Katie Wright · Julie McLeod   *Editors*

Rethinking Youth Wellbeing

Critical Perspectives

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Contents

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Katie Wright is an Australian Research Council Fellow (DECRA) at the University of Melbourne. Her major research interests concern the role and effects of psychological knowledges and therapeutic discourses in social change, cultural life, and educational contexts. Her current research projects include a study of public inquiries into childhood maltreatment, a cultural history of adolescence and schooling, and an investigation of past and present understandings of youth mental health and wellbeing.

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Chapter 1
Inventing Youth Wellbeing

Julie McLeod and Katie Wright

Abstract Calls to address wellbeing are now so commonplace and widespread that they can mean both everything and nothing. Across policy and popular discourses, improving wellbeing is offered as a solution to the myriad issues facing young people today. This chapter explores the invention of youth wellbeing as a concept and a category of concern, noting its ambiguity and changing applications. It introduces a case for defamilarizing the status and truth claims of the construct of youth wellbeing, by exploring its invention as well as its movements and productive effects. Two sets of conceptual resources are outlined for developing this analysis: the first is informed by Somers' approach to developing an historical sociology of concept formation, and the second is Bacchi's account of the construction of policy problems. The chapter concludes with an overview of the papers in this volume which, in drawing on a range of approaches and intellectual traditions, take a step back from taken-for-granted assumptions about youth wellbeing and provide provocations to think anew about this category, the problems it addresses and the promises it makes.

Keywords Defamilarization • Historical sociology • Policy • Problematization • Youth wellbeing

Wellbeing has become a keyword in contemporary social life. Its register cuts across policy discourses, everyday discussions and specialist programs and it has acquired particular currency and potency in the fields of education and youth studies. The construct of wellbeing has an aspirational quality, reflecting an ideal state of being. It also functions as a diagnosis of a perceived problem – lack of wellbeing – and holds the promise of its amelioration. Promoting wellbeing increasingly informs policy objectives aimed at improving the lives of young people, and expansively encompasses their physical, social, mental and emotional health. A central idea underpinning much commentary on this topic is that we are facing major social

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problems at macro-structural, interpersonal and individual levels; these are manifest, for example, in moral, ecological, health and economic crises, and there are concomitant concerns that in this period of rapid social change and uncertainty, wellbeing is increasingly precarious. These discussions are commonly framed by a sense of alarm and grave concerns about how young people are faring, with an associated and pervasive policy logic that action should be taken to improve outcomes on a range of social, economic, health and education measures. Yet calls to address wellbeing are so commonplace and widespread that they can mean both everything and nothing. It is precisely such paradoxes that provoked the idea for this volume, seeding its aims to understand the invention, movement and effects of the notion of youth wellbeing.

The contemporary focus on youth wellbeing in the policy arena and beyond reflects a broader embrace of wellbeing as a measure of the quality of life of populations. This is evident, for example, in the launch in 2011 of the *OECD Better Life Initiative*, which now publishes regular reports of wellbeing in OECD countries and other major economies (OECD 2013). Measurement of wellbeing and the ranking of countries according to wellbeing indicators are now common practices, at both a population level and for particular groups, including young people. The US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), in collaboration with the International Youth Foundation (IYF), recently published a report entitled, *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index* (Goldin et al. 2014), which provides an international ranking of youth wellbeing. UNICEF similarly publishes league tables on child wellbeing in some of the world's advanced economies "to encourage the monitoring of children's well-being, to permit country comparisons, and to stimulate debate and the development of policies to improve children's lives" (UNICEF 2013). Such large-scale global comparative ranking exercises combine a range of child and youth wellbeing indicators. There is generally an emphasis on objective measures, such as per capita GDP and expenditure on and access to health and education, but subjective measures that provide insights into the experiences and perceptions of young people themselves are often also included. In national social, health and education policy contexts, by contrast, the emphasis is typically placed upon social and emotional dimensions of wellbeing, with mental health and psychological distress commonly identified as key problems.

Discussion about wellbeing abounds, with considerable efforts now directed towards enhancing the wellbeing of target populations, particularly young people. There remains, however, considerable ambiguity in how the concept itself is understood in official and lay discourses, and even in how it is defined and operationalized in policy and practice. As a non-technical concept, its meaning is seemingly self-evident. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines wellbeing as "the state of being or doing well in life" a "happy, healthy, or prosperous condition" and as "moral or physical welfare (of a person or community)". As such, wellbeing encompasses physical, emotional, social, psychological and material dimensions. Broadly speaking, it is understood as a measure of the quality of people's lives, which may be assessed objectively and/or subjectively.

Significant definitional and conceptual difficulties arise when moving beyond a commonsense understanding of the concept of wellbeing and its everyday use. At this point, it becomes strangely difficult to define. While research into wellbeing has been increasing at a rapid pace, there remains little consensus in the scholarly literature on how it should be conceptualized (Dodge et al. 2012). It is, as Morrow and Mayall (2009, p. 221) argue, pervasive but "conceptually muddy", a term that effectively acts, according to Ereaut and Whiting (2008), "like a cultural mirage: it looks like a solid construct, but when we approach it, it fragments or disappears" (p. 5). Wellbeing is different to – although may encompass – overlapping states such as happiness, satisfaction, contentment, self-actualization, and personal safety. But it is possible to experience wellbeing in the absence of any of these things, and it is also possible to experience wellbeing at the same time as experiencing states of sadness or loss or ill health (Manderson 2005).

Commonly, wellbeing is associated with physical and mental health. It featured in the Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO), which defined health in the late 1940s as "a state of complete physical, psychological and social wellbeing" (WHO 1948, p. 1). There is, as Manderson (2005) notes, some circularity in this notion of health as wellbeing, and wellbeing as health. But perhaps more troubling is that even though wellbeing is an elusive term and a fluid concept (Ereaut and Whiting 2008; Watson et al. 2012), it is nevertheless asserted confidently in any number of policy statements and program rationales.

Both the ambiguity of the term and its elasticity mean that wellbeing is a notion that may be put to use in different ways for different purposes. One striking example of this is the changing focus and objects of wellbeing during the late twentieth century. Eeva Sointu's (2005) work is highly instructive in this regard. Her study of British newspapers reveals that during the 1980s the term was not widely used in everyday discourse. When it was discussed, it tended to be in relation to national health and economic indicators. During the 1990s, however, a more personal, individualized, psychological and therapeutic notion of wellbeing emerged. Her analysis points to a shift in the concept from one associated with "the wellbeing of a citizen in a traditional nation state – produced and conceptualized through institutionalized strategies of national governance" to "an increasing emphasis on wellbeing that is actively produced by the choosing consumer" (pp. 255–256) and an accompanying focus on wellbeing pertaining to individual health. In short, she characterizes a shift in wellbeing discourses from broadly concerned with "the body politic" to an overriding emphasis on "the body personal" (Sointu 2005, p. 259). A preliminary search of digitized Australian newspapers reveals a similar shift (NLA 2014). In the immediate post-war period, wellbeing is linked mostly to questions of national stability and economic prosperity, yet shifting to a more personalized quality attached to individuals by the latter decades of the twentieth century.

It is not only that dominant understandings of wellbeing have changed in recent decades. Alongside this there has been an overall increase in the use of the term. This is vividly captured with the aid of a statistical tool like Google Ngram, which maps word frequencies in books. Prior to the 1970s, usage of the term in published books
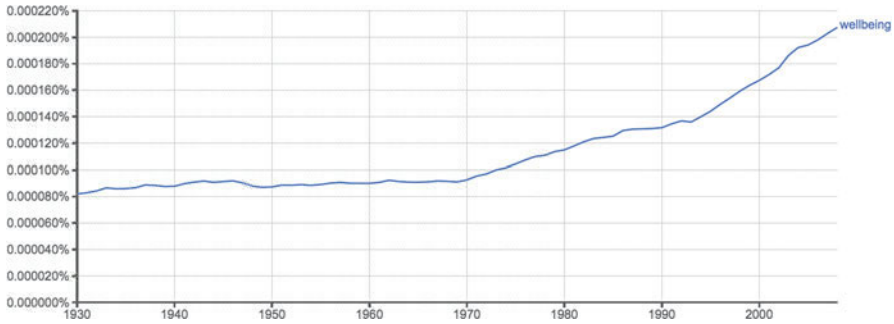
Fig. 1.1 Frequency of the word "wellbeing" in the Google corpus of English books from the years 1930 to 2008. The graph was made with the Google Books Ngram Viewer with a smoothing of 3

remained fairly constant. However, as the graph here illustrates, there has been a steady increase in use since that time, with a rather dramatic increase evident from the early to mid-1990s. While the raw number of instances in the word "wellbeing" varies according to spelling (that is, whether it is expressed as a compound or hyphenated word), the general trend of increased frequency of the term remains consistent (Fig. 1.1).

This rapid rise in wellbeing, as reflected by the analysis of its incidence in published books, corresponds to the embrace of the concept in social, health and educational policy in many countries during the latter twentieth century. Indeed the invention of wellbeing as a compound word in itself demonstrates its normalization and widespread acceptance (Ereaut and Whiting 2008), operating as a self-evident thing, a noun and an adjective with cross-over referents in everyday and specialist discourses. The sharp spike in the use of wellbeing also points to accelerated changes in wider cultural norms, hinting at intensified processes of individualization, or perhaps more accurately, personalization, as well as the colliding effects of therapeutic culture and neoliberalism (measuring the performance of wellbeing and mental health), and the flow of so-called private and personal feelings – optimism, feeling positive and even happy – into public life. Moreover, wellbeing has been so frequently affixed to young people that the phrase "youth wellbeing" is rapidly becoming its own new construct.

Youth, as a prefix, gives a particular meaning, focus and urgency to wellbeing – an unassailable warrant to enhance the lives of not only young people but also of future generations. In the developmental logic underpinning much educational and youth policy, intervening early to promote wellbeing is seen as vital. Additionally, adolescence remains positioned as a volatile and vulnerable stage in the life-course, making the youth wellbeing fix all the more relevant and pressing. The changing and unstable emphases in the understandings of the term, its dramatic increase in use, and its condensation of myriad social meanings and promises make "youth wellbeing" ripe for rethinking.

To consider the invention of youth wellbeing is to engage in a task of defamiliarization. The rationale for this volume of essays is framed by the

Foucauldian genealogical project to make the present strange, with an overall strategy of "problematization". As Foucault (1996) asserts: "Problematization doesn't mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn't exist. It's the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that make something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought" (pp. 456–457). In grappling with youth wellbeing as an object for thought, the concern of this volume is not only with wellbeing as a socially constructed term, as a phrase that is invented in different times and places for different purposes – though this remains an important element in historicizing youth wellbeing. The overall purpose in bringing together this volume of papers is also to follow the movement and effects of wellbeing, not simply to observe that it is socially or discursively constructed but to understand what it has produced, and continues to do so, what it does, where it goes, what it opens up and shuts down, and what it makes possible and impossible to think and to do.

In developing such an approach to the invention of youth wellbeing, we identify here two sets of conceptual resources which we have found useful to think with. The first draws from the field of historical sociology and is guided by Margaret Somers' (1999, 2008) approach to developing an historical sociology of concept formation. She describes this as a research program designed "to analyze how we think and why we seem obliged to think in certain ways" (Somers 1999, p. 132) and consequently it seeks to expose "the historicity of thinking and reasoning practices" (Somers 2008, p. 173). Somers further proposes that this method for conducting social research is "based on the principle that all of our knowledge, our logics, our theories, indeed our very reasoning, are marked indelibly (although often obscurely) with the signature of time, normativity, and institution building" (2008, p. 173). This trio offers a helpful anchor in analyzing the invention of youth wellbeing as a concept that distils particular and shifting systems of reason about young people. In unpacking the procedural aspects of this approach, Somers identifies three key components. *Reflexivity*: "the categories with which we analyze the world are not self-evident and need themselves to be objects of study" (Somers 1999, p. 132); *Relationality*: what appear to be "autonomous concepts defined by a constellation of attributes are better conceived as shifting patterns of relationships that are contingently stabilized in sites" (1999, p. 133); and *Historicity of knowledge cultures*: "concepts are historical objects"; "successful truth claims are products of their time and this changes accordingly" (1999, p. 134). Somers' account thus offers valuable signposts for historicizing key concepts and for attending to their situated, contingent and relational effects.

Continuing in this vein, but looking more specifically at the organizing and normalizing ideas of policy discourses, Carol Bacchi's (2009) account of the construction of policy problems is also helpful. Policy, she argues, gives particular shape to social problems and in this sense is itself fundamental to the very constitution of what we understand to be problematic and in need of "fixing". A disarmingly simple but especially useful framework for our project is offered in her "what's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) approach (Bacchi 2009).

WPR is a conceptual framework that "starts from the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (needs to change). Following this thinking, policies contain *implicit* representations of what is considered to be the problem ('problem representations')" (Bacchi 2012, p. 21). The first task, therefore, is to make implicit policy assumptions explicit. In relation to the focus of this volume, improving youth wellbeing – the desired outcome – implicitly represents wellbeing as problematic, with policy initiatives designed to address an apparent lack of wellbeing. This is an important first step. However, this approach also requires interrogation of assumptions that underpin representation of the problem, attention to how such representation arose, consideration of what is left unproblematic and how the problem may be thought about differently. It also invites analysis of how representations of a problem are produced, disseminated and defended (Bacchi 2012).

While drawing on a range of approaches and intellectual traditions, and exploring different dimensions of and questions about youth wellbeing, the chapters in this volume offer the kinds of interrogations called for by Bacchi (2009). And in the spirit of Somers' (1999) historical sociology of concept formation, they each in various ways seek to take a step back from taken-for-granted assumptions about youth wellbeing and defamiliarize normativities and self-evident reasoning. In so doing they provide provocations to think anew about this category and its subject (or object) of address. The focus of analysis is wide-ranging, including the social determinants of wellbeing, mental health and pathologizing practices, pedagogical approaches to health promotion, cross cultural and historical contexts, social-emotional learning, sexuality, practices of the self and changing educational ideas. The chapters variously explore how notions of wellbeing have been mobilized across time and space, in and out of school contexts, and the diverse inflections and effects of wellbeing discourses.

The issue of psychopathologization is the focus of the following chapter, in which Linda Graham examines the increasing use of medications for young people diagnosed with mental health disorders. She raises serious questions about what it means to be "well" and identifies a number of dangers that flow from this for children categorized as "unwell". Graham suggests that normative understandings of psychological wellbeing individualize important social influences that affect mental health. Drawing on interviews with young people enrolled in "behaviour schools", the chapter identifies pressing concerns in relation to the ways in which mental health diagnoses are internalized, possibilities for the development of agency within this context, and consequences of this for young people in terms of their wellbeing.

The social context and determinants of wellbeing are taken up in the next two chapters, in which Kathryn Ecclestone considers questions of vulnerability and social justice and Johanna Wyn, Hernan Cuervo and Evelina Landstedt explore the social, political and economic parameters that shape wellbeing. Ecclestone raises critical questions about what constitutes empowering and progressive education by drawing on C. Wright Mills' call to examine what seemingly "private troubles" might reveal about "public issues", in this case, those that stem from

wider structures of class, economics, culture and politics. Ecclestone argues that there is currently a deep pessimism about declining emotional and psychological wellbeing. Within this context, she suggests that issues of social justice are refracted through concerns about vulnerability, which mask the reality of economic exclusion. Attention to emotional vulnerability, she suggests, reflects new forms of neoliberal responsiblilization and pathologization of social problems and, in doing so, deflects attention from the structural conditions that adversely affect youth wellbeing.

Drawing on data emerging from a longitudinal and cross-generational study of young Australians, Wyn, Cuervo and Landstedt develop a related argument that illuminates the inherently social dimensions of wellbeing. They explore the tensions that arise for young people today in relation to the imperative of wellbeing as an individual responsibility, and the reality that being "well" is inextricably linked to social, political and economic parameters that are not of young people's own making and are most often beyond their control. Wyn, Cuervo and Landstedt suggest that indicators of the poor mental health of young people may be attributed to social factors that include uncertainty in relation to employment, economic hardship and fragmentation of time with significant others. They argue that the conditions that jeopardize the mental health of young people are cumulative and exacerbated by the strategies demanded of individuals to manage the manifold stresses of contemporary social conditions by making personal adjustments.

Themes of individualization are further explicated in the following chapter, in which Kellie Burns and Cristyn Davies examine how "health-as-wellbeing" is operationalized as a modality of neoliberal government. Focusing on young women, and taking the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccination program in Australia as a case study, they consider how the management of youth subjectivities involves pedagogical and consumption practices which position young people as free-choosing agents and managers of the self. Their analysis of public health programs aimed at preventing HPV and HPV related cancers in young women illustrates broader social processes pertaining to norms of healthy and gendered citizenship. In particular, they explore how the right to "know" may be compromised by the obligation to "choose" healthy behaviours, lifestyles and products.

Extending the focus on gender and the policy contexts in which young people's health is regulated, Ester McGeeney explores the complexity of youth sexual wellbeing. Drawing on a UK study that examined experiences of sexual pleasure and notions of "good sex", she employs a critical culturally-informed approach to understanding young people's lives and in doing so complicates debates about policy approaches in the realm of sexual health. Of particular interest to McGeeney is the mismatch between young people's sexual cultures and their accounts of pleasure on the one hand, and contemporary policy frameworks aimed at promoting sexual wellbeing on the other. Informed by narrative accounts of young people's experiences, she argues for rethinking policy agendas and educational practices in the area of youth sexual health. Of critical importance in this regard, she suggests, is the need to ground policy and educational approaches in the reality of young people's experiences. This includes embracing holistic and complex understandings

of young people and their sexual practices, rather than foregrounding policy frameworks with alarmist accounts of young people's vulnerability and risk-taking behaviours.

Difficult questions about youth wellbeing are further explored in the following chapter, in which Kathryn Daley examines young women's self-injury. Daley challenges the established and, she argues, presumptive notion that "cutting" is inherently harmful, and offers an alternative viewpoint. Drawing on narratives of young women accessing drug treatment services, she develops a conceptualization of self-injury that moves beyond a psychiatric paradigm, shifting the focus from the behaviour as itself inherently problematic to a standpoint in which it is understood as a symptom of distress. Most importantly, she argues, rather than viewing self-injury as compromising wellbeing, it may be better understood as a mechanism by which some young people try to protect their wellbeing. Daley's alternative conceptualization is a provocation to think anew about this troubling practice, opening new ways of thinking about the relationship between wellbeing, embodiment and practices of the self.

Moving from research conducted in a treatment setting to reflections on pedagogical approaches aimed at promoting health and wellbeing, Helen Cahill continues the task of challenging dominant understandings, albeit of a different kind. Engaging with examples from her own practice in the area of sexuality and gender rights education, the focus of Cahill's analysis is the use of stories and role-play to disrupt unexamined assumptions and in doing so, enhance wellbeing. She ultilizes the concept of "trojan stories" to illustrate how entrenched narratives may unwittingly be reproduced in the classroom, thus undermining the very objectives educators set out to achieve. Cahill offers valuable guidelines for educators for rethinking conventional health education practices and developing more innovative strategies. This includes critical and creative exercises for thinking afresh about educational approaches, which, she argues, have the potential to open up and move towards a pedagogy of possibility.

Philosophical questions, prompted by the embrace of wellbeing as an educational aim, are examined in the following chapter. Amy Chapman turns her attention to the big question of the purposes of schooling, asking how wellbeing might align or compete with other educational goals. Her analysis seeks to make explicit the normative dimensions of wellbeing in schools by focusing on the diverse range of educational objectives that the promotion of wellbeing seeks to address. These include well-established aims such as overcoming barriers to and providing support for learning, and tackling the problem of mental health disorders in young people. Yet she also shows how wellbeing is marshalled as part of broader socialization processes and indeed even how fostering wellbeing is understood in an educational context to contribute to happiness. Reflecting on the implications of the take up of wellbeing in schools as well as the normative dimensions that buttress the focus on wellbeing, Chapman argues that there are pressing philosophical questions at stake which go to the very heart of what we understand to be the purposes of education.

Moving from philosophical questions to those concerning culture and schooling, Wan Har Chong and Boon Ooi Lee examine the promotion of wellbeing in an Asian

context. The focus of their analysis is the adoption of a social-emotional learning (SEL) framework for Singapore schools, which is designed to guide school-based program initiatives aimed at fostering and strengthening young people's capacity. While acknowledging the usefulness of SEL, Chong and Lee offer a salient reflection on the take up of this model in cultural contexts that may hold different values from those dominant in Western societies. The implications of this are explored as they highlight the difficulties that may arise, for example, in understandings of competence and patterns of emotional expression and distress, which vary across cultures. They identify dominant themes of western psychotherapy and counselling present in SEL models, and consider the issues this raises for the implementation of affective programs in non-Western contexts.

The final two chapters take up the challenge of historicizing the concept of wellbeing, exploring key ways in which wellbeing and its antecedents have been operationalized in schools. Julie McLeod examines self-esteem as an important precursor to the rise of wellbeing. Her analysis situates the embrace of self-esteem and wellbeing in education – and their circulation in policies and programs – within broader cultural moves pertaining to the increasing importance of emotions in the public sphere. While self-esteem has largely been dismissed as a failed educational experiment, narrowly concerned with making people feel good and leading to an epidemic of narcissism, McLeod reminds us of the liberatory feminist projects in which self-esteem played a critical role. Her chapter offers a timely reflection on the forgotten history of this concept and its mixed and contradictory effects. In so doing, it develops new ways of thinking about the implications of wellbeing discourses in the historical present.

In the final chapter, Katie Wright examines changing educational concerns with mental health and wellbeing. Focusing on two historical periods, the early decades of the twentieth century and the late twentieth century to the present, she explores dominant ideas about psychological health and the remedial, school-based strategies developed on the basis of that knowledge. In doing so, she examines the shift from the traditionally narrow focus on targeted interventions for young people identified with problems, to the embrace of universal approaches aimed at fostering the mental health and wellbeing of entire student populations. Drawing on an analytical framework informed by critical policy studies, Wright analyzes both the preventative promise that characterizes current educational approaches and the aspirational dimensions that make the concept of wellbeing appealing for both educators and policy makers.

Each chapter in this volume responds in distinctive ways to the challenge of providing a critical rethinking of youth wellbeing. In so doing, they stand on their own in addressing particular aspects of wellbeing. In aggregate, however, the contributions tell a bigger story, illustrating diverse aspects of the movement of youth wellbeing across time and place, exploring it as an invented construct with practical, public, policy and personal effects. The book thus offers researchers as well as practitioners new perspectives on current approaches to fostering wellbeing in schools, and showcases novel and productive ways of rethinking what it means to address youth wellbeing in and beyond educational settings.

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Chapter 2
To Be Well Is to Be Not Unwell: The New Battleground Inside Our Children's Heads

Linda J. Graham

Abstract A number of factors are thought to increase the risk of serious psychiatric disorder, including a family history of mental health issues and/or childhood trauma. As a result, some mental health advocates argue for a pre-emptive approach that includes the use of powerful anti-psychotic medication with young people considered at-risk of developing bipolar disorder or psychosis. This controversial approach is enabled and, at the same time, obscured by medical discourses that speak of promoting and maintaining youth "wellbeing", however, there are inherent dangers both to the pre-emptive approach and in its positioning within the discourse of wellbeing. This chapter critically engages with these dangers by drawing on research with "at-risk" children and young people enrolled in special schools for disruptive behaviour. The stories told by these highly diagnosed and heavily medicated young people act as a cautionary tale to counter the increasingly common perception that pills and "Dr Phil's" can cure social ills.

Keywords Medicalization • Disadvantage • Behaviour • Children and young people "at-risk"

Introduction

> *Mental health is a state of emotional and social wellbeing. It influences how an individual copes with the normal stresses of life and whether he or she can achieve his or her potential. Mental health describes the capacity of individuals and groups to interact, inclusively and equitably with one another and with their environment, in ways that promote subjective wellbeing and optimize opportunities for development and use of mental abilities.* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001, p. 4)

Wellbeing is a relatively recent and, as yet, still amorphous concept; one that is absently defined through vague references to mental health and its more sinister shadow, mental illness. Whether subtly or otherwise, the discourse of wellbeing is underpinned by an individual disease model and, as such, is inherently medical

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