

**Does wellbeing travel?**  
**Debating universalism and cultural difference in understandings of wellbeing**

**10 February 2012, Bath, UK**

**Small Group Discussion: Relationship**

**Facilitator: Dr Sarah Coulthard, University of Ulster**

**Rapporteur: Viviana Ramirez, University of Bath**

**Rapporteur's Summary of Discussion:**

This session centred on three distinctive matters on the topic of human *relationships* and how they are and can be studied within social sciences: (1) the *relevance of relationships for wellbeing*; (2) the different *aspects of relationships*; (3) the *methodological and measurement issues* of the complex phenomenon of human relationships; and finally (4) the *relevance of a relational view for policy-making*.

**(1) The relevance of relationships for wellbeing**

The group started with an analysis of the ambivalent impacts that relationships can have for wellbeing, understanding that not only can relationships have *positive* effects but they can also have significant *negative* effects. Among the positive effects of relationships that were discussed, a salient one was the emotional and material support that they can have for people in times of need, as well as the need to have a good balance between the time allocated to work and to other domains of life such as cultivating friendships and family ties. However, social relationships can also be detrimental to wellbeing, through violence, discrimination, and isolation. Therefore, the necessity of considering the role of relationships with ambivalent effects for wellbeing was stressed during the group conversation.

**(2) Different aspects of relationships**

During discussion of the distinct effects that relationships can have on wellbeing, various aspects of relationships emerged. The *interactional dimension* of relationships was said to represent the interrelation and exchanges that individuals have with others in their social and private world. However, other interesting aspects of relationships were considered, such as the connection between individuals and their *socio-structural surroundings* - in other words, the cultural and normative values that exist in the community in which individuals live. The final aspect of relationships is related to how these interactional and structural aspects of relationships shape the *self and identities* of people, which could play a part in the formation of individual views and beliefs and their capabilities to flourish. However, as it may be possible to recognise, the group concluded that these structural, interactional and identity-related aspects of relationships are highly interlinked and thus their complex impact on individual and collective wellbeing is difficult to isolate.

### **(3) Methodological and measurement issues**

Due to the current character of social sciences and its approach to social phenomena, *measures* are fundamental to understanding the link between relationships and wellbeing. The common individualistic cast and categorical nature of the instruments frequently used to measure relationships was discussed, underlining the contradiction that these entail for a relational view. However, there was an overall feeling of the difficulty of translating the highly ambiguous and interlinked phenomena of relationships into measures. Nevertheless, the significance of measuring relationships, although with non-perfect instruments, was considered salient in order to place relationships on the map within social sciences, wellbeing studies and public policy. This took us to the last topic conversed by the group: the necessity of simplifying the complexity of relationships to be useful for policy design.

### **(4) Relevance of a relational view for policy-making**

The possibility of transforming the complexity of human relationships into simple notions that are easy to use for *public policy* was a central but unresolved topic of this discussion. However, it was clear that a relational view could be instrumental to evaluate current policy agendas and influence the policy practices that take place as a result. A relationship lens, for example, can help uncover the implications of the implementation of policies and practices during their delivery. In addition, at the individual and social level, the introduction of this lens into policy could bring awareness about the relational phenomena that impact the current experiences of wellbeing in our communities.

In sum, participants in this session generated several questions related to the role of relationships that are central for the study of wellbeing. While there was an overall sense of reaching only a few answers to them - which shows that this is an understudied area within social sciences - the group is hopeful that at least the generation of questions could lead to more concrete answers about the role of relationships in the future.