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Wellbeing as a wicked problem: navigating the arguments for the role of government

Introduction

There has been significant interest and often a hostile response by scholars, commentators and political activists to news that the UK government, among others, is seeking to elevate happiness or wellbeing as an explicit policy goal. It is difficult to adjudicate between the various arguments surrounding the appropriate role for government in this area as they often take very different starting points, either metatheoretical or disciplinary. In seeking to steer a course through these arguments we take the distinction between ‘wicked’ and ‘tame’ problems as a reference point¹, arguing that wellbeing should be categorised as the former. The seminal discussion of this distinction (Rittel and Webber 1973) resonates sharply with current debates on wellbeing and indeed is located within similar debates in the past.

In developing our arguments we ground them in relation to empirical research on developments in the UK², where the connection between wellbeing and public policy is seen as relatively advanced, or at least sufficient to provoke concern that the government is developing a ‘happiness index’ (in reality a dashboard of indicators) that will become the focal point for government policy.³ However, our arguments apply more broadly and we reflect on developments elsewhere also.

Broadly defined, there are two aspects to this agenda: measurement and policy application. In reflecting on the UK case we make two main observations: first, that while the measurement agenda is relatively well advanced, the policy agenda is somewhat embryonic; and second, that as the terms ‘happiness’ and ‘wellbeing’ are often used loosely and interchangeably in policy circles, much of the concern over developments in the UK focuses on debates around the role of government in the pursuit of happiness. However, happiness is a relatively small part of the measurement agenda that has had little to no impact on public policy to date.

Our argument is developed in five sections. In the next section we outline the distinction between wicked and tame problems and explain its relevance to the current debates on happiness and wellbeing with close reference to the original contribution on this

¹ We would like to thank John MackMerish for this suggestion. We would also like to thank Paul Alin, Karen Scott and the anonymous Journal of Happiness Studies reviewers for their very helpful comments on this article.

² This paper draws on material from 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with a cross-section of actors engaged with wellbeing measurement and policy in the UK, undertaken between 2011 and 2013.

³ In the field of economic development, the United Nations Development Program, Bhutan and Mexico have also developed multi-dimensional measures of life quality. Other countries around the world are considering their development currently.

topic but also referring to more recent literature. In section two, we present an overview of recent developments that illustrate the current position of wellbeing on the political agenda, before turning to the case of the UK (section three). In section four we identify and consider four dilemmas relating to these developments, reflecting on how understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem might inform debate. The concluding section argues that understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem can help take the issue beyond debates that cannot be resolved empirically, by arguing for pragmatic and legitimate government action.

Wicked and Tame Problems

At the core of Rittel and Webber's (1973) analysis is the argument that the search for scientific answers to most public policy problems is bound to fail because these problems are generally 'wicked problems', which are by their nature difficult to define and for which there are no definitive and objective answers. The contrast is made with 'tame problems', which science and its related practices are capable of dealing with. With tame problems there is a clear mission and it is also clear when the problem has been solved – the example of a mathematical equation is given. With wicked problems there is no such clarity and they cannot be solved in the same sense. Here we suggest that the challenge of promoting either happiness or wellbeing is a wicked problem – the latter being particularly complex because of its multidimensional nature (below).

If the application of the wicked/tame distinction to current debates on wellbeing is not obvious at first, a revealing aspect of this classic contribution is that it was written partly in response to what have been described as 'first wave' concerns with developing wider measures of progress in the 1960s and 1970s (Bache and Reardon 2013) that resonate with current attempts to measure wellbeing. Specifically, the article refers to attempts to install a Planning Programming and Budgeting System [PPBS] requiring the explication of desired outcomes, and the subsequent attempt to develop a system of social indicators⁴ to be taken as 'surrogates for statements of desired conditions' (Rittel and Webber 1973, 157). However, they suggested that it was 'terribly difficult, if not impossible, to make either of these systems operational' (p. 157).

These developments emerged in a period of great social unrest in the US that has parallels in contemporary expressions of discontent around the world: 'participants in these

⁴ The social indicators movement is widely seen as a forerunner to contemporary experiments with measuring wellbeing and led to new national surveys such as the Swedish Level of Living Survey (1965) and the UK Social Trends Report (1970).

revolts were seeking to restructure the value and goal systems that affect the distribution of social product and shape the directions of national policy' (Rittel and Webber 1973, 157). There are also parallels in the multi-dimensional aspects of current narratives around wellbeing with those in the US four decades ago, with a similar diversity of forces for new 'direction finding instruments':

'Systems analysis, goals commissions, PPBS, social indicators, the several revolts, the poverty program, model cities, the current concerns with environmental quality and with the qualities of urban life, the search for new religions among contemporary youth, and the increasing attractiveness of the planning idea – all seem to be driven by a common quest. Each in its peculiar way is asking for a clarification of purposes, for a redefinition of problems, for a re-ordering of priorities to match stated purposes, for the design of new kinds of goal – directed actions, for a reorientation of the professions to the outputs of professional activities rather than to the inputs into them and then for a redistribution of the outputs of governmental programs among competing publics' (Rittel and Webber 1973, 157).

With echoes of current debates on wellbeing Rittel and Webber (1973, 159) reflect on then present dilemmas around the 'planning task', of 'where and how to intervene even if we do happen to know what aims we seek', reflecting a growing crisis of confidence in rational planning models. Similarly pertinent is the point that:

'one of the most intractable problems is that of defining problems (or knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition) and of locating problems (finding where in the complex causal networks the trouble really lies). In turn, and equally intractable, is the problem of identifying the actions that might effectively narrow the gap between what-is and what-ought-to-be' (Rittel and Webber 1973, 159).

This resonates with contemporary issues over the definition of wellbeing, the direction of causality in wellbeing and the domains that are seen to constitute it, such as health, and thus the appropriate policy mix for promoting wellbeing (e.g., Dolan et al 2008; Scott 2012).

Wicked and tame problems

For Rittel and Webber (1973, 160) wicked problems⁵ are by their nature ill-defined and ‘rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution’. Importantly, they suggest that wicked problems are never solved: at best they are only re-solved – over and over again. By contrast, tame problems can be solved because it is possible to formulate the information required for understanding the problem and assuming the problem-solver ‘knows his art’. We summarise the key differences between wicked and tame problems as follows (Table 1):

Table 1: Tame and Wicked Problems – about here

At the core of contemporary debates on wellbeing is contestation on the nature of the problem: for example, some are most concerned with the accelerating levels of reported mental ill-health, for others it is social issues and for others it is to foreground concerns around environmental sustainability. Appealing to correcting the problem of ‘ill-being’ as a catch-all for a wide range of social problems has a logical intuition but does not bring the necessary clarity – a core characteristic of a wicked problem:

‘The formulation of a wicked problem *is* the problem! The process of formulating the problem and of conceiving a solution (or re-solution) is identical, since every specification of the problem is a specification of the direction in which a treatment is considered’. (Rittel and Webber 1973, 161)

Thus, while it may be possible for individuals to identify what they think is important (although people do not always have well defined preferences), the policy process is comprised of a multitude of actors and organisations with different interests and value structures. As such, they have different ideas about what is important and thus contrasting ideas of what ‘the problem’ is that should be addressed – and beyond this, how it might be addressed.

⁵ Rittel and Webber use the term “wicked” in ‘a meaning akin to that of “malignant” (in contrast to “benign”) or “vicious” (like a circle) or “tricky” (like a leprechaun) or “aggressive” (like a lion, in contrast to the docility of a lamb)’ (p160).

Rittel and Webber's initial conceptualisation has been widely applied⁶ and its key features have proved resilient over time. Thus, Conklin (2005), Durant and Legge (2006) and Head (2008) all emphasise contestation over the nature of the problem and the preferred solution as the core of a wicked problem. There is a continued emphasis on the importance of interconnected problems across multiple policy domains, while Weber and Khademian (2008) and Head and Alford (2013) emphasise the importance of multiple levels of government or *multi-level governance*, which has become a feature of contemporary policy-making since Rittel and Webber's seminal contribution (see Bache and Flinders 2004).

Other contributions, while recognising the appeal of the binary formulation, prefer to emphasise a continuum of tame and wicked problems. Thus, many public problems are seen as having degrees of wickedness which have to be understood by reference to multiple dimensions (Head and Alford 2013, 2). Further, Conklin (2005, 9) has clarified that 'tame does not mean simple – a tame problem can be very technically complex', giving the example of putting a man on the moon and returning him safely: the problem did not change over time and it was clear when the problem was 'solved', but the technical aspects were extremely complex. We might add the more prosaic example of refuse collection – not straightforward to organise, but a public policy problem that is clearly defined (to empty bins), has a clear stopping point (the bins are emptied) and can be evaluated as successful (residents satisfied).

According to Head (2008, 103) tame and wicked problems should be understood by reference to three dimensions – complexity, uncertainty and divergence (Table 2).

Table 2: Complexity, uncertainty and divergence - about here

In this schema, no dimension alone is sufficient to ensure wickedness: our examples of technical solutions to tame problems illustrate this in relation to complexity and the same point applies to uncertainty and disagreement among stakeholders. It is 'when serious disagreements are combined with complexity and uncertainty we have crossed a threshold' (Head 2008, 103). As there is no 'root cause' to issues of complexity, divergence and uncertainty, there is no root cause to wickedness and thus 'no best approach to tackling such problems' (Head and Alford 2013, 5). We now turn our discussion to wellbeing.

Wellbeing on the Political Agenda

⁶ 5786 Google Scholar cites as of 18/06/2014

Over the past decade there has been increasing debate at both national and international level over the extent to which governments can improve the wellbeing of their citizens. This debate is often in response to increasing recognition that the dominance of GDP as a measure of prosperity has not led to wholly desirable outcomes for society (Cobb, Halstead & Rowe 1995; Easterlin 1974) and has led to a number of initiatives aimed at developing alternative or complementary

measures of progress, UNDP (1990), Sen (1999) and Anand et al (2009). As suggested above, this has sometimes been construed as a ‘happiness agenda’ though in reality policy thinking about measurement issues has related to a broad notion relating to objective conditions of wellbeing in many domains of life as well as measures of subjective experience.

Initiatives have taken place both nationally and within international organisations and are generally focused on wellbeing measurement. Research has revealed complex territorially overarching networks of academics, statisticians and policy-makers exchanging information and ideas that result in a cross-pollination of initiatives that often appear separate and distinctive within national settings (Bache and Reardon 2013). Internationally, the OECD has launched a *Better Life Index*, and claims the measurement of wellbeing and monitoring of wider notions of progress to be a key priority for the organisation in order to create ‘Better policies for better lives’. Also, the EU has since 2007 been developing its own ‘GDP and Beyond’ initiative, which provides a roadmap of five key actions to improve the EU’s indicators of progress: complementing GDP with environmental and social indicators; near real-time information for decision-making; more accurate reporting on distribution and inequalities; developing a European Sustainable Development Scoreboard; and extending national accounts to environmental and social issues.

In addition, a significant catalyst for national action has been the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP), which was established in 2008 by President Sarkozy of France. Led by Nobel Prize winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen the Commission’s brief was to:

Identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement; to consider what additional information might be required for the production of more relevant indicators of social progress; to assess the feasibility of alternative

measurement tools, and to discuss how to present the statistical information in an appropriate way' (CMEPSP 2009, Executive Summary).

The final report of the Commission in 2009 advised that emphasis should be refocused away from measuring economic production, to measuring people's wellbeing and produced a number of recommendations aimed at stimulating debate and action at national and international levels.

Accompanying these international developments have been growing demands from epistemic communities for governments to pursue wellbeing measurement in order to put wellbeing at the heart of government activity (Brulde 2010; De Prycker 2010; Duncan 2010). Relevant initiatives have emerged in a number of contexts. National initiatives tend to be in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or European Union (EU) countries. Within the OECD, for example – although not a government initiative – the Canadian Index of Well-Being was created in 2003 to try and refocus the political discourse in Canada, and help reshape the direction of public policy so it would more concretely improve the quality of life of Canadians. Subsequently it is treated as a tool to hold decision makers to account for whether things are getting better or worse in terms of wellbeing (Canadian Index of Well-Being 2013). This composite index measures eight domains; community vitality, democratic engagement, health, education, leisure and culture, time use, and living standards. The Australian Bureau of Statistics also has a similar measurement programme, known as MAP: Measures of Australia's Progress. MAP 'brings together measures from across social, economic and environmental domains, so these can be assessed side by side for a balanced view of national progress' (Wall and Salvaris 2011, 8). Within the EU there are initiatives in a range of countries, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Slovenia and Spain (Kroll 2011). For example, Italy has created the BES Initiative and as a result produces a Report on Equitable and Sustainable Wellbeing (ISTAT 2014). This report brings together data relating to twelve dimensions of wellbeing, including social relationships, economic wellbeing and subjective wellbeing (SWB). It suggests that such data can enable the statistical office and government to 'understand where our country is heading, identify critical points, possibilities, and the positive dynamics in play' (BES 2014). Since the Stiglitz Report, INSEE (the French Statistical Office) has implemented a specific multi-modal survey on quality of life, as well as adding wellbeing variables to existing surveys. These additions have meant that there can be scrutiny of all the objective and subjective dimensions of quality of life mentioned in the Stiglitz Report. This initiative

allows for the ability to calculate, at the individual level, correlations and cumulative welfare deficiencies, ‘as well as enable a better understanding of the links between objective drivers of quality of life (e.g. health, education); and provide more information to policy makers, who can currently only rely on objective quality of life measures to inform their policy’ (OECD 2012, 29).

The Netherlands also has multiple surveys conducted by the national statistical office (Statistics Netherlands) that contain long-standing SWB questions. Further, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research Life Situation Survey asks questions on positive and negative feelings, inter-personal feelings, social contacts and self-esteem (de Jonge 2009). Statistics Netherlands also has the long running Life Situation Index which monitors eight domains of the ‘life situation’ (seen as affecting wellbeing and quality of life). These domains include housing (including type of home, number of rooms); mobility (possession of a car or a public transport season ticket); and holidays (frequency of holidays, foreign holidays) (Boelhouwer 2010, 20). It is suggested that ‘the overriding goal of the Life Situation Index is to identify and describe social developments for the purpose of policy, more specifically social policy, aimed at preventing social disadvantages, and where they exist, to overcome them’ (Boelhouwer 2010, 36).

Much of the attendant debate has focused on one of the key demands of the Stiglitz Commission, which was to use SWB indicators alongside more widely used objective indicators, such as employment rates and life expectancy, in order to measure wellbeing. SWB refers to a person’s own assessment of their lives; their own account of their feelings. The monitoring of SWB by government and its potential use in shaping policy is central to some of the concerns we outline below. Our focus here is on the UK where developments are widely regarded to be most advanced in relation to the SWB agenda in particular. However, much of the material discussed here illustrates issues that are likely to be considered in a number of countries (such as those discussed above) looking to further develop wellbeing measurement and policy. Further, while we focus on the UK partly because of the degree of attention paid to the SWB dimension, we are concerned with wellbeing in the round to incorporate both subjective and objective elements. Moreover, while at the outset we distinguished between the measurement and policy application aspects of the wellbeing agenda, the UK case illustrates that measurement and policy might be seen as two sides of the same coin.

Developments in the UK

In November 2010 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) launched its Measuring National Well-being Programme, the aim of which was ‘to develop and publish an accepted and trusted set of National Statistics which help people understand and monitor well-being’ (ONS 2012b, 1). In endorsing the programme Prime Minister David Cameron (2010) argued that it would:

‘open up a national debate about what really matters, not just in government but amongst people who influence our lives: in the media; in business; the people who develop the products we use, who build the towns we live in, who shape the culture we enjoy. And second, this information will help government work out, with evidence, the best ways of trying to help to improve people’s wellbeing.’

The launch of this programme gave the UK wellbeing agenda its greatest publicity to date and generated, for a short while at least, a public/media debate on the pros and cons of the agenda. The ONS subsequently conducted a series of hearings and presented its first findings to government in July 2011⁷. A key part of the ONS programme was the addition of four ‘experimental’ self-report SWB questions⁸ into the Annual Population Survey from April 2011. This aspect of the programme brought media focus on the ‘happiness’ dimension and proved most controversial.

The ONS (2012a, 37) highlights three potential uses for its SWB data: overall monitoring of national wellbeing; use in the policy making process; and international comparisons. It argues that measuring SWB can provide an indication of how the wellbeing of the nation is changing over time, and provides a direct means through which people can tell policy makers what matters most to them in terms of their wellbeing (ONS 2012a, 33). The idea of measuring SWB for international comparisons is not a new one, but the idea that this should be included in national data collection (and within the European Statistical System) is relatively new, although we note that SWB measurement has been part of national data collection in the Netherlands since 1974, (Boelhouwer 2010). The OECD has played a prominent role in coordinating wellbeing measurement and has developed guidance on

⁷ In total, ONS held 175 events, involving around 7,250 people. In total the debate generated 34,000 responses (ONS 2011, 2)

⁸ The four questions included in the APS were: Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? Each is measured on a scale from 0 to 10. These questions will be asked of around 200,000 adults (aged 16 and over) each year (ONS 2011, 17).

measurement to promote comparability across nations (OECD, 2013). The work of the ONS is in part a response to this agenda (ONS 2012a 38).

In relation to use of SWB data in the policy-making processes, which is central to most concerns levelled at the wellbeing agenda more broadly, one purpose for a large sample size in the survey is to allow comparison of different groups within the population or between different areas within the UK and thus potentially to allow policies to be targeted where there is greatest need in terms of SWB. The UK's data collection also allows analysis of how different domains (e.g., education, health) relate to and might impact on SWB and thus facilitate identification of policy measures that might improve SWB. A further potential use is for cost-benefit analysis in the policy appraisal process: SWB measures provide an alternative way of assessing the costs and benefits of different policies (below). Finally, viewing policies through a 'wellbeing lens' might not only inform policy formulation but also its implementation and beyond this, inform policy evaluation and monitoring (ONS 2012a, 37-8).

Developments in the policy sphere

Since the launch of the ONS programme in 2010 there have been a number of related developments across UK government. First, in 2011 the section of the Treasury Green Book policy guidance to government departments for dealing with the valuation of non-market goods was updated to add SWB evaluation to the market-based approaches to Social Cost Benefit Analysis, Stated Preference and Revealed Preference (both market-based) (Fujiwara and Campbell 2011, 57–8)..

However, more recently, the government has emphasised that the ONS SWB data are 'experimental statistics and still in development, and as such we should not expect at this stage to have examples of major decisions that have been heavily influenced by wellbeing research' (HM Government 2013, para. 4). Despite this, some developments or 'foundations', as they are described, for instilling a wellbeing approach can be identified (HM Government 2013, para. 4).

In August 2010 the Social Impacts Task Force was created with the aim of developing a cross-Government approach to understanding social impacts, and integrating the consideration of such impacts into the policy making process. In light of the work of this taskforce a plethora of surveys are either being adjusted or commissioned across UK government departments to include wellbeing questions and the ONS wellbeing data is being

disseminated throughout departments to further understanding and use by departmental policy makers (HM Government 2013).

However, while these may prove to be significant developments, they do not amount to the measurement or idea of wellbeing acting as a meaningful driver for new policies. Rather, there is a view that to date this interest in wellbeing has resulted mainly in the re-packing of existing policies rather than shaping new ones. Thus, the new economics foundation has suggested that:

‘there is a lack of evidence of meaningful embedding of a well-being approach as a matter of course across governmental policy-making. Thus there is a danger that well-being evidence will be used to provide support for policies that already have considerable momentum behind them, but not to suggest new policy directions or initiatives’ (nef 2013, para. 13)

Our interviewees (2013) confirmed this view, suggesting that that the wellbeing agenda at UK government level amounted to a ‘series of mini-projects’ on particular policy areas scattered across departments rather than a coherent policy agenda.

Thus, while there is a clear and comprehensive wellbeing measurement programme in the UK, there is no significant application of a wellbeing approach to policy yet. Moreover, it is important to note that while this discussion has focused on SWB as the point of controversy, the ONS is very clear that SWB data should be collected to ‘supplement existing socio-economic measures of objective domains in order to fully understand and monitor national well-being’ (ONS 2012a, 37). There is no sense in which SWB data is intended to replace existing data for this purpose. As such, it is important to note that in the UK case, SWB indicators are to be placed alongside objective indicators from a broad range of other domains, namely: our relationships; health; what we do; where we live; personal finance; education and skills; the economy; governance; and the natural environment (Beaumont 2012).

It can thus be argued that at present the UK’s approach is focused on collecting data and improving knowledge to increase understanding of wellbeing – its causes, consequences and distributions. While this agenda has the support of the Prime Minister, this issue is currently not a hot topic and is not about to have significant policy effects. Politicians and policy-

makers generally see this as a long-term process that is currently in the knowledge accumulation phase.

Four Dilemmas Relating to the Wellbeing Agenda

In light of the discussion above we identify four dilemmas that have been raised in relation to the wellbeing agenda (measurement and policy). The dilemmas illustrate that this agenda very much relates to a wicked problem, but that the measurement agenda is somewhat less wicked than that of policy. Moreover, these dilemmas also emphasise the importance of distinguishing between happiness (or at least SWB)⁹ and wellbeing (as a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of SWB and a range of other indicators set out by the ONS, OECD and others). That there is a blurring of boundaries in both academic and policy debates between measurement and policy, between happiness and wellbeing and, beyond this, considerable ambiguity and uncertainty over the nature of any policy response indicates the status of wellbeing as a wicked problem. We now reflect on these dilemmas, which we categorise as reliability, responsibility, distrust and distraction.

***Reliability** - That wellbeing cannot be adequately measured and so should not be relied upon for public policy purposes*

There is a long-standing dispute within academic communities about the respective merits of subjective vs. objective measures of wellbeing. In particular a number of issues are raised in relation to the reliability of subjective indicators where the individual is asked to evaluate their sense of wellbeing (e.g., Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?). For example, Devos (2012, 185-186) argues that ‘Such lines of questioning remind one more of the shrink’s sofa than of meticulous data mining. But they are nonetheless invoked to “scientifically” diagnose the state of the human condition.’ A key concern here is that different individuals may define the question differently and even where a shared understanding can be assumed, individuals cannot be trusted to provide accurate information about their level of wellbeing. For example, Erikson (1993, 77) argued that the problem with indicators based on self-assessment of their degree of satisfaction is that ‘it is partly determined by their level of aspiration, that is, what they consider their rightful due. This means that measuring how satisfied people are is, to a large extent, equivalent to measuring how well they have adapted

⁹ In the ONS programme, there is one question on happiness out of four on ‘personal wellbeing’).

to their present conditions'. This view generally contends that objective data should form the basis of government appraisal and development of policy.

In response to the criticisms about the reliability of SWB measures, a number of studies have employed triangulation of methods to assess their accuracy. These studies have alleviated concerns that the mood of respondents and contextual factors affect the validity of SWB measures. Further, the viability of interpersonal comparability of SWB responses (often seen as a barrier to using such data) is now thought to be both possible, and more robust when extrapolated to an aggregate level (Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2008, 29-30; Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, 1999; Stutzer and Frey, 2000). In addition, findings from SWB self-report questionnaires have consistently been validated through cross-referencing the respondents self-declared SWB score with their friends and family assessments of the respondent (Layard, 2005). Further, nef (2012, 2) has suggested that 'concerns about the fluctuations of "moment to moment mood"... can be largely discounted once large enough survey samples are considered' (such as the 165,000 in the UK's Annual Population Survey). Increasingly, the consensus reached in academic studies is that there is 'meaningful and reliable data on subjective as well as objective well-being' (CMEPSP 2009, 16) (Cummins et al, 2009; Dolan and White, 2007; nef, 2012; Ott, 2010; De Prycker, 2010).

In addition, the point is often made that while the debate is framed as 'subjective vs. objective' measures, this is a misleading description: there are 'more' and 'less' subjective measures but none that are truly objective in design or application. For example, any approach to measuring wellbeing (as with GDP) may involve a judgement on what domains (or activities) should be included. This argument raises an interesting question in relation to the standards required of the reliability and accuracy of wellbeing measures. While it is clear that there will be ongoing debate about what matters and what should be included in any assessment of wellbeing used for public policy purposes, the same remains true for modelling the macro-economy as the basis of developing policies. The current economic crisis has revealed considerable gaps in this analysis and the approach to measurement is pragmatic.

Viewing wellbeing as a wicked problem brings a caution against over-reliance on scientific solutions. This does not mean that indicators and data are not important and should not be used to guide public policy. However, it suggests that data should be used that is 'good enough', accepting that there will be always be contestation over which data should be used and that such contestation will be ongoing. In this case, the degree of overlap in the domains used by national and international statistical bodies suggests an emerging consensus on how wellbeing should be measured. However, there is far less certainty on how this data might

inform policy responses and data should not be expected to ‘solve’ this wicked problem but rather contribute to understanding the nature of the problem and therefore to the ongoing attempts to develop and frame provisional courses of action or ‘re-solutions. Epistemic communities relating to measurement should thus play an ongoing role in the deliberations and dialogue relating to the policy agenda.

Responsibility - *That government is not the most appropriate/effective vehicle for promoting wellbeing*

There are a number of elements to this argument. One is effectively an argument in principle against ‘big government’. This is a position taken, for example, by those who argue that the market is generally a more effective way of allocating scarce resources. Others take a similar position about ‘big government’ but may argue for a greater role for societal groups in promoting wellbeing – here there is a clear link between the wellbeing agenda and the Big Society a notion also closely associated with Cameron. A third position is that wellbeing is best left to the individual. A final variation here is an emphasis on improving institutions as a way of facilitating individual and collective notions of the good life, rather than direct policy interventions (Frey and Stutzer 2007).

Some of the positions relate to metatheoretical predispositions that, by their very nature, cannot be refuted empirically. However, empirically, a key argument connecting these positions is the point that governments have introduced a range of policies, since the Second World War in particular, that have enhanced domains closely associated with wellbeing (education, health, welfare etc.) and yet aggregate levels of happiness have remained relatively constant. Such findings relate to the notion of the idea of the ‘hedonic treadmill’, which suggests that individuals’ expectations adapt as their income rises, leading to demands for higher incomes and welfare provision to maintain the same levels of life satisfaction (Layard 2005). A further issue is that, even if SWB data were deemed reliable, the policy implications of this would be far from clear and the policy process is far from rational, which would make it extremely difficult to target effective wellbeing interventions.

The scope of these arguments is vast and they cannot be adequately dealt with here. They illustrate fundamentally different understandings of the location of problem – for example, whether it lies at individual or societal level – and highlight arguments that are far from resolved within epistemic communities, such as the effect of the hedonic treadmill on individual wellbeing. On the latter, while there is evidence that aggregate SWB has remained constant at the aggregate level despite various government social and welfare policies, we do

not know what would have happened to this indicator in the absence of these policies: it is difficult to imagine that, for example, government involvement in improvements to health and the opening up of access to education have not positively affected human wellbeing (see also Ott 2010). Diener, Lucas and Scallan (2006) argue that research shows flawed assumptions in the hedonic treadmill argument; notably individuals' set points are not hedonically neutral, and individuals have different happiness set points depending on their temperaments. They also argue that these set points can change under some conditions and that the extent of change or adaptation will differ from individual to individual; some experiencing a change to their set point in light of an event, others not experiencing such a change. Subsequently they argue that research does show that interventions can have a lasting effect on people's happiness/wellbeing and that therefore there is a role for policy in light of these findings (Diener, Lucas and Scallan 2006, 305).

While we cannot address the 'what should?' question empirically, we can reflect on 'what is?' in the UK context to give some sense of the contemporary relevance and urgency of these arguments. The evidence is that, to date, government has done little more than begin to collect SWB data with a view to this possibly informing policy in a very gradual and partial way – other indicators beyond the wellbeing agenda (e.g., on growth and employment) remain paradigmatic in policy terms and, even within the measurement agenda, 'personal wellbeing' constitutes one domain out of ten in the ONS programme. As such, UK government has done little to promote wellbeing in public policy other than collect data and conduct some exploratory initiatives within the UK administration. Of course, this may prove more significant longer term and it is not entirely clear whether the agenda implies an extension of government activity:

'Now, of course, you can't legislate for fulfillment or satisfaction, but I do believe that government has the power to help improve well-being, and I'm not alone in that belief...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. That's why I reject the criticism that government policy simply has no role in this area.' (David Cameron 2010).

However, it is also possible that the current focus on wellbeing is more of a rhetorical shift by politicians and policy-makers – the former seeking a new set of indicators that might be

improved on while the ‘old’ ones (on the economy) are difficult to improve; the latter responding by repackaging existing policy ideas and practices under this new heading. Moreover, given the centrality of Cameron to UK developments, it is unclear what will happen to the agenda once he is no longer PM.

Understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem implies a role for government, but does not suggest that the governments can ‘fix’ the problem – by its nature the problem cannot be fixed. However, governments would be viewed as part of the problem because of their impact on various domains of wellbeing (economy, health, education etc.) and thus be involved in framing the response. Here it is important to note that this argument relates to wellbeing, drawing on the UK case, and that some of the concerns expressed around the role of government are more properly focused on the pursuit of happiness specifically. In short, understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem does not point to a particular direction in which governments should move either in terms of specific policies or through more or less intervention, but that governments are inevitably part of the problem and thus the solution.

***Distrust** - That politicians will be inclined to manipulate data and thus cannot be trusted with wellbeing data*

This argument is grounded in a general and growing distrust of politics and politicians and has been heightened in the UK recently by expenses and other scandals involving MPs, although increasing public distrust of politicians is a broader phenomenon (Hay, 2007). It assumes that politicians either promote self-interest or special interests rather than the democratic will or the public good. As such, there is little point in developing datasets on wellbeing to guide public policies when political actors are driven by different motivations. Moreover, some would argue that the nature of wellbeing data presents a more sinister opportunity for unscrupulous politicians to deliberately misuse data for political ends. For example:

‘Happiness research also fails to provide a rule about the scope and limitations of government intervention in the private sphere. Should the government be allowed to prohibit the consumption of alcohol if this were to raise the population’s happiness in the long run, or should this be left to the discretion of the individuals (based on the results of happiness research)? And even more importantly: To what extent should the government be allowed to change the preferences of its citizens?’

Many current interventions might affect people's well-being in the future due to a change in preferences.' (Frey and Stutzer 2007, 9)

This latter point connects to concerns over the use of 'nudging' in relation to the wellbeing agenda. As Tomlinson and Kelly (2013, 6) note, data about how people feel and behave are valued by behavioural economists who feel this information can be used 'as part of the architecture of choice that may 'nudge' individuals towards better consumer and lifestyle choices, whether consciously or unconsciously.' Given that the current UK government created a Behavioural Insights Team (also known as the 'nudge unit') for this purpose, such concerns about the connection between governments seeking to 'nudge' people towards wellbeing have some foundation.

The general point about the motivations of politicians cannot be proven or disproven empirically. However, we note that the discourse of cynicism that surrounds contemporary politics pushes politicians to risk-averse, lowest common denominator decisions that can stifle innovation and policy progress. It is increasingly difficult for politicians to think 'outside of the box' and develop distinct positions. Such reluctance feeds public scepticism towards politicians who are 'all the same' and 'won't give a straight answer', thus contributing to a downwardly spiralling relationship between publics and their elected representatives. As such, it is important that we at least challenge this 'default' setting that 'politicians can't be trusted', where we have some basis to do so. Here we focus on the motivations of David Cameron who, while obviously not representative on this issue, is nevertheless a key actor.

Our interviews with individuals close to the policy process in the UK – from across parties and within the civil service and non-governmental organisations – provided a range of views on why Cameron has pursued this agenda. In the sceptical view, there is a persuasive story of Cameron advocating wellbeing when trying to re-brand the Conservative Party in 2006 to make it more electorally appealing. However, this story has less resonance when trying to explain his high-profile position soon after becoming Prime Minister, apparently advocating the agenda against the advice of senior colleagues and risking a media backlash, which he duly received. So the sceptical view continues that, once in office, wellbeing offered a useful narrative to try to divert the public from the deteriorating economic conditions and cuts to public services. We can understand this position but feel there is also value in an alternative view expressed by some Cameron supporters and opponents alike – that his support for the agenda is at least partly informed by his values and intellectual

interests. Interviewees referred to personal/family experiences that might have shaped his values in this respect, others to Cameron having been influenced by his close advisor, Steve Hilton, and others to philosophical underpinnings shaped while studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics and Oxford University. As noted above, individual motivations can be ‘proven’ empirically, but we have no reason to doubt that even if there were instrumental reasons behind Cameron’s support they were to some degree accompanied by a degree of belief in the agenda.

However, we are not suggesting by any means that politicians should be ‘trusted’ with data to the extent that there is not close scrutiny and clear lines of accountability. Trust is central to the validity of wellbeing measurement and policy. Understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem emphasises this point: ‘In such fields of ill-defined and hence ill-definable solutions, the set of feasible plans of action relies on realistic judgement, the capability to appraise “exotic” ideas and on the amount of trust and credibility between planner and clientele that will lead to the conclusion, “OK let’s try that”’ (Rittel and Webber 1973, 164).

On the nudge agenda, we suggest that governments have long been in the business of creating ‘choice architectures’ through their policy interventions and that the alternative to ‘nudging’ in the direction of wellbeing is not ‘no nudging’: the status quo is not neutral and in the UK policy context is heavily skewed towards an economic paradigm. However, we suggest that the shift to a more explicit nudge agenda should be accompanied by greater public and political discussion and scrutiny to promote understanding and consensus on the types of nudges that governments might use. However, while we recognise the dangers inherent in the nudge agenda and argue for appropriate caution and scrutiny in relation to wellbeing and more widely, there is nothing intrinsic or inevitable in the linkage between these agendas.

As noted above, if understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem implies that there is a role for governments, then political involvement is inescapable. It is not clear from the more critical literature on this issue why data on happiness or wellbeing should be any more subject to manipulation than other data used by governments or why we should be any more concerned about manipulation of this data than other data (e.g., economic, health). But again, understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem cautions against over-reliance on data and this would encourage close scrutiny of how data is interpreted and used by politicians.

Distraction - That the pursuit of wellbeing by government will lead to government failing to address other concerns

In the present UK context, the main concern here is that a focus on wellbeing would distract government from a focus on the economy. More broadly, there is a concern that a focus on wellbeing might lead to the neglect of other desirable political goals. As Duncan (2010, 172) argues:

‘The fact that we want to be happy does not ineluctably lead to the conclusion that happiness-maximization should be our ethical guide. Indeed, there are respectable branches of moral philosophy that argue that it should not be, and instead principles such as freedom, human rights, duties, virtue, capabilities or fairness may be more relevant.’

It is easy to see how this position is taken in response to arguments by Layard, suggesting that ‘Happiness should become the goal of policy’ (Layard 2005, 145- 157).

In general terms there are good arguments advanced about potential ‘distraction’ effects when the focus is happiness, but these arguments speak less effectively to a multidimensional wellbeing agenda. As noted above, there is some consensus among statisticians on the domains that constitute wellbeing, but contentious issues to be resolved about the relative value attributed to different domains and how these might be emphasised differently by politicians with different value structures (e.g., freedom vs. equality): such contention is inherent to the wickedness of wellbeing. There may be a tendency in UK policy circles to employ SWB as a shorthand for the broader agenda and Austin (2014) has referred to ‘happiness’ as potentially hegemonic within wellbeing discourse in the UK. This is clearly an issue that requires vigilance and close scrutiny if distraction concerns are to be avoided.

To date though, there is little empirical evidence that the collection of SWB data in the UK and the nascent policy interest is about to squeeze out other concerns: the focus of politics and policy remains very firmly on the economy. Indeed, in launching the ONS programme of work, Cameron (2010) stated: ‘let me be very, very clear: growth is the essential foundation of all our aspirations... at this time I am absolutely clear that our most urgent priority is to get the economy moving, to create jobs, to spread opportunity for everyone’. The ONS wellbeing measurement programme sits alongside long established statistical functions and it is these - particularly relating to economic growth and unemployment - that continue to dominate the interest of the media, public and politicians.

On distraction, understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem emphasises the multidimensional nature of the issue and draws attention to the important distinction between

happiness/SWB and wellbeing: the distraction concerns are stronger when addressed towards the former. However, the concerns relating to the wider wellbeing agenda are not irrelevant. For some, initiatives to measure wellbeing and related policy experiments are part of a broader agenda to redefine the notion of societal progress. This would challenge and ultimately replace the dominant economic paradigm that, critics believe, fetishizes economic growth and overlooks other important dimensions – social, environmental and personal wellbeing. In this sense, distraction may not be the most appropriate term but it speaks to an attempt to shift the political and policy focus away from the status quo. Understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem emphasises that these issues are about value choices and political action: ‘...in the pursuit of a wicked planning problem, a host of potential solutions arise...It is then a matter of *judgement*¹⁰ whether one should try to enlarge the available set or not. And it is, of course, a matter of judgement which of these solutions should be pursued and implemented’ (Rittel and Weber 1973, 164).

Moving forward

Thus far we have argued that the challenge of wellbeing should be understood as a wicked problem and that this might help us to steer a course through debates on the appropriate role for government in this area. Here we consider whether the literature on wicked problems offers any further insights on how the issue might be taken forward. The literature makes a number of potentially useful observations.

Conklin (2005, 9) suggests that the first step in dealing with a wicked problem is ‘to recognize its nature’. Similarly, Head (2008, 103) suggests that while it is not clear that labelling a problem as ‘wicked’ will readily help solve it, this approach ‘might help to generate wider understanding of strategies available for managing and coping with complex and chaotic issues.’ It is generally observed in the literature that as there is no ‘root cause’ of wickedness, but always a number of contributory factors, there is ‘no single best approach to tackling them’ (Head and Alford 2013, 5). Moreover, there is consensus that there are ‘no quick fixes’ and that ‘more knowledge, even if well targeted, is never sufficient...’ (Head 2008, 109), and, that while conclusive solutions are very rare, it ‘is possible to frame partial, provisional courses of action against wicked problems’ (Head and Alford 2013, 2). Similarly, Conklin (2007, 5) observes that rather than solve wicked problems the response is to develop

¹⁰ Emphasis in original.

a shared understanding of the problem and potential solutions, noting that ‘the objective of the work is coherent action, not final solution’.

Head (2008, 105) suggests that in some cases ‘the key challenge is to unpack and discuss entrenched differences’, perhaps through a process of mediated dialogue, to explore common ground about long term goals and more immediate steps for joint action. Durant and Legge (2006, 310) emphasise the importance of ‘reflexivity, learning, and meaningful stakeholder involvement in the deliberations of public agencies’ and suggest that deliberative models may be more attuned to dealing with wicked problems than more managerialist ones. On this theme, Head (2008, 102) emphasises that importance of deliberative processes recognising the perspectives and values that ‘frame’ the definition of the problem and in providing a quite different approach from the ‘top-down imposition of technical solutions, or from expertise-based solutions arising from the growth in empirical knowledge.’

However, the definition of the problem tends to imply a solution. For example, if stakeholder disagreement is at the core of the issue, then dialogue is an implied way forward. By contrast, if the core issue is lack of knowledge, then further research and data collection is implied (Head and Alford 2013, 5). In the case of wellbeing, while we may be nearing consensus over measurement, both stakeholder disagreement and lack of knowledge characterise the policy aspect, leaving the field some way from resolution. In dealing with these issues, the emphasis in the wicked problems literature on legitimate processes is crucial and speaks to a number of the dilemmas raised above.

Conclusions

As we suggested in our opening section, it is very difficult to adjudicate on the many arguments surrounding happiness and wellbeing – they originate from different disciplines and often from different metatheoretical foundations. The distinction between ‘wicked’ and ‘tame’ problems provides a means to steer through these arguments with a clear reference point; from which it can be deduced that wellbeing is not the kind of problem that can be solved but, at best, only temporarily re-solved. Understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem points us very clearly to the conclusion that the solution to this, as to other wicked problems is ‘not true-or-false, but good or bad’ (Rittel and Webber 1973 162).

While we note some consensus in measurement issues, there are intractable disputes in relation to other aspects of the wellbeing agenda that depend on how the issue is framed and that will be characterised by value dissensus. A number of suggestions for ways forward have been identified from the wicked problems literature. An additional way forward may be

the construction of a ‘meta-frame’ (Schon and Rein 1994) that builds on the conflicting frame of reference of key stakeholders. As Head and Alford (2013, 13) suggest, depending on the scale of the issue ‘it may be feasible for policy designers to involve the antagonists themselves in constructing a shared narrative that recognizes multiple voices, teases out the implications of these value preferences, and seeks to resolve conflicts’. Alternatively, the way forward may be for policy-makers to ‘muddle through’. In this view, there is no need for policy-makers to clarify their guiding values and objectives as a starting point (Lindblom, 1959). Rather, empirical inquiry and selection of goals and values happen simultaneously.

Our reflection on empirical developments in the UK suggest that while there are valid concerns expressed over the relationship between government and the promotion of wellbeing measurements and policies, it is important not to overstate the nature, extent and pace of change taking place. At this stage, developments are tentative and experimental, and there is a long way to go before there are likely to be any significant policy impacts – but this remains possible in the longer term if political interest is sustained. As with the 1960s and 1970s there are diverse forces seeking new ‘direction-finding instruments’ for society and the field of narratives challenging the ‘God of GDP’ paradigm has become crowded. Concept such as sustainability, green growth, and inclusive growth are just a few attracting interest alongside happiness, wellbeing and quality of life. Whether wellbeing or quality of life can provide the meta-narrative to challenge the GDP paradigm is far from certain: such a change could require a political redefinition of what matters from ‘growth’ to ‘progress’ and a process of consensus-building to ‘re-envision what was institutionalized over the last 65 years’ in terms of dominant economic indicators (Costanza et al 2009, 23).

As Head (2008, 114) suggests, understanding a problem as wicked requires us to recognise ‘two ongoing truths of public policy – the inherent nature of decision making and the impossibility of resolving all problems through government activity’. At the same, it reminds us that such problems are inevitably political and, as such, there is need for caution. As Scott (2012, 4) argued: ‘quality of life and wellbeing have been mobilised in different ways, by different groups, to support different agendas over time. This makes it important to explore what and whose values are represented, which accounts dominate, what is their impact and on whom’. Understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem underlines this point and steers us towards deliberation and scrutiny as central to the agenda. Above all perhaps, understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem cautions us against expecting to find a panacea, but can take us beyond irresolvable disputes by pointing to the need for pragmatic and legitimate government action.

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