WELL-BEING RESEARCH NETWORK NEWSLETTER

February 2023

Why has the well-being network been set-up?

In July 2021 WISERD launched a wellbeing Research Network, headed by Professor Steve Smith, at The University of South Wales. The network is focussed on well-being research and has been set-up recognising two main factors which have profoundly affected well-being research in recent years.

- The increasing academic importance of well-being research for understanding civil society and its goals, coupled with the growing political significance, in Wales and elsewhere, of using well-being as a key measure of social and economic progress.
- The increasing range of well-being research undertaken, from a variety of often disparate disciplines and settings, across a wide range of subject areas, and for a number of different purposes.

What are the aims of the well-being network?

Given the above developments in well-being research, WISERD thought it timely to set-up a well-being network with the following aims in mind:

To champion interdisciplinary well-being research, drawing from a range of disciplines, for example, (but not exclusively and in no particular order): social policy, sociology, economics, social geography, political science, psychology, criminology, health sciences, pedagogy, creative arts and cultural industries, business studies, and applied social and political philosophy.

To facilitate cross-organisational and intra/inter-institutional exchanges and partnerships, concerning well-being research across a wide range of subject areas, within and between the WISERD partners, other relevant research centres, individual researchers, and including those from outside the WISERD partner institutions.

To systematically engage in co-productive research reflecting the agendas, knowledge and experience of key non-academic stakeholders in well-being research, with a view to including these stakeholders in the research process, working alongside academics, and within various professional and policy-based contexts.

To inform and positively impact the development of policy and practice across statutory and non-statutory settings, for example (but not exclusively and in no particular order), in social services, health, education, housing, income maintenance, education, youthwork, workplaces, community groups and activities, businesses and social enterprises, and other public, private, and third sector settings.

The network's register

- We have collated a *register* of those researchers who have become members of the well-being network, with presently 50 members, representing 8 universities in Wales and England, and 6 other organisations which variously engage with well-being research and policy development.
- Members have been sent a copy of the register which shares what kind of well-being research members of the network are presently engaged in, with details about relevant organisation(s) or institution(s) that members are affiliated to and partner with, including contact details, weblinks, and so on.
- The network updates the register periodically, and with a view to using this register as a basis for supporting the above aims.
- Members are encouraged to promote the network and recruit new members, inviting potential new members to contact Steve Smith, the network lead, at steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk.
- The network's leadership team has also developed a strategy to provide a framework for implementing the above, and which includes producing a newsletter.

The purpose of this newsletter

Building on a series of seminar/workshop events we organised during the 2021-2022 academic session (both online and face-to-face), we are now engaged in delivering activities for the 2022-2023 session. These activities arose from discussions we had in a meeting with the leadership team in November 2022 (details about the leadership team can be found in the network's register), and from suggestions made by members about 'where the network should go next', prior to this meeting.

Therefore, the following briefly describes these activities for the 2022-2023 session, and our progress to date. The broad purposes of these activities are three-fold, and reflect the outcome of the above discussions and suggestions: (1) to continue sharing our work in ways which deepen our understanding of each others' research, and well-being research more widely (2) to start collecting data across the network which systematically identifies common well-being research questions and themes we are engaged in, and that can also be used as a basis for developing joint research grant applications, and (3) to start engaging with policy makers and other non-academic audiences/organisations about our research and its application to the impactful development of policy and practice.

Sharing our current research and other activities of network members

Researching educational change, learning needs, and mental health, using arts-based methods and story-telling

Emma Wheeler (emma.wheeler@southwales.ac.uk) is a Senior Lecturer, Course Leader for Foundation Years, and Doctoral Researcher at The University of South Wales. Emma's research focusses on educational change, learning needs and mental health, using arts-based methods and gathering stories.

Her work recognises social, political and cultural complexities that surround an inclusive agenda for students at every level. Higher Education teaching practice, community arts collaboration and art psychotherapy practice, offer Emma the opportunity to reflect and articulate learning through an action research approach. The research is firmly embedded in the act of teaching, and the identity of a research-full practitioner is embraced within the process of ongoing reflective and creative journaling, art making and reflexive response. She collaborates with participants, facilitating mutual learning and articulation of lived experiences associated with learning differences. Mental health and wellbeing, understood here as the encouragement of 'comprehensibility, manageability and meaning', is of primary consideration. Promotion of creative methods in research and teaching motivates her work. Critical theory which seeks to acknowledge and challenge oppression and injustice, frames the perspective with commitment to interdisciplinarity.

In summary, then, through conversing, building relationships and collaborating with creative researchers and educators, Emma's research presents a bricolage or 'quilt' of multiple mini explorations that when assembled will hopefully provide an exposition of 'journeys walked'. The research process is therefore slow and immersive, happening alongside and within meaningful reflective practice. The culmination aims to impact educational research and development by building on 'empowerment discourse', and contributing to co-produced policy and practice development.

Why have face-to-face conversations in a post Covid online world?

Emma is also leading a workshop with the above title at the WISERD 2023 annual conference to be held at Bangor University, 28-29th June. The workshop was originally being offered as part of our series of online seminars that the network delivered in 2022, but due to technical issues this didn't happen (and spot the irony!). The workshop offers a report of reflections made by eight well-being researchers based in South Wales, who participated in a social experiment that was set up by Emma, as a starting point for the intended online seminar. The aim of the social experiment was to facilitate and encourage space(s) for conversation between those interested in well-being research. That is, recognising the importance of organising and facilitating conversation (both online and face-to-face), so that productive and meaningful conversations can take place between people.

The initial idea came out of a reflective conversation within the network, acknowledging that while online conversations can be useful and beneficial for a range of reasons, important aspects of face-to-face conferences may be lost during on-line events. Given this, face-to-face and online meetings were set up between people in pairs and small groups, in the weeks leading up to the online event. The WISERD conference workshop in June therefore will provide a space to both report their experiences and engage in a wider reflective discussion among other well-being researchers from within and outside of the network; some of whom use visual and performative methods in their work for communication, learning and thinking. In short, the overall aim of this reporting would be to try and understand better how good quality conversations about our research and the subject of well-being can be facilitated, whether this takes place online and/or face-to-face.

Setting-up reading groups between network members

The idea here, suggested by members, is to provide forums for discussing well-being research across different disciplines and for a range of purposes and subject areas. The first of these groups has now been set-up by four network members, in alphabetical order, Gideon Calder (University of Swansea), Kate Galvin (University of Brighton), Dave Morgans (University of Wales, Trinity St David), and Steve Smith (University of South Wales). This group will explore issues concerning the application of theory to well-being research, and the importance of theory-building and philosophical reflection in understanding how notions of well-being are variously conceptualised and promoted in policy and practice.

The group to date has organised two online sessions, to be held in April. In these sessions two journal articles will be discussed, exploring the relationship between 'subjective' and 'objective' conceptions of well-being, and what might be variously understood as a 'meaningful' life as related to well-being and its enhancement.

We would also very much encourage other network members to set-up on-line reading groups, which can then be publicised via the network. Please contact steve smith (steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk) if you want to discuss this further.

Setting-up conversational interviews between network members

The idea here, again suggested by members, is to more deeply and actively engage in each others' work, but in ways which are accessible to wider audiences (both within and outside the network). To achieve this, an interview format will be used to facilitate members reading each others' work, and then having conversations with each other about their research, which will recorded and disseminated accordingly.

The first of these interviews will be between Sarah White (Co-Founder of The Relational Wellbeing Collaborative), and Steve Smith (University of South Wales, and author of *The Ontology of Well-Being in Social Policy and Welfare Practice.* Springer Publications, 2022). The interviews will take place over the summer of 2023.

So, Sarah's work focusses on how relational well-being links to personal, societal and ecological change. She looks beyond individual psychology or behaviour to relational environments, highlighting the importance of recognising cultural and social diversity, concerning how well-being is understood and promoted differently within and between societies and social groups. Steve's book identifies what he calls, six features of the human condition, namely, embodiment, finiteness, sociability, cognition, evaluation, and agency. He argues that these aspects to human ontology reveal how our experiences of time, emotion, and self-consciousness are often profoundly conflicting, and which, in turn, have a profound bearing on our experience of well-being and how well-being is understood and promoted in social policy and welfare practice.

We would also very much encourage other network members to set-up similar interviews, which can then be publicised via the network. Please contact steve smith (steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk) if you want to discuss this further.

Collecting data across the network to identify common research questions, and the potential for grant applications

An online Group Concept Mapping (GCM) exercise will be organised, which will systematically explore (with the help of GCM software), what research questions are most important to members of the network, as related to their personal interests and motivations. After these research questions are identified and listed by members during the first stage of the GCM, in the second stage, members will then be asked to group or 'sort' these questions thematically, providing a data platform to explore the relationship between these questions and their groupings. Finally, in the third stage, members will be invited to rank the relative importance or significance of these questions and groupings, that is, in relation to (a) their perceived impactfulness on policy and practice, and (b) their perceived potential for underpinning successful grant applications, across teams and a range of interdisciplinary settings.

The GCM exercise will be set-up in late spring of 2023, inviting members to participate in the three stages over the summer, with an aim to analyse and disseminate the results sometime in Autumn 2023.

Engaging with non-academic audiences, policy makers and practitioners

One of the aims of the network (as stated above), is to inform and positively impact the development of policy and practice across statutory and non-statutory settings, for example, in social services, health, education, housing, income maintenance, education, youthwork, workplaces, community groups and activities, businesses and social enterprises, and other public, private, and third sector settings.

Consistent with this aim, the network is planning to hold a series of workshops to begin in late Spring/Early Summer of 2023, to open-up a 'research channel' between academics, practitioners and policymakers on questions around how well-being is promoted and understood across various policy and practice based contexts. These workshops will be organised and led by members of the network, Gideon Calder (University of Swansea), Steve Smith (University of South Wales), and Susie Ventris-Field (Chief Executive of the Welsh Centre for International Affairs).

The main starting point for discussions within the workshops will be a recently published evaluation of the Social Services Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014. Issues which will be raised and addressed, include, for example, the relative roles of the statutory and third sectors, and the relationship between conceptual understandings of well-being and what might be called, 'the nuts and bolts of practice' in relevant fields.

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