**Happiness on your doorstep:** The regressive dove-tailing of wellbeing and localism in UK national policy agendas. Karen Scott

This is a working draft - please don’t cite without checking with me for an updated version. Many thanks.

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Abstract

This paper is a critical review and analysis of the recent emergence of wellbeing discourses in UK national politics and their relationship with localism agendas. In 2011 the UK Coalition Government initiated a national programme to measure wellbeing. Despite a stated desire to consult the public as widely as possible on what matters for wellbeing, policy discourse is currently dominated by a ‘new science of wellbeing’ which frames wellbeing, through disciplinary biases, predominantly within the arenas of subjective wellbeing research, positive psychology and individual behaviour change where community participation and volunteerism narratives feature heavily. The critique presented here argues that there has been a regressive dove-tailing of subjective wellbeing, localism and behaviour change discourses which lie at the heart of ‘compassionate conservatism’ agendas. This argument is backed up by a discourse analysis of government documentation on wellbeing and localism, particularly around the recent Localism Act, which illustrates how ideas of subjective wellbeing are entwined with ideas of community, democracy, social capital, responsibility and behaviour at a local level. The explicit desire on the part of the UK Coalition Government to devolve more responsibilities to the ‘local community’ is justified by appeals to particular ideas of wellbeing which are evidenced by particular sorts of research, limiting room for other, more progressive, accounts.

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been an international intensification of activity in wellbeing research and measurement. The Aristotelian idea of ‘eudaimonia’ or ‘human flourishing’ has been taken up by a wide variety of academics and policy actors across the globe resulting in a prolific industry of ‘holistic’ wellbeing research and indicator development. In tandem, a ‘new utilitarianism’ has emerged following the accumulation of research on subjective wellbeing (SWB) from the psychology, economics and neuroscience disciplines, the so called ‘new science of happiness’\(^1\). These movements have manifest themselves in various ways, mainly across the OECD and EU countries, but where the Bhutanese government has enjoyed iconic status for its Gross National Happiness measure. A key event was the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress established in 2008 by President Sarkozy of France, which reported in 2009 and identified eight components of wellbeing: material living standards; health; education; personal activities including work; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; environment; security - economic and physical (Stiglitz et al. 2009).

A number of international and national factors and currents have contributed to the growth of interest in wellbeing in the UK including: concern over climate change and a mainstreaming

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\(^1\) In 2005-2006 a host of new books appeared including Richard Layard’s *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*; Daniel Nettles’ *The Science Behind your Smile*; Huppert et al *The Science of Well-being*
of sustainable development (SD) discourses; the accumulation of and increased confidence in evidence regarding subjective wellbeing (SWB); the emergence of psychological governance influenced by the positive psychology movement; an increased interest within government in behavioural economics or ‘Nudge’; influence of the social capital literature and discourses of a ‘broken’ society; criticism of neoliberal economic growth agendas (intensified post 2008) and the search for a more holistic measurement of quality of life (Tomlinson & Kelly 2013; Jones et al. 2012; Scott 2012). In addition, the influence of a number of high profile key actors who work transnationally in the OECD and EU has had a significant effect on the movement and translation of wellbeing ideas across national boundaries, although those ideas will be manifested differently in different countries (Bache and Reardon 2013).

Wellbeing as a concept has been taken up and operationalized by the New Labour governments during the period 1997 to 2010 and by the current Coalition government formed in 2010 from an alliance between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. In early discourses of the New Labour government, the concept of wellbeing (or quality of life) was inter-twined with sustainable development (SD) which was often presented as ‘social, economic and environmental wellbeing’ (DETR 2000). Although early work was carried out in 2002 within the Cabinet Office which explored subjective wellbeing research and its implications for policy (Donovan and Halpern 2002) it was the strong commitment within Defra which pushed the wellbeing agenda forward within the context of SD indicator refinement. In 2005, a greater commitment to explore and refine the concept of wellbeing was set out by them in the national sustainable development strategy Securing the Future (UK Govt. 2005: 23) and several studies were commissioned including those which focussed on the relationship of wellbeing and SD (for example: Dolan et al. 2006, Marks et al. 2006). Interest in wellbeing travelled across departments but understandings and usage of the term were not joined up (Ereaut and Whiting 2008). The Whitehall Wellbeing Working Group was set up and a statement of common understanding was created regarding the definition of wellbeing as a positive mental state enhanced and supported by various social, environmental and psychological factors (Defra 2007). One of the main manifestations of the wellbeing work under New Labour was the The Local Wellbeing Project which was heavily influenced by both the positive psychology movement and the new science of happiness. This work, which focussed on ‘local’ wellbeing, and was piloted in three local authority areas, developed the first set of local wellbeing indicators focused heavily on ‘place-shaping’ at the neighbourhood scale (Steuer and Marks 2008). New Labour discourses of wellbeing were heavily enmeshed within Third Way philosophies, where a ‘new localism’ was vigorously promoted, centred around social capital and community empowerment through devolved governance arrangements (Scott 2012, Davies 2009). As Fairclough (2000) has pointed out, a key feature of New Labour political discourse was to nominalise processes like ‘change’ and ‘globalization’. The effect of this discursive practice was that globalization became a taken for granted entity which has no agents and cannot be managed. Such structural entities become increasingly perceived as unmanageable and the policy gaze transfers to the ‘local’ which is seen as the remaining site where policy innovation might occur. However, as many have pointed out, there are ‘profound ambiguities’ between discourses of bottom-up local development and the responsibilization of communities (Raco 2005). In the latter, spatial inequalities can become redefined as a problem of local origin where ‘failed places’ are associated with ‘bad community’ in need of social capital and where ‘social’ and ‘local’ therefore become regressively merged (Raco 2005; Amin 2005). This presents ‘significant intellectual puzzles and profound strategic dilemmas’ for those concerned with place shaping for social justice (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).
Interest in and commitment to wellbeing in the opposition camp can be traced back to early pronouncements by David Cameron as leader of the Conservative Party regarding the need to measure ‘gross national happiness’ in 2006 and the setting up of their Quality of Life working group. In a search for a Tory Third Way, influencers such as Philip Blond (2010) promoted ideas of ‘progressive conservativism’ or ‘Red Toryism’ which, rather than seeing the state and the market as opposed, saw them both as harmful monopolies, and promoted a mixture of localism, traditional values and community renewal, where wellbeing was heavily mobilised as having a positive relationship with ‘strong’ local communities:

I really believed in the politics that Cameron was trying to bring about…for the first time in British politics, somebody was talking about wellbeing; about broader categories of human happiness and satisfaction, and civic and local solutions.’ (Philip Blond, The Guardian 2009).

Other strands of ‘compassionate conservatism’ promoted a focus on wellbeing which resonated with increased interest in subjective wellbeing research:

We don’t simply need a better vision of society; we need a better understanding of the individual, of what it is to be human’ (Norman 2010).

Once in power, one of the early initiatives was the Measuring National Wellbeing project, which David Cameron announced in November 2010. Recent empirical research finds that sources within government view Cameron as having a genuine commitment to wellbeing (Bache and Reardon 2012). However, the initiative has been heavily criticised, partly due to the focus on subjective wellbeing, or happiness, and partly due to the new spend on creating and testing measures of happiness in a time of austerity when £8.9 million of data collection has been cut across departments by the government affecting the General Lifestyle Survey, the take up of welfare benefits and health services data (Tomlinson & Kelly 2013; Fenton 2013).

A core policy for the Conservatives and then the Coalition has been localism, manifest as the ‘Big Society’ and the Localism Act 2011. The move ‘from big government to big society’ includes: more freedoms for local government; new rights for local people; reforms to the planning system; and elected mayors in major cities. In June 2010 Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government, declared that ‘localism, localism and localism’ was his concern. David Cameron made the link between wellbeing and localism clear:

It's about enabling and encouraging people to come together to solve their problems and make life better. Some people say that there are no big ideas in politics anymore. But I think this is about as big as it gets. It's not the big state that will tackle our social problems and increase wellbeing. It's the Big Society.’ (Rt Hon David Cameron : Speech ‘Our 'Big Society' plan’, Wednesday, March 31 2010)

Another distinctive move by the Coalition was the setting up in 2010 of the Behavioural Insight Unit within the Cabinet Office with responsibilities for researching and promoting positive behaviours which support both the Big Society and wellbeing goals. The so called ‘Nudge Unit’ is heavily influenced by Thaler and Sunstein’s (2008) work on behavioural psychology where ‘choice architects’ make interventions in society to get people to change their behaviour ‘below their radar’. This form of ‘libertarian paternalism’ has come under
criticism for a lack of democratic mandate and the risk of regressive policies which target particular groups in society (Jones et al 2013; Jones et al 2010; Menard 2010). These ideas of localism, nudge and wellbeing have become inter-twined and have been taken up by influential groups working on wellbeing, both inside and outside government, like the New Economics Foundation, where wellbeing is increasingly promoted as an opportunity:

Having opened up opportunities, citizens must be persuaded – individually and through voluntary, charitable and community-based groups - to seize them (NEF, 2010)

Wellbeing discourse as a post-neoliberal agenda?

Neoliberalism is ‘oft-invoked and ill-defined’ (Mudge 2007). Stiglitz (2008) described neoliberalism as a ‘grab bag of ideas based on the fundamentalist notion that markets are self-correcting, allocate resources efficiently, and serve the public interest well’. Much work has focussed on how far neoliberalism is hegemonic and what spaces of resistance there may be, however Peck et al (2009:95) argue that this dichotomy is flawed because neoliberalism is an ‘adaptive regime’ which ‘exists as a parasite on its oppositions and has a relationship with them’. As such neoliberalism gets remade in crises (Mudge 2007) and ‘co-opts’ alternative ideas of development therefore being continually re-generated. A key question therefore, is how far political wellbeing discourses serve a more acceptable form of neoliberalism and how far they represent a resistance to it.

Certainly the concept of wellbeing has been deployed in anti-neoliberal critiques, and policies based on ‘human flourishing’ rather than economic growth are often promoted as a radical departure from the past mistakes of a neoliberal ‘free-for-all’. However, wellbeing is a useful concept politically due to its malleability. Therefore, how it is being deployed, for what purpose and, importantly, with what effect on whom is important to scrutinise. A close attention to language allows us a powerful lens (one possible lens among others) to view the building blocks of wellbeing construction and its relationship with social and political practices. The meaning-making that is created by language has social effects, with pervasive influence on many areas of social life (Fairclough 2003).

As many scholars have argued, selective views of human wellbeing and quality of life have being deployed in UK political discourse since the 1980s to normalise a series of fundamental and potentially controversial reforms where human well-being is conceptualised through the lens of enhanced ableist, middle-class choice and conspicuous consumption (Raco 2009, Edwards and Imrie 2008; Rapley 2003; Rose 1992). It is through such consumption that the aspirations of citizens are to be met turning the ‘politics of expectation’ based on rights and equality into a ‘politics of aspiration’ based on ability and opportunity (Raco 2009). Although, the current rise of interest in wellbeing is often viewed as part of post-neoliberal or sustainable discourses, it has been argued that the specific construction of wellbeing recently mobilized by central government in the UK, which tends to focus on subjective wellbeing and behaviour change, may close down other ways of framing and studying wellbeing which are underpinned by concepts of social value, social justice and democracy (Jordan 2008; Scott 2012). The UK wellbeing agenda has been viewed as a ‘move away from a politicised public sphere to one in which the management of individuals and their behaviour is paramount’ (Edwards and Imrie 2008).
Burchardt (2006: 157) cautions against governments creating a ‘cosy sensation of wellbeing’ whilst avoiding getting on with the difficult task of creating the objective conditions for actual wellbeing and of generating public debate about ‘trivial matters’ to avoid ‘dwelling on more significant injustices’. She also argues that one problem of focussing on happiness is the distributional effects problem where the risk is that resources will be allocated to more efficient subjects i.e. those who achieve a greater amount of happiness from less, as this may benefit the poor but not the disabled. In addition the social justice problems associated with ‘adaptive preference’ (poorer people may be happier with less) needs to be addressed. She is among many who argue that the economics of happiness, or utilitarianism, cannot answer fundamental social policy concerns with distribution. The new focus on economics of happiness can bring a fresh perspective but we need to guard against using this without a ‘substantive theory of social justice’ which addresses Amartya Sen’s important question:‘equality of what?’ (Burchardt 2006: 157; Sen 1980).

Ereaut and Whiting (2008: 13) in their study of central government discourses of wellbeing found that whilst striving for greater clarity regarding definition and measurement of wellbeing, struggles over the meaning of wellbeing represented ‘stakes in the ground’ for particular departmental positions or agendas. Similarly, recent work by Atkinson and Joyce (2012) shows how wellbeing is variously framed and constituted at the local governance level by different local authority partnerships. They found that although there were dominant discourses of wellbeing of which a key feature was ‘individual responsibility’, they found that the inherent ‘instability’ of the term gives it the potential for ‘enabling the local expression of voices contesting dominant ideologies of the self, responsibility and governance’ (2012:146). Therefore they argue that:

The key task for releasing the potential of wellbeing as an emergent tool of neoliberal governance is boundary work to narrow the scope of how the concept is practised and this should be the key arena for resistance (Atkinson & Joyce 2012: 147).

Likewise, the author has argued that over-scientization of the concept of wellbeing poses a threat to the heuristic value of the term in promoting democratic debates about how society should be organised and for what goal (Scott 2012). Conversely however, under-developed notions of wellbeing can also pose problems, where wellbeing is used as a vague, future goal to justify controversial policies and their potentially negative impacts, as the author found in a study of wellbeing discourses in a regeneration project in North East England (Scott 2012a).

**Methodology**

Discourse characterised as constitutive social practice allows us to look at the role language plays in meaning making and social practices and creates a ‘positive problematic’ (Griggs and Howarth 2011). Although such work is emerging now relating to wellbeing discourses, as Atkinson and Joyce (2011: 134) find ‘there is almost no analysis to date that explores how well-being is conceptualised in relation to different governance regimes’. Therefore, this research sought to understand how wellbeing is being conceptualised by the current government, focussing on the Measuring National Wellbeing project, and how this is articulated with the localism agenda. The focus was on the main groups in government with interest in and/or responsibility for these agendas. Therefore, although this paper predominantly focuses on the Coalition government documentation since 2010, it does not
exclusively restrict analysis to Conservative or Liberal Democrat politicians nor does it seek to compare wellbeing discourses along party political lines. A number of key departments within government were identified. These included the Cabinet Office (including the Behavioural Insights Unit), Department of Communities and Local Government, Defra, the Treasury, and the Office of National Statistics (ONS). It also included key cross-party groupings (such as the All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics,) and working groups with a wide participant/advisor base (National Wellbeing Steering Group and Technical Advisory Group). Key policy actors were identified which included Prime Minister David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, Francis Maude MP, Nick Hurd MP, Eric Pickles MP, Greg Clarke MP, Gus O’Donnell MP, Oliver Letwin MP, Jo Swinson MP, Jill Matheson (ONS), David Halpern (Behavioural Insights Unit). Documentation analysed included: speeches and pronouncements by key actors, policy statements, research reports, House of Commons debates (for instance the Localism Bill at second reading stage), meeting minutes, early day motions and questions in the House of Commons, accounts of workshops and presentations.

A range of 34 documents were sourced and imported into NVivo 10 software as Word or pdf. files for qualitative data analysis. Some material, such as a number of early day motions by the APPG on wellbeing economics, were collated into one Word document and imported. Material was organised into three main folders: sources relating specifically to the National Wellbeing Measurement agenda; sources relating specifically to the Localism agenda; and ‘other’ sources relating to statements of key policy concern for the government. The latter included for example The Coalition: our programme for government which outlines national priorities and the speeches of key actors at the annual party conferences as examples of statements of general policy priority. The organisation of data in this way facilitated comparison across the three source categories. For example, to understand how far the term ‘wellbeing’ travelled across the localism agenda or across general policy statements of government. As a first step the material was coded according to a number of initial themes including: definitions of wellbeing; wellbeing research and measurement; role of government and citizens; wellbeing and economic growth; concepts of ‘local’ and ‘social’; goals of wellbeing policy. Theme coding reports were printed off from NVivo which allowed the author to analyse broad thematic groupings of text. Analysis was refined by asking a number of cross cutting questions. Ereaut and Whiting (2008) usefully developed main questions for carrying out discourse analysis regarding wellbeing:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>Is wellbeing an individual or collective concept?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subjective or objective?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Permanent or temporary state?</td>
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<tr>
<td>General or specific?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducible to components, or an irreducible holistic totality?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whose responsibility?</td>
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<tr>
<td>A neutral state (nothing wrong) or a positive state?</td>
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<tr>
<td>A state or process – a place or journey?</td>
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<td>An end in itself or necessary to another end?</td>
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To this I added other nuances/questions informed by Fairclough (2003) and Chilton (2004). These questions and ways of interrogating the data are not exhaustive but included:

<table>
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<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>What problem is a focus on wellbeing addressing?</td>
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In tandem with thematic coding, word searches carried out for ‘wellbeing’ and variants and a number of other key words allowed the author to access ‘word-trees’ for each term. These tools show all usages of the word in their immediate context as a diagram, highlighting how many times the term is used in association with other terms, what prepositions and adjectives it is associated with etc. As analysis progressed and new themes and patterns emerged, further codings and word searches were carried out. The value of the NVivo software is that it facilitates systematic analysis and checking and re-checking of researcher assumptions and preliminary ideas. Three main discourses were identified but before discussing these main discourses, I offer an account of part of the methodology to allow a more transparent discussion of discourse analysis process, which is often lacking in critical discourse analysis papers. I follow Fairclough (2003) in promoting critical discourse allied with a systematic analysis of language.

**The absence/presence of ‘wellbeing’**

What is slightly surprising in the analysis conducted is that the term ‘wellbeing’ seems rather confined to the documents which are specifically about wellbeing. So, it doesn’t seem well featured in the localism or ‘other’ source categories other than a very occasional usage. A search in those two source categories for ‘wellbeing’ returned only six hits (three of which related to the local authority ‘Power of wellbeing’), ‘quality of life’ returned eight and ‘happiness’ returned no hits. A search for ‘welfare’ yielded far more hits (43) but when looking at the context the majority of instances of this term are related to an over-burdened, dependency-inducing welfare state where the key message is ‘welfare isn’t working’ (David Cameron, Leader Speech, Birmingham 2012).

After coding and analysis of all the texts to see what sort of words were being used to express wellbeing type constructs, there is a repeated collocation of terms such as ‘wellbeing and happiness’, ‘wellbeing and quality of life’ or ‘health and wellbeing’. Often short lists appear in the context of discussing wellbeing such as: ‘health, family and community stability, educational success, and environmental assets’ (Valuation Techniques for Social Cost-Benefit Analysis, HM Treasury 2011). Analysis of the composition of these lists and what is and is not included, what specific words are chosen over possible others, was part of the process of analysis. So, within the list above the concept of family, for example, is posed as an unproblematic construct but is often used discursively as a hetero-normative concept which assumes a set of characteristics including the sharing of a household and the desire/ability to have children. Compare this for example to Martha Nussbaum’s list of Central Human

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>What alternative meanings of wellbeing are possible but not present or</td>
<td>not promoted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not promoted?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What temporal, scalar and spatial aspects of wellbeing are being evoked?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What other concepts is it being equated with, related to, contained</td>
<td>in or set in opposition to?</td>
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<tr>
<td>to?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is wellbeing a minimum standard, a full glass or something that can</td>
<td>keep growing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it evoked as an aspirational concept or an attainable state?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What or who are its agents and patients?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How is the government’s capability and intentionality towards</td>
<td>wellbeing expressed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>wellbeing expressed?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is expressed as scientifically ‘true’ and what as morally ‘right’</td>
<td>in terms of wellbeing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the incentives/rewards of wellbeing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How is wellbeing expressed regarding a public/private dichotomy?</td>
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2 Key word searches for ‘wellbeing’ also included ‘well-being’ and ‘well being’.
Capabilities (2000) where she lists ‘love’ or ‘attachment’ towards other people without suggesting or prescribing who those people may be or any particular types of relationship or living arrangements. However, ‘love’ (in terms of a close relationship with others) is a concept almost completely absent across all the texts studied. It appears only once in this sense relating to the ‘love of our parents’ (Cameron’s Leader speech Birmingham 2010). Note also the term ‘educational success’ rather than any number of other terms including ‘educational opportunity’, ‘educational fulfilment’, ‘educational standards’. All of which would alter the meaning. Note what concepts are not listed for example, employment/job opportunities or leisure/play.

Concepts often cropping up regularly in the analysis were: ‘family (friendliness)’, ‘civility’, ‘law and order’, ‘health’, ‘responsibility’, ‘social relationships’, ‘volunteering’, ‘giving’, ‘fairness’, ‘freedom’, ‘choice’, ‘control’ ‘power’ and ‘community’. These were often associated with wellbeing (although not necessarily synonymised with it) and it is these concepts that tend to travel more widely and are fairly central to current government discourses across all the sources looked at. In addition phrases such as ‘making life better’, ‘improving their lives’, ‘getting on in life’ emerged regularly and these are often associated with social mobility discourses and constructs.

Scrutinising these relationships can be revealing for an analysis of the boundary work on wellbeing. The effect of this is that a new base of synonyms for wellbeing are being created as wellbeing is constructed in a particular way. The relative absence of the term ‘wellbeing’ from the localism and ‘other’ sources (leader speeches at the party conferences for example) may be explained in several ways: that wellbeing is a fairly new concept in political discourse which has still some way to travel; that ‘wellbeing’ is confined to specific policy work on subjective wellbeing; that wellbeing is considered a distinct policy area rather than an overarching rationale for policy; that the wellbeing agenda is being used strategically as a useful handmaiden to justify/support other more central concerns in governmental discourse.

Wellbeing as an adjective.

A key feature in the texts examined was the use of the term ‘wellbeing’ adjectively to describe the following entities: agenda, aspects, angle, benefits, boards, classes, champion, choices, considerations, curriculum, elements; education, economics, evidence, factors, impact, information, index, measures, index, indicators, information, objectives, outcomes, plan, project, policy, research, syllabus, strategies. The effect is that there is a specific and bounded bundle of entities which can be described as ‘wellbeing’ and another set of entities which fall outside that description and are therefore ‘other’:

We propose that existing public health education capacity, as it moves into local authorities and re-shapes its objectives, broadens its remit to inform people also about wellbeing factors affecting their lives…

Ante-natal classes are also a useful example for other public health interventions, which should similarly expand their role to cover wellbeing aspects (‘A new purpose for politics: quality of life. Liberal Democrat Policy Paper 102, 2011).

The context here is that public health education and ante-natal classes in particular are not currently teaching wellbeing. Consider the different meanings of wellbeing allowed by an alternative wording (using wellbeing as a noun) of the last line of the quotation such as:
‘...which should similarly expand their role to cover other aspects of wellbeing’. This feature of the language is helping to perform some of the ‘boundary work’ on the concept of wellbeing. Note that two other important inferences are made here: that ‘wellbeing aspects’ can be taught and that this can be a relatively simple and positive add-on to classes, rather than requiring any radical restructuring or cost. Another important effect of using wellbeing adjectivally is that these entities become wellbeing, like a blue book becomes blue. In other words, wellbeing exists because wellbeing entities exist: ‘wellbeing information’, ‘wellbeing champion’ and ‘wellbeing classes’. This analysis is supported by looking at how these terms are used in context. A close reading reveals a repeated assumption that wellbeing will be increased through providing data and educating people about wellbeing. There is subsequently a large focus on education, plans and measures with a curious vacuum regarding policy. This again could be due to the relative recent interest in wellbeing, but the effect generated is that these wellbeing entities become the policies for wellbeing in themselves.

Wellbeing Discourses

From many different ways of analysing the texts and language closely (and the above highlights some of that process) a systematic analysis was carried out and three main discourses were identified. Interestingly, in terms of seeing useful cleavages in the data where distinct discourses were emerging, the breakthrough came not when analysing ‘wellbeing’ itself but when performing a search for the concept of ‘social’ after initial readings revealed its frequency. A large group of references were related to ‘social enterprise’/‘social finance’; ‘social capital’/‘social relationships’; and ‘social learning’/‘social psychology’. This provided some fairly clear categories in terms of looking at the ways that social was being used in relation to wellbeing which seemed to chime with central terms like ‘freedom’, ‘fairness’ and ‘responsibility’. This gave a window into some useful categorizations. I’ve identified the discourses as: wellbeing as free enterprise; wellbeing as social capital; and wellbeing as psychological investment. While I have been a little playful in naming these discourses, the basic point I want to make in this paper is that none of them offer a radical departure from neoliberal economic ideologies. (Please note discussions of these discourses are work in progress).

Wellbeing as free enterprise

This discourse meshes the concepts of freedom, choice and control (over one’s life) with (social) mobility and (social) enterprise. Actors are rational individuals who, given the right information, can make informed choices about their own wellbeing. Moreover, given the right opportunities and support actors are able to act on those choices in order to maximise wellbeing. Therefore this discourse is fundamentally utilitarian where the state is an enabler, providing basic assurances and opportunities to allow individuals to ‘get on in life’. Wellbeing is characterised predominantly through the lens of happiness or life satisfaction with references to subjective wellbeing evidence. The emphasis is very clearly on the individual level:

The point is that human problems cannot be dealt with through technical and bureaucratic solutions...it is equally wrong to think that economic structures determine whether we are happy or not happy.Far more variation in wellbeing is driven by variation in personal rather than societal factors: temperament and physical fitness for example. These personal factors are linked to the kind of actions that the research shows tend to increase wellbeing: propensity to engage with others, to give
of your time, to take notice of the world, to keep learning about the world, to take exercise. (Jonty Olliff-Cooper, the Practical Politics of Wellbeing, Progressive Conservatism Project, Demos).³

Structural factors such as economic systems, inequality or distributional justice are played down as having a major role in wellbeing, and programmes to try to address structural issues by previous administrations are regarded as ‘rule based’, ‘bureaucratic’ and ‘technical’. On the other hand ‘human’, ‘personal’, and ‘context based’ factors are perceived as having more impact on wellbeing. In this way, scalar and spatial dimensions are strongly invoked, where a move from central to local and from state to community or individual is strongly promoted. A key and persistent theme running all through the texts is a reduction in bureaucracy:

The contention is that just as we can create the climate for business to thrive – by cutting taxes, slashing red tape and so on – so we can create a climate in this country that is more family-friendly and more conducive to the good life...

People who feel in control of their own destiny will feel more fulfilled. That’s why we’re giving parents real choice over schools and patients real choice over where they get treated. (David Cameron, Wellbeing Speech, 2011)⁴

In the wider context of this piece Cameron is not explicitly saying that cutting red tape is more conducive to the good life, he is saying that governments have a role in affecting positive change. However, the position of the clause about ‘red tape’ in the middle of the sentence lends meaning to both parts of the sentence and this is characteristic of the way that an implicit narrative of reducing bureaucracy is associated with wellbeing where red tape has been ‘strangling’, ‘holding back’ and ‘suffocating’ people’s desire to do more for themselves and their communities. Getting rid of this will ‘unblock’, ‘open the door’, ‘unlock new markets’ which will have a positive effect on wellbeing.

Trying to improve people’s lives by imposing decisions, setting targets and demanding inspections from Whitehall simply doesn’t work. It creates bureaucracy. Greater freedom and flexibilities for local government are vital for achieving the shift in power the government wants to see. But on their own, these measures will not be enough. Government alone does not make great places to live, people do. People who look out for their neighbours, who take pride in their street and get involved – from the retired teacher who volunteers once a month in the village shop, to the social entrepreneur who runs the nursery full time. (DCLG, 2011)

Enterprise and social mobility is a key and central concept: ‘Britain on the rise’ is a metaphor for individuals as well as the country in general where successful countries ‘on the rise’ are characterized as ‘lean, mean and enterprise obsessed’ compared with ‘fat, lazy, sclerotic, welfare obsessed’ countries ‘on the slide’.

³ This corresponds exactly to exhortations in a New Economics Foundation’s publication ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ (Aked, J. & Thompson, S. 2011) which distills evidence from subjective wellbeing research into the key actions for increased wellbeing: Connect: Give: Take Notice; Keep Learning; Be Active. (Note these instructions are directed at citizens not government.)
⁴ Note the spatiality here, where rather than how people get treated. Social mobility in these narratives has often an explicit spatial dimension, focussing on the actual physical movement of people between health settings and schools. The inference is people can and do vote with their feet.
‘And for us Conservatives, this is not just an economic mission – it’s also a moral one. It’s not just about growth and GDP, it’s what’s always made our hearts beat faster – aspiration; people rising from the bottom to the top. Line one, rule one of being a Conservative is that it’s not where you’ve come from that counts, it’s where you’re going’. (David Cameron, Leader’s Speech, Birmingham 2012)

Alongside social mobility the concept of ‘fairness’ is often deployed. ‘Fairness’ is usually viewed from the position of a ‘hard working’ ‘aspirational’ citizen seeing welfare claimants receiving more than the average wage, and from the position of family in poverty where welfare is seen as a disincentive to enterprise, keeping people stuck in disadvantage. So, this can be seen as the ‘fair trade’ aspect of this discourse where a greater level of state influence or support may be necessary to help people who really need it perform wellbeing choices and act in an enterprising manner. Government’s role is to provide wellbeing education with a basic framework of social justice in place, where social justice is the provision of support to those in need to perform effectively. Wellbeing measures are therefore important because they can help individuals in need decide on their wellbeing options.

Terms which describe a qualitatively different type of ‘social’ like social progress, social inequality, social cohesion and social justice were altogether rarer and more a feature of ONS documents or technical papers rather than ‘position papers’ or speeches. Even in the context of ‘social care’ (mentioned only four times) we see the personalization narrative with a focus on ‘policies focussed on providing people with greater choice and control, such as individual budgets for social care, have proved effective in raising quality of life.’ Choice and control are indeed a feature of many wellbeing accounts and sets of indicators, based on statistical evidence of SWB but also on philosophical accounts of social justice (e.g. Nussbaum) and empirical participatory accounts of wellbeing with local people (Scott 2012). So it is clear that at some level, control over life is a fundamental need and human right. However, it is important to be aware of how control is being characterised. In these discourses a predominant theme is ‘increasing choice’. Burchardt warns against governments attempting to create the impression of the amount of choice the ‘consumer’ of health care has whereas in fact they can exert little control over quality of healthcare Burchardt (2006; 159). This so called ‘hard choice’ was also a feature of the late Blairite discourses where citizens are expected to choose key services within a context of a competitive markets designed to incentivise service providers (Needham, 2008). These hard choices require that citizens are equipped with information and strategies and resources to make those choices and implement them. As more and more areas of life have become a market so citizens must learn how to handle ‘the freedoms the market imposes on them’ (Binkley 2007 p119). Education about wellbeing therefore is not in fact a resistance to neo-liberal market-led forces, it is a technique designed to help us make the most of the market.

**Wellbeing as social capital**

This discourse focusses on family, community, (social) relationships, (social) trust, ‘volunteering’ and ‘giving’. By far the most common occurrence of the word ‘society’ in the texts studied was in relation to the Big Society (59). In discussing society in general, a key feature was to characterise it as ‘broken’ and in need of ‘building’ or ‘delivering’ a ‘bigger’, ‘stronger’ and ‘happier’ society. A key narrative within this, across all texts is ‘social capital’ and related concepts such as ‘social cohesion’, ‘social relationships’ ‘social involvement’ and ‘social networks’. A major assumption is that volunteering, social networks and relationships, giving and social trust all create positive (economic) externalities, although this assumption
has been highly contested and evidence is lacking (Jordan 2008). A recent review of localism and community empowerment case studies revealed a problematic relationship between localism and evidence of community empowerment (Painter et al. 2012). As Amin argued, in the neo-liberalism of the 1980s, the social was ‘individualized and marketized’ and solutions to spatial inequalities would be market-led by encouraging entrepreneurialism. In New Labour ‘third way’ discourses a focus on market-led policies based on regional competition spawned a new localism where the local was re-imagined as the ‘cause, consequence, and remedy of social and spatial inequality.’ The social and spatial were ‘folded together’ in a ‘geographically promiscuous understanding of the social’ (Amin 2005: 618). In Coalition discourses, wellbeing has been folded into the mix too, as particular sorts of evidence back up the need for localism. Within these discourses, a reclaiming and reframing of ‘social’ occurs where the ‘social’ in socialism means ‘bureaucracy’ and where we can see claims about the nature of humans are being heavily influenced by narratives of social capital and subjective wellbeing:

As human beings, it is in our nature to join together to achieve common goals. There are two ways in which this joining can work: From the top-down, through hierarchy mediated by bureaucracy - and which invades civil society by sucking everything towards itself in the name of "stakeholding." Or from the bottom-up, through diverse forms of self-organisation. The former is what defines socialism. The latter is what defines conservatism - and, for that matter, liberalism. (Greg Clarke MP 27 July 2010)

Volunteering and charity fundraising provides strength to the social fabric, by spreading awareness of the needs of others and by increasing the sense of interdependence of those who give and those who need and by fostering a sense of community endeavour, benefiting giver and receiver alike. (Liberal Democrat Policy Document 106, 2011)

The Community Life Survey is a new survey commissioned by Cabinet Office to provide Official Statistics on issues that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities, including volunteering, giving, community engagement and well-being (Community Life Survey - Cabinet Office 2012).

The term ‘societal’ is mentioned only once (see the Jonty Oliff-Cooper quotation above) and then only to claim that societal factors have less impact on wellbeing than individual ones. In these discourses the state is seen as a devolver of power and an enabler. Wellbeing is conceptualised among a number of initiatives which form part of a bigger goal, that of making the country more family-friendly:

I’ve said before that I want every decision we take to be judged on whether it makes our country more or less family-friendly, and this new focus on wellbeing I believe will be an important part of that (David Cameron Wellbeing speech 2010)

Included in the idea of family wellbeing (or family-friendliness’) across the texts is: civility, community, having a job to earn money to look after your family, protecting ‘innocent’ childhood (unharmed by advertising), making home a more comfortable place, taking the children on holiday, having a choice over schools, and helping families stay together. A particular feature of David Cameron’s speeches is that he often draws together family breakdown with social breakdown with the effect that individual, family and community become merged in these discourses where ‘social’ is heavily presented as an individual good or located in the local area.
Wellbeing as psychological investment.

This discourse weaves two related narratives together, ‘nudge’ and the psy-science of positive psychology. Both construct humans as basically free and able to make their own wellbeing, but essentially flawed in the sense that often we don’t do what’s good for us or we engage in irrational behaviours. Like ‘Homer Simpsons’ we have to be helped or trained to do the ‘right thing’. In this discourse many prescriptions are given about what the right thing is, and there are some interesting elisions occurring between what is ‘right’ in terms of what the evidence shows about wellbeing, and what is ‘right’ in terms of what is ‘responsible’.

Activities such as training or volunteering that are associated with strong positive externalities – effects that benefit others as well as the individual – tend to be ‘under-invested’ in by rational individuals. In the case of giving, evolution seems to have offset this to some extent, but at the same time busy modern life sometimes means that we give less than we might wish. Behavioural science gives us some useful clues about how we might nudge ourselves to give a little more. For example, it might lead us to give more publicly – signalling to others that a cause is worthwhile and triggering further giving. It might even make us a little happier.

(Giving, well-being, and behavioural science Policy Note by David Halpern)

In this discourse the education of ‘free’ citizens and ‘nudging’ appear to become elided and indeed, according to Thaler and Sunstein (2008), ‘nudging’ poses no threat to liberalism as individual choice remains intact. The role of government is to make it easier for people to do the right thing, and to educate them so that with just a tweak here and there we can maximise happiness, while at the same time conveniently delivering services to others which the public sector is increasingly hard-pressed to do. In this win-win discourse, it is negative behaviour or thoughts which pose the biggest barrier to wellbeing, rather than a lack of wellbeing causing negative thoughts and behaviour. Structural factors are almost completely absent from these narratives. For example, in the quotation above, modern busy lives are cited as one cause of not giving enough but no comment is made of the structural factors which may create the need to have modern busy lives. Here it is the lack of giving which is the barrier to greater wellbeing, not ‘modern busy lives’ (which are beyond our control). There is no fundamental questioning here of the structural basis of life in the UK, nor of the problematic societal differentials between who is and is not able to give what, where, when and how, as highlighted by an enormous empirical research literature on community participation which is not reflected in any of the documents looked at. In addition, for liberals it could be argued that this narrative of giving poses a step too far in terms of what should be expected from ‘free’ citizens.

There are a number of explicit and implicit desired outcomes for a focus on wellbeing in these discourses. For example, in a discussion of wellbeing and happiness classes at Wellington College, the outcomes described are:

The classes have been popular with young people and the school says that they are linked to improved academic performance. (Liberal Democrat Policy Paper 106)

Happiness is often transformed in this discourse from an end to a means, it is a resource and has become associated with the exploitation of other resources, better performance, longer life, better relationships, more opportunities. Therefore it is not hard to make links between
happiness and broader project of neoliberalism, where even the domains of wellbeing become in themselves subject to marketization.

Jones et al. (2012) document the relatively rapid rise of the psy-sciences in terms of governmental agendas. They argue that, because of their political malleability, they have become very pervasive: appealing to both left and right and acting as a practical way of implementing both the Third Way and the ‘Big Society’. However, while behaviour change policies may start from a premise that the whole population needs to be helped to make the right decisions, the danger is that these policies regress to target those presumed to be making bad decisions on a regular basis. Thus targeted groups have their choices circumscribed or structured in subtle ways (Jones et al. 2012). They also argue that there has been no debate that gives any political mandate to use ‘nudge’.

Like a good investment portfolio to guard against financial shocks, investment in psychological ‘stocks’ made easy with the ABC of ‘flourish’, exercises to do every day to build up resilience, change your future and increase your chances of return. A key feature in these discourses is that wellbeing is not a threshold concept but an open-ended and ever-increasing possibility. This is important because it holds out the hope of continual improvement. Binkley (2007: 114) argues that the contemporary interest in happiness is linked to formation of contemporary identity through lifestyle brands. In contrast to the past when choice and identity were limited by custom, class, family for example, now modern life offers an array of choices, and the concept of ‘lifestyles’ help us organise those into what is right for us. Happiness is becoming increasingly a lifestyle choice (Binkley 2007 p 114). Through contemporary discourses of ‘flourishing’ and the proliferation of ‘happiness exercises’ negative thoughts, such as our docility or our dependence on the welfare state, can be changed ‘through sheer acts of will’(Binkley 2012 13:45). In these discourse, Binkley argues, traditional Freudian psychology is rejected and psychological life has become democratized, we no longer need ‘experts’, because according to the science, 40% of happiness is within our control.

Discussion

This study finds that the UK has been heavily involved in ‘boundary work’ on the concept of wellbeing such that its range of meanings have been heavily circumscribed to the subjective wellbeing realm. This supports current critique that the UK’s work is heavily oriented towards the measurement of subjective indicators and, while there is considerable overlap between Eurostat and National Wellbeing Index, the UK index does not reflect EU or OECD developments where there is more focus on inequality, unmet needs and social exclusion (Tomlinson and Kelly 2013: 14). The index has also been critiqued for its failure to provide an adequate national assessment of sustainable development. However this critique is partly answered by the very recent work to bring SD and wellbeing indicators together (Defra 2012). Although current governmental discourses of wellbeing in the UK claim to offer scope for alternative thinking on societal progress, it is doubtful that they offer a radical challenge to neoliberal growth ideologies.

In addition, due to the parallel intensification of new localism, wellbeing has become a handmaiden to the new Localism agenda, where the same research from a fairly narrow evidence base on subjective wellbeing focussing particularly on positive correlations with

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5 For example Martin Seligmans’ PERMA and NEF’s Five Ways to Wellbeing
volunteering and giving are routinely wheeled out across a number of documents to evidence the need for localism. Bureaucracy is forcefully mobilised as an anti-wellbeing entity, where arguments for individual, community, local, small scale interventions are made instead. Of course an obvious contradiction in these discourses taken as a whole, is that on the one hand it is argued that structural factors have little effect on peoples’ lives yet on the other a bureaucratic state is seen as having a large effect on people’s lives. Wellbeing has been ‘co-opted’ into contradictory and potentially regressive localist discourses which do not exhibit a serious engagement with the problems and challenges of community empowerment. Rather, these discourses are symptomatic of a growing narrative about the role of the state, citizenship and the ways in which state action can both create and inhibit the development of ‘aspirational’ citizens, eager to take on greater responsibility for themselves and the well-being of their communities. However, for a number of writers the emergence of such politics represents further evidence of the ways in which western states are ‘shifting their modes of intervention and rolling-out neo-liberal agendas of change’ (Raco 2009: 236).

A powerful space to debate future progress was opened up by the 2008 financial crisis which has been characterised as a potential ‘Berlin Wall’ moment for neoliberal economic ideologies, prompting some scholars to ask whether we are in a post-neoliberal phase. However, without a promised land, such as that which capitalism offered in 1989, crisis managers lack a ‘destination imaginary’; as a result they are carrying out ‘running repairs’ which actually results in a focus on economic growth at any cost (Peck et al. 2009). In the new austerity era neoliberalism has lost political credibility but will continue in an increasingly erratic state while there is a casting about for alternatives (Peck et al. 2009, Peck 2010). The focus on wellbeing, and particularly on happiness, is increasingly providing a meta-narrative as ‘the rationale for social science research and government policies, nationally and internationally’ (Tomlinson and Kelly 2013: 14). However, from this empirical investigation it is clear that ‘wellbeing’, as currently constituted in UK political discourse, neither represents a serious threat to neoliberalism nor constitutes a coherent alternative development movement which can be properly characterised as post-neoliberal.

References


