Reclaiming the well-being agenda in community development

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Abstract   Improving well-being did not use to be a controversial idea in community development. Yet, in recent years, the growing focus on well-being at the policy level has made many become critical of the term. Well-being has been employed to support government neo-liberal agendas by emphasizing individual responsibility over social justice. On this framing, improving well-being is thought to shift community development practice from challenging injustice to helping people feel and cope better with their lives. This article argues that, despite attempts to associate well-being with individual responsibility, the greater focus on well-being at the policy level is something to celebrate. This article draws upon the philosophy, psychology and sociology of well-being to make two arguments. The first argument is that conceptualizations of well-being are diverse and contested, and as such, it is important not to associate well-being with the narrow conception one is critical of. The second argument is that a greater focus on well-being can help communities challenge the reduction of welfare spending. Well-being, instead of de-politicizing development, can help reinforce its political stand. This article advocates for the use of pluralistic understandings of well-being within the framework of the capabilities approach to ensure community development advances social change.

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Introduction

Well-being can mean different things to different people. Meanings range from 'feeling good', as a state of mind, to 'living well', as objective welfare conditions. Community development can also mean different things to different people. It can be defined as outcome, process, discipline, approach, set of skills and values, occupation, social movement, political activity, or professional practice (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Banks, 2011; Kenny, 2011; Phillips and Pittman, 2014; Shevellar and Westoby, 2018). Different understandings coexist because community development, like well-being, can 'reflect competing ideals (. . .) and divergent analyses about the role of the state, the market and civil society in promoting the common good' (Emejulu, 2015, p. 2). Despite these different understandings, there has historically been a broad agreement that one of the goals of community development is to improve well-being (See Bhattacharyya, 2004; IACD, 2004; Phillips and Pittman, 2014; Kenny et al., 2018; CLD Standards Council for Scotland, 2022).

This goal, improving well-being, did not use to be a controversial idea. Yet, in recent years, the emphasis placed on individual well-being at the European policy level has made those involved in community development critical of the term. Well-being has been employed to support neo-liberal agendas (Bache and Scott, 2018) by emphasizing happiness, positive thinking and individual responsibility over social justice (Furedi, 2004; Sointu, 2005; Ahmed, 2010; Atkinson and Joyce, 2011; Davies, 2015). This understanding of well-being has made those involved in community development critical of employing well-being as a framework to guide their practice. One concern is that well-being can shift community development from challenging injustice to helping people feel and cope better with their lives (Barnes et al., 2013; Ferrier and McGregor, 2016).

This article argues that, despite criticisms, the greater focus on well-being at the policy level is something to celebrate. Drawing upon the philosophy, psychology and sociology of well-being, this article makes two arguments. The first argument is that conceptualizations of well-being deployed in well-being agendas are diverse and contested, and as such, it is important not to surrender the term to those one is critical of. The second argument is that the growing focus on well-being at the policy level can help community development challenge the reduction of welfare spending. Well-being, instead of de-politicizing development, can help reinforce its political stand.

The article has five sections. The first section introduces the rise of the well-being agenda, by employing the case of the UK as an example. The second section explores the contested terrain of well-being by identifying three main approaches to individual well-being: subjective, objective, and pluralistic. The third section challenges some of the criticism against well-

being agendas on the grounds that they shift responsibilities from state onto individuals. The fourth section draws upon the capabilities approach to illustrate how governments' well-being agendas can be employed to hold them accountable. The fifth section concludes.

The rise of the well-being agenda in policy

To properly understand the skepticism against well-being, one needs to recognize the context in which well-being agendas emerged: drastic austerity measures as a response to the 2008 economic crisis (Bache and Scott, 2018). In the UK, to give an example, the well-being agenda concurred with severe funding cuts and the idea of the 'Big Society': the Government's vision of a world in which voluntary organizations would play a leading role in delivering public services, improving local areas and promoting a new culture of 'responsibility, mutuality and obligation' (UK Government, 2010, p. 1). Influenced by Richard Layard's (2005) claim that prosperity does not necessarily bring happiness, the UK well-being agenda appeared to legitimize well-being as an individual responsibility, and not as a matter of public spending (See Cameron, 2010). For the UK Coalition Government, it was entirely possible to pursue higher levels of well-being whilst minimizing state's responsibilities over welfare provision (Scott, 2011; Levitas, 2012; Milbourne and Murray, 2017). In this context, the voluntary sector experienced significant funding cuts. The expectation was that those involved in community development would provide support services to an increasing number of people experiencing poverty and mental health problems, without the support of the state (Rees and Mullins, 2016, p. 57).

Around that time, another key development shaped government well-being agendas. This was the rising popularity of positive psychology, an emerging sub-discipline of psychology that seeks to discover the strengths that enable people to improve well-being by themselves. Positive psychology promotes the idea that people can improve their well-being by learning certain skills, altering the way they interpret events and changing certain behaviours (Seligman, 2006; Seligman et al., 2009). Understanding well-being in this way, critics argue, helps reinforce a view of wellbeing as a matter of individual responsibility (Ferguson, 2007, 2011; Edwards and Imrie, 2008; Taylor, 2011). Instead of challenging inequalities, and structural injustice, well-being is pursued by encouraging people to become more resilient and optimistic about their future and their lives.

In countries like the UK, the impact of austerity, the government well-being agenda, and the learnings from positive psychology influenced the actions of voluntary organizations. The sector witnessed a growing provision of 'health and well-being activities' such as yoga, mindfulness, nature

walks, community connectors and self-care workshops (Rees and Mullins, 2016; Powell et al., 2017; Chapman, 2022). Some argue that this emphasis on well-being reflected a new culture of consumerism in which people were encouraged to seek individual well-being through the acquisition of feel-good experiences and therapeutical engagement (Furedi, 2004; Davies, 2015). It also reflected the idea that the responsibility of well-being largely lies with people, instead of states (Atkinson and Joyce, 2011).

In this context, it is not surprising that those involved in community development became increasingly critical of 'well-being'. They had good reasons. If obtaining well-being is understood as an individual responsibility, there is the danger of stigmatizing people suffering low levels of well-being (Crocker and Major, 1989; Frost and Hoggett, 2008; Friedli, 2011). There is also a risk of absolving the state of its own responsibility for addressing inequality and injustice (Taylor, 2011; Scott, 2015). When social problems are framed as individual problems, the solutions people offer tend to be individualistic (Hawkins et al., 2001). Finally, the emphasis placed on positive thinking is thought to have a soothing effect that limits spaces for dissent and protest (Ferrier and McGregor, 2016). Because people are encouraged to be resilient, and to see the glass half-full, structural injustices and systems of oppression can remain unchallenged.

Critics are right to raise concerns about a conception of well-being specifically tailored to legitimize welfare retrenchment. Yet, there are multiple ways of conceptualizing and operationalizing well-being, and it is within this diversity that well-being can be employed to (1) achieve more transformational outcomes and (2) bring back governments' responsibilities over welfare (Atkinson and Joyce, 2011; Bache and Scott, 2018).

The contested terrain of well-being

Much of the opposition to well-being may stem from the fact that well-being appears to be a 'buzzword' with no deep meaning. Yet, if one turns to the academic literature, definitions of well-being are rich. There are multiple ways of understanding well-being and each has implications for community development. Similar to concepts like empowerment and participation, the 'potential for providing competing legitimacies for very different interests and purposes is, of course, part of the [definition] problem' (Shaw, 2008, pp. 24–25). This section draws upon the philosophy, psychology and sociology of well-being to discuss three of the approaches well-being agendas draw upon: subjective, objective and pluralistic well-being. The section also provides some examples of how these three approaches can be operationalized in community development settings.

Subjective accounts of well-being

Subjective accounts of well-being, broadly speaking, include theories such as hedonism and desire-fulfilment theory (from philosophy), hedonic well-being or subjective well-being (from psychology) and social happiness approaches (from sociology). All these theories have one thing in common: they are based on the idea that to know how someone's life is going, one needs to capture the sense of well-being from the person's own perspective (Kahneman et al., 1999; Diener et al., 2003a; Heathwood, 2006; Lucas, 2016).

Key to subjective accounts is (1) experiences and (2) desire-fulfilment or satisfaction. For proponents of subjective accounts, what contributes to well-being (what is good and bad for people) must affect what people experience, or in other words, what people feel. Being with friends may be good for us because it is enjoyable, and as such, it feels good. Food deprivation is bad for us because it feels bad (Gregory, 2016, p. 113; Kahneman et al., 1999). According to this view, the more enjoyable experiences people have, the higher their well-being will be.

However, a person may experience lots of pleasures whilst being deeply unsatisfied with her life. Hence, for proponents of the subjective account, what contributes to well-being must also be related to desire-fulfilment or satisfaction (Diener et al., 2003b, p.196). On this framing, well-being is determined by the extent to which a person is able to fulfil her desires, or in other words, what she values (Heathwood, 2016). If a person fulfils her desires, she will have a higher degree of well-being than if she does not.

Because experiences and desire-fulfilment are thought to contribute to well-being, scholars adopting a subjective account measure people's balance of (1) positive and negative experiences, and (2) overall life satisfaction or satisfaction with different domains such as housing, employment, relationships, and so on (Kahneman et al., 1999). Self-reports of experiences and satisfaction are important because to know how well a person's life goes, one needs to 'capture a global sense of well-being from the respondent's own perspective' (Diener et al., 2003b, p. 197). In this way, the subjective approach to well-being is able to capture what matters to people.

A subjective account to well-being can have several applications in community development. One application is to ensure that the well-being indicators employed by governments, policymakers and non-profit organizations reflect people's interests, values, and desires. Examples may include research conducted on community well-being indicators (see Phillips and Wong, 2016) or research exploring the meaning of 'well-being' for specific communities (Barnes et al., 2013; Coburn and Gormally, 2018).

Another application is to help people improve their well-being by focusing on areas of their lives they have more power over, such as their expe-

riences and perceptions. This focus on subjective well-being is common, for instance, in asset-based approaches to community development. Asset-based approaches promote a more 'appreciative' view of communities. They encourage people to focus on what they have, instead of on what they lack (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; García, 2020). They aim to help people re-imagine their future and become more hopeful about what they can achieve (Pattoni et al., 2016, p. 47). These approaches are based on the premise that people can more easily enhance their well-being if they act upon their experiences and perceptions than if they try to influence external conditions or powerful actors (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Mathie and Cunningham, 2003).

Why do improved experiences and perceptions matter? Experiments in psychology have yielded ideas as to how people can improve their own sense of well-being by cultivating positive emotions and resilience (Ryff and Singer, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). Studies have also found that when people become more optimistic about their lives, they can better cope with stress and adversity, and they tend to enjoy better health (Tugade et al., 2004; Seligman, 2006; Diener and Chan, 2011). Community projects that focus on improving people's experiences and perceptions can positively contribute to areas of well-being such as relationships, mental health, perceptions of safety, self-esteem and sense of happiness and life satisfaction, amongst others (Foot, 2012; Hopkins and Rippon, 2015; Asenjo Palma, 2024).

However, a subjective account to well-being, on its own, can bring significant limitations to community development. Aiming to improve well-being by helping people improve their experiences and perceptions can be flawed because people may report a high level of well-being whilst not actually having a good quality of life. There are two reasons why this might occur. One is known as 'adaptive preferences' (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Sen, 1999). Adaptive preferences are preferences that arise due to external constraints. Someone who is in a situation of oppression may, over time, come to hold preferences that they might not otherwise hold. Since some goods are denied to them, they adapt their preferences to what is accessible. As a result, they may report that they are happy or satisfied even though they do not enjoy the same freedoms as those who are not oppressed (Sen, 1999, p. 63).

Another reason is that an emphasis on positive thinking may influence people's own assessments of well-being. For instance, communities involved in asset-based approaches can internalize a narrative on positive thinking that makes them more likely to assess their well-being by focusing on their aspirations (what they hope to achieve) and less on their realities (what they have achieved). As a result, asset-based approaches may appear

to have a higher impact on well-being than other approaches, but only because participants in asset-based approaches develop a more optimistic view (Asenjo Palma, 2024). Because subjective reports of well-being are complex and can lack accuracy, some well-being scholars prefer the objective approach.

Objective accounts of well-being

Objective accounts of well-being, broadly speaking, include theories such as objective list theories (philosophy) and eudaimonic well-being (psychology). All these theories are based on the idea that whatever is that contributes to well-being does so because it has prudential value in itself, and not only because people experience them as positive (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Kashdan et al., 2008; Fletcher, 2016; Tiberius, 2016). For instance, as Valeria Tiberius (2016) points out, a subjective approach to well-being may consider physical health to be constitutive of well-being because people enjoy having good health. An objective approach, by contrast, considers physical health to be constitutive of well-being 'because health is objectively good. (...) someone who did not want health would still be someone for whom health is good' (p. 567).

Key to the objective approach is the notion of 'doing well' rather than 'feeling good' (Keyes and Annas, 2009, p. 198). Proponents of this approach are more interested in what goes right and wrong in people's lives than in the score people give to represent their level of positive experiences and life satisfaction (Haybron, 2016, pp. 40–41). This focus on 'doing well' is thought to help them overcome the problem of having misleading reports that do not correlate with high well-being (Ryan and Huta, 2009; Tiberius, 2016).

In community development, an objective approach to well-being helps ensure that certain living conditions are met independently of people's desires. This focus on objective well-being is common, for instance, in rights-based approaches to community development, as they tend to follow an externalist perspective on well-being. Externalist perspectives hold the view that to improve well-being, people need to advance their social and material circumstances (Ahuvia et al., 2015). In this respect, well-being is framed less as an aspiration, and more as an entitlement, in which governments play the role of duty bearers (Schmitz, 2012). This account of well-being is, for instance, reflected in projects that aim to improve people's living conditions such as those of political campaigns, unions, and human rights organizations.

Why do objective conditions matter? The objective account has some advantages over the subjective account in community development. An objective account, for instance, avoids the adaptive preference effect and the 'soothing' effect that positive thinking may have in preventing communities

from pursuing more radical change. As scholars have claimed, overlooking socio-economic factors of disadvantage and structural injustice, in favour of behavioural and attitudinal change, can be particularly detrimental for those most marginalized (Ennis and West, 2010; Friedli, 2013; MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014; Emejulu, 2015; Ward, 2019).

Objectively identifying the conditions that are needed for people to enjoy well-being can also help community development pressure governments to meet their responsibilities in ensuring adequate living conditions. If we acknowledge well-being as a fundamental element of human life, with the state serving as the duty bearer, those involved in community development can more effectively question the reduction of public spending and community services, as well as the transfer of responsibilities from the state to individuals.

However, objective accounts to well-being can also raise significant limitations as they tend to be elitist and paternalistic. Objective accounts involve imposing certain standards of well-being upon people because their well-being is assessed without reference to people's own experiences, feelings and desires. There is indeed a large body of literature from critical disability studies that question objective approaches to well-being for treating disability as having an intrinsic adverse effect on well-being (See Edwards and Imrie, 2008). Hence, even if we accept that certain objective conditions are universally valued (i.e. adequate income), people may still weight conditions differently. Some people may be willing to sacrifice social relationships for a high income, whilst others may prefer to have a smaller salary if this allows them to maintain better social relationships. Subjective accounts of well-being, by contrast, allow this differential weighting (Lucas, 2016, p. 407).

Given the limitations of subjective and objective accounts, some advocate for combining subjective and objective approaches, particularly in applied settings (Kashdan et al., 2008; Kagan, 2009; Ryan and Huta, 2009; Woodward, 2016). I agree. Pluralistic accounts of well-being provide community development a path to account for objective standards of well-being as well as what people subjectively care about.

Pluralistic accounts of well-being
Pluralistic accounts of well-being are those that integrate objective and subjective conditions. Objective conditions, as explained above, are attitude-independent and externally observable. They contribute to well-being because they improve someone's life irrespective of whether they are desired by that person. Subjective conditions are, by contrast, attitude-dependent and internally perceived. They are based on a person's evaluations and perceptions of how well their life goes.

Those who favour a pluralistic account over subjective and objective accounts do so for two main reasons. First, a pluralistic conception is thought to be more comprehensive. Theories that offer either a subjective or an objective account of well-being give a partial picture of well-being. They are based on reasonable premises but, at the same time, miss out fundamental elements. A pluralistic account, by contrast, offers a more integrated understanding of well-being since it includes elements that are objectively considered to be good for people and what people subjectively care about (Gasper, 2004; Ahuvia et al., 2015; Tiberius, 2016).

The second reason is that a pluralistic account of well-being overcomes the limitations of measuring subjective and objective indicators by themselves. Excluding either measure can yield counterintuitive results. If subjective indicators are excluded, a person may score a high level of well-being even if she is extremely unhappy with her life. If objective indicators are excluded, a person may score a high level of well-being because she has adapted to poor living standards.

Pluralistic accounts emphasize a view of well-being as necessarily involving both elements of 'feeling good' (subjective well-being) and 'doing well' (objective well-being) (White, 2016). For a person to score a high level of well-being, her life must be subjectively evaluated as positive, and objectively meet the criteria of 'the good life' (Ahuvia et al., 2015; Cieslik, 2017). This dual emphasis on 'feeling good' and 'doing well' has made pluralist accounts particularly popular in applied policy and practice settings. For instance, most well-being frameworks employed by governments acknowledge that both subjective and objective dimensions are important aspects of people's quality of life (See UK Measures of National Well-being, Australia's What Matters Framework, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Framework for Measuring Well-being and Progress and Canada's Quality of Life Framework). Pluralistic accounts are also better suited to measure individual and societal progress because they account for key factors such as income inequality, access to healthcare and education, social support networks and environmental factors. They provide information about how people perform by looking at objective indicators (life expectancy, employment rates, wealth, level of education, etc.) and subjective indicators (how satisfied are people with their lives, relationships or work, what are their perceptions of happiness, health and safety, etc.).

Why policy well-being agendas should be celebrated

Even if there continues to be a degree of contestation as to which approach to well-being can better conceptualize or measure 'what the good life is', pluralistic accounts of well-being have been prioritized in applied settings.

These accounts, as I explained above, not only account for subjective reports and sense of happiness, but also for material living conditions and objective assessments. Yet, the inclusion of these subjective dimensions triggered part of backlash against well-being. For some critics, monitoring happiness can de-politicize well-being because it compels governments to encourage people to feel 'happier' by engaging in 'positive' behaviours or improving their perceptions of their lives (Furedi, 2004; Ahmed, 2010; Davies, 2015; Ferrier and McGregor, 2016).

The idea that subjective well-being matters did not use to be a controversial idea in community development. Improving well-being, and within it, happiness, has guided community development in local, national and international settings. One may agree with critics that there are reasons to be concerned about employing well-being as a tool to justify austerity or to promote 'compliant happy individuals'. However, these criticisms, I argue, do not need to lead to an objection to employing well-being agendas. For most people, well-being means much more than positive thinking or happiness (See for instance, Cieslik, 2021; Coburn and Gormally, 2018; White, 2017).

Two arguments can help disassociate subjective well-being and individual responsibility. First, a broad and complex concept like well-being needs not be reduced to a narrow conception (positive thinking or happiness). What is problematic is the use of subjective well-being to minimize government responsibility for welfare services. Yet, when critics dismiss well-being without distinguishing the range of possible conceptions, they risk reinforcing the very interpretation of well-being they seek to challenge. The inclusion of subjective well-being, I argue, provides community development an opportunity to re-gain the focus on areas beyond (and not instead of) material living conditions. Instead of opposing well-being, those involved in community development can play a role in re-negotiating the terms of policy well-being agendas.

Second, what is well-being and what causes well-being are two separate questions. One could think that well-being is a mental state (feeling good or happiness), and at the same time think that what makes someone feel good is caused by structural factors like adequate housing, income or access to public services (as evidence suggests). Similarly, one could hold the view that well-being can be improved by changing the way one feels (an idea associated with positive psychology) without regarding well-being as an individual responsibility. After all, it could be that well-being is a matter of how one feels but how one feels is determined by, say, the quality of social support that a person receives. Hence, there is no reason to oppose well-being (not even a subjective account of well-being as a mental state) under the assumption that it necessarily leads to assuming individual responsibil-

ities over welfare. I hope these two points illustrate why a focus on well-being does not necessarily involve ignoring structural factors or accepting the status quo. Rather the opposite can be true.

Well-being as a political tool in community development

The greater focus on well-being can be employed as a political tool because the well-being agendas set by governments compel them not only to measure well-being but also to fulfil their responsibilities towards well-being outcomes. Let me explain this by drawing upon the capability approach.

The capability approach can be described as following a pluralistic account of well-being that includes both subjective and objective domains (Robeyns, 2017; Austin, 2018). Central to the capability approach is the distinction between functionings and capabilities. Functionings refer to activities and states of existence that people value, such as being well-nourished or being part of a community. Capabilities, on the other hand, refer to people's abilities to achieve those functionings (Sen, 1999). For example, the capability to have access to food is necessary to achieve the functioning of being well-nourished (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2001). The distinction between functionings and capabilities is crucial, as it highlights the difference between a person who chooses to fast and a person who is forced to starve. By identifying functionings (well-being outcomes), one can identify capabilities (what enables people to achieve those well-being outcomes).

On this framing, when governments pursue a well-being agenda, they become accountable. The state plays the role of the duty bearer because the well-being that 'people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health [or] basic education´ (Sen, 1999, p.5). The capability approach provides thus a language to challenge the reduction of public expenditure, the erosion of community services and the shift of responsibilities over welfare from the state onto individuals. Evidence indeed suggests that progressive welfare policies have a direct positive influence on people's well-being, happiness included (Deeming and Hayes, 2012; Heins and Deeming, 2015).

Governments in Wales, Scotland and New Zealand can help illustrate how well-being agendas can lead towards greater accountability over welfare and quality of life. In these countries, for instance, the implementation of well-being agendas involved monitoring government performance in achieving well-being outcomes. The Welsh 'Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015)' required public bodies to publish annual reports of well-being outcomes by focusing on sustainable development; In New Zealand

and Scotland, in turn, the well-being frameworks set by the government served not only to set out the direction of governmental policies but also to make them accountable for providing the resources needed to act upon well-being indicators (Anderson and Mossialos, 2019; Heins and Pautz, 2021).

Besides accountability, the greater focus on well-being can also give more power to communities to define well-being in their own terms. For instance, both in Scotland and in New Zealand, the well-being frameworks employed by each Government drew upon the perspectives of communities themselves (i.e. New Zealand integration of Māori perspectives, and the Oxfam (Scotland) Humankind index). This is key, since scholars acknowledge that well-being can mean different things to different people. Because well-being is culturally and collectively mediated, it is essential that communities identify what constitutes well-being from their own perspectives (Oishi, 2010; White, 2016, 2017).

A notable example of employing pluralistic approaches to well-being, and reclaiming governments well-being agendas is the work done by equality organizations in the UK and elsewhere. The equality sector has historically combined a range of approaches to ensure policy agendas include the perspectives of intersectionally marginalized groups, whilst pressuring governments to assume their responsibilities towards well-being and rights protection (Christoffersen, 2020). Following examples from the equality sector, those involved in community development have the important task of (1) bringing communities understandings of well-being to the forefront of governments' well-being agendas and (2) pressuring governments to ensure the achievement of well-being outcomes as set in their agendas. To do so, government well-being agendas need not to be rejected but fought over.

Conclusion

Whilst it is crucial to remain critical of conceptions of well-being that emphasize individual responsibility, it is equally important to recognize the potential of government well-being agendas. Community development can advance conceptions of well-being that drive meaningful social change, but to do so, those involved in community development need to shape policy well-being agendas, instead of rejecting them outright. Pluralistic approaches to well-being can become a tool for social action as they account for both subjective experiences and objective living conditions. They hold governments accountable for welfare provision, and they advance conceptions of well-being that are contextual, community-driven, and focused on structural injustice. If we endorse well-being as a goal of community development, challenging the policies and systems that limit people's opportu-

nities (and freedoms) to achieve what they value (including happiness) is critical. In this respect, the focus on well-being, far from leading to a de-politicization of community development, can help reinforce its political stand.

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