

Silent Transformation of Wellbeing

Timo Hämäläinen
Sitra, Finland

Wednesday 13 April 2011

Overview

The old view of wellbeing is outdated having been generated in a world which no longer exists. There has been a silent transformation of the complex array of factors which affect wellbeing in contemporary contexts. Crucially these include the pressures on mental wellbeing and the sense of meaning and purpose in life together with the impacts of short term and selfish decisions. New perspectives on policy making, which view the creation of wellbeing as a central purpose of society, are needed to address this adequately.

Summary

The Big Picture – Historical Transformation

Timo began by arguing that combinations of large scale changes have transformed economic activity. These include the information revolution, the globalisation of markets and business activity and greater specialisation in market activity. This has occurred with scant attention to socio-cultural impacts, adjustments or aspirations which such change generates. In public policy circles, instrumental discourse dominates. In this discourse, purpose is often taken for granted and not really explicitly discussed. Consequently the purpose of economic activity is taken to be self evident and never fully discussed. Economic activity is pursued in its own sphere as if it were separate from welfare, and welfare is pursued in its own sphere as if separate from the economic activity. In this construction, the key dialogue between them tends to focus on tax regimes and public expenditure necessary to address the undesirable consequences of economic activity. Timo suggested that a central purpose of such activity ought to be the creation of everyday wellbeing. He accepted that the meaning of this term needed to be the subject of discussion and that for him it included elements of welfare provision, how well people themselves feel, happiness and what makes for a good life.

Timo suggested that drivers of wellbeing have changed and that alongside continuing problems of inequality and deprivation, large numbers of people faced challenges associated with modern life which had an adverse effect on wellbeing. Briefly stated he argued that a set of inter-related factors – changes in the environment, resources and capabilities at our disposal – gives rise to a set of everyday activities which provide more or less mental coherence, greater or lesser sense of meaning/purpose and more or less self fulfilment depending on how these play out in everyday life.

Timo went on to argue that these days the conditions of everyday life have created growing problems for wellbeing associated with uncertainty, change, information overload, individualism and selfishness. These trends associated with conformity to market norms, have increased short-term thinking, procrastination and selfishness. Short term thinking and selfishness are known to reinforce each other in times of change such as we have now.

This, combined with increasing choice and fixed time, creates a sense of hurry and dissatisfaction which further intensifies the cycle of activity in which the full consequences of actions are not fully understood and in which it is assumed that market activity will take care of the common good.

New context and sense of purpose and coherence

All of this creates problems around choice and the fulfilment of higher human needs beyond basic material needs. For example, in the realm of social relationships humans have the need of love and a sense of belonging while current conditions produce isolation, short term thinking, hurry and lack of loyalty. This in turn puts pressure on questions of purpose and meaning which are not adequately answered by individualist market based pressures and the specialisation demanded by the market. This affects sense of coherence and the ability to understand and manage what is occurring in a complex, rapidly changing, uncertain world in which social understanding is constantly trying to catch up with how the world is changing.

Referring to Antonovsky's sense of coherence scale Timo suggested that the new context described above added up to a set of conditions in which it is more difficult if not impossible for people to feel or be well. Increasing uncertainty is undermining the ability to make sense of the world; problems associated with making moral and market choices is making life less manageable while the extent of individualism, selfishness, consumerism, materialism and instrumentalism undermines meaning. All of this affects sense of coherence which in turn has an impact upon wellbeing. This he argued is pushing societies along a continuum from health towards illness, with increasing numbers of people being unable to function adequately, a fact reflected in both physical and mental health data.

Short term and selfish behaviour has accumulating effects on wellbeing

Accumulating impacts of individual decisions in the long-term and in large groups

Long-term	Life management problems (Kahneman, Giddens)	Environmental, child development, social relationship problems
Short-term	Hedonistic instant gratification dominates	Traffic jams, littering, status competition, etc. (Hirsch, Schelling)
	One's own well-being	Others' well-being

Over time the cumulative effects of short term decision making can be seen in individuals, organisations and cultures, e.g. obesity, indebtedness, environmental degradation, global inequality, etc. What begins as small effects accumulate over time into significant problems as the same decisions are repeated and as large groups of people make similar decisions.

Policy Implications

Drawing on Stafford Beer's idea of a viable system as a way of gaining both decentralisation and coherence of the whole, Timo suggested that five areas needed attention at multiple levels from individual through to global.

Operations – what must humans do to thrive?

Co-ordination – how to ensure that the different parts of the system are not working against each other in the quest for wellbeing.

Control – is the system manageable? How can sense of coherence be increased?

Intelligence – how to better understand the world in which we operate.

Policy (direction, values, purpose) – identifying and agreeing purpose and values. The development/restoration of a coherent sense of meaning which enhances higher human values and fulfilment.

He went on to suggest that alongside these five elements, Ashby's law of requisite variety will also be helpful. This law states that the variety in the intervention must match that of the variety in the system addressed. The complexity of life on earth together with the limited capacity of humans suggests that the challenge of how live well may overwhelm our species.

Two related approaches to address this are:

1. *Take action to reduce variety and choice.* Such actions may include the review of the extent of personal commitments, outsourcing non-core activities, coherent living arrangements, changing cultural contexts and norms.
2. *Improve capacity.* Such actions include better co-ordination and control, technical supports, closer social relationships, rest and cultivation of wellbeing and developing a sense of purpose. Also, to train and educate human beings with a greater sense of transformational capacity by concentrating on skills and capacities needed for the 21st century and beyond.

Timo concluded by suggesting that with sufficient focus and effort Europe could lead the way to create a sustainable wellbeing society.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.