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Researching Wellbeing Across the Disciplines: Some Key Problems and Ways Forward

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I.   The issues

1.   The Disciplines

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

What is your discipline? How do you relate to people studying the same topic in other disciplines?

2.   'Wellbeing'

> It is increasingly accepted that livelihoods are socially and culturally constructed in specific societal contexts. The purpose of this research is to develop a conceptual and methodological framework for understanding the social and cultural construction of well-being in specific societies. A key theoretical challenge confronted by this research programme is to comprehend and explain the relationship between 'universal' and 'local' models of well-being. It will explore the ways in which the 'universalising' tendencies of theory and policy can be informed by 'local' models of how people construct their well-being and, importantly in developing countries, how poverty is constructed. (First paragraph of the WeD research proposal)

What does 'wellbeing' mean to you? How does it relate to 'poverty'?

3.   'Researching'

What do you <u>do</u> when you are researching?

II.   Grid for exploring disciplines

III.   The WeD disciplines: an ideal-type map
See P2

IV.   Working across the disciplines: is 'wellbeing' a useful place to start?

V.   Researching 'wellbeing' across the disciplines: some ways forward
1.   Negotiating an agreed ontology
2.   Combining epistemological strategies
3.   Conceptual frameworks and substantive theories
4.   Towards a methodological framework

V.   Conclusion: the real problems
Few real intellectual barriers: designing good cross-disciplinary dialogues.
What to do about the political, institutional and cultural barriers?
Personality and mindset issues?

Table 1: An ideal-type depiction of the WeD disciplines[1]

Questions	WeD social anthropology	WeD sociology	WeD social policy	WeD psychology	WeD development microeconomics
Focus: What are we interested in?	Human, material/natural, social, and cultural resources in political economy and socio-cultural contexts. Household and human poverty in community context Local cultural repertoires	Human, material/natural, social, and cultural resources in political economy and socio-cultural contexts. Interacting human/ household/ community and country poverty Processes	Universal human needs and intermediate needs satisfiers Country poverty and universal individual wellbeing (objective)	Individual quality of life and subjective wellbeing Individual wellbeing: objective and subjective/universal and local	Household consumption poverty; Education, health and health services Household poverty Individual functionings Objective resources and objective and subjective wellbeing
Values: Why?	Poverty and inequality are bad and persistent and should be reduced.	Poverty and inequality are bad and persistent and should be reduced.	Human needs ought to be met	Individual wellbeing is good	Economic poverty is bad Non-economic wellbeing is desirable
Ontology: What is the 'reality' of what we are interested in?	Reality exists independent of our thoughts and is complexly constituted of things, people, relationships, structures, energy, and time. From one perspective there are many 'realities'.		One observable reality exists independent of our thoughts	One observable reality exists independent of our thoughts There are multiple realities.	One observable reality exists independent of our thoughts.
Epistemology: How can we know about reality?	We can only intellectually know what reality is like through discourse. Truth should be understood as practical adequacy.		Use externally verifiable stocks of codified knowledge	We can observe it using scientific methods (deduction/induction) and we can establish truths / generalisations about humans. Interpretation	We can observe it using scientific methods (deduction/induction). We can also use logic. Using these together we can establish truths / generalisations.
	Social science requires the interpretation of meaning (abduction)....	...and the identification of mechanisms and processes (retroduction)			
Theory:	Reflexive theories	Middle-range theories	Normative theories /Critical theories	General theories Culturally-grounded theories	Mathematical models
Research strategies: How can we establish what is really happening?	Data: Ethnography including a range of research instruments Analysis: interpretation and comparison	Data: Integrated use of surveys, participant observation, and a range of especially designed e instruments. Secondary sources. Analysis: 4 strategies of comparison	Analyse published quantitative data	Experiments. Psychological instruments statistically validated. The construction of a new measure as a major output. Individual life histories	Statistical analysis of household surveys
Empirical conclusions: What (kind of) conclusions can we draw?	Understanding of people's actions, and relationships in cultural context Community studies	Universal: common mechanisms and processes / Local: how they work in different contexts Country study	Classification of welfare regimes	Descriptive statistics using psychological variables. Identification of regularities with other non-psychological variables.	Descriptive statistics using economic variables. Identification of regularities.
Rhetoric: How can we inform others about these?	Translating and interpreting local cultures	Suit the language and document to the particular type of 'other'		Academic papers	Equations, regression analyses, and some interpretations in words
Praxis: What to do? Who should do it?	Good research will help the different types of anti-poverty actor to act more effectively.		Encourage 'mixed economies' incorporating plural forms of economic steering and procedural processes. Governments and international organisations are key actors	Implications for socialisation	Advise various modernisations. 'Sound' economic policies. IFIs and governments.

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[1] Apologies for any mis-representations and mis-understandings; please clarify.