Wellbeing for Public Policy: Roles for Q Methodology

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Abstract: *Measures of income, such as gross domestic product, have long helped governments gauge how well their policies serve the overall wellbeing of citizens. In recent decades, such measures have been joined by a variety of alternative and complementary measures of how well a life is going for a person, or for a group of people. Measures and their referents are generally categorised as subjective or objective. Subjective measures are attained by self-report methods and objective otherwise. What is measured is deemed subjective if it is a feeling or evaluation and objective if it is an observed outcome or characteristic. Q methodology's strength in the objective study of the subjective enables an enriched treatment of self-reported feelings or evaluations across the full spectrum of conceptual wellbeing referents. Q methodology also has potential in clarifying some of the challenges wellbeing researchers confront when trying to make clear distinctions between types of measures and referents. Against a backdrop of the policy relevance of various concepts and measures of wellbeing, I characterise, justify and illustrate some specific substantive and theoretical contributions that Q methodology offers.*

Introduction

We now have (in the west) more than 40 years of 'science of happiness' research, dedicated journals, prominent politicians backing what is widely referred to as a subjective wellbeing-measurement agenda, and a philosophical tradition dating from Aristotle. From Bhutan to Britain, governments signal their interest in measuring and tracking alternatives to gross national product as gauges of the wellbeing* of the nation. Intergovernmental organisations have gotten into the act. The United Nations General Assembly passed a non-binding resolution to investigate adding happiness to its development indicators (Plett, 2011). The resolution was sponsored by Bhutan, whose Gross National Happiness indicator 'measures quality of life by trying to strike a balance between the material and the spiritual' (Plett, 2011). Just days later,

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* 'Wellbeing' will be used when the generic set of concepts, including happiness and flourishing, is intended; other terms will be used as required for specific reasons.

British newspapers reported Prime Minister David Cameron's launch of a wellbeing index. 'Two hundred thousand people will be asked to rate, on a scale of zero to 10, their satisfaction, happiness, anxiety and belief that what they do in life is worthwhile' (Dixon, 2011). New Zealand fell in line, too. In his farewell speech, the Secretary to the New Zealand Treasury launched a new framework for working towards higher living standards, which included provision for a 'subjective check' on other indicators (Whitehead, 2011; Gleisner, Llewellyn-Fowler, & McAlister, 2011).

Forays into both the historical record and the rich seams in a number of disciplines—especially economics and psychology—reveal a long list of wellbeing's conceptual referents. For example, the US constitution invokes 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. Arguably, however, given the evolution of several definitions of happiness from about 1600 on, as described in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, happiness in this context very likely means good fortune (Duncan, 2005; compare 'happen', 'mishap' and similar modern words whose root retains the older meaning), and thus refers to the pursuit of success and enjoyment in life (indeed, of 'faring well', after an older sense of welfare). The current association of happiness with good feelings seems to have taken hold in the 1920s and 1930s, with a number of developments in psychology, epidemiology, and gerontology (Angner, 2011). Happiness today is widely understood to be a balance of positive and negative affect and overall life satisfaction (for example, Argyle, 2001; Diener, 2006). The positive psychology movement, spearheaded by Martin Seligman (1990/2006; 2011) has come to embrace the wider concept of flourishing, which traces its roots to Aristotle's eudaimonia: 'true happiness is found in the expression of virtue—that is, in doing what is worth doing' (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 145; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Seligman (2011) now favours a five-part concept composed of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships and accomplishment.

Social indicators work got underway in the 1960s and 1970s (Angner, 2011) in the heyday of faith in the rationality of science, including social science, to solve big social problems. This work tracked various aggregate statistics to complement and compare with measures of income and wealth. Social indicators parallel the concept of quality of life, which also lists factors, and evaluations of them, as complements to economic resources in contributing to a person's overall wellbeing. Interest in scientific indicators tailed off with the failure of the period's planning-based optimism. Today, the influence of earlier indicators and quality-of-life work is reflected in the 'evidence-based policy' movement, strong in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and influential in other countries, including the United States. Privileged evidence for policy is objectively measured, quantitatively robust

information that reveals policy effects on people. The extremely influential *Stiglitz Report*, commissioned by the French President Sarkozy (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009), has drawn economists' attention to quality-of-life measurement.

A number of authors have also addressed aspects of wellbeing as they apply to relationships between people (for example, Thin, 2012, and Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011, who refer respectively to 'social happiness' and 'relationships and social support'). Some researchers emphasise the role of resources, or conditions in which a person lives, adopting more process-oriented and 'life-in-the-round' treatments of wellbeing (see, for example, McGregor, 2007; McGregor & Sumner, 2010).

Governments' interest in the 'science of happiness' and measures of wellbeing and their policy implications is firmly established. Yet, debates continue to traverse varied definitions of wellbeing, its cognates and components and whether wellbeing should and can guide or inform policy decisions (for example, Stiglitz et al. 2009; Duncan, 2010). While much attention in the debates focuses on the respective worth of 'subjective' and 'objective' measures, worries about the distinctiveness of the two kinds of concepts is largely sidestepped by simply noting an inherent ambiguity or pointing out matters of convergence and divergence in measures. Moreover, many recognise that some aspects of wellbeing, such as health, can be ascertained both objectively (observed or measured about a person by another person or means, such as a clinical test) and subjectively (reported by people about themselves or some aspect of their lives, such as their felt level of overall health) (Dolan & White, 2007).

Q methodology, with its unique approach to the objective study of the subjective suggests its potential to make a variety of specific contributions to the wellbeing-for-policy project. This article identifies the unique or particularly valuable ways that Q research and subsequent insights may best meet the needs of those interested in wellbeing measures for policy purposes, by considering Q's comparative advantages in wellbeing research. The next section provides an overview of some challenges in researching wellbeing concepts for policy. The article then discusses and illustrates some partly overlapping substantive and theoretical ways that Q methodology has already been—and might further be—drawn on to inform policy decision makers about wellbeing.

Challenges in Conceptualising and Measuring Wellbeing for Policy

Wellbeing resists definition. In common usage, the referent—the thing itself—is often conflated with its measure. This is especially the case

when self-reports are presented as 'subjective wellbeing' in terms such as 'X's happiness is 5.2 on a 7-point scale'. Forgeard, et al. (2011) note that 'wellbeing is best understood as a multifaceted phenomenon that can be assessed by measuring a wide array of subjective and objective constructs' (p. 79), that is, that the phenomenon is known via a set of constructs. Following a thorough review of the 'multifaceted phenomenon', Forgeard et al. (2011) recommend that policy makers adopt a 'dashboard' approach, which allows policy makers to simultaneously consult different indicators. Gasper (2010) stresses that when a measure is subjective, what is measured is an evaluation or a judgement and not the 'multifaceted phenomenon' that the person evaluates. Therefore, in his terms, when dealing with subjective measures, the dashboard records a range of people's *evaluations of* their 'life/a life/life chances' (Gasper, 2010, p. 352). But if policymakers take the indicators on a dashboard as the thing itself, there is a danger of shifting policy focus to the indicator and not the referent.

Dolan and White (2007) find that governments 'routinely' target objective circumstances and increase the choices people have, but pay little attention to 'trying to directly improve how people actually feel' (p. 71). Greater attention to how people feel could be a means to overcome short-termism in policy decisions and to lead to more sustainable policies. There is new interest in national-level surveys of how people feel. In New Zealand, for example, the Treasury Secretary stated that measures of 'how people feel about their living standards, including how they are distributed. . . . [allow] us to assess how well someone is living, based on that person's own perspective or experience, and enable us to cross-check whether we are focusing on the right areas' (Whitehead, 2011). However, when governments focus on how people feel, they may enact policies cynically to achieve sufficient feel-good responses to keep them in power, at the expense of people's longer-term interests.

The challenges of getting behind measures to a define wellbeing, or to mitigate the elusiveness of the definition in some way and sharpen its policy relevance can be tackled in several ways. First, particularly in the case of 'subjective wellbeing', which tends to be measured by one or a few simple scales of 'happiness' or 'life satisfaction', policymakers may simply take for granted that the proxy measures reliably show if and to what extent they have influenced evaluations of the referent wellbeing. Nevertheless, despite its expediency, the nature and type of changes in the wellbeing referents remain out of sight. Moreover, the gauge of 'how people feel' is an average of individual responses; a change in the measure can mask significant changes in the underlying distribution.

A second approach to overcome the challenge in defining wellbeing is to create an index or other composite, usually focused on objective measures of objective conditions. Here, the idea is that the rigorous

application of good conceptual and methodological practice across several items generally deemed relevant to wellbeing serves to smooth and filter what might otherwise be problematic biases in each of the components involved. For example, the United Nation's Human Development Index (HDI) comprises three indicators in the areas of income, health and education. The HDI was influenced by the work on Amartya Sen (1999), whose 'capabilities' and 'functionings' approach to wellbeing has had enormous influence on expanding the frame of wellbeing beyond income measures. An advance, perhaps, on single-item measures, indices are still proxies, with some of the same limitations. In addition, because only a selection of 'domains' is used, what is included, what is measured and how items are weighted become the focus of attention, leaving unexamined what might be left out and the implications of distributional differences among individuals. In a related approach, Stiglitz, et al. (2009) urge statistical offices to continue to work towards providing 'the information needed to aggregate across quality-of-life dimensions, allowing the construction of different scalar indexes' (p. 59).

Some argue for an integrated measure or a common structure for information. For example, Forgeard et al. (2011) call for new work on 'methods needed to collect and combine both objective and subjective data' (p. 99). Comin (2005) is concerned by the challenge of how to structure 'a multiplicity of informational spaces' (p. 168) in the context of interactions between dimensions of wellbeing and the needs of people (particularly those who are disadvantaged in several domains).

While Stiglitz and Forgeard and their colleagues see the combination of information as a technical challenge, Comin diagnoses a more basic reason for lack of 'mutual fertilisation' of objective and subjective approaches to wellbeing. Looking to Sen's capabilities approach (considered objective), Comin notes its normative foundation, in contrast to the lack of a 'normative anchor' in the 'basically factual and descriptive' subjective wellbeing (p. 163). This perhaps counterintuitive identification of subjective wellbeing as factual is yet another example of the eliding of measure and referent, when a subjective wellbeing *measure* is perceived as a statistically robust fact, such as '5.2 on a 7-point scale'. As White (2012) notes, subjective wellbeing 'takes essentially qualitative, intangible subject matter and provides a formula and method for translating it into quantitative data' (p. 765). Comin proposes achieving connection between the normative and non-normative with a higher-order construct (such as 'flourishing') or an inclusive view of happiness, 'identified with a plurality of aims, p. 169). Such a strategy arguably shifts the challenge to a more abstract level.

A third type of response relies on theory to develop a set of 'core' universal attributes of living well. Proponents argue that this approach

obviates challenges from a lack of comparability between countries or other units of aggregation. Some examples of this approach are Doyal and Gough's (1991) theory of human need, which centres on health and autonomy, and Ryan and Deci's (2001) triplet of autonomy, competence and relatedness in their self-determination theory. Nussbaum (2000) sketches in a longer list necessary to human capability, covering life, bodily health, imagination, practical reason and play, among others. Further illustrating the 'objective list' approach, the *Stiglitz Report* urges simultaneous attention to material living standards, health, education, personal activities including work, political voice and governance, social connections and relationships, environment (present and future conditions) and insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature (Stiglitz et al. 2009, pp. 14–15). Yet, despite widespread agreement on the merits of an agreed list of common core items, disagreements on which list is best, and for which purposes, remain.

Fourth, there are some very recent efforts to confront the definitional challenge from a first-principles approach. These efforts aim for a definition that avoids the debate on what components might be included in a list (or alternatively, allows for a purpose-driven selection of items as needed). Thus, Dodge, Daly, Huyton, and Sanders (2012) define wellbeing as a stable, yet dynamic state in which 'individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge' (Dodge et al., 2012, pp. 226, 230). If resources and challenges are not 'balanced', wellbeing dips (p. 230). The definition allows for descriptions of resources to be supplied in applications. Yet, this definition is unlikely to meet with universal acceptance, in part because it conceives wellbeing in terms of *individual states*.

Other researchers prefer to emphasise *processes* or the continuing connections of process and outcome in their definitions. For example, wellbeing can be defined as a 'dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going through the interaction between their circumstances, activities, and psychological resources' (Michaelson, Abdallah, Steuer, Thompson, & Marks 2009, p. 3). Others have defined wellbeing as a 'state of being with others', as 'a way of understanding the world, as well as a set of experiences or domains' (Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2010, p. 411) or as a 'interplay of outcomes and processes' that are 'firmly located in society and shaped by social, economic, political, cultural, and psychological processes' (McGregor, 2007, p. 317).

A fifth strategy to address definitional and measurement challenges is to defer to collective processes. Such a strategy acknowledges that there can be no single agreed definition of wellbeing. Because all measures are evaluative, even 'objective' measures are not value independent. If a list of objective items is selected by a group, then it is,

in effect, 'collectively subjective' (Gasper, 2010, p. 353, quoting Philips, 2006, p. 233). Even so, what is collectively deemed important can vary considerably (Christopher, 1999) and the possibility of difference, and its content is often underemphasised (Gasper, 2010). Gasper (2010, p. 354) identifies three levels of difference: the culture as a whole (collectivist or individualist; egalitarian or hierarchical); value choices for other persons; and value choices of persons for themselves. For practical purposes, as Forgeard et al. (2011) point out, further work is often needed to settle on what is to count. They point out that the core of many wellbeing measurement debates concerns what is to count *within* aspects of wellbeing. They wonder, for example, who is to decide whether 'attendance at the opera and at professional wrestling matches' should have equal standing as measures of cultural engagement (p. 91). Boulanger et al. (2009) propose to let the people in the society decide (via Q methodology), ready for a follow-up process to legitimate the measures ultimately used.

Agreement is instrumentally valued. Policy makers want a way to find what a society values and to track progress accordingly (Forgeard, et al., 2011, p. 91). Having wellbeing data can serve to guide collective decisions concerning the 'basic conditions for a good life' or the conditions for a 'typical/decent/good life' (Gasper, 2010, p. 356). Similarly, Boulanger, et al. (2009, p. 10) consider it necessary that measures contribute to the development, implementation and assessment of 'actual public policies'. A measure is useful, according to Forgeard, et al. (2011, p. 88) when it is able to provide 'the conceptual and methodological sophistication of national economic indicators'. They approve of Diener's (2006) guidelines that indicators for policy use should measure facets of wellbeing separately; that measures should be sensitive to changes in circumstances; that short-term and long-term changes in wellbeing should be assessed separately; and that measurement instruments should be valid.

A sixth and final strategy for addressing definitions and measures relies on systems or categorisation schemes. Gasper (2010) proposes a system for organising conceptions of wellbeing across 'six relativities': scope and focus; underpinning values; research instruments; purposes; standpoints; and theoretical frameworks. These divisions 'distinguish six dimensions of variation' in evaluating a 'life situation' or 'life path' (Gasper, 2010, p. 351). Even though wellbeing remains complex and dynamic, Gasper's structure offers both a way for researchers to attend to their choices in the six divisions and a basis for judging the worth of subsequent claims: 'We should ask, for any [wellbeing] or [quality of life] evaluation: who is doing what to/for/with whom, when, where, and why?' (p. 353). Choices within a given 'relativity', moreover, also have several levels.

The foregoing overview of concepts and measures draws highly selectively from a vast literature. Yet, it confirms that treatments of objective and subjective concepts and measures require sensitivity and sophistication if they are to be useful to policy decision making. As we've seen with regard to subjective measures, they may provide a cross-check on objective-circumstance data. At summarised by Dolan and White (2007) additional uses for subjective measures include providing values for policy effects that are hard to quantify, thus assisting efforts to compare policies, providing benchmarks for 'consistent policymaking across a wide range of areas' and '[helping] policymakers set policy defaults', which in turn can serve 'integrated' policy (p. 78; 80). Almost all policies are concerned with what people do or don't do. Thus, as Gasper (2010, p. 356) points out, wellbeing measures can help us to 'understand and predict other people'.

In sum, wellbeing research for policy purposes is about gaining a better understanding of what matters, for whom and in which circumstances and relating this understanding to the conditions that pertain in the domains of policy influence and control. Policymakers favour research that finds stable relationships and reliable determinants or explanations for levels of wellbeing and differences between groups. Whereas in the past, economic measures (such as GDP) have served policy makers as key indicators, 'effort should be devoted to developing and implementing robust, reliable measures . . . that can be shown to predict life satisfaction (Stiglitz, et al. 2009, p. 15). However, multiplicity complicates matters: a wide variety of aspects of wellbeing are measured; some target the individual level and others emphasise a larger community; some measures are evaluative and some descriptive; significant individual and cultural differences can lead to divisive views about what wellbeing benefits figure in specific policies. In addition, wellbeing data tend to derive from large-scale studies with statistical samples and make use of correlations between measures of wellbeing and between those measures, various demographic variables, and other variables hypothesised to 'determine' wellbeing.

Some researchers argue persuasively for localised and qualitatively influenced methodologies in order to recognise key differences (see for example Gough & McGregor, 2007). Q methodology, too, alerts us to expect that there are different 'ways of wellbeing', that such ways are not likely to be clearly correlated with demographic measures, and that even in a very small-scale place or event, several patterns are likely to co-exist. In other words, there is good reason to expect small-scale, precisely tuned Q-methodology research to complement others' work on wellbeing for policy. The next section turns to a thematic review of the potential for Q methodology in wellbeing research for policy purposes.

Q-Methodology Studies of Wellbeing for Policy

The challenges considered in the last section concern ambiguities and overlaps between objective and subjective measures, and in definitions of referents, which span feelings, evaluations, observable outcomes and relationships in society. Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore, to find in wellbeing scholarship and commentary some glimpses of Q methodology's underpinning theory, expressed in other terms. For example, Gasper (2010) argues that the use of wellbeing information within a 'capability approach' requires a 'deeper type of talk; [and] reflection and debate', going beyond consultation with 'one's socialized and partly unconsidered notions' (p. 355). This is because the approach 'sees people as social individuals who are capable of reflection especially through interaction' (p. 355). Gasper's description bears a striking resemblance to a person's engagement in concourse. Moreover, he conceives 'a subjective wellbeing self-report as a practical attitude, a stance constructed for particular purposes in a particular context' (p. 356), a description very like a completed Q sort. McCloskey also seems to approach the heart of Q methodology, when she observes about 'happiness studies' that 'no science can be about the purely objective or the purely subjective, both of which are unattainable' and hence argues for a 'conjective' approach (2012; her coinage). Adding an important nuance to wellbeing work, Rojas (2007) asserts that the 'role of the researcher is to understand the nature of a person's wellbeing assessment, rather than to assess it' (p. 261). Scholars approaching wellbeing from a culturally sensitive perspective note that understandings of wellbeing are informed by culture, and that purported measures of wellbeing can be 'uncritical', but 'deeply shaped' by the culture's 'moral vision', where the moral vision concerns 'ontological claims' about the self and the good person (Christopher, 1999, p. 142). Christopher's concern is that such shaping can easily slip into prescriptiveness, putting the onus for being well on individuals.

Q methodology seems well-suited to addressing Gasper's requirement for 'deeper talk' and McCloskey's plea for a conjective approach. Similarly, while there may be a concern that individuals are coerced by measures and left unable to judge what is conducive to their wellbeing, as Christopher fears, Q methodology supports exploration of shared culture in the first instance, on the basis that cultural shaping is an empirical matter. In Q methodology an individual shows where he or she is placed in concourse, no more and no less. The researcher seeks an interpretation of what factors reveal about the concourse structure and then considers the implications of those factor interpretations in terms of some substantive theory or wellbeing domain. Moreover, there is no need for researchers to establish a priori normative standards about the

theories or domains. A person does not 'have' some conception of wellbeing that simply requires appropriate probes to reveal it. Rather Q methodology entertains a notion of a person who is free to relate to aspects that comprise wellbeing as he or she sees it, emergent in concourse.

Q methodology can contribute additionally to the theoretical and methodological study of wellbeing for policy. In wellbeing literature, as for Stephenson (1953), we can distinguish objective measures (measures with no self-reference) and evaluative, or subjective (self-referent) measures. The data (Q sorts) are evaluative and felt descriptions of the concourse from subjective positions/situations. Q facilitates the addition of an interpretive 'layer', supplied by the researcher, of a life or life situation, engaged in and 'evaluated' by a person. The interpretation is entirely constrained by the evaluations presented in the data, but 'brought out' by the researcher.

In the following, I describe some ways that Q methodology may inform policy makers about wellbeing. The suggestions are offered against a backdrop of a policy-making process that tends to value objective evidence about people's lives and their abilities to improve, and to dismiss as ephemeral or unreliable the subjective feelings people may have about their lives (Dolan & White, 2007; Hutchinson, 2012).The dominant policy demand is for indicators of wellbeing that are as 'sophisticated' as those from economics (Forgeard, et al. 2100, p. 88). I consider the substantive contributions from clarifying concepts, selecting and weighting measures, developing perspectives on subjective wellbeing overall or in applications, and improving integrated policies. Then, in a theoretical and prospective vein, I consider some ways that Q might advance new hypotheses on wellbeing. I look at how we might use the theory of concourse and a person's engagement via concourse to conceptualise 'wellbeing ecologies', thereby advancing an understanding of intersubjective wellbeing (Wolf, 2012). The themes are not mutually exclusive, but allow for some nuance according to prominent policy interests in measures, meanings and applications. No doubt, finer gradations can be elaborated; my selection is designed to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and flexibility.

Clarifying the Concept

Q methodology has a role to play in conceptual clarification (Gerring, 2001; Goertz, 2005). Gerring (2001, p. 41) urges a distinction between what a term (such as wellbeing) connotes and what it denotes. Much of the philosophical debate centres on the definition of wellbeing, with what the term connotes (the properties of phenomena referred to by the term). However, for policy purposes, arguably of more interest are the phenomena, or what the term denotes, evidenced by the conflation of

the measure and the thing measured in practice. Q studies can be used for either connotative or denotative studies. A typical connotative study would explore what the term means to people. Denotative studies would study combinations of referents. Carr (2011), for example, identifies a lack of research into the diversity of patterns amongst possible referents of a person's wellbeing or flourishing. He shows that an examination of the 'deep structures' of subjectivity challenges 'prevailing conceptions' (for example, that happiness is universally emphasised) and adds to the general knowledge about subjective wellbeing. He presents incipient hypotheses regarding the influence of age or experience on concepts of wellbeing that would seem to be of value to policies bearing on life-course outcomes. Finally, he finds empirically that some people approach wellbeing by identifying its sources and the manner of being required to be well, whereas others focussed on the main signs or characteristics that indicate that they had achieved wellbeing.

Policy makers express interest in how 'states of mind' correlate with 'states of the world', as shown, for example, in the NZ Treasury's interests in subjective wellbeing measures as a check on policies. Life satisfaction scores depend on how a person evaluates his or her life, and so people with similar observable characteristics can reveal different levels of life satisfaction (Forgeard, et al., 2011, p. 85). As a single measure, the scores do not provide detail on why a person decided on a particular satisfaction level. Q methodology can show the meaning behind the life satisfaction judgements of a person, and could influence the design of studies that seek to correlate (for example) typical meaning patterns with some measure of life satisfaction.

Selecting and Using Measures

Diener and Seligman (2004), motivated by an observation that policies are made on the basis of 'guessing' what will improve well-being, note that the 'ongoing measurement of wellbeing in representative samples and in diverse domains of life is required to confirm or disconfirm the efficacy of policies intended to increase wellbeing' (p. 27). The success of their project depends on being able to trust detected changes in those measures. But policy makers also need to ensure that they have information across usefully representative domains from the available diversity. Forgeard, et al. (2011, citing Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009) claim that choosing weights and who is to choose are matters that are both unavoidable and yet to be resolved satisfactorily. This challenge is addressed by the *Wellbeing in Belgium* (WellBeBe) study (Boulanger et al. 2009), which sought a fully conceptualised and agreed definition of wellbeing, one that people share, or would endorse as a prerequisite to selecting indicators (p. 5).

The purpose of the Belgian work is to contribute theoretically sound

and democratically legitimate indicators and an index of well-being (Boulanger et al. 2009, p. 5). The WellBeBe work, therefore, uses Q methodology to find out which aspects of wellbeing should be measured and how they should be weighted. The study illustrates Q methodology's value in helping identify the various aspects that enter into people's conceptions of wellbeing, which can then be mapped to specific measures.

Four categories were used to structure the concourse. These were derived from themes from focus groups and organised according to Sen's capabilities approach, in which capabilities are 'real-life chances' to have, be and do (Boulanger, et al. 2009, p. 16):

• Having (possessions): basic needs, time, autonomy, security, materialism, freedom, values, influence and opportunities

• Being (internally): state of mind (faith, optimism, confidence), pleasure and satisfaction

• Doing (influencing): responsibility, management, choices, projects, planning, new directions, adventure, motivation and goals

The design initially included a relational theme consistent with some of the literature described above, called 'interacting' and targeting autonomy, social belonging, respect, trust, love, family, nature and solidarity. However, as the authors explain, 'while different conceptions of the good life can be categorized according to the degree to which they privilege the having, the doing or the being dimensions, none of them can dispense with the interacting one' (Boulanger, et al. 2009, p. 45). The authors claim that it 'is not interacting rather than being, doing or having, but instead what kind of interaction is favoured, and what context of interaction matters most' (Boulanger, et al. 2009, p. 45). Accordingly, other researchers interested in relational and process-oriented approaches to wellbeing may wish to examine the findings though a single, reframed, interactive lens.

Although further work on selecting indicators subsequent to the Q study has not been reported by the WellBeBe researchers, the three factors go some way toward suggesting what they might entail:

> Factor 1 shows an active conception of well-being. It scores . . . high on the interacting-society dimension. . . . it clearly gives less importance to the having and being components of well-being. Factor 2 gives less importance to working and acting and more to feeling, relaxing, etc. It [reveals] a surprising combination of individualism—rejecting integration in one's own society and inner circle of relation . . . with communitarianism with respect to the external world, others and the environment. Thus, it can be considered an illustration of the being and interacting-environment/global dimensions at the expense of having, on the

one hand and HOME and WORK on the other. Finally, Factor 3 summarizes a conception of well-being giving more importance to comfort and material conditions brought by working and social security and enabling [people] to fully enjoy family relations. It favours a quiet and secure life without being forced to struggle. . . . the having and interaction-home and society dimensions hold sway. (Boulanger et al., pp. 45–46)

Assessing Subjective Wellbeing

One of the main instruments for collecting subjective evaluations of wellbeing, used for example by Gallup (2009), is Cantril's ladder (Cantril, 1965), which employs a 'self-anchoring' scale. Respondents are told that the top of the ladder is the best current (or future) happiness and the bottom the worst, and asked to choose a rung which places them (as they are, or as they expect to be) on the scale. Typically the ladder is used to calculate average 'rungs' or to find clusters, which in Gallup's analysis are 'thriving', 'struggling' and 'suffering' (Gallup, nd). It can also be used to compare a person's scores under different conditions and at different times, since the ladder, like the Q-sort grid, is self-normalised. It would be a simple matter to devise a representative sample of 'wellbeing situations' for Q sorting, perhaps adopting the thriving–suffering continuum to anchor the sorting scale.

Understanding for Specific Applications

A number of Q methodologists investigate topics on the broad spectrum of wellbeing or quality of life. A sampling from the wider literature shows a number of studies in a range of aspects of quality of life in health care (for example, Baker, Van Exel, & Mason, 2007; Palombi, Corr, Bartolomucci, & Weber, 2009; Stenner, Cooper, & Skevington, 2003). A common feature in these studies is a recognition that it is not necessary for researchers to choose what is salient for individuals amongst the complex of aspects of wellbeing or quality of life. Instead, Q allows for the identification of 'holistic' patterns, or 'constructions' of quality of life. Thus, in general, well-designed Q studies can identify patterns from opinion and experience, especially at local and personal levels where concrete needs for better policy are apparent, such as in healthcare or rural life. Researchers might also seek to learn from a number of applied studies in a single field, following principles of 'meta-analysis', in which the results of several studies are considered together.

There is huge potential at the very local geographical or personal levels, as well as at national, global and highly collective levels, to tap into concourses of wellbeing, and study emergent patterns based on evaluations of experience. The immediate usefulness, however, may be more evident at the local and personal levels, where local government officials or healthcare workers face concrete needs to better design

services. Q can show areas of significant overlap that exist despite differences. Q can also show that human diversity settles into a few broader patterns, and that a great many people are likely to 'fit' one or more of those patterns with some closeness. Moreover, in all uses, Q is able to 'go deep', finding the font of the expressed attitudes and opinions. A researcher or a practitioner, suitably theoretically informed, is in a good position to work with the findings.

A brief profile of one application helps to illustrate. A New Zealand study sought to understand the motivations and aspirations of sickness-benefit and invalid-benefit (SB/IB) clients in relation to their experience of the benefit and their willingness to seek employment (Peace, Wolf, Crack, Hutchinson, & Roorda, 2004). Participants, all of whom were able and willing to work, had various physical, psychological and intellectual impairments. Data on ethnicity, age range, and self-reported levels of 'happiness' and 'interest in working' were also collected. The study sought holistic understandings of the dispositions of beneficiaries in terms that were consistent with policy goals.

Most observers would expect to find at least two distinct attitudes among beneficiaries, one in essence the resisters' view and one the accepters'. An accepter view would mirror the basic premises of the government's policy, in which wellbeing is associated with economic independence and, wherever possible, people work as a means to independence. Work is then a component of what provides people with a sense of wellbeing. A resister view would convey an oppositional stance, from which beneficiaries resist the requirements of the benefit system and maintain that a sense of wellbeing can be achieved when there is 'hassle-free' access to adequate supports that meet people's needs and allow them to get on with their lives free from undue coercion to 'get back to work'. The factor analysis revealed a more complex picture, shown in Figure 1.

Two factors (1 and 2) reflect belief in structural forces—the situations in society (negative) or the system (positive). In contrast, Factors 3 and 4 are agentic interpretations, again one negative (victim) and one positive (workers). Factor 5 stands out for its pragmatism: an intention to manage with whatever support comes along.

As profiles of beneficiaries' attitudes to wellbeing and work, the five factors are a significant advance on the two stereotypes common in policy discourse. Nevertheless, continued probing and discussions with people who load significantly on each factor enabled researchers to find underlying belief systems and to understand them as the source of observed attitudes. An extended look at Factor 1 illustrates the composition of opinions in this attitude, and indicates the belief system underlying the attitude.

Figure 1: Attitudes Toward Wellbeing, Independence and Employment

1 Owed by Society
A *negative* situational orientation: social stuctures cause the client's problem situation; clients view themselves as 'deserving' and they should claim their 'rights'

2 Grateful for the Sytem
A *positive* situational orientation: benefits provide a pathway to independence; thankful toward caseworkers; hold that the system is flexible enough to facilitate change
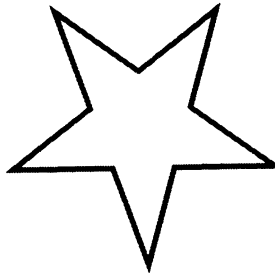
3 Stigmatised
A *negative* role identity: 'society' perceived to treat clients badly; feels they achieve against the odds and experience shame; opposed to 'expectation' to work but strong interest in working

4 Rather be a Worker
A *positive* role identity: being a worker is good and work is valued more than being on the benefit; work contributes to a sense of identity

5 Pragmatic Hopeful
'Let's get on with it': celebrates capability; neither grievance- nor contentment-oriented; sickness/disability a hurdle to be overcome; benefits help overcome 'stuff' but are not required for wellbeing

Source: Adapted from Peace et al., 2004

Factor 1 conveys a negative situation-response, an 'entitlement to support'. The participants' views are orientated around being 'deserving' or of claiming 'rights' due to their status as SB/IB clients. They believe that their experienced level of wellbeing reflects unmet requirements and expectations. They feel constrained by 'the system'. The statements related to this factor bear a sense of disgruntlement and a personalised belief that the benefit system is responsible for their poor circumstances. They strongly agreed with the statements: *Never having enough money affects my ability to be part of society,* and *[The government agency] should recognise the changing nature of my disability.* A sense of thwarted entitlement comes through in some statements about the role of case managers and the benefit system. For example: *All the case managers I have worked with were great at making people feel good about themselves* (rated at −4).

Other statements and post-sort interviews with clients confirmed that this attitude relates to where the clients are 'right now'. There is a strong expectation of support. Getting a job appears to be secondary to achieving their rights while on a benefit. There was some evidence of

tension in the attitude between 'where I am' and 'where I want to be' and how change should occur—again, a belief that the client's independence was constrained by the benefit system, contra the wishes of the individual: *The benefit should help and reflect what I want to do— but it should be me deciding.*

The factor was neutral about the value or meaning of work, even while expressing a preference to be working rather than on a benefit. In this latter case, researchers surmised that the strong negative reaction to being on a benefit was a judgement of the benefit system as a whole, and not a pure preference to work. Overall, then, this factor presents a much more nuanced portrait of the stereotypical resister: rather than a picture of a person who complains loudly and bitterly about the 'system' while taking every step to resist compliance, there is a picture of a person who feels disconnected from the benefit system, perhaps more frustrated than angry, a situation response that masks an underlying strong sense of self-worth (I want to decide and feel good about myself).

The results of the study were presented to policy and front-line operational staff, with discussion about how the findings could be used to improve the process of persuading individual beneficiaries to behave more consistently with government's intentions for them.

Among the matters raised was how the Agency might use the findings. Given the divergences among the factors, a single slogan-type message to beneficiaries is unlikely to be effective. For example, compare: 'We'll help you undertake job training when you are ready' (which could imply that there is no role for the client to decide when 'ready' occurs) with: 'being ready for work isn't just about you; it involves you and us and the whole situation. Job training is one of the services we may encourage or require'. Even though some common ground can be invoked advisors still need to tailor their persuasion according to 'where the client is coming from'. The study allowed case workers to appreciate that there were more than two types of claimants and that claimants were likely to respond to both situational and identity-based persuasive messages. It was never suggested that the Agency have five chutes for sorting clients with appropriate 'scripts' for advisors to follow: Q methodology does not categorise people. While some people may almost always look like a 'Factor 1', most people can relate to several factor perspectives simultaneously, or at one or another time. Clients are likely to have a mix of identities and situational responses, and one aspect may appear to mask another. The study provided frontline workers with powerful and relevant 'everyday' hypotheses, initiated by the clients' own self-referencing opinions, to augment their own experience of client interactions, and make positive interactions more likely.

Advancing 'Joined-Up' Policies

Policy makers are increasingly interested in the potential for overcoming policy fragmentation, in order to address 'whole-person' wellbeing. Good 'joined-up' policy for people should reflect at once key dimensions of people's lives, their skills and abilities along with limitations and constraints. The aim is to avoid artificial categories of people, for example, by income or education levels. However, policy makers still need to understand how such discrete elements interweave in experience and aspiration. There is also significant public policy interest in evaluating changes in wellbeing, especially when changes are positive and can be attributed to policy decisions. Typical instruments are clumsy for determining if a change has made people better off overall. There is a problem of attributing an outcome to a policy activity (perhaps a good outcome would have occurred anyway).

In the absence of an apropos example investigating the use of Q methodology to overcome policy fragmentation, I will evoke a common policy concern and seek to illustrate potential Q analysis in a stylised way. Consider, then, current youth culture and some helpful and unhelpful behaviour that can be observed. Two images, drawn from contemporary news accounts, set the scene. In one, a 20-year-old man spots an 80-year-old whose car has run out of petrol on a snowy road. The young man brings the stuck man some petrol to get his car going and—with no prior discussion—a hot sandwich. Later the press photographs him having a thank-you beer with the older man. In the other scene, a similar-aged man is photographed after being arrested during riots in the United Kingdom. His expression is blank and his head is bandaged and bloody. Whether good Samaritan or rioter, young people's (mis)behaviour has complex and unknown antecedents across a full range of traits and experiences: it is not easy to gauge where young people are coming from.

Q methodology researchers can make use of the 'condition of instruction' to explore counterfactual and other explanations of behaviour according to young people's own assessments. While each person is different, Q methodology can help to find common patterns in how young people view the present and their futures and assist policy makers to provide services and supports that take into account the identities and beliefs that facilitate positive interactions and behaviours. Without the understanding, there is a risk that policy continues ineffectually to address single issues in isolation and to address problem symptoms only. Q methodology, in other words can be used to appreciate the 'everyday ontology' of young people and its subjective nature. As Gardiner (2006) defines them, with reference to the work of Heller (1985), everyday ontologies feature 'emotion and affect rather than formal logic; they tend to be repetitive, prone to analogical forms of

reasoning and overgeneralisation; and they are pragmatic, based upon immediate perceptions and experiences and subordinated to the requirements of mundane tasks' (Gardiner, 2006, p. 205). A Q study could develop clear ontologies from the Q sorts of young people, or any other group of interest. For example, a similar ontological approach could be used to understand the complexities of the lived experiences of people with autism and their families (as detailed in Stace, 2011).

Having considered five ways that Q-methodology studies can prove useful to policy makers through better knowledge and understanding of wellbeing in people's lives and the implications for policy, I next turn to briefly discuss how Q methodology can support theoretical advancement of understanding about wellbeing.

Supporting New Theoretical Understanding in Applied Studies

Q methodology offers scope for more explicit mid-level theorising. That is, once factors have been interpreted, researchers can draw on those interpretations abductively, in concert with their existing knowledge and experience, to develop new hunches to pursue. The potential is especially notable when one or more factor is unanticipated or surprising (a fairly common occurrence in Q methodology). Researches are urged to look for the 'sophisticated surprise' (Starbuck, 2006)— something in the interplay that leads to new interpretations and offers a possible resolution to the surprise.

To illustrate, I continue with the New Zealand example. The study supported additional 'discoveries' in the form of hypotheses warranting further investigation. For example, researchers saw some evidence of new, plausible associations between the factors and ethnicity or age. Beneficiaries who identified as European comprised all the significant loaders on the negative Factor 1. Māori participants, by contrast, were associated with the positive factors. The age-related patterns suggest a lingering effect on attitudes from experience that pre-dates recent concepts of disability (which is itself broadly construed). Current New Zealand policy distinguishes individual 'impairment' from the 'disabling' environment. Older respondents tended to be associated with the identity-inflected factors ('I am ready for work' and 'I am a victim'). While professionals in the benefit system understand and act on the new interpretations, it is important to bear in mind that some clients' identities are framed differently, regardless of whether the professionals reject that framing. Encouraging a person whose self-reference includes 'being disabled' into more active compliance with job-seeking activities, for example, may mean encouraging them to look less at themselves and more at the easiest situational barriers to conquer. Further pursuing this line of inquiry, researchers found that both 'identity' factors had fairly neutral opinions about volunteer work and society's expectations

of them, which supports an effort to persuade them to look outwards for opportunities.

Theorising Wellbeing Intersubjectively

One of the key reasons to look to Q methodology is its capacity to reveal rich, comprehensive pictures of the way it is for some people/within some segment of concourse, as illustrated not only by many applied studies of quality of life, for example, or the hypothetical uses of Q to understand the identities of young people or people with autism, but also in studies of trust and interaction. Stephenson's concourse theory reminds us that every 'culture' has a repertoire/a place of mutually understandable communication on any topic. Concourse, and people's engagement with concourse, can be studied with Q methodology to find the 'inherent form' of wellbeing. Drawing on renewed attention to intersubjective wellbeing and comparisons with existing theories of wellbeing, researchers have the potential to develop richer theories of what makes a life go well for a person.

As I define it (Wolf, 2012), intersubjective wellbeing refers to what makes a life go well for people as experienced relationally, involving shared meanings, and the ways in which subjects relate to others, to their own experiences, cultures, environments in which they live and in the extent of their lives in time and space. It takes in past experiences and future possibilities from an actual here-and-now perspective. It holds promise to isolate aspects of wellbeing that are located neither 'within' a person (like a feeling of joy) nor with 'everyone' together (like national income), but which exist between people. Yet, the study of wellbeing remains dichotomised and heavily influenced by western individualising norms and methods. There are exceptions, however. For example, McGregor and Sumner (2010), deriving their views from extensive development work, claim that 'wellbeing arises from the interaction of the capabilities of the person and the societal conditions in which they struggle to escape persistent illbeing outcomes' (p. 108).

An important dimension of theorising takes an 'ecological' perspective on wellbeing: when Q sorting (as in everyday life) a person exists in culture/society with an accumulation of experiences that bear on wellbeing. As suggested with the young identities example, Q sorting (with a well-chosen sample from a concourse) can facilitate access to the everyday ontology of emotions and affect, routine, internal dialogue, steams of sensory inputs, heuristics and instincts, an ostensibly larger and more connected field than that expected in normal cognitive and evaluative exercises (which attempt to restrict—however successfully— the response to one emanating from a point-in-time individual). I contend that Stephenson's theories can be turned to enrich the conceptualisation of wellbeing as intersubjective.

Q is particularly valuable for its unique approach to the 'everyday' world (Hutchinson, 2012). The everyday world is the world of common sense, outside the normal margin of scientific interest, a world in which '[we] believe we act as we do because the reasons for so acting are, by our own lights, better than the reasons in favour of acting in any other ways that are, by our lights, available to us in that situation' (Forgusen, 1989, p.5): again think of the stylised young-men example above, captured in a moment taken from the stream of the everyday life. Q methodology can provide 'snapshots' of such reasoning about wellbeing. But these will not be mere snapshots. We can be reminded of Neurath's metaphor for common sense and ordinary language as a boat we must rebuild plank by plank while remaining afloat in it (Coates, 1996, p. 2). Continuing the boat metaphor, Broks (2007) discusses Daniel Dennett's notion of the 'extended now' as a ship that has a stern in the past and a prow in the future, with the subject occupying the temporally thick 'present'. Moreover, drawing from the pragmatist tradition, we understand people to be involved in actively shaping the reality they enter into, not only passively experiencing it (Anderson, 2007). Q 'snapshots' capture a slice of the sorter's 'talk', as at the moment a rioter decides to throw a rock, or a young passer-by to buy a sandwich, and so on, in the most everyday evocation of a life's vector of experiences.

Q methodology stands poised to find the deep structure under the ephemeral, a person's 'situatedness' in the complex wholeness of some everyday phenomenon as a common-sense, personal judgement. Opinions about the issue—innumerable and all personally, experientially, and situationally referent—are the 'raw material' for Q methodology. After factor analysis, the researcher's abductive inquiry finds patterns or stable attitudes, which can be interpreted as person-centred frames of interest for wellbeing studies. Of interest is not simply the patterning of views on the topic, but the embodied, underlying dispositions of likes and dislikes that predispose a person's engagement with the raw material in the Q sample.

Conclusion

Q methodologists can contribute in a number of ways to assisting policy makers understand and improve the contributions of policy to wellbeing, from better conceptualisations and applications addressing specific policy concerns to broadening understanding of wellbeing for a whole person and the contributions to it. This article has directed attention to the ways Q methodology can assist policy makers (and researchers) to avoid some of the artificiality and ambiguity of the subjective–objective dualism that is so prevalent in the wellbeing literature and to explore the contributions afforded by the concept and measures of intersubjective wellbeing.

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