

Thriving lives

Which way for well-being?



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Summary

In the fashion of politics, ‘well-being’ is this season's must-have. We all want it, but we’re not really sure what it actually is, let alone how to get it.

The current focus on well-being reflects a widespread concern about the state of our society and the quality of our own lives. There is a growing realisation that economic prosperity doesn't have all the answers and that our nation needs a new direction. In this context of discontent, the language of well-being is attractive because it describes the goals for every individual human life.

Driving the debate is the belief that the true goal of life is happiness, or in scientific language, ‘subjective well-being’. For some, happiness means *hedonic* pleasure, a single dimension of feeling good. But promoting this kind of happiness as a national goal runs the risk of simply reinforcing cultural values of individualism, selfishness and self-damaging short-termism. A better approach is to distinguish hedonic pleasure from the *eudaimonic* positive experiences associated with healthy functioning, achieving personal potential and living a good and meaningful life – sometimes referred to as flourishing mental health. Yet there must also be more to well-being than this.

Subjective well-being can be partly achieved on our own, but it's entirely dependent upon both direct relationships with other people and the indirect connections we have with others through a range of different social systems, such as family, friendship networks, workplace, local community and even the nation as a whole. And in order to have healthy relationships and social systems – and therefore ensure our subjective well-being – we all need the capacity to make choices for the benefit of others without regard to our own gain.

So if well-being reflects the goals for human life, it must include not only the subjective dimensions of happiness and flourishing mental health but also the objective, pro-social motivation and ability to make positive contributions to the lives of others. Combining these subjective and objective dimensions, we define well-being as *thriving lives*, the condition of lives that are good for both the individual and for society.

Responsibility for well-being lies in many areas. Individuals, communities, companies, professions and both local and national government all have important roles to play. This report looks in particular at how government policy can promote thriving lives. The relationships that make for well-being can't simply be legislated into existence. Rather, policy shapes the social environment that either fosters or undermines such relationships. We look at three different ways in which policy can enable relationships and how these might translate into specific policy options:

- **Motivation** – encouraging a culture that values relationships
- **Opportunity** – providing the foundations for relationships
- **Support** – strengthening existing relationships and building relationships for the excluded

Promoting the concept of thriving lives has both attractions and challenges. A focus on relationships as the key to well-being allows for a more positive, less authoritarian, role for government of encouraging, enabling and supporting. Yet if policy is to promote the attainment of well-being as, at least in part, a collective task, then it will enter the difficult terrain of influencing choices in a pro well-being direction. Millions of us make positive contributions to the lives of others every day, but there is clearly much more that needs to be done to ensure well-being now and safeguard it in the future. It is time for political leadership to look at where we are currently heading, put forward a vision for the future, and help us to get there.

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Introduction

With any journey, you need to know where you are going and how to get there.

When it comes to well-being, many of us feel that as a nation we are not where we want to be. There are, undeniably, many good things about our modern society to celebrate – in countless ways, across areas like health, education, poverty and justice, we can look back over our nation’s history and chart significant progress.

And yet it’s hard to escape the sense that all is not entirely well. Our ‘progress’ has often come at a price. Our national statistics reveal stories of stress and depression, drug addiction and alcohol abuse, conflict and social breakdown. Public and politicians alike are becoming increasingly aware of it – we are in many ways not a healthy society, and we need to get well.

The trouble is, few people agree on what ‘well’ really means. There is much talk of happiness as our social panacea, but just as many doubts about whether happiness is really enough. And if we can’t agree on where we want to be, it’s hardly surprising we disagree on how to get there. We want public services to be better, but don’t know which goals to aim for. We want people to enjoy better lives, but don’t know how to make that happen without interfering with personal freedom.

In this context, what is needed is a clear direction. The purpose of this report, therefore, is to point policy towards the destination and to signpost the paths that can lead us to well-being.



1. Where to?



The 30 second version

In a climate of concern about society, the language of well-being resonates because it describes the goals for every individual human life. But if we want to increase well-being, we need to know what it is. The main focus is currently on 'subjective well-being', i.e. what we feel about our own well-being, or how happy we are. We consider two classical approaches to happiness: the *hedonic* which focuses on the experience of pleasure, or happy feelings, and the *eudaimonic* which looks at the positive experiences associated with healthy functioning, achieving personal potential and living a good and meaningful life. Both of these are necessary in a full definition of well-being, but in order to achieve subjective well-being, both personally and collectively, we also need a third objective component – the motivation and ability to make positive contributions to the lives of others without regard to our own gain. Taking these three dimensions together, we define well-being as *thriving lives*.

Why well-being?

Well-being used to be a term reserved for marketing copywriters to sell anything from herbal teas to luxury spa holidays. Now it's become a serious business, appearing regularly in corporate HR policies and political debate. For the most part, this reflects a growing and genuine concern and a sense of responsibility for the welfare of people and the quality of their lives. There is a dawning recognition that while the pursuit of economic prosperity, at both an individual and a national level, has delivered better lives in some respects, it has also created a range of new social problems.

Over recent years, our national and global culture has been going through a period of re-evaluating priorities – taking stock of the path we have been following and feeling the need for a new direction. Sociologists introduced the concept of social capital with a call to recognise the value of social networks for a range of economic and social outcomes. Issues of social justice have become hugely popular through campaigns like Make Poverty History and the growth of Fairtrade industries. Concern for the environment and climate change now dominates politics in a way that would have been unimaginable even a few years ago. And into this highly receptive context comes the challenge to refocus on well-being.

The language of well-being has instant appeal for both public and politicians because it describes the goals for every individual human life. And what the psychologists are saying is that what really matters aren't the objective conditions of our life, only how they affect our personal experience of life – our *subjective* well-being.

This approach has attractions at every level. Knowing exactly how to create subjective well-being would revolutionise our capacity to help the most disadvantaged in society – an end to policies that are well-meaning but ineffective and the ability to work out exactly which interventions will make a real and tangible difference to quality of life. We could find new solutions to our social problems, creating lives that are happy and contented, not angry and anti-social or searching for fulfilment in addictive or risky behaviours. And on a personal level, while most of us might feel that we're doing alright, there are probably few people who wouldn't welcome some changes to our culture and social structures that would allow for a more enjoyable and less stressful experience of life.

We all want to see greater subjective well-being – personally, for others in our nation and for people around the world. But before we can start out on our journey, we need to be sure of the destination. What is well-being and what are the real goals for human life? It's a big and complex question and there are a variety of different opinions, some conflicting, others varying in detail and nuance. It is also a confusing field, with a range of different terms often used to mean similar or at least overlapping concepts, and the same terms often used to mean different things. We should say up front that we don't intend to settle the debate here with our own detailed definition, though a range of references are given for further exploration. What we consider more important at this stage is to chart the territory of well-being in a way that will help to guide public debate.

So let's take a brief overview of where we've come from before thinking about where we should be going.

The birth of happy politics

In a 2006 poll for the BBC programme, *The Happiness Formula*, 81% of respondents agreed that government's prime objective should be happiness, not wealth. But although happiness is enjoying new-found popularity, it's not a new concept in politics. It appears numerous times in ancient Greek writings, but it was Jeremy Bentham in the seventeenth century who created a coherent happiness approach to politics and turned it into a specific school of thought called Utilitarianism. The basic premise of Utilitarianism is that pleasure is good and pain is bad, and therefore what is good is whatever brings the greatest degree of pleasure. So in theory, any policy decision by government could be weighed according to the resultant effects on the nation's happiness. If a decision would result in a net gain in happiness, it is judged as good.

In practice however, the calculation of possible effects on happiness proved impossible to perform. Without a way of accurately evaluating the subjective experience of every individual, the alternative was to use measurements of objective factors that were generally agreed to make people happy. So, for example, if we believe that being healthy and educated make you happy, then all we need to do is measure levels of health and education as proxies for happiness.

This objective approach has formed the foundation of virtually all public policy, both domestic and foreign, based on beliefs about what makes for a good experience of life. Where policies differ between political parties or between individual politicians, it's often due to different beliefs about how to achieve happiness. Often the well-being goal is implicit, at other times it is specifically stated, such as in areas of welfare or international development.¹ But although it may not seem so on the surface, the strongest influence of objective well-being on policy is perhaps in our modern approach to economics.

Economics and utility

The underlying rationale behind the economic approach is the assumption that well-being is personal. Although some of the basic components for alleviating unhappiness will be the same for everyone, achieving happiness is only thought to be ultimately possible through the satisfaction of one's personal preferences. Happiness is therefore a personal and private affair. It cannot be created by government but can be promoted by ensuring individual liberty and maximising freedom of choice.

The next assumption is that every significant personal choice for well-being involves the consumption of some kind of goods or services which involves a financial cost. So while Bentham used the word 'utility' to mean happiness, the modern economist uses it to mean the benefits you can get for your money. Tying these two

strands together, the logical inference is that national well-being is achieved by individuals having the financial means to be able to do whatever makes them happy. The history and development of the utility model of economics is well described elsewhere², but at the simplest level it boils down to the equation, greater GDP equals greater well-being.

The rise of subjective well-being

In recent years the foundation of a narrow exclusively economic approach to well-being has been seriously rocked. The idea that people are entirely rational beings has been largely swept away in psychology, and research has shown that individuals in fact tend to make quite bad choices when asked to judge which options would make their lives happier. What's worse, simple measures of life satisfaction across a number of high-income countries have shown that, despite significant growth in GDP, there seems to have been no significant improvement in how good people on average feel about their lives.

At the same time, psychologists have been revisiting Bentham to see if modern science can solve the Utilitarian problem by developing accurate ways to measure happiness. The new field of 'positive psychology' embodied a renewed drive to apply an empirical methodology to the study of all that is positive about life, and brought happiness back into the sphere of experimental research under the label of subjective well-being (SWB). In the flurry of activity that followed, various new tools were developed and tested to try to measure accurately levels of SWB, and significant progress was made in revealing some of the key factors that determine a person's level of SWB.

This new scientific approach to what was previously considered both a private and intangible concept opened the door for well-being to start being considered seriously in political thinking. Professor Richard Layard takes much credit for championing a well-being agenda in the UK.³ A range of other voices such as Oliver James⁴ and think-tanks like Compass⁵ and New Economics Foundation⁶ have also raised the profile of the debate. And politicians have been duly taking note.

In 2002, The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit held a life satisfaction seminar in Whitehall discussing the implications of a happiness policy, and produced an analytical paper shortly afterwards that explored a range of policy options.⁷ The Department for Food and Rural Affairs has been looking at well-being in the framework of sustainability, commissioning a range of papers on the subject and setting up the Whitehall Well-being Working Group.⁸ On the other side of the House, David Cameron has been talking widely of the need to embrace 'General Well-being', or GWB as an alternative to GDP. The Conservatives have also set up their own working group to look at well-being.⁹

The pursuit of subjective well-being has gained such momentum that the word 'subjective' is routinely dropped. The words 'well-being' and 'happiness' have become so synonymous that newspapers tend to use them interchangeably. Yet in the headlong rush towards happiness, few people are stopping to ask if it's really what we want. Can an exclusive focus on happiness really deliver a happy society, or is there more to well-being?

What is happiness?

Although it might seem a ridiculous question, we first need to ask what happiness actually is. In fact, it can mean two rather different things, derived from two different Greek words: *hedonismos*, from which we derive the English word 'hedonism', and *eudaimonia*.¹⁰

Hedonic happiness

The hedonic view believes the goal of life to be the experience of pleasure or feeling happy, and that happiness overall is simply the sum total of all one's hedonic moments. Most subscribers to this view would have a broad understanding of pleasure as both physical and mental, for example through attainment of goals or valued outcomes, but pleasure or pleasantness is considered essentially the same regardless of its cause.

This is what Bentham meant by happiness, and it is the predominant focus of research into subjective well-being to the extent that even some who do not agree use it as the definition of SWB.¹¹ Richard Layard also takes this approach, and the majority of what is now being talked about in terms of well-being is based on the findings of studies that have tried to measure hedonic happiness through single questions about general happiness or life satisfaction.

The hedonic view is certainly a valuable approach and research in this field has revealed some important findings about what makes us feel good in life. However, if well-being is only the experience of pleasure, we soon run into a number of problems.

From a philosophical perspective the most obvious objection is that if pleasurable experience is the ultimate goal, then the hypothetical solution would be to put drugs in the water supply and dope the entire population into a permanent state of bliss. After all, if we do it with fluoride to improve people's physical well-being, why shouldn't we also add something to boost mental well-being? Layard dismisses this scenario on the grounds that all drugs have side-effects and therefore reduce happiness in the long-term, and that the idea of a perfect happiness drug is too far from reality to need taking seriously. Yet unrealistic as it may be, the ethical objections the scenario raises illustrate that pleasure is surely not enough. Something else is needed than a pleasure dimension alone.

At a personal level, promoting the maxim that pleasure is good and pain is bad runs the risk of encouraging individualism, selfishness and an unhealthy focus on present experience that can be damaging over the long-term. It can too easily be used to justify risky sexual behaviours, men walking out on their families or the refusal to care for disabled or elderly relatives. It may also encourage the avoidance of any good form of pain in the way of challenge or difficult experience that is necessary for personal development and maturity.¹²

Proponents of hedonism might argue that such behaviours could be avoided by rational calculation of the future effects on the individual's happiness – forgoing pleasure, or even enduring pain can be justified for future benefit. But this still leaves us with some serious problems. The most fundamental is that if some pleasures result in later pain, measuring experienced pleasure at any one point in time cannot be a sufficient measure of well-being.

Secondly, while there is certainly evidence that people who engage in risky behaviours find it hard to think about the future¹³, individuals cannot be expected to make everyday judgements based solely on such complicated calculations. It is entirely unreasonable to suggest that they either can predict all possible ramifications of any given decision, or will make a rational judgement about uncertain future possibilities over certain immediate

opportunities¹⁴, or even that they always should, as this would rule out the joy of spontaneity and present focus.¹⁵

Although hard for the individual, it is easier for the independent observer (or indeed the older person with more life experience) to identify which pleasurable behaviours now will result in less happiness later on. There is certainly a role then for education, but on its own this is unlikely to be successful since it relies on telling people how to live their life and to avoid certain pleasures for the promise of some vague future reward. Such attempts often result in the opposite effect to the one intended.

It is also easier to see how intervention from a central government can provide a more balanced distribution of happiness across society. But if there is little public motivation towards social responsibility, that intervention will inevitably be heavy-handed and far from optimal effectiveness. The greater problem is that determining 'the greatest happiness' is still as impossible now as it was for Bentham. With our modern global interrelatedness, we are ethically bound to consider the impact of any decision on happiness levels across the world as well as over the lifespan of all people now alive and for future generations. We therefore need a better way to decide policy than hedonic happiness alone.

Eudaimonic happiness

Some of the problems of hedonism are dealt with by embracing a different definition of happiness. While they are commonly translated by the same English word, the Greek *eudaimonia* is quite different from *hedonismos* and some would therefore argue it should not be translated as happiness at all.¹⁶ Rather than looking at pleasure alone, the eudaimonic view focuses on the positive experiences associated with healthy functioning, achieving personal potential and living a good and meaningful life.

The origin of *eudaimonia* is often attributed largely to Aristotle (e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics*) who strongly reacted against the hedonism of other Greek philosophers and thought that true happiness was found in pursuing a life of virtue – doing what is worth doing. In a similar way, John Stuart Mill rejected the simple single-dimensioned hedonism of Bentham, his godfather, insisting that there are different kinds of pleasure, higher and lower, and that it is the quality, not just the quantity, that matters.¹⁷

Today, the eudaimonic distinction has been expressed in a variety of different ways: Waterman sees well-being as living in accordance with one's true self, and developed the concept of 'personal expressiveness';¹⁸ Ryff and colleagues coined the phrase 'psychological well-being' that covers the six dimensions of autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery and positive relatedness;¹⁹ Keyes and others talk about positive mental health and the difference between languishing and flourishing, with the essential components being emotional well-being, positive functioning and social well-being;²⁰ and Seligman talks about 'authentic happiness' as a combination of the pleasant life, the good life and the meaningful life.²¹ We find 'flourishing' to be a useful way of referring to the eudaimonic without tying ourselves too closely to any one theory.

There is clearly a degree of looseness about what flourishing includes, and this has raised the criticism that the criteria are more based on the values of the 'experts' than on just what people report makes them happy.²² Yet there is little doubt from the evidence that eudaimonic components are valid and important, and that they are distinct from simple feelings of happiness but are closely related and even necessary for a sustainable subjective experience of well-being. Therefore, we don't feel that we need to create our own precise model of eudaimonic well-being, but that it is more important at this stage to encourage policy debate to look at more than just happiness in hedonic terms.

As well as having psychological validity, the concept of a eudaimonic dimension also helps us understand how to build well-being in society. At a theoretical level, the distinction solves the drugs in the water paradox – although we might all be having a great time, our pleasure needs to be complemented by other aspects of positive experience to be both optimal and sustainable. The same principle provides the justification to persuade people away from some activities that might provide a degree of hedonic pleasure but are transitory and do not lead to personal growth or fulfilment. It also helps us understand why some people willingly sacrifice pleasure or comfortable living for the satisfaction that comes with being engaged in activity that is purposeful and meaningful.

Therefore, both the hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions must be included in any definition and promotion of well-being. The hedonic feelings of happiness are certainly an important part of life. But without the eudaimonic dimension, the pursuit of hedonic happiness can quickly become irresponsible and, ironically, may ultimately undermine the happiness of self and others. We would in fact recommend that the word ‘happiness’ is not used as a substitute for well-being, for although some people do use it to mean both dimensions together, it is all too easily understood to mean pleasurable emotion alone. We will return to our own preferred term later on.

Secondly, policy-makers should be wary of making judgements based on research that measures only a quantity expression of happiness without any reference to quality. Simple measures of happiness or life satisfaction are more likely to assess hedonic happiness, which may or may not reflect levels of eudaimonic happiness, do not tell us about the sustainability or social impact of that happiness, and therefore act as poor guides to improving subjective well-being.

Going beyond subjective well-being

By complementing pleasure with the concept of flourishing, we’ve taken a step closer to gaining a better understanding of well-being and the goals for life. But there is one further step that needs to be taken.

The subjective well-being approach by definition focuses on the individual’s positive experiences. From the psychologist’s perspective the question is therefore how the individual can engage in activities or make lifestyle choices that will provide such experiences. Choices that do not benefit one’s own subjective experience, either in the short or long-term, are thereby implicitly seen as less valuable.

However, we do not exist as isolated individuals. As we will see further in the next chapter, our experience of well-being is deeply influenced by our connections with other people, both directly and indirectly. And when we look at well-being at a social level, we begin to see how much our collective well-being depends on choices that are not made for personal gain.

This is most evident in direct relationships. It is certainly in the individual’s long-term interest to invest in relationships, even though there may be a short-term cost, and there is undoubtedly merit in motivating commitment to relationships now by promoting the future benefits.²³ But long-term gains that are distant, uncertain and indeterminate are a poor motivation for present behaviour compared to a willingness to commit to others and invest in their well-being. Moreover, it is unlikely that there will even be any long-term well-being gains from a relationship if the motivation for investment is purely one of self-interest. It is only by a genuine motivation to give without seeking personal gain that relationships flourish.

The same principle is true even when the effects of personal choices are indirect and less obvious. Individuals exist not only in direct relationships with others, but as part of social systems – clusters of connections between people that vary in size and complexity and overlap with one another. The family, friendship network, local community, workplace and even a nation are all examples of social systems where individuals are interconnected such that the actions of any one individual can have multiple knock-on effects on others.

To illustrate this, we can think of each individual's input into a system in mathematical terms as either neutral, positive or negative, and each input will have an independent effect on the individual's own subjective well-being. A positive input may simultaneously create a sense of personal fulfilment, as is often demonstrated in the act of volunteering, although it may equally come at a personal cost. Similarly, a negative input could be the result of pursuing personal fulfilment at a social cost, for example choosing to work long hours at the expense of family relationships.

The collective input of all the individuals in any one system will then determine the output to each individual in terms of a positive or negative effect on subjective well-being. This gives us a number of different possible outcomes:

- A positive input at personal cost may return benefits at a later date. Although volunteering in a local community might, for example, be hard work at times, it could help to build a sense of community spirit or social capital which over time results in better care for the local environment and less crime and anti-social behaviour.
- A positive input may result in a degree of net loss to the individual but a net gain to numerous other individuals. The social benefit of such acts of self-sacrifice might be lost in a purely individualistic account of well-being.
- A negative input for the sake of immediate personal gain may result in a long-term personal loss. As in the earlier example, prioritising work over family relationships could lead to later relationship difficulties or even breakdown.
- A negative input could result in long-term personal gain, but a range of negative outputs for others. Just as local communities and terrorist cells can both be described as having high social capital, a consideration of the social outputs allows us to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' forms of subjective well-being.²⁴

In smaller social systems, the input of each individual plays a greater part in determining the outputs, and the chain of effects is shorter and easier to trace. As with direct relationships, there is therefore validity in individuals acting with some regard to long-term personal gain. But the larger the social system becomes, the less impact each individual input has, the harder it is to trace the consequences of those inputs and the longer it takes for them to filter through to affect outputs. The individual is therefore unlikely to be aware of the relation between inputs and outputs, and may not even experience the benefits of his or her own input, while at the same time experiencing the consequences of other people's inputs.

An analogous example can be seen with environmental sustainability. The actions of each individual may appear negligible, may result in a degree of inconvenience and personal cost, and the consequences of one's actions are unlikely to be experienced personally and immediately. Yet there is such a concern for the outputs which future generations and people in other parts of the world will experience that people are increasingly willing to do not what will benefit them but what is ethically right.

Similarly, if we are to ensure the social sustainability of well-being, it is vital that individuals are able to act in ways that make a positive contribution to society, whether or not their actions create a personal sense of well-being, either immediately or long-term. Therefore, what is 'good' in terms of well-being is not just that which is subjectively experienced as good, but also the motivation and ability to do what is good with regard to the subjective well-being of others. As well as the hedonic and eudaimonic, there must be a third pro-social dimension that comprises values such as compassion, justice and morality, and abilities like emotional and social intelligence that allow us to make a positive social contribution.

So what is well-being?

In our search for a definition of well-being, we come to two conclusions.

The first is that subjective well-being is more than simply hedonic pleasure but must include a eudaimonic dimension. Not only does policy need to be based on more detailed research than just questions about happiness, the very word 'happiness' should be used carefully to avoid encouraging individualistic pleasure-seeking behaviours among the public that are detrimental to both individual and society in the long run.

Secondly, in order to achieve subjective well-being collectively, the emphasis needs to be not only on personal and subjective experience but on the objective ability to make positive social contributions without seeking personal gain.

Therefore if 'well-being' is about the goals for individuals' lives, it needs to include both the subjective dimensions of happiness and flourishing mental health, and an objective, pro-social dimension. Taking these three dimensions together, we define well-being as *thriving lives*. We use 'thriving' because well-being is not simply about happiness, but about the condition of lives that are good for both the individual and for society. And we use 'lives' in the plural because well-being needs to be considered at a social, not just an individual level, and we all need to work together if we are all to thrive.

In the next chapter we will look in more detail at the connection between relationships and well-being before going on to consider the policy implications.

2. Why relationships?



The 30 second version

Relationships are widely acknowledged as vital to well-being. Personal and social relationships have a direct effect, but well-being is also affected indirectly by other people's relationships. Both direct and indirect relationships mediate the impact on well-being of policy in many areas. Well-being policy must not be just a bolt-on extra to make people feel a bit happier. A wide range of different relationships are important for well-being.

The quality of people's social relationships is crucial to their well-being. People need supportive, positive relationships and social belonging to sustain well-being. Evidence [shows] that the need to belong, to have close and long-term social relationships, is a fundamental human need, and that well-being depends on this need being well met. People need social bonds in committed relationships, not simply interactions with strangers, to experience well-being.

Diener and Seligman²⁵

Such evidence as we have suggests that social connections, including marriage, of course, but not limited to that, are among the most robust correlates of subjective well-being. People who have close friends and confidants, friendly neighbours and supportive co-workers are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem and problems with eating and sleeping. Indeed a common finding from research on the correlates of life satisfaction is that subjective well-being is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections.

Helliwell and Putnam²⁶

Our relationships with others are crucial to our well-being. The baby boomer generation has lower levels of social capital than previous generations, due to higher levels of divorce and separation, and from not belonging to local community structures. Social bonds, interactions and levels of participation and trust need to be strengthened.

Compass²⁷

Well-being can't be measured by money or traded in markets. It can't be required by law or delivered by government. It's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture, and above all the strength of our relationships... What makes us happy, above all, is a sense of belonging - strong relationships with friends, family and the immediate world around us.

David Cameron²⁸

There is relatively little need for us to contend for the basic fact that our social connections are fundamental to our well-being. As the quotes above demonstrate, this fact is widely accepted by academics and on both sides of the political divide. Positive relationships are of course not the exclusive source of well-being, nor are they necessarily sufficient alone to create well-being, but they are certainly necessary and play a greater role than any other factor.

If we are to promote well-being, however, it is not enough simply to know that certain forms of relationship correlate with increased levels of life satisfaction or subjective well-being. The more we know about how relationships contribute, the more certain we can be that the choices we make and the policies we implement will be likely to promote well-being. The literature and evidence base is now extensive, drawing on

neurobiological processes associated with relationships, psychologists' understanding of the interplay between self and relationship, and robust statistical correlations between a wide range of outcomes (health, educational achievement, future earnings, life expectancy) and relationship experience.

We do not intend to chart here every process by which relationships influence well-being, or present detailed evidence to support our assertions. This would take an entire book in itself, and footnotes are given for those who wish to pursue the details further. Our purpose is not to guide relationship counselling, but to demonstrate sufficiently the importance of relationships in order to guide the direction of policy interventions for well-being. We will therefore take a tour of the main routes of influence, going beyond the immediately obvious, before reviewing which relationships matter most.

How relationships contribute to well-being

Direct effects

The most obvious place to start are the effects of a person's relationships with other people, both specific known individuals and social groups generally. Positive relationships are so fundamental to well-being that many flourishing accounts include an aspect such as 'relatedness' as a distinct component of well-being.²⁹ As Diener and Seligman note in the opening quote in this chapter, the experience of having close personal relationships can be considered a fundamental human need. It provides feelings of connectedness and belonging, intimacy and support. The sense of giving these through a relationship can be just as important as receiving them.

Experience of relationships is also important at a social level. Keyes for example has developed a model of social well-being as a core component of positive mental health. He describes individuals as functioning well when 'they see society as meaningful and understandable, when they see society as possessing potential for growth, when they feel they belong to and are accepted by their communities, when they accept most parts of society and when they see themselves as contributing to society.'³⁰

In addition to the intrinsic experience, positive relationships result in a range of beneficial outcomes for well-being, including:

1. Practical support

As well as the feeling of security that comes from the availability of support, healthy personal relationships also bring the practical benefits of support. This can be manifested in a variety of different ways – it may be borrowing a tool from a neighbour, or money from a relative; it may be the performance of a 'favour' or provision of care when it is needed; it may be the accessing of information or advice based on skill or personal experience. Practical support both provides a gateway to other sources of well-being and acts as a buffer against negative impacts on well-being. Some forms of support require physical presence, or higher levels of trust and commitment, and so the nature and quality of relationships influence their support-giving potential.

2. Developing self

In our psychological development we come to understand who we are primarily through the way that other people relate to us. There is certainly a distinct role played by nature in influencing our personality but, whatever

variations in weighting are ascribed to it, there is undeniably a significant role for nurture through personal relationships. This is particularly the case in children,³¹ although it may often be true in adult life as well.

For example, two components of Ryff's psychological well-being are self-acceptance and autonomy.³² While these may seem somewhat individualistic in their manifestation, they are thoroughly relational in their origin. Beliefs about the value and ability of the self are shaped by what other people say, particularly as the concept of self is being formed in child development but also potentially through strong relational experiences in later life, whether positive or negative. In fact, if the basis for self-esteem or autonomy becomes too focused on the self it may result in greater levels of narcissism and anxiety, and thereby reduce levels of well-being.³³

Developing self continues throughout life and is closely linked to personal growth, another key component of subjective well-being. Whilst some personal growth and development is possible apart from relationships, they are an important factor. It is in the context of relationships that we learn, develop interests that inspire growth and create the opportunities that allow for growth.

3. Physical health

Well-being is often used to mean physical health, but we would argue that it should be considered rather as a factor that may influence our sense of well-being. Good health does seem to boost feelings of happiness, but it also appears common for people to adapt to ill-health or disability and report as much life satisfaction as before. When adaptation does not occur it may be because poor health impacts on eudaimonic aspects of well-being, such as sense of purpose or relationships. The poor health of a partner can also significantly undermine the well-being of family carers, particularly when they receive limited support or respite care. Physical exhaustion, social isolation and reduced income are common problems.

There are a number of ways in which relationships interact with health. Poor relationships can lead to unhealthy behaviour as well as resulting in a lack of support. Positive relationships are linked to improved immune responses, improved buffering of stress, and faster recovery from strokes and cancer. In reviewing the link between relationships and 'allostatic load' (the long-term cumulative effect of physiological accommodations to stress) Ryff concluded that 'the importance of nurturing social ties and maximizing opportunities for valued, emotionally rewarding and meaningful interactions with significant others may be as consequential for long-term health and well-being as widely promulgated messages regarding proper nutrition and adequate exercise.'³⁴

4. Opportunity and access

As well as the benefits of close relationships, there are also benefits from what Granovetter calls 'weak ties'.³⁵ In the current social capital debate this is linked to the benefits of bridging relationships as opposed to the narrower, stronger and more exclusive bonding relationships of close family and group relationships. These relationships of familiarity may not be experienced on a regular basis, but can be valuable in passing information and for matching up a need (e.g. for a job or for a person who can do a job) with a person who can meet that need.

5. Social development

Social skills and an understanding of appropriate and moral behaviour towards others are central both for personal access to the well-being benefits from relationships described above and for contributing to the well-being of others. These can be taught to an extent, but are best developed in childhood in the context of relationships with others. Family relationships are primary in providing opportunity to experience close relationships, to see relationship skills modelled and for a moral framework to be moulded and reinforced through appropriate rewards and sanctions. Wider community relationships are also important, for example with neighbours and in school,³⁶ although there is often debate about the relative importance of different relationships, with the contentious issue of day-care as opposed to family care being an obvious example.

Indirect effects

Our well-being is also influenced by the outcomes of relationships that we are not directly party to, as well as by highly mediated and indirect relationships. Examples of the impact of other relationships include the ability of others to provide care resulting from their own inter-professional and inter-agency relationships, experiencing the negative consequences such as increased anti-social behaviour that may result from other broken relationships, or whether other people have, over time, created a community which new arrivals can join.

The degree of distance from these relationships can vary. In some cases a third party may have a fairly clear and immediate impact on a relationship. Caring for an elderly relative or disabled child for example can place a strain on a couple relationship. In other cases, our well-being may be affected by decisions taken in distant relationships over which we have little influence. The relationship between investors and managers may, for example, influence investment decisions that have significant consequences for employees and their families.

The effects of relationships may be mediated through a number of different steps before impacting the well-being of others. Negative relationships in a family context might lead to anti-social behaviour or crime. On the positive side, good community relationships might result in better care for the local environment, or good business relationships might lead to increased productivity and more meaningful and engaging work. In cases like these, the immediate effect on well-being might not appear to be a relationship issue, but may have its origins in the outcomes of one or more relationships.

Finally, as we noted in the first chapter, individual actions can have knock-on effects through social systems. This may be through a chain of effects, such as the relationship between consumers and producers, or may have a more distributed effect across a social system.

The easy route, both for academics and policy makers, is to simplify and compartmentalise different areas of life, and focus only on how to improve direct relationships. But as soon as we start to take a more collective, social view of well-being it becomes evident how much broader the approach to addressing any one issue needs to be.

Which relationships?

The variety of direct and indirect effects points to a wide range of relationships that are significant for well-being. Well-being is not a bolt-on policy extra to make people feel a bit happier, but an entire paradigm of political thought that has relevance for every aspect of politics. However, there are certain key relationships that policy might focus on. Our objective here is not to provide an assessment of the state of these relationships, nor to

review the extensive literature on each type of relationship, but rather to illustrate why they merit particular consideration in formulating policy to promote well-being.

Extended family

The ways in which relationships contribute to well-being point immediately to the benefits of close personal relationships for both adults and children. It is therefore no surprise that well-being research shows clear benefits of marriage in particular³⁷ and supportive adult relationships in general. Cummins, for example, has examined the contribution to subjective well-being of both income and a relationship with another adult that involves mutual sharing of intimacies and support. Looking at the interplay of the two factors his findings suggest that single parents need a relatively high income to compensate for the lack of the resource of an adult partnership. A three-person household (partners plus child) on low income has higher SWB than the two-person household (one parent plus child) on the same income. The increased consumption of goods by the additional adult is more than offset by the instrumental and emotional support they are able to provide one another.³⁸

Families embrace many types of relationship: sibling, couple, parenting and grandparenting. Research by the Young Foundation points to the continuing resilience of the extended family, its important role as a support for other family relationships, but also the threats to its future through a range of policies such as housing allocation or restricted grandparental access to children.³⁹ Policy that focuses on ever smaller family units risks weakening the protective context for those units.

Peer and friendship

Families are not the only source of supportive relationship. Pahl's qualitative studies on friendship have shown that adult friendships are vital forms of support for many people.⁴⁰ Yet 20% of people have neither a 'satisfactory friendship network' nor a 'satisfactory relatives network'.⁴¹ Data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing suggests that loneliness is the most significant predictor of life satisfaction, with 50% of elderly people with no friends reporting that they often or sometimes felt isolated compared to 20% of those with 7-10 close friends.⁴²

Peer relationships are of particular importance for children's learning and socialisation. It is therefore significant that the recent UNICEF report on children's well-being highlighted poor peer relationships for UK schoolchildren.⁴³ Less than half described their peers as generally kind and helpful, the lowest for any OECD nation.⁴⁴ The recent ippr report, *Freedom's Orphans*, has also raised concerns about the growth of unmediated socialisation. This can lead to peer pressures informed by unmediated exposure to advertising, as well as increased levels of gang membership with reduced influence of family and community socialisation. Thus peer and friendship relationships can enhance well-being, but can also be anti-social.

Neighbour and community

Neighbourhood and community relationships are a third area of direct experience of relationships. The General Household Survey Social Capital module reports that one in four adults speaks to their neighbours daily, while one in five speaks to them less than once a week. Three quarters of people had received a favour from a neighbour in the last six months. Neighbourliness and reciprocity increases with the length of time lived in the neighbourhood, is greater for older people than for those under 30, and is greater for homeowners and social renters than for private renters.⁴⁵

Levels of trust, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour are important mechanisms through which neighbourhood and community relationships impact on well-being. Social capital research raises concerns about declining levels of trust in strangers and traces close links between this and reported well-being. UK data suggests that 58% of people feel they can trust most or many of the people in their local neighbourhood.⁴⁶ Another area of concern is the reduction in informal forms of secondary control (e.g. milkmen, park-keepers) within communities and the loss of confidence of residents to intervene in situations. Lack of choice about housing, with limited opportunities to move, combined with feelings of limited control over the local environment are all detrimental to well-being.

Between groups

Relationships between ethnic groups and between generations are two important examples. Group relationships can influence feelings of belonging or exclusion. The extreme case of communal violence or systematic oppression is obviously detrimental to well-being. At a lower level, threats to a cherished sense of identity, and the burden of imposed identities can both be damaging. Perceptions of fairness, in terms of both influence as well as finance, are important for ensuring well-being.

Workplace

Workplace relationships with colleagues and clients are an important arena for social contact and basis of identity and esteem. The relationship between employer and employee is of particular concern where unrestrained power differentials create potential for exploitation. Purposeful work, opportunities for personal development, job security, employee welfare, health and safety, as well as provision for old age, incapacity and unemployment are all important considerations for well-being in this area.

Within and between service providers

Public services involve a complex set of relationships: between service users and providers, within and between providers (whether private, voluntary or public sector) and between professions. Each of these relationships is important for well-being, as is clearly demonstrated when services fail. Reviews of the deaths of children undergoing heart surgery at Bristol Royal Infirmary and the death of Victoria Climbié have shown how failures in relationships were a key factor in these most tragic outcomes.⁴⁷ More positively, it is through accessing the contributions of other agencies and professions that it becomes possible to make a real difference to people's lives. But failures of collaboration are still all too common. Integrating accountability for outcomes, empowering service users, inter-professional training and improved commissioning all have the potential to support improvements in these relationships that could increase their capacity to promote well-being.

Addressing all of these relationships will require different kinds of interventions and the involvement of a range of different actors. In the next section, we will look specifically at the role policy can play in building relationships to enable well-being.

3. How to?



The 30 second version

When we consider well-being as a more holistic concept than simply ‘happiness’ we see that there is significant scope for improving levels of well-being. The responsibility for well-being lies across all levels of society, both with individuals in the conduct of their relationships and with those whose actions affect the environment in which relationships are conducted. We suggest three areas in which policy can help to build relationships: encouraging the motivation for relationships, ensuring the opportunity for relationships and enabling support for those who need it.

So far we’ve considered the destination of where we want to go for well-being and argued that our aim should be for thriving lives, not just happiness. We’ve seen how relationships are fundamental in taking us there. Now we need to identify some of the policy pathways to follow.

Can we change well-being?

Before planning any strategies to improve well-being, we need to ask whether the task is even possible.

The extent to which policy can lead to sustained increases in subjective well-being (SWB) is somewhat disputed. Some argue that everyone has a natural level of happiness or satisfaction to which they tend to return.⁴⁸ They base this assertion on findings that, for example, lottery winners and quadriplegics usually return to their previous level of life satisfaction within a few years of their life changing event.⁴⁹ This is in part ascribed to genetic determination,⁵⁰ and partly to adaptation⁵¹ – people get used to improved conditions and therefore higher standards of living lead to only short time rises in ‘happiness’. Under extreme negative circumstances, a reduced capacity to cope and adapt can mean that individuals and nations can fail to achieve their ‘normal’ levels of SWB for protracted periods. The most significant contribution of policy within such a view is to support those who are not achieving their ‘normal’ level.

A different argument is that happiness levels will tend to be relatively stable at a national level (assuming there are no significant national negative factors), because happiness is largely based on comparisons between individuals.⁵² Thus while the ranking of individuals on the happiness scale may change, the overall average level of happiness for the nation remains the same.

However, it would be wrong to adopt a fatalistic attitude to promoting well-being for three reasons.

The first is that levels of happiness may be less determined than previously thought, and there is evidence for various interventions that can produce sustained increases in happiness levels.⁵³ Furthermore, while SWB can be affected by social comparison, this is not necessarily so. Comparisons on financial terms may equally result in empathy on the one hand and aspiration on the other.⁵⁴ It seems therefore that the often described negative effects of financial inequality are not due to the inequality per se but to cultural values and expectations that more money is better, and associated social factors such as inequality of opportunity or injustice.

Secondly, the majority of the work on happiness levels has been based on simple hedonic measures of happiness or life satisfaction rather than on eudaimonic measures of flourishing. As we showed in chapter one, the two are certainly linked and it is generally changes in eudaimonic elements (for example in relationships or purpose) that result in sustained changes to reported happiness. But they also have a certain independence, and it is possible that static levels of happiness mask changes in quality of well-being, whether for better or worse. And although quantity of happiness cannot increase infinitely, there is much more scope for broadening the quality of positive experience through increases in positive mental health.

Finally, our concern should not simply be how happy we are as a nation, but whether our basis for happiness is sustainable over the long-term, and whether it aids or hinders the well-being of other nations. There is therefore a certain need for investment in the objective, pro-social dimension of well-being that we have described.

Responsibility for well-being

Having established the possibility of improving well-being we must identify who needs to act. The policy priorities for well-being will depend on where we believe the responsibility for well-being lies, and different political parties may put different weighting on different actors, particularly with regard to the role of the state. Yet while views on the precise nature and relative importance of each area of responsibility may differ, the main areas of focus are:

Personal responsibility

If well-being is significantly influenced by personal relationships then it is inescapably a personal responsibility: relationships are not something that can be given to you or created by a third party, but something that every individual must choose to prioritise and invest in. Couple relationships, parenting, and friendship all depend on those involved, and no agency can substitute for these contributions to well-being. An individual's personal responsibility is for their own well-being and for that of other people. Indeed it will often be through seeking the well-being of others that we build the kinds of relationships that are most beneficial for our own. It is also important that we are willing to care for others even if we think they have little to offer us.

We are responsible too for the health of the various social systems to which we belong. Social well-being depends upon the collective actions of many individuals, and the larger and more complex the social system, the harder it is to trace the connection between individual actions and outcomes. Yet while a change in behaviour by one individual may not significantly affect the system as a whole, every individual nevertheless remains responsible for his or her actions.

Having said this, the individual is not exclusively responsible for his or her own well-being. There are a range of other factors that influence the individual's ability to make good choices, and all those who relate to the individual must also take their share of responsibility.

Corporate responsibility

Business makes a vital contribution to well-being. It does this most obviously through the direct effect on employees of employment, income and workplace relationships. Being employed is demonstrably better for well-being than being unemployed, and having a job that is meaningful with opportunities for engagement and personal growth is better still. Low income is certainly detrimental to well-being, and even relative poverty can

be damaging due to its effects on social relationships. The workplace is also becoming an increasingly important opportunity for positive relationships, while also being a place where negative relationships can do significant harm.

Business also has a much wider set of impacts. Working hours and employment rights can either undermine family and community relationships or be managed in ways that support them. Advertising reflects and shapes culture and can reinforce misguided choices about well-being. High levels of consumer debt are known to put pressure on family relationships. Decisions on where to locate offices and manufacturing sites can enhance or weaken the well-being of the communities affected. Social sustainability has long been recognised as the weakest element of the 'triple bottom line', not least because social sustainability implies value judgements about the state of relationships that is to be preserved.⁵⁵ But the language of well-being should help businesses to map their impact and take steps to improve it.

Professional responsibility

Public service professionals directly influence the well-being of others through their work in areas such as health, education, justice and social care. A serious commitment to well-being will therefore need a rethinking of the goals of services. It will require a richer vision of education than the transmission of knowledge and gaining of qualifications. Health becomes a positive state to be promoted, not simply the management of illness. Criminal justice seeks the resolution of damaged relationships between victims and offenders, and offenders and society.⁵⁶ And 'care' must be fundamentally about caring for the individual's well-being, providing human connection, not simply carrying out a caring task.

Professional responsibility also goes beyond direct interactions with service users. What it means to be a professional is increasingly understood not simply in terms of knowledge or skill but as being based on the conduct of key relationships. Taking health and social care as an example, there are six key professional relationships each of which is significant for the promotion of well-being. These are the relationships with: one's own profession; other professions; individual users; the wider public; partner agencies and providers (public, private and voluntary sector); and with policy makers and regulatory bodies.⁵⁷ It is the conduct of these relationships that is key, both positively to the promotion of well-being through performance and development, and negatively through the avoidance of service failure.

Local civic responsibility

Promoting the well-being of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups requires stable, trusting relationships with the flexibility to innovate in service provision. Being in a position to make a difference to someone's life is often the product of many patient years of work. A long-term vision, independent of funders' targets and priorities, is needed to imagine and work for differences that may take twenty years to realise. It is often voluntary sector organisations who have these kinds of relationship, but they tend to be rooted in local history and commitment so cannot always be readily replicated or 'rolled-out' nationally.

Whilst local responsibility for well-being may be expressed through a wide range of voluntary organisations and social enterprises it is also a collective political responsibility. Public services have many opportunities at a local level to promote well-being.⁵⁸ In a series of consultations for senior civil servants and front-line professions convened by Relationships Foundation we found considerable support for greater local funding of services, making them locally accountable for outcomes.⁵⁹ Local 'ownership' of the costs and consequences of failing to

address issues, or of the dividends of success, can also create a context in which investment in prevention may be more readily achieved. Although there is support for ‘localism’ among all political parties, considerable caution remains over significant shifts of funding and accountability to a local level.

National government

National government has an important role to play in creating the environment that shapes relationships and in assuring that there are no gaps in the provision of services that enhance well-being. Local provision cannot always expand its reach whilst retaining its distinctive ethos and quality. There are also national issues which affect our well-being, not least with regard to the role of government in ensuring security and in economic management.

Most of all, it is national government that influences every other area of responsibility. It can promote, reward and sanction modes of individual behaviour. It can encourage good business practice and restrict harmful practices. It sets the priorities and values for public service and defines the parameters of local responsibility. That is why well-being is not just for self-help books or HR schemes, but must be at the heart of government policy.

The focus of policy

The next step is to consider where policy should focus in order to achieve maximum gains in well-being. One obvious suggestion is to focus on those who are most in need. If well-being could be represented on a scale from one to ten, it would be possible to argue that there is more value in moving someone from two to three than there is in moving another person from seven to eight. One could also contend that growth in well-being is not linear, and that growth at the bottom end of the scale makes a much bigger difference to personal experience than at the top. These arguments are powerful and tend to lead to interventions that are based predominantly at the individual level.

On the other hand, the spread of well-being across a population probably follows a normal distribution, with small numbers of people at either extreme, and the majority somewhere in the middle. A focus on the middle of the range would then affect the largest number of people.

A way to tie these two viewpoints together is to combine individual interventions with population-level interventions. The argument for this approach is that a small shift in the average level of well-being (the peak of the normal curve) moves the whole curve upwards, resulting in large numbers of people both entering what was previously the top end of well-being and leaving the previous bottom end.⁶⁰

Therefore, we believe that building relationships for well-being requires both direct intervention to support specific relationships and a broader focus on creating a social environment that allows relationships across the population to flourish.

Policy and well-being: three types of intervention

In this, our first report on well-being, we outline a number of policy options for further discussion, development and evaluation. This is not intended to be a comprehensive policy response to well-being, but an illustration of how government might enable the positive relationships that are fundamental to well-being.

As we have seen, the responsibility for positive relationships is both personal, between the parties involved, and also distributed amongst those who shape the environment within which the relationships occur. Looking at one or other side alone can lead to interventions that either focus on the micro-level processes of relationships, such as warmth or stability, or consider only the objective structures of relationships. A third approach that combines both sides is to deconstruct relationships to consider the different aspects that are important for their contribution to well-being.

A more detailed outline of the preconditions for positive relationships is provided in the appendix, in a model that has been successfully applied to building specific relationships in a range of local community, business and public service settings. However, in framing a broad policy agenda for promoting 'thriving lives', we believe it is helpful to focus on three distinct areas of intervention. Specific initiatives or policies may impact on more than one area but it is nevertheless useful to distinguish the different purposes they serve:

- Influencing the motivation to invest in the relationships that make for thriving lives
- Ensuring that people have the opportunity to do this
- Enabling support for those who cannot achieve it themselves.

Motivation

As we noted earlier, healthy relationships require personal responsibility, which itself requires an inherent motivation to invest in relationships.

This motivation faces a number of obstacles. One is that relationships are a somewhat long-term and undramatic source of well-being, and there is some evidence that people tend to opt for short-term gains, like a pay-rise, over relationships when asked what will most affect their happiness.⁶¹ It is unclear whether this is a natural cognitive bias to select the immediate and certain gain over the long-term uncertainty, or whether it is culturally driven. But a culture which is fast-moving, individual-focused and anxious about an uncertain future can only reinforce such a bias.

Second, we have noted how investment in relationships often comes at a personal cost. Whilst people may value the dividends of relationships, they do not always welcome the commitments required to sustain them. Increasing the motivation to pursue the relationships that make for well-being is particularly important for investment in the wider set of social relationships where the individual may not experience the well-being dividends personally.

Finally, while individuals have personal responsibility for the health of the social systems they belong to, there is often little accountability for this responsibility other than a sense of ethical duty. As the size of social system increases, it becomes harder to trace the consequences of personal actions and easier to think that personal choices are unimportant. At the same time, those affected by collective actions become more distant and the effects on their well-being are unseen.

Governments have always had an interest in behaviour change across the population over a wide range of issues including wearing seat belts, drink-driving, smoking, carbon use, electoral participation and dropping litter.⁶² Building the motivation for relationships therefore fits within established strategies for change.

We do not offer a particular theory for changing behaviour. Rather, by way of example, we are keen to explore further three different areas where relational incentives may be of particular importance for well-being:

- The incentive for communities, through local political and funding processes, to invest in prevention and so secure longer-term improvements in well-being
- The incentive for extended families (and potentially other small groups) to jointly address welfare needs
- The incentive for couples to form, work through difficulties and stay together for their own well-being and that of their children.

Whilst finance may be an important element of each of these we do not see it as the only or most significant mechanism for change. It is likely that effective changes will include a number of mechanisms.

Local taxation and funding of services

Promoting thriving lives will not always be politically straightforward. There are some easy wins, but it may also require incurring costs now for uncertain longer-term returns. We must therefore consider whether some of these decisions are easier to make locally or centrally, and how the decisions can be encouraged. Sometimes central government is more distant from the 'losers' in any policy decision and therefore more able to push through difficult policies. There is also an important role for central government in ensuring equity of provision. Yet judgements about what needs to be done may be easier at a local level. Cause and effect in complex social systems may be easier to visualise. But most importantly, local ownership of the costs and benefits of addressing, or failing to address, the issues that affect well-being can create a financial incentive to deal with them. If the costs of failure and the dividends of success are always redistributed nationally, local responsibility may be diminished. But if the failures to deal with problems, and to invest in prevention, will be retained locally and impact local tax and spending, then there is a real incentive for local residents to support measures to promote well-being. The optimum balance of local and central funding, and the best ways of raising local funding, will continue to be a focus for political debate. The impact on local responses to well-being should be one of the factors that is considered in this debate.

Small group mutual finance

Relationships Foundation is seeking to explore the potential of 'welfare syndicates' as a mechanism for encouraging small group (for example within extended families) collaborative responses to welfare needs. This idea builds on the Lebanese model of family associations as well as the history of friendly societies and other small mutuals in the UK.

The basic idea is that a group may come together to build up a financial pot that can be used to address agreed welfare needs. This common savings element might be encouraged by tax incentives of a similar kind to those that have been available for friendly societies. Earlier research by Relationships Foundation has shown the potential for this small group activity to be incentivised and the growth of the welfare pot increased by a number of products where group savings might be possible. Examples include insurance where group discounts could benefit members as well as higher excesses covered by the mutual fund. Savings could benefit from higher-tiered interest rates based on aggregate amount saved while each member's share remains under their individual control. Enhanced loyalty and 'friends and family' schemes might be offered by a wide range of organisations.

The contribution to well-being would come in two ways. The first is the use of finance as a form of ‘social glue’. Where extended families have become geographically fragmented, common financial interests might foster contact and so help to strengthen the kinds of relationships that enable well-being. Secondly they could help address a number of welfare gaps. The Relationships Forum in Australia is seeking to explore the potential of this approach to address a care gap for disabled young people. In the UK it might help extended families address care needs of elderly relatives, for example by providing mechanisms to support financially family members providing care. Where this delays the requirement to purchase residential or domiciliary care, the consequent savings could be fed back into the syndicate. If tax benefits are offered for group savings, the range of legitimate welfare needs for which funds could be used would need to be specified but other possibilities might include paying for university education or guaranteeing mortgages for younger family members. Further work is needed to explore the potential and viability of such an approach but it illustrates a different approach to incentivising well-being through relationships.

Encouraging marriage

Lone parenthood is known to be detrimental to the well-being of both parent and child, particularly for those on lower incomes. The ippr report, *Freedom’s Orphans*, accepted that children’s outcomes were better when parents were married than co-habiting. However it eschewed what it described as ‘the unachievable and unpalatable goal of promoting marriage’⁶³ in favour of targeting support at the children most in need and in supporting the micro-level processes of warmth, stability and consistency. While some people may regard the cultural associations of marriage as unattractive, and promoting marriage may be perceived as a judgment about other relationship choices, encouraging the making of a promise to another person, and putting a relationship in the public domain with a package of privileges and responsibilities, is surely not inherently unpalatable.

Couple relationships have too often been neglected in favour of parenting. Two years ago a Treasury official suggested the ratio of public spending on parenting support to couple support was approximately 4000:1.⁶⁴ Focusing only on the contribution of the parenting relationship to the well-being of children neglects the well-being of the parents themselves and their capacity to provide for the well-being of children. Whilst the tax and benefits system can create a ‘marriage penalty’ for some people, it is far from universally agreed that fiscal incentives are the most effective response. This may be an area where cultural influence is more important (although fiscal incentives may give an important cultural signal even if the money does not of itself change behaviour or decisions). In their discussion paper on well-being, *The politics of happiness*, nef eloquently argues that cultural values and pressures restrict the individual’s freedom to make choices contrary to those values.⁶⁵ If happiness is defined culturally in ways that do not lead to well-being, in materialistic terms for example, it is much harder for the individual to choose to invest in relationships instead. There is a significant responsibility therefore for all those who shape culture, whether at a national level or for any sub-section of society, to promote those relationships, both in marriage and elsewhere, that enhance well-being.

Opportunity

The motivation to develop the relationships that make for well-being may be of little value if the opportunities to do this are constrained. In enabling people to build relationships, four factors merit particular consideration:

Time

This is foundational to relationships. People need to have enough time for the relationships that are key to their well-being, both now and in the future. Because our well-being depends upon other people we are also dependent on other people’s use of their time. People will not always invest their time in the activities that

contribute most to their well-being but they may also be constrained in their time allocations. Three examples of this are:

- *Working time.* Both the number of hours worked and when those hours occur will affect the availability of time to spend with others outside of work. Long working hours can affect relationships both directly, e.g. parents arriving home after children are asleep, and indirectly, e.g. through stress or tiredness. Irregular hours may also be significant if they reduce the amount of shared time off. This may be particularly important for couples, families (especially where children are at school during the week) and for community activities, such as sports clubs. Policy therefore might consider better protection for workers in terms of both number and timing of hours, and the implications of business becoming increasingly 24/7.
- *Travel time.* In his work on social capital Robert Putnam makes the suggestion that every ten minutes of commuting cuts all forms of civic engagement by ten percent.⁶⁶ There is of course no guarantee that time not spent travelling would be used for things that promote well-being. Yet this issue provides one illustration of how policy in a wide range of areas might impact well-being through the mechanism of time. This suggests that evaluating policy for its well-being impact may need a wide frame of reference. Investment in transport infrastructure and planning decisions that influence the relative location of work and home are obvious examples.
- *Targets and regulation.* We have already referred to the nature of professional responsibility for well-being. Their key contribution to well-being lies in the time spent in front-line relationships, whether these are teacher or teaching assistant to pupil, doctor to patient or social worker to client. The same is true for voluntary sector contributions. There are many pressures on this time. Reporting and accountability processes risk diverting time and energy from its most productive use. Accountability is important and can support performance improvement, yet the time costs can be disproportionate to the benefit. The time costs of organisational change are also often underestimated. Greater recognition that relationships are key to the achievement of outcomes needs to translate into accountability processes that enhance the development of relationships rather than detracting from them.

Place

The opportunity for physical presence changes the boundaries of possibility for a relationship. It enables higher bandwidth communication (touch, facial expression, body language, tone of voice) as well as practical support provision. Co-location also creates opportunity for relationship, and can be more inclusive for those who are not readily chosen to be members of non-geographic networks and communities. The spatial context of relationships can be influenced in ways that either aid or undermine well-being. Architecture, town planning, housing management and allocation can all affect how people encounter each other and build relationships.

Physical design is not the only influence. Where people are located or chose to locate, the extent of mobility and the frequency of moving all influence the development of family and community relationships. University education and first jobs are often a trigger for young people to move away from home. A recent survey by BT found that 60% of staff lived more than 100 miles from their place of origin.⁶⁷ Distance from family can lead to reduced family support for parents of young children, as well as greater difficulty in caring for elderly relatives. Some employers are therefore looking at ways of enabling employees to relocate in order to fulfil care responsibilities. The constrained choices of access to social housing can also make it difficult for extended families

to remain in close proximity, and housing allocation is thus one of the ways in which policy can support extended family relationships.

Social and relational skills

These are as much to do with the ability to take opportunities as the opportunities themselves, although the exercise of relational skills will tend to open up other opportunities. We are interested in exploring the potential for relational skills assessments in schools in order to encourage schools to focus more on this area. Assessments and league tables have brought with them the risk that breadth of curriculum and educational vision is lost in order to focus on improved attainment in specific areas. Yet relational skills are not only important for strengthening social well-being, they are also increasingly valued by employers. Some schools are already working on emotional literacy and seeing associated improvements in learning skills.⁶⁸ Relationships Foundation is interested to explore further how relational skills might best be developed and assessed within a school setting. It is, of course, important that any assessment helps ensure that those pupils who are most in need of developing relational skills are encouraged and supported to do so.

Social mobility

Access to education, the creation of job opportunities and the capacity to take these opportunities are important for well-being. This is one of the reasons why approaches to well-being that may weaken growth and employment need to be treated with caution. However, despite sustained economic growth, pockets of high-level unemployment persist and large number of young people remain out of education, employment or training. As a result, their opportunities to participate in many of the relationships that enhance well-being are constrained. There may be many factors in their lives which make accessing the most basic courses available a step too far without considerable support. One solution pioneered by Citylife,⁶⁹ an Industrial and Provident Society set up by Relationships Foundation, is the concept of employment bonds to generate local funds for job creation and supporting people back into work.

Support

Well-being is severely compromised by relationships that break down or are unhealthy. Support for relationships at difficult times, as well as education or other support to prevent problems, is therefore an important contribution to well-being. We believe that there are two main opportunities for greater support for relationships.

Relational support through public services

The first opportunity involves providing more relational support through the existing activities of public services. There are longer-term concerns about the increased demands on public services and reduced co-production associated with potential changes in family and community relationships that also affect well-being. Issues at stake may be the educational attainment of children, social care for elderly people, or costs of youth justice and community safety. The provision of more relational support is thus not just an immediate contribution to well-being, but potentially also important for the future.

A good example of the potential to provide support through existing activity which has been evaluated is the role of health visitors in providing support to new mothers' relationships with their partners.⁷⁰ This can be a stressful time in a relationship, but the opportunity to provide support and advice was being missed as health

visitors felt this was not their professional role and that they lacked the necessary skills. A short training course has been shown to enable them to give valued advice with significant health and relationship benefits. Because this takes place within existing activities it does not therefore require significant increases in funding. There may be many other under-utilised contact points, including community policing, extended schools, neighbourhood managers, district nurses, youth workers and many others. Too often those who have been able to build relationships with those who need support lack the time, commissioning authority or effective partnership relationships to secure the support provision that is needed. The support they provide themselves may not relate to their own targets and may therefore be disincentivised. We are therefore interested in mapping more closely the opportunities to provide support and the constraints encountered, to enable more effective use of existing budgets.

Relationships Education

The benefit of relationships education, for both couple and parenting relationships, has been supported by both Harry Benson of Bristol Family and Community Trust⁷¹ and ippr.⁷² In reviewing the literature Benson concludes that many of the factors present in couples headed for future trouble are dynamic and changeable and that preventive education is therefore an ideal intervention.⁷³ Funding for relationship education is limited, only £5 million in 2004/5, and is thus an area where much more could be done. Some evaluations have been mixed and further investment in this area should be accompanied by continuing evaluation of the most effective programmes. There is, however, already sufficient evidence that appropriate programmes can deliver real preventative dividends. Given the known financial and well-being costs of relationship breakdown, and the importance of the couple relationship in supporting parenting, investment in increasing the capacity to provide support and education should be considered a priority.

4. Where next?



The 30 second version

This report represents the beginning of our journey towards well-being. As we go forward, there are three particular issues to consider: the role of measuring well-being and how this might be done; how a well-being agenda might affect economic growth; and how to address the challenges that the message of well-being presents.

In this report we've identified the growing sense of a need to reconsider the goals for our nation and how to attain them. A new focus for these goals is commonly now being referred to in terms of 'well-being', but there has been a widespread lack of certainty about what exactly the goals of well-being are, how they might be attained and even whether these are really the right goals or just an added luxury on top of existing policy to make everyone feel a little bit happier.

Our review suggests that the goals for subjective well-being need to be broader than simply the feelings of happiness, and that they must be complemented by an objective dimension by which individuals are able to contribute to the well-being of others. We have also noted how a wide range of social connections affect well-being, and how a focus on encouraging relationships can be applied across a range of policy areas.

At this stage in the debate, our focus has been predominantly on the illustrative rather than the detailed and comprehensive in order to suggest the direction for future debate. We believe our account of well-being as 'thriving lives' helps to:

- Highlight the key areas of intervention
- Integrate the personal and social accounts of well-being
- Integrate a number of key debates on happiness, well-being and social capital
- Identify the indicators we will need to assess well-being

As we look forward, we see three particular issues that will need to be addressed.

Measurement

The ability to measure progress towards achieving goals is important in strengthening accountability and evaluating the effectiveness of different options. It may serve a number of purposes including assessing the progress of a nation, holding organisations to account for the use of public funds, enabling performance to be managed and improved, identifying and prioritising need, or evaluating the effectiveness of interventions either through predictive modelling or in assessing pilot projects.

Greater scrutiny and measurement of delivery in recent years has, however, brought greater recognition of the dangers. These include:

- Reductionism and a distortion of activity as the goal becomes what can be most easily measured, and what is less easily measured is neglected. There are particular dangers when measurement informs targets and creates the risk of perverse incentives and obstacles to collaboration.
- The integration and weighting of different elements. Where a number of indicators are being combined into some aggregate ranking, choices are not only made about which indicators to include but also about their relative importance. These are inevitably matters of judgment informed by different understandings of both the goals and the most significant factors influencing their achievement.
- Capturing time-delayed and indirect impacts. Snapshot measures, even if part of a regular series, may encourage a short-term focus and are not always suited to capturing progression. The risk is that the use of measurement encourages investment on initiatives more likely to show shorter-term results and may inadequately account for consequences that do not have clear causality.

There are a number of implications from our account of what it means to promote thriving lives through policy interventions that address the motivation, opportunity and support for relationships:

- Focusing on the social and objective dimensions of well-being means that individually reported life satisfaction will not be enough, although it may remain a useful mechanism for tracking differential experience of well-being. So, for example, survey findings that show having children may reduce reported life satisfaction are useful in indicating the pressures and challenges parents encounter, and that lone parents on low incomes face particular difficulties. But if the goal is to measure national progress then it is important that the care of others and the sustenance of the social fabric are also counted.
- Recognition of the range of overlapping responsibilities for well-being needs to be built into any assessment of outcomes. The importance of individual responsibility may mean, for example, that policies for well-being are best evaluated in terms of their enabling capacity, since the outcome depends on other contributions. There is a sense in which relationships can be seen in similar terms to Sen's account of freedom as both a goal and means of development.⁷⁴ Relationships are too often depicted as a constraint on individual freedom (by virtue of the commitments and obligations they properly entail), but it is only through relationships we have the opportunity to become or do anything. Assessing whether people have the kinds of relationships that enable their well-being, and whether policies and organisations are increasing this capacity, will therefore be a useful approach.
- Thriving describes growth rather than a fixed destination. Measures of progress may therefore be more relevant than some absolute yardsticks. This may be particularly important in assessing the well-being of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people where progress is often slow, erratic, in small steps and over extended periods. If their most significant progress is in the rebuilding of their relationships and their capacity to relate, then this will require very different measures to the typical outcomes of improved skills, qualifications, health or employment status.
- A single approach or a single aggregate measure of well-being is likely to be of limited value. Thriving is a rich concept that cannot be neatly captured in models and includes value judgements about the kinds of relationships that are desired. It is therefore better to have a range of 'windows' into the issue which serve to mark progress or alert us to potential problems, with different models and measures likely to be better at picking up different aspects of thriving.

We believe that there are two approaches to assessing relationships that could be developed as a contribution to the assessment of thriving lives. The first would involve developing more rigorous ways of assessing the impact of policies and organisational practices on the preconditions for relationships. The model described in the appendix is a framework that has been used in the context of evaluating policy implementation, for example with regard to new primary care organisations, and can be used within and between organisations to survey specific relationships, but would need to be developed for use in assessing personal relationships or for more detailed modelling of relational impacts.

The second would involve some overall assessment of the health and state of the various relationships that contribute to and constitute well-being. This is likely to involve a range of proxy indicators. Indicators of intra-community relationships for example might include crime and vandalism levels, trust in strangers, or people knowing the names of their neighbours. The challenge and difficulties here are similar to those faced in the measurement of social capital, though we would be seeking a clearer assessment of the range of relationships discussed in section two rather than seeking to compile an aggregate measure.

Economic impact

One of the reasons why some people have been reluctant to embrace the well-being agenda is because of concerns about the implications for economic growth. The familiar chart that pits growing GDP or personal income against stagnant life satisfaction levels is often misused to argue that economic growth is the wrong strategy for achieving well-being.

Of course, the picture is far less straightforward. Leaving aside the inadequacy of simple life satisfaction measures discussed earlier, it would seem valid to say that economic growth is not a sufficient condition for well-being. Indeed, this is not particularly surprising given what we have seen of the importance of positive relationships for well-being and the relative independence between the two factors of money and relationships. Yet we cannot say that economic growth is therefore not necessary for well-being.

In fact, a lack of economic growth may seriously undermine well-being if it increases poverty and unemployment or limits the provision of social goods such as health and education which are derived from economic activity. This leads us to another interesting line of argument that well-being isn't affected by how much money you have, but what you do with it. Robert Frank argues that money can indeed buy happiness if we use it in ways that boost well-being such as investing in the environment or buying a smaller house but with a shorter commute. He believes that the reason why life satisfaction levels haven't grown with income is that there has been greater conspicuous consumption (e.g. larger houses or cars) to which we easily adapt, but little net increase in 'inconspicuous consumption' (e.g. freedom from traffic congestion or time with friends and family) which has a more enduring effect on well-being.⁷⁵

The link between well-being and the economy therefore needs to be considered carefully. Some interventions to strengthen relationships may have short-run growth costs, for example through reduced labour market efficiency. But there may be longer-term benefits of avoiding the costs of low well-being (e.g. in health, crime, education and social welfare). One avenue for future investigation is to see where there is greatest immediate dividend for well-being for lowest or no short-run reduction in growth, and where there is the greatest potential for long-run growth dividends.

Whilst the immediate costs or benefits may be relatively easy to model and estimate, the longer-term consequences that are shaped by the interplay of different policies in different areas are much more difficult to

measure. Given that future consequences are hard to predict, and therefore likely to be significantly discounted, it may prove more useful and practical to take a similar approach to social capital, assessing whether a particular package of policies is preserving or increasing the state of the relationships that will be a source of well-being in the future. If the short run impact on the state of relationships is acceptable, the long-term dividends of thriving lives are likely to accrue.

The attractiveness and challenge of thriving lives

Happiness is an attractive language: it is hard to say you oppose happiness. Well-being is also part of the positive sounding language that is fairly easy in this debate, even if the content is at times vague or divergent. But the fact that we make choices that do not always maximise our well-being suggests that there are powerful competing attractions, or that the goal of thriving lives is elusive and hard to attain.

Promoting the concept of thriving lives has both attractions and challenges. While some well-being approaches rely on a measure of dictating individual choice, a focus on relationships as the key to well-being allows for a more positive, less authoritarian, role for government of encouraging, enabling and supporting. Yet there may also be parts of the package that both politicians and public find less easy to accept. Promoting the benefits of marriage for well-being or the restriction of working hours will cause difficulties for different people. For those people whose identity, security and status is closely linked to their wealth and possessions, shifting the focus to relationships will not necessarily be easy.

There is, however, one core message at the heart of our account of thriving lives that is a challenge for everyone. It is that we have an obligation to seek the well-being of others, and that this may, at times, require us to hold loosely to our own well-being. If policy is to go beyond simply picking up any pieces that fall as a consequence of individuals decisions, and is to encourage the promotion of thriving lives as, at least in part, a collective task, then it will enter the difficult terrain of influencing choices in a pro well-being direction.

Conclusion

Our hope is that the well-being agenda can follow the same path as the increasingly successful environmental agenda.⁷⁶ Most of us are quite good at looking after our own bit of the environment as far as it affects us, although there are certainly many whose actions are more harmful than beneficial. But our choices don't only affect us personally. They affect other people around us, and even contribute to the whole global climate such that people in other parts of the world and in future generations might have their lives impacted by what we do here and now. Some people have realised this for years and have been acting responsibly without anyone having to tell them what to do. For others, there is only now a growing realisation that the stakes are high and that the responsibility doesn't just fall to government or business, but to every single individual.

There is certainly satisfaction in acting responsibly, though there is inconvenience too. Yet we willingly accept limits to our 'freedom' for the sake of a greater purpose, and as culture and expectations shift, the costs are increasingly accepted as part of life and cease to be costs at all.

The situation with well-being is exactly the same. Our choices clearly affect our own well-being. But they also have a direct effect on others, and our individual choices collectively affect the society we live in, with repercussions across the globe and into the future.

The well-being agenda is in many ways a harder message to promote because it is much less tangible. We can't measure a 'social footprint' in the way that we can calculate our carbon footprint. But the effects are no less real, and the responsibility for our social environment lies with all of us.

Millions of us make positive contributions to the lives of others every day as parents, carers, neighbours and friends. But there is clearly much more that needs to be done to ensure well-being now and safeguard it in the future. The evidence is beginning to mount, both for the scale of the issue and the role we each play. Culture is also showing a shift towards a higher valuing of relationships. Now it is time for political leadership to look at where we are currently heading, put forward a vision for the destination, and help us to get there.

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Appendix: the preconditions for relationships

Well-being is best thought of as the state of a system that can be tended and influenced, not as an outcome to be delivered. Supportive personal relationships cannot be legislated into existence: they can be encouraged, supported or undermined. A useful way of exploring the interface between policy and relationships is to look at a framework of preconditions for relationships. These help to identify some of the characteristics of relationships that are likely to enhance well-being, as well as the conditions that tend to foster such relationships.

From our experience we have observed five key dimensions of relationships:

1. **Directness** looks at the nature and degree of presence (physical or emotional) in a relationship and how this presence is mediated by technology (eg phone, email, video conference), time or other people. The experience of encountering the presence of another reflects a desire for 'connectedness' and is at times, an end in itself. It also has functional benefits in enabling more effective communication and group bonding.

Directness matters not just for the quality of communication it enables, but also because other tasks require physical presence. A phone call to an elderly relative is not the same as a visit, where practical assistance can also be offered. With many employees living some distance away from relatives, facilitating elder care (as well as relocation to fulfil care responsibilities) is one area where organisations can assist the task of maintaining social sustainability. In promoting social sustainability within communities public policy should seek to avoid diminishing directness in family and community relationships. Just as office size and design influences patterns of communication (most people won't walk very far for face to face contact), so too urban planning and architecture influence patterns of encounter. Housing policy may need to address the need for a higher number of larger multi-generational units, for example.

2. **Continuity.** Time is the currency of relationships, and so time use within a relationship as well as the overall length and stability of the relationship is a second dimension to consider. Relationships are distinguished from interactions by the way in which the present encounter is shaped by the experience of previous interactions and expectations of future interactions. High levels of turnover in a relationship break this informational continuity, can reduce accountability as people are no longer around when the consequences of actions come to light, and can disincentivise investment in relationships if they are expected to be short-lived.

Trust and understanding take time to develop. Lack of time spent in building and maintaining a relationship can lead to poor communication and misunderstandings. But many people experience acute time pressure as a result of the demands of multiple relationships, increased expectations of time productivity and requirement for fast turnaround. Time for key social relationships is therefore one important indicator of sustainability. Shared time is important for both family and community and so high levels of unsocial hours, particularly where employees are required to work them, could be a negative indicator. Working both weekend days can create particular problems for parents of school age children. 'Shift parenting' resulting from income pressures and the lack of provision of reasonably priced childcare is certainly detrimental to strong couple relationships. Frequent relocation can disrupt both extended family and community relationships as roots and belonging take time to develop.

The continuity aspect of continuity can thus be summarised as a concern for the overall duration of a relationship, change management processes that preserve continuity (eg through effective handovers),

time allocation within and between relationships, flexibility and control over time, and recognition of the time costs imposed on others.

3. **Multiplexity** refers to the breadth of knowledge in relationship. Limited knowledge can cause misunderstandings (eg not realising the pressures that counterparts face) or missed opportunities (not knowing someone's skills, contacts or interests means their contribution may not be invited). Ensuring that relationships are conducted in a way that enables this knowledge to be gained is therefore important. Meeting in different contexts can aid this as it allows the expression of different skills and interests to be seen.

Not knowing the needs and circumstances of employees and their families may mean that companies do not act or respond appropriately. The impact of changes in working practices or times may be misunderstood, not only causing problems in staff relations, but also with unintended (and perhaps unrealised) consequences for family and community relationships.

Similarly companies need to know what they can usefully contribute in community engagement, and external stakeholders need to understand what works for the company. Lack of mutual awareness of needs, capacities and interests may mean that opportunities for positive impacts may go unmissed. Or, more negatively, limited understanding of the community may lead to 'white elephant' projects which are underused, ineffective or unsustainable.

Assessing multiplexity focuses on whether this is adequate breadth of knowledge (which may require perception gap analysis) as well as the processes for gaining and sharing that knowledge. Multiple knowledge may be retained within personal relationships but not transferred to organisational relationships. Where decision making processes increasingly strip out this contextual knowledge, mistakes can occur.

4. **Parity** is concerned with the use of power within the relationship. It recognises that there may be legitimate power differentials, but seeks the use of power in ways that build relationships by fostering participation and conveying respect. The fair distribution of risks and rewards is also important in this regard.

This touches on many of the issues commonly raised in 'employee' indicators. Pay differentials, consultation processes, policies on bullying and discrimination are all relevant. These tend not to capture the culture, though, which is often more powerful. The 'rules' may be right but the actual experience awful. Running a 'relational health check' would add flesh and colour.

A lack of parity is corrosive and tends to lead to disengagement, or destructive behaviour within the relationship, and can therefore seriously undermine sustainability. Concerns are often raised about the power differential between large multinationals and some of the communities within which they operate, particularly where the community feel excluded from the relationship with host government. Consultation and participation in decision making, equity in the distribution of risk and reward, and dignity and respect in the conduct of the relationship are all important aspects of parity to explore.

5. **Commonality** looks at the extent to which goals and/or identity are shared. Divergent goals and priorities create strain in relationships. The 'real' or personal agenda can be very different to the official line, and so commonality must look beneath the glib surface statements of agreement to that which really motivates and informs priorities. Difference enriches relationships, and thus a second element of commonality is the extent to which diversity can be embraced under some shared identity or purpose.

One issue here is whether the meaning/content of 'social sustainability' is understood and shared, and whether these are part of the motivating goals for people as citizens, residents, employees or interest group members. If not, there may be a completely different 'real' agenda. It's important to dig behind the surface statements - everyone may say they're working for the good of the community but mean different things and have competing priorities.

Professional, ethnic and faith cultures can all differ. Failure to understand and manage these differences can create conflict and misunderstanding. Commonality does not require people to be the same, rather it is concerned with the robustness of the unifying focus of the relationship. Different relationships have different 'centres of gravity' for their commonality. It may be the customer or service user or the target-setter (whether government or investors). Within a complex system the unifying gravitational centre must be stronger than the other potential accountabilities that may pull the relationships apart.

The fullness of relationship is not always sought. Fear of risk and obligation may outweigh the perceived benefits of the possibilities that are opened up. But it is also sometime unnecessarily constrained. Building relational proximity involves reducing a number of 'gaps' that limit the achievement of the above:

- *The mediation gap.* People and technology create indirect connectedness. They can increase the feeling of connectedness to the extent that they help to overcome other gaps which may be spatial or to do with power (advocates and brokers). But people and technology can also result in edited, lower bandwidth connections within which the 'other' is less fully encountered.
- *Temporal gaps.* Long intervals between encounters may reduce the perceived significance of that particular 'relational story' and lead to a reduced sense of the enduring presence of the other. Continuity may be concerned with either reducing the duration and frequency of these gaps, or with managing them so that the story of the relationship can continue to unfold, and awareness of the presence of the other be maintained.
- *Knowledge gaps.* There are known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. Breadth of information is gained through encounter in different contexts, through learning from other people, and from the ability and desire to acquire information in the context of encounters. Reducing the gap between each party's knowledge of themselves and the other party's knowledge of them reduces misunderstanding and false assumptions. And because we don't know what we need to know, or what can be known, the greater the breadth of knowledge the less the risk that important knowledge will be missed.
- *Power gaps.* Power differentials, particularly without checks, balances and accountability, are risky. Aversion to experiencing injustice is more deeply rooted in our nature than the commitment to promote justice for others. Where respect for self differs significantly from respect for other and/or from other (either more or less), power is more likely to be abused.
- *Alignment gaps.* Divergence of goals and identity can weaken relationships. It is not difference that matters – indeed it is often enriching – but the inability to align those differences around some common reference points.

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