Placing Wellbeing: Anthropological Perspectives on Wellbeing and Place

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Introduction

Wellbeing enjoys a renewed interest in policy and academic circles, as demonstrated by the proliferation of grey and academic literature on the topic (e.g. Stiglitz et al. 2009; ONS 2012; Cabinet Office et al. 2013), and its central position in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (see, e.g., Haddad and Jolly 2013). While this attention is both positive and necessary, it has also brought to the fore the problematic and contested nature of the term which remains ill-defined, under-conceptualised, and measured and applied in different ways for different purposes and in different contexts. Recently, and especially as it applies to policy, wellbeing has been considered as a measurable index based on Euro-American practices and discourses that can be universalised, with little attention to the constitutive interactions between wellbeing, place, and culture.

In this thematic issue we contend that an undermining of place has produced a lack of appreciation for the role that culture plays in forming and informing different discourses, understandings, and practices of wellbeing, as well as wellbeing scholarship itself. This introduction will first outline the emergence of wellbeing as a powerful scholarly and policy concept, to then review the mainstream approaches and understandings of wellbeing. We will then move on to address some of the main limitations in these understandings, and will end by highlighting the contributions of the papers in this thematic issue to the wellbeing scholarship.

Wellbeing Research in Context

A review of the existing literature from different disciplinary positions reveals three biases that complicate our understanding of wellbeing: (1) an overwhelming predominance of psychology and economics approaches; (2) an over-preoccupation with measuring wellbeing; and (3) an undermining of the role of place in wellbeing due to the privileging of studies and perspectives from Anglophone and high-income countries. In what follows we engage further with these three issues before moving on to discussing the papers in this issue.

While there is a multidisciplinary engagement with wellbeing, the scholarship on the topic is overwhelmingly dominated by psychology and economics. The prominence of such disciplines in this research is problematic. In psychology, the debate has evolved around the distinction between *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* approaches to wellbeing. Hedonic and eudaimonic philosophies 'have given rise to different but overlapping paradigms of empirical enquiry' (Carlisle et al. 2009: 1557; see also Waterman 1993) that have led to different understandings of what makes 'a good life'. Hedonic approaches focus on the pursuit and experience of pleasure or happiness, while eudaimonic understandings of wellbeing look at the dynamic processes that enable and re-enable a sense of self-fulfilment, meaning and purpose (Deci and Ryan 2008). Eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing are emerging also in economics, fuelled by findings related to 'the paradox of affluence' (Easterlin 1974). The paradox posits that while increases in income might have a positive effect on the subjective wellbeing of people who are very poor in economic terms, after a certain threshold material comfort does not mean a happier life (cf. Jackson 2010). The paradox also applies at the level of nations, as economic growth does not bring increased wellbeing beyond the levels of necessary material subsistence. This has led to a more recent line of research leading the

tendency away from policy understandings of wellbeing as welfare (e.g. economic/material wellbeing) and towards the acknowledgment that economic growth and material wealth should be seen as the means to a flourishing life rather than as an end in itself. This has led to calls to go beyond economic measures of social progress, and also to wellbeing becoming a central governing policy concept (e.g., Jackson 2010; Max-Neef 2010; Bina and Vaz 2011).

The main difference between the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches can be condensed in the question of whether wellbeing is in the pursuit of happiness or in the happiness of the pursuit. The answer to this question is far from straightforward as it is linked to another problematic area of debate in wellbeing scholarship: whether wellbeing can and/or should be measured in objective or subjective terms. This, in turn, is related to the choice of research methods, as wellbeing research in psychology and economics draws on evidence that is mainly generated through surveys and experimental approaches (see, e.g., Huppert et al. 2005; cf. Carlisle et al. 2009). The methodological preference of these disciplines addresses one of their major preoccupations: to identify the variables that affect (enhance or diminish) wellbeing through the use of pre-existing measurements. Yet, by imposing an intellectual order upon the particular group subject of study, such methods 'cannot allow a steady unearthing of the layers of meaning attached to daily life' (Herbert 2000: 556). As a result, wellbeing has been defined predominantly as the outcome of a particular set of measures, which has led to wellbeing research focusing mainly on the variables that may affect wellbeing rather than on its very nature (Christopher 1999). These characteristics evidence that there has been little attention paid to alternative notions, practices, and discourses of wellbeing in 'other' places and geo-cultural contexts. Little attention has also been placed on the role that both culture and place play both in informing different discourses, understandings, and practices of wellbeing, and in shaping the scholarship on the topic.

An ethnographic attention to both culture and place reveals the problems of trying to measure wellbeing, as concentrating on universal indexes may be done in detriment of other ways of knowing and understanding human wellbeing practices. Indeed, anthropologists are showing the inherently ethnocentric nature of such methodological instruments, and thus their inability to compare different cultural contexts (see, e.g. Matthews and Izquierdo 2009). Even the laudable attempts at cross-cultural statistical comparisons have been unable to overcome the fact that at the very core of such comparisons lie Euro-American conceptions of wellbeing. These conceptions are taken as the reference against which to measure and/or understand wellbeing in other contexts (e.g. Diener, Kahneman, and Helliwell 2010; Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Wierzbica 2004; also Colby 2009). This raises the complex issue of the role of culture in these practices.

Both culture and place have come relatively recently to debates on wellbeing. The studies that have looked at the role of culture in wellbeing are few in number and are most are conceptually limited as they either equate culture with country (see, e.g., Diener 2009; Kasser 2011), or convey a notion of place that defines and treats it as a static and given container of experiences that influence subjective or objective wellbeing (Fleuret and Atkinson 2007). Recent studies, mainly from human and cultural geography, have started to approach place in relation to wellbeing as relational. That is, in terms of how people perceive and make place through relationships, activities, emotions, imaginations (see Atkinson, Fuller, and Painter 2012b). However, such attempts still address mainly the medical and or psychological dimensions of wellbeing (Conradson 2012 and, by its own admission, predominantly focuses on high income Anglophone settings (cf. Aitkins et al. 2012a; Fleuret and Aitkinson 2007).

This issue
Anthropology's explicit engagement with wellbeing debates is recent, compared to that of

other disciplines, but critically necessary, as one of our collaborators has argued elsewhere (Thin 2009; see also Corsin Jimenez 2007; Mathews and Izquierdo 2008; Sarmiento Barletti 2011; Fischer 2014). Ethnographically-informed anthropological engagements bring to wellbeing scholarship evidence that there is no single way of understanding or even pursuing wellbeing, but a multiplicity of "wellbeings" (see Mathews and Izquierdo 2009 for a thorough review). In this thematic issue we build on this by offering conceptual and ethnography-based analyses of wellbeing that respond to the key role that place plays in human existence and sociality (see, e.g. Casey 1996; Dirlik 1999; Escobar 2001).

The articles we include here were presented at a panel at the 2014 conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists called "The place of place in wellbeing scholarship". Each in their own way, they our articles interrogate conventional approaches and understandings of wellbeing; set their analytical focus on the concept of place and place-based imaginaries as they relate to these practices; and highlight that place-specificity allows for a different and more creative reading of wellbeing. As a set, our articles address recent critical engagements from different disciplinary positions within wellbeing scholarship that (a) call for a notion of place that is more than 'the context in which wellbeing as an outcome emerges' (Atkinson, Fuller, and Painter 2012b: 8; see also Napier et al. 2014); that (b) 'position place as inherently relational in both its production and its influence' (Atkinson, Fuller, and Painter 2012b: 3; see also Schwanen and Atkinson 2015); and that (c) pay attention to the role that place-making (through relationships, activities, emotions, and imaginations) plays in people's sense of wellbeing (see Atkinson, Fuller and Painter 2012b for a review of this literature).

Our engagement is motivated by positions like Dirlik's (1999) and Casey's (1996), who have demonstrated the disregard held in modern theory and social life for place. The importance of place in different pursuits of wellbeing is emphasized in the papers by Thin, and by McCourt, Rayment, Rance, and Sandall. Based on three different ethnographic examples of late-life place appreciation, Thin's article proposes that wellbeing is the result of the lifelong interactions that people have with places. His contribution invites us to expand current discussions on wellbeing by focusing on how people move, attach, and detach from places as they seek to enhance their wellbeing. McCourt, Rayment, Rance, and Sandall, centre their analysis on Midwifery Units in England, which have been intended specifically as locations to promote a sense of wellbeing by seeking to have a therapeutic effect on babies and birthing women. Their article reveals that the focus on the place of birth that led to the introduction of these Units has also had a positive influence on the wellbeing of the midwifery staff. Thus, these therapeutic places act positively towards the birthing experience because of their design, but also because they enhance practitioners' ability to care.

Our engagement with place has a second motivation. We argue that the undermining of place in wellbeing research has produced a lack of appreciation for the role that culture plays in forming and informing different discourses, understandings, and practices of both wellbeing, and the scholarship that theorizes, measures, and analyses it. Following Dirlik's (1999) and Escobar's (2001) concerns, we write with the conviction that ignoring place when engaging with categories of social analysis does nothing but support the subordination of the local to the global. The papers by Miles-Watson and Sarmiento Barletti present alternative notions and practices of wellbeing from non-Euro-American social contexts. Miles-Watson offers an account of the multiple ways in which the Tara Devi temple in Shimla, northern India, acts upon the wellbeing of locals. His article reveals the complexities in people's relations to these places and how they are constantly remaking them. This, Miles-Watson argues, highlights the complex relationships between humans and non-humans that are key for a community's wellbeing. Sarmiento Barletti also engages with the connection between wellbeing and human-non-human relations in his exploration of indigenous Ashaninka people's pursuit of

kametsa asaiki ('living well together') in the Peruvian Amazon. The article focuses on his collaborators' experience of Peru's civil war (1980-2000) and post-war reconstruction agenda, which heavily relies on the extraction of natural resources. This context has been experienced as a continuum of violence that is destructive to the socio-natural relations with other-than-human beings through which Ashaninka people pursue *kametsa asaiki*. Sarmiento Barletti's contribution underlines the need for the scholarly and policy literature on the concept to recognise the subtleties of people's everyday lived experience, and how they inform local discourses and practices of wellbeing

Ultimately, we are less concern with definitions of wellbeing (or indeed place), than with offering critical snapshots of the different forms that wellbeing takes when approached from place-based perspectives. Our articles are expressions of the ample possibilities that an attention to place opens up for thinking creatively about wellbeing. We engage with place as part of a project that aims at generating new contexts from which to 'think otherwise' about social policy, politics, the creation of knowledge, and, ultimately, existence. Wellbeing is inextricably embedded in all of them.

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