

1. Introduction: Making Wellbeing Policies Effective

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Few people would doubt that governments can make huge contributions to societal wellbeing by improving their choice of policies. One of the crowning achievements of much recent social science research has been to give greater prominence to the importance of mental wellbeing as a policy goal, in addition to the past focus on physical welfare, or on incomes and their economic situation. But to make government intervention practicable and effective in this area, metrics are needed that can be used to evaluate alternative policies. Recent years have seen a growing interest in wellbeing as a goal of public policy. This has led to significant advances in our understanding of the measurement of subjective wellbeing and its determinants. This book seeks to communicate to a wide audience of policy-makers, academics and students the policy implications of recent research on wellbeing, as well as emerging questions and challenges. New frameworks provide ways of moving ahead progress in measuring and acting on wellbeing at the household, regional or national levels. Some of the pioneers in the field are based at the LSE and the contributions in this book cover a mixture of well-known arguments and novel insights.

Richard Layard opens the book by considering the increasing **recognition of wellbeing** as an explicit and specific goal

of policy-making in the past decades. An approach putting ‘people and their wellbeing at the centre of policy design’ recognises happiness and subjective wellbeing as the overarching good, and makes it the key criterion against which to judge the merit of different policy outcomes. This can lead to a radical shift in policy priorities because happiness research offers grounds to focus on social infrastructure policies and services – such as mental health, physical health, child development, family life and elderly care – rather than on the past priorities around economic infrastructure and long-term growth.

Paul Dolan’s chapter next seeks to explore the far-reaching **policy consequences** of adopting wellbeing as a single, dominant metric to assess policy interventions. He advocates using the ‘wellbeing-adjusted life-year (WELLBY)’ concept for cost-benefit analysis. Focusing on the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dolan points out a range of adverse distributional consequences that have been largely overlooked by focusing just on mortality risks, and by the use of very restrictive interventions such as lockdowns. This analysis argues that adopting a metric to capture subjective wellbeing and life experiences would enable policy-makers to better identify the costly ripple effects of policy responses, and who stands to gain or lose from them.

Yet looking at subjective wellbeing alone may also create different difficulties. In her response to Dolan, Johanna Thoma articulates how the use of a single metric necessarily relies on settling some contentious moral questions. For instance, wellbeing approaches that adopt an equity-weighted cost-benefit analysis, and prioritise the experiences of those who are worst-off on this indicator, neglect other factors. Yet in addition to

subjective wellbeing resources, capabilities, or opportunities may all reasonably be thought of as of major concern for distributional equality. Other people may also object to the priority afforded to distributional concerns in the first place, for instance those who prioritise relational rather than distributional equality. Adopting a single metric may thus overlook and hide these contrasting moral concerns. Faced by reasonable disagreements about value Thoma argues that we need **multiple metrics** as an input into public deliberation.

The **capability approach** is one of the main alternative approaches to wellbeing in seeking to understand and measure quality of life. Its exponents often emphasise the challenges involved in trying to use subjective wellbeing as a reliable proxy for people's objective quality of life. These difficulties are especially acute because of the phenomenon of 'adaptation' – where people adversely affected by marked objective inequalities may nonetheless show high levels of subjective wellbeing. Their adaptation may hide (and possibly serve to justify) policy inaction on the objective inequalities involved. In his chapter, Paul Anand underscores not just the differences between the wellbeing and capabilities approaches, but also how in practice they often come to similar conclusions when identifying policy priorities. He sets out what the capability approach specifically contributes as a framework for policy, and how it enhances our understanding of the different dimensions and drivers of wellbeing.

In recent decades wellbeing research has had remarkable impact on health policy. Evidence showing a dynamic relationship between subjective wellbeing and health has grown, with influence running in both directions. There has been a widespread

adoption of subjective measures of health and their incorporation into policy-setting. The next two chapters explore this relationship particularly in relation to mental health. Michael Daly and Liam Delaney analyse how the UK's **pandemic responses** affected mental health. They argue that the institutionalisation of wider measures of mental health and wellbeing would have led to a more holistic policy approach. It could also fulfil an important function in approaching emergency responses beyond the pandemic. Greater integration of multidimensional wellbeing measures into emergency responses would widen the disciplinary expertise informing government advisory bodies. And it would enable the development of better structures and frameworks for devising other timely policy interventions and evaluating societal impacts.

Annette Bauer next looks more in-depth at the specific types of mental health and wellbeing evidence that should be used to inform targeted, integrated, and long-term **responses to health emergencies**. Research exploring the root causes of poor mental health, and the mechanisms and factors that matter the most for addressing mental health problems, can contribute a lot here, as well as economic research to inform resource-allocation decisions.

Poor health and wellbeing may limit many aspects of people's social life, potentially including political participation in liberal democracies. Most political science attention has focused on the political determinants of health and health inequalities, but the last two chapters examine the less-explored side of the coin – how health status and wellbeing affect political participation and attitudes towards politics. A 'health gap hypothesis'

was often assumed in the past, positing a positive relationship between a person's health and their political engagement. However, Christopher Anderson, Sara Hagemann and Robert Klemmensen present a more nuanced picture. They show that while ill-health is negatively correlated with political participation overall, there are **significant differences** across demographic groups. Indeed, for some groups there is a positive relationship between ill health and political motivation. Moreover, people's subjective sense of wellbeing and subjective health have stronger effects on their engagement with politics than does their reported health. This evidence opens up a set of questions which are crucial for policy, in relation to the role played by different health care systems and the political mechanisms underpinning them.

Mikko Mattila's chapter corroborates the **multifaceted impact of health** on different forms of political engagement. He particularly illuminates the distinctions and similarities between the definitions of health and disability in relation to political attitudes and activities. Disability can prevent some kinds of activism, but ill health need not. Conflating the two limits our understanding of their relationships with different forms of political engagement.

Looking across the book as a whole it is clear that wellbeing remains a powerful but contested concept, one that can be interpreted and used differently, with consequences for how it is incorporated into policy decisions. By bringing together scholars from economics, psychology and behavioural science, philosophy and political science, this book explores how different disciplinary approaches can contribute to the study of wellbeing and

how this can shape both policy priorities and emerging research questions and challenges.

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