

Measuring Wellbeing

Towards sustainability?

Karen Scott

Summary

This book is organised around these four related areas of inquiry. I explore the theoretical concepts and local understandings of wellbeing; I explore the relationship between concepts of human wellbeing and sustainable development and the tensions between them; I explore the complex issues around creating the forms of participatory governance that can support these deliberations; and I explore the nature of indicators and their role in policymaking processes to promote wellbeing. The four remaining chapters that make up Part I address each of these questions in turn and provide an overview of the complex field of enquiry we need to undertake in order to devise local policy for wellbeing. Part II of the book explores these questions through a detailed case study.

This book engages with both the philosophical and practical challenges of defining, measuring and promoting wellbeing and sustainability. Wellbeing definitions and their measurements both shape and are shaped by their cultural context, social norms and institutions, and this affects the way measurements are developed and chosen and how they are used (or not) (Galloway 2005; Astleithner and Hamedinger 2003; Astleithner *et al.* 2004). This book particularly focuses on the relationship between central discourses and local governance, it looks at the development of indicators and the processes by which they are created, at the local level. This is not a 'how to' book although I believe the case study has practical implications for policymaking. The book focuses on the policy processes, institutional norms and power struggles that the definition and measurement of wellbeing entail. Although the focus on wellbeing for public policy goes hand in hand with attempts to 'measure what matters', I show that not only is 'what matters' up for debate, but also how we measure it. It is how we acknowledge and value that debate and the different types of knowledge and experience which can inform it, that is the real challenge of measuring wellbeing.

2 Human wellbeing and quality of life

I wish you health and happiness
 I wish you golden store
 I wish you heaven when you die
 What can I wish thee more?

This poem was once a popular sentiment sewn into embroidery samplers and quilts. Some may consider it trite. For my grandfather, it must have had a deeper meaning. He wrote it on the back of a postcard and sent it to my grandmother soon after they were married. It was 1945 and he was a prisoner of war in Burma. I imagine that every word sent home counted a great deal. When it comes down to it, most of us can express our ideas of wellbeing quite well, according to what we value for ourselves and our loved ones, in the context of our social situation and culture. Since my grandfather wrote that postcard, the world has changed profoundly in ways he could never have foreseen. In some ways our values and expectations have shifted as well; in others they have endured. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt put it, 'we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (1958: 7–8).

How can we capture sameness and difference at once? This is one of the fundamental challenges to the quest for a common definition of wellbeing for public policy. How can we arrive at a common definition that can support strategic decisions without restricting our freedom as individuals to choose the way we want to lead our lives? What would this definition look like? Philosophers have wrestled with these questions since Aristotle if not before.¹ We now have an extensive literature on quality of life, wellbeing, life-satisfaction, welfare, utility, happiness, prosperity, human flourishing, human development and so on. This chapter reviews a wide and complex field. Limitations of space and my focus on conceptions of wellbeing for general political purposes necessarily result in some significant omissions. For instance, I do not cover here more specific health-related quality of life measures. For fuller and more learned reviews of the range of quality of life constructs, research and measurement see Phillips (2006) and Sirgy *et al.* (2006). The discussion here focuses mainly on the terms 'wellbeing' and 'quality of life' as these are the ones most frequently used in UK policy literature and discussions regarding measurement. They are often used interchangeably, being intuitively understood generic terms for

a wide range of ideas about what constitutes a 'well-lived life' (Dasgupta 2004: 13). This inherent accessibility is part of the common-sense value of these terms in democratic debate. Nevertheless there is a range of possible meanings. I will explore some specific constructs of wellbeing and quality of life in this chapter by considering the roles of philosophy and science over the last fifty years, including within current discourses on 'happiness' measurement and policy in the UK.

What is it to be 'truly' human?

Theories of wellbeing or quality of life cannot be disengaged from theories of what it is to be human and what life is for. Even the most liberal accounts of wellbeing, some of which are reviewed in this chapter, are predicated on assumptions that as humans we are essentially tolerant and reasonable beings, that we can live and let live. Wellbeing theories that claim to be grounded in a universal ethic, will still privilege certain ideas of humanity over others. Of any account of wellbeing, we should ask, what assumptions does this make about human nature and what does it prescribe? Our views on what makes a good life are also informed by a wide range of beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life. The nature of human beings and the meaning of life are of course entwined. If one believes in some form of after-life, the pursuit of wellbeing will also take that into account; recognition of a higher spiritual authority may take precedence over personal autonomy. Wellbeing in this life may be evaluated in relation to the prospect of greater wellbeing in the next. From a more existentialist viewpoint, individual autonomy may be the primary criterion for self-realisation or wellbeing. If one believes that human functioning is inextricably connected to society, the health of social groupings, or the common good may take priority over individual preference. If one believes that human life is part of a fragile ecosystem on which wellbeing depends, then the good life may be determined by the health of that whole system. This is not to say that we cannot believe some of these things (or others) simultaneously or that our behaviour always follows our beliefs, but those are complex discussions, outside the scope of this book. My point is that all theories of wellbeing and its measurement are underpinned by values and beliefs, whether explicitly stated or not, about the nature of humanity and the meaning of life. So while it is common and understandable for researchers to claim 'neutrality' in measuring wellbeing, the idea is really a nonsense. Wellbeing studies should therefore consider the context within which discussions about measurement and policy occur, and which beliefs and values they privilege, exclude or undermine. One means of doing this is through discourse analysis, which examines language, social practices and power relations in order to evaluate what is being promoted in a particular account of wellbeing and, crucially, what impact it has, and on whom.

Critiques of utilitarianism and GNP

During the early part of the twentieth century, the dominant idea of human welfare was defined by material wellbeing. Subsequently, economic growth, measured

by gross national product (GNP) and now predominantly by gross domestic product (GDP)² became a proxy for social progress (Offer 2000; Veenhoven 1996). Although economists (including Simon Kuznets, the creator of the GNP prototype) have often pointed out that it was never intended to be a measure of welfare, politicians have used it in this way, placing great importance on increased economic growth as a welfare goal in itself (Dasgupta 2004; Levett 1998). This link between economic growth and wellbeing reflects utilitarian ideologies of maximising welfare³ in society. Utilitarianism has its roots in the philosophy of social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) who sought to promote policies that improved utility for the greatest number of people in a society. According to Bentham, utility or happiness meant the presence of pleasure and absence of pain; as people themselves are the best judges of what gives them pleasure and pain then they should be free to satisfy their own preferences.⁴ One of the best ways to do this is to provide people with the means to exercise these preferences, income being a key factor, hence the subsequent meshing of utilitarianism with GDP approaches to welfare. The idea of individual preference has dominated wellbeing studies in economic theory for over 100 years (Dolan *et al.* 2006b). The measurement of GNP/GDP became inextricably linked with these notions of welfare and became a powerful, internationally institutionalised indicator which incorporated the notion of human development. The prioritisation of economic growth fuelled by the aspiration to raise GDP has long underpinned Western public policy.

To make as many people as possible happier seems a reasonable goal but for critics of utilitarianism (and there are many), the aggregation of welfare levels in society can hide glaring inequalities and the interests of minorities can be consistently overlooked (Dasgupta 2004; Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1980). In addition, if increased happiness is the goal, according to utilitarian principles unequal pay between men and women, for example, does not matter so long as women are content with the situation (Robeyns 2005: 96). Therefore utilitarianism comes under strong critique from those who are concerned with social justice because 'it cannot directly rule out slavery, or the oppression of women, or the misery of the poor' (Nussbaum 2005: 35).

In addition, a reliance on preference satisfaction as a mechanism for wellbeing lacks explanatory clarity for the psychological, cultural and social complexity behind choices; it does not distinguish between a wide range of concepts which might affect people's decisions, such as 'belief, desire, perception, appetite, emotion, impulse, inclination, intention' (Nussbaum 2005: 34). Studies in social economics, for example, have shown the importance of norms and institutions associated with family, place and tradition in how people make decisions regarding their livelihoods (Oughton *et al.* 2003). Furthermore, preference satisfaction is inefficient as a mechanism for wellbeing as we cannot always satisfy our preferences in the same way that we can satisfy a need (O'Neill 2011). Preferences can be insatiable, especially when coupled with an increasing choice of consumer goods. Instead of increasing happiness in society Easterlin (1974) showed that the post-war rise in general affluence had not delivered a similar rise

in levels of life satisfaction (the so-called ‘Easterlin paradox’), and increasingly, utilitarian theories associated with preference satisfaction and economic growth were found to be lacking.

Dissatisfaction with GNP as an indicator for human development grew alongside an anti-materialist movement in the 1960s (Offer 2000). New theories about the ideological basis and measurement of wellbeing started to emerge:

It was in this period of prosperity, when for the first time doubts were raised in the highly developed western societies about economic growth as the major goal of societal progress. The ‘social costs’ of economic growth and ‘public poverty’ as the other side of the coin of ‘private affluence’ got public attention and received prominence in political discussions. There was increasing doubt whether more should ever equal better, and it became a public claim to prefer quality to quantity. The concept of ‘quality of life’ was born as an alternative to the more and more questionable concept of the affluent society and became the new, but also much more complex and multidimensional goal of societal development.

(Noll, 2000)

Lyndon B. Johnson, US president at the time, picked up on this mood in his ‘Great Society’ speeches during 1964 which cautioned against unbridled growth for its own sake and called on citizen initiative and traditional values to steer a new vision of society. Johnson is credited with coining the phrase ‘quality of life’ in its modern form (Rapley 2003; Noll 2000). Robert Kennedy put the point eloquently, later that decade:

Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product – if we should judge America by that – counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead, and armored cars for police who fight riots in our streets. It counts Whitman’s rifle and Speck’s knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it tells us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.

(Robert Kennedy Address, University of Kansas March 18, 1968)

Although this has strong echoes with the ‘Big Society’ and wellbeing discourses of UK prime minister David Cameron (who has quoted Robert Kennedy), the Great Society discourses of quality of life were set within a context of post-war prosperity, not economic crisis and public service cuts. The focus was on welfare provision and social reform to distribute the benefits of economic growth more widely. In the civil movements of the 1960s disenfranchised groups found their voice and claimed their fair share of economic opportunity and social mobility. In the UK, Harold Wilson’s Labour government prioritised major spending on welfare provision, social housing, education and health and legislated busily to improve civil rights and social freedoms.

The social indicator movement

These movements went hand in hand with various attempts to better account for quality of life in national indicators, resulting in ‘extended national accounts’ and the ‘social indicator movement’ (Offer 2000). Economists worked hard to factor non-market values into the individual preference model and thereby extend the model of national economic accounting (Jordan 2008; Offer 2000). At the same time, social scientists endeavoured to capture aspects of life important to wellbeing which had not previously been measured. The ‘social indicator movement’ or ‘quality of life movement’ spread throughout Europe and the USA, characterised by a proliferation of social reporting projects and the gathering of a huge amount of statistical information (Rapley 2003; Offer 2000; Cobb 2000; Gasteyer and Flora 1999; Michalos 1997).⁵ Its promoters sought to quantify this new complex idea of ‘quality of life’ and to reproduce the success that economic indicators had previously enjoyed in terms of directing policy. In Europe, this trend is exemplified by the first Swedish Level of Living Survey in 1965. Responding to the recognition that ‘GNP is an insufficient measure of the wellbeing of citizens’ this survey commissioned a study of ‘the distribution of welfare in non-monetary terms’ using ‘objective’ indicators such as life expectancy, employment and education levels (Erikson 1993: 68).

In the UK, the annual *Social Trends* report was first published in December 1970 and contained over 200 pages of charts, tables and diagrams intended to measure social as well as economic progress. Muriel Nissel, its first editor, gives an engaging account of its launch at No 10 Downing Street to a rendition of chamber music and massive media coverage. That the report was responding to a widespread public call for change is evident in its being voted runner up for the title of the best new reference book that year (apparently being let down only by the quality of its binding) and included on the Christmas reading list in several Sunday supplements. The report for the first time gathered together in one volume a wealth of social statistics, to give a picture of Britain that had not been seen before: it was ‘above all concerned with people’ (Nissel 1995: 492).

However, authors reviewing this period of social reporting record the disappointing impact on policy achieved by this vast amount of data. They offer three explanations. First, there was a vain expectation that data in itself would inform policy, and the more data the better. This expectation failed as the

bewildering array of indicators and information was not linked to any coherent framework or theoretical analysis of what constitutes quality of life, or of what needed to be achieved for whom, and how (Innes 1990; Offer 2000; Cobb 2000). Accordingly, although there was a growing recognition of the limitations of GNP, it remained a single indicator linked to embedded (albeit flawed) theories of how to create wellbeing, and continued to influence and justify policy decisions which prioritised economic growth. Second, there was a growing realism that measurement of social phenomena was more complex than previously imagined, and researchers became disillusioned with inadequate 'surrogate measures' or 'proxies' for public goods such as education and health (Nissel 1995). Third, the political climate changed in the late 1970s and 80s, as economic difficulties and the rise of right-wing neoliberal ideologies in the Thatcher/Reagan era unseated the social indicators movement (Rapley 2003; Nissel 1995). As Offer (2000: 12) says, social indicators relied on a 'social-democratic consensus' but 'by the time social indicators were delivered, the impetus of social democracy was spent'. In the UK, work that had been done in the late 1970s on measuring the wellbeing of minority groups became politically sensitive, and fell by the wayside (Nissel 1995). Prime Minister Thatcher famously said 'there is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women and there are families'⁶ and championed the view of active citizens responsible for their own welfare. It was during this era of 'conservative ideology with its celebration of the market and the responsibility of individuals', that interest in quality of life on the scale of the individual arose (Rapley 2003: 8). The so-called 'American model' of quality of life measurement became primarily based on subjective indicators at the level of individual citizens, for example, measures of personal satisfaction or happiness (Noll 2000).

Quality of life and the enterprise culture

The term 'quality of life' became re-embedded in the discourses of government at this time but it was now linked to the rise in the enterprise culture. The concept of quality of life was deployed in all manner of public discourse during the 1980s and 1990s, from advertisements for household goods to healthcare strategies. It became enmeshed with the idea of 'subjective beings' who can buy/choose from different quality of life options in all areas of life (Rose 1992). For instance, Rapley (2003) shows how in ten years spanning the emergence of the Thatcher enterprise culture in the UK, people with learning disabilities had been transformed in government rhetoric from a homogeneous group of 'the mentally handicapped' who needed nursing and care, to individual citizens with the potential to make a contribution to society. The idea of quality of life was thus connected both with new imperatives in care provision and with a new construction of the learning disabled as consumers who exercise choice and responsibility for their own care and support. This is strongly connected to the neoliberal economic project of creating autonomous individuals, independent of the state, responsible for their own quality of life and able to create the means for enriching it. But much deeper than that, it reflects how we view the self:

And this image of an 'enterprising self' is so potent because it is not an idiosyncratic obsession of the right of the political spectrum. On the contrary, it resonates with basic presuppositions concerning the contemporary self that are widely distributed in our present, presuppositions that are embodied in the very language that we use to make persons thinkable, and in our ideal conceptions of what people should be.

(Rose 1992: 141)

These discursively constructed notions of the self are of course continually produced and re-enforced by market mechanisms (consider the ubiquitous advertising mantras 'treat yourself', 'you deserve it' and 'you're worth it'). However, they are also intimately connected to ethical concepts of rights, freedom, justice, equity and democracy which have long historical roots and were mobilised forcefully in the movements of the 1960s. Although many blame neoliberalism for the current social, environmental and economic ills, this is too simplistic. The meshing of market-based mechanisms with deeply held ethical norms has produced a particular idea of the self; unique and deserving with an identity distinct from, but of equal worth to, all others. This dominant construction has become so embedded in our daily lives in the west that it is almost impossible for most of us to conceive of human life and the quality of our lives differently, and indeed we may deem it unethical to do so. This is precisely why such 'realities' should be questioned, and why they are so difficult to question. I return to this in the next chapter when I consider the challenge of trying to integrate the concepts of sustainable development and wellbeing.

An increasingly individualistic construct of quality of life provoked a rise of interest in subjective indicators to measure individual self-reported experience of wellbeing. In 1983, these subjective indicators were included in the *British Social Attitudes Survey*, which highlighted the importance of factors such as marriage, friends, family life and the weather, as well as the already-reported jobs, health and housing concerns (Nissel 1995). These measures provided new dimensions to the notion of wellbeing, focusing on individual experience and preference. Social researchers in Scandinavia however, rejected this model. For instance, Erikson and Uusitalo (1987) argued that it should be resources rather than satisfaction or self-assessed needs that should be measured, for through these resources people acquire their own welfare. In the 'Scandinavian model' thinking focused on objective indicators of level of living or quality of life of society as a whole, such as employment rates, education and life expectancy, and rejected measurements of personal satisfaction (Noll 2000).

Towards a philosophy of social justice

New ideas in philosophy emerged in parallel during the 1970s and 80s which challenged existing utilitarian views of human welfare. A significant contribution came from political philosopher John Rawls, whose influential work, *A Theory of Justice*, was published in 1971. This book argued for 'justice as fairness' as opposed

to maximising aggregate happiness in society. He rejected average 'utility' as the goal of policy and instead proposed that each individual should be able to enjoy 'primary goods'. These are certain inviolable basic rights and freedoms, like free speech, which should not be compromised by attempts to maximise happiness (Rawls 1971; Cohen 1993).⁷ However, he recognised that in a complex society inequalities exist, so he also argued that society should be organised so that *some* inequalities were to be tolerated if they improved the absolute position of the worst off (Rawls 1971). For example, unequal wealth creation and distribution may be tolerated provided some of the increased wealth improves the lives of the poorest. Rawls suggested using an index of social position determined by income to identify the 'worst off' in society. He believed that the happiness of a society was not directly measurable, and that it should not be the basis for justice, but that his theory of justice, if applied, would increase happiness. However, his focus on income was criticised heavily as too crude a proxy for the distribution of other primary goods, which included 'the social basis of self-respect' (Nussbaum 2005: 38).

Rawls' work influenced a new generation of philosophical thought on human wellbeing developed around theories of equity and justice. Important debates arose about the sort of equity to be promoted: should we aim for equality of welfare (happiness) or for equality of resources? This debate was notably explored by Dworkin (1981a, 1981b) who argued that equality of resources should be prioritised over equality of welfare. Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize-winning economist, promoted the concept of 'capabilities' as the basis of human flourishing (Sen 1980, 1993) arguing that equality of resources and equality of welfare are both flawed in achieving social justice. Sen's ideas have had wide impact particularly in the development field. This approach was influential in the creation of the Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990, now an internationally used composite indicator which includes longevity, literacy and education as well as GDP to generate national comparisons. This has been influential in raising awareness of global inequalities and the plight of the world's poorest.

The capability approach

Capability theory proposes that equality in what people are able to be and to do is a more valuable measure of quality of life than a model based on either equality of resources or welfare. Sen proposes this as a 'natural extension of Rawls' concern with primary goods, shifting attention from goods to what goods do to human beings'⁸ (Sen 1980: 218–219). Sen locates the key to wellbeing in the freedom to fulfil human potential, rather than in the technical possession of rights or resources. He distinguishes between capabilities and functionings. Put crudely, functionings are what people do, capabilities are what people are able to do. If we concentrate on functionings as a definition of wellbeing, we may become overly prescriptive. For example, to eat is a basic human function; the opportunity or ability to eat is a capability. It may be important for someone to choose not to eat in certain circumstances, such as a fast or hunger strike, because they are fulfilling

another need important for human wellbeing, freedom of religious or political expression. However, no-one should be prevented from having the opportunity to eat and therefore it is opportunity or capability which is the most important focus for wellbeing accounts.

There are many overlaps between functionings, capabilities and needs but it is important to retain a philosophical distinction because the general provision of a public good, a right or a resource is meaningless if a person has not the knowledge, ability, confidence or freedom to access or exercise it. The capability approach is appealing because it takes into account 'the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of life' (Robeyns 2005). This approach does not reject resources as unimportant, clearly they are not, but holds that measuring these alone gives a distorted picture of human wellbeing. For instance, a person with disability may need more resources than a person without disability to achieve a similar quality of life (Alkire 2005). Likewise, using only individual happiness or satisfaction as a measure of equity can also cause distortions because people have 'adaptive preferences' that mean they can become accustomed to poor conditions and consequently lower their expectations (Elster 1983). For these reasons many capability theorists argue for 'objective' indicators such as levels of education and life expectancy, to be used to highlight the differentials in opportunities.

The problem with an approach based on people's own assessment of their degree of satisfaction is that it is partly determined by their level of aspiration, that is, what they consider their rightful due. This means that measuring how satisfied people are is to a large extent equivalent to measuring how well they have adapted to their present conditions.

(Erikson 1993: 77)

Researchers and policy actors are becoming increasingly interested in the capabilities approach. This, however, is a complex concept with different cultural meanings. This poses considerable theoretical and practical problems. The challenges of specifying particular capabilities for a good life highlight a critical struggle:

The search for a universally accepted applicable account of the quality of human life has, on its side, the promise of a greater power to stand up for the lives of those whom tradition has oppressed or marginalized. But it faces the epistemological difficulty of grounding such an account in an adequate way, saying where the norms come from and how they can be known to be best.

(Nussbaum and Sen 1993: 4)

Due to this risk of imposing inappropriate or unacceptable norms, discussions of local democracy and participation are central to accounts of quality of life in the capabilities literature. For this reason, Sen has always veered away from a prescriptive account of what quality of life should look like, preferring to leave this to democratic decisions in each area. However, Martha Nussbaum has taken

a different view and has produced a much discussed list of ten central human capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; control over one's environment (see Appendix B for a full account). Nussbaum argues for the need to set out a substantive account of fundamental capabilities that are 'a minimum account of social justice' for political purposes. She recommends a 'political focus on the individual' because political accounts should aim to support each person to function in a 'truly human way' with human dignity (Nussbaum 2000: 72). It provides the 'underpinnings of basic political principles that can be embodied in constitutional guarantees' (Nussbaum 2000: 72–76). Her list determines a basic minimum that people of otherwise different values can agree to, an 'overlapping consensus' (using Rawls' term) or common ground upon which all can stand. Because her list is based on capabilities and not functionings (what people are able to do rather than what they actually do) it avoids over-prescription and allows people to subscribe to options that they recognise as beneficial to others, even if they do not wish them for themselves.

This approach is influenced by Aristotelian concepts of 'eudaimonia' or flourishing, and is an example of a 'perfectionist' or 'classical' account which aims at a broad conception of what the good life is or should be. Such accounts are often criticised for being paternalistic, unlike 'liberal neutrality' accounts which propose a basic minimum of public goods to allow people to choose their own good life in a pluralist society. However, Aristotle himself argued that a basic conception of the good life is necessary to create conditions whereby plurality can flourish (O'Neill 1993). There is also an important argument to be had about the point where the argument for providing minimum public goods becomes a perfectionist account of the basic social minimum for a good life. In a defence against criticisms of imposing a paternalistic set of values, Nussbaum describes her list as general enough to accommodate cultural differences, and argues that the detail will still need to be decided through local democratic process. She argues for universal values by pointing out that cultural ideas have now spread across the globe and it may be hard to define what exactly 'local' means (Nussbaum 2000: 49). Furthermore, local ideas may be values of a powerful elite imposed on others, or of a majority which excludes minority views; many existing local value systems are already paternalistic and limit what certain groups can and cannot do. 'Why,' she asks 'should we follow the local ideas, rather than the best ideas we can find?' (Nussbaum 2003: 40). I pay particular attention to Nussbaum's approach because I compare her philosophical and universal account with a wellbeing framework built on 'local' views described in the case study later in this book (see Chapter 8 for comparison and analysis).

The capability approach has a 'special character' because it focuses on 'potential rather than actual outcomes' which makes measurement challenging (Gaspar 2007b: 478). How can we measure flourishing or potential? There are considerable difficulties in applying a capability approach. Nussbaum made a start by setting out a list of central capabilities, and Anand *et al.* (2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2009) have tested and refined a list of indicators that is based on this list and

applicable to British culture. This included survey questions such as 'Do you have as much love and support as you need?', 'Do you have the opportunity to go on holiday?' Some local authorities have begun to put this type of question into their annual surveys.⁹ However, it is unclear what could be done with this information in terms of public policy. Moreover, in spite of the theoretical distinctions between a focus on happiness, resources or capabilities, in practice these things are not so easily distinguishable.

The needs approach

Closely linked to, but distinct from, the capabilities approach, is the human needs approach. Maslow's (1943; 1954) theory of needs is perhaps the most well known example of this. Maslow ordered them into a series of layers, with physiological needs at the bottom which must be met before working upwards through safety, love/belonging, esteem to the pinnacle of self-actualisation. He refined this basic model to include other layers but essentially his theory is that we tend to meet our needs in a particular order. This hierarchical approach has been very influential but the prioritisation of physiological needs risks being conflated with a concept of 'basic needs' (as I show in the case study later) which may allow policymakers to have a very 'thin' view of wellbeing, particularly for the poorest. Other needs, like that for love and support, are viewed as important but in a sequential fashion, after basic needs are met. This is in contrast to accounts like Nussbaum's, which puts forward a set of capabilities where the presence of each is necessary to lift an individual above a minimum socially-accepted threshold for quality of life.

Doyal and Gough's (1991) *A Theory of Human Need* is perhaps the best theorised and discussed contemporary account of needs. Needs are described by Doyal and Gough (1991: 55) as 'a particular category of goals which are believed to be universalisable' and if not met 'serious harm of some *objective* kind will result' [my emphasis]. As such, they forcefully argue that if a person is in need it is the duty of society to meet that need. Like Nussbaum they consider it important 'to clarify and defend those universal human interests which alone can underpin an emancipatory and effective political programme for all men and women' (Gough 2003: 3). Doyal and Gough present a dual structure of needs: primary needs, which must be met at an optimum level; and intermediate needs which must be met at the minimum level to produce the optimum level of primary needs. Primary needs are physical health and autonomy of agency. Intermediate needs are: nutritional food and clean water; protective housing; non-hazardous work environment; non-hazardous physical environment; safe birth control and child bearing; appropriate health care; secure childhood; significant primary relationships; physical security; economic security; appropriate education.

Their account is critiqued for being a rather 'stark' account of quality of life as they provide no account of pleasure or enjoyment of life (Phillips 2006: 90). Furthermore, the role of participation in defining needs-based approaches in general has been unclear (Alkire 2002). In addition, critics of needs-based

approaches generally claim that they are overly prescriptive and concentrate on resources (a bundle of goods) and functionings (doings and beings) rather than the capability to access resources or carry out functionings. However, there are considerable overlaps between the capability and needs-based approaches. O'Neill (2011: 28) argues that using verbs rather than nouns to describe needs, 'Joe needs to be able to eat adequately' rather than 'Joe needs food', shows that the capabilities and needs approaches may not be as far apart as often thought. Gough (2003: 16) himself admits that, 'the functioning-capability distinction would help us to diminish lingering charges of paternalism'.

Summary

The contribution of these philosophical endeavours was to refine important questions about the aim of public policy. Should it aim to increase an aggregate measure of happiness in society or for equality? If the latter, what sort of equality: of happiness, resources, capability or fulfilment of needs? This brief account cannot fully represent the extensive, complex and often highly abstract debates in the literature about the proper focus for wellbeing measurement. However, the philosophical framework outlined here may help us understand the particular theoretical or ideological stance on wellbeing policy that public bodies may be considering, and the types of prescriptions and solutions proposed in policy discourses. Sabina Alkire (2002: 194) reviewed a range of lists setting out dimensions of human development, reflecting a wide range of theories about wellbeing and quality of life. She pragmatically concluded that what was most important about a list was its efficacy as a means to 'confront the many challenges of this generation'. So, although theoretical clarity can enable better informed policy decisions and enhance the link between indicators and action, the search for philosophical perfection may distract.

Happiness and hard science – subjective wellbeing

In addition to these theories, work in economics and psychology over the last 40 years has created a large body of statistical evidence about subjective wellbeing (SWB). This is a complex field that generates a great deal of interesting debate. Essentially SWB research focuses on the individual's own assessment of their wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing can be crudely categorised in two ways: hedonic and eudaimonic (Sirgy *et al.* 2006). Hedonic wellbeing research focuses on measuring 'happiness' (positive affect)¹⁰ or judgements about life satisfaction (cognitive evaluation). Measurements are usually taken using large-scale surveys that ask people to rate their feelings (affect) or life satisfaction judgements on a Likert scale. These are then compared with other variables to tell us, for example, whether there is a positive correlation between life satisfaction and income. Life satisfaction surveys can also be split into 'domains' such as work, relationships, leisure, environment, et cetera, so measurements can tell us how different variables correlate to reported satisfaction in different aspects of life. For example,

a higher income may correlate with satisfaction in work but not relationships. Life satisfaction studies have long been used by economists, and the focus on the individual's judgement about their own welfare according to their own criteria fits well into a utilitarian framework. In addition, individuals' assessments of their subjective wellbeing have been shown to be reliable when compared with external reports (of friends or family) and to observed behaviour (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Diener 2000). Recent advances in neuroscience have now located the site of activity in the brain that corresponds to happiness, thereby bringing happiness research into the realm of hard science (Layard 2006). Scientists have found that when people report on their own levels of happiness, this largely corresponds to an 'objective reality', a measure of activity in the brain that rises and falls 'just like your blood pressure' (Layard 2003: 8). This measurable phenomenon has made SWB more interesting to economists, who are realising that positive affect may after all be quantified.

Eudaimonic wellbeing is a more recent and fast-developing field of research, which recognises the limitation of single-item measures of happiness and life satisfaction studies and focuses on a fuller conception of wellbeing, how well people function and how they realise their potential (Huppert *et al.* 2009). Work in this field has been influenced by Aristotelian ideas of human 'flourishing' and the capabilities approach and has been informed by the work of psychologists such as Carol Ryff who developed an approach identifying six key components of wellbeing: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life and self-acceptance (Ryff 1989). Other psychologists have developed a psychological needs-based approach to SWB. The self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) defines autonomy, competence and relatedness as three psychological requirements for wellbeing. This resonates with the needs approach discussed earlier where autonomy and health (arguably 'competence') are primary needs defined by Doyal and Gough's *Theory of Human Need*. While many use the terms hedonic and eudaimonic to distinguish between different approaches to subjective wellbeing, some consider the latter approach as a distinct but complementary field to SWB research termed psychological wellbeing, a more holistic and 'theory-guided approach to wellbeing' (Forgeard *et al.* 2011: 93–4; Sirgy *et al.* 2006; Ryff and Keyes 1995). These terminological differences are indicative of a fast-moving and emerging field.

GDP and subjective wellbeing – the Easterlin paradox

An iconic and long-debated finding of SWB research is that in advanced liberal democracies in recent decades average life satisfaction has remained flat despite considerable increases in GDP, the so-called 'Easterlin paradox' (Easterlin 1974; for a discussion see Jackson 2009; Jordan 2008; Offer 2000; Johns and Ormerod 2007). Many subsequent studies show that SWB and economic growth are correlated but only up to a certain point, after which there seems to be little relationship: more and more money does not increase happiness. Furthermore, the

sum at which income stops influencing SWB is surprisingly low. Gasper (2007b: 486) describes this as 'one of the major findings of modern social science' and it has become a mantra in a range of alternative contemporary discourses whose common aim is to discredit mainstream economic growth policies.¹¹ However, the paradox theory is not without its critics (Offer 2000). As Ormerod (2007) suggests, people can choose the evidence to fit their argument. There is a tendency for SWB data to be uncritically 'grafted onto' existing concepts such as capabilities or environmentalism to back up their various claims (Jordan 2008: 15). Whilst the Easterlin paradox may have its detractors, it is clear that a more complex relationship between income and happiness exists than the one that informs utilitarian economics.

Studies have consistently shown that, after a basic income threshold, relative income has a greater impact on happiness than absolute income. So even if the income of the poorest is rising, SWB will not necessarily be increased if the richest are also getting richer. The study of 'gaps', or multiple discrepancy theory, puts the case that out of a series of gaps between what a person has and wants; has and needs; has and relevant others have; social comparisons have the most effect on satisfaction and happiness (Michalos 1999). There is additional evidence that the reference area for social comparison is more likely to be national than local, which means that social position in wider society has more effect than direct comparison with neighbours (Ballas *et al.* 2007; Wilkinson and Pickett 2006). This is an unpalatable message for the British government because, although general affluence is increasing, the gap between the richest and poorest in UK society is also growing, and certain sections of society are being left further and further behind (Jones 2008; Ballas *et al.* 2007; Marmot *et al.* 2010). Wilkinson and Pickett (2010: 174) present statistics from 21 countries in developed market democracies to show that health and social problems are higher in more unequal societies (using income inequalities) and that the UK is the third from the bottom of that list. 'Our growing understanding of how human health and wellbeing are so deeply affected by social structure inevitably pushes science into politics' (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010: 277).

This body of SWB research incorporates studies which explore the relationship between materialism and SWB and report a negative correlation. Those people who have predominantly 'intrinsic' values, focusing on building loving relationships and self-development are happier than those who hold 'extrinsic' values focusing on status, material wealth and image (Schmuck *et al.* 2004; Kasser and Ryan 1996). Therefore, in addition to the evidence that GDP is not an adequate measure of wellbeing and that equality is important, there is a growing debate about whether policies focused on economic growth and consumption, fostering a rise in an image-dominated materialistic culture, are actually reducing SWB. This has become a powerful discourse promoted in a number of books written for the popular press, such as *Affluenza*¹² by Oliver James (2005), and organisations, such as the New Economics Foundation which, in its *Wellbeing Manifesto for a Flourishing Society* (Shah and Marks 2004), called for a ban on commercial advertising pitched at children.

A health warning

In recent years, the amount of research on SWB has 'burgeoned' but there are all sorts of problems in measuring SWB, including a lack of evidence on causality, making clear policy recommendations problematic (Dolan *et al.* 2008: 96). Despite increasing attempts to theorise SWB and some claims for 'wellbeing theory' (Forgeard *et al.* 2011), the SWB research field is an 'emerging science' and there is a lack of consensus about what should constitute a 'gold standard' of wellbeing measurement (Huppert *et al.* 2009: 305). Subjective wellbeing should be treated as a 'broad area of research activity and interest, rather than as a specific construct' (Sirgy *et al.* 2006: 388). It is characterised by a proliferation of discrete studies, which tend to be cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, each using a different categorisation of variables and choice of categories (for example, some studies on the effect of long-term relationships treat married and cohabiting people separately, while others group them together) making universal claims problematic (Jordan 2008; Dolan *et al.* 2008, 2006b; Sirgy *et al.* 2006; Diener and Seligman 2004). In addition, there are various problems with relying on people's own assessment of their wellbeing because SWB can be adaptive or distorted (see Gasper 2007b for a discussion). Nevertheless, some clear correlations and patterns have emerged between SWB and relative income, age, health, personality, relationships and employment status (see Diener *et al.* 2009 for a review of evidence). This new body of data, and increasingly sophisticated measurement tools, have allowed scholars to interrogate how subjective wellbeing relates to different personal, societal and (increasingly) political variables. The field is growing fast and often provides interesting evidence but, as Flavin *et al.* (2011: 253, f1) warn, scholars should be 'careful not to attribute explanatory power' to surveys 'beyond what they represent'. Despite earlier complaints that SWB was largely ignored by policy actors in favour of objective indicators, international policy discourses have become increasingly infused with references to wellbeing and happiness and many governments are now creating national subjective wellbeing indices (Bache and Reardon 2011). Although, considering the problems attributing causality, it remains largely unclear how these indices will influence policy decisions other than to serve as an important 'cross-check on the validity of economic and other social indicators' (Sirgy *et al.* 2006).

Societal wellbeing, social quality and social capital

The discussion so far has centred mainly on different models of individual wellbeing, whether this be the preference-based utility model, approaches based on capabilities or needs, or the research on subjective wellbeing. Many scholars defend ethical individualism as the appropriate approach for wellbeing definition and measurement as it allows for the fact that there are important differences between people and that social relations and culture can exert harmful constraints upon individuals (Robeyns 2003). In addition, some theorists see an approach focused on meeting individual needs as the basis for promoting

social citizenship. As Gough states, 'It is inconsistent for a social group to lay responsibilities on some person without ensuring she has the wherewithal to discharge those responsibilities' (2003: 5). Such accounts make obvious claims to human rights and civil liberties for each and every person. However, such accounts are also critiqued for tending to view human relationships and social structures as instrumental to individual wellbeing instead of having intrinsic value; they may set up a false polarisation of the 'I' and the 'we' instead of recognising their inherent co-construction (Oughton and Wheelock 2006). On this basis, scholars argue for institutional approaches to wellbeing that look to integration of state, market, organisation, community, household and individual (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2007; Oughton and Wheelock 2006). Similarly public health scholars and social policy theorists point to a lack of focus on the importance of culture in influencing wellbeing (Jordan 2008; Eckersley 2006, Carlisle and Hanlon 2007).

Jordan (2008) argues that what matters is 'how institutions and cultures enable individuals to value their experiences, rather than simply what they have the opportunity to do' calling for a focus on 'social conventions and power processes' as these ultimately 'relate behaviour to wellbeing' (Jordan 2008: 25–26). He critiques the capabilities approach on this basis, and Nussbaum in particular. This is echoed by Michalos (2011: 121) who points out that focusing only on the freedom of what individuals *can* be and *can* do is 'troublesome' in the sense that it provides no guidance as to what is either moral or pleasant in life. He points out that one could be 'fully free and able to pull a drowning child from the water but choose instead to continue sunbathing on the beach'. While I have instinctive sympathy with the need to consider social values and institutions, as will be evident from this book, Jordan's criticism is unfairly directed at Nussbaum's account, which refers throughout to the importance of protecting social cultures and institutional arrangements that help people flourish. For example, she talks of the 'social bases of self-respect' and 'protecting institutions that constitute and nourish [empathetic and meaningful social affiliations]' (Nussbaum 2000: 79). As Phillips (2006: 183) argues the capabilities approach 'has considerable resonance with the definition of social quality' based heavily as it is on participation. Nussbaum has been criticised elsewhere for *failing* to distinguish between individual needs and societal conditions (Gough 2003: 14). Nussbaum's list is included in several of her texts in which she clearly acknowledges the role of social culture and institutions, for good or ill, in affecting individual wellbeing.

These discussions are hampered by a lack of clarity regarding terminology. 'Social wellbeing', which is a characteristic of individuals referring to the quality of their social relationships, should be distinguished from 'societal wellbeing', which refers to the quality of society. However, some authors, for example Phillips (2006), categorise the capability approach as an example of a 'social perspective' of wellbeing due to its focus on social justice and the social and political basis for this; whereas others, like Jordan (2008), seek to distinguish it from an account based on 'social value'. The UK Office of National Statistics has a programme

of work to measure wellbeing. Measuring 'subjective wellbeing' is a sub-section under 'Measuring Societal Wellbeing'. When looking on their website for a definition of societal wellbeing the closest I was able to find was:

'Measuring Societal Wellbeing' provides an overview of measuring societal wellbeing and considers the main approaches emerging for how it should be measured...There is no shortage of relevant existing data to help build pictures of societal wellbeing and to assess our quality of life. Clearly, our overall wellbeing is likely to reflect health, education, culture, safety and a sense of community, among other things. But any of the strands may be valued more or less by individuals and groups within society.

(ONS 2011)

Is societal wellbeing simply an aggregate of individual wellbeings or something qualitatively different? If the latter, then what is it? Theories of social quality have been thoroughly developed by Beck *et al.* (1997; 2001a) and emerged from a critique of the EU's focus on an economic development paradigm. In 1997 the Amsterdam Declaration was signed by 74 academics in the social sciences and the EU has now incorporated social quality into its social reporting (see Phillips 2006 for an extensive review). According to Phillips (2006: 176): 'The social quality of a collective is not just the accumulation of the life quality of each of its individual members: it incorporates collective as well as individual attributes and is holistic in its orientation.' The major components which make up social quality are socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion and social empowerment (Beck *et al.* 2001b: 352). This construct is measured in the European Network on Indicators of Social Quality (ENIQ) and includes 95 indicators under the sub-headings of (for example): income security; security of health provisions; working conditions; generalised trust; altruism; social contract; political rights; social care; friendships; availability of information; reconciliation of work and family life; cultural enrichment; support for collective action; openness of economic system; support for social interaction. These indicators perhaps get closer to what Jordan (2008) is talking about when he refers to 'social value'. However, these societal level theories are not well referenced in current wellbeing research literature which is dominated by economic and psychological approaches to subjective wellbeing measurement. Rather, SWB studies have forged a closer link with the social capital literature which tends to focus more narrowly on civic associative behaviour and relationship networks, a more social than societal wellbeing construct. In a review of wellbeing research literature Cronin de Chavez *et al.* (2005: 77) found that most research is focussed on physical and psychological aspects of wellbeing and that the 'social and cultural bases of wellbeing' have been under-explored. They found large disciplinary gaps and a surprising lack of research in the sociology and anthropology fields.

This is well illustrated by a recent attempt 'to go beyond individualistic aspects of wellbeing, by incorporating measures of social or interpersonal wellbeing' (Huppert *et al.* 2009: 304). The theory they refer to is social capital

and questions in this domain are: the levels of help and trust in the local area, quality of family life and relationships, levels of giving and participating in local activities, optimism about the future and whether the individual feels they get enough recognition and are treated with respect and fairness. However, these questions are still trying to measure what is important for the individual rather than what constitutes societal wellbeing. A range of SWB studies show that social relationships are extremely important for individual wellbeing and that volunteering and community participation are correlated with higher levels of SWB (Dolan *et al.* 2008). Helliwell and Putnam (2004) found social capital and SWB to be positively correlated (although they guard against assumptions about causality) across areas such as family and social life and community involvement. However, someone may have a good score on all these factors but have extremist views and volunteer for a terrorist organisation.

It is often easier to diagnose that something is lacking than to define what this actually is. Many point to the 'absence of society' and synonymise this with a decline in societal values, and increasing negotiations by individuals regarding choice and risk linked to market mechanisms (Bauman 2008; Beck 1992). It is now a common refrain that in western liberal democracies a weakening of traditional ties, moral relativism and increased individualism and materialism are the cause of social decline. The inference is that the breakdown of families and high levels of insecurity, distrust and violent crime can be solved by having more of 'society'. This is an over simplification and conflation of a set of complex phenomena (Grenier and Wright 2006). A perceived decline in social values since the 1960s is often linked to the increased freedoms that era brought for particular social groups. This sense may be fuelled by nostalgia for the 1950s and 1960s 'a comparatively crime free era of strong communities and solid families (albeit with endemic homophobia, sexism, poverty and racism)' (Browne 2008: 4). This association of entities is common. Its inference is that the civil rights and liberties movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought increased crime, community collapse and family breakdown. In a complex period of social transition set in a globalised context of massive change it is by no means a given that, for example, a greater focus on women's rights will lead to a reduction in family or social values, even though this may have contributed to a rise in divorce. There are many reasons for seeking divorce, but common discursive inferences will affect how we view the definition, causes and therefore solutions of social problems.

These discourses of social decline infuse and in many cases are the basis for theories of social capital. There is now a very wide literature on social capital (for a thorough and accessible review see Field 2008). Like 'wellbeing', social capital is a term that has been gaining currency, particularly since the publication in 2000 of Robert Putnam's influential book *Bowling Alone*. Definitions of social capital include 'networks of sociability, both formal and informal' (Hall 1999: 418); 'social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam 2000: 19); or simply, 'relationships matter' (Field 2008: 1). Putnam argues that social capital can be both a private and a public good, and that social networks can have externalities which affect general wellbeing levels,

not just those of the participants. Putnam also stresses that like any other form of capital (e.g. physical or economic) social capital can be used for good or ill. Strong ties between individuals can promote sectarianism and corruption just as they can promote co-operation and trust (2000: 22). Putnam makes a distinction between social capital that bonds and social capital that bridges. The former refers to bonds based on specific reciprocity that tend to occur within tight-knit groups. The latter refers to the links between different networks of people. The first is vital social 'glue' and the second is 'lubricant' needed for social mobility. Jordan (2008) critiques the language and claims of social capital on the basis that it promotes very little that cannot already be explained through economic models of increasing individual utility, and that Putnam even uses the language of economics to frame the concept. Grenier and Wright (2006) argue that social capital theory and research has concentrated too much on face-to-face, non-market, associational and volunteering activities and ignores important realms such as the workplace or internet and phenomena like informal childcare networks. They find that although overall levels of associational activity and charitable giving have stayed stable in the UK, more (time and money) is given by fewer people today in different ways and for different reasons than previously. In short, they find that participation is more concentrated in the A, B and C1 social classes and is becoming increasingly commodified, for example, volunteering in order to enhance a CV. They argue that participation is becoming more and more 'about private benefit, hollowing out its social meaning and weakening its relationship with social capital' (2006: 48). In Jordan's (2008) view, someone who volunteers may do so for all sorts of reasons and it is these *reasons* which are important in assessing social value, and it is social value which creates the link to wellbeing.

Discourses of wellbeing and public policy in the UK

In recent years wellbeing has risen up the political agenda in the UK to the extent that some commentators view it as 'an idea whose time has come in British Politics' (Bache and Reardon 2011: 1). In 2002, a 'life satisfaction seminar' was held at the Treasury where economist Professor Richard Layard (also a member of the House of Lords and nicknamed the Happiness Czar by some pundits) urged government to rethink its priorities and promote the happiness of people (Easton 2006). This generated a modest interest in exploring the link between government activity and life satisfaction, as well as wellbeing in general (Donovan and Halpern 2002). The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra or 'Happy Central') was charged with developing a measure of wellbeing (Furedi 2010; Easton 2006) and commissioned several reviews of wellbeing research and its policy implications (such as Dolan *et al.* 2006b; Levett-Therivel Sustainability Consultants 2007). Quality of life indicators had already been developed by Defra under the sustainable development paradigm (and these are discussed in the next chapter) but in 2005 the new UK National Sustainable Development Strategy *Securing the Future* stated a stronger commitment to explore the concept of wellbeing. Although wellbeing is not defined it is mentioned alongside 'life