

SHOULD YOU HITCH YOUR WAGON TO WELL-BEING?

Speech to a Relate conference on relationships and well-being, St George's House, 14 September 2015

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Introduction

Thank you for inviting me today. This is a great opportunity to think hard about well-being. I hope I'll be a little controversial and make you think a bit about this fascinating topic.

I'm now a trustee of the new [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#)—a research centre that Gus O'Donnell was instrumental in getting off the ground. In my interview to be a trustee, my pitch was that I was rather sceptical about well-being, so if you want a sceptic on the board, I'm your man. And that's my perspective today.

I'm going to say a little about why well-being is being talked about so much at the moment, then try and unpick what it means. After that I'll touch on issues around measuring well-being. I'm an economist and so inevitably I see measurement as important to the progress of this agenda. I'll talk a little about some of the work we've done at NPC, and what the What Works Centre for Well-being is doing. Finally, I want to talk about the dangers of focusing on well-being. You might want to reflect on this, because the big question I want to end up with is: should the relationship sector hitch its wagon to this kind of train, or is that a mistake? Not just because it might be here today and gone tomorrow as a policy—but does it have all the right things you want?

As I said, I'm an economist and I've always had a strong desire to understand and act on evidence. Sometimes I get frustrated, particularly where I work at the moment in the social sector. Charities often take as a given that 'we're wonderful, we have heart, we're person centred' and so on. After four years at NPC I've now worked with a whole lot of them. And while such statements are undoubtedly true for many, for others it's an assertion without much proof. I've been a policy person, I've been a Treasury apparatchik—amongst other things—and we all know that money is tight. If you want to make a case and get more funding, or even get government policy to change, it's not an easy thing. There are lots of sceptics around. And there are lots of other competing demands, with people saying, 'We have the answer—if only you did this, it would transform everything'. So it's quite tricky and this is the world well-being is now throwing itself into.

Why all the hype around well-being?

Why has well-being become so big? It's been rumbling along for quite a long time. A lot of people, particularly on the environmental side, have been very unhappy with GDP. They've said, 'How can we have a set of measurements that seem to suggest that the world is getting better and better off, when we're using up our natural resources and that's not sustainable?'. So they've always been critical. Other critics have joined in who say, 'On conventional measures, the West has been getting wealthier and wealthier over the decades, but our citizens don't seem to be any happier. So something's not working in the way we measure progress.'

Within the coalition government, David Cameron made quite a big thing out of well-being and its measurement. That led to a bit of scepticism from some who asked: 'At a time when you know growth isn't going very well, do you just want people to talk about something else?'

Nevertheless, I think there is a dissatisfaction, which he reflected, with the way we're trying to understand how we're progressing in society. I think there is a feeling that there's something to do with well-being that we're not capturing.

Some commentators feel that the concept of well-being is very radical, and that it tells us something very important about capitalism and the way we organise our societies in the West. I'm going to quote [Will Davies of Goldsmiths](#) a few times. He's an academic critic of this new 'happiness and well-being' industry. Having read more of his material in preparing for this speech, it turns out that he's amazingly quotable for an academic!

He says that one of the fascinating things about well-being and the search for satisfaction is that the culture and dynamism of capitalism must keep individuals dissatisfied. We need to be dissatisfied enough so we continue to seek to find satisfaction, but not so dissatisfied that we reject or resist the system outright. So we've constantly got to be innovators and to strive for happiness. But if we ever reached happiness and well-being, we'd stop innovating and working so hard and capitalism would grind to a halt. It's interesting to think about well-being as being quite a radical concept. Perhaps that's why we've developed the concept of 'alienation' that Marxist theorists talk so much about.

What does well-being mean?

So now this concept of well-being is entering the mainstream. There was a headline last week about over-bossy parents destroying the 'well-being' of their children. I wondered whether they'd have used a different word had it been a few years ago. And of course, like all good concepts, it turns out people don't know exactly what they are talking about when they say 'well-being'—and often they mean different things.

We've found it's a misunderstood and contentious term in a lot of the work we've done at NPC, particularly around measuring the well-being of children between 11–16. In the measurement world well-being tends to be about things like resilience and self confidence. But it tends to be used in the general debate rather more broadly, and is often used interchangeably with 'happiness'. That's quite an interesting place to pause and consider whether it makes any sense.

There are philosophers who love writing about this, so it all gets very complicated. Briefly, some people say equating happiness and well-being is wrong, because happiness is something you can have for a second and then it's gone, whereas well-being is something that's more stable: it's a state of mind. Others say happiness is something to do with your overall emotional condition, while well-being is about what benefits a person and makes their life go well for them. And then you have debates on timescale: is your well-being okay if it lasts for just a month, or does it need to be for a year or three years? That matters conceptually and philosophically—and also when we're looking to try and measure it.

There are also debates about whether well-being is a group phenomenon or an individual thing. That matters, as they lead to different approaches as to how to maximise well-being in total without going down completely wrong paths. Underlying this is a debate about what it is that makes us feel good, and how to achieve well-being itself.

I think a key issue, not least for those interested in relationships, is whether the obsession with well-being is because we love well-being and want people to feel good, or whether it is its links to other things that we want. Things like reduced health spending, higher productivity in the workplace, less likelihood of being out of work. That's a fundamental difference: are we trying to maximise this thing for itself, or does it lead to other outcomes, many of which result in lower public expenditure? And of course, if it's really about prevention and early-intervention, then it join other movements that have been perhaps a bit too long on promise and a bit short on evidence.

Lastly, is well-being a nice thing to have? So, all things being equal, it would be good to have well-being as well. Or is it a fundamental challenge to the way we think about governance, society, policy and so on? Again people take very different views on that.

So well-being is a bit of a vague concept, which is one of the reasons there are difficulties in measuring it. If you can't somehow measure it, I don't think it will have the impact and cutting edge many hope it will have. For a long time people thought you couldn't measure it. Can you really measure happiness?

Some great minds said yes you can, simply by asking people, 'How do you feel?' and calling it 'subjective well-being'. Of course it's a bit more complicated than that. There's a debate about whether this is a well-founded concept at all and whether you should be doing anything with the answers people give in surveys like this. The [Legatum report on well-being](#) discusses this, and whether subjective well-being is too fuzzy and ill-defined a concept.

A common well-being metric?

All this makes it hard to imagine that there will or could ever be a common metric of well-being. Many people like to make an analogy with health, where [Quality Adjusted Life Years \(Qalys\)](#) have become that common metric. To some extent, different approaches to health can be ranked on their efficacy and cost-effectiveness. Then we can decide what health interventions to allow and pay for by choosing the best ones.

I have my doubts about that in health and even bigger doubts about the idea of doing this with well-being—and then finding universal solutions to raising that well-being. For example, the well-being of an older person in a rural area with no family, is a very different concept to someone who lives in the inner city, with an extended family around them, and so on. The concepts are so different that to try and reduce them to a single metric is dangerous—and of course the relevant policy to improve well-being will be different too.

A lot of work is going on to try and establish a common metric—not least via the What Works centre. People get really excited about the different kinds of methodologies and there are all sorts of problems with saying that a particular thing gives us a 'dose' of well-being. The Legatum report points to a simple example: it's very nice to have a glass of water here on the table next to me and it probably adds to my well-being that I could have a sip if I needed to. But it would be amazingly important to my well-being to have that glass of water if I hadn't had anything to drink all day and was stuck in the desert. So these things are entirely conditional, which makes the whole methodology complex.

Some have tried to bring the high end of evaluation methodology to measuring well-being. Despite running an organisation that spends its life trying to get people to evaluate things, I'm very sceptical about Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) in social policy. I'm not sure whether they really tell you much and, in particular, whether you can scale an intervention that has had a decent RCT. RCTs could be more of a problem in the well-being world, because we're not quite sure of the metrics themselves.

The Legatum report suggests that those who really feel we will reach a common metric believe we'll be able to decide between the well-being benefits of the pound spent on health intervention as opposed to getting someone back to work. I think that's very unlikely and is starting to feel like comparing apples and pears.

Another related approach is to try and use well-being to measure things that have always been hard to measure. And some have attempted to use sophisticated econometric methods to get there.

Potentially we can identify the values, in well-being terms, of a youth centre or going to the theatre and so on, and then monetary values can be put on them. This has been attempted. The Department for Media, Culture and Sport has used this approach in the past, and I've come across charities trying to use it—often based on work like that of the [Housing Association's Charitable Trust \(HACT\)](#). One of the interesting things with this is that you end up with extraordinarily high values for public and non-market goods. Will Davis argues convincingly that this is

because, when we're asked the amount of money we would need to be compensated if we weren't allowed to go to the theatre once a month—which is essentially the methodology being used—we come up with some phenomenally high numbers. That's because money is such a weak correlate of happiness when compared to social and public goods. It often takes extraordinarily large monthly payments to compensate us for the non-market goods we enjoy. That's quite a criticism of this methodology.

Where might all this focus on well-being take us?

Will it take us into new areas? There has definitely been a new emphasis on mental health in recent times—at least rhetorically—and that's been a very good thing. [Richard Layard](#), who has written a lot about happiness and well-being, has pushed mental health strongly. His argument is: since we know from surveys that people living with mental illness are some of the least happy, we should really focus on them. Since we know there are some therapies that work, then we should get on with them. Richard's ideas can be quite controversial within the mental health and psychotherapy sectors, but they've been positive in adding to the argument that the government should be doing more on mental health.

A focus on well-being should also lead to a lot more focus on the way that communities work. There's lots of evidence that the relationships we create matter enormously to our well-being. So it should mean more emphasis on community facilities and spaces where people can come together voluntarily. It should also raise the importance of planning for good, mixed neighbourhoods and cities. I must admit I don't see much progress on any of that at present.

Although I am a little sceptical about using well-being to value intangible things, in some places the concept of well-being can help us here. When I was a young economist I worked on forestry—although I still don't know much about trees! But the thinking showed me that forests had a value even if no one visited them: they had what the literature now calls 'an existence value'. We feel better just knowing the forest is there. This kind of thinking should matter to policy makers.

And, of course, the other area well-being should help push up the league table of policy concerns is relationships.

The What Works Centre for Well-being I'm now involved in is mainly funded by Public Health England. Some other government departments have chipped in a little bit and the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) has funded some of the academic programmes that are feeding evidence into it. The Centre, like some of the other What Works centres, is trying to synthesise what we know, as well as to commission new work and evaluations where they can afford to. To start with, they're focusing on measuring and evaluating well-being around work and adult learning, on community well-being—which I think is where relationships come in—and also on culture and sport.

At NPC we end up working a lot on well-being. Many charities, whatever they say, are really trying to improve the well-being of people. They find it very difficult to evidence that and to get that funded, so sometimes have to say, 'Well, actually what we really do is reduce the number of NEETS', or something like that. [We've designed a tool](#) to help charities measure the well-being of children from 11–16, which uses well-tested and validated questionnaires. Organisations like the Outward Bound Trust and various schools use it and I think they find it helpful. For instance, they can investigate whether some of their projects or classes are doing better than others in terms of well-being, and can reflect upon that. And at NPC, we can now aggregate the data from the several thousand young people that have been assessed. That not only gives baseline data to compare individual organisations against, but also allows us to see what's happening in aggregate. In common with other surveys, it shows that for that age group—and particularly for girls—[there's a real fall-off in well-being over time](#). That's both interesting and disturbing.

What are the dangers of a well-being focus?

If those are the advantages of this new focus on well-being, what about its dangers? I think it's worth thinking a little bit about this before we throw ourselves headlong into the concept.

One set of people is worried that by putting that concept so high up into our policy objectives that we will be 'coerced' into being happy. An ex-colleague of mine, [Vicky Pryce](#), has said we may be moving to a position where 'being miserable is no longer socially acceptable'. There's this whole sense that happiness and well-being implies we ought to be dynamic, jolly, up for it and resilient. And we are failures if we don't fit that pattern. To many that feels rather uncomfortable.

More subtly, some fear a well-being focus leads us into the 'nudge' world of behavioural economics and change. Traditionally the line was that we all have very diverse preferences, and that what government tries to do is take them all as a given and see if we can make a world that works for all of us. The fear is that an objective of maximising our well-being encourages policy makers to think, 'Well why don't we try and change peoples preferences and then it's all much easier?'. Some people find that a little worrying and a bit 'Big Brother'. Even more so, when some academics—like [Andrew Oswald](#)—get quite excited that we can use bio markers and measurements of bits of our brain activity to see how our well-being is progressing in real time.

I think you also get concerns that within health, a well-being focus may lead to the view that the problems are often about individual and psychological issues—and lead to things like cognitive behavioural therapy. This then takes you away from a more social model of public health. But if the only reason we need resilience and help to secure our well-being is because of the social, economic, and environmental factors we face, why don't we change *them* rather than trying to *adapt* to them?

A related danger is that the well-being focus may take attention away from inequality of income and other tangible assets. Richard Layard argues that because a small sum of money gives more happiness to those on lower income than those on higher ones, it backs up the concept of redistribution. But if we found that the poor were pretty happy and the rich deeply unhappy—for all sorts of reasons—does this really mean that policy shouldn't worry about the poor?

So there are some big interesting concepts at play, and they centre around concerns that we're shifting between causes and symptoms of unhappiness and low well-being, which could mean we end up working too much only on the symptoms.

There are also some slightly worrying implications from making decisions based on subjective well-being. Some of the big changes that have happened in society—like the growth of cities and industrialisation—might have scored badly on any well-being metrics, at least for the first decades. Some of you may think that it would have been great if we'd never moved to cities, but it does make you think a little about what a world, based on decisions only about well-being, might be like.

Can we really improve well-being?

The last thing which links into relationships, is how much we can actually do to improve well-being.

I've painted a picture where the government could tweak our well-being. But what can we really do about it in practice? I think that's an important issue, especially when we focus on relationships. Let me tell you about my experience of a specific problem.

I worked at the Department for Education for a while, and the ministers were very keen on parenting policy because there was a lot of evidence that parenting was crucial to a child's progress. There was also some evidence that there are programmes that seem to work. But the people who needed the parenting help would never come to classes unless they were 'forced' to. So the fact that we know something is important doesn't

mean there's a policy that can get at it. And sometimes it's best to admit that. I think that's a big issue in terms of relationships as well.

At NPC, we did some work with [Relate on health and relationships](#) and it's very clear that those with good relationships have better health outcomes. Somebody turns up to their GP and it's pretty obvious that lurking behind their depression or even physical ailment is something to do with poor relationships at home. What is the GP supposed to do about that? Maybe you can send them on a course or for therapy, but how much does this help even if this 'social prescribing' is practical in every location? Perhaps, given where they live and the fact their partner has just died, life is all pretty tough and they may not want some type of mentor coming to talk to them or befriend them. The key point is that identifying a need for relationships doesn't mean we know what to do to solve the issue. And this, I suspect, bedevils well-being policy.

Will well-being ever determine policy?

My last point is that I'm pretty sceptical that policy makers will ever take well-being as seriously as we want them to in their decision making. That's partly due to the public valuing—for good or bad—more tangible things like GDP, jobs and income, over these more nebulous things like happiness.

I still find it hard to imagine politicians—even Jeremy Corbyn—saying, 'Here's our new policy. It's going to reduce GDP. It will reduce your income but I've got evidence it will increase your well-being,' and everybody cheering and saying it's brilliant news. That's a little bit hard to picture.

Deciding what move is best for well-being is more complicated. We held an event recently on housing and the private rented sector and somebody from Shelter said that there's a lot of evidence that having more security of tenure would improve your well-being. But others would say that if you overdo security of tenure, you'll reduce the supply of private rented accommodation—and that means you reduce the well-being of a whole lot of other people. So these things are not straightforward even if we take well-being as our single objective.

Final thoughts

I do think well-being is a really interesting concept and has opened up lots of conversations which people weren't having before. As we start to put some sensible metrics and measurements around it, that will help and allow us to understand what works, and what doesn't, a bit better. We'll weed out the woolly thinking and hopefully it'll start to get us thinking in different policy areas.

I guess the question for the relationships industry is: do you hitch your wagon to well-being? And if so, in what ways and to which bits? My provisional answer would be yes, but I will also say, don't expect too much.

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