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Melania Calestani

An Anthropological
Journey into
Well-Being
Insights from Bolivia



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An Anthropological Journey into Well-Being

Insights from Bolivia

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Preface

This book explores a new perspective in the study of well-being, which tries to overcome the quantification bias by creating an account of ‘the good life’ in a specific place. Rather than numbers, this research focuses on local narratives, emphasising the urgent need to include a wider range of methodological approaches when engaging with well-being. Although development economists such as Sen (1999) have also emphasised a need to incorporate a larger set of qualities into their recommendations, still today this has not become one of the priorities in well-being studies. Quantitative research still has a bigger impact and influence in comparison to qualitative findings.

The book focuses on the above argument and demonstrates through the Bolivian case study the value of qualitative research for well-being studies. It aspires to show the potential to integrate predominant quantitative data with qualitative outcomes, such as those emerging through ethnography. It is aimed at academic and non-academic (non-profit, governmental and policy sectors) audiences, as well as experts, researchers and students in well-being/quality of life studies.

An anthropological approach to well-being seems a relevant project at this historical moment when globalisation, migration and displacement are changing our comprehension and representation of the world. Notions of ‘the good life’ affect each one of us, in a constant re-elaboration of what it means to be a person, or a group and how we engage in relations with the state, the natural environment and other nations. As an anthropologist, I explore the relationships between different aspirations, orientations and models among urban migrants of the city of El Alto.

This book focuses on individual and collective definitions of ‘the good life’ in the Bolivian plateau and explores potential contradictions between different orientations and models of well-being. The increasing interest amongst Aymara intellectuals and the Bolivian government in an indigenous perspective on this topic provides the point of departure for an exploration of the complexity of ideas relating to this issue and an account of different definitions of ‘the good life’ among

Aymara people. The book makes a contribution to debates regarding poverty and well-being and the problems attached to universal definitions, which tend to be based on simplified and economic criteria.

Reference

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Complexity of Well-Being

Children's fairy tales often end with the sentence 'and they lived happily ever after'. Those princes and princesses are supposed to remain the same, never changing, as if their state of well-being is continuous, settled and permanent. They are frozen in time and space as if their identities and relations never evolve. On the other hand, in this book the main characters of my narrative are inhabitants of El Alto, an Aymara Andean city, often internationally defined as a shantytown. My characters are first and second generation rural–urban migrants, who left their villages in the countryside in search of a better life in the city. At the centre of my investigation, there is their Aymara/Bolivian identity. In particular, I look at how this evolves and adapts to the different social circumstances they encounter. Thus, in this book, well-being is considered 'not as a settled state but as a field of struggle' (Jackson 2011, p. ix), creating sometimes a sense of discontinuity between what people are and what they might become.

In recent decades there has been an increasing interest worldwide in developing universal definitions of well-being in academic, governmental and non-governmental circles. However, little empirical research focusing on people's own perceptions of well-being has been carried out. This book outlines and discusses the concept of 'the good life' as practiced and articulated by my informants in the Bolivian plateau in 2004. The 'good life' can be approached through the local concepts of *Suma Jakaña* and *Suma Qamaña*, which stress the importance of the social, such that well-being is largely attributed to harmonious relations.

My research contributes to the exploration of a new perspective in the study of well-being in anthropology (Thin 2012; Jackson 2011; Mathews and Izquierdo 2008; Jimenez 2008), which tries to overcome the quantification bias (Thin 2005) by creating an account of 'the good life' in a specific place. Rather than numbers, this research focuses on local narratives, emphasising the urgent need to include a wider range of methodological approaches when engaging with 'the good life'.

The argument of the book draws on ethnographic research conducted in the urban area of El Alto. El Alto is placed in the western part of the country, at 4,000 m of altitude, on the Andean plateau and not far from La Paz. In Bolivia, the western and eastern parts of the country diverge from one another, just as the