Towards an interdisciplinary approach to wellbeing: Life histories and Self-Determination Theory in rural Zambia

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A B S T R A C T

What are the prospects for a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and methodologically plural approach to wellbeing? This question is addressed using Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a psychological theory based on quantitative empirical methods, to structure qualitative analysis of wellbeing in life history interviews in Chiawa, rural Zambia. Enquiry goes beyond simply reading across methods, disciplines and contexts, to consider fundamental differences in constructions of the human subject, and how these relate to understandings of wellbeing. Field research took place in two periods, August–November, 2010 and 2012. Analysis draws primarily on 46 individual case studies, conducted through open-ended interviews. These were identified through a survey with an average of 390 male and female household heads in each round, including 25% female headed households. As SDT predicts, the interviews confirm its key elements of autonomy, competence and relatedness as vital to wellbeing. However, these are expressed in ways that highlight material and relational, rather than psychological, factors. Key findings are: the mutual constitution of autonomy, competence and relatedness; the appreciation of autonomy as independence in action; the importance of social competence; and the centrality of relatedness. People appear as social and above all moral subjects. The paper concludes by endorsing SDT's utility in interdisciplinary approaches to wellbeing, but only if it admits its own cultural grounding in the construction of a psychological subject. This would go beyond recognising that autonomy, competence and relatedness may take socially and culturally distinctive forms, to questioning their universal status as basic psychological needs. Implications for organisations working on wellbeing are discussed.

1. Introduction

Is wellbeing universal, or does it take culturally specific forms? Responses generally divide by discipline and methodology, with quantitative researchers (especially in psychology and economics) tending to favour universality, while qualitative researchers (especially in sociology and social anthropology) tend to emphasise diversity. This paper seeks to speak across this divide, asking whether qualitative analysis of life history narratives supports the key tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Based on quantitative methods, wellbeing is theorised in SDT to result from the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). To provide a hard case for claims of SDT's universalism, our study's participants are men and women in rural Zambia. This contrasts with most studies of SDT, which draw mainly on educational and urban contexts, predominantly in the Americas, Europe, Australasia, and East Asia.

The paper explores three questions: 1) Does qualitative analysis of Zambian life histories, generated through open, minimally structured interviews, identify competence, autonomy and relatedness as critical to wellbeing? 2) If so, *how* do competence, autonomy and relatedness appear, and does this confirm or challenge the ways they are identified in SDT? 3) Do the tenets of SDT, which assume a psychological subject, hold for a societal context where people may not prioritise the psychological in their representations of self? The enquiry thus goes beyond simply reading across methods, disciplines and contexts, to considering fundamental differences in constructions of the human subject, and how these relate to understandings of wellbeing.

The broader context of this paper is widespread interest not only in thinking about wellbeing, but also in working on and with it, across a broad range of health, social care, education, employment, and project, programme or policy evaluation settings. Talking with people who work with wellbeing in service delivery was in fact what inspired us to write this paper. They repeatedly raise three issues. First, they want a simple, robust model of wellbeing that can be translated into practical terms for programmatic use. Second, they feel the typically quantitative

concern for comparative measurement of progress and perhaps wider generalisation of results. Third, they share the typically qualitative concern with context, that the measures they use should be appropriate for the population they serve and the particular programmes they provide.

Generic measures of Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) as life satisfaction and/or affect balance are attractive as being light and easy to apply and widely validated. They have, however, two limitations. First, they provide insight into hedonic aspects of wellbeing but not eudaemonic concerns with meaning, fulfilment or flourishing (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Stone and Mackie, 2013). Second, they indicate *levels* of happiness or wellbeing, but provide no substantive content as to what these reflect. Interpreting the meaning of SWB scores may thus not be straightforward, as it requires psychometric or econometric analysis which is beyond the scope of many organisations focused on service-delivery.

We decided, then, to look for a more substantive approach, that specified some content rather than simply measured levels of wellbeing. There are many of these, from domain-based models of Psychological Wellbeing (e.g. Ryff, 1989) to multi-level frameworks which look towards organizational and community change (e.g. Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2006). We chose SDT for the following reasons. First, SDT seems to combine optimum levels of specification and openness, being sufficiently defined that it clearly identifies key variables, while sufficiently open that these can take contextually specific forms. Second, its key concepts are capable of evaluation through a variety of methods. Third, SDT goes beyond simply modelling wellbeing, to being a theory about what promotes it. Fourth, the concentration within SDT on three key dimensions makes it practical for wider adoption. The more complex the model, the less portable it becomes.

While the paper arises from concern with the application of wellbeing in programmes and projects, its primary focus is the way we *think* about wellbeing, which ultimately structures planning and action. We begin by considering the construction of human subject that underlies different approaches to wellbeing. Cultural perspectives on SDT are then explored, followed by a review of how ethnographic research in Zambia identifies competence, autonomy and relatedness. The methods and findings of the present study are then described. The paper closes by considering whether the key tenets of SDT are supported in this context, and thus the prospects for a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and methodologically plural approach to wellbeing.

2. Modelling the subject of wellbeing

Central to constructions of wellbeing is the understanding of the self. This is, however, often so taken for granted as to go unremarked. In cross-cultural studies it is more likely to be noted, and is rendered most commonly through the contrast between individualism and collectivism. This identifies cultures as varying according to whether they promote personal growth, independence and self-reliance on the one hand or accommodation, interdependence and reciprocal support on the other (Miller, 2002). This is expected to affect construals of wellbeing. Triandis, for example, states:

‘well-being for collectivists depends on fitting in and having good relationships with the in-group … while for individualists it depends on satisfaction with the self … Thus, individualists sample mostly personal emotions, while collectivists sample mostly norms, obligations, duties.’ (Triandis, 1999, p.129).

As Miller (2002) remarks, the collectivism/individualism binary still assumes the ontological primacy of the individual, who in individualist cultures prioritises his/her own interests, and in collectivist cultures subordinates them to the group. Other branches of psychology suggest instead that persons are fundamentally inter-related (Christopher, 1999) or being itself is intrinsically relational (Gergen, 2009). In anthropology the social and cultural construction of personhood is a long established and lively debate, with a strong emphasis on more relational perspectives (e.g. Carsten, 2004).

Overlaying such debates is a distinct but related question: what kind of subject are humans taken to be? Different disciplines have their own constructs, with political science constituting people as political subjects, sociology as social subjects, economics as economic subjects, and so on. But beyond this is a strong trend within contemporary Euro-American culture, to represent human beings as above all *psychological* subjects, prioritising how people are thinking and feeling over other dimensions of life (e.g. Rose, 1998; Thomson, 2006). While its cheerleaders may be psychologists and behavioural economists, this is a broad cultural trend which spreads far beyond the academy. The explosion of contemporary interest in happiness and wellbeing is itself an expression of this trend, and has brought a shift in the way wellbeing is understood. From earlier debates about politics and welfare, wellbeing is now commonly viewed as a property of individuals and predominantly construed in cognitive or affective terms (Sointu, 2005).

Research on wellbeing in the global south has, by contrast, emphasised how subjective experience is intertwined with material and relational dimensions of welfare and wellbeing (e.g. Gough and McGregor, 2007; White with Blackmore, 2015). Michael Jackson (2011), for example, argues that understandings of wellbeing amongst the Kuranko people of Sierra Leone are grounded in their experience of material scarcity. Wellbeing is thus ‘less a reflection on whether or not one has realized one's hopes than a matter of learning how to live within limits' (Jackson, 2011, p. 61). Wellbeing is also profoundly relational. The challenge is not to subordinate one's own interests to those of the group, as Triandis suggests, but:

‘to find a more bearable balance between personal needs and the equally imperative needs of others. By implication, well-being could not be found within oneself but only in relation to significant others.’ (Jackson, 2011, p.184).

The underlying model here is not a psychological, but a social subject. This does not deny the importance of thought, feelings and reflection, any more than a psychological subject denies the importance of inter-personal interaction. What it does, however, is ground the individual in the social, giving priority to social relations and practice as the primary focus of investigation and source of explanation. It is a social, rather than psychological, subject that is found in ethnographic representations of Zambia and Africa more broadly. This also resonates with the ways people in Chiawa describe wellbeing and narrate their selves, as described in more detail below.

3. Self-Determination Theory in cultural perspective

Inspired by humanistic psychology, SDT defines wellbeing as ‘the actualization of human potentials’ (Ryan and Deci, 2001, p.143). Wellbeing follows the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs, ‘innate, organismic necessities’ which must be met, or harm will result (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p.229). These are competence – the ability to tackle challenging tasks successfully; relatedness – connection with supportive others; and autonomy – defined not as independence from others, but that choices are self-determined. This definition of autonomy is critical to SDT's claims to universalism: what matters is not whether values are individualist or collectivist, but whether the individual fully endorses them.

In SDT a dialectic is posed between psychological processes and social contexts which provide different levels of ‘ambient support’ (*ibid.*) for the fulfilment of these needs. If contexts are ‘excessively controlling, over-challenging, or rejecting’, positive, growth-oriented psychological processes will be replaced by negative, defensive ones (*ibid.*). Contextual, cultural and developmental factors are acknowledged to affect ‘the modes of expression, the means of satisfaction, and the ambient supports’ for basic needs (Ryan and Deci, 2001, p.147). However, the main thrust of cross-cultural research on SDT has been to emphasise the universal and essential role of autonomy (e.g. Chirkov