

“Don’t ask me; ask my husband” Enquiries
into wellbeing in India and Zambia

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““Well-being” in the West is conceived as reflecting a predominance of positive over negative personal emotions. But in the East it is sometimes perceived as a social condition (e.g., when asked if she was happy, an Indian woman said: “Don’t ask me; ask my husband” [Diener, personal communication, 1996]’ (Triandis, 1999:134).



Aim of the paper

- Discussion paper, drawing on on-going research
- Some dimensions of cultural grounding of wellbeing
- Thoughts particularly on forms of enquiry, practical implications of studying wellbeing in 'other places'
- Basis for reflection on ways culture constructed in wellbeing literature and implications of this for understandings of wellbeing



Outline

- Introduction to Wellbeing Pathways research
- Place: Local Wellbeing Issues
- Implications for enquiries into wellbeing

Starting point:

- 'Wellbeing is experienced when people have what they need for life to be good'
- Both objective and subjective data
- Exterior conditions, collective and individual dimensions



The Wellbeing Pathways project

Ambition:

- to develop a model of wellbeing that is grounded in the South - (more like) how people there think and talk and feel and act
- to explore the relationships between poverty and wellbeing – both quantitatively (survey) and qualitatively (interviews)

Research:

- in marginalised rural communities, Zambia and India
- two rounds of fieldwork of 3-4 months in each country
- In each location and each round 350 respondents: 150 couples (husbands and wives separately) and 50 women heading households



Grounding and Piloting

- Not simply 'bottom up' approach: based in our own previous research and experience, plus reading sociology/ social anthropology/psychology/development studies/wellbeing and quality of life research
- Model refined through a mixed method approach
Survey items (what we should ask about and how to ask it) derived through:
 - consultation with NGOs and other local people
 - intensive qualitative field testing
 - ongoing reflection within local teams
 - statistically tested and revised (Zambia to India, round one)
- Conceptually derived, reflexively refined, statistically tested



The Wellbeing Pathways model

- Seven domains (closely interacting)
- Wider environment which enables or constrains wellbeing
- Wellbeing as a process which emerges through interaction:
 - between the different domains
 - between the person and those important to him or her
 - between the person and the broader environment
- Model should thus be seen as dynamic, rather than static, with flow and interchange between its different elements
- All of this is culturally embedded





Place

- Surprisingly little attention to place in discussions of cultural dimensions of wellbeing
- But studies of inequality and wellbeing suggest place is a major factor
- So begin with our two places, and the local wellbeing issues that people there are facing



Chiawa, Zambia



Sarguja, India





Local wellbeing issues

1. Food and hunger:

- Chiawa: more than 50% reported going hungry for part of previous year, 14% single women went hungry throughout 12 months, compared to 1% of married men and women
- Sarguja woman: 'Now we are getting rice from the government and so we are able to live our lives.'

2. Land and farming:

- Low technology largely rain-fed agriculture
- Land quality, lack of titles and (Chiawa) land grab issues



3. The state

As Provider

- Chiawa: fragmentary presence
- Sarguja: good roads, rice, rural employment scheme... but complaints of corruption

As Enforcer

- Chiawa: game management area, protected game threaten livelihoods and physical safety
- Sarguja: 2006 Forest Act formally protects customary rights to forest products, but may not be implemented, fears of decline in access resources especially amongst poorer
- In neither place is there much confidence in police and justice system



4. Alcohol

**No Anda Eadge!
Bar - Chiawa**



Sarguja (reformed man!)

- 'We Pahadi Korwas [a low status Adivasi group] like to drink and we drink everyday... so what would happen is that the moment we had a bit of money from the sale of firewood, we would head straight to the liquor shop in the village and then for the rest of day we would lie about in a drunken stupor. We were happy to have earned just enough to buy our drink for the day. But look at the Oraons [a high status Adivasi group], they would farm their land or sell forest produce and instead of spending it all on drink they save and plan for the future so that they have money for bad times and to send their children to school.'



5. God and the gods

- In both places, frequent references – expressing trust, helplessness/insecurity, deliverance
- Adivasi cosmology environmental wellbeing: people's caring for nature a form of devotion, and reciprocity: if people don't care for 'the garden' God won't send rain
- (Sarguja, woman): 'When God is good to me then life is good to me. If I stop praying to God then obviously God will give me sorrow.'

6. Health, including mental health

- Chiawa HIV/AIDS major issue
- Both places close ties with religion: healing the most common reason given for conversion
- Both places patchy health care provision (better in Sarguja)

7. Children

- Both places anxiety about children's future, their education, or whether they would make the right choices
- Chiawa especially, de/attachable children, often around education

8. Ambivalence of social relations.

- Social support – but anxieties about reciprocity
- Envy and bewitchment:

Percentage agree/strongly agree	Chiawa	Sarguja
'I believe that there are people who would like to cause me harm,'	68	6
'I live in fear of harm from evil powers.'	69	46



Reflections on place

- Underlines importance of domains – looking to understand wellbeing across a range of aspects of life – but also inter-relations between them
- Questions Maslow’s hierarchy of needs – co-existence of hunger with whole range of other concerns and dimensions
- Economic concerns, though, are pervasive. This shows through both qualitatively – how people explained their responses – and quantitatively. In Sarguja, objective economic status was a significant and positive predictor of all three overall subjective questions

	Predicted by Economic status?
Considering the last twelve months, how would you say you are doing economically?	√
Comparing your standard of living overall with five years ago, how are you doing now?	√
Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are these days?	√

Forms of Enquiry





‘...Ask my husband’

For Triandis, the ‘Indian woman’'s response revealed a collectivist culture:

‘well-being for collectivists depends on fitting in and having good relationships with the in-group which requires close attention to the norms of the in-group, while for individualists it depends on satisfaction with the self, and the emotions associated with self-satisfaction [Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis, 1998]. Thus, individualists sample mostly personal emotions, while collectivists sample mostly norms, obligations, duties’ Triandis (1999:129).

- However, it could have been a way of avoiding awkward questions!



Don't ask me....

- Our experience that people had considerable difficulty answering in the standard style
- For testing the model (factor analysis) need to capture an aspect of an abstract concept; for people to answer, however, it is much easier if the questions are more specific and tangible
- This is reinforced by the language of interview: e.g. Hindi much less abstract than English
- Move to questions rather than statements
- Move to specific answers tailored to questions, rather than single scale 'strongly agree – strongly disagree'
- Move to more descriptive/indirect rather than direct

- Aspirations are seen to be an important aspect of wellbeing, but questions about future prospects brought the response ‘who can tell what the future will hold?’
- Sarguja, man asked to assess his achievements in life: ‘If I were able to do what I wanted I would have had vegetables. My kids if they pass the class I am happy but if they do not I am not. As a farmer I go to the field, similarly I have sent them to do their farming at school and if they are successful I’ll be happy, if not I won’t be. “

A woman is similarly equivocal:

“If God is by my side then I will accomplish everything. Only if we attempt to do everything can we live up to our responsibilities, otherwise not.”



Talking about the self

- Many of the statements about self are difficult: comparisons with others may be seen as invidious; professing pride in one's own achievements is seen as inappropriate
- Some of this recognised in literature:
- Christopher (1999: 144) : 'In the United States we are taught to "toot our own horn," whereas in Taiwan one should let a friend, neighbor, or family member do the tooting.'

But there are other, perhaps deeper dimensions to this:

- Negative statements may be feared to attract the evil eye
- Cultures of expression vary in the extent to which they are direct or indirect: many of these things are not matters where people would normally speak directly about themselves, but indicate and imply through more general statements: 'the life of a woman!'



The uncertain future

- Aspirations are seen to be an important aspect of wellbeing, but here is also a difficulty/ tentativeness in talking about the future
- Partly perhaps that life is uncertain for many people, and they have encountered many obstacles to their plans
- And fear of attracting evil eye (and negating whatever you already have achieved)
- E.g. this interchange with a Sarguja man:

'Who can say what will happen in the future.

Going by what has been and what you have achieved so far can you imagine what it might be like?

Yes if I go by that then I imagine that things will be possible.

Do you think you will be able to complete everything?

That is difficult to say, I don't think I can say that everything will happen but most things I imagine I can do.'



Close relationships

- Sarguja:

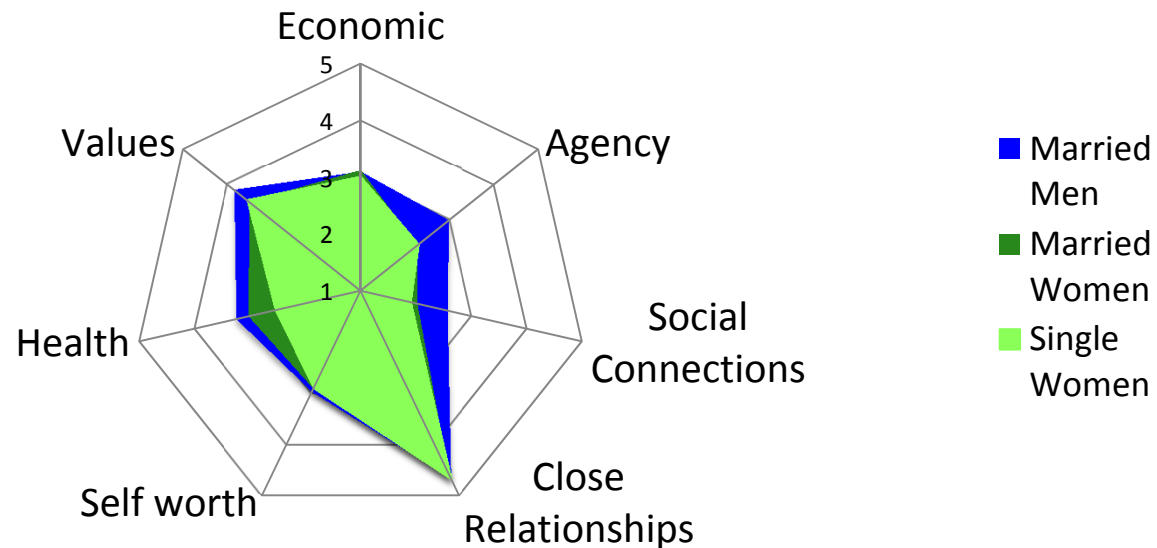
To questions about the care for her in her family:

- A) She always worries about her husband going to another village and that he will drink there and maybe fall down and what will happen to him. If her husband was at home then she would have cooked for him and fed him and known where he was safe at home, but if he is out then she worries about him and can't sleep.
- B) She was married in front of several people.
- C) Surely he loves her since they have been living together so long and have had five children together!



Patterns of Wellbeing

Mean domain scores: Sarguja, 2011
(close relationships 4.6/5; mean of other means 2.9)





Happy families?

- Very high scores on close relations may be taken at face value (e.g. Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2006, 5.93/7 satisfaction with family)
- Or may be due to some form of social desirability bias linked to ideologies about family unity or how this is presented to strangers
- Contrary evidence from: observation and discussion of family-based violence; comments made in relation to other domains during survey; qualitative interviews



Closing thoughts

- Wellbeing is not culture/context neutral!
- The challenges we have experienced raise questions about instruments that claim universal validity, or that you can simply 'bracket out' the local in going for emotion, mood, or satisfaction scores
- They suggest the need to look not just at patterns of response, but also the cultural and ideological embedding of concepts, methods and instruments of wellbeing assessment

And finally:

- The importance of place in grounding cross-cultural studies of wellbeing
- Confirmation of the importance of economics to wellbeing in marginalised communities – but some questions about the way this is conceived in the 'does more money make you happier?' literature
- The importance of qualitative methods: in developing quantitative tools; for triangulating quantitative findings; for seeking to explore meanings more nearly in people's own terms



Thanks!

To the Wellbeing Pathways Team whose work this presentation reflects:

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