



Narratives of Wellbeing

Edited by Tarryn Phillips · Natalie Araújo
Timothy Willem Jones · John Taylor

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CHAPTER 1

Interrogating ‘Wellbeing’ Through a Narrative Frame

*Tarryn Phillips, Natalie Araújo, Timothy Willem Jones,
and John Taylor*

INTRODUCTION

‘Wellbeing’ has become a buzzword, humming in conversations across the globe. Policymakers draw on the concept to justify, evaluate and retract policy agendas. Corporate managers and university executives embrace the language of wellbeing, ostensibly to ensure the welfare of their employees with the added incentive of increasing productivity. A multi-billion dollar ‘happiness’ industry revolves around the commodification and marketing of wellness products, and, accordingly, consumer culture spends a significant proportion of income in the pursuit of wellness (Illouz, 2018). The

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popularity of the concept across all these spheres indicates an important social aspiration to improve quality of life across a range of areas. Yet, as wellbeing scholar Sarah White notes, constant references to wellbeing also indicate a ‘broader anxiety that all may not be well in late capitalist modernity’ (2017, p. 121).

While some scholars highlight useful distinctions between ‘wellbeing’, ‘happiness’, ‘quality of life’ and ‘wellness’, these terms are often used interchangeably and tend to do similar conceptual work. In this volume, we examine them as a bundle of connected logics. Given the aura of positivity surrounding these concepts, they are often embraced in an uncritical fashion, which assumes there are universal understandings about improvements in health and happiness that are relatively straightforward to measure. By contrast, the critical turn in wellbeing studies—which this book seeks to define and advance—asks not only how wellbeing can be defined and measured but what is created and excluded by the process of striving for and articulating wellbeing. In this introductory chapter, we trace this critical literature as our point of departure, before exploring how adopting a narrative frame can extend this scholarship.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO WELLBEING

The concept of wellbeing rose in popularity alongside an increasing imperative to measure and govern populations. Tellingly, the very term ‘statistics’ was developed to measure human happiness and inform the implementation of social policy (Oman, 2021). Wellbeing has, moreover, taken on particular meaning with the rise of neoliberal ideology in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. While neoliberalisation has played out in culturally variable and non-linear ways across the globe (Brenner et al., 2010), its values have crept into many aspects of social and political life, including the concept that individuals have responsibility for their own welfare, the assumed merits of economic growth through capitalist free markets and competition, and the imperative to privatise public goods and social services. Proponents of neoliberalism once argued that wealth obtained in this regime would ‘trickle down’ from elites to create broad prosperity, yet it is now widely accepted that these forces have contributed to widening inequality (Schrecker & Bamba, 2015). This system has particularly disadvantaged countries in the Global South, yet wealthier nations in the Global North have pockets of shameful inequality, particularly in relation to First Nations communities. The dramatic economic

downturn of COVID-19 has only rendered more visible—and exacerbated—these gaps, both within and between countries (Ryan, 2020).

A focus on wellbeing is sometimes put forward as a corrective to the failures of capitalism. Bhutan famously developed the 'gross happiness index' as an alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—the neoliberal measuring tool for human progress—and numerous international happiness polls and wellbeing indexes have followed. Since concepts of wellbeing are often positioned as counter to the Western obsession with economic growth and expansion, this in turn renders them political and, often, racialised. Wellness products such as mindfulness, yoga, and massage are typically based on orientalist readings of Eastern religious concepts (Ahmed, 2010). In the Pacific, constructions of Indigenous happiness are used to lure Western tourists to Fiji, the idea being that by travelling to 'paradise', prospective travellers can learn from their naturally smiling Indigenous hosts, who in turn are cast as unconcerned with the stressors of workaday life (Phillips et al., 2021). These images draw on colonially entrenched and infantilising stereotypes of the 'happy native' and imply that Pacific Islanders are naturally content with their lot, despite being monetarily poor and continually exploited by low wages in the tourism sector (Phillips et al., 2021). Such cultural essentialisms that tether wellbeing to simplicity and humility in non-Western contexts are highly problematic because they romanticise and further entrench longstanding inequalities. On the flipside, however, other cultural groups have become figureheads for the opposite of wellbeing—suffering—as depicted in Michael Jackson's contribution to this volume. While Sierra Leone is consistently ranked near the bottom of global quality of life indices, the suggestion that impoverished lives are bereft of wellbeing is to negate the meaning given to (and contentment found in) 'family, friendship, community and attachment to home'. These seemingly contradictory fetishes about Indigenous lives—as either authentically happy or wretched—are both steeped in colonial thought and reveal what happens when Western constructs of wellbeing are more widely imposed.

Critical scholars argue that discourses about wellbeing can also justify and reproduce the neoliberal status quo. The focus of wellbeing (and its brother concept of 'resilience') situates responsibility for health and welfare on the shoulders of individuals, while also veiling structural inequalities that limit one's capacity to thrive. Individualistic notions of wellbeing blame individuals for any misfortune they experience, which then alleviates corporate employers, nation-states and the global community from a

duty of care. In turn, by localising blame, individuals are alienated from each other, which has the effect of ‘privatising suffering’ and stops people from collectively challenging the system (Ehrenreich, 2009). Compounding matters, the capitalist system nurtures a culture of optimism and ‘positive thinking’. We are relentlessly sold the idea that ‘the good life’—including equality, economic stability, more quality time with friends and family, and happiness—is within reach, even though global conditions make this unlikely for the majority of the world’s population (Berlant, 2011). More insidiously, to achieve this elusive ‘good life’, people are encouraged to work hard, contribute in prescribed ways to the economy, and consume material goods—all discourses that valorise and enrich the neoliberal economy and erase the ongoing impacts of colonisation. Highlighting the dangers of buying into such disempowering discourses of ‘positive thinking’ with respect to First Nations people in postcolonial Australia, Chelsea Watego writes succinctly: ‘fuck hope’ (2021).

There is a vast contemporary literature that seeks to define and measure wellbeing from different disciplinary angles, including from development studies, economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology and social epidemiology. Indeed, increasingly, universities are offering qualifications in the interdisciplinary field of *Wellbeing Studies*. Some scholars tend to focus on subjective wellbeing, or whether people *feel* well or happy, while others focus on objective indicators of wellbeing, such as people’s status in terms of employment, income, health, education and so on (Martela & Sheldon, 2019; Stiglitz et al., 2010). Even amongst economists and data scientists, there is a growing consensus that GDP, income and expenditure surveys, and health data cannot solely account for wellbeing, and that people’s perceptions of happiness are pivotal and context-dependant (Voukelatou et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the measuring tools usually proffered as alternatives still tend to approach wellbeing from an individualistic perspective and negate the role that community and culture play in wellbeing (Page-Reeves, 2019).

Some important scholarly interventions have sought to move away from individualist formations of wellbeing and to meaningfully capture how quality of life is experienced, conceptualised and strived for in a variety of everyday cultural contexts. Shreya Jha and Sarah White, for example, have advanced the concept of *relational wellbeing* (White, 2017; White & Jha, 2014). Drawing on relational ontology, this concept posits that individuals are constituted by their social, material, spatial and spiritual relationships. This enables a close examination of how wellbeing is

shaped and constrained by relationality—paying as much attention to, on the one hand, individual agency, navigation and fluidity, and, on the other, the ‘stickiness’ of embedded power structures (Ahmed, 2004; White, 2017). Similarly, scholars in the 2019 volume edited by Janet Page-Reeves, aptly titled *Well-being as a Multidimensional Concept*, have argued for the need for a ‘broader lens’ to better understand the role of culture and community in enabling (or hindering) health and wellbeing. Going further, Emily Mendenhall and Lesley Jo Weaver (2019) argue that it is important for disciplines such as anthropology and epidemiology to work together in their studies of wellbeing—despite divergent definitions and intellectual histories—if they are going to be able to improve equity and ultimately health outcomes. Similarly, editors of the volume *Wellbeing and Schooling* argue that cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspectives on wellbeing are crucial to get past the ‘monocultural, monodisciplinary and monomethodological’ way it has been approached in the past (McLellan et al., 2022). To encourage such an approach, Wright and colleagues argue that wellbeing is best understood as an ‘assemblage’, with ‘interconnected knowledges, discourses and practices that both constitute and address the “problem” of wellbeing’ (Wright, & McLeod., J., & Flenley, R., 2022).

It is telling that critical approaches like these must emphasise words like ‘multidimensional’, ‘interdisciplinary’, ‘relational’ and ‘cross-sectoral’ in their definitions of wellbeing and recommendations for how to improve it. These are all joining words: responses to the fragmented and atomised ways in which being healthy and living well have historically been defined and studied from a Western, biomedical perspective. Similarly, wellbeing scholars often include an inventory of dimensions that *should* be covered by the concept. Consider, for example, this summary, which argues that relational wellbeing

means not only the social relational dynamics that seem relatively obvious (e.g., family, personal ties and friendships, social networks, and community connections) but also relationships that individuals and communities have with places (e.g., land, the natural environment, sacred spaces, and locations of experiences), with the spiritual realm, with historical experience (both individual and group), and with ideas, concepts, and identities that embody meaning or value. (Page-Reeves & McKinney, 2019)

The need to provide a list of domains—as we also often do in this volume—reveals the lack of words in the English language to capture holism

with respect to health and wellbeing. This is perhaps best illustrated by the advent of hyphenated terms like ‘bio-psycho-social’ and ‘socio-emotional’, biomedicine’s clunky attempts to expand its historically dualistic approach to mind and body. In stark contrast, many First Nations languages have words in regular usage that intrinsically define health and wellbeing in all-encompassing ways: in Yawuru country in North-Western Australia, for example, the word for wellbeing, *mabu liyan* (literally ‘good feeling’ or ‘inner spirit’) means to ‘weave people, culture and country together’ (Nyamba Buru Yawuru, 2020). In other words, no list is required when the language and culture already conceive of wellbeing in a relational way.

NEW INSIGHTS ON WELLBEING THROUGH A NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

In this volume, we take these threads of historically situated, culturally contextual, critical, relational and everyday approaches to wellbeing as our point of departure. To extend scholarly conversations, this volume thus draws together contributions that critically examine wellbeing through a narrative framework. Narratives are a window into the temporal nature of human experience (Ricoeur, 1979) and narratives of *wellbeing* reveal how the aspiration to live well is socio-culturally and individually mediated.

Narrative theory specifically prompts us to think about how we understand and produce the world through storytelling, and, in turn, how stories are refracted through our experiences of the world. We ask, how is being well navigated, interpreted, articulated and/or brought into being through the construction of narrative in a range of different settings? And what *work* is done by stories about wellbeing in each of these contexts? As Arendt (1958) noted, the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves and others, form essential components both of identity making and of the transformation of private and public life. Narrative structures enable ‘individuals to locate themselves within history and culture, whence they can construct a self-identity narrative that connects the past to the present’ and help one imagine a future (Yekenkurul, 2011, p. 55). In this way, narratives form an essential element of self-reflexivity. They are a means by which people engage in sense-making and sort through complex emotions and experiences.

In her work on everyday disruption, Gaylene Becker (1999, pp. 191–192) argues that in addition to informing self-identity, narrative

works to reinforce the 'construct of continuity', an impulse that she identifies as felt and acted upon by individuals as they seek to project a semblance of order and purpose within their lives. This accords with Rasmussen's (1995, p. 164) argument that narrative offers stability to individuals by linking past and future and 'giving a sense of continuity to an ever changing story of the self'. Narrative offers the individual a pathway to cohesion or what Giddens (2016, p. 513) refers to as 'unification' in the face of the intentional and extensional fragmentation of modernity. The construction and protection of narrative identity may provide stability to notions of self-identity.

However, the centrality of narrative to human experience extends beyond the project of self-reflexivity. Jackson (2002) reminds us that narrative is more often aimed at transforming relations, both positively and negatively, between selves and across divergent lived experiences of the world. To this end, narrative is also a tool of transformation and an act of imagination and creation. Reflecting on Levi-Strauss' work on myth, Bruner (1997, p. 266) maintains that 'if classificatory schemes provide a science of the concrete, narrative schemes may provide a science of the imagination'. For Bruner, narrative structure emphasises the ways in which we seek to order and sequence that which matters to us, to give shape to the world not as it is, but as we imagine it to be.

While narrative plays a critically important role in how individuals make sense of the world, the construction of a narrative is never a solitary endeavour. Instead, by its very nature, narrative is dependent on the existence of both an addresser or 'storyteller' and addressee or 'audience' (Araújo, 2018). This is true even where the audience is not materially embodied but instead exists as 'inner alter' or 'other-in-the-self' (see Salgado & Hermans, 2009; Marková, 2006), or as a 'super-addressee', such as God, the universe, or a 'scientific community' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 126). Taking the intersubjective context of storytelling as a starting point, Jackson (2002, p. 18) argues that deployment of narrative as a means of expression and sense-making does not rely on or create fixed meaning. Rather, given that stories or narratives are produced for others as well as for selves, depend upon shared meaning and work to transform personal relationships, they are inherently unstable and dynamic. Narratives, then, both offer insight into the continuity we seek in our understanding of the world and the dynamics of change and relationality we experience.

To this end, the notion of ‘narrative’ which frames this volume incorporates interconnected attributes. First, and most immediately and obviously, it denotes the stories that people tell about their life experiences, the mechanisms through which they articulate their understandings of themselves and their worlds. The notion of narrative deployed here also draws attention to the ways in which individual narratives relate to more widely dispersed social and ideological metanarratives, for instance relating to the meanings of particular places, particular kinds of persons—including especially gendered persons and ideas of political personhood—and understandings of social justice and community care. It recognises that ‘narrative seeks out the contradictions’ of lived experience (Rasmussen, 1995, p. 164) and emphasises heterogeneous meanings attached to our interpretations of the world. Embracing this complexity, this volume as a whole reveals the tensions and overlaps between various scripts about what it means to live well, socially, culturally, economically, spiritually and spatially.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME’S STRUCTURE AND CONTRIBUTION

This collection is shaped into four sections, which frame and develop a critical engagement with wellbeing as a narrative and the role of narrative in constructing wellbeing. Each tells a story, designed to guide the reader through the origins and impacts of wellbeing discourses in different contexts, explore the relationship between sites of wellbeing, and examine the ambivalent logics that infuse themselves in wellbeing discourse.

The first section, ‘Orienting Wellbeing’, historicises wellbeing as a notion and begins to ask what wellbeing tends towards. Examining wellbeing as a narrative, this section opens the question of what that narrative’s object has been and may continue to be. In doing so, this section establishes wellbeing as a story with a beginning (a history) and prompts us to consider how the wellbeing narrative arc may resolve. Through grounded ethnographic case study, Michael Jackson’s chapter follows the lives of two Sierra Leonians in their quest to seek and maintain quality of life, with one migrating for economic security and another remaining at home—both having to make compromises along the way. Drawing particular attention to the role of contingency, Jackson’s rich case study raises foundational questions about the nature and limits of ‘development’, highlighting the complex interplay between subjective and objective

measures of wellbeing. In Timothy Jones' chapter, the relationship between material indicators of wellbeing and spiritual yearning is explored as he examines spirituality in wellness industries in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jones' chapter provides both a historical context for understanding contemporary wellness discourses and a framework for investigating the role of spiritual satisfaction in wellbeing practices.

The second section, 'Placing Wellbeing', locates wellbeing in place, with analyses of the spatial logics of wellbeing. In Niko Besnier's chapter, for example, we see how certain spaces are imbued with (and marketed as having) therapeutic qualities. Taking Palm Springs, California, as a case study, Besnier highlights how these narratives have led to wellness-related migration and the establishment of wellness industries, which in turn have displaced Indigenous communities and shaped a class of precarious employees in the care sector. Anna Halafoff, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Fitzpatrick's work makes clear that the 'spiritual marketplace' of the wellness industry is often reductively conceptualised as a space of individualist self-improvement, particularly made up of women. Halafoff and her co-authors find, however, that it is a social space through which many people engage with anti-capitalist activism and fight for planetary wellbeing. Moreover, they argue, an increasing number of disenfranchised men have engaged with this space to rail against COVID-19 mandates, which has led to complicated gender dynamics. While Halafoff et al. and Besnier focus on how the creation of new material and virtual wellness landscapes shape identity, other contributions in this section explore the ways in relationships to land shape wellbeing for those experiencing displacement. Natalia Gerodetti and Sally Foster examine narratives of memory, place and identity generated through the community gardening practices of migrants in the North of England. Growing and sharing food becomes a mechanism for cultivating sustaining connections to the past and to others in the present—offering a unique temporal perspective on how relational wellbeing can be maintained despite displacement. This section consequently raises the question of the wellbeing of place—or of *this* place in particular—in addressing planetary wellbeing, ecological care and the affective trauma of ecocide.

'Wellbeing and Community', the third section, examines the collective and relational nature of wellbeing. Wellbeing is rendered in the collective plane through narrative; it is through stories that wellbeing is imagined, shared, contested and rearticulated. Given the iterative and reiterative process of storytelling and the configurative role of narratives in creating