

# Voicing Subjectivity: Reflections on Researching Wellbeing

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# Ubiquitous Wellbeing

- The rise and rise of wellbeing in public policy
- Varying and often ill-defined meanings, but something about what policy means for people's quality of life, as they themselves see it – 'subjective wellbeing'
- Our research asks what is the value-added of looking at wellbeing in the context of poverty
- Early stages, but already many questions about the quasi objective way subjective wellbeing is being operationalised



# Summary

- Introduce Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways
- The broader context of researching subjective wellbeing
- Project approach
- Developing the survey
- Refining the wellbeing questions:
  - What is subjective? What is objective?
  - Ways of asking; ways of listening
- Reflections on voicing subjectivity in wellbeing research



# The Project

- To explore links between poverty and wellbeing in rural communities in Zambia and India, 2010-13
- Partnership: Bath and Brunel Universities; three NGOs (international, national, local) and (so far) one research institute (India); Bath based and local researchers
- Sociology of development and psychology
- Two rounds of fieldwork, 3-4 months each, in each country
- (2x) 700 respondents across Zambia and India: 300 couples (husbands and wives separately) and 100 women heading households



# Project methods

- Community profiles to assess general resource environment
- Survey including subjective and objective questions
- Statistical tests to assess the validity, consistency, and reliability of our model of wellbeing
- In-depth case studies to gain a deeper understanding
- Same respondents visited again after two years to see what has changed in 'wellbeing' and 'poverty', and if we can discern any relationships within this



# Research on Subjective Wellbeing

Two broad approaches (also interaction between them)

1. SWB = Satisfaction (thinking) + Happiness (feeling) **'hedonic'**

- Main measures 'satisfaction with life scale' (Diener et al., 1985) and Positive and Negative Affect Scale, PANAS, (Watson et al., 1988). Also variations on these.

2. Functioning and fulfilment **'eudaemonic'**

- SWB derives from satisfaction of 'basic psychological needs' (autonomy, competence, relatedness) Self-Determination Theory, e.g. Ryan and Deci, (2000)
- or 'psychological wellbeing' comprising 6 components of 'positive psychological functioning' (e.g. Ryff, 1989)



# Subjective wellbeing is not the whole story

- Enabling environment (what's out there)  
(objective account of collective provision)
- What people think of what's out there  
(subjective reflection on collective provision)
- What people can get of what's out there  
(objective wellbeing – personal)
- What people think of what they can get  
(subjective reflection on objective wellbeing)
- What this all means for how people are in themselves (subjective wellbeing)



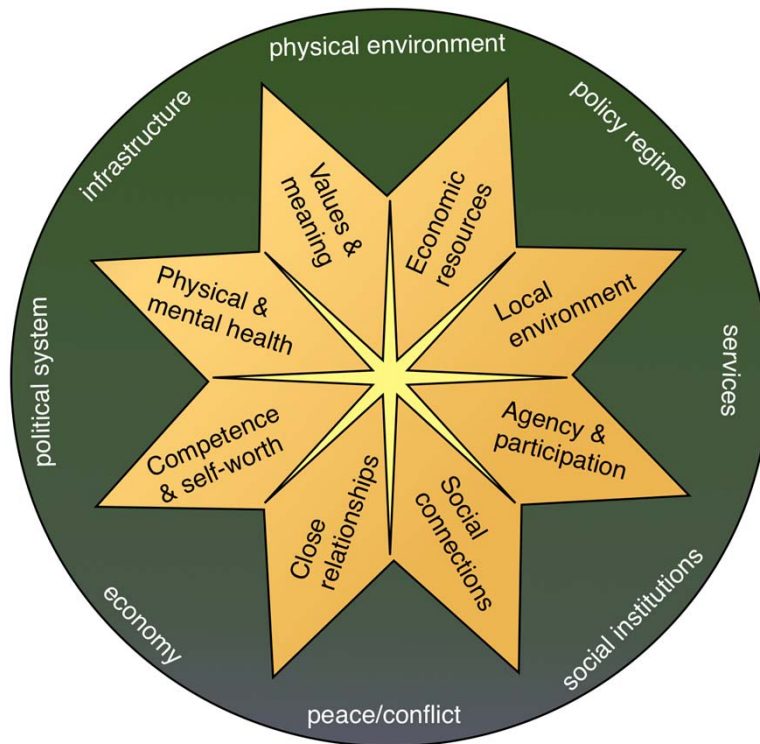
# For example.....

## Concerning health services:

- **Enabling environment**
  - Availability/quality of health care services
- **Objective wellbeing:**
  - Level of access to health services achieved
- **Subjective reflection on objective wellbeing:**
  - Satisfaction with health care received
- **Subjective wellbeing - how services enable/disable you**
  - Confidence of care if fall ill



# Our model of wellbeing



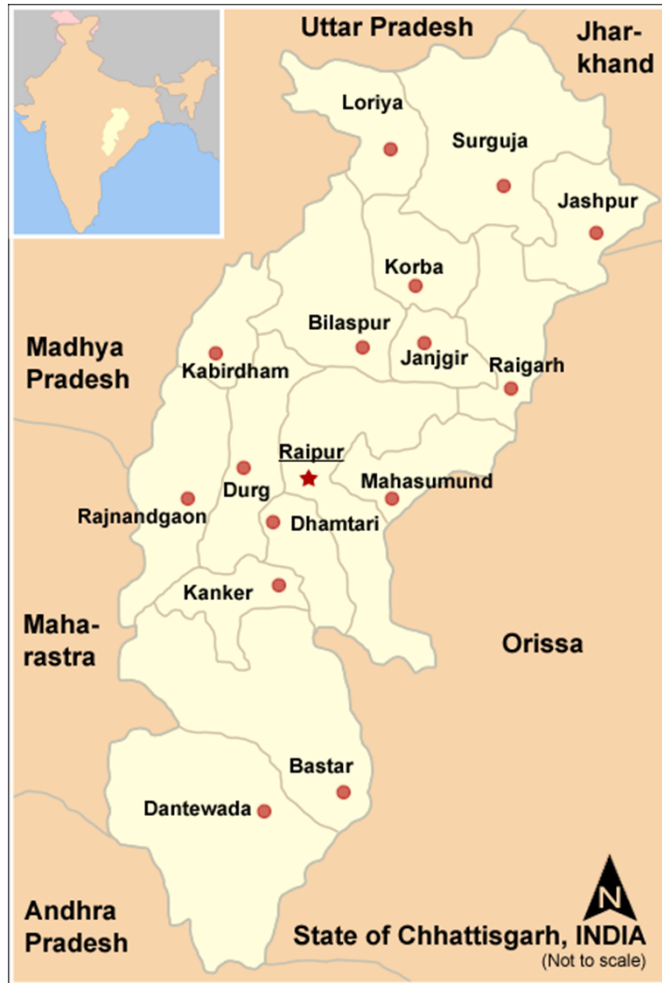
- Eight domains (closely interacting)
- Wider environment which enables or constrains wellbeing
- Wellbeing as a process which emerges through interaction:
  - between the different domains
  - between the person and those important to him or her
  - between the person and the broader environment
- Model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



# The sites: Chiawa, Zambia

- 2 ½ hours from Lusaka, but in many ways 'remote'; minority ethnic group, close to Zimbabwe border
- Game management area: acute human-wildlife conflict
- Low (no) technology agriculture dependent, but dramatic fall in land farmed – destruction by animals, short monsoons, flooding from dam upstream
- Malaria, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS
- Major access issues: no metalled road and river crossing only via ferry
- 'Development' seen as tourist lodges and plantation agriculture
- Wide-reaching rule of chieftainess

# Sarguja, Chhattisgarh



- Largely 'tribal' area (c. 75% population) – hills and forests
- Mainly agriculture dependent, though also collect forest products
- Major issues over (individual and collective) rights over forest land and some displacement through mineral extraction
- Also issue of erosion of Adivasi tradition and culture – including through Hindu and Christian 'mission' activity
- Combination of relatively effective state government and popular mobilisation means relatively good access to government services: subsidised food and employment guarantee particularly important



# Developing the survey

- Two components: 'poverty' (objective)  
'wellbeing' (subjective)
- Principles:
  - more time = less quality data
    - Only include what we think we will *use*
    - Don't ask for unnecessary detail that makes answering onerous
    - Try to structure with quasi conversational logic
    - Extended grounding and piloting – with local team an important part of the process



# Structure of the Survey

## **Section 1: Demographic (21 questions)**

- Tracking questions
- Age, community, religion, marital history, status/position and education
- Household members (and whether any with chronic health condition or disability)
- Children (and where they live and their education)
- Health status and use of health services

## **Section 2: Subjective wellbeing (32 questions)**

## **Section 3: Livelihood related (17 questions)**

- Main sources of income, food sufficiency, assets
- Access to government services
- Savings and credit
- Group membership
- Overall review questions (3):  
how doing economically; now compared with 5 years ago; 'how happy'



# Major changes in the survey

- Length:
  - Started at 24 qs (plus 42 SWB)
  - Maximum 47 qs (plus 48 SWB)
  - Final 39 qs (plus 32 SWB)
- What goes where?
  - Some questions shifted from subjective to objective, e.g. re. access to resources
- Satisfaction?
  - Inclusion and then removal of satisfaction questions (after objective on e.g. education, health, government services)



## Other methods issues

- Hand-held computers and paper copies
- Relaxed style, not interrogation, space for stories and explanations of answers (notes)
- Community profiles and community meetings
- Team meetings, switching pairs and ongoing support/reflection



# Refining the wellbeing questions

- Structure (5 point scale)
  - Statements or questions?
  - Verbal or visual responses? (respondents as subjects)
- Format
  - Shifting statements between domains to fit how respondents answering them
  - Phrasing to ensure a range of responses
  - Phrasing to ensure status neutral, not closet objective
  - Phrasing to ensure sufficiently personal, how they are themselves affected – not general observations on how things are





# Challenges

- For testing the model (factor analysis) need more abstract questions which capture an aspect of a common concept; for people to answer, however, it is much easier if the questions are more specific and tangible
- Questions about future prospects invited the response 'who can tell what the future will hold?'
- 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!'
- Many of the statements about self are difficult: negative statements may be feared to attract the evil eye; comparisons with others may be seen as invidious; professing pride in one's own achievements is seen as inappropriate



# The scope of the self

- Economic was very pervasive – hard to get statements that weren't interpreted in economic terms: harmony in the family, ability to help others, achievement in life.....
- Easily assimilated into Maslow-type hierarchy of needs – economic issues more important for poorer people (also see Cummins, 2000)
- But perhaps something rather different to this, about constructions of the self, internal and external, notions of responsibility and types of preoccupation
- Constructions of wellbeing as the bearers of ideology?  
(c.f. very different approach to subjectivity in social theory)



# Reflections

- SWB is not culture/context neutral!

Need to pay much more attention to the cultural and ideological embedding of instruments and patterns of response. Dominance of concern with measurement can crowd out attention to substance, concepts and meaning

- Except Ryff, all dominant instruments designed for other purposes, and many an amalgam of different measures

Need to look much more carefully at what they were designed for and intended to measure, not assume that widely 'validated' measures are therefore 'fit for purpose' in some kind of global way

- The numbers make no sense without the frame

To interpret scores – and any changes over time – you need to know what people have in mind when scoring (c.f. problem of rising aspirations which may signal programme success but result in lower satisfaction scores).



## More....

- Need question carefully *how* wellbeing is used in public policy:
  - Politics of asking how people ‘feel’ and how upbeat they are in times of adversity – especially at arm’s length
  - What does subjective wellbeing tell us, and what level is appropriate for its use?
- Where is the subject in the subjective?
  - Is there some collective bad faith in seeking ‘objective’ evidence from subjective indicators?
  - Important to explore what people mean when they say they are ‘somewhat happy’ or even ‘very happy’ when they have earlier themselves described many difficulties they are having
  - Can questions about ‘happiness’ shorn of context make sense?



# Thanks!

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