of an industry interest in delivering a standard product. At another level, however, the desire to screen out what is distinctively human seems profoundly disconcerting. The fact that this should come from one of the most renowned contemporary psychologists of wellbeing gives pause for thought. Reading against the grain, however, one might say that the issue of ‘noise’ provides a key fault-line in current debates about wellbeing. The specificities of cultural or personal meanings which are to qualitative researchers the stuff of wellbeing, are to quantitative researchers like Kahnemann unhelpful noise that need to be filtered out, to produce ‘clean’ data of maximum comparability. This methodological difference also marks a difference in the type of interest in wellbeing. One is primarily evaluative, seeking to use levels of wellbeing as a marker for example of national progress or programme success. The other is more substantive, interested in the experience of wellbeing, in *how* people are doing when they say they are doing well.

This paper puts forward the concept of ‘relational wellbeing’ (RWB), an emergent construct that seeks to offer a way of listening to the ‘noise’ of wellbeing. Relational wellbeing is grounded in the interpretivist tradition in social science, which approaches people as subjects, and aims to understand the ways they see the world in as near to their own terms as possible. This contrasts with the positivism of the mainstream approaches, which positions people as objects, whose variability is to be investigated through observation rather than inter-locution. Since the recent upsurge in interest in wellbeing has focused on its subjective dimensions, or ‘happiness’, it seems paradoxical that the social science traditions that emphasise subjectivity should thus far have been marginalised in wellbeing debates. This paper draws together recent contributions which take an interpretivist approach, as a step towards reversing this trend.

¹The interview is headed, ‘What would I eliminate if I had a magic wand? Over-confidence.’ Whether this was intended irony, given the excessively ambitious character of Kahneman’s current project, I am not sure.

While this paper is the first to my knowledge to seek to propose relational wellbeing as a distinct sub-field, the approach – and indeed the term itself – can be discerned from the convergence of work of a number of scholars working quite independently, mainly, though not exclusively, on or in the global South. The result is a set of approaches which share some ‘family’ resemblances, rather than a single, authorised theory. Challenging the dominance of psychology and economics in framing contemporary conceptions of wellbeing, these perspectives are informed by development studies, social anthropology or human geography. They are primarily qualitative in orientation, though also include mixed methods.

The starting point is to approach people as subjects who are formed within a specific social and cultural context. This leads on to looking beyond thoughts and emotions to emphasise also materiality, which in turn directs attention to the effects of social structure and of place. Just as subjectivity emerges through relationality, so wellbeing is seen as social or collective, going beyond the individual. Relationships thus form a central focus, as both the means through which (psychological and material) goods are distributed and needs are met, and as intrinsic to the constitution and experience of wellbeing. For Haidt (2006:236–7) thus, ‘Happiness comes from between’, emerging through ‘right relationships’ with work, with others, and with ‘something larger than yourself’. Some scholars take relationality further, to see wellbeing as active and dynamic, constituted through the interplay of personal, social and environmental processes. Finally, scholars of relational wellbeing are leading the argument for more critical analysis of the activity of wellbeing research, viewing different disciplines and their epistemologies and methods as not simply reflecting, but also helping to constitute, the diverse accounts of wellbeing.

Table 1 sets out some of the main differences between relational and psychological and subjective wellbeing approaches. Such a device necessarily emphasises difference and suppresses similarity. As such it fails to capture nuance, or the ways in which approaches blend one into another. Nevertheless, it offers a convenient shorthand way to capture some key distinctions of basic orientation which will be explored in more details in the course of this paper.

Table 1. Key differences between subjective or psychological and relational wellbeing approaches

	SWB/PWB	RWB
Core disciplines	Psychology/economics	Anthropology/geography/sociology
Primary location	Global North	Global South
Epistemology	Positivist	Interpretivist
Core methodology	Quantitative	Qualitative
Orientation	Universalist	Contextual
Site of wellbeing	Individual	Relational
WB grounded in	Science	Politics
Core interest	Evaluative	Substantive
Relationship of objective subjective	External (independent to dependent variable)	Mutually imbricated / co-constituting
WB imagined as	State	Process

The paper begins with a summary introduction to the mainstream approaches in the field of wellbeing. It then describes relational wellbeing in more detail, setting out how it both builds on and provides some major challenges to the dominant conceptions and the ways these have been mobilised in policy. The final section considers how relational wellbeing may be operationalised in policy and practice.

2. Wellbeing: the mainstream approaches

Wellbeing is an infamously broad term, used in a wide variety of ways across a range of disciplines (Gasper 2010, Gough and McGregor 2007, Haybron 2008, Scott 2012, Sointu 2005). From the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century its measurement in public policy was dominated by ‘social’ or ‘quality of life’ indicators, which were developed to counter-balance the dominant emphasis on income in national statistics (Noll 2002). While important work continues to be done on social indicators, this has been somewhat eclipsed by an upsurge of interest in subjective wellbeing (SWB). SWB was in part nurtured by research on social indicators and quality of life (e.g. Andrews and Withey 1976) but it has come to be something of a cuckoo in the nest, displacing – and often failing to acknowledge – these earlier bodies of work (Maggino and Raviglioni 2011, Michalos 2011). SWB research has been led on the one hand by economics, following especially Easterlin’s (1974) questioning of the equation between income and happiness (see e.g. Graham 2011) and on the other by psychology, following especially the launch of ‘positive psychology’ in the USA, 1998 (see e.g. Diener 2000). SWB constructs consist of measures of life satisfaction and/or measures of emotional experience (‘affect’). Its great advantage is the relative absence of ‘noise’, since SWB seeks to provide a metric simply for how happy or satisfied people are in their own terms, leaving aside the question of how they define that happiness or satisfaction. Recent work, however, has questioned the equivalence of measures of life satisfaction and affect, showing in particular that the former tend to correlate with economic status while the later may not (e.g. Diener et al, 2010, Graham and Nikolova 2015) .

Stone and Mackie (2013) therefore suggest a new term of 'experienced wellbeing' (ExWB) to distinguish measures of affect more clearly from those of life satisfaction, or what they label 'evaluative wellbeing', and measures of a sense of meaning, purpose or value in life, which they term 'eudaemonic wellbeing'.²

Psychological wellbeing (PWB) approaches seek to go beyond measuring levels of 'feeling good' to consider more substantively what *is* good for people, conceived as optimal psychological functioning (e.g. Ryff 1989, Ryff and Singer 2006) or the ability to meet core psychological needs (Ryan and Deci 2001). In doing so they emphasise eudaemonic understandings of wellbeing, which they contrast with the 'hedonic' approach of SWB. This distinction is traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, identifying eudaemonic approaches with Aristotle's ideas of a good and flourishing life as one lived according to virtue, and hedonic approaches with Epicurus, who is said to have placed primary value on pleasurable experience. As with any use of ancient philosophers to voice contemporary debates, there is considerable variability in the ways that the views of Aristotle and Epicurus are presented, and I am not competent to judge the relative accuracy of these.³ However, it seems to me wise to exercise care in mapping philosophies regarding the grounds of happiness or wellbeing onto either emotional experience or means of assessment. People may feel happy, for example, due to the sense of purpose or meaning in their lives. It would seem odd to identify this as reflecting hedonism. Conversely, if the purpose that drives them is to achieve fame and fortune, it would seem mistaken to view this as a eudaemonic approach to wellbeing. The abstraction of many assessment methods means that we simply do not know how people understand the happiness or satisfaction to which they refer.

The more substantive orientation of psychological wellbeing approaches results in a number of areas of overlap with relational wellbeing. One of Ryff's six domains of psychological wellbeing is 'positive relations with others'. One of the three basic psychological needs identified by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is relatedness. The two other needs, for autonomy and competence (both of which appear also in Ryff's domains⁴) are also relationally grounded, concerning relations between the self and others on the one hand, and between the self and its environment on the other. I discuss this further below.

The capability approach offers a further influential form in which wellbeing has been conceptualised in contemporary public policy. The primary emphasis is material rather than psychological, concerned with 'the alternative combinations of things a person is able to be or do' (Sen 1993: 30) or the scope to achieve 'valued functionings'. These range from meeting basic needs such as being adequately nourished, to more psychological and relational factors, such as 'achieving self-respect or being socially integrated' (Sen 1993: 31). The scope to have positive relations with others thus certainly belongs to those capabilities that people 'value and have reason to value'.

² Stone and Mackie (2013: 3) identify eudaemonic dimensions as in 'some ways separate but also intertwined with the evaluative and experienced dimensions' of subjective wellbeing.

³ Haybron (2008) provides an extended, stimulating discussion of philosophies of wellbeing.

⁴ As autonomy and 'environmental mastery' respectively

However, perhaps the primary form in which relationality appears in the capability approach is more parabolic, as the implicit shadow to its stress on agency and freedom. As Sen (1992:51) states, 'Acting freely and being able to choose are, in this view, directly conducive to wellbeing'. The value of agency and freedom is, for Sen, pre-eminent. Citing the example of Gandhi's hunger strikes, he states, 'Agency encompasses all the goals that a person has reasons to adopt, which can *inter alia* include goals other than the advancement of his or her own well-being.' (Sen 2009: 287).

Like relational wellbeing, the capability approach recognises the importance of context. Sen refuses to identify any universal list of capabilities, insisting that these must be defined through 'public reasoning'. This is very far from cultural relativism, however, as Sen emphasises that capabilities reflect what people 'have reason to value', not simply whatever they might choose. His colleague Martha Nussbaum has produced a universal list⁵, but deliberately keeps it general, to allow 'the possibility of multiple specifications of each of the components' (Nussbaum 2000: 93).⁶ Both authors show considerable faith in the capacity of processes of argumentation to deliver rational and beneficial outcomes. While relational wellbeing concurs with the importance of discussion, it lays much greater stress on the power dimensions of this, and tends to investigate agenda-setting and forms of social bias at a more fundamental level. The two approaches also differ in disciplinary and methodological terms, as the capability approach is grounded in economic philosophy, while relational wellbeing looks to ethnography and the qualitative social sciences. Perhaps in consequence, they differ most fundamentally in their view of the human subject. The capability approach ultimately relates wellbeing to an individualised subject, the sovereign rights-holder of liberal-democratic discourse. Relational wellbeing, as discussed further below, views wellbeing (and in some versions, subjects themselves) as emergent through the interplay of personal, societal, and environmental processes.

3. Relational Wellbeing

Whereas the dominant approaches seek to abstract from context (filter out the noise) to derive an approach that can be claimed to be universal, relational wellbeing holds that notions of wellbeing are socially and culturally constructed, rooted in a particular time and place (Atkinson *et al.* 2012). Attention thus concentrates on investigating what wellbeing means to the people who are the subjects of research (see e.g. Atkinson *et al.* 2012, Calestani 2013, Fischer 2014, Jackson 2011, Jimenez ed. 2008, Mathews and Izquierdo ed. 2008, Thin 2012, White ed. 2015). This sometimes results in explicit calls for inter-cultural dialogue (e.g. Rodríguez 2015). The core interest of relational wellbeing is thus substantive, rather than evaluative. It seeks to understand a particular context or individual in its own terms, rather than rank it against some other. This section outlines some of the key elements that emerge from this approach.

⁵ In fact several, as she recurrently updates it.

⁶ A caveat must be noted, however, regarding the strong terms in which Nussbaum denounces 'cultural relativism', and her identification in moral terms of 'the relationship between culture and justice' (Nussbaum and Glover 1995:6). These suggest some doubt as to the range of 'specifications' that Nussbaum would deem to be legitimate.

Asked to describe what wellbeing means, people rarely refer to themselves alone. Rather, their answers include – at least – the wellbeing of those who are close to them. Wellbeing, that is, is understood in collective terms, as not the property of individuals but something that belongs to and emerges through relationships with others (Christopher 1999). This is particularly evident in studies outside the West, where people tend to lay greater emphasis on collective identities and relationships of (often unequal) reciprocity, but the sense of ‘being-in-relation’ is also found in everyday ways that people in the West talk about wellbeing. Some scholars use the term relational wellbeing to highlight the significance to wellbeing of the health and quality of relationships and the work people put into maintaining them (e.g. Huovinen and Blackmore 2015). McGregor (2015) identifies relationships as ‘the stuff that makes it work or not’, the many forms of association through which goods are distributed and needs are met or denied. Relationships thus appear as a key resource which people nurture, invest in – and may seek to escape from, in order to evade the claims of others (Ferguson 1997).

Seeing wellbeing in collective terms raises the classic moral dilemma of whose wellbeing matters and where the boundaries are to be drawn (‘who is my neighbour?’). It does, however, recover the main tradition in political economy, where – stretching back to Aristotle’s *Politics* – the wellbeing of the polity was the primary concern, and the wellbeing of citizens seen to derive from this (Sointu 2005, Deneulin, pers.comm.). The idea of collective wellbeing as a common good comprising social cohesion, shared values, safety and security also has considerable political traction especially in urban neighbourhoods.

To see wellbeing as a collective good does not imply the denial of politics. In Latin America, where indigenous views of wellbeing have been incorporated into political discourse, ethnographic studies point out difference and disputes within even ‘the same’ cultural communities, let alone between different people groups (e.g. Calestani 2013, Loera-González 2015, Rodríguez 2015). These are not simply the inevitable differences of personality, but also reflect places of residence – the countryside or the city – and positioning by social structure, of age, wealth, gender, or generation. This indicates the importance of social structure, such that gender, age or occupation, for example, constitute clear markers of difference in both ideologies of wellbeing (what it is to live a good life as a man or as a woman of a certain age) and in the achievement of wellbeing in material, social, and psychological terms.

Relational wellbeing goes beyond psychology to stress materiality, that how people *feel* about their lives cannot be abstracted from how they are doing in social, political and economic terms. This again reflects empirical research, as asked about their experience of wellbeing, people persistently mix together ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ dimensions which are treated as quite distinct in the literature (e.g. Woodcock et al. 2009). Research in the global South in particular has found that people frequently refer first to economic resources when asked about wellbeing. However, they also conceive of the economic in fundamentally social terms. The following response by a Zambian village man is typical:

“Most essential thing I want to say is that one must be able to have sufficient food for him and also his family.”

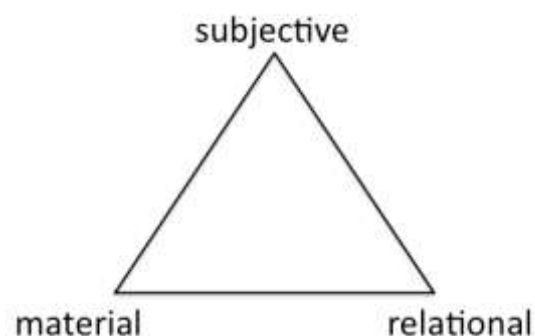
(White and Ramirez 2015:125).

People also commonly respond to questions about subjective experience by referring to objective circumstances. Thus an Indian village woman, asked about harmony in her family, explained that there is harmony now because they are economically better off, which makes life less stressful (White and Jha 2015:160). Jackson (2011) amongst many others emphasizes the importance of grounding cultural representations of wellbeing in material contexts – such as pervasive scarcity. Brangan (2015) shows how this is policy-relevant as she contrasts professional constructions of ‘health behaviour’ with the meanings and practicalities of physical activity in a South African township.

This indicates another important dimension of materiality: place. Running through Haybron’s (2008) philosophical discussion of ‘the elusive psychology of wellbeing’ is a contrast between two places, with differing ways of life, and the different groundings for happiness these provide. The significance of place is also a major theme amongst geographers of wellbeing, many of whom take a relational approach (e.g. Atkinson et al. 2012; Fleuret and Atkinson 2007). Awareness of place also draws attention to the interconnections between the environment and human wellbeing, as discussed further below.

Taken together, these points suggest that in people’s experience at least, material, relational and subjective dimensions of wellbeing are mutually imbricated and co-constituting (see Gough and McGregor 2007). Thus the rice which is emblematic of Bangladeshi conceptions of wellbeing is not simply a source of calories, but is a condensed symbol of community – those you eat with and those you do not – of love, identity, nourishment, entitlement and belonging (White 2010). When seen like this, simple oppositions between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ wellbeing begin to dissolve. In seeking to visualise this, the initial image used was a triangle, as in Figure 1, to emphasise the interdependence of the three dimensions (White 2010: 161). As described below, this has been superseded by an image which captures better the dynamics of process or flow between the different elements.

Figure 1. The Dimensions of Relational wellbeing (mark 1)



In sketching out the key themes within relational wellbeing approaches, it is important to be clear about how they differ from the dominant approaches and where they overlap. Scholars of subjective and psychological wellbeing and the capability approach also recognise the significance of culture, material sufficiency, security and good relationships. The differences lie in the way they envisage the relationship to wellbeing. For most psychologists, constructions of culture follow the dominant framing of a major axis of difference between the individualism of the West and the collectivism of the East.⁷ The following is a classic expression of this view:

‘well-being for collectivists depends on fitting in and having good relationships with the in-group which requires close attention to the norms of the in-group, while for individualists it depends on satisfaction with the self, and the emotions associated with self-satisfaction.’

(Suh et al. 1998)

This clearly considers culture to be implicated in the construction of wellbeing, but sees culture in a rather limited way, as a linear global scale against which particular societies can be plotted (Miller 2002).

On the face of it the individualism/collectivism binary is not a particular concern for SWB, since its slim measures of self-assessment do not concern themselves with the grounds of the ratings.⁸ Nevertheless, cultural differences are found in the levels of average scores. Thus Diener *et al.* (2000) report that (white) Americans tend to give higher average scores than do East Asians, particularly when it comes to ‘global’ life satisfaction. The authors suggest this reflects a ‘positivity disposition’ which varies by culture.⁹ What is important for the present purposes is to note that subjective wellbeing constructs the links primarily in exterior terms. The term ‘social determinant’ expresses this well. Thus income, culture, or relationship status may all be constructed as ‘social determinants’ whose impact on wellbeing should be assessed, with wellbeing itself defined in standardised cognitive (satisfaction with life) or affective terms (the predominance of ‘positive’ emotions). For psychological wellbeing, Karasawa et al.’s (2011) paper on aging and wellbeing suggests a potentially different approach. This is that emotions themselves may be constructed differently in the USA and Japan, such that in Japan:

‘there is no cultural prescription for feeling mostly positive emotion and not feeling much negative. If anything, there is socialization to feel both, as strands of a rope that are woven together.’

(Ryff, in Frenkel 2012)

In general, psychological wellbeing approaches envisage a more interior connection

⁷ The location of ‘West’ and ‘East’ is clearly mythic. The most common actual locations seem to be the USA and ‘East Asia’, especially Japan.

⁸ Whether the measures are in fact entirely culture-free may be disputed, of course, since even the slimmest reflects a particular framing.

⁹ Others might see this in more ideological terms – see e.g. Held (2002) on ‘the tyranny of the positive’ in the USA, Ehrenreich (2009), and Ahmed (2010).

with wellbeing than does SWB, at least when it comes to relatedness and culture.¹⁰ As noted above, relatedness is one of SDT's three psychological needs. While wellbeing is still seen as the property of an individual, the individual seems to be construed in more relational terms. Similarly, while Ryan and Deci strongly maintain that the three basic psychological needs are universal, they admit that culture may shape the form in which they are expressed. Focusing on autonomy in particular, as the most culturally loaded term, they assert this is defined as the opposite of heteronomy, or being denied any choice, not of dependence. Someone who personally identifies with the values of his or her group (as in a so-called 'collectivist culture') and therefore chooses to follow them, would therefore be expressing autonomy. Miller *et al.* (2011) have tested this with matching sets of North Americans and Hindus in India and confirm both that choice or autonomy is important for satisfaction and that people can experience a sense of choice in contexts where they also feel a sense of duty – doing one's duty can be a positive experience. Despite this theoretical support, however, Miller *et al.* (2011:58) state that coding in widely used SDT questionnaires is problematic. These interpret references to duty as indicating an absence of choice or autonomy, and so implicitly identify autonomy with individualism, despite the stated views of SDT theorists.

In the capability approach the mix is different again. Here the material concerns of being able to support oneself and one's family, or being able to be safe from crime or violence, do constitute core capabilities that are therefore constituents of wellbeing. Scope for the contextual determination of what wellbeing means is also given in the stress on 'public reasoning' noted above. At the same time, it has to be said that the approach to culture in the capability approach is generally rather negative. While Sen does not use the word 'culture', it is clearly lurking behind his analysis of 'perception biases' relating to the perceived contribution to the household of Indian women (Sen 1991). His later work on cultural liberty constitutes an unashamedly robust assertion of liberalism:

'Individuals have to shed rigid identities if they are to become part of diverse societies and uphold cosmopolitan values of tolerance and respect for human rights'

(UNDP 2004: 23)

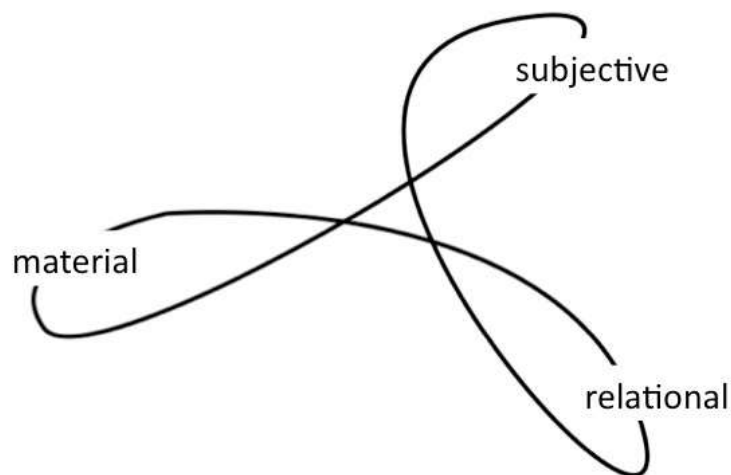
Reflecting across the different approaches, the main variability lies not so much in the factors that are seen to be important, but in the ways that the relations between those factors are construed. A continuum can be discerned from the more linear, external relationships envisaged by SWB, through progressively more interior, constitutive inter-relations in psychological wellbeing, the capability approach, to relational wellbeing. These conceptual differences are of course intimately connected to research methods. While qualitative narratives can handle flow, ambivalence and polyvocal meanings, quantitative methods seek to demonstrate in a more mechanical way the presence (or absence) of a causal relationship between independently derived variables. The

¹⁰ Neither Ryff, nor Ryan and Deci, include in their frameworks more material considerations, such as income or security, though they could perhaps be related to the domain of 'environmental mastery' and the psychological need of 'competence', respectively.

significance of methods in producing different accounts of wellbeing is discussed further below.

The importance of process to notions of relational wellbeing caused re-consideration of the triangle image given in Figure 1. On reflection this seemed too structural, and too static. An updated version thus retains the sense of co-construction and inter-relationship, but captures in addition a sense of movement or flow. This is given in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2 The Dimensions of Relational Wellbeing (mark 2)



4. Wellbeing as Process

A further characteristic of relational wellbeing – which some, but not all relational wellbeing scholars share – is to view wellbeing as process or flow, something that *happens*, rather than a state to be achieved. A first move in this direction is to conceive wellbeing in terms of activity. The Psycho-social Assessment of Development and Humanitarian Interventions project (PADHI) identified domains of wellbeing through ethnographic enquiry in Sri Lanka. They characterize these domains in active terms: *accessing* valued resources; *experiencing* competence and self-worth; *exercising* participation; *building* social connections; *enhancing* physical and psychological wellness (Abeyasekera 2014:42–44). Izquierdo (2009:84) similarly presents wellbeing amongst the Matsigenka people in Peru in terms of the strength to do valued activities (‘work, hunt, and fish; care for family members; keep good social relations; and keep malevolent spirits at bay’). Thapan (2003) stresses the importance of work to women’s sense of wellbeing in Delhi slums. Jha and White (2015) designate the construction of wellbeing itself as a kind of work, as they reflect on the attention, activities and self-restraint through which women in their Indian research promote and maintain good relations in the family.

Viewing wellbeing as process also appears in attention to life-course and the way that current understandings of wellbeing incorporate reflections on the past and expectations of the future, both for individuals (Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008, White 2002, Huovinen and Blackmore 2015) and for communities (Loera-González 2015 and

Rodríguez 2015). A further example is to emphasise the dynamic inter-relations between different components of wellbeing. McGregor (2007: 337) for example characterises wellbeing processes as 'involving the interplay over time of: goals formulated, resources deployed, goals and needs met, and the degree of satisfaction in their achievement'. Davies (2015) stresses the iterative and systemic character of relations between people and the environment in her notion of 'wellbeing ecology'. In addition, as discussed further below, seeing wellbeing as process helps to recognise how (personal) wellbeing is increasingly invoked in self-management, or implicated in the performance of self (Ahmed 2010, Atkinson 2013: 140–141). Perhaps most radical is to frame wellbeing as something that *happens* rather than as a set state. One inspiration here is Thompson (1968:939)'s discussion of class:

'Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people and different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies, and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion --- not this and that interest, but the *friction* of interests, the heat, the thundering noise... Class itself is not a thing, it is a happening.'

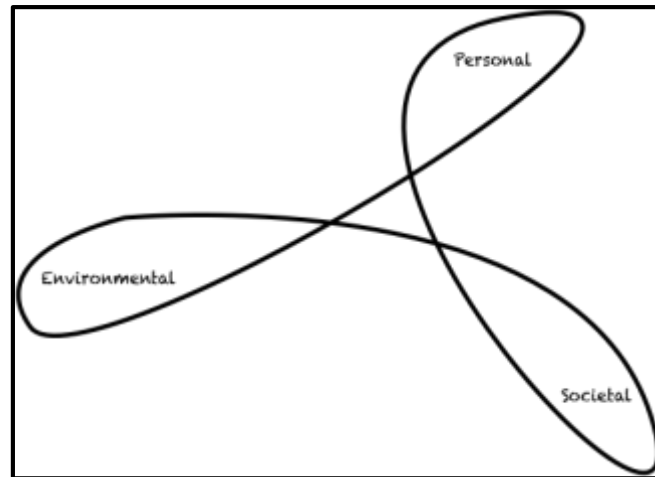
The industrial, machine-based imagery is at odds with the harmonious and organic symbolism of wellbeing to which we are accustomed. An alternative might be to substitute the image of dancers with long broad sashes, which they use to reel one another together or fling each other apart. The point would be the same – wellbeing inheres in the dance, it is not the property of individual dancers.

Atkinson (2013) approaches the 'happening' of wellbeing through a rather different language and imagery. For her, wellbeing is radically detached from individualised subjects as it inheres in assemblages of relationships amongst people and places and material objects and intangible aspects of places (such as atmosphere). Wellbeing thus becomes profoundly situated and relational, located in 'the movement and clusterings of affect' that emerge at particular conjunctions of time and place (Atkinson 2013: 142).

Figure 3 presents a diagram which seeks to capture the idea of wellbeing as process. It begins with the same basic image as in Figure 2 above. Instead of labelling this with the three dimensions of wellbeing, however, it draws the argument up to the next level, to consider the processes involved in constituting wellbeing. Three kinds of processes are identified. The first is personal. This recognises that wellbeing is intimately connected with intra- and inter-personal processes, one's psychological make-up, response to circumstances, personal history, material context, personal and social relationships. This is most easily thought about in immediate terms, but could include one's sense of identity and responsibility as a national or global citizen. The second, societal, recognises that all of this has a broader context, well beyond the individual or community. This includes underlying social, governmental, political and cultural structures and processes, which again can be considered at a number of scales, from local to global.

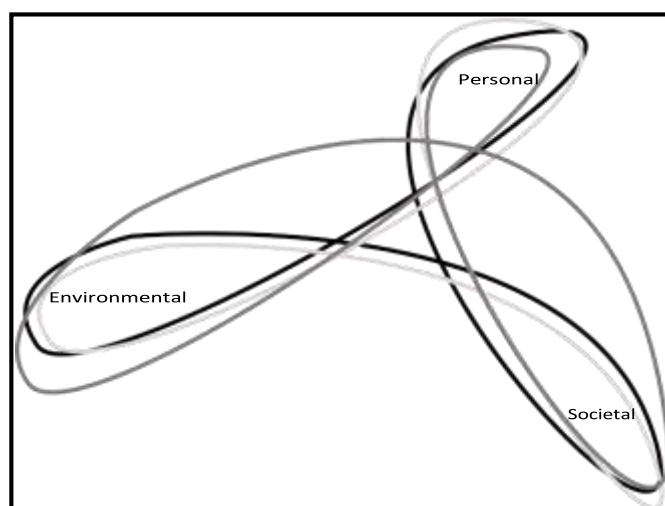
The third, environmental, recognises that human wellbeing is intimately tied up with planetary wellbeing, and that the natural world has its own processes, flows and constraints, checks and balances which respond to human action but are also significantly beyond human control.

Figure 3. The Constitution of Relational Wellbeing as process



The key feature of Figure 3 is that the line is continuous – the ‘wings’ are constituted in relation to each other. This means they are interdependent and mutually supportive, but also potentially in tension with each other. There are two ways to read this image. The simpler reading is to see personal wellbeing as intimately linked with collective, societal wellbeing, which is in turn linked to environmental wellbeing. More ambitiously, one might see wellbeing as represented by the image as a whole, constituted through inter-linked personal, social and environmental processes. In either case, the image is intended to suggest motion or flow, an always unstable settlement being made and re-made continuously. Figure 4 thus suggests how the size and relationship between the ‘wings’ may vary as conditions in one cause stress in another. While this image emphasises fluidity, the movement is not of course free, but both enabled and constrained to particular directions by material and social structures, as described above.

Figure 4. Relational Wellbeing as multiple processes



5. Methods and politics

As mentioned above, relational wellbeing approaches are developing a more critical consciousness of research as a social process. This is again part of the interpretivist tradition, which lends itself to post-positivist, critical approaches to research. It means locating accounts of wellbeing in relation to the identities of researchers, the disciplines and the methods used to produce them (e.g. White with Blackmore 2015). This draws attention to the politics of wellbeing, swimming against the tide of a prevalent tendency to claim that studies of wellbeing now constitute a 'science' (e.g. Diener 2000, Layard 2005, Graham 2011).

An important starting point is to question the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective', which is foundational to much of contemporary wellbeing discourse. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches require a material transformation of their data, but in opposite directions. Qualitative methods tend to subjectify the objective. They resist the notion that data is simply 'gathered', and stress instead that they are generated or constructed, produced through the labour of research. At its simplest, this draws attention to the necessity of codification: even something as tangible as housing, for example, becomes data only through a series of decisions about what will be recorded - quality of roof, of floor, material of construction, number of rooms, presence of outdoor space, tenure status ...? Taking this further, the standards of what counts as good housing or poor are shown as socially constructed, reflecting not just local weather and materials available, but also cultural expectations and economic standards of living. Which in turn leads into the more qualitative concerns of what housing means to people, as shelter, security, social status, home, or investment.

By contrast, quantitative methods tend to objectify the subjective, stripping away its context (as 'noise') and reifying it as a stand-alone item. The oft-performed analyses testing for the effect of income as independent variable on subjective wellbeing as dependent variable are made possible only by such a transformation. The subject whose perceptions are recorded becomes invisible, as does his or her thinking and the situation which the perception reflects. The perception is fixed and objectified by being rendered in numerical terms, an independent integer which can be tested for its degree of correlation with others. While on the one hand this objectification is required by the structure of statistical tests, on the other it may also offer a way of resolving an existential anxiety which is generated for quantitative researchers working with a positivist epistemology on subjective data. This anxiety is expressed in the search for 'objective correlates' to substantiate subjective claims: the identification of 'experience sampling' which seeks to capture immediate ratings of emotions as they happen (e.g. Larson and Csikszentmihalyi 1983) as the 'gold standard' in measuring emotional experience (Stiglitz *et al.* 2009: 147); testing claims of happiness with frequency of smiling (Nettle 2005) or brain imaging (e.g. Berridge and Kringelbach 2011).

Each epistemology, and the research method to which it is attached, re-works the data in its own image. Interpretivist, qualitative approaches tend to subjectify, positivist, quantitative approaches to objectify. This reinforces the claim that *all* accounts of wellbeing are intrinsically related to the methods and the instruments through which the data are generated and analysed (see White with Blackmore ed. 2015).

The constitutive role of approaches to research in shaping accounts of wellbeing suggests that politics, not simply 'science', governs the construction, adoption and use of measures of wellbeing. The significance of politics is widely noted. Sointu (2005) describes how changing definitions of wellbeing signal changes in forms of responsibility and entitlement between citizen and state. Ahmed (2010) discusses how normative ideologies of happiness can be used to exclude and disenfranchise. Oman (2015) analyses the politics of the dominance of quantitative methods in the UK Office for National Statistics' 'Measuring National Wellbeing' exercise. While qualitative contributions were invited in the form of 'free text' boxes, these were barely analysed, resulting in the exclusion of any perspectives that challenged the norm. Loera-González (2015) and Rodríguez (2015) describe political struggles within and between communities in Latin America over what it means to live well. Scott's (2012) reflection on the experience of working with a local authority in northern England to develop sustainability and wellbeing indicators presents a consistent and compelling reflection on the political nature of wellbeing. Her discussion ranges from the changing complexions of national politics and the impact these had at local level, through the complexities of local engagement and participation, to the way agendas are shaped through the micro-politics between officers and councillors, to what constitutes a 'successful' indicator, to the underlying assumptions about human nature and the policy process in different formulations of wellbeing.

'Wellbeing studies should therefore consider the context within which discussions about measurement and policy occur, and which beliefs and values they privilege, exclude or undermine.'

(Scott 2012:16)

Scott notes a recurring tendency to frame the process of generating indicators in technical terms and to deny the need for political debate, not least with repeated requests that Scott, as the officer concerned, should come up with the indicators herself. She also notes the danger that consultations are framed in ways that exclude discussion of the ways national policies or global re-structuring might undermine wellbeing or sustainability:

'At worst, over-emphasis on local wellbeing projects may distract from debates about wider and deeper issues by making local residents responsible for delivering their own wellbeing.'

(Scott 2012:79)

Scott (2012:169) summarises her main contention as follows:

'wellbeing and sustainability are, above all, political projects, and what needs to underpin all sets of indicators is political debate about social values, where political participation *is* a social value, entrenched in the way we conceive of ourselves in the world and how we act on behalf of ourselves and others.'

6. Operationalising Relational Wellbeing

Its awareness of complexity and emphasis on the social context may make relational wellbeing seem less 'policy-ready' than some other formulations. In fact, however, there are a number of ways in which relational wellbeing is well-suited as a policy and practice tool.

The first of these is in facilitating a process of discussion. Scott (2012:9) remarks:

'The fact that it means different things to different people is often seen as problematic in defining and measuring wellbeing but it is often neglected that, crucially for democracy, it also means something to everyone.'

The value of generating broad-based discussions about aspirations and constraints and how to address them is the most widely remarked benefit of bringing wellbeing into policy and programme discussions (e.g. Atkinson 2013, Scott 2012, Spencer et al. 2014, Thomas 2014). While there is a hunger for indicators and quantitative evidence, policy processes are also littered with an elephants' graveyard of indicators which are never used or referred to, and considerable disappointment amongst their advocates that even large amounts of data may have minimal impact on policy change (Scott 2012:19). As James Purnell, then Work and Pensions Secretary in the UK Government, remarked, it is a 'political truth' that 'data doesn't trump choice'.¹¹ A simple tool, like that in Figure 1, which anyone could draw, can serve as the basis for quite complex, yet inclusive discussions. What should the relative size of the wings be in a particular context? What would go in them? Where can we act, and how? What takes priority? There are, obviously, no 'right' answers to these questions, but they provide a means to come to a common mind, or at least to identify key lines of difference. Its fundamental value is that, even if it is used to assess individual wellbeing, the image encourages people to think relationally – what is going on within themselves, what is affecting them and why, what and who are they in turn affecting – rather than to assume all responsibility for 'their' wellbeing belongs at the individual level. It may even spawn some indicators and the energy that gets people behind them and so makes them work.

A relational wellbeing perspective also provides the grounds for policy critique. While there is much to be said for a wellbeing approach in policy, there is clearly the danger that it becomes simply the performance of a public relations exercise aimed at galvanising support through its 'people-friendly' form for established agendas and routines of policy practice or as a smoke-screen for policies of austerity. At an individual level similarly, wellbeing narratives may be co-opted for very personal and invasive disciplining of the self. Ehrenreich (2009) provides an instance of this in her account of her diagnosis of breast cancer, and how the injunction to 'think positive' was used to police her emotional responses.

¹¹ Purnell was speaking at the Local Wellbeing Conference, organised by the Young Foundation. London. 9 September 2008.

Her expression of anger on a website brought rebuke from other women living with breast cancer. The ‘healthy’ response to cancer, and the only acceptable response, was to look for the positives, ‘for her own sake’, and with the (sometimes explicit) implication that negative thinking could inhibit a cure, or even be responsible for the cancer having developed in the first place. Addressing such issues is a political task and cannot be achieved through conceptual means alone. Nevertheless, the social and material grounding of relational wellbeing approaches and the way they direct attention to connections and underlying associations, provide them with better means to critique and resist. The primary technical and empiricist orientation of psychological and subjective wellbeing make them much more vulnerable to capture.

Table 2 sets out some differences between epistemological and methodological approaches, when it comes to practical application. Since the contrast is greatest between relational wellbeing and subjective wellbeing, it concentrates on just these two.

Table 2. Practical applications of different approaches to wellbeing¹²

	SWB	RWB
Orientation	Evaluative Concrete to abstract	Substantive Abstract to concrete
Strengths	Simplifying complexity Testing for (causal) relationships Establish ranking between people/contexts Standard tool with minimum needs for adaptation to context	Revealing complexity Exploring process & inter-relationships Indicate variability of people/contexts Localised tool better able to reflect particularities of specific context
Limitations	Requires data from large numbers of individuals Requires sampling to ensure appropriate range of respondents of different types For analysis need significant technical expertise Standardised form may make for bland, trivial or uninterpretable findings	Requires sensitively guided participatory process Requires groups organised to give range of respondents of different types For analysis need skills in critical reflection and local knowledge Localised form may limit comparability across contexts

¹² Table adapted from White and Jha (2014).

As stated in the introduction, the critical difference between SWB and RWB is in their attitude to 'noise'. SWB seeks to abstract as 'pure' an indicator as possible for comparative evaluation. The particularities of context are thus rendered distraction. RWB may use a simplified model – such as that presented in Figures 1 and 2 – but as a way of exploring a setting more closely. This difference is critical, because when it comes to programme design and evaluation, it is the particularities of a context that matter. It is not enough to know simply 'how happy' people are, or even how they are doing on a longer list of psychological variables.¹³ To plan for or assess programme effectiveness, it is required to know more precisely how people are doing, and why.

As Table 2 suggests, both approaches are demanding to apply in practice. The abstraction of SWB means large numbers of respondents are required if significant differences are to be observed. SWB indicators are also sensitive to 'framing effects', showing variability, for example, according to which questions immediately precede them (Deaton 2012, Schwarz 1999). RWB, on the other hand, requires considerable skills of facilitation in order to bring out and manage various, possibly conflicting perspectives within a situation, and of judgement, to decide when the limits have been reached in terms of levels of complexity that can be handled productively. Both approaches also require considerable skills if the data are to be analysed effectively.

In her study of 'staying well' in a South African township, Brangan (2015:115) states as follows the main policy message that arises from her research:

Those interested in promoting health and preventing non-communicable diseases need to look upstream and beyond the sphere of health to consider how to create conditions conducive to the broader wellbeing within which health will more easily flourish.

While this reflects the immediate focus of her work in health, its general message of the need to look 'upstream' and beyond the specific policy focus again directs towards connections and unearthing hidden relationships. This illustrates how the division between 'substantive' and 'evaluative' eventually breaks down: an evaluative tool that will result in improvements in policy and practice must ultimately be based in substantive understanding of the lives of the target population. Atkinson (2013: 142) sets in a broader context the ultimate implication for policy of relational wellbeing:

'A shift is demanded away from how to enhance the resources for wellbeing centred on individual acquisition and towards attending to the social, material and spatially situated relationships through which individual and collective wellbeing are effected.'

¹³ A widely used example is the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al. 2007).

7. Conclusion

This paper draws attention to the dominance of positivist epistemologies in the recent upsurge of interest in subjective dimensions of wellbeing, and seeks to redress this by introducing an emergent construct, relational wellbeing, which draws on the interpretivist tradition in social science. The key characteristic of interpretivist approaches is their attention to people as subjects, and concern to understand their worlds and worldviews in as near to their own terms as possible. The paper argues that such a perspective, drawing primarily on qualitative methods, is vital to the current explosion of interest in subjective dimensions of wellbeing. It provides a critical complement to the tendency of positivist approaches to position people as objects whose characteristics are to be observed from outside, through predominantly quantitative methods.

The paper begins by outlining the major approaches to wellbeing in psychology and economics. It then sets out some of the key characteristics of wellbeing that emerge from asking people what it means to them, through research predominantly in the global South. These are: differences by culture; the sense of wellbeing as something social and collective; a strong emphasis on relationships; awareness of politics, and difference by social structure and position; a stress on materiality; and the importance of place. The section closes by considering how subjective and psychological wellbeing and the capability approach consider issues of culture, relationships and materiality. It is argued that what differs between the approaches is not so much the elements they identify, as the way they put them together.

The next section considers wellbeing as process. It begins by looking at wellbeing as activity and across the life-cycle. Relational wellbeing is then suggested to emerge through the interplay of personal, societal, and environmental processes, interacting at a range of scales, in ways that are both reinforcing and in tension. The following section considers methods and politics. It argues in particular against a strict division between 'subjective' and 'objective', maintaining that these are in part at least constructed through different methodological approaches, with qualitative methods tending to subjectify, and quantitative to objectify, the data. The final section considers applications to policy, arguing that relational wellbeing facilitates a much needed dialogic approach, and recognising the differing strengths and challenges of seeking to apply subjective wellbeing and relational wellbeing in practice.

Relational wellbeing, like subjective wellbeing or psychological wellbeing, comprises a range of practices, rather than a single theoretical or methodological approach. Some of these are more descriptive, some more analytical. While relational wellbeing is still emergent as a construct, it has sufficient internal consistency, and sufficient distinctiveness from other approaches, to warrant much more serious attention. The notion of 'noise' provides a critical indicator of this difference. What is 'noise' to Kahneman, the 'random variability', or 'error you can't reliably predict' is to Arendt the human condition. If we are serious about subjective dimensions of wellbeing, it is time we got better at listening to the noise.

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