

WHAT IS THE
WELL-BEING
DEBATE?:
THEORETICAL
CONTEXT AND
SOME
QUESTIONS FOR
YOUTH POLICY
AND YOUTH
WORK
PRACTICE

Steve Smith

University of South Wales

steve.smith@southwales.ac.uk

WELL-BEING DEBATE: what is it?

Raises various questions: (a) What is the nature of well-being (for example: is it one thing or many, and, if the latter do these elements conflict or cohere? Is the nature of well-being different for children and young people compared with adults?)? (b) How does well-being, whatever its character, relate to other values governments legitimately pursue, such as social justice and equality? and (c) Can well-being be measured, and, in particular, are these measurements applicable to monitoring and developing youth policy and youth work practice?

Some of the above questions are social scientific ones (e.g. about measuring and monitoring) others are more philosophical/theoretical (e.g. meaning of, and relationship with other values) – *this presentation* is primarily concerned with philosophical/theoretical questions and how these questions might be applied to youth policy and youth work practice

FOCUS AND STRUCTURE OF PRESENTATION

- ▶ To try and *map* some of the different meanings of well-being and how they fit on a four point scale, starting from a very *general meaning* of well-being which most people agree on
- ▶ To identify what are 'objective' and 'subjective' accounts of well-being and how they relate to youth policy and youth work practice
- ▶ To identify what are 'paternalistic' and 'non-paternalistic' accounts of well-being and how they relate to youth policy and youth work practice

GENERAL WORKING DEFINITION OF WELL- BEING

- Well-being refers in general terms to *how well* a life is going
- **Leading to key questions:** Is a person's life going well better, worse or the same **compared** *with* another life that could have been led either by that same person or another person (that in turn get us to questions about **equality** and **social justice**)?
- **BUT:** Of course, the **meaning of what is 'well'** about a person's life is open to question and dispute based on disagreements and debates about the meaning of 'well-being' and even whether states of well-being can be compared at all



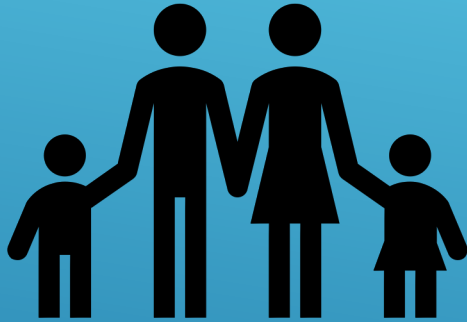
- **Objective meanings** of well-being do *not* refer to the subjective perceptions, experiences and beliefs of the person whose well-being is being measured or viewed
- BUT instead refer to **objective measurements** or indicators which are made **outside or externally** to the subjective perceptions, experiences and beliefs of the person whose well-being is being measured or viewed – e.g.
- **Education indicators** – numeracy and literacy etc.
- **Health indicators** – morbidity and mortality rates etc.
- **Social and economic indicators** – housing, income, employment, lifestyle, quality of relationships etc.
- **Opportunity indicators** – accessibility, choices and freedoms, employment, personal talents and capabilities etc.

OBJECTIVE MEANINGS OF WELL-BEING



- **Subjective meanings** of well-being do *not* refer to the objective indicators or external measurements just outlined
- **BUT rather** to the subjective or 'internal' perceptions, experiences and beliefs of the person whose well-being is being measured or viewed – in short, the 'view from the inside' of the person in question – e.g.
- ***What a person feels and experiences in her life*** – whether the person feels and experiences happiness, sadness, anger, excitement, joy, optimism, pessimism, pleasure, pain etc.
- ***What a person believes or evaluates about her life*** – whether the person judges or evaluates her life as successful, a failure, valuable, not valuable, worthwhile, worthless etc.

SUBJECTIVE MEANINGS OF WELL-BEING



- **Acting paternalistically** is when a decision is made **on behalf** of a person because the decision is seen by **others** as being in their best interest, **regardless** of whether the person in question agrees or wants the decision to be made for them
- Given this, **objective accounts of well-being can often be paternalistic** – relating to say, education, health, social and economic conditions, opportunities
- **Why?** Objective accounts are **not** referring to the subjective or internal perceptions and beliefs of the person whose well-being is in question, but rather to **externally measurable indicators of well-being which, when pursued, is seen to reflect the objective interests of the person**

PATERNALISTIC MEANINGS OF WELL-BEING



- ▶ **Non-paternalism** implies that the person whose well-being is in question is the *best* person to **decide for themselves** what to pursue or choose in order to protect or enhance their own well-being
- ▶ Given this, **subjective accounts** of well-being **often are non-paternalist** in character - relating only to the subjective individual viewpoint or *internal perspective* of the person whose well-being is in question
- ▶ That is, reflecting **personal feelings and beliefs** which belong to or are attached to the person whose well-being is in question

NON-PATERNALISTIC MEANINGS OF WELL-BEING



- ▶ Those who promote *objective* accounts of well-being will usually have pre-defined lists of policies and practices that then can be used to measure. *So how will well-being understood objectively be used to evaluate youth policy and youth work practice?*
- ▶ Those who promote *subjective* accounts of well-being will usually not have pre-defined lists but will leave the definition of what enhances well-being to the person in question. *So how will well-being understood subjectively be used to evaluate youth policy and youth work practice?*
- ▶ **FURTHER QUESTIONS:** *To what degree do conflicts and dilemmas in understanding and critically reflecting on youth policy and youth work practice, often centre on the above conflict between objective and subjective accounts of wellbeing?*
- ▶ *And, finally, how does the above conflicts, in turn, reflect the inevitable paternalistic leanings of some/much youth work versus the importance of promoting the value of individual autonomy and choice for young people as s/he moves to adulthood?*

CONCLUSION: SOME QUESTIONS
FOR YOUTH POLICY AND YOUTH
WORK PRACTICE