

WORKING PAPER

Respecting the subject in subjective wellbeing public policy: Moving beyond the social planner paradigm

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ABSTRACT

There is a rising tide of advocacy for public policy to be made on the basis of ‘subjective wellbeing’. We argue that the vast majority of the associated policy proposals adopt the same ‘social planner perspective’ that undergirds conventional economic policy analysis. This perspective is broadly technocratic, emphasising scientific standards for what constitutes good policy and empowering ‘dispassionate’ experts. We argue that WPP could and should lend itself to a more transformative agenda, one that embraces the value-laden nature of ‘wellbeing’ as a concept. This would see WPP relinquish the social planner perspective’s arguably naïve ideal of objective analysis by technical experts and instead give a greater role to participatory and deliberative modes of policymaking to define, analyse, and measure wellbeing and ultimately make policy decisions. We call this the ‘citizen perspective’.

Keywords: wellbeing, public policy, social planner, coproduction, participatory governance

Introduction

Reframing public policy decisions was at the heart of wellbeing science's narrative from the moment it first burst onto the scene some thirty years ago. In particular, wellbeing advocates often positioned themselves in opposition to economists, adopting the rhetoric of going 'beyond GDP'. The rejection of the use of income as a measure of outcome in economic policy analysis, which economists define in terms of preference satisfaction, became a central tenet (Diener and Seligman 2004). An oft-invoked argument was that psychological metrics like life satisfaction are a more 'direct' measure of 'wellbeing', with wellbeing defined as a feeling or mental state rather than preference satisfaction (Angner 2009). But how was wellbeing public policy (WPP) to be made on the basis of wellbeing science? In this paper we argue that the vast majority of these policy projects adopted the same 'social planner perspective' that undergirds conventional economic policy analysis and that this perspective still dominates WPP proposals. Essentially, WPP advocacy has to date sought to shift the metrics and definition of wellbeing employed by technical policy analysts rather than change the policy analysis paradigm. We argue that WPP could and should lend itself to a more transformative agenda, one that embraces the value-laden nature of 'wellbeing' as a concept. This would see WPP relinquish the social planner perspective's arguably naïve ideal of objective analysis by technical experts and instead give a greater role to participatory and deliberative modes of policymaking to define, analyse, and measure wellbeing and ultimately make policy decisions. We call this the 'citizen perspective'.

The social planner paradigm envisages the scientist, whether economist or psychologist, as a dispassionate expert adopting a 'view from nowhere' (sometimes called a 'wide reflective equilibrium') and offering advice on how to maximise social welfare to an equally dispassionate 'social planner' (Sugden 2018, ch. 2). The social planner is conceived as a kind of benevolent autocrat. In the traditional microeconomic framework, the social planner mediates between public preferences on the one hand and expert knowledge of how to maximally meet those preferences on the other (Fabian & Breunig 2018). WPP's redefinition of wellbeing from preference-satisfaction to 'happiness' or some other mental state alters this somewhat. It is assumed that individuals can assess their own wellbeing (for the most part), but they do not usually know what policies improve it (Diener et al. 2018). The expert performs the measurement and infers from data what policies the public needs, making recommendations to

the policy maker. The evidence considered most reliable consists of quantitative survey data and randomised controlled trials (Frijters et al. 2020). The citizen's role is little more than to report their subjective wellbeing in terms of metrics previously validated by scientific experts. The social planner perspective in WPP is thus identical to the social planner perspective in neoclassical economic analysis except in terms of the objective function, which is defined in terms of life satisfaction as a measure of subjective wellbeing rather than equivalent income measuring preference satisfaction.

While the social planner perspective has many commendable ethical, epistemic, and political features, we argue that WPP lends itself to an alternative paradigm: the citizen perspective. This perspective is based on a different ideal of knowledge and politics, namely the ideals of deliberative and participatory democracy; and on a different understanding of the realities of policymaking, that of the public administration tradition.¹ The citizen perspective recognises that the notion of dispassionate technical advice, while a noble ideal, is unattainable. While decision-makers should strive to be impartial, policymaking is inherently political and value-laden. It is thus necessary to engage honestly and openly with who holds the power to make value judgements and control process in policymaking. The social planner perspective, coming from the economic tradition, instead "chooses solved political problems as its domain", in the words of Abba Lerner. The citizen perspective, in contrast, recognises that only by including all relevant stakeholders in the policy process and centring the value-judgements and lived experiences of citizens can legitimacy and indeed effectiveness in policy be achieved (Bovaird 2007). Furthermore, the citizen perspective acknowledges the complexities of public service delivery and the multidimensional nature of the outcomes it seeks. Public management thus requires a sensitivity to local context, bespoke measurement, and qualitative analysis that is anathema to the formal stance of the social planner perspective. While the citizen perspective arguably cannot fully replace the social planner perspective, it is useful to articulate and recognise it as a meaningful alternative for policy formation, most especially in WPP.

¹ For deliberative democracy see Bohman and Rehg 1997, Dryzek 2002, for participatory economics see Hahnhel 2020, and for the public administration tradition see Wright 2005. Although undoubtedly distinct, elements of each lend themselves to articulation of the citizen perspective proposed here.

Part I: Features of the social planner perspective

We start with articulating where the social planner perspective on wellbeing comes from, what it encompasses, and what it gets right. Only once we have a balanced view can we appreciate the problems with this perspective and the need for an alternative.

Part I:1 A brief history of wellbeing public policy

What we call the ‘social planner perspective’ in WPP is an outcome of the way that academic research of wellbeing and the policy world have interacted in the recent decades. We demonstrate this with a brief historical review.² Our review is somewhat UK-centric, given the prominence of WPP in the UK, but its central claim—that the social planner perspective is prominent—generalises, as we shall endeavour to illustrate.

Initial publications purporting to launch a new field of wellbeing studies began to appear mainly in the USA in the 1990s (Kahneman et al. 1999, Van Praag et al. 2004), building on more sporadic work in earlier decades. Soon its proponents began to translate this “new science” into policy (Diener & Seligman 2004, Diener et al. 2009, Graham 2011). They advocated new indices to track wellbeing nationally and internationally, and policies to target wellbeing instead of or in addition to conventional economic indicators.

In the UK, this work was picked up by prominent economists and psychologists, and quickly acquired sponsors in government who began advocating for policy driven by wellbeing (Layard 2005, O’Donnell et al. 2014). For the most part, these ambitions to steer policy by wellbeing metrics were not realised, though the language of wellbeing and happiness entered the New Labour Government’s decentralisation drive in the early 2000s. In keeping with the ideals of localism, the councils in England were encouraged to develop their own wellbeing practices (Scott & Bell 2013, Jenkins 2017, Aked et al. 2008). These exercises often amounted to rethinking trade-offs between commerce and development on the one hand and protecting the environment and leisure on the other. The arrival of the Coalition Government in 2010 produced WPP initiatives with a more lasting impact. Wellbeing advocates such as Oliver

² For more detail see Bache & Reardon 2013.

Letwin in the Cabinet were able to institute changes at the national level. These included the start of National Wellbeing data collection at the Office of National Statistics, the birth of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, and the first mention of subjective wellbeing in the Treasury's Green Book (Fujiwara & Campbell 2011).

The wellbeing policy agenda has advanced significantly in a number of other countries. These include the US, Bhutan, UAE and New Zealand. In the UK, the 2016 Brexit referendum diverted the attention of the UK government. However, wellbeing has remained the focus of prominent academic sponsors such as Richard Layard and his colleagues at the influential LSE Centre for Economic Performance, and continues to win significant attention at different levels of government including the devolved nations and local government. The work of this group, especially their book *Origins of Happiness* (Clark et al. 2018) and subsequent publications (Frijters et al. 2020, Frijters & Krekel 2021) exemplify clearly the social planner perspective. But they are not unique. A recent endorsement of a similar expert-driven approach, emphasizing the need for common metrics and benchmarking of policies comes from the Nordic Council of Ministers, a body that speaks for Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland (Birkjær et al 2021). We will now define this perspective with more precision.

Part 1:2 What is the social planner perspective?

Economic policy-making generally analyses outcomes in terms of a conception of social welfare in which a benevolent social planner maximises aggregate utility as defined by a specified social welfare function (Adler 2019). Formalised by Paul Samuelson in the 1940s and able to embody different distributional criteria, the notion of the 'optimality' of this maximisation exercise rests on a series of assumptions underpinning the welfare theorems in economics that have been much-debated and critiqued (Coyle 2020). The welfare theorems also involve a particular definition of improvement: a Pareto improvement is a change in allocation of resources that leaves at least one person better off and nobody worse off.

Social welfare assessment in economics also incorporates two less-widely debated philosophical stances. First, it is the assumption of separateness of facts from values. That is,

the estimation of optimality is treated as a technocratic process while values only enter when the politician decides to act on this evidence. This separation of positive and normative was articulated by Lionel Robbins in a 1932 publication, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, where he argued that political processes can make value judgements (for example, by selecting a social welfare functional form) on the basis of positive evidence provided by economists. Even though the Pareto criterion means there is actually an ethical assumption deeply embedded in welfare economics, the Robbins separation protocol has a firm hold in economics. For example, it was famously reaffirmed by Milton Friedman (1953), and recently by Esther Duflo (2017).

Secondly, maximisation of social welfare by the social planner is a version of the ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel 1989). Dating back at least to Adam Smith’s idea of an ‘impartial spectator’, it demands that the interests of all members of society be taken into account. Behind this admirable idea is a less appreciated aspect: the analyst themselves is placed outside the society of which they are a member (Coyle 2021). Naturally, standing outside the society armed with all the necessary information, the analyst has to assume that no other necessary information (nor technical abilities) that the public may have are relevant for their decision.

The biggest challenge to the social planner perspective within economics has been the public choice movement (Buchanan 1964, Buchanan & Tullock 1962, Tullock 1965, Olson 1965), which introduced into the assessment of policy outcomes the interests of the policy-maker, challenging the notion that impartiality was possible. In public administration practice, public choice theory formed the basis for New Public Management (NPM), introducing practices such as target-setting to control the interests of bureaucrats (Lane 2000). However, NPM does not address either the notion of maximisation of social welfare—calculable by an analyst from outside the model given codified information—nor the positivist presumption that the normative and positive aspects of a decision can be separated.

These two commitments—value freedom and outsidedness—characterise the ideals of economics generally. The sciences of wellbeing described above construct the social welfare function out of subjective wellbeing data rather than preferences inferred from choices. Nevertheless, the neutrality of these data and the ability of the social planner to offer objective advice on their basis are very much preserved in WPP advocacy emerging from these sciences.

Psychologists Diener and Seligman (2004, p. 24), for example, write that “we believe that measures of wellbeing are—and must be— exactly as neutral politically as are economic indicators. The indicators are descriptive, not prescriptive, and must remain so”. Manifesting the social planner perspective, they argue (p. 1–2) more broadly that “wellbeing should become a primary focus of policymakers, and that its rigorous measurement is a primary policy imperative...wellbeing ought to be the ultimate goal around which economic, health, and social policies are built”. Happiness economists in Frijters et al. (2020, p. 144–145) make similar claims:

We argue that a useful approach would be to have an interactive process in terms of ‘agreed-upon metrics and causal effects’. The idea is that the bureaucracy should adopt a current metric for wellbeing (i.e., life satisfaction) until a better one comes along. Similarly, it should maintain and regularly update a list of believed effects of various policies and circumstances on its chosen metric of wellbeing ... Because the list would be so influential in setting priorities and generating effects, its elements must be arrived at via a transparent process and improvements should be as scientifically argued as possible ... Given the importance of openness, we think it is probably best to have a headline estimate derived from whatever the supposed ‘best study’ is on some topic, because that allows practitioners to see all of the elements of the process (i.e., the type of measurement, the type of individuals, the conditioning set of other variables, etc.). Of course, any such nominated ‘best estimate’ would need to be backed up by several other studies that have similar results, and if their methodology is close enough, one could advocate a meta-estimate of them.

In keeping with value freedom and outsidedness, in these proposals the legitimacy of policy is supposed to be determined entirely by scientific standards. Fritjers et al. go on (p. 152) to argue that a policymaker should decide whether a policy change is desirable on the basis of cost-effectiveness analysis, where “value is measured in units of happiness” and “the problem is how to maximise aggregate happiness of the relevant population”. They assert that “the correct approach is then to rank all possible policies in terms of the extra happiness which they generate per pound of expenditure.” In terms of implementing WPP, Fritjers’ et al. identify 3 pivotal areas for development: measurement, methodology, and government guidelines.

Scholars must develop and debate the first two, while analysts must be trained in the later; then “ultimately, government needs to be empowered to apply the wellbeing toolkit for wellbeing to become the goal of policymaking” (p. 161). This is an archetypical example of the social planner paradigm in action, with researchers speaking directly to bureaucrats in a closed loop. Indeed this technocratic approach has been implemented in UK Treasury guidance on cost-benefit analysis, including an algebraic formula for calculating ‘WELLBYS’, a quantity that determines whether a policy is worth pursuing (HMT 2021).

WPP advocacy from the social planner perspective also preserves the assumption of asymmetry of information between the social planner and the public. For example, Diener et al. (2018) argue that, “Smoking seems to be related to lower SWB, and thus perhaps counterintuitively, cigarette taxes can actually raise the happiness of smokers”. There is no suggestion here of asking smokers for their opinion, as their opinions would likely be riddled with ‘cognitive bias’ (Fabian & Pykett 2020). So the discounting of implicit and local knowledge and its replacement with technical knowledge continue to be firmly endorsed. The social planner grants that the public has values, but does not grant them knowledge about how to realise these values, which is why the expert goes to the policy-maker rather than to the public with suggestions and advice. Notably, the only role for citizens in Frijters et al.’s framework appears to be electing the government (and filling out the life satisfaction surveys when asked). They conclude (p. 161) by citing empirical evidence that incumbent governments tend to be re-elected when life satisfaction is relatively high. The public plays no role in the value judgements, measurement, methodology, or government guidelines involved in WPP, all of which are instead controlled by ‘dispassionate’ experts.

The extent to which the social planner tradition allows for deliberation and localism is minimal. Minipublics and other deliberative exercises are sometimes mentioned, but used largely to ensure formal legitimacy, rather than discovery and development of new policies, or indeed new metrics (Oman 2021). The lack of commitment to two-way learning is also reflected in the fact that WPP advocates take ‘local wellbeing policy’ to consist in empowering communities to use wellbeing indicators *as defined centrally* and validated by experts (Scott & Bell 2013, Scott 2014). This is why validation of wellbeing measures is so central to the social planner—she takes the indicators to have been validated once and for all and then undertakes to spread their use as widely as possible with the goal of benchmarking and standardising evidence (Brown et

al. 2017). The localism is therefore limited. Since quantitative evidence is most likely to be standardisable, transportable, and to fit with evidence hierarchies, it inevitably dominates decision making (Oman 2016, 2020, Oman & Taylor 2018). Finally, cost-effectiveness emerges as the preeminent criterion of policy legitimacy.

Due in part to the influence of hedonic psychologists and happiness economists³, the social planner perspective in WPP sketched above is nowadays embedded in knowledge brokering organisations that work to translate scientific understanding into policy. These include the OECD, which has published several reports on measuring subjective wellbeing, mostly recently in 2013, and who established a Centre on Wellbeing, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE) in 2012; the National Academy of the Sciences in the United States, which published the findings of a high level panel on measuring subjective wellbeing (Stone & Mackie 2013); and, in the UK, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WWCW). The foreword to the OECD's (2013) guidelines makes explicit that it aims to "be most useful to governments and other decision-makers". The National Academies report targets a similar audience: "could gathering data on subjective wellbeing help governments and organizations develop policies that better serve the needs of their constituents?". The WWCW is the only one of these organisations to include the public in its immediate audience. They describe their mission as "to develop and share robust, accessible, and useful evidence that governments, business, communities, and people use to improve wellbeing". These knowledge brokers are responding to a perception within 'expert' communities that the optimal mode of policymaking involves taking insights from science and delivering them directly to 'decision makers' in government and other powerful bodies.

Part II: Evaluating the social planner perspective

It is unsurprising given its illustrious history and contemporary champions that the social planner perspective has much to commend it. We begin this section with an overview of these strengths before considering the perspective's weaknesses, with special attention to how these manifest in WPP.

³ We note that the many experts consulted by the OECD and National Academies for producing the reports we cite in this paragraph come almost exclusively from hedonic psychology and happiness economics. Other perspectives on wellbeing, such as those of clinical psychology or development studies, are absent.

Part II: 1 The strengths of the social planner perspective

The social planner perspective has firm ethical foundations, namely welfarism. A variant of utilitarianism, this view holds that policies, rules, and regulations should be evaluated on the basis of their impacts on overall human welfare. It is a popular doctrine among moral philosophers and economists, with many high profile advocates going back at least to Bentham arguing that governments ought to maximise happiness. Now there are highly sophisticated and intricate versions of welfarism that stand up to better scrutiny as compared to the earlier versions. The basic idea that everyone's welfare should count has been supplemented with many theoretical tools about how to identify and measure this quantity and how to incorporate into this calculation other ethical considerations such as equality and fairness.⁴

Another relevant theoretical foundation for the social planner tradition is the methodology of evidence-based practice, namely measurement, data analysis, and causal inference. Evaluating the effectiveness of policies on the basis of these tools requires a) a unified (and preferably unidimensional) measure of value, b) causal inference techniques such as RCTs, instrumental variable, regression discontinuity or difference-in-differences methods, c) systematic reviews of existing research. This methodology is well established in the fields of evidence-based medicine and policy.⁵ So another advantage of the social planner approach to wellbeing is its familiarity to social scientists and statisticians. Life satisfaction measurement plugs straightforwardly into existing practices and thus it comes across as practical and uncomplicated.

In addition to these moral and methodological credentials, there are several pragmatic motivations for adopting the social planner perspective in public policy. First, in representative democracies the public elects decision-makers for the specific purpose of making decisions on their behalf. The motivations for this are several, ranging from the need for specialisation (policy makers have a unique skill set) to the quality of information and expertise available to government officials (citizens may reasonably expect policy makers to be better briefed to

⁴ For an overview of welfarism in economics and ethics see Bossert and Weymark 2004. For a defense see Sumner 1996.

⁵ These methods were developed and remain used by such pioneers as the Cochrane Collaboration (for healthcare) and the Campbell Collaboration (for public policy). They are described in numerous manuals, website, and textbooks inspired by these initiatives. For history and details see Littell and White 2018.

make important decisions because they have the civil service apparatus to help guide them). Second, the use of the social planner perspective is often justified on the grounds that it supports “rational” policy making, coordinated and harmonised by the common pursuit of the same social welfare function. Having a single explicit function enables democratic accountability of politicians. It enables voters to know how much a given policy delivered and at what cost. The social planner perspective thus comes with a framework against which policy coherence and efficaciousness can be tested (Fabian & Breunig 2018). A relevant example is the use of cost-benefit analyses to ensure value for money from public spending. In general, high benefit-to-cost ratio interventions should be funded, low ratio interventions should not, and when these heuristics are violated flags are raised that can instigate further investigation (Dobes 2018). While controversial, not least because of the sometimes narrow scope of what costs and benefits can typically be included, this methodology can apply a discipline to public spending that mitigates the construction of ‘white elephants’ and other patently bad value projects.

A related benefit of the social planner perspective is the way that it uses evidence in decision making. Compiling data from research results, official statistics, and policy impact studies enables social planners with the national perspective to make the most of the available evidence on what works, and what policies have failed to deliver their objectives (Breunig 2018). In a famous example, the ‘scared straight’ program, widely believed to reduce criminality among delinquent youth, was shown by a randomised control trial to have the opposite effect. Its consequent abandonment refocused public resources on potentially more effective policies. Would-be social planners would admit that the political economy of real-world decision-making always entails compromise such that the ‘optimal’ policy can rarely be implemented. Nonetheless, it is a useful exercise to consider what the social planner ‘would do’ in a world without political constraints and imperfectly aligned incentives (Sugden 2013). Even those disposed to a more deliberative (Dryzek 2002) or contractarian (Sugden 2018) view of government would likely concede that the cost benefit analyses and social welfare functions that are the stock-in-Si of the social planner perspective are useful inputs into the broader political process.

All in all, the social planner tradition as applied to wellbeing has a lot going for it. It is based on solid and well-developed theoretical tools in welfare economics and econometrics, but it

improves upon them by aiming directly at people's evaluations of their lives and by adopting the methods of evidence-based policy such as the RCTs. Monitoring and benchmarking policies for their effect on wellbeing can be a useful way of holding politicians accountable in a democracy. What could go wrong?

Part II:2 The limits of the social planner perspective

When critiquing the social planner perspective it is useful to distinguish between three dimensions: the ethical, the epistemic, and the political. In each of these dimensions, the social planner oversteps her bounds; that is, she claims to have knowledge and entitlements that she cannot plausibly have.

The ethical problem arises because the social planner perspective is typically articulated using the concepts of utilitarianism—a moral theory according to which the good consists in positive mental states and the right course of action is to maximise the quantity of this good. Moreover, while utilitarianism itself is a wide umbrella term that admits of diverse articulations (Sinnott-Armstrong 2019), the 'wellbeing social planner' adopts a specific version of this philosophy, namely a version of welfarism with a distinctive commitment about what is value, how to detect it, and what it means for public policy. The good here is exhausted by positive responses to standard questionnaires, and the right course of action is to adopt any policy that brings about the highest quantity of reported wellbeing given the resources available. The wellbeing social planner thus has an especially narrow view of both the good and the right. People are treated as receptacles of utility who lack agency and knowledge of their own to improve their lives.⁶ The improvements happen *to them*, and hence without respect and recognition of their agency. Moreover, these improvements are not constrained by rights, obligations, or any other constitutional constraints. For example, if the quantitative evidence shows that education does not raise reported wellbeing as much as another intervention, then too bad for education. There are no resources within the social planner perspective to appeal to any standards other than maximisation of reported wellbeing.

⁶ This is a well-known objection dating back from Smart & Williams 1973.

The epistemic line of criticism addresses the ability of the social planner to be ‘evidence-based’. Discovery and confirmation of causal relations between wellbeing and variables that can be affected by policy is absolutely essential to this perspective and is perhaps the strongest card in the social planner’s deck. But how warranted is the social planner’s confidence in her evidence base? We see three reasons to worry.

The first problem is that the social planner relies far too readily on the availability of valid data about wellbeing, when this judgement is not justified by reasonable standards. Most wellbeing data come from reported life satisfaction or other short questionnaires. Some commentators question life satisfaction as a wellbeing relevant quantity in principle.⁷ However, let us suppose the idea of life satisfaction itself is a good one and ask only whether we have a good measure of it. It is customary to use headline psychometric indicators as evidence of this validity (Clark et al. 2018, Diener et al 2009). But it is well known that psychometric validity is always relative to a population in which a given survey was initially validated. In addition to this relativity, construct validation operates on purely correlational evidence and nothing more – the point of construct validation is to check that a scale correlates with other scales that our background assumptions say are relevant (Alexandrova & Haybron 2016). As such, construct validation is entirely silent about the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in mapping the underlying construct of interest to self-reports on the metric in question, which is crucial for making inferences about subjective wellbeing from life satisfaction scales in particular (Fabian 2019). Partly as a result of our almost total ignorance about the underlying process (that is, how people form judgments when filling out these surveys), whether life satisfaction scales measure a welfare-relevant construct in a way that is appropriate and precise enough for welfare calculations is hotly contested (see Fabian 2019, Fleurbaey and Blanchet 2013, Adler 2013, Benjamin et al. 2020, 2021, Plant 2020a).

One such controversy is comparability. Traditional economic analysis relies on ‘objective’ metrics, notably income. Such objective accounts typically entail external experts who identify various domains of wellbeing, gather the associated data, and analyse it, including in terms of applying weights and deciding on aggregation processes (Agarwala et al. 2014). This means that results can be compared across individuals, as they are based on the same input data and

⁷ Haybron 2008, though see Sumner 1996 and Plant 2020b for a defence.

aggregation process. In contrast, subjective wellbeing questionnaires rely on the individual being assessed to make these calculations for themselves. Its proponents tout this as the great advantage of subjective wellbeing, but they typically fail to mention the disadvantage. Each respondent may consider different domains of their life, weights, and aggregation methods. The individual is arguably best placed to make these assessments on their own behalf (Frijters et al. 2020, p. 16). However, if the reporting process varies over individuals and/or over time, then claims over the consistency and comparability of the data are less valid (see Kapteyn et al. 2013 for an empirical example). So too then are any inferences we draw from the data, regardless of how rigorous the statistical analysis may be.

Together these considerations perturb the supposed consensus about the validity of the measures so fundamental to the social planner. There are theoretical reasons to question these measures and even if they can be shown to be valid in one situation, there is no warrant to assume such validity in general. The validity of any measure cannot be settled once and for all, but rather needs to be re-established for each new population and context. This may be entirely impractical and, given the current glut of life satisfaction data, wasteful. However the epistemic point stands. The social planner perspective clearly prioritises comparability, standardisation and the sheer wish to keep going with the current status quo at the expense of validity.

The second epistemic challenge is that the social planner relies on the ideal of assembling best practice about 'what works' to improve wellbeing. Frijters et al. (2020, p. 128) even going as far as likening the idea to the Imperial Kew Gardens, which collected best agricultural practices to be exported to the colonies. But such a knowledge bank is poorly suited to dealing with problems of external validity and the context-sensitivity of wellbeing. The social planner is attracted to the idea that the 'happiness equation' has a common functional form and much happiness economics goes along with this assumption (Powdthavee 2011). For example, Blanchflower (2009) observes that the "structure of a happiness equation has the same general form in each industrialized country". Local context, if it comes in at all, does so via different coefficients for the universal variables. But elsewhere in policy such an approach is widely rejected – whether or not a policy works and how it does is a hugely local matter (Cartwright & Hardie 2012). For a phenomenon as complex as wellbeing, such a universalising attitude is especially overconfident.

One illustration is the recent debate about the relation between mental health and wellbeing. Mental health measured largely by brief standardized self-reports explains a large chunk of variation in life satisfaction, more so than poverty and inequality. Clark et al. (2018) use this to claim that mental illness is the biggest cause of misery, and that intervening to treat it, rather than say to alleviate poverty, is the most efficient way of raising happiness. An obvious circularity arises here because questions about life satisfaction are very similar to questions concerning self-reported mental health. But more significantly, as the network of activists Psychologists for Social Change argues this approach relies only on simple regression modelling and ignores the rich tradition of qualitative research in this area that does demonstrate a link between misery and poverty.⁸ It is entirely implausible to treat mental health and poverty as non-interacting variables that each make a separable contribution to wellbeing. In this case, happiness economics puts forward an estimated parameter with questionable validity and misleading precision and uses this figure to support a consequential conclusion about policy choices; namely, that helping people to feel better is more important than addressing the causes of ill feelings. A deeper problem is the assumption that wellbeing determinants have a universal non-contextual effect that estimated coefficients can measure. Of course, it is possible to disaggregate the statistics by sub-populations and hence recognize the differences (which many happiness economists do). But the social planner has a strong temptation to seek a stable parameter relative to which policies should or should not be funded. To settle on such a number, the effect of a variable identified by statistical analysis needs to be treated as a uniform contribution of this variable always and everywhere. This uniformity is extremely implausible, no matter how convenient it is.

The third problem under the epistemic heading is the assumption, inherited from the standard economic social welfare maximisation approach, that the social planner stands outside the society she evaluates. The risk in this is a failure to incorporate the likelihood that the objects of study are in turn reacting to the expert studying them (Coyle 2021). Failure to account for the potential reflexivity (which could range from strategic responses to wellbeing surveys to behavioural changes) is likely to lead to incomplete or irrelevant policy recommendations. Moreover, the assumption of outsidership in practice downgrades granular and tacit

⁸ See Psychologists for Social Change response to the *Origins of Happiness*: <http://www.psychchange.org/origins-of-happiness-psc-response.html>

knowledge of practitioners on the ground, in favour of classified and aggregated knowledge. Scott (1999) persuasively argues that this aspect of the social planner tradition has been responsible for some of the great tragedies of 'high modernism', including famines and natural degradation. Scholars of contemporary public policy and management have demonstrated the perverse and unintended consequences of governance by benchmarking, namely the loss of trust, the disempowerment of teachers and nurses, and administrative bloat (Van Thiel & Leeuw 2002). The outsidedness of the social planner setting these benchmarks is one cause of this problem.

In addition to the ethical and the epistemic problems, there are also political ones. The social planner model embodies the political philosophy of technocracy, in which decisions about how to live and how to organise our communities are outsourced to the expert. But since, in case of wellbeing, the expert has to make value judgments about what wellbeing (what makes a life 'go well') consists of and what data reliably measure it, the expert inevitably oversteps the technocratic remit (Alexandrova & Singh 2020). She ends up assuming a role that does not have legitimately in a democratic polity. One need not be a sceptic of expertise to see this. There is plenty of room in a democracy for division of epistemic labour and hence for the idea that some people know more about a complex technical problem than others (Moore et al. 2020). But the social planner claims more expertise about matters on which citizens themselves can clearly also claim expertise. To this extent the social planner tradition undermines democracy (Fabian & Pykett 2021, Davies 2015). It implicitly adopts the so-called "deficit model" of citizens according to which citizens are too ill-equipped or biased to form opinions about policy. In speaking directly to the bureaucrats and policy-makers rather than the various publics engaged in political action, the social planner bypasses political process on paternalist grounds (Haybron & Alexandrova 2013).

To take stock, there are merits to adopting the social planner perspective in policy-making, but also distinct dangers in doing so. Whether the costs outweigh the benefits will depend on the nature of the policy challenge, especially its urgency and complexity, and the level of knowledge available. It is however useful to articulate an alternative to the social planner paradigm, one that will be of more net benefit in some circumstances, notably WPP.

Part III: Wellbeing policy from a citizen perspective

We start by dropping the two key assumptions we attributed to the social planner perspective: value-freedom and outsidedness. What would WPP look like without those? To reject value-freedom means to recognise that questions of wellbeing are not purely technical. Wellbeing is what philosophers call a ‘thick concept’, which means it both describes and evaluates (Anderson 2002). As such, while it is amenable to empirical inquiry, both the definition and measurement of wellbeing require value judgements to be made. After all, wellbeing is what is ‘good for’ somebody; what makes their life ‘go well’. As such, studying wellbeing requires moral and political arguments, not just statistical analysis. While it might be reasonable for researchers to keep such arguments in house for some scientific purposes, when they cross over into the policy domain, especially in a democratic society, such arguments should be settled in the public sphere. This would also lead us to reject outsidedness, making the policy maker and the wellbeing expert part of a legitimate political process.

The first pillar of what we call a ‘citizen perspective’ should therefore be *participation* of the public in the generation and validation of knowledge relevant to WPP. There are several ways to implement such participation. At a minimal level publics can be consulted about different ways of measuring wellbeing or different wellbeing policies. The 2010–2011 “What matters to you?” consultation by the Office of National Statistics was one way of inviting public input on what statistics should represent the UK’s national wellbeing (ONS 2019). However, consultations are by their nature one-way and embody substantial power asymmetries between experts and the public. In particular, experts decide what questions to ask and how to parse the data. Oman (2021) documents how this leads to blind spots and the omission of many perspectives on wellbeing from the outcomes of the ONS process. In particular, the ‘open response’ data, where participants could write in what wellbeing means to them personally, were almost entirely overlooked in favour of quantitative data from ‘check-box’ questions prefilled with categories selected by experts. Such power asymmetries are characteristic even of some more deliberative processes where experts inform citizens about complex technical issues involved in a policy area, such as vaccine distribution, and then citizens deliver experts their value judgements after deliberating amongst themselves (Rawlins 2005). While understandable given their contexts, such practices see experts structure the policy problem to

be addressed, soliciting value judgements from citizens only to plug them in to an expert developed analytical framework.

One way of overcoming such asymmetry is a more robust participatory process. These are referred to as co-production, or sometimes co-creation, co-design, or collaborative governance (Bevir et al. 2019, Emerson et al. 2012, Fung 2015). Coproduction is a well-established practice in health and design sciences, local governance, and social policy. Coproduction requires an equal and deliberative process that includes and represents the views of all relevant stakeholders, with technical experts classed as merely one stakeholder group among many. In the field of wellbeing, such coproduction exercises have long been conducted by scholars and policymakers working in the capabilities paradigm, especially in development policy and with indigenous communities (e.g. Greco et al. 2015, Dew et al. 2020). More recently, charities and local authorities have employed the methodology (Mazzei et al. 2020).

Coproduction can focus either on establishing metrics of wellbeing or on devising services, or both. The key is to combine different varieties of expertise (Alexandrova & Fabian 2021). ‘Lived’ experts, whom we refer to here as ‘citizens’, bring expertise over the value judgements WPP should serve and relevant contextual factors specific to the policy domain or local conditions. For example, indigenous lived experts working with Yap and Yu (2016) to coproduce a wellbeing index for their local community emphasised the importance of the health of local fishing spots. ‘Practitioners’, in most cases bureaucrats or representatives of organisations delivering policy on the ground, bring expertise about the practical requirements of WPP in the context in question. Representatives from the UK anti-poverty charity Turn2us working with Fabian et al. (2021) to coproduce a theory of ‘thriving’ to inform their work pointed out that many-item questionnaires, common in psychometrics and capabilities research, were inappropriate for measuring the baseline wellbeing of their service users. This is because Turn2us works with people experiencing life changing events and in desperate need of assistance. Large survey batteries turn them off from seeking help. Finally, ‘Academics’ bring technical expertise about the logical consistency of wellbeing theories and the validity of metrics.

Coproduction and related participatory methods necessarily involve *localism* and *contextualism* of a more robust kind than the social planner perspective allows. The centre should not be

aiming to convey to the provinces how best to measure and advance wellbeing, but rather to empower citizens on their own terms and within their context. This requires becoming more tolerant of locally specific indicators that do not translate straightforwardly to the standard ones. The latter have the advantage of being comparable and therefore amenable to aggregation (Allen et al. 2019). But participation at a local level may well result in idiosyncratic metrics and indeed in metrics that might change over time in line with cultural changes in a given community. It is important of course that, while sacrificing comparability, such metrics meet clear and transparent standards, such as reliability and validity. But the key point is that validity is relative to a context and a population. As we already emphasised when discussing the weaknesses of the social planner perspective, there is no such thing as universal validity of wellbeing metrics. So long as these indicators are produced with care and attention to established practices (those in qualitative and mixed-methods fields, not only the quantitative ones), the citizen perspective should allow for them.

Similarly, the citizen perspective should be open to variation on the actual wellbeing policies that end up getting adopted. In contrast to the social planner's dream to calculate the average impact of a given policy on wellbeing and apportion funds on this basis, localism embraces variation. Localism and participation also imply a different vision and a different expectation from wellbeing research, as more of a toolbox of ideas about how to approach a social problem, rather than a clearing house of definitive, proven, or even probable claims about 'what works' and what doesn't. It should focus on creating an institutionalised process that ensures rigour and quality but can be developed and applied locally, rather than on setting the outcomes centrally. Such an approach promotes the localist and participatory nature of the citizen perspective, without shifting all responsibility and control from the social planner to the local communities.

Preserving the integrity of local participation requires reliable institutions dedicated to the *process* and this should be the second pillar of a citizen perspective. This emphasis contrasts with the social planner's overwhelming focus on outcomes, namely increasing the total quantity of wellbeing. The citizen perspective, instead, is centrally concerned with legitimacy of WPP and since legitimacy is a property of political processes (Buchanan 2002), rather than an end-state, it makes sense to focus on the process and the institutions that maintain it. This is a recurring theme in the literature that implicitly challenges what we have been calling the

social planner perspective (Scott 2014). Scott and Bell (2013) go as far as arguing that “Policy makers and scholars should place more focus on the process of developing indicators rather than the indicators that are produced.” This procedural emphasis accords well with the literature in deliberative politics. For example, referring to mini-publics, Setälä (2017) argues that they “could be better connected to representative decision making through institutional arrangements, which institutionalise their use; involve representatives in deliberations; motivate public interactions between mini-publics and representatives; and provide opportunities for ex post scrutiny or suspensive veto powers.” This last passage outlines two of the fundamental characteristics that an institutionalised process governing wellbeing public policy in relation to citizens’ involvement should have to be effective: a formalised interaction between citizens and policy-makers, and ex post scrutiny of how citizens’ inputs have been included in the policy process.

Critics of localism might legitimately raise concerns about the ignorance or parochialism of locals, whose views might benefit from an outsider perspective. They might also chafe at the idea that locals should set policy that may have spillover effects on citizens at large, notably through taxation and public financing of local initiatives. For example, debates around re-zoning and other efforts to increase housing supply and renew urban landscapes in many OECD nations are hampered by well-organised local anti-development groups. They often want better local services, but block developments that might bring in the relevant public revenues owing to a fear of being priced out of their neighbourhood, or a loss of its character (Ahlfeldt 2011). But here the relevant stakeholders are not just locals, but also people who would like to be locals but are excluded by constrained housing supply. The model of coproduction we outlined would include would-be-residents as relevant stakeholders in a process for deciding whether further housing development is pro-wellbeing in such a neighbourhood. It would also include practitioners who can offer a perspective on housing at a larger scale, and whether local goods can be financed without recourse to development or outside funds. Finally, it would include academics who could provide information on whether locals would indeed be priced out after renewal and other such questions. The perspectives of locals and other lived experts are not sacrosanct nor taken as exogenous in the process we outlined. They are merely centred in the policy dialogue, which we would expect to frequently change locals perspectives endogenously. Similar methodologies have proven effective in ameliorating local opposition to waste sites in Canada (Kuhn & Ballard 1998). Even pandemic management, a collective

problem par excellence, is now recognised to require public deliberation through inclusive local processes (Norheim et al. 2020).

In summary, the citizen perspective on WPP demands participation, localism, and robust processes. Each is necessary to avoid the ethical, epistemic and the political downsides of the social planner perspective. Participation means that people have agency and are not mere receptacles for wellbeing. Localism addresses the epistemic critique because local claims about validity of a pre-determined metric or a policy are far less contentious and more realistic to establish than general claims to that effect. Robust institutions that implement the processes of local participation are essential for avoiding their misuse. Like any good idea, participatory approaches can be abused: they can serve as a mere instrument to gain the appearance of formal legitimacy, while furthering hidden agendas, vested interests of local NIMBYs, or even serving as corporate public relations (Blacker et al. 2021, Dahl and Soss 2014, Glasner 2001). Ideally, a well-designed and transparent process should prevent such abuses.

Conclusion

Given the relative strengths and limitations of the social planner and citizen perspectives, it is appropriate to conclude with a brief discussion of which situations the perspectives are best suited to. We begin by noting that the social planner perspective is most prominent in central policy bureaus concerned with public finance and national accounting, notably treasuries and statistical offices. The supplementary guidance for wellbeing appraisal produced by the UK Treasury (HMT 2021), for instance, is a stark example of the social planner perspective. This is understandable given the need for policy comparison in budgetary offices, and the need for standardised measures in national accounts. However, we note that treasuries, and the methodology of cost-benefit analysis and impact evaluation more broadly, have in recent years moved away from the idea that costs and benefits must be denoted in a single metric, and that the maximisation of this metric is the goal of budgeting (Coyle 2022).

We further note that there is no reason why the convenience of these departments should dictate what paradigms inform policymaking. The kinds of participatory approaches that inform the citizen perspective are relatively prominent in bureaus concerned with service delivery, commissioning, and operations, notably social services and public health, and local governance.

The complexity of outcomes in these areas and the associated need for varied and granular metrics often demands qualitative, discursive, and multidimensional approaches to policy design and evaluation. Indeed, in UK public management, the notion that ‘success’ can be easily quantified and evaluated is increasingly giving away to a ‘human learning systems’ approach. This paradigm proposes to replace the New Public Management emphasis on markets, managers, and metrics with an emphasis on dynamic learning between public services and the public whom they serve (Centre for Public Impact 2021). Human Learning Systems and similar approaches to public management regard the citizen perspective as a way to bring nuance and new insights into the policymaking process.

The relative prevalence of the social planner or citizen perspectives at different nodes of policy outlined above suggests that their suitability depends substantially on whether policy needs to be general or specific. In terms of representativeness, deliberative processes may not substitute for mass participation, which means they are likely to be a highly imperfect proxy for public opinion in shaping public policy (Lafont, 2015). WPP in the citizen perspective mould then, is likely unsuitable for developing national wellbeing accounts or adjudicating over matters of national interest, like defence policy or whether to be a part of the European Union. But the more local the policy issue, the more this problem recedes. Indeed, issues of national interest will likely miss local nuances. Measuring life expectancy as a catch-all for health, for example, may be suitable at the national level but might miss the importance of a more context-specific health issue like dementia among the elderly, or obesity in impoverished communities. We see here a trade-off between the convenience and analytic power of the social planner perspective and its tendency to throw away information in service of aggregation and generalisability.

While the social planner perspective has understandable appeal to those concerned with budgets and statistics, if WPP is to constitute a transformative shift ‘beyond GDP’ and away from the deformations of economic analysis, it should pay greater heed to the citizen perspective. WPP aspires to redefine the goals of public policy. This is highly political and value-laden objective. It cannot be prosecuted legitimately without substantial involvement of the public, which must go beyond ticking boxes on surveys. Coproducing the outcomes and measures of WPP through collaboration between citizens, practitioners, and academics is one way to balance the political, practical, and technical issues inherent to WPP. As a methodology, it is especially well suited to issues of local governance and context-specific nodes of public

policy like aged care, disability services, natural assets, and public amenities. Where the social planner perspective rests substantially on outmoded ideas about the nature of public administration and technocratic advice, the citizen perspective embraces cutting edge developments in deliberation, participation, and co-design. It is thus well-suited to a future-oriented notion like WPP.

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