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Putting the Quality into 'Quality of Life': the Contribution of Qualitative Methods to Assessing Wellbeing in Zambia and India

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The Field of Wellbeing

- Wellbeing in development currently two main trajectories:
 - National level ‘beyond GDP’ statistical measures of progress
 - Community/individual level research and some project M&E
- Wellbeing in development builds on long tradition of broadening vision of development (‘beyond economics’) and range of voices (‘bottom up’ perspectives and participatory approaches)
- Subjective dimension is signature to wellbeing but not new
 - eg work on gender and empowerment
- Broader field of happiness, quality of life and wellbeing:
 - Dauntingly large number of studies
 - Overwhelmingly quantitative
 - Dominated by measures not concepts
 - Expert/elite capture



Reclaiming the qualitative

- This paper reports on on-going mixed method research in India and Zambia to argue the vital contribution of qualitative approaches to the study of wellbeing:
 - improving data quality and problem-solving
 - strengthen analysis and interpretation of results
 - deepening conceptual, ontological and political debate



Points of Reference

- Kanbur and Shaffer (2007) note value of mixed methods in poverty analysis, but also tensions which derive from different philosophical standpoints
- Graham (2011) notes of the 'does money make you happy' debates that much of the dispute can be traced to the methods used in different studies
- Camfield et al. (2009) describe discrepancies between qualitative and quantitative data from same subjects

'Qualitative approaches... foreground the presence of both the respondent and the researcher, which highlights the fallibility of all data collection by emphasising their role in its "co-creation" ' (Camfield et al., 2009: 8)



The Wellbeing Pathways project

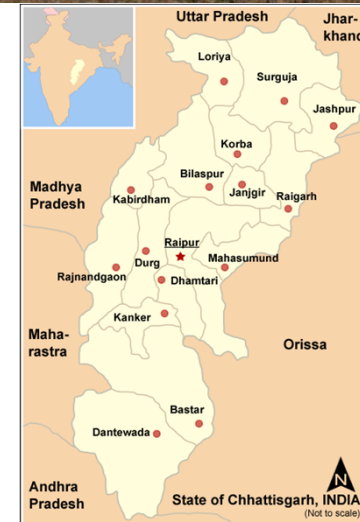
Ambition:

- 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

The Sites





Wellbeing Pathways model

- Seven domains (closely interacting)
- Wider environment which enables or constrains wellbeing
- 'objective' conditions of people's lives (via self-report) plus
- inner wellbeing:
 - beyond satisfaction
 - how people feel they can *be* or what they feel they can *do*, in each domain
 - distinct in concept and methods from Subjective Well-being (SWB) or subjective quality of life
 - allows fluid associations between mind, body and spirit, recognising cultural constructions differ





Improve data quality through survey design

- Quantitative approaches tend to emphasise output
- Qualitative pay more attention to input and process

Designing the survey

- Initial consultation on local issues
- Intensive grounding and piloting – 10 weeks in all
- To ensure data quality (and ethical research practice):
 1. only include what we think we will *use*
 2. don't ask for unnecessary detail that makes answering onerous
 3. make the process of doing the survey as conversational as possible
 4. phrase items as closely as possible to the ways that people talk
 5. pay attention to *how* people are thinking and talking about their lives
- Research officer present throughout, regular team meetings to raise spirits, ensure data quality, extend local researchers' skills



Qualitative Problem-Solving

- Statistical analysis of 1st round data from Zambia showed it didn't come together as we had hoped (skewness and kurtosis so no factor analysis possible)
- Qualitative reflection identified problems:
 - 'I do not get government assistance at the right time'
 - high scores for close relationships (right answer)
 - 'strongly!' (pattern of questioning)
 - acquiescence bias (+ve/-ve loading of statement)
- Changed for India:
 - some to objective sections
 - Questions not statements and responses
 - Range of standard examples agreed
- And seven domain model statistically validated!



Strengthening analysis and interpretation of results





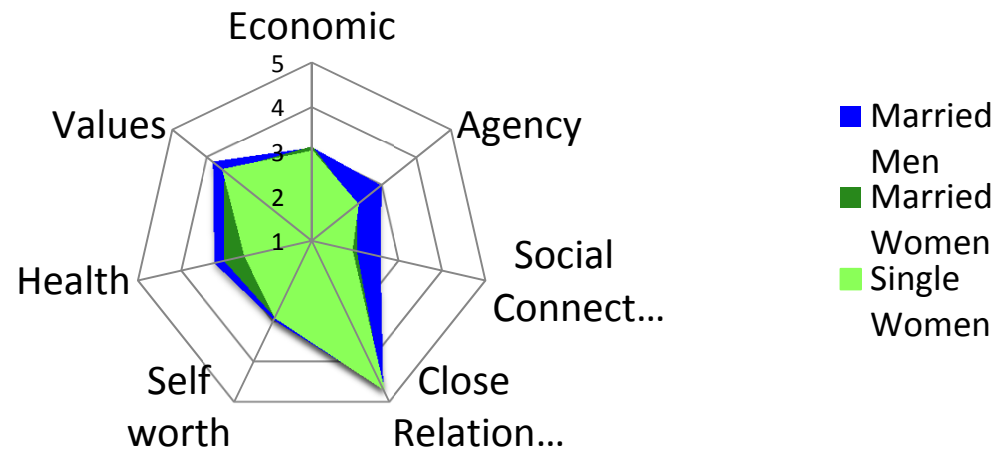
SWB in Calcutta : Main Findings

- Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2001; 2006
- Lower satisfaction scores re material domains (except food)
- High scores in rating self and social, in particular:
 - 2001 (scores out of 3): family (2.50), friends (2.40), morality (2.58)
 - 2006 (scores out of 7): social satisfaction (5.08); self (5.77); intelligence (5.85); family (5.93)
- ‘while the poor of Calcutta do not lead enviable lives, they do lead meaningful lives. They capitalize on the non-material resources available to them and find satisfaction in many areas of their lives’ (B-D&D 2001: 349)
- good social relationships may buffer negative effects of material deprivation (2006:201)



Patterns of Wellbeing

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



Chiawa items on family relations average 4.4 beside overall mean of 3.31

But both places much domestic violence and unhappiness



Close relationships

- Not appropriate to talk so directly
- 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!

- Strong positivity bias



Social Connections

- Asked about general helpfulness people gave very positive responses, often referring specifically to their own neighbourhood, but saying they couldn't comment about people beyond their neighbourhood.
- In general scores about social connections rather low: Sarguja 3 of 4 items below mid-point. 2 of these strong gender pattern (men doing better)
- Stronger demand on connections, lower the score
- Chiawa also strong gender pattern (3 of 6 significant)
- Strong country contrast on people were actively seeking their harm. Sarguja 4.35; Chiawa 2.11 – men highest. Witchcraft, while Sarguja mainly natural harms
- Qualitative confirms quantitative in showing ambivalence of social relations – e.g. demands of reciprocity



Deepening the Debate

- Questioning the frame
- Epistemology – do the methods co-construct the data?
- Ontology – selves as fixed and WB as something people 'have' or 'seek to achieve'?
- Surveys as disciplining respondents:
direct answers; abstracting questions;
- 'Evolutionism, functionalism, diffusionism - whatever the method, all express otherness in the name of sameness, reduce the different to the already known, and thus fundamentally escape the task of making sense of other worlds.' (Mudimbe, 1988: 72-3).



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