



**ESRC Research Group on
Wellbeing in Developing Countries**

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RESEARCHING WELLBEING: FROM CONCEPTS TO METHODOLOGY

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WeD - Wellbeing in Developing Countries

ESRC Research Group

WeD is a multidisciplinary research group funded by the ESRC, dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and draws on the knowledge and expertise from three different departments (Economics and International Development, Social and Policy Sciences and Psychology) as well as an extensive network of overseas contacts and specific partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The purpose of the research programme is to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of well-being in specific countries.

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SUMMARY

This paper presents an integrated model of wellbeing and summarises the suite of methods to assess it developed within the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) ESRC research group. The paper begins by rehearsing the underlying notion of wellbeing in the WeD project: an interplay between the resources that a person is able to command; what they are able to achieve with those resources; and the meanings that frame these and that drive their aspirations and strategies. The second part identifies five key ideas that underpin a new theory of human wellbeing. These are: the centrality of the social human being; harm and needs; meaning, culture and identity; time and processes; resourcefulness, resilience and adaptation. Part three then draws these together to present an integrated model of wellbeing. This requires an interdisciplinary research methodology outlined in part four. The WeD suite comprises six research components grouped into three pairs: those that deal with *outcomes*, those that deal mainly with *structures* and those that deal with *processes*. The paper concludes by noting the challenges that still confront the wellbeing agenda: how to undertake inter-disciplinary research, how to make it accessible to policy-makers and politicians, and how to reconcile competing visions, notably global and local deliberations on the universal and normative. This paper is a revised and abbreviated version of Chapter 14 of the forthcoming book, *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research*, edited by Ian Gough and J Allister McGregor, to be published by Cambridge University Press.

Key Words: wellbeing, interdisciplinary research methodology, outcomes, structures, processes

1. FROM CONCEPTS TO METHODOLOGY

The Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research programme rests on the proposition that the concept of wellbeing is not only academically promising but also can be of practical policy value in both developed and developing worlds. But if this is so, argues Des Gasper (2007), then two basic challenges must be met. The first is to demonstrate that the label of 'wellbeing' can be conceptually useful, or as he puts it 'appealing', to both academia and policy. The second is to answer 'When will it promote priority to the basic needs of the poorest and under what conditions?'. To achieve this, we contend, requires a) combining different disciplinary perspectives to advance our understanding of wellbeing and b) translating this into an agenda for empirical research. These are the central concerns of this paper.

The formal objective of the *Wellbeing in Developing Countries* Research Group at the University of Bath is to develop a conceptual and methodological framework for understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in developing countries. The proposal was stimulated by recognition of a growing gap between advances in development philosophy and progress in research methods which seek to build our 'on the ground' knowledge of poverty outcomes and processes. While advances in both have been influential in different arenas of policy thinking there remains a basic incoherence between them and this manifests itself in weaknesses in current development policy thinking. A wide range of authors have drawn attention to different shortcomings in both the conceptualisation of poverty and its relationship to policy (see amongst others Nederveen Pieterse 2002, Hickey and Bracking 2005, Booth 2005, Robeyns 2005). There has been a lack of 'joined-upness' across academic and policy thinking about how poverty is produced or maintained and how it might be reduced or eliminated.

We argue here that the concept of wellbeing can represent a means of reconnecting different strands of development thinking and of drawing upon wider social science contributions to improve our understanding of the dynamics of poverty. Such a conception of wellbeing must combine the 'objective' circumstances of a person and their 'subjective' perception of their condition. Furthermore, wellbeing cannot be thought of only as an outcome, but as a state of being that arises from the dynamic interplay of outcomes and processes. This interplay of outcomes and processes must

be understood as firmly located in society and shaped by social, economic, political, cultural and psychological processes. In basic terms we conceive of wellbeing as arising from the combination of:

1. what a person has
2. what they can do with what they have, and
3. how they think about what they have and can do

The WeD research programme is a purposive venture into this area of thinking.² We recognise of course that throughout time and in many different literatures (not least of which we must count all organised bodies of religious thought), there have been many different and more sophisticated ways to elaborate this basic formulation of wellbeing. Our starting point has been the three frameworks of needs, resources and quality of life, discussed in an earlier WeD Working Paper (Gough, McGregor and Camfield 2006).³ This enables us to reframe the above three components of wellbeing as follows. Wellbeing can be conceived in terms of the interplay between:

1. the resources that a person is able to command;
2. what they are able to achieve with those resources, and in particular what needs and goals they are able to meet; and
3. the meaning that they give to the goals they achieve and the processes in which they engage. A key element of this last dimension of meaning, and a basic driver of the future strategies and aspirations of the person, is the quality of life that they perceive themselves as achieving.

Once again we emphasise that all of these take place in the context of society and social collectivity. Later we focus on how this conception of human wellbeing might be operationalised within a unified social science research methodology. A key and distinctive element of the WeD research programme has been its remit to carry out extensive and coordinated

² It has adopted a wellbeing perspective as a means of better understanding the conditions under which poverty persists in developing countries.

³ WeD Working Paper 19

www.welldev.org.uk/research/workingpaperpdf/wed19.pdf

empirical fieldwork alongside the development of its conceptual thinking. As Alkire (2007) notes, the most fecund concepts are weakened if they lack a 'methodological sidecar'. Often, however, the two strands of intellectual development are carried out apart or are separated in time. In this respect the experience of developing the wellbeing methodology and its application in studies in four developing countries⁴ are equally important means of exploring the value of the concept.

The second part of this paper identifies the *differentia specifica* of the wellbeing approach: five key ideas which when combined in a single conceptual framework mark it off as distinct from other approaches. These are then brought together in an overarching wellbeing conceptual framework in part three. The paper then goes on to introduce the ways in which this general framework has been operationalised in the six research elements of the WeD research programme. Finally, it returns to broader issues and briefly considers the benefits and challenges that are thrown up by this perspective for effective policy making.

2. RESEARCHING WELLBEING: FIVE KEY IDEAS

We contend that five key sets of ideas provide the conceptual scaffolding for a new theory of human wellbeing. These are:

- The centrality of the social human being
- Harm and needs
- Meaning, culture and identity
- Time and processes
- Resourcefulness, resilience and adaptation

i. The centrality of the social human being

First, the concept of human wellbeing brings the 'human' back to the centre of the analysis. As Rojas (2007) puts it, the ultimate purpose of his study is to consider the condition of 'the human being of flesh and blood ... and in

⁴ Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand.

her circumstance'. Although the human is present in all social science investigations she does not always appear at centre-stage. Thus it is possible to study structures such as 'the market', 'the state' or 'culture', or forms of organisation such as 'the household', 'the firm', 'the village', in all of which the person is present but is not the main subject of analysis. We can also study 'components' of the human such as personality, intelligence, morality, or entrepreneurship, but, while these all contribute to the being of the person, they do not wholly define her, him or them. The distinctive proposition of the wellbeing perspective is to understand the role that they play in the production of wellbeing for different men, women, boys and girls.

This notion of the centrality of the human is nascent in the three analytical frameworks underpinning WeD's approach to wellbeing and represents one of the basic bridges between them (see also White 2002). We can only judge whether needs have been met with reference to the condition of the human being; resources ultimately can only be identified as such by human beings; and the feelings of a person are best reported by that person. Emphatically, however, and anticipating mischievous interpretations of this as a statement of rampant individualism, we argue that placing the human being at the centre of analysis requires us to acknowledge the entirely social nature of that human being. We cannot understand the human being without reference to the collectivities, communities and societies within which they are located and live their lives. These different forms of collectivities bring with them the social structures and ideologies within which human beings interact. But human beings differ: they are men, women, boys, girls, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, married, divorced, black, white, *mestizo*, indigenous, migrant, elite, peasant, worker, destitute and so on. Such difference ensures that human beings are differently placed in relation to social structures and as such are differently able to negotiate their notions of and strategies for wellbeing.

Bevan (2007) warns of the potential disconnect between individualistic and relational approaches to wellbeing. The polarisation of individualist and relational perspectives manifests itself in many guises throughout the disciplinary literatures: in psychology the debate over the existence of individualist and collectivist societies or cultures; in economics and sociology over the merits and efficiencies of individual and collective action; and in political science and philosophy the relationship between individual and collective rights, for example. These themes are of great importance to debates within disciplines, but they are usually cast in binary contrasts (see

Nederveen Pieterse 2001). Yet the individualistic and relational ways of conceiving of wellbeing need not be fetishised as opposite poles, rather our conception of wellbeing must recognise the person, their volition, and the ineluctably social nature of each.

In a powerful critique of the contemporary social sciences, Douglas and Ney (1998) argue that many of the theories that dominate the analysis of poverty, welfare and wellbeing operate without a theory of the person. Such a theory, they propose, would require a conception of the person as a 'social being' and for them to be understood as a 'whole person'. The social being they argue is constituted through relationships with other persons and the prime need of the 'social being' is communication. Their plea suggests that relationships and communication are pivotal for the wellbeing research agenda.

Doyal and Gough's (1991) *Theory of Human Need* already recognises the significance of relationships and the heuristic by which it relates abstract basic needs to needs satisfiers encourages recognition that all needs are satisfied through relationships. Whether these are satisfied through interactions with close relatives and friends, through personal or impersonal contacts with representatives of the state, or intermediaries in the market, or other relationships is then a matter for empirical verification in particular community and societal contexts (see Gough and Wood et al 2004, Wood and Gough 2006 forthcoming).

White and Ellison (2007) illustrate how resources only have meaning in the context of specific relationships. Their use and value depends on the intentions of the person seeking to realise them and how that person interacts with the perceptions and actions of those others. The intentions of the resource user in turn reflect the meanings, values and norms at play in wider social structures. Similarly, differences between people will shape what resources they are able to realise and what outcomes they are able to achieve with them.

Douglas and Ney overlook the debate in the Subjective Wellbeing literature between hedonic positive psychology and eudaimonic perspectives on wellbeing. Yet, eudaimonic conceptions of wellbeing, and particularly Deci and Ryan's Self Determination Theory, are fundamentally built around a notion of relatedness. As Ryan and Sapp (2007) note, 'Self Determination

Theory begins by explicitly positing that humans are inherently active, relational beings.’

The second part of the Douglas and Ney proposition for a minimal model of the person, integral to our proposition to place the social human being at the centre of our framework for analysis, is the call for social sciences to conceive of the ‘whole person.’ On the surface this is an argument against the type of analytical vivisection of the person that is so pervasive in contemporary disciplinarian forms of social sciences. But while much of their criticism is heaped on the model of *homo oeconomicus*, their challenge is more profound and applies to the deep influence of this type of approach across all of the social sciences.

There are long historical processes here which have been extensively studied by the sociology and anthropology of science and knowledge (Tambiah 1990, Weber 1904) and these have entailed the analytical contrivance of reducing people’s lives to a single dimension so that social scientists can apply ever more sophisticated techniques to explore their behaviour in relation to that⁵. In this reduction, other key parts of the person’s life or being are either assumed or ignored. But, more importantly, Douglas and Ney argue, the process of ‘assuming’ or ‘ignoring’ other aspects of ‘being’ results in elements of moral judgement being hidden and smuggled into these analytical frameworks. They then go on to argue that by making moral and then also subjective dimensions of our understanding of the human disappear, these elaborate academic practices serve to advance a notion of ‘objectivity’ in the social sciences. The problem, however, is what is lost. As Douglas and Ney put it, ‘So we are left with the paradox that the social sciences description of the self does not refer to the social being. As the microcosm⁶ requires, everything has to be sacrificed to generality, which is expected to protect objectivity, but the generality evacuates meaning.’ (1998: 89). The problem of the use of the term ‘objective’ in the contemporary social sciences, and particularly in its relationship to policy, is returned to below.

Placing the social human being at the centre of a wellbeing framework has many ramifications but perhaps most basic and profound for social science

⁵ For the case of economics, see Gudeman (1986, 2001).

⁶ For example, the device of *homo oeconomicus*.

enquiry is the attention it draws to its foundational ontology. As Bevan (2007) argues, a human ontology recognises that people are whole persons with a biological, psychological and emotional constitution; that they are also social beings; that they are actively engaged in the reception, interpretation and construction of meaning; that persons are different from each other, both in their internal constitution and their social being; and that they live in time.

ii. Harm and needs

Bevan (2007) also writes: 'While agreeing that the "fully rounded humanity of poor men, women and children in developing countries" should be acknowledged, it is also important to acknowledge that for many poor people life is unbearable and often ends in a painful early death. The suffering and the lost years must not be ignored as they are in most poverty studies.' The adoption of a human ontology highlights the ubiquity of potential harm to the person: the notion of human wellbeing requires a concept of harm.

The core of the Doyal and Gough Theory of Human Need is that where universal basic needs are not satisfied then serious *harm* of an 'objective' kind will result. THN defines serious harm as '... fundamental disablement in the pursuit of one's vision of the good.' In this view harm is understood both as something that affects the human body but also the ability of the person to participate in society. In particular, the basic need of autonomy is a profoundly social concept. Ryan and Sapp (2007) also work with the notion of harm, but from the social psychological perspective. Building upon a biologically and psychologically grounded notion of human growth and development, they claim, '... *a basic psychological need* denotes only those nutriments essential for psychological growth and integrity (Ryan 1995). This suggests that there are psychological supports that humans must experience to thrive, and that when deprived of these supports, empirically observable degradation results'. As with Doyal and Gough, this approach appeals to a notion of harm that can be objectively verified. The claim that needs are 'objectively' linked to harm provides the basis for the claim to 'universal' status for both theories.

Self Determination Theory provides a psychological deepening of the Doyal and Gough Theory of Human Need. In the latter autonomy (or rather its lack) was partly defined and operationalised as 'learned helplessness' (from

Seligman 1975) and severe mental illness. There was little discussion, however, of the circumstances or conditions leading to mental ill-health. The SDT rectifies this by identifying three psychological needs whose denial results in degraded mental wellness, which in turn and without intervention will be manifest in physical decline. Establishing the relationships between Theory of Human Need and Self Determination Theory begins to place the psychological needs of the latter in their broader social and political context, but this needs to be further strengthened.

We have argued above that wellbeing is both constructed and largely achieved through relationships. In the THN, 'significant primary relationships' are a universal need satisfier and in SDT 'relatedness' is a basic psychological need. Ryan and Sapp define the latter:

'Relatedness ... concerns feeling socially connected. Typically, one feels most related when one feels cared for and significant to others, but relatedness also pertains to a general sense of being integral to a social organisation that lies beyond the individual or what Angyal (1941) labelled homonomy '

'Feeling' and 'significant' are the two important terms to highlight here. They force us to consider is how we identify and understand who are 'significant' others and how we know how to feel about our relationships to them. While the social construction of 'meaning' is central here both SDT and THN tend to underplay its importance at key points of their argument.

Drawing on a different tradition, Lukes' (1974, 2005) analysis of power encourages us to consider how 'meanings' come about; how agendas are set; and how persons operate with particular frames of meaning and are socialised in ways that challenge their ability to conceive of other frames of meaning. From this perspective the construction of meaning involves profoundly social and political processes and as such these mediate how we are able to 'feel' about experiences. These feelings shape how we experience 'harm'.

With this in mind the claim by both sets of theories to the status of 'objective' can be misunderstood. Both THN and SDT are concerned with needs which involve much more than the physical nurturing of the biological person. In both theories, harm arises as much as a consequence of cognitive and

social processes as from direct action which damages the biological entity. They both depend upon an appreciation of the person in social relationships and particularly in the context of socially and culturally constructed meaning. In this respect they connect to grand traditions in the social sciences where processes of relationship and meaning and their social consequences are discussed in terms of 'alienation' and 'anomie' (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim)⁷. Since the relational and cognitive (subjective) processes that mediate the relationship between needs and harm in large part involve social constructs of what is 'normal', 'desirable', or 'acceptable', then to refer to either SDT or THN as just 'objective' theories of need is an oversimplification.

Traditional western liberalism conceived of harm as intentional acts by individuals, groups or the state preventing other persons pursuing their fundamental goals. The policy response was to enshrine various 'forbearances' in common law and/or in the form of civil and political rights. Socialist and reformist thinking in the twentieth century challenged this by recognising egregious structural but unintentional obstacles to the pursuit of fundamental goals, such as Beveridge's 'Five Giants' of 'Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness'. The policy response was to enshrine a range of social and economic rights to the wherewithal for human survival and thriving. This has marked an historic extension of thinking on harm and wellbeing. It recognises what some call 'structural violence': interactions with others, at close or distant remove, where simply following rules or norms inevitably but unintentionally results in harm to others.

However, as Bevan (2007) among others argues, it is important when analysing poverty and illbeing in many developing countries today to reemphasise and reinstate the active infliction of harm. Since wellbeing is a product of relationships, we must recognise that some of these relationships can - and are intended to - result in harm to other persons. This can include situations where a person is actively denied some key resources (such as land or water) or components of need satisfaction (such as health or security) by other persons. Her analysis of insecurity regimes in Africa and the work of others on suffering, such as Farmer, provide harrowing examples (Bevan 2004a, Farmer 2005).

⁷ We are grateful to Geof Wood for drawing attention to this point.

iii. Meaning, culture and identity

All of the discussion so far points to the importance of '*meaning*' for a wellbeing research agenda. Meaning acts as a bridge between the three organising ideas of needs, resources and quality of life. In the previous Working Paper (Gough, McGregor and Camfield 2006) we argue that, 'It is systems of meaning, negotiated through relationships within society, that shape what different people can and cannot do with what they have. And, by giving sense to a person's doing, meaning translates the "having" and "doing" into "being"'. This complements the 'centrality of the social human being' by recognising the role of social organisation and culture in the generation and transmission of the meanings through which our relationships are conducted and constrained.

In proposing their minimal model of the person Douglas and Ney write, 'As a social being the person needs to be capable of reading messages from other persons, of responding to these and of composing intelligible messages to send out' (1998: 89). A theory of the person depends on having a conception of culture and they emphasise a particular and partial definition of culture. 'Culture is the result of people getting together; it is the result of mutual encouragement and coercion. ... Culture is the selective screen through which the individual receives knowledge of how the world works and how people behave.' (1998: 91).

To study wellbeing therefore requires a framework of analysis that is able to comprehend the cultural construction of meanings in particular contexts. The analysis of the construction of meaning has been the core business of social anthropology since its invention in the 19th century and a key element in its academic arsenal has been the concept of *culture*. However its value is periodically contested, partly because of the multiplicity of definitions and meanings that are attached to the notion. It can seemingly mean everything and nothing and, as Olivier de Sardan notes (2005: 81-82), its overuse encourages unhelpful stereotyping. But this does not render the concept useless.

To avoid these problems we require a much more specified and differentiated use of the concept. Cultures are seen here as dynamic systems of norms, values and rules that are developed by particular communities, founded in their relationships to particular natural and social environments. They are to be identified at all different levels of social

collectivity, both within the nation state and beyond it. As suggested by Douglas and Ney, these systems of norms, values and rules provide the guidelines as to what meanings are to be attached to what the participants in 'the culture' perceive and do. Cultures guide our aspirations. They represent systems of meaning with which people perceive what it is they need or want, and also provide the measures against which we decide whether we have enough of what we want, or whether we are satisfied with what we are able to do and be.

Cultures as systems of meaning entail histories and as such are characterised by path dependence. They are dynamic social products, with internal processes of contestation and reproduction and external processes of adaptation to other cultures and systems of values. Societies and their cultures are constantly in flux; meanings are contested; and people in all societies frequently engage in the renegotiation of meaning in their efforts to address new challenges. This view of culture is a considerable and necessary advance on a conception of it as just 'normative consensus' (see Doyal and Gough, 1991: 79-80).

Cultural analysis is an important ingredient of a wellbeing methodology⁸, affirming a view of the person as both recipient of meaning and generator of it. From the perspective of the person as *recipient* of meaning this requires us to acknowledge the power of those forms of meaning that are neither 'objective' in scientific terms nor 'subjective' in personal terms, but are nevertheless highly significant in our social lives. These are those ideas, values and other elements of meaning that are accepted as 'fact' or 'reality', but which are products of interpersonal agreement, social consensus and are regarded as culturally 'given'. That they are social constructs need not necessarily make them less 'real' or less difficult to refute in the lives of men, women and children as they pursue wellbeing than if they were 'hard facts' or pieces of stone. And, as both SDT and THN elaborate, failure to meet needs that are underpinned by these social constructs can just as inevitably result in physical human harm as can the denial of food. The

⁸ The definition of cultural analysis offered by Thompson is particularly appropriate: "... the study of symbolic forms - that is, meaningful actions, objects and expressions of various kinds - in relation to the historically specific and socially constructed contexts and processes within which, and by means of which, the symbolic forms are produced, transmitted and received. " (1990: 136).

perspective of the person as *generator* of meaning reminds us that these social facts are not immutable and the possibility of social change depends entirely on the fact that these social constructs can and do change, but it is important not to underestimate the power that is often associated with them.

Ryan and Sapp (2007) argue:

‘Indeed, it will be a fundamental tenet of SDT that the reason people have a readiness to adopt and internalise ambient cultural values, no matter what their content, is that by doing so, they satisfy needs. It is by assimilating the values of one’s group that one becomes more connected and related, and more competent and effective. Furthermore, the general tendency to make ambient values one’s own, and to feel them as central to identity, is an expression of the need for and developmental tendency toward autonomy. Put differently, needs supply the underlying processes that explain how cultures become part of individual personality. These essentials are thus apparent across historical, cultural, political or economic contexts.’

Here they almost exclusively emphasise the person as recipient of meaning, but in doing so they shed further light on how we might understand the relationship between needs and ‘objectivity’. They argue that their three basic psychological needs operate together in a way that is inextricably linked to the functioning of particular cultural contexts.

Looking at this from a different angle, Doyal and Gough argue that the meeting of human needs is dependent upon the organization of the society in which people are participating and that a key element of social organisation is the ability of societies to reproduce themselves. To do this they must first have systems for the transmission of meanings and values that are deemed (consciously or unconsciously) important for the society, and second, systems of authority to maintain, promote and protect these meanings and values. Just as much as if it were a matter of objective fact, the transgression of norms and given values by a person will often result in that ‘society’ punishing (inflicting harm) on the transgressor.

Culture, as an evolving and dynamic system of norms, values and rules, provides guidelines for what meanings are to be attached to what men, women and children in particular societal context observe and do, and as

such it is an essential medium in both societal transmission processes and systems of social authority. It tells the social being what is to be considered 'a fact', what is 'normal', or 'expected', or what is simply 'a given' in any social context, regardless of whether it is scientifically or statistically proven to be objectively 'a fact' or not. This reaffirms the view implicit in the formally stated objective of the WeD research, that wellbeing cannot be adequately perceived in just objective and subjective terms, but that it is a concept that crucially depends upon social construction. That is, there are elements of meaning that are key to our conceptions and construction of wellbeing that are *inter-subjective* (Habermas 1987, Giddens 1976: 26-27).

The Ryan and Sapp's argument about the internalisation of culture essentially addresses the issue of *identity*. It argues that a person's ability to establish identity is closely bound up with their feelings of relatedness and competence in respect of the culture of the group in which they are interacting. However, at this time, in all of the WeD study countries and in all of the communities studied, struggles over identity are very much evident. In arguing for the importance of cultural analysis in contemporary thinking about international development, John Clammer quotes Friedman's contention that, in today's world, culture is 'a complex negotiation of identity now irretrievably embedded in globalisation and linked also with consumption as the dominant cultural form of late capitalist society.' (from Clammer 2005: 104). More than ever before we are aware that people in all societies can operate with multiple identities and some of these identities are not wholly grounded in the specific social context in which they are living. Depending on the specific context and reason for interaction, sometimes the identity may be a religious one; in other social contexts it may be an ethnic identity; and in still others it may be an identity associated with an internationally marketed football club.

The adoption of different identities or 'cultural repertoires' (see Dean 2003) has implications for researching wellbeing in developing countries. An empirical wellbeing research programme must be aware of not only those systems of meaning that are engaged day to day and in face to face relations in particular communities, but also those that involve relationships with persons at other levels of our social systems, including those that are 'imagined' and that we experience through our participation in and identification with different levels of collectivity; from village to globe. Benedict Anderson wrote of the profound influence of print and text in the emergence of the nation state in the middle ages (Anderson 1983), and in

the twentieth and twenty-first centuries we now need to take account of the globalization of broadcasting in its many forms and of the role of Information Technology, the mobile phone and the internet. All of the communities in the WeD research reveal remarkable relationships with actors in global arenas (through international migration from highland Peruvian communities, or via satellite television in rural Thai villages).

Researching wellbeing today cannot ignore the realisation and challenges of our increasingly global community. Systems of meaning which have their roots in societies other than one's own, but which are conveyed by globalised travel and communications can affect conceptions, aspirations and experiences of wellbeing (see Graham 2006, Graham and Pettinato 2002). We contend that human beings are at the centre of our analytical framework, but they must be understood in relation to all the contexts in which they relate and communicate. Escaping from the tendency to focus on just one level or another⁹, a contemporary, empirical wellbeing research agenda cannot randomly focus on any one of these levels. The conceptual framework must recognise that these contexts are many and multi-dimensional, ranging from the household, to community, to nation state, and to the global community.

Finally, and in order to illustrate the significance of these arguments about culture, meaning and identity for wellbeing research, it is worth returning to interrogate the idea of 'autonomy'. Not only is 'autonomy' a 'need' and word that is shared between THN and SDT, but it is a concept that is closely bound up with our sense of identity in whichever culture we operate. It is also the element of both theories which most excites and agitates researchers who come from a more anthropological tradition. The concept particularly evokes tension between 'universalist' and 'localist' perspectives. Cultural analysis of the term itself may clarify its meanings and potential uses such that it can be comprehensible to both.

Ryan and Sapp (2007) note that, 'Autonomy does not herein mean independence or separateness, but rather refers to the self-endorsement of one's own behaviour - that is, feeling personal value and interest with respect to what one does'. It is important to acknowledge that as with Doyal

⁹ Whether it be the anthropological 'my village, my people' mentality, or the international relations focus on 'big systems' to the exclusion of all others.

and Gough, autonomy must be distinguished from dependence or interdependence. From the cultural perspective the notions of 'self-endorsement' and 'personal value' are of particular importance. Our argument recognises that these are constructs that arise out of particular frames of meaning and the processes of internalising particular cultural values. In different cultural settings they are likely to be different and as such the ability to 'personally value' particular types of action or behaviour and to 'self-endorse' them is likely to be different.

This indicates that while 'autonomy' may be a category fundamental to a 'universal' and abstract conception of wellbeing, what constitutes 'autonomy' in particular social contexts is socially constructed 'locally', in those different societies and cultures. The standards by which we 'self-endorse' and achieve 'personal value' are socially communicated and the meaning of what it is to be autonomous in any social context is constructed within particular sets of relationships, values and cultural contexts. Thus what constitute norms of autonomy will be quite different in (what some observers label as) 'individualistic' societies and 'collectivist' societies (see Devine et al. 2006).¹⁰ Nevertheless, although it may be manifested differently in different cultures, the concept of 'autonomy' remains essential to understand wellbeing in all. It is a concept that refers to the boundaries of the relationship between the self and others. It refers to what is normal and acceptable in terms of our dependence and interdependence on others within that culture.

The same argument then applies to the two other psychological needs identified in Ryan and Deci's SDT. While we may argue that 'relatedness' 'competence' and 'autonomy' are basic psychological needs in all societies, they are so in an abstract sense. The specific meaning or form of these

¹⁰ Indeed the logic of the argument suggests that the terms 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' when used to label particular societies may be unhelpful. What we are interested in as an empirical project is to identify which cultures (and even sub-cultures) define autonomy in similar ways. This is unlikely to break down into two such broad categories.

'needs' is particular societies is socially constructed. This begins to indicate what the relationship between the 'universal' and the 'local' must be in a wellbeing research agenda: A 'universal' theory of wellbeing must deal with analytical concepts that are abstracts but can be recognised as present in some form or other in all human societies. It must posit relationships between these different analytical concepts in a general conception of wellbeing. But the role of the 'local' is to define more concretely the manifestations of these different analytical concepts in different social and cultural contexts. Iteration between the two should then confirm the validity or otherwise of the relationships being proposed and where necessary modify the universal conception.

iv. Time and processes

We consider it inappropriate to separate wellbeing outcomes from wellbeing processes. To abstract a particular moment in time, a 'snapshot', in order either to compare different snapshots or analytically manipulate them to explore causation and effect, is but an analytical device. We do not deny here that such snapshots can have important analytical and policy functions, for example in allowing governments to assess how many poor or illiterate people they must budget for or how effective some policy interventions have been. But outcomes are abstracts and it is important for the analysis of wellbeing that they are always understood to be non-discrete, ongoing moments that are a part of an interplay of complex societal and cognitive processes. We need to adopt a methodology which can accommodate both 'snapshot' and 'movie'.

This helps us understand better the ways in which wellbeing is in a permanent process of construction; and this fosters more effective policy thinking about how to eradicate poverty or promote wellbeing. Policy intervention is inevitably and unavoidably about changing processes in a particular society. Whether that consists of directly trying to affect the behaviours and interactions of different persons or of changing the rules or structures that shape the interactions, it is dependent upon a view of how those processes work.

Other contributions to Gough and McGregor (2007) highlight some of the different ways to take account of time. Ryan and Sapp (2007) argue that for psychological needs to be considered universal they must be cross-developmental – that is they must apply to humans across all ages. Wood's

(2007) discussion of security and autonomy focuses heavily on the time trade-offs that poor people must engage in as they seek to establish security for themselves and those near to them. He also highlights the importance of a person's expectations of future wellbeing for their present state of wellbeing. Bebbington *et al* (2007) highlight misunderstandings over time-based priorities as the source of a major disconnect between NGO interventions and the aspirations of the rural people they are intended to serve in the Andes of Peru and Bolivia. The emphasis by NGOs on present agricultural practices does not, they argue, connect with the concern amongst rural peoples for investment in the education of their children, precisely so that in the future they may escape from agricultural livelihoods. Moller's (2007) study of quality of life in South Africa over a quarter of a century situates wellbeing within processes of economic and social transformation and political upheaval. These examples embrace a huge range of wider processes, from the near relationships in the family and household, to the most distant and anonymous relationships in global markets. Some of these interactions with elements of social structure are fleeting while others are more persistent in people's lives.

Following the work of Abbott, Bevan proposes three ways of conceiving of time relevant for the analysis of poverty: calendars and clocks, rhythms, and histories (Bevan 2004b). Calendars and clocks refer to the ways in which our societies formally organise, measure and record time using such notions as minutes, hours, days and years. Rhythms refer to the patterns over time associated with biological and social rhythms. These include the different biological rhythms of human life, but also the rhythms of, for example, agricultural, business and political cycles. Histories acknowledge that all human interactions take place in the context of both a past and a future and that both of these are important for relationships and interactions in the present.

All three of these conceptions of time are important in understanding the processes in which people pursue wellbeing and the persistence of poverty. As Bevan puts it:

'individual and local episodes of long-lasting poverty are embedded in unequal structures and dynamics. They can produce long-lasting harm, at three levels: long-lasting harm to people's bodies, minds, relationships and subjective quality of

life; long-lasting harm to local political economies, societies and cultural repertoires ...; and long-lasting harm to global relations, values and interactions' (Bevan 2004b: 16).

Important in understanding poverty are the effects of events that happen unexpectedly or out of their anticipated time, as the literature on vulnerability has demonstrated. For example, in Bangladesh it is not so much the regular event of flooding that produces hardship or a spiral of decline, but when floods occur sooner than expected and before crops are ripened or harvested, or when they last too long and people are consequently unable to find work in agricultural labouring. The literature on poverty is replete with examples of the relationship between time and poverty: the often disastrous impact of the 'untimely' death of family breadwinner; the duration of drought; the impacts of cyclical trends in global markets which affect the prices of goods that poor people produce and upon which they depend for a living.

v. Resourcefulness, resilience and adaptation

A final common feature of the WeD approach has been the importance of resourcefulness, resilience and adaptation. The Resource Profiles Framework was developed partly in response to the observable paradox of people living in material poverty, even what appears to be life-threatening poverty, but being able to adopt strategies which permit them to survive and also gain some satisfaction and enjoyment from their lives (Camfield and McGregor 2005). One explanation offered by our framework is that money and material assets comprise only part of the portfolio of resources of peoples: relationships with others, both intimate and at further removes, are and always have been crucial components of the total resource portfolio that people apply to their struggle for wellbeing. As a result even the poorest of people may have other resources to draw upon: in one meaning of the term they are 'resourceful'.

But we can go further. The work of Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) on the lives of people living in Calcutta slums is striking in this respect. From the positive psychology perspective, they found that the poor people included in their study reported being only slightly less satisfied overall than middle-class comparison groups and that satisfaction in particular areas of life was uniformly positive. This was particularly the case for the domain of 'social relationships'. The authors conclude:

'The participants in this study do not report the kind of suffering we expect. Rather, they believe they are good (moral) people, they are often religious ... and they have rewarding families.'
(Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2001: 348)

There are analytical and moral hazards in this area of debate, reflected in Amartya Sen's concern that people's perceptions of how they are doing 'can be easily swayed by mental conditioning or adaptive expectations' (1999: 62), leading to the 'scandalous' situation where,

'If a starving wreck, ravished by famine, buffeted by disease, is made happy through some mental conditioning (say, via the "opium" of religion), the person will be seen as doing well on this mental states perspective.' (1985b:188)

In support of this he cites evidence from a post-famine health survey of widows in India, which suggested significant disparities between self-reports and external observations (1984: 309). He also appeals to a form of the 'false consciousness' argument by stating that peoples' accounts are shaped by wider social, cultural and political structures and as such cannot always be taken as 'true' reflections of their experience or satisfaction with it. There have always been problems in the social sciences with the 'false consciousness' type of argument (see Lockwood 1981, and Scott 1985 amongst others), but these insights from psychology and other theorising (Elster 1983) offer constructive new ways of interpreting and understanding this old dilemma.

Processes of adaptation can play an important role in explaining how men, women and children cope with what to external observers appear to be the most unbearable of circumstances¹¹. Kahneman and Tversky (1984) argue that all human judgements are relative to the 'frame' in which they are made and that this frame is established through social comparison. Included in

¹¹ For one of the most striking pieces of writing on this refer to Primo Levi's reflections in 'If this is a man?' on life in a concentration/ extermination camp during the Second World War (1959).

this are comparisons with the performance of others, but also reference to internalised values of what is necessary to get by. Research into subjective wellbeing finds that people are 'resourceful' in the sense that they are able to adapt through the management of meanings and comparisons.

The weak links between income or material resources and happiness or subjective wellbeing, a constant of this research, are the starting points of a richer notion of quality of life. This entails a multi-dimensional or domain approach, recognising the contributions of health, family and friends, occupation and community, among other things, to our ongoing construction of wellbeing. Referring back to the eudaimonic dimension, feelings of competence and confidence, and progress in achieving significant personal goals, are critical to enhanced wellbeing. But these feelings and achievements cannot be separated from the social processes through which meanings are generated and shared. From this constructivist perspective even the poorest can be resourceful, hopeful and resilient.

This matches well with the centrality of autonomy as a basic human need in THN; on agency freedom in Sen's capability theory; on human dignity and of people 'as somehow awe-inspiringly above the mechanical workings of nature' in Nussbaum's version of capability theory. People endlessly exhibit creativity in facing demanding, even squalid or abusive, situations.¹² This second, and more usual, meaning of 'resourcefulness' is emerging as a common feature of twenty-first century understandings of wellbeing. It features, for example, in Cummins' observation that subjective wellbeing indicators like happiness and life satisfaction are maintained by a 'dispositional brain system' that keeps each person's wellbeing within a narrow, positive range (2002a). Rather than see the unresponsiveness of SWB to other factors as a problem, Cummins argues 'the fact that it is generally predictable and stable enhances its usefulness ... because the values for subjective QoL can be referenced to a normative range [which] is homeostatically maintained' (2002a: 264). He goes on to ask 'what are the

¹² Indeed, we can consider the possibility that a totally secure environment may undermine resourcefulness (Standing 2004).

conditions that produce homeostatic defeat?’ and ‘what are the personal and instrumental resources that defend against such defeat?’¹³

3. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCHING WELLBEING

The purpose of the discussion so far has been to prepare the ground for the presentation of a wellbeing research methodology. There are two steps in this process: The first is to draw together the observations made so far and to represent these in a general and overarching conceptual framework. The second is then to provide greater specificity by describing the operationalisation of the general principles into a methodology for the empirical study of the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in developing countries.

Figure 1 draws together these observations to present a new perspective on the study of wellbeing. The diagram offers a view which is trans-disciplinary and deliberately seeks to be comprehensive in its notion of wellbeing. As we shall see, it also helps design a suite of specific methodologies for wellbeing research. It is unlikely that any single empirical study of wellbeing will be able to deal equally with all aspects of the huge agenda that is implied by this diagram. Different empirical studies could choose to focus on some elements of the diagram to greater extent than others, but the argument here is that the perspective constitutes a package and even if not all parts are dealt with equally in any empirical study they must in some way be taken account of. The diagram helps ensure that specific studies remain consistent with the overarching wellbeing perspective.

Figure 1 adopts the human ontology and places the social human being at the centre of the analysis. These social humans then relate to others both in pursuit of their own wellbeing goals and also in the constitution of society (at all its levels of collectivity), in order to enable human goals to be better met. The diagram also acknowledges the inseparability of wellbeing outcomes

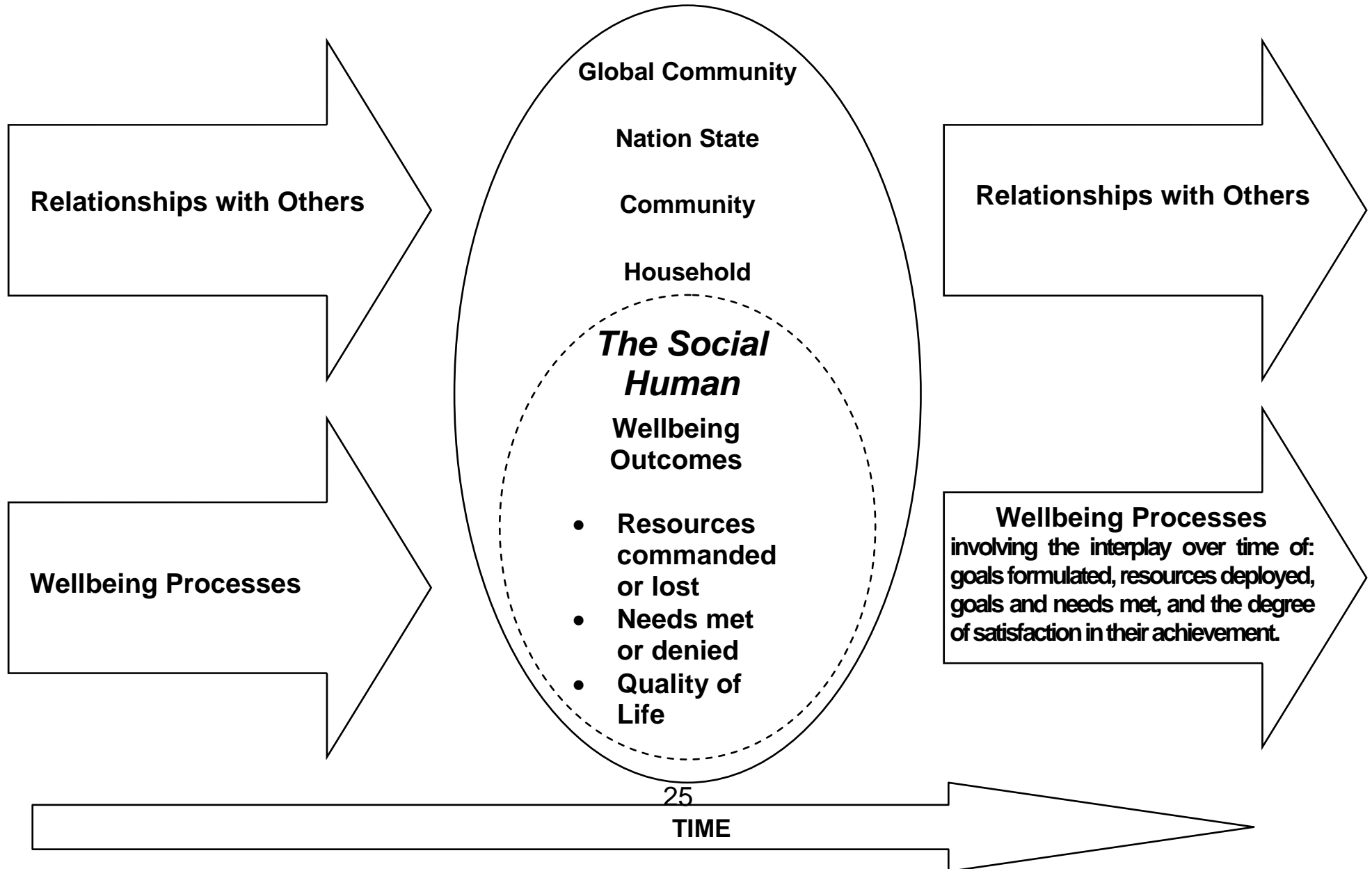
¹³ The work of Camfield, Ruta and Donaldson (2006) offers some insights into the potential relationships between the work of Cummins and that of Sen and others in the more social dimensions of wellbeing.

and processes and emphasises their constant iteration through time, from processes to outcomes and then onto processes again, by envisaging time as flowing from left to right along the horizontal axis. The axis is given no scale since some of the relationships that are involved will take place over a short time span and others over much longer time scales.

The social persons' wellbeing outcomes are represented in the central circle in the limited threefold sense discussed at the beginning of this paper. They comprise of the combination of needs met, resources commanded and quality of life achieved. The processes that generate these outcomes are seen as similarly involving the interplay of needs, resources and meanings. That is, we recognise that people formulate goals or objectives (which are likely to be a combination of needs and wants); they then deploy resources in seeking to meet these goals; and they adjust both their goals and their strategies for achieving them in relation to their perceived satisfaction in achieving their goals. This dynamic highlights the social and cognitive processes of adaptation that we discussed earlier. In the processes of goal formulation, in deciding on how to use resources and then in evaluating their own condition social human beings are both resourceful and resilient.

Figure 1: A wellbeing framework

SOCIAL STRUCTURES



Since the social human being exists in society then all utterances, actions and decisions are shaped by the frames of meaning at work in the context in which the person participates. Culture imbues all the levels of social structure that are identified in this diagram. However, we have argued for a view of culture that is neither monolithic nor static. In contemporary struggles over identity social human beings may engage in many different cultural contexts and may have open to them many different cultural repertoires. It is a matter of empirical study to identify what these different cultural repertoires may be for different people and then how these enable or constrain them in formulating and then pursuing wellbeing.

Harm to the social person primarily arises from the failure to meet needs (including where this is the direct and intended consequence of the action or actions of others), but we have expanded the definition of needs here to include social, affective and cognitive needs. The explanations as to why harm is generated can involve material, social, affective and cognitive processes or a combination of them. Thus, and as only limited examples, harm may arise from failing to have the necessary resources with which to meet material needs, but could also arise from aspiring to goals which cannot be then achieved, or aspiring to yet other goals which when achieved produce harm in themselves¹⁴.

The diagram conceives of human beings engaging in relationships with others, across a range of different levels of social structure, and over time. The terms household, community, nation state and global community are identified here and are used (ambiguously) to refer to both the location of the interaction and the types or domain of interaction. Thus, for example, we can envisage household relationships with family members who are not physically present in the household but who are to be found somewhere else in the world. The locations and types of interaction that are shown here are indicative and not exhaustive. Different analyses may require specification of alternate levels of social structure (for example, neighbourhood, workplace, or region).

The diagram does not imply that all relationships are necessarily real or face-to-face, but as we have discussed earlier, it may be that certain

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of these possibilities see Gaspers (2007) discussion of the different usages of the term 'needs'.

wellbeing outcomes and processes depend on relationships which are essentially 'imagined' (for example, with other members of the nation state or with the global congregation of a particular faith group). Once again this raises the issue of identity and highlights the contemporary challenge of social beings physically located in particular societies nevertheless operating with multiple notions of identity, not all of which are rooted in that particular society.

4. A METHODOLOGY FOR RESEARCHING WELLBEING

How can this broad framework be translated into a methodology for studying the ways in which different people attempt to construct their wellbeing? Here we summarise the approach adopted in the WeD research programme.

In order to study the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in developing countries the research group identified four countries in which to carry out the research: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. These span three continents, four dominant religions, and include two middle-income and two low-income countries. Within each country six or seven research sites were selected to cover a spectrum of rural to urban communities. In each country case the country team selected communities on that grounds that they were neither representative nor exceptional, but that study of them would yield particular insights into the challenges to the achievement of wellbeing in the country at this time.

The composition and organisation of the WeD research group reflects the challenges of both the disciplinary scope of the wellbeing conceptual framework and the problematic of keeping both the 'local' and the 'universal' in focus. It is international, bringing together researchers from the five different countries involved, and it is multidisciplinary (drawing upon anthropology, sociology, political theory, economics and psychology). Individual researchers in the group range in their emphasis and experience from those concerned more with revealing local ('emic') understanding and those whose interest is more fixed on universal ('etic') models. The group set out to reconcile these and other differences not only via the types of theoretical debate that have been reviewed here, but also by negotiating and implementing a joint programme of comparative and cross-national empirical research. As a microcosm of the tension between 'Universalism' and the 'Localism' the process of constructing the WeD methodology involved considerable time in iteration between all parties, seeking

agreement within the group over both the interpretation of the trans-disciplinary framework and the detail of fieldwork implementation.

The WeD research methodology comprises six distinct research components. Each of these generates data on key elements of the conceptual framework and they can be grouped in the three categories: those that deal primarily with *outcomes*, those that deal mainly with *structures* and those that deal with *processes*.

Outcomes

Two of the three dimensions of wellbeing outcome (see Figure 1) are addressed by one research instrument, the Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ).

1. *RANQ*. The RANQ is a household survey that establishes both an outcomes benchmark and the basic population upon which other elements of the study can draw. The RANQ was specifically designed to map the distribution of resources and needs satisfactions within the communities being studied. The five categories of *resources* were derived from the Resource Profiles Framework: material, human, social, cultural and natural. The major categories of need satisfaction were derived from the Theory of Human Need (for example, health, education, food and housing). What marks the RANQ apart is that both needs and resources extend beyond those that are explored by the types of household survey conventionally used in international development research and policy. Thus resources extend to the social and cultural resources that a household and its members can command and the needs explored extend to relationships.

In each case the specific or 'local' form of the resources or needs had to be established by an extensive process of grounding and piloting. The result was a common set of questions but translated into each local language and with specific forms of resources and needs satisfiers where required. Thus the instrument does not ask about *llamas* in Bangladesh, or about *madrassas*¹⁵ in rural Peru. Throughout, careful attention was paid to issues of cognitive and linguistic equivalence in order that results from the four countries could be analysed in relation to each other. Up to 250 households

¹⁵ Islamic school for religion based study.

were included in the survey in each community studied, resulting in around 1,000 rural and 500 urban households surveyed in each country. Although a household survey the RANQ gathers detailed information on every member of every household and in particular seeks to establish levels of needs satisfaction on an individual basis.

RANQ also gathers information on basic household demographics and on important instances of long-term shock and good fortune experienced by the households and their members over the previous five years. Having gathered the basic demographics for either the complete population of the community or a large sample of it, the RANQ then provides a basis for the sub-sampling of individuals and households for subsequent phases of fieldwork.

The third dimension of wellbeing outcome identified in the framework is Quality of Life, and this is investigated in our QoL research.

2. *QoL*. After an extensive review of available methodologies for measuring quality of life the research group concluded that none of these adequately met the needs of the wellbeing framework. Consequently the group adopted a three phase strategy to study quality of life as both the outcomes experienced in the communities studied and the processes which generate them.

Phase 1: The approach to quality of life adopted has been 'bottom-up', recognising that no other QoL methodology has been developed through close engagement with people in relatively poor rural and urban communities in developing countries. In the first phase exploratory and grounding work was carried out with community members, identifying what goals and resources were regarded by them as important to their QoL in their particular community. The first phase also explored the efficacy of a range of research methods for the study of QoL in these communities, where literacy rates can be low and where other aspects of community life and organisation limit the effectiveness of methods developed using highly educated participants from industrialised countries (see Bullinger and Schmidt 2007).

Phase 2: The substantive and methodological findings of the first phase were then used to define a workable definition of quality of life appropriate for such communities and a strategy for the implementation of a specific and

unique instrument (WeDQoL). Adapting the WHO definition of Quality of Life, the WeD group has operated with a view of quality of life as emerging from, '... the gap between people's goals and perceived resources, in the context of their environment, culture, values, and experiences.' (Camfield, McGregor, & Yamamoto 2006). The instrument that was developed gathers data on the key elements of this definition.

Phase 3: A common interview administered instrument was developed and was then grounded in each country. The series of measures that it produces are then analysed in relation to each other and in relation to data generated by other parts of the WeD methodology. Importantly this approach permits the analysis of the relationship between subjective data and both quantitative and qualitative data that deal with the more the objective dimensions of wellbeing and the frames of meaning with which people operate.

Structures

As illustrated in Figure 1, the social human being is embedded in society and this part of the research methodology is designed to comprehend those structures of society that are most relevant for the individuals and households studied. Again the WeD programme had to be selective, and we opted to study in depth just two of the hierarchy of social structures: the community and the nation state.

3. *Community profiling*: The community profile is a document which describes the salient demographic, social and physical characteristics of each of the communities included in the study. It is compiled using a variety of research approaches including the use of secondary data, key informant interviews and participatory methods. The community profiling also plays an important role in the sequence of the research. It has two interlinked purposes: it begins to build a relationship between the researchers and the people in the communities being studied and builds an appreciation of the meanings of wellbeing that are at play in each community. As the WeD methodology moves on it increasingly depends upon a growing level of trust between researchers and community members. Also the growing understanding of the community is important for subsequent elements of the methodology, where it allows a more attuned approach and more sharply focuses work than otherwise might have been the case.

As a document the community profile can then be developed throughout the research, with more data being added as the results of further methods become available. In this sense it becomes an important resource document for the research team. Because the community profiles have been written to broadly the same format across the four countries, this also enables us to compare differences and similarities across the communities.

4. *Structures research and welfare regimes*: This component relates the wellbeing outcomes and processes observed to national systems and features (and to a certain extent regional and other sub-national features). The intent is to locate the research sites within national and global structures of power, exchange and information. It also seeks to draw attention to how actors within the research sites mediate between the households and outside organizations and institutions, including government, business and civil society.

The approach we adopt draws particularly on the insecurity and welfare regimes framework developed to analyse developing countries by Gough, Wood, Bevan and others (2004). In conceptual terms this contributes to the developing critique of the 'Washington consensus' and the idea that there exists one linear path of economic development. Instead it posits distinct paths of development in different countries and regions, which constitute persistent and distinct welfare regimes. There is a close link here with the model of Sigma society and social exclusion developed by Figueroa, Altamirano and colleagues in the Peruvian WeD research team and discussed by Copestake (2007). The data for this component of the research is mainly secondary and includes both quantitative and qualitative data, but this is gathered in reference to the community profiles, 'the process research' and the identification of key community actors in the RANQ so that our understanding of structures is connected across the different levels.

Processes

Finally, the research framework in Figure 1 emphasises that wellbeing outcomes cannot be understood without reference to time and the processes that generate them. The research into the processes in which different individuals and households engage as they pursue their wellbeing provides us with insights into the relationships between wellbeing outcomes and structures. Two distinct research components were developed here.

The first, obviously titled ‘process research’ entails largely qualitative engagement with a sub-sample of different individuals and households to discern the types of processes that they regard as most important in formulating their wellbeing goals and strategies. The second is the income and expenditure research.

5. *Process research*: This divides into two distinct approaches involving two different sets of research methods. The first of these is a ‘thematic’ approach, in which a series of prominent and contemporary ‘wellbeing’ issues are identified for particular attention. These ‘themes’ (for example, local collective action, livelihoods or migration) are identified by a combination of insights from the communities as well as cognisance of debates and discourses within each country. A sample of different individuals and households then are interviewed in relation to their process experiences in respect of these themes. The second approach is the ‘core cases’ approach, where a sub-sample of individuals and households undertake diary work and repeated interviews over an extended period. This data then can be used to identify and explore the range of different processes that are salient to their wellbeing. The purpose of both approaches, however, is the same: to illuminate a number of key relationships that these individuals and households engage in as they seek to achieve their desired state of wellbeing.

6. *Income and expenditure research*: This, a clear follow-on from the RANQ, provides information on how the portfolio of resources that a household commands is translated into incomes or other means by which needs or goals are satisfied, over a period of one year. The expenditures dimension of this work not only gives a view as to what goals or needs are actually met, but also an indication as to how these are distributed within the household. The research team have used two methods to collect this data. In Bangladesh and Peru a sample household survey has been conducted at three points through the year, providing a large sample of data¹⁶ but with less information on periods between the surveys. The second method, monthly diaries applied in Ethiopia and Thailand, yields more qualitative information but for a smaller sample. In each case, however, because the data is gathered over a period of one year we gain some insight into the

¹⁶ The surveys involve a sample of between 250 and 300 households, while the diaries cover around 75 households.

ways those seasonal fluctuations in both income and expenditure demands are dealt with by different kinds of household and individual.

Taken together these six elements of the wellbeing methodology are intended to provide a coherent set of data which is both quantitative and qualitative across a range of different households and individuals in the communities studied. Because all of the instruments have been designed with reference to the same basic framework there are important points of conceptual interconnection between them and the data from these different research components can be analysed in relation to each other. They are now all linked via an integrated database.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

This paper has sought to show that wellbeing is a novel and potentially fruitful approach for both academic and policy thinking. We have offered a view as to how these different contributions can be brought together in a single conceptual framework and developed a methodology that seeks to operationalise that framework for empirical study in a selection of developing countries. These are yet early days for a wellbeing research agenda and there are many challenges both at conceptual and methodological levels which require much further work. However, it is pertinent to conclude with some discussion of the common challenges that the wellbeing research agenda has encountered.

Multi, inter, and trans-disciplinarity

Inter-disciplinary research is both lauded and ignored across the social sciences, which exhibit their own languages, methodologies, and assumptions, and are organised in separate corporate structures comprising university departments, professional associations, journals, and library classifications. Cross-disciplinary fields of study do exist, of which development studies and social policy are two relevant examples; yet challenging the domination of disciplines is hard even at the multi-disciplinary level, let alone in a trans-disciplinary way.

The contributions to this book illustrate the degree of convergence at this time between authors writing from different disciplinary traditions as they engage with the concept of wellbeing. In the academic arena the concept of human wellbeing is one in which most if not all social science disciplines

profess an interest. Most also have the humility to recognise that their own single disciplinary perspective and tools will be inadequate in comprehending the type of rounded conception of human wellbeing that we advance. As such the concept provides a timely and new opportunity for interchange between disciplines. Wellbeing has an important communicative function to fulfil within the global social science community at this time.

Each of the disciplines represented in the WeD research group and highlighted in the forthcoming volume (Gough and McGregor 2007) has their own and different wellbeing discourses and their own traditions of dealing with the concept. It is therefore a challenge to understand the relations between these different histories and discourses, and then to find some acceptable common ground with which to take forward debate. The research agenda inevitably encounters what Bevan (2007) refers to as 'the political economy of disciplinarity'. These more basic barriers reflect how we currently organise our academic institutions and their relationship to policy, and are not to be underestimated either at a grand level of academic policy and funding allocation, or in the simple day-to-day attempts at communication between disciplinarians. But among the contributors to the forthcoming volume *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: New Approaches and Research Strategies*, edited by Ian Gough and J Allister McGregor published by Cambridge University Press there is evidence of positive willingness to recognise the validity and potential value of insights from other disciplines and research traditions.

Wellbeing and policy making

Apart from communications between social scientists, there is also the challenge of communication with policy makers. Des Gasper (2007) cautiously hopes that the concept of wellbeing can provide a new impetus for research and policy where he judges earlier theories of need to have failed. Injecting a note of realism he reminds us that in both the academic and policy dimensions, the potential of the concept is matched by real potential pitfalls arising from the confusion of discourses. Like 'need', 'wellbeing' can be used in diverse and loose ways. Such 'slipperiness' is, he argues, a profound obstacle to meaningful cross-disciplinary communication and a trans-disciplinary wellbeing agenda will require much clarification. Within WeD we have discovered that the review and harmonisation of terminology is an important undertaking not only for smooth inter-

disciplinary communication but also to operationalise the research agenda within a workable methodology.

But Gasper, with a longstanding awareness of the ‘needs of policy and policymakers’ (Schaffer 1985, Apthorpe and Gasper 1996) then asks ‘How can these linked research programmes (needs and wellbeing) proceed effectively in political-intellectual-organisational space, aware not only of the precision, logic and empirical reference of discourse but also of its politics?’ Here a major challenge confronts wellbeing researchers: the concept is inherently complex and yet we must reject some of our traditional social science ways of simplifying complex realities. How can such a holistic, woolly and intuitively appealing notion provide better political and policy leverage than the preceding discourses of needs?

The challenge is to advance a rigorous and well-disciplined academic debate around wellbeing; to do this in a way that permits the operationalisation of the concept in an empirical research agenda; and, at the same time, retain its simple intuitive appeal and rhetorical value. This will require compromises in two directions. The first is to ensure that amongst academics the conceptual debates are not elaborated *ad absurdum*, and that a balance is achieved between the inevitable disciplinary trade-offs and the necessary precision for research operationalisation. The second is to ensure that policy makers accept that wellbeing entails acceptance of a greater level of complexity than prior frameworks demand or than many are used to. It is not a concept that sits easily with the disciplinarian underpinnings that are prevalent in many contemporary bureaucratic divisions of labour.

Wellbeing, policy makers and politicians

While the relationship to policy makers is challenging enough the wellbeing research agenda begins to highlight some broader and in some ways more profound challenges for our political systems. Indeed, the more that we engage with the concept the more we can wonder whether our current policy processes and political systems can cope with the implications of working with a concept of wellbeing that so profoundly incorporates both subjective dimensions and inter-subjective meaning.

The framework that is presented here implies that to formulate and implement an effective policy requires a good appreciation of the local

realities that confront the human beings who are ‘the objects’ of that policy. A key dimension of these local realities is knowing what people think about what they conceive as wellbeing and how they are trying to achieve this (see McGregor 2004). This is what, in theory, systems of democracy are supposed to do. They are supposed to provide a means of communicating people’s values to those who would seek to make policy on their behalf. It is well recognised, however, that even when working well our systems of democracy are often rather blunt instruments for this purpose (Pateman 1970, 1983) and need supplementing with more direct forms of participation.

Yet, if we are to accept that men, women and children have some kind of right to have their views of what goals they are trying to achieve and how they are trying to achieve them taken into account, then the challenges to our social and political systems are laid more open. At one level there is the basic challenge of how we organise political participation so as ‘simply’ to be able to hear different ‘voices’ at all levels of policy decision-making. Development policy makers and agencies have become increasingly aware of this through the work of pioneers such as Robert Chambers and also initiatives such as the World Bank’s ‘Voices of the Poor’ exercises, but there remain tremendous obstacles to making this routinely effective in the politics and policy processes of many developing and developed societies. There is the deeper question of how to resolve conflicting and contested visions of what different people want for themselves and how we want our societies to be.

In this respect it is not just democracy but governance that matters. We have argued here that in order for people to achieve wellbeing then societies need to be organised in ways that enable them to meet their needs and achieve their goals. But alongside this comes a requirement for systems of authority that support such societal organisation, ensure that it is reproduced, enable it to evolve, but also to protect that social organisation from possible damage as a consequence of the actions of individuals. Earlier we noted that in the Doyal and Gough Theory of Human Need serious harm is defined as ‘fundamental disablement in the pursuit of one’s vision of the good.’ But we argue here that not all ‘visions of the good’ are likely to be equally acceptable within societies if the values and organisation

of that society are to remain intact in such a way as to better enable all in that society to pursue their wellbeing¹⁷.

As political science has long understood authority rests on a balance between consent and coercion, but lessons from history and around the globe indicate that for societies to succeed then coercion has its limits and that authority has to be acceptable to the majority of people subject to it (Beetham 1991 – The Legitimation of Power). The wellbeing agenda suggests that our ability to accept shared meanings and values requires that careful attention is paid to the mechanisms and processes whereby we reach consensus. This applies not just to overt policy decisions but also to debates over the very values upon which our societies depend.¹⁸

The Global Challenge of the Social Contract

Governance is a concept that applies to all levels of social collectivity from the household, through the village or town, to the nation state, and on to the global community. Recognising this returns us to what is perhaps the grandest challenge that the wellbeing agenda highlights. Stated in its most abstract form it requires us to consider what the relationship between the person and their society is to be.

Des Gaspers' deconstruction of the concepts of needs and wellbeing is important here. As he notes the 'strongest' way in which the term 'need' is used refers to where '... it establishes a strong normative claim since the objective is a normative priority, and the requisite is indeed essential.' This normative prioritisation can then drive the allocation of resources. However, it prompts us to consider where such normative prioritisations come from. Hitherto, universal theories and then the policies that are founded in them, whether explicit like those of Doyal and Gough or covert such as those of neo-classical economics, have sought to establish a superior claim to normative priority with reference either to the objectivity that their theoretical

¹⁷ As Des Gasper has noted in discussion, if one's 'vision of the good' entails actions that damage or eliminate particular sections of a society's population, then we have to ask whether that is an acceptable characteristic of a 'good' society?

¹⁸ THN concludes that a 'dual strategy' is required to combine codified knowledge and experiential knowledge in a way that enhances human wellbeing: this returns us to the dilemma of devising locally legitimate and effective dual strategies.

argument supports or to the evidence available that affirms their propositions. The argument presented here is that 'normative' statements in social theory and social policy tend to understate the social and cognitive processes that construct them. This is especially so when the argument depends strongly on a notion of objectivity. Rather 'universalist' statements, theories and policies must themselves be understood as global social and cultural constructs.

But this statement does not necessarily undermine their legitimacy. It is neither a collapse into post-modernism nor surrender to unfettered cultural relativism. Rather we must undertake cultural analysis at all levels of our global systems. We must consider how in any community and at any level, including at the global level, we reach our conclusions as to what is acceptable as a normative statement.

As argued throughout the forthcoming volume (Gough and McGregor 2007), international development is fundamentally about competing visions of what wellbeing is or should be. It manifests itself in debates about what is meant by desirable and socially feasible. It is important for a future wellbeing research agenda to recognise and accept that both of these are and always will be matters of contestation. Subjective and inter-subjective dimensions are an integral part of our definition of wellbeing and this recognises that each vision of wellbeing is founded in sets of values and that those values are generated and maintained within particular societal contexts.

However, as Gough has noted elsewhere, '... the two discourses – on the nature of wellbeing and on the institutions, processes and policies that affect wellbeing in developing countries – are disconnected. This disadvantages peoples – and notably the poor - in the developing world, for two reasons. First, they are deprived of influence over discourses and debates about universal and global goals. Second, they are deprived of influence over discourses and debates about local and place-specific means and policies.' (2004: 276)

The challenge here then is how we are to take account of competing visions in our global deliberations on the universal and normative. This involves debating the political processes involved in establishing the universal normative. The purpose and promise of the wellbeing research agenda is that it represents a new analytical approach to these issues. It has the potential to generate, for example, a new perspective on debates over the

roles of the state, market, community and individual in the creation of conditions to enable wellbeing. We have argued earlier for a definition of development as ‘... the creation of conditions where all people in the world are able to achieve wellbeing’. The incorporation of a subjective dimension in our conception of wellbeing implies that wellbeing cannot be wholly delivered by the state or market. Rather it something that the person pursues and can seek to achieve. But they do not do so in a vacuum and the task of living together in society ensures that we must pay attention to our social structures and the systems of values with which we operate.

The US Declaration of Independence speaks of the ‘right to pursue happiness’ and in a similar sense our debates over the organisation of our societies and relations between them should be governed by judgements over whether the conditions are in place for people to pursue their notions of wellbeing. The concept of wellbeing has the potential to provide a basis for deliberations over what minimal standards of wellbeing would be and what societal conditions are necessary to make these possible. This is challenging at the level of the nation-state, but it is equally important and necessary to consider the challenges in respect of our global community.

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