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**WELLBEING, LIVELIHOODS AND RESOURCES IN SOCIAL
PRACTICE**

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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 explores the ways a concept of 'resources' can contribute to our understanding of wellbeing. The major argument is that resources do not have a fixed meaning but are constituted through social practice. While we may construct 'resource profiles' to record different types of resources, their significance for wellbeing will depend on understandings about how these resources can and cannot be used in particular contexts. We must avoid reifying categories like 'capitals' or 'assets'. All forms of resources, such as land for example, have material, relational and symbolic dimensions. How resources are used in practice also depends critically on who is involved, and the structural forms of power they can deploy. This approach exposes the common 'conceit' when development agencies assume that because they are familiar with 'a resource' they understand what would constitute its 'rational' use in different contexts. The paper concludes with a plea for some balance between a universal framework and one sensitive to local understandings.

This paper is a revised version of Chapter 7 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: resources, wellbeing, social practice, values

Key Reading:

Saltmarshe, D. 2002. 'The resource profile approach: A Kosovo case study', *Public Administration and Development* 22 (2): 179-190

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. H. and Fisch, R. 1974. *Change - Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. London: W.W. Norton and Co.

1. INTRODUCTION

'When in 1334 the Duchess of Tyrol, Margareta Maultasch, encircled the castle of Hochosterwitz in the province of Carinthia, she knew only too well that the fortress, situated on an incredibly steep rock rising high above the

valley floor, was impregnable to direct attack and would yield only to a long siege. In due course, the situation of the defenders became critical: they were down to their last ox and had only two bags of barley corn left. Margareta's situation was becoming equally pressing, albeit for different reasons: her troops were beginning to be unruly, there seemed to be no end to the siege in sight, and she had similarly urgent military business elsewhere. At this point the commandant of the castle decided on a desperate course of action which to his men must have seemed sheer folly: he had the last ox slaughtered, had its abdominal cavity filled with the remaining barley, and ordered the carcass thrown down the steep cliff onto a meadow in front of the enemy camp. Upon receiving this scornful message from above, the discouraged duchess abandoned the siege and moved on.' (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch 1974:xi)

This story gives an example of comic reversal in the definition and deployment of resources. Faced with a desperate situation of chronic food shortage and imminent military and political defeat, the commandant resorts to a reckless, apparently irrational act. Rather than have the remaining food consumed in a final attempt to rally his people's flagging strength, he has the ox and barley hurled over the barricades in a last-ditch, winner-takes-all, symbolic act of resistance. The gamble pays off. The duchess, already wearied by her recalcitrant troops and the lure of other battles to fight, has had enough. The commandant's transformatory interpretation of the resources at his disposal has a transformatory outcome. The use of ox and barley as symbol of scorn and defiance has a material impact far beyond their 'innate' capacity. From simply enabling an insupportable situation to be continued a little longer, they become the means for liberation.

The story offers a number of challenges to conventional ways of thinking about resources. It suggests, first, that the character of resources is not simply given, but varies according to the context in which they are perceived - and the potentially radical ways in which they may be re-conceived and creatively deployed. Second, and linked to this, it shows the importance of agency, that it is human subjects and their reading of their needs and what they wish to achieve in the situation they face, that defines how resources are understood. Third, it points to the significance of social identities and power relations for both the capacity to use resources and the outcomes of

that use - if one of the ordinary soldiers had suggested throwing away their remaining food, he might well have found himself hurled over the barricades instead. Finally, it points to the indeterminacy of social practice. However great the creative inspiration of the commandant, the success of his action depended on the response of his opponent. Had she reacted otherwise, the fate of the besieged community and our history of that part of the world would have been very different.

This paper considers the significance of these points for the use of 'resources' as a conceptual category in researching wellbeing. Rather than seeing resources as stable, fixed categories of assets, we argue that what constitutes a resource in any given context depends primarily on the *purposes* of the people involved. Resources offer means to an end. Both the ends people identify and the perceptions of resources available are constituted in and through culture and social relations. We begin with a brief introduction to the concept of wellbeing and the livelihood frameworks which inform approaches to wellbeing in development studies. This leads into more general discussion of the points made above: the importance of agency; the difficulty of fixing categories of resources; and the place of subjectivity, social identities and contingency in the definition and use of resources. We then explore these issues in closer focus, through examination of a specific piece of social interaction described by Paule Marshall in her novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. In conclusion, we consider the significance of the arguments made here, and their implications for researching wellbeing.

2. WELLBEING AND LIVELIHOOD FRAMEWORKS

Building on established critiques of narrowly economic approaches to poverty or development and restrictively medical understandings of health, wellbeing offers a rounded, positive focus which includes not only material resources and social relationships, but also the psychological states and subjective perceptions of people themselves. The stakes are high: at the core of 'wellbeing' lies the question of what are the essential conditions for human flourishing. On the one hand it invokes the universal: the notion that there are core dimensions of human wellbeing which are common across time and space (e.g. Alkire 2002b; Doyal & Gough 1991; Nussbaum 2000; Ryan & Deci 2001; Sen 1999). As post-colonial scholarship attests,

however, frameworks that aspire to be 'universal' nevertheless remain caught within a particular set of cultural co-ordinates (e.g. Mehta 1997; Parekh 1995). On the other hand, therefore, the notion of 'wellbeing' appeals to the local, and the particularities of culture and personal experience. In the policy context its key promise is to provide a more holistic, accurate profile of what is really important to people, challenging the default biases of the professionals and enabling them to shape their programmes in more effective ways.

Within Development Studies, it is livelihood frameworks which aim to offer such a rounded, bottom up perspective, reflecting a reaction against a narrow emphasis on one-off, income measures of economic status, and seek to give a more holistic, people-centred approach. They recognise that household livelihoods are often diverse, combining various activities of various members, with multiple priorities, strategies, influences and therefore outcomes. They seek to overcome the compartmentalisation of people's lives according to the arbitrary 'sectoral' divisions of government departments and development agencies: urban/rural, formal/informal, education/health/industry/agriculture. They also aim to move beyond single 'snap-shot' views of poverty, recognising seasonality changes with the turning year, as well as longer term cycles and shifts. Through the concepts of 'vulnerability', (Chambers 1989) 'sensitivity' and 'resilience' (Bayliss-Smith 1991) they also seek to capture the hazards that households face and the shocks that these engender, and the capacities of households to respond to them. Echoing the move towards 'wellbeing' as focus, the overall inspiration of livelihoods approaches is to move away from negative, outsider categories which dissect people's lives according to areas of professional specialisation. Instead, they aim to offer a positive, actor-oriented focus which emphasises 'strengths' rather than 'needs', and draws on people's own perspectives through participatory methods of research. In aspiration at least, such approaches seek, rather than abstracting particulars from their context, to show how the system works in context: how the whole gives character to the parts through the inter-relation of the social and economic, the human and environmental, people's action and the policy and political context.

The notions of 'resources', 'assets' or 'capitals', and the categories into which these are seen to fall, play a key role in the ways that livelihoods approaches conceptualise different facets of people's lives. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework advanced by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and researchers at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, for example, categorises the types of resource at people's disposal into natural, social, physical, financial, and human 'capital'. Diagrammatically, this allows household livelihoods to be represented as a pentagon whose points rest on each of these different forms of capital. The larger the area that the pentagon occupies, the stronger and more resilient the livelihood it represents (Carney 1998). An alternative approach is offered by Caroline Moser's Asset Vulnerability Framework, derived from urban research (Moser 1998). This identifies five categories of assets: labour; human capital; productive assets (especially housing); household relations (the composition and structure of households and cohesion of relations within them); and social capital (co-operation and cohesion within the community).¹ This has the great advantage of including explicit reference to asset-holding at various levels within its core terms: figuring in differentiation within households on the one hand and within communities on the other. Other frameworks, by contrast, tend to focus primarily on 'the household' and so are vulnerable to producing an over-homogenous view of this. The Resource Profiles Framework (RPF), developed at the University of Bath, is distinctive in including culture as a separate resource category. This points to the significance of status and symbolic value in the social interactions which constitute livelihoods. To be seen as 'poor but pious', for example, may enable people to advance claims beyond those justified by their material position or social relationships alone (McGregor 1998²).

¹ Although it does not include this within the five asset categories, the framework also recognises the importance of social and economic infrastructure, and the mix of public and private provision of this, to people's welfare positions.

² McGregor, J.A. (1998) *A Poverty of Agency: resource management amongst the poor in Bangladesh*, paper presented at the Fifth Workshop of the European Network of Bangladesh Studies, 18-20 April.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF AGENCY

Having broken the view that 'resources' or 'capital' comprise only income and productive assets, the question arises as to how much more such frameworks can do? Does dividing up household characteristics and assets according to various categories tell us anything new, or simply re-describe tangible and observable features in rather abstract and alienated ways? Do the frameworks genuinely incorporate the importance of social and cultural dynamics, or simply re-cast these in economic terms? What do such approaches add to our understanding of the practical problems poor people face and the processes by which poverty and inequality are produced, reproduced and potentially transformed?

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework seeks to answer such questions by setting the 'asset pentagon' within a broader diagram showing the additional factors of 'vulnerability context' and 'structures and processes' that impact on livelihoods and the flows of influence between them.³ This has the advantage of relieving the 'asset pentagon' of much work. Variability apparently derives from these other factors, which will affect the specific content of a particular asset bundle, but leave the basic model untouched. The disadvantage, of course, is that this introduces a whole further set of variables which again need more investigation, both in terms of their definition and in their relationship to one another and to the whole. Rather than simply building more *around* the notion of types of capital, it is important to investigate further the notion of capital or resources itself, and in particular to explore the social and cultural processes through which they are constituted and deployed (see e.g. Molyneux 2002).

The first step towards investigating the notions of 'capital', 'assets' or 'resources' is to question the reification which can arise from their uncritical transplantation from one context into another. The 'home' context of 'capital', for instance, lies in the discourses of economics and political

³ The 'vulnerability context' comprises: 'trends' -in natural resource stocks, population, technology, politics and economics; 'shocks' - climate or conflict; and 'culture'. The 'structures' comprise levels of government and private sector, and 'processes', laws, policies, incentives and institutions (Carney 1998).

economy, where it indicates the presence of tangible assets with particular functions in systems of production and exchange. Within these discursive conventions, it then becomes possible to extend the term metaphorically, and to talk of ‘human capital’ and ‘social capital’. As these have come into common usage, however, they are increasingly used in apparently literal ways, as representing ‘real things’ ‘out there’, rather than categories of economic thought. The difficulties this brings can be seen at quite an immediate, practical level. In applying livelihoods approaches, decisions have to be made about how to allocate goods, services or characteristics between the various resource categories. As with any framework, in practice it can be difficult to know what goes where. Take education. In all of the livelihoods frameworks this appears as a type of human resource, as providing skills or aptitudes that add value, basically, to the household stocks of labour. In Bourdieu's (1984) work on the makings of elites and social distinctions, however, education appears primarily as a cultural resource. It is at once a highly transactable sign of status (symbolic capital, in Bourdieu's terms), and the means through which values are inculcated and tastes are refined, which in turn drives the reproduction of social and cultural difference. Should education be classified as a human resource, or a cultural resource? The obvious answer is that it may function in both ways.

Recognising this dual potential of education challenges us to move beyond simply generating inventories of the goods and relationships people have at their disposal, to ask how different categories of resource are related to each other. This may be done in different ways. For mathematically minded economists, the question becomes how to quantify the social and cultural, and how to model the terms of exchange whereby more of these may compensate for fewer material goods. For those more interested in the social processes through which people generate their livelihoods, it is here that the importance of distinguishing between the languages of ‘capital’, ‘assets’ and ‘resources’ becomes clear. Far from being simply semantic, the choice of terms points to more profound distinctions which bear importantly on the key issues for this paper. As Wood (2005: 5) points out, the term ‘capital’: ‘implies fixed rather than variable value, somehow existing with relative autonomy from the actor(s)’.

The choice of the RPF to talk of ‘resources’ thus points to an active relationship between householders, the material and other assets to which they have access, and the strategies which they use to deploy them. It aims to prioritise the social and see this as the context for the economic, rather than the other way around. Thus McGregor (1994) argues that if you wish to understand the livelihood dynamics of poor people in Bangladesh, you need to focus on credit *relationships*, rather than the exchange of credit as an inert asset in itself. To grasp the utility of different kinds of intervention, you need similarly to explore the social relations which mediate their entry into villages, since these can result in formal government programmes reinforcing the very relations of patronage they are designed to overcome (*ibid*). Wood (2005) makes an allied argument in the form of a metaphor, likening the agency of the household members to the shine given by a bowler to the cricket ball of the household assets, the critical element that determines its swing, and thus the outcome it secures. As in our initial story of the siege of Hochosterwitz, these more social approaches suggest that the character of resources is given by their *use*. Resources are not things that can be abstracted simplistically from their context and categorised without reference to the people to whom they belong. They are already infused with meanings and intentions which reside in the relationship between the ‘thing’ itself and the person who values it and deploys it as a resource within a social and cultural context (cf. McGregor & Kebede 2003⁴).

4. REVIEWING RESOURCE CATEGORIES

Recognising the importance of agency to the character of resources opens up a very different way of approaching the classification of resources and the relations between them, involving two major departures from the literalist account of ‘capitals’ or asset types. In this section we discuss the first of these, the de-stabilising of the conventional, reified categories. In the

⁴ McGregor and Kebede (2003) *Resource Profiles and the Social and Cultural Construction of Wellbeing* paper presented at the inaugural workshop of the ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries, University of Bath, 13-17 January 2003

following section we move on from this, to see how different categories of resource are not mutually exclusive, but rather help to constitute each other.

The common usage of the terms 'capital' or 'resource' conjures specific, if sometimes intangible, identifiable goods whose character is given and stable. The siege of Hochosterwitz, however, indicates that the features that 'goods' can assume differ markedly by context and use. It is vital, therefore, to open the space to differentiate between (tangible and intangible) goods, services, activities and relationships (Doyal & Gough 1991) that can be observed objectively to exist, and the transformation of these into *resources* when they are perceived by people as offering the means to meet a particular end. Let us return to the example of education. In both the wellbeing and development literature, this is typically seen as a fundamental pre-requisite for a good life. In fact, however, historically many communities have existed quite successfully without anyone knowing how to read or write. Literacy is certainly an objectively identifiable good (though the means for assessing it obviously vary) but it becomes a *resource* only when people have the need to read. This is not simply a semantic point, it has practical consequences. As numerous adult education programmes have found to their cost, enthusiasm falls and skills quickly fade where there is no immediate need to put classroom learning into practice. To categorise literacy as a resource is thus ultimately a cultural act. Goods, services, relationships etc objectively exist, but they become *resources* only when they are perceived by a subject as offering the means to achieve a desired end.

This claim may seem too bold. We do, after all, generally regard resources as having an objective existence, that is, of existing, *qua* resources, independently of the subject. There are, we believe, four important reasons for this. Two of these are general, and two relate specifically to the formation of livelihood frameworks and the development discourse which they reflect. The first reason that resources appear to have a 'real' existence, independent of any actor, is that agency and subject-hood are not properties of individuals alone, but also carry a collective aspect. We recognise that oil is a resource, for example, even if we personally do not run a car, or operate oil powered heating systems. The structure of our social and economic systems and the technologies on which these depend,

construct oil as a critical resource. If we as individuals were to die tomorrow, this would not change. Through history and anthropology we can, however, look to other social and economic systems in which oil has not been a resource because people have not identified a need for the functions that it can offer. We can even, although with perhaps more difficulty, imagine a future where oil might again become redundant, and so slip once more out of the category of resources. ‘New’ resources also emerge as circumstances change. The global market in human organs, where poorer people come to see parts of their bodies as saleable assets, and richer people parts of other people’s bodies as items for purchase or theft, perhaps offers one of the most striking, and shocking, instances of the emergence of a new category of ‘livelihood resource’ (see e.g. Scheper-Hughes 2000).

Second, there is also a psychological dimension to the reification of resources. As Bourdieu (1977: 79) notes, over time ‘history [is] turned into nature’. What we need to learn at one point in our life is with habitual use taken for granted, since it becomes second nature to us. The move from learning a conscious set of actions which enable us to drive a car to ‘just knowing’ how to drive is an example of this. Our everyday knowledge has of course been learned through identifiable steps that can be consciously reconstructed when called for. This is what happens, for example, when one teaches someone else to drive. For everyday purposes, however, our association of certain goods with certain purposes is so habitual that we forget that what these things *mean* to us is not given to us by the things themselves. Our use of pieces of paper as money is a prime example of this. For the most part, to use Bourdieu’s (1977:19) term, we operate out of ‘a *learned ignorance*.’ When circumstances shift, however, and our default responses are no longer adequate, a creativity is called for to reinterpret the potential of resources in new ways. This, of course, was the crowning achievement of the commandant in the story of the siege. But this creativity is not the sole preserve of desperate commandants; it may be the very stuff of any effective agency and is clearly evident in the livelihood activities of many very poor people.

The third part of the explanation of why resources appear to have an existence independent of the subjects who employ them is more specific to

the formation of livelihoods frameworks and the assumptions and values they express. Although it has become commonplace in development studies, the value of broadening definitions of 'capital', 'assets' or 'resources' from the material or financial to include the social or cultural is not self-evident. It becomes meaningful in the context of a policy discourse which privileges economic understandings of what is important. When the framing shifts so the meaning changes. A woman feeding her children probably does not consider what she is doing as the reproduction of human capital. For an economic analysis to express it in this way is to capture something critical about what is going on, which challenges more conventional views of 'productive' (read valued) activity. This is undoubtedly useful, reflecting as it does feminist arguments regarding the essential inter-relationship of 'productive' and 'reproductive' labour, and hence the importance of women's work, much of which might otherwise be discounted. However, to analyse what is happening *simply* in these terms is to commit what Spivak (1988:271) has called in another context 'epistemic violence.' It distorts what is taking place, posing it in quasi market, calculative terms, and suppresses what it means for the woman and children themselves. Most importantly, perhaps, it obscures the primacy of identity and relationship (motherhood, love, family, belonging) which is the 'home' context which makes the action meaningful to those involved. It over-writes the subjectivity and concerns of the actors with the perspectives and interests of external observers.

This dominance of economic terminology and perspectives on livelihoods and resources reflects more widely the structural formation of development discourse and practice. As critics from Karl Marx to Karl Polanyi to Pierre Bourdieu have pointed out, the economic thinking that dominates current intellectual approaches is one that obscures its own particularity, and effectively silences other voices. What is critical for the argument here, is that the economics of capitalism mystifies the primacy of social relations between people and re-presents them as relations between people and things, or even as between objects themselves. This is a major argument that cannot be taken further here, but we believe it is an important issue for future discussions.

The final part of the explanation for the apparently universal characterisation of resources brings us back to agency. We believe that there are, in fact,

subjects of the livelihoods analyses, subjects whose interests and purposes define which goods are featured as resources and how these are classified. Despite the claims to the contrary, these subjects are not the local people whose lives the frameworks claim to describe. In fact, they may not be real people at all. Rather, the subjects are constituted through the discursive practices of development bureaucracies and the geopolitical relations which underlie them. It is these institutions, their values, techniques and procedures that define the purposes of 'alleviating poverty' or 'sustainable development' that govern particular readings of 'resources'. In addition, as Mudimbe (1988) argues with respect to colonialism, they construct the identities and subject positions not only of those who are to be developed, but also of planners and policy makers. While the subjecthood of 'local people' receives celebration in contemporary development discourse, however, that of planners and policymakers is implicit. Part of the 'necessary self-deception of planning' (Chatterjee 1993:207), the 'unmarked', supposedly neutral presence of planners and policymakers facilitates an elision between their interests and those of development subjects. Whereas in fact, as Bernard Schaffer (1985: title) pointed out two decades ago, 'policy makers have their needs too'. The construction of the development industry tends to mask this, making it easy for development bureaucrats to mistake their own tools and assumptions for the perspectives of the people themselves.

5. FROM TYPES OF RESOURCE TO DIMENSIONS OF RESOURCES

The importance of agency, and a more flexible and interactive approach to resources, is very clear when we come to the category of 'culture'. In the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, 'culture' appears along with 'shocks' and 'trends' as part of the 'vulnerability context.' Diana Carney (1998: 11) sets out the 'key issue' that this raises as follows: 'What effect, if any, does culture have on the way people manage their assets and the livelihood choices they make?'

This question is deeply problematic. It casts culture as residual, exterior, implying a profoundly materialist understanding of the ways that people conduct their lives. This reflects a broader poverty in the understanding of culture within development circles - it often appears, as indeed in that book, almost exclusively in relation to gender issues, with 'religion' now perhaps

more frequently added in. This renders 'culture' as not only externally located, outside of the nitty gritty of everyday (economic) life, but also localised, significant only in particular, marked, areas of society. As noted above, the RPF gives more space to culture than the other livelihoods frameworks, by identifying a specific category of cultural resources. This offers both an opportunity and a danger. The opportunity is that the framework directs users to look for cultural resources, and to recognise the significance these have. The danger is that treated crudely this can rigidify rather than overcome the localisation of culture, implying that other 'material' or 'human' or 'natural' assets are somehow a-cultural. Culture may then again become a residual category, containing only those 'pure' markers of status - such as honorific titles - that cannot be fitted anywhere else. As is clear in the papers which apply the RPF, however, this is very far from the intention (see e.g. McGregor 1994, 1998; Saltmarshe 2001, 2002; Wood 2003, 2005). In fact, of course, all of social life is constituted through culture. To be human is to speak a particular language, wear a particular kind of clothes, eat a certain kind of food, use a particular set of tools, marry according to certain rules, value some kinds of goods over others. This is not to deny the existence of some biological universals - the needs that human organisms have to survive - but to recognise that nowhere do we have access to these outside of the mediation of culture. Recent reflection on the RPF under the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) ESRC programme thus recognises that there is a duality to culture: it forms at once a specific form of resource and the context through which all resources are constituted (McGregor & Kebede 2002).

Once this point is accepted for culture, we can go on to see that it holds for other resource categories also. Whether material, social or symbolic, *they all represent at once specific forms of resource and the means through which resources are constituted*. Land, for example, is classified in all the livelihoods frameworks as a material, physical, or 'natural' endowment. However, land only becomes a *livelihood resource* when transformed through the *human* activity of labour, the *social* contracts of ownership or use-rights, and the *cultural* meanings of value and status. Its value is not simply given, but varies markedly depending on the state of the market, the social and political context, and the personal circumstances and relationship of the would-be buyer and seller. In transactions between kin, transfers

between strangers in times of plenty, or distress sales in times of famine, violent conflict or forced migration, the cash value and livelihood significance of the apparently fixed material resource of land may differ almost beyond recognition. Similarly *cultural* values - such as beauty, or piety - are not free-floating in the ether, but always embedded - or embodied – materially and socially.

The importance of recognising that the conventional categories of resource do not represent mutually exclusive types, but rather co-constituting dimensions, is especially evident when we come to consider social resources. Certain links, such as close kinship ties, have a strong institutional element that exists relatively independently of any affective element or active celebration – the ‘I may not like him but he is still my brother’ syndrome. Such relationships and other forms of institutionalised networks may, as Wood (2005: 6) suggests, have such a robust existence, functioning ‘independently of the idiosyncrasies of any party to them’ that they may be categorised as social capital. The ‘social capital’ of a household is then the sum of all such structural relationships in which the household is engaged. As quantitatively inclined economists have found, this leads into considerable technical difficulties of how to assign values to relationships of differential intensity or utility. But proceeding in this way may not only be technically difficult but also philosophically mistaken. It is helpful that economics and the dominant development actors now recognise that relatedness and social connections are critical to people’s psychological welfare, social status and economic potential. The challenge is to go beyond seeing this as representing one area of life, set apart from others. At base, the term ‘social capital’ is a metaphor, which draws our attention to the importance of social relationships, not a ‘real thing’ which exists somehow ‘out there’. And relationships are not inert, fixed assets, but rather exist as they are *lived*. Any negotiation, any aspect of the pursuit of livelihoods or wellbeing will necessarily have a social side. Issues such as the politics of who is entitled to what, the negotiation of values, the terms of access to key goods, and the significance of social identities, interpersonal and social group dynamics in structuring these, are constantly present.

Rather than seeing specific goods, services, relationships and activities as constituting always a particular type of resource, therefore, we may also say

these all have the potential for use as material, social or relational and symbolic resources. As in the opening story, this brings to the definition of resources a certain indeterminacy: the 'obvious' way of looking at resources (the ox and grain as food) is not the only way, nor necessarily the most useful in a given context. As noted above in the case of education, whether a particular item constitutes a resource in the first place, and then whether it is performing a primarily symbolic, or social, or material function will differ according to the setting, and these functions may in practice be intertwined. As Bourdieu (1998/2001:53) rather chillingly notes: 'the most brutal relations of force are always simultaneously symbolic relations'.

6. SUBJECTIVITY AND CONTINGENCY

Having set out a general framework above, in this section we go micro, re-locating to the dingy kitchen of a couple of Caribbean share-croppers, courtesy of Paule Marshall's novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. The headline issue is one beloved of development studies: food security. Although the passage is a little long, we relate to it here as a powerful cameo of the use of resources in social practice.⁵ To draw on such a text in a paper like this might itself be seen as a somewhat creative interpretation of resources, since novels are not typically seen as material for use in social science analysis. However, the acute observation of personal interaction contained within it offers the opportunity to explore a further important aspect of resources which is often overlooked. Where livelihood frameworks have been criticised for failing to offer an adequate account of power and social identities, this episode clearly demonstrates the interplay of different perspectives and priorities amongst differently placed actors. It also offers an opportunity to reflect further on our earlier claims regarding the importance of subjectivity in determining the character of resources, and to consider how issues of social structure and human agency articulate with this.

⁵ We have abridged the original text for the sake of brevity.

We enter as Harriet, the elite, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant wife of a North American Jewish anthropologist, who visits a neighbouring house and finds the children alone and hungry.

'Harriet had gone that late afternoon to the hopelessly overcrowded house where Stinger and Gwen lived with their innumerable children.... She arrived to find that Gwen had not yet returned from the fields although it was past five, and the children, left alone in the house all day, had had nothing to eat since the midmorning meal at eleven. She could barely make out their individual faces in the interior dimness of the two tiny cluttered rooms.... But she could sense their hunger, almost see it....

The oldest child, a girl, had been left in charge, and Harriet called her over....

"Isn't there anything at all to eat, Brenda?" she said. She could not bring herself to look at her.

The child also kept her gaze averted. "No, please," she said.

"Are you sure? Isn't there perhaps something left over from this morning?"

"No, please. We've eaten the last."

But there was nothing in Harriet that could comprehend such a fact, and on sudden impulse she turned from Brenda and made her way out to the kitchen,... remaining the longest time gazing with a kind of numb fixity at the soot-covered pot in which the day's rice had been cooked. It had been scraped clean. Even the burnt part at the bottom had been eaten....

And then she saw them: a half-dozen brown-speckled eggs in a cracked bowl inside the otherwise empty larder. Never thinking to ask herself why they had been left there unused, she strode over to the larder... and took out the bowl....

"Brenda."...

"Yes, Miss Harriet?"

"Is there a frying pan?"

She didn't turn to look at Brenda as she spoke, or at the other children who, curious and intrigued, had slipped silently up behind their sister, filling the doorway.

"Yes, please." Brenda said.

"Would you bring it for me, please."

The child held back a moment, her troubled eyes on the eggs, wanting to say something but not bold enough; and then brought her the heavy iron skillet.....

Her most severe test came during the actual cooking, when she had to struggle with nausea at the sight of the littered, food-stained hearth, the grease-encrusted pan, and the suspiciously rancid smell of the butter as she heated it.... But finally, there lay the finished omelette.... [Harriet was] inordinately proud of it. There was something of a miracle about it almost; the fishes and loaves. Above all, she felt an immense relief. She had done her part, she told herself, gazing down at it steaming gently on the plate, to quiet that ravenous presence charging up and down the two rooms.....

[Harriet leaves Brenda with instructions to share out the omelette between them, and makes her way home. When her husband comes in, however, he is furious at what she has done.]

"Could you please tell me just what the hell you thought you were doing over at Stinger's today?"

For a moment she couldn't imagine he was speaking to her.... "What did I think I was doing?" Her voice, her frown, expressed her bewilderment....

In face of her distress he turned aside, ashamed of his anger. "Oh, Christ, Hatt, I know you meant well," he said.... "But if only

you had thought to ask somebody first..." ...On his way home ... he had stopped off at Stinger's,... only to find Gwen quarrelling and the child Brenda in tears. Gwen, it seemed, had a longstanding agreement with the postmaster to sell him all of her eggs. This money was then used toward purchasing the family's weekly supply of staples. It was a very carefully worked out arrangement of which Gwen was proud.

"Gwen's not mad at you for having cooked the eggs," he said. "She understands why you did it, but she blames poor Brenda for not speaking up and telling you who they were for. I'm afraid she gave her quite a thrashing."

"Oh, no!" she cried, and her mind wheeling back she saw Brenda standing bowed and silent amid her sisters and brothers in the doorway....

"Well, it'll all blow over, I guess." he said. ... "If only you would stop and ask, Harriet, before taking things into your own hands! I am sure it never even occurred to you to find out if the eggs hadn't been left there for a reason. I don't know," he said, slowly shaking his head, "there's this thing in you which makes you want to take over and manage everything and everybody on your own terms.... And it's not to say you don't mean well most of the time, but it still makes for complications."

"But they were hungry!" Her voice was sharp and emphatic; she had not permitted herself to hear what he had just said. "Besides, it doesn't make any sense to sell perfectly good, nourishing eggs to buy that awful rice they all eat."

"It might not make sense to you," he said..... "but it obviously does to Gwen. She's probably discovered she can feed more mouths doing it her way. I don't know. What I do know is that you can't go around ordering other people's lives and trying to make them change long-standing habits overnight...Everybody doesn't live by your standards. Your values aren't necessarily the world's. Why, the kids didn't even eat the goddamn omelette."

"They didn't eat it?" And she was perhaps more stunned by this than anything else he had said..... "Perfectly good, nourishing eggs.... I don't understand...." (Marshall 1969/84:175-181, abridged)

As noted above, resources are what people can use to meet their needs and purposes. Logically, therefore, a need must precede the identification of a resource to meet it. But the story above gives a further twist to this. Simply having a need is not enough. The children's hunger is not in doubt. But for them, the eggs were not a resource they could use to meet that need. Why not, when they were, as Harriet appreciates, perfectly good, nourishing food? Because, in that household's livelihood strategy, the eggs were for sale, not for consumption. This is worth underlining. For those children, the eggs were not food - and even when Harriet had cooked the omelette, they did not become so. Probably the children did not even think of eating the eggs - maybe they were not part of their diet, or maybe they had simply internalised their mother's absolute rights over their disposal. What was critical was not which of the conventional asset categories they fitted into - no-one doubts that they were material - but rather the *purpose* to which they had been assigned, and the power relations which circumscribed their use.

Admitting that the identification of a resource is ultimately subjective, is not however to suggest that it is somehow random or indiscriminate. Harriet making the omelette was a (rather catastrophic) assertion of agency, to be sure, but it was an agency both enabled and constrained by structure. At base, this structure is configured by international relations, the imperialism of US interests over the Caribbean. At its simplest, this gives the context for Harriet's presence on the island. At a deeper level, it also shapes her entire understanding of the place and her relationships within it as well as the island people's responses to her. Just as Said (1985) argues with respect to nineteenth century European writers on the Orient, the patterns of international dominance are so strong that *no* interaction across these lines can be innocent of it. The beauty of this passage, however, is that it illustrates graphically how such structures operate not only at the 'public' or macro level, but also within the most intimate, inter and intra personal

relations. The macro political structures intertwine with the 'everyday' dominance of adult over child. The eggs did not belong to Harriet, were not in any sense hers to dispose of, and yet because of who she was she assumed the rights to use them. The children were silenced by fear, the power of Harriet's person even greater than their fear of their mother's reaction. Gwen's anger is vented not against Harriet, the high status perpetrator, but against Brenda, the child who had been pressed into service as unwilling accomplice. Power is not something inert, 'out there', but expressed graphically through speech and silence, action and passivity, the meeting and avoidance of eyes.

These links between macro patterns and micro interaction and the ways that structure and agency together inform subjectivity, are powerfully conceptualised by Bourdieu in his notion of 'habitus'. This is particularly apposite for a focus on wellbeing because it offers an unusually holistic view of human experience, connecting the bodily to the social, and the social to the psychological. Bourdieu describes 'habitus' variously as a 'system of dispositions', propensities, or ways of being in the world; the 'feel for the game' which is so deeply embedded within one that it seems like second nature (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). Its role is to generate regular practices, perceptions and attitudes that are not governed by rule or conscious calculation. The habitus is developed through childhood and experience and is shaped by the social structures in which these take place. Far from a set template which always marks out a predetermined pattern, the habitus is a principle for the 'improvisations' that for Bourdieu are the stuff of social life. Critically, however, inscribed within it is awareness of one's own social location and hence the different locations of others and how these are placed in relation to one's own. In linking structure and agency, it also offers a critical orientation towards *social practice*. Social (and economic) life is seen as something done, achieved through time in risky interaction with others, never settled or utterly predictable, but requiring new and creative responses as established attitudes and propensities confront the demands of a new context or 'field'.

Finally, however, Harriet's intervention offers a paradox to this picture of power and the agency related to it. As bell hooks (1983) argues, there is a power that belongs to the margins and limitations for those who live at the

centre and assume that the centre is the whole world. For the children, hunger could be borne for the present. It was probably not unusual for them and they understood the domestic economy was one in which they had to endure. For Harriet, on the other hand, the children's hunger was literally unbearable: she could not look at them. Her agency was both an expression of power and of weakness: it was predicated on her ignorance of the ways Gwen made ends meet and her refusal or inability to quieten the clamour within herself and see the world through the children's eyes. It gives an example, once more, of the indeterminacy of social practice. In this case Harriet 'got it wrong': she misread the 'field' of action. Though she could push through with her own intention to make the omelette, the children refused to eat it as she intended, and Gwen was furious rather than grateful when she found out what had happened. These responses transformed the character of Harriet's behaviour. From a salvific act of altruism, it became an insulting and wasteful imposition. Her action came out of her own desperate need to act, to resolve things, to find herself valid through their reception of her gifts. The needs that Harriet was responding to were not so much the children's, but her own. The outcome was that Harriet made things worse. Materially, of course, in wasting the assets Gwen had carefully set aside for sale. But beyond this, the incident is shot through with symbolism. Harriet's actions at once betrayed her lack of faith in Gwen's capacity to care for her family, and undermined the strategies Gwen had set in place. Gwen's fury at Brenda was not only an expression of her grief at the material loss she had suffered. It was also borne of humiliation, that her struggles to feed her family should be so shamelessly exposed, and anger, that the settlement that she had made in a difficult situation should be so thoughtlessly overturned.

At one level, of course, Harriet stands as a metaphor for ill-informed and ill-advised development intervention by outsiders. Many of us who have been involved in development practice may recognise aspects of Harriet in our projects, our colleagues, and even ourselves, just as we wish to distance ourselves from other elements. Indeed the novel as a whole may be read as a study in the resistance of the islanders to the development they are offered, and its framing of the issues in political, rather than technical terms offers a powerful caution to the blithe assumptions of much development planning. This is worthy of further study in its own right. However, the main

point here is rather different. Pursuing our concerns with social process and the social and cultural construction of resources, is to see through a practical encounter how resources are critically associated with social identities and power relations, both within and beyond the household. At one level the passage takes us right down to the level of individuals, and intensely personal interaction. But it is not *simply* personal or freestanding. As noted above, structural inequalities by race, class, age and gender are implicated in Harriet's need to feed the children and their unwilling accession to her demands. In order fully to grasp this piece of micro interaction, we need to look outward and upward at the international political economy and policy regimes which structure the poverty and dependence of the sharecroppers' livelihoods on the one hand, and Harriet's assumption of the right and necessity to intervene on the other. This takes us on a further step in our understanding of resources. The character of what these are, is not only intrinsically related to agency, purposes, and what is *done*, but these are in turn fundamentally related to subjectivity and *who* does what, and the structural forms of power which these identities embody.

7. CONCLUSION

How, then, does this discussion of resources contribute to research into wellbeing? First, there are a number of ways in which the arguments we have made in relation to resources can be applied directly to the study of wellbeing. The most important aspect of this is the need to retain openness to a people- and context-centred view. The tendency in our intellectual culture towards reification, and emphasising relations between things rather than between people, can affect understandings of wellbeing, just as it does resources. There may indeed be universal determinants of wellbeing, and conventional indicators of human development such as maternal or infant mortality may offer shorthand indices to these. However, such 'hard' statistics need to be held lightly, as probable indicators of factors which promote or inhibit wellbeing, rather than 'the thing itself.' For ultimately the meanings of wellbeing will differ, like resources, according to the cultural context, purposes, agency, and social identities of the people concerned.

Second, there is an implicit plea here for greater rigour on the part of sociologists and anthropologists involved in development studies. If the

promise of 'wellbeing' to offer a genuinely new, more holistic and more people-centred approach is to be fulfilled, there is a vital need for much more critical, sociologically and politically engaged thinking. This must go beyond the rhetoric of 'it all depends on the context' so beloved of social development specialists, which elides their own proto-disciplinary perspectives with those of 'the people', and leaves all powerful explanatory models in the hands of economists. The point is not to deny the importance of the economic, but to broaden our understanding of what that may comprise, and to situate it securely within the social, cultural and political. Instead of being shy of theory, it is vitally important that social analysts of development draw on the wealth of critical thinking that exists in the disciplines they represent. The test of such an approach will be that it adds explanatory value to simple observation, and genuinely explicates the particular, rather than simply re-describing it in alienated terms. This paper, we hope, offers some suggestions as to how to move this forward.

For effective policy-making, what is required is not a template through which diverse realities can be 'read' in standardised terms. Rather, the need is for a model which is sufficiently open and dynamic that it can be used in a variety of contexts in order to expose the specificity of each. In place of an abstract, universalised notion derived externally, research needs to build up a dynamic picture of what wellbeing means in practice for particular people faced with particular challenges, and the politics involved in their struggles to achieve it.

Critically, of course, attending to the relations between people rather than the 'resources' which are exchanged, also suggests the importance of the terms on which exchanges take place. This is to approach livelihoods and the attempts to secure wellbeing as a form of social practice: recognising that interactions are fundamentally constructed through social and cultural structures and power relations; recognising that our own positions as planners or analysts are not 'unmarked' or innocent, but utterly implicated in these patterns of power; letting go of the conceit of agency which is predicated on structures of global injustice; admitting the primacy of people's own priorities and purposes; and seeking ways of listening better to these, rather than assuming we already know what they are or should be.

And, finally, recognising the creativity and indeterminacy of social practice, and expecting to be surprised.

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