Commentary: Wellbeing, Space and Society

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The launch of a new journal is always exciting. But the launch of a new journal that explicitly connects the concepts of wellbeing, space and society could not be more welcome. As the editors prepare this inaugural edition for publication, we are coming to the end of an exceptional year of pandemic in which the relationships between these three titular concepts have been raised to the forefront of everyone's awareness. Many of us across the World have experienced dramatic shifts to the spaces in which we enact our everyday lives as the possibilities for movement globally, nationally, and even locally have been closed down, or at best curtailed, both compulsorily and voluntarily. Moreover, central to this has been a reconfiguration of connection in which we are simultaneously directed to greater inward looking attention through technologies of the self and greater outward looking exploration through technologies of the digital world. In discussion to date of these short-term impacts of the pandemic, thinking about wellbeing has been writ large, building from its existing contemporary status as an emergent dominant concept into a place-holder for a range of quite serious concerns about the medium-term aftermath of the pandemic's impacts. There is already growing awareness of the likely longer-term impacts of lockdown, isolation and domestic tensions on mental health and of economic recession and interrupted education on life-course prospects. In response, the internet now abounds with new sites of advice and practice for maintaining our mental and physical health. Alongside the exhortations for strategies to manage and support our own wellbeing during times of restricted movement, public health epidemiology has monitored the differentiated impacts of the virus by age, gender, occupation and ethnicity revealing and foregrounding other pre-existing and entrenched inequalities within and between societies. The short-term impacts from how we have responded to crisis spatially, socially, physically and emotionally are likely to spill into future practices and outcomes for a broad based consideration of societal wellbeing. How timely, then, is this inaugural issue offering a collection of papers that engage the social and spatial relations around wellbeing explicitly in reference to themes of inequality, change and retreat in concert with a range of relevant spatial and conceptual tools.

The body of spatially informed research on wellbeing most often mirrors and covers a conventional divide across the social sciences. On the one hand, studies draw on large quantitative data-sets to map distribution, differentiation and social associations; on the other hand, research focuses on the processes of how such patterns are experienced and produced through contextual and temporal relations that are variously cultural, economic, political, affective and discursive. The inaugural volume reflects this breadth of work on wellbeing and provides a treasure trove of intellectually stimulating riches from which, in this brief and personal commentary, I will draw out three that have caught my own attention – variance, mediation and ambivalence.

The first of these comes from the careful, meticulous and sophisticated engagements in this issue for understanding and assessing processes of change and *variance*. These studies all flag what will surely be a central theme for this new journal, that patterns of association or difference in the potential factors influencing wellbeing have to be understood through a lens of context-dependency if we want to generate insightful and useful results that avoid either over-simplified platitudes or a glib invocation of complexity. While change and variance infuse all the papers to some extent, the inaugural issue gifts us three papers exploring inequality, variance and change in wellbeing through analyses of existing large data-sets at different spatial and temporal scales of analysis: international and cross-sectional (Lee et al.); within country small areas at a three year interval (Curtis et al.); within country specific disaster site also at a three year interval (Shibo et al.). Despite very different data-sets, different settings and different research questions, a common thread to all is how the specificities of context, of time and place, inform how constellations of factors shape and deepen inequalities in wellbeing. In the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Shibo et al. unpick the relations between the experiences of the disaster, different kinds of social support and mental ill-health and highlight the limited role of social support for those dealing with the most serious forms of damage and loss. Those already experiencing the worst material losses of property and income are also the least amenable to benefits through increased social support. This has implications for post-disaster interventions and the longer-term generation of post-disaster patters of inequality in wellbeing. In a similar vein, Lee et al. unpick variance around the averages of life satisfaction, national income and income inequality at national levels and find that the assumption that low GDP together with a high Gini coefficient of inequality would explain greater variance in wellbeing is not supported. They emphasise the importance of understanding context-dependent mechanisms and particularly the underlying vulnerabilities of countries that lack resources to respond to events or stressors that may impact negatively on population wellbeing. Curtis et al. take this type of discussion into a local comparative analysis of medium scale small areas in the United Kingdom of changes in wellbeing over time in relation to a measures of disadvantage or 'adverse context.' They demonstrate that, although national wellbeing improves over the time period, in those areas of 'adverse context' improvements in well-

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being were significantly lower. These three studies, in different ways, begin to draw out the pathways and constellations of factors through which spatial and social inequalities in wellbeing are produced, maintained and deepened.

The quantitative analyses of variance and inequality address the *mediation* of wellbeing, which is a theme common across all papers. This is most explicit in Shibo et al.'s 'causal mediation analysis' of how social support and social capital mediate, or not, the impacts of disaster on mental health. The collection of papers, however, introduces other ways of understanding the mediation of wellbeing. The potential benefits and harms of technological development is an increasingly common theme in wellbeing research that focuses on individual experience. The focus here on space and society brings a broader set of encounters with the intersections of place, technology and wellbeing. The papers by Robeyns and by James and Kearns both treat technology as not only a mediator of wellbeing but also as a mediator of space. In this they implicitly reference the extensive literature on globalisation and the reconfiguring of distance and place. James and Kearns document the use of social media by tourists and workers at an exclusive island resort as part of exploring the diversity in meanings and practices of isolation, privacy and connection in relation to the intentional pursuit and provision of wellbeing. Robeyns, in arguing that a capabilities approach can frame a place-sensitive understanding of wellbeing, also highlights the ways that technology mediates place-based capabilities, including an explicit reference to changes in academic practices during the pandemic. James and Kearns also demonstrate how technology may mediate how we frame and know wellbeing as they undertook a substantial part of the data-collection through virtual online methods. Framing and knowing wellbeing inform two papers that explore the mediation of wellbeing conceptually. Robeyns tackles the definitional challenges of wellbeing by drawing on the work of philosopher Alexandrova to argue that this is a debate that largely misses the point. The point, then, is that what constitutes wellbeing is of necessity always context-dependent and needs explicitly to be positioned as such. Robeyns argues that a capabilities approach enables the conceptual and practical flexibility needed to frame and encompass different engagements with wellbeing. She elaborates place-based capabilities for which place is relevant both in constituting wellbeing and in instrumentally impacting wellbeing. Robeyns complements the presentation by Andrews and Duff of new forms of contemporary capitalism within which, they argue, we again need to recognise wellbeing as both an outcome and constituent. Thinking about the work wellbeing does in or for society and its members within the contextual specificities of the relations of capital redresses an imbalance in most health-related wellbeing research which privileges wellbeing-as-outcome. Andrews and Duff further argue that how wellbeing is actively mobilised into contemporary expressions of capitalism mediates and fixes particular understandings of and policies for wellbeing to the exclusion of possible alternatives.

The duality and circularity of wellbeing as constituent and outcome, mediator and goal, is just one of many *ambivalences* inherent to the concept and practice of wellbeing. James and Kearns highlight how variations in terminology built on a prefix of 'well' reflect the ambivalent duality of wellbeing. They implicitly position wellness as a goal or end-state, albeit necessarily a temporary one. They argue that wellbeing also conveys a more static sense of state and that a dynamic conception of 'well' is better served through a new term, well-becoming. James and Kearns' point is well made regarding the need to stress the dynamic aspects and the becomingness of wellbeing, which is the central concern of their study. Nonetheless, the ambivalent duality of wellbeing as simultaneously both state and emergent process is also important to convey and may still be best served by 'being' with its connotations of both condition, agency and living. The mediations of place, social relations, capital flows or technology also show diversity and ambivalence in relation to wellbeing. Shibo et al's analysis of social support and capital in mediating disaster and wellbeing or Lee et al's analysis of the relations of national income and variance reveal the challenges of causal and explanatory analyses where certain variables are ambivalent in terms of their impacts on wellbeing. Curtis et al. make this explicit when they find remote rural areas with few social services nonetheless show greater improvements in wellbeing over time despite their lower 'adverse context'. The sometime unpredictable or ambivalent relations of wellbeing are similarly evident within James and Kearns account of the very different encounters with retreat not only between tourists and staff but within the same person, for example in relation to arrival and departure, or in relation to expectations and discovery. The study similarly discloses the circularity of wellbeing within a framing of new capitalism. The dominant, and commercialised, discourse on wellbeing promotes the benefits of getting away from the demands of work, including people and technology, which drives the choice of retreat. The study then draws out the diversity and ambivalences around how this retreat is experienced and managed, in which several of the tourists are far more socially and technologically connected than might be predicted. The key conclusion in the study is not the contribution of retreat, of disconnection, or even of an aesthetic landscape to wellbeing but rather the therapeutic value of choice and control over these. Such choice and control allow a more flexible encounter with place, technology and the discourses of wellbeing within contemporary capitalism and echo the spaces of freedom in Robeyns detailing of place-based capabilities.

The aftermath of the current pandemic will demand attentive, place-sensitive and socially nuanced research on the medium- and longer-term relations with individual and collective wellbeing to mitigate the clear inequalities in pandemic experiences and impacts. The timing of this inaugural issue means only Robeyns explicitly references the pandemic in passing, but all the papers provide important lessons, insights, approaches and conceptual tools for ensuring that the core relations of wellbeing space and society are not overlooked, simplified or subjected only to dominant formulations. The papers already available for future volumes of the journal promise further intellectual stimulation through attention to different spaces of institutions, green and built settings or online communities, through exploring the meaning making of wellbeing from culturally or life-course diverse viewpoints, and through capturing a range of exceptional and everyday wellbeing practices including moving, participating and caring. Most importantly, the focus of this new journal, on the societal and spatial relations of wellbeing, counters the dominant tendency to elevate the individual and thereby already offers one strategy to respond to the exhortation by Andrews and Duff to find intellectual fissures through which to hold on to plural meanings of wellbeing and alternative propositions of how to be well in the world. The launch of this new journal of '*Wellbeing, Space and Society*', for me then, is not only exciting and welcome, but offers a space for a hopeful endeavour in confronting the challenges to wellbeing that lie ahead.