

1 Introduction

While the social sciences have historically tended to focus on social problems and pathologies, this Element invites us to think about what it means to live well with others. By exploring living well in its own right, making it a focus of study, we are afforded a new and enlarged view of the person or self and of society at large – a view different to that which arises from attention to the pathological. Without doubt, striving for a better understanding of social problems and crises is of the utmost importance, but studying pathologies can only get us so far when it comes to understanding wellbeing, which is not simply an absence of suffering or an inversion of the problematic, challenging, or undesirable. Living well and wellbeing are, of course, closely related, in complex ways, to negative and challenging aspects of experience. In many cultural settings, suffering and wellbeing are not seen as polar opposites but as mutually constitutive and entwined aspects of the human condition. Departing from this insight, this Element is underpinned by two central and related questions: How do people living in different kinds of situations understand wellbeing and how do they strive to live well despite the many challenges they face?

I approach the discussion of wellbeing through the lens of three conceptual framings, which I refer to as conviviality, care, and creativity. I do not wish to imply that these are the “key elements,” “ingredients,” or components of wellbeing, or the prerequisites for achieving it. I have chosen these concepts, in the first instance, because they – along with some others including hope, vulnerability, resilience, and happiness – have been at the forefront of much productive work in anthropology in recent years. I draw on anthropological contributions to the discussions of conviviality, care, and creativity, which are not, for the most part, directed at the discussion of wellbeing as such but lend themselves very well to understanding social qualities of wellbeing and their embeddedness in particular cultural contexts. By exploring their relevance for wellbeing, and by making the connections more explicit, I therefore aim to offer a substantive contribution to cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary discussions – slightly shifting the way we use these concepts along the way. I do this from a distinctly anthropological perspective, namely one that combines theoretical analysis with nuanced ethnographic descriptions based on long-term engagement with research participants and aims at a “thick description” of their experience. Among other things, anthropology has the capacity to draw on ethnographic findings to show us other ways of organizing thought and practice. By attending carefully to the conceptual framings of others, we can better challenge and refine our own ontological and epistemological assumptions. The perspectives of those we meet in the field – our research participants and

interlocutors – can and do often encourage us to reconsider what exists and what we can know.

My own research has been mostly carried out in Japan, with older Japanese and, more recently, with young contemporary artists. In *The Process of Wellbeing*, however, I will draw on a broad range of examples. To those less familiar with an anthropological approach, this might seem surprising: Are so many examples from different parts of the world really necessary? Yes, they are, and they are not merely illustrative, although the textured description is helpful in itself. Most importantly, they provide the raw material that allows us to construct the argument. The method here is primarily inductive. Rather than departing from particular hypotheses, straightforward and clearly articulated, which are then “tested,” as it were, the inductive approach aims to build arguments gradually from the ground up. Ethnographic theory, at its best, draws on empirical examples from rich ethnographic descriptions; conceptual framings are developed and refined with reference to these descriptions, and stem from them, but are more abstract than the descriptions themselves. Rather than primarily relying on theoretical tools and concepts developed by Western philosophers, then, my departure points consist of concepts originating in the ethnographic description of diverse cultural practices around the world. By focusing on how people in a variety of different settings attend to conviviality, care, and creativity, we are well placed to reconsider, and expand, our understanding of the nature of wellbeing.

1.1 Culture and Wellbeing

Anthropologists have long concerned themselves with the different ways in which people not only live but reflect upon their own lives and with how they negotiate social models and personal preferences. Countless ethnographies have been written in which we may discern an underlying concern with what a good life is for a particular group of people, and yet, surprisingly, questions of wellbeing and happiness have rarely been explored explicitly. Neil Thin (2008) attributed anthropology’s evasion of the topic of happiness to four dominant influences in the social sciences more generally: alongside “anti-hedonism” and “moral relativism,” he identified what he described as “clinical pathologism” and “anti-psychologism.” The former refers to the prevalent attitude among social scientists that pathologies and problems are somehow more worth studying than the good aspects of life. The latter, meanwhile, has constrained analysis of the emotions either through the social constructionist rejection of the psychologists’ universalist assumptions about the unity of human psychological

makeup or through a cognitivist resistance to the study of emotional experience (Thin, 2008, pp.138–150).

On the other hand, happiness and its relationship to the good life have long been an overt object of attention among philosophers (cf. Brülde, 2007; Tiberius, 2004) as well as psychologists and social psychologists. The importance of wellbeing and related topics in psychology seems to be growing, and the study of positive experiences is fast becoming one of the central research interests in the field of personality psychology (Suh & Oishi, 2004). The philosopher Valerie Tiberius (2004) distinguished substantive accounts of wellbeing from its formal analysis, stressing that while cultural differences might be relevant for the first, they do not undermine the latter philosophical project, which strives to reveal the nature of wellbeing as a universal notion. As such, the philosophical project mostly limits itself to formal analysis of the concept, leaving the substantive accounts, which point to differences in sources and causes of wellbeing, to other disciplines. To date, this has mostly been undertaken by social psychologists comparing large samples of quantitative data. The need for other types of data, including in-depth ethnographic accounts, has been explicitly recognized by practitioners in the field (Diener & Suh, 2000; Suh & Oishi, 2004). Much has been written on the topic of wellbeing in cross-cultural psychology, but the contributions from anthropologists remain relatively scarce.

1.2 Wellbeing and Happiness

At this point, it is fruitful to examine more carefully some of the various key terms mentioned so far, particularly “wellbeing” and “happiness,” and their interconnections. Happiness is often equated with subjective wellbeing (SWB) (cf. Diener & Suh, 2000; Thin, 2008). Psychologists use the notion of SWB as comprising people’s affective and cognitive evaluations of their lives (Diener & Fujita, 1995, as cited in Triandis, 2000, p. 14). These evaluations include people’s emotional reactions to events, their moods, and judgments they form about their life satisfaction, fulfillment, and satisfaction with domains such as marriage and work. Thus, SWB concerns the study of what laypeople might simply call happiness or satisfaction. Furthermore, “SWB is one measure of the quality of the life of an individual and of societies” (Diener et al., 2003, p. 405). The notion of wellbeing triggers two opposed yet linked reactions among many anthropologists, as Lambek (2008, p. 115) has pointed out: On the one hand, the idea of measuring wellbeing bears resemblance to certain modernist interventionist ideas that have caused a number of difficulties – one need only be reminded of the pitfalls of social modernist planning, for instance. On the other hand, the need for engagement with the political, and the related need

for the study of ethics in social action, makes engaging with ideas of wellbeing crucial. In order to make critical statements about aspects of social action, one needs some kind of description or criterion of wellbeing.

The notion of wellbeing has also been a focus of interest in the fields of economics and development studies, typically in the form of something to be measured and quantified through what scholars take to be either its constituents (e.g., freedom) or its determinants (e.g., services or goods that contribute to it) (Dasgupta, 1993). These analyses of wellbeing were often equated with, or paralleled by, discourses about “quality of life.” A notable example is the so-called capability approach, according to which capabilities are understood as peoples’ freedom to realize various aspects of their wellbeing (e.g., Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Robeyns & Biskov, 2020). Efforts have been made to encompass various aspects of wellbeing within a holistic notion that extends beyond material goods and economic wealth (Gough & McGregor, 2007). The discourse of wellbeing and quality of life has served as one that unifies claims about health, rights (political and human), freedom, and education (Jiménez, 2008). In this respect, it is not unlike human rights discourse, which has been used both as a powerful tool for empowerment and as a delimiting discourse, defining a certain type of personhood, preferably independent and agential.

Wendy James (2008) helpfully analyzed the concept of wellbeing alongside the more established concept of welfare. Despite their similar usages in the context of social theory and policy, the meanings of these notions are quite different:

“Welfare” can only be imagined, and put into practice, in the context of a very clear social whole, where responsibility can be located for the ongoing lives of persons to whom some obligation is publicly acknowledged. . . . On the other hand, “wellbeing” as a concept is not geared to the needy. In contemporary usage, in practice, it is part of a gloss on the promotion of consumer interests in the enhancement of “self.” (James, 2008, pp. 69–70)

Wellbeing in this sense moves beyond the mere satisfaction of needs. James drew attention to a difference in the connotations of these terms and the contemporary usage of the rather postmodern term “wellbeing” in the contexts of humanitarian endeavors or by administrative authorities. One of the problems with the use of the term “wellbeing” is that it often obscures an underlying modern or modernist project of welfare (James, 2008). Without any intention to devalue the attempts of social scientists and policy makers to use this kind of concept in order to build holistic, more effective and humane social policies, it is important to note that there is significant ambiguity surrounding the present

usage of the concept of wellbeing in terms of the relation between individual self-enhancement and the wider social whole.

What is the relation between wellbeing and happiness? Many of the authors who consider wellbeing defined primarily as subjectively experienced and reported, or SWB, have further equated wellbeing with happiness. Some authors conceive them as basically different expressions of the same notion or at least do not make an explicit distinction (cf. Diener & Suh, 2000; Thin, 2008). On the other hand, and as indicated by cross-cultural contributions of psychologists in the volume by Diener and Suh (2000), happiness seems to be both variously conceived depending on time and place and differently valued in relation to its contribution to wellbeing. In other words, what happiness means for people, and how important it is considered to be for their wellbeing, varies across cultural contexts and perhaps for different individuals. This has been explored by philosophers through the notion of “prudential value” or “final value,” which refers to a good as an end in itself. If the good life or wellbeing is formally defined by philosophers in terms of what has a final value for a person, then one should ask what these values are. Is happiness the only final value? It is certainly possible that there are other final values such as meaningful work, social relations, or friendship, among others (Brülde, 2007). From an anthropological viewpoint, focusing on substantive accounts rather than formal definitions, happiness cannot therefore be equated with wellbeing, even though it could represent a central value for some.¹

1.3 What Is Wellbeing?

In light of these different approaches and perspectives, it is important to outline what wellbeing means in the context of this Element. Although I am sympathetic to some of the criticisms of the concept voiced by anthropologists, I believe that wellbeing remains a useful concept, well worth retaining.² One reason for this is quite simply its widespread scholarly use in recent years. While I depart from SWB, for the sake of continuity with the plethora of studies in psychology, economics, and social policy that rely on its large-scale measurement, my aim is to offer an anthropological enlargement and refinement of the term’s definition and use.

¹ For a discussion of happiness and values in diverse ethnographic contexts, see Kavedžija and Walker (2016).

² Some of the objections revolve around the idea that it is not an “experience-near” concept, unlike “happiness,” which most people seem to recognize (Thin, 2012). Happiness might indeed offer a greater sense of familiarity: we might all feel we know what we mean by it, yet this might be a problem in itself and a source of confusion.

One helpful approach to wellbeing by anthropologists suggests it is a positive state for communities, groups, and individuals (Mathews & Izquierdo, 2009). Although experienced subjectively by individuals, it is culturally framed, inflected by social contexts and particular sociohistorical circumstances and expectations. And while people in different places might have various ideas about what comprises wellbeing, these ideas and experiences, Mathews and Izquierdo (2009) argued, can be compared. They wrote, “Well-being is an optimal state for an individual, community, society, and the world as a whole” (p. 5). Although the link between these different levels of analysis is important, the definition of wellbeing as an optimal state is not, however, without its problems. First, it seems potentially unattainable and exclusive – it may exclude some people or groups, and even appear as an impossibly high bar for most people, most of the time. Furthermore, focusing on wellbeing as a “state” leads us to think of it in static terms – as something to be achieved – and to lose sight of its processual and relational nature. The strength of this definition is instead in the emphasis both on the individual and on larger collectives such as a community or society. This emphasis on the social qualities of SWB has also been highlighted by some other authors (e.g., Thin, 2012) and is worth insisting upon.

Let us then consider what it might mean to say that wellbeing is in some fundamental ways social. It is not merely to say that sociality is valued or that people need social connections to thrive. It is also to recognize the social forces that structure health and suffering, such that some groups of people are distinctly at a disadvantage (Farmer, 2004; Kleinman, Das, & Lock, 1997). This is clear enough when it comes to illness, suffering, or discrimination, but this meta-individual level affects wellbeing, too. In other words, if suffering can feel deeply individual, private, and personal, so too can wellbeing.

I believe it is more helpful to consider wellbeing an intersubjective process, rather than a subjective state. It is not objective or static either, even though the objective circumstances and evaluations of others, concerning the status of one’s own wellbeing, do have an appreciable effect. Focusing on care, conviviality, and creativity, as I do here, has the distinct advantage of drawing attention to wellbeing’s processual nature as well as its dynamic, intersubjective qualities. By looking at wellbeing through these three theoretical frames we become aware of the effort, mastery, and skill involved in living well together; entanglement with others in relations of care and dependence on others; and the temporal unfolding of wellbeing when looking at creative processes. The latter allows us to focus on the process itself, and on collaborative participation in the moment, rather than on achievement or final products.

For the purposes of this discussion, then, I define wellbeing as the intersubjective process of living and feeling well. Crucially, it does not pertain to an individual alone but plays out within the relations of care that constitute people. It has an important moral and political dimension alongside the affective dimension more directly implied in notions of “feeling good” or “feeling well.” Wellbeing is not an achievement or a state; it is not static but an ongoing process that involves individuals, communities, and societies.

1.4 Wellbeing in a World of Want

It might be objected that a focus on wellbeing is a luxury: something one can only begin to entertain once basic needs and living conditions have been satisfied. What constitutes the good life is indeed the kind of question reflected upon by those who have what the ancient Greeks called *scholé*, a spare moment, the leisure to pursue such issues. It has, not unreasonably, been suggested that *scholé* was the source of philosophy. In this light, it might seem plausible to argue that a preoccupation with ideas of wellbeing – along with a direct pursuit of wellbeing in any of its various guises – could be lumped with other so-called post-materialist values. This latter notion is based on the idea that changing dominant values in modern industrialized societies reflect the relative security brought about by technological and economic change, which significantly lowered the likelihood that people would die young due to starvation or disease (Inglehart, 2000). This may well be true, yet I am convinced, as an anthropologist, that some idea of what constitutes the good life pertains in some form to every human society. Striving for a better understanding of the diversity of these ideas, attentive to potential points of convergence and divergence, is crucial. It is also feasible even where the available data were not collected with this aim in mind.

Hardship, scarcity, poverty, and various other consequences of civil war are no strangers to many living in Sierra Leone, including the Kuranko, with whom the anthropologist Michael Jackson (2011) worked on several consecutive field trips.³ Yet these difficult circumstances have not precluded their thinking about wellbeing. On the contrary, it seems that many of Jackson’s interlocutors reflected on their lot in the world with some frequency. What seems to matter is how one bears this lot, and how one goes on living, under the burdens of life – a sentiment encapsulated in the Kuranko saying, “The name of the world is not world. Its name is load” (Jackson, 2011, p. 179). What matters most, for them, is how one copes with life and what it brings, less realizing one’s dreams and more

³ Parts of this section have previously been published in an essay in the *Anthropology of This Century*. <http://aotcpress.com/articles/singing-empty-belly/>.

“a matter of learning how to live within limits To withstand disappointment and go on in the face of adversity imparts quality to life” (Jackson, 2011, p. 62). According to this view, the needs of others (especially significant others) must be balanced with one’s own needs, and wellbeing is to be found within this balance but, as such, always continues to be labile (Jackson, 2011).

The dilemma is made more visible when people struggle to achieve a better, or at least more bearable, life, balancing their obligations to the group (whose support is often precious) with their own aims. This is when the feeling of strain in sharing their scarce resources becomes noticeable, as does the burden of submitting their life course to the plan laid out for them, with the importance of social harmony and custom always in mind. Acute for many Kuranko, this dilemma rings true for most of us, and Jackson indeed attempted to say something about universal human existential issues using the Kuranko example. He did so above all by telling stories, weaving together those stories Kuranko know and retell – those they share or make their own – with the stories of their lives and circumstances. The point stories make is often ambiguous, but that is precisely their strength: rather than simplifying the links between the causes and effects, stories comprise multiple meanings. They have a capacity to teach people how to act in a complex world of changing circumstances and, as Arthur Frank (2010) pointed out, how to make our lives good. Perhaps this is what makes them so well suited for an exploration of wellbeing.

One such story runs as follows:

There was a man and a woman. They had a child. But the parents died when the child was very young, and the little girl was placed in the care of her mother’s co-wife. This woman would prepare rice and sauce and put it on the same platter. All her children would eat from the same plate. But one day the woman divided the food into two portions. One portion was for her own children. The other portion was for her late co-wife’s child. And then into this portion the woman put poison. When the child ate this food she began to foam at the mouth, and she soon died. But after she had passed away she sent a dream to her mother’s co-wife, saying that she knew about the poison, and how the woman killed her. The stepmother woke up in dismay, saying, “It wasn’t me, it wasn’t me. You must have eaten that poisoned food elsewhere.” The child said, “All right, then; one day you will die and meet me here in lakira, and God will judge whose story is true.” After that dream, the child disappeared. She disappeared from this life. (Jackson, 2011, p. 57)

It is hard to know if this means that a punishment will ensue or if the girl disappeared for good with a vain hope. The ending of the story admits of several possibilities and circumscribes an uncertain existence. This story was told to Jackson by an eleven-year-old girl, Sira Marah, who was not an orphan but

whose father had left and whose mother was unable to take care of her. The night before she told the anthropologist one of her stories, she came to the spot where he was sitting with a few companions near a fire. Despite her slender physique, her voice was strong and beautiful, more noticeable than that of the two older girls who accompanied her. She had not eaten for two days but her voice was unwavering and her song compelling. It later transpired that Sira had composed the song herself, along with many others, and also had a gift for divination and herbal medicine, and made a living in this way. After her father left, she could no longer afford school fees and stopped her education, so Jackson started wondering if he could help out by paying her fees. In the end, he decided to do so despite having doubts and realizing that Sira had found a way to live, making do with what she had, with her gift. Sira's story illustrates another aspect of wellbeing, central for many Kuranko: endurance and the ability to make do with what one faces in life – singing on an empty belly.

On the other hand, Sira and Jackson's other interlocutors have a strong wish to improve their lot, to have more and make more of their lives. Jackson emphasized the importance of hope, which allows people to envision their lives as more than what they already are, with tomorrow always bringing new possibilities. Young Kuranko, like many other people in this country scarred by war, are often frustrated by an apparent lack of possibilities, for work and for making a life of one's own, and find themselves lacking stability and income, and therefore prospects for starting a family, stuck instead in their present circumstances. Hope is an important element of wellbeing for these young people dealing with the harsh reality of everyday life, facing scarcity and poverty.

Close attention to the Kuranko example brings other questions to the fore: For instance, how does the way people understand themselves in relation to others influence their search for wellbeing? Jackson's work indicates a link between these issues. Some groups of people, like the Kuranko, emphasize the importance of their relationships; in some ways at least they are fundamentally open to others. At the same time, they insist that despite this openness, they cannot really tell what is in others' minds – what their motivations are or how they truly feel. In contrast, people who tend to think that human beings are essentially separate and self-contained (as implied by the term "individual") seem to talk more freely about the emotions and intentions of others. Perhaps those who believe that selves are fundamentally permeable and open tend to be more concerned with demarcating boundaries around the self, while those who consider it to be fundamentally separate emphasize creating bridges with others. How do these opposed ways of thinking about oneself in relation to others mesh with ideas of wellbeing and a striving to live well? The Kuranko example

suggests that reconciling the demands set by others with our openness to them is one of the central balancing acts in the ongoing cultivation of wellbeing. In this discussion, in order to make arguments about how wellbeing figures in different cultural settings, we must attend to the different ways in which persons are themselves conceptualized.

1.5 Beyond the Individual

Social scientists and psychologists are increasingly aware that in order to understand what it means to live well, one cannot focus solely on individuals. This is clear in settings such as that described by Jackson but does not only hold true where there is a cultural emphasis on relationships and connections. While the simple dichotomy between individualism and collectivism has been the focus of critique, attending to the emplacement of the individual in the collective and to the social construction of personhood is fundamental for a more inclusive understanding of wellbeing.⁴ This is particularly important as many of the dimensions identified in psychological studies do appear to have a very strong social or meta-individual component. Furthermore, Veenhoven (2008) is right to suggest that wellbeing is important for sociology and the social sciences, not merely as an intellectual project but also as one that allows us to improve social systems. Yet, in the same article, he cited work on the limited effects of social inequalities for wellbeing, past a certain income threshold, and pointed to studies suggesting that social welfare regimes do no better than other states at ensuring the wellbeing of their citizens. The problems might be with the specific studies in question, of course, but the implicit contradiction could be attributed to a move between different conceptualizations of wellbeing, hinging on either objective or subjective criteria.

In my view, it is crucial to move beyond the idea of wellbeing as something that pertains to an individual alone. We must also bear in mind that such a discourse has practical and political consequences. If we think of happiness as a matter of individual responsibility and individual choice, we might be empowering some, but we are also failing to highlight the structural nature of some of the problems that befall many others (see also Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). Suffering may be individually experienced, but it is entwined with structural forces operating in society at large, well beyond the individual's own influence – as illustrated by Paul Farmer's well-known work on structural violence (2004). In this sense, studying wellbeing gives us the opportunity to do better social

⁴ The dichotomy between individualism and collective criticism has come under scrutiny in recent years, along with an increased understanding that such labels cannot account for internal diversity of societies described in these terms, and the use of such dichotomies in therapeutic settings may result in unhelpful stereotyping (Wong, Wang, & Klann, 2018).