

Happy Now? Well-being and Cultural Policy

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Although much of the debate in UK policy circles has been on the definition and measurement of well-being, there have been as yet relatively few attempts to apply a well-being lens to specific policy areas. One partial exception has been cultural policy.

In 2010 the Culture and Sport Evidence Programme (CASE) reported on a three-year research project into the drivers and impacts of participation in sports and cultural activity. CASE was a major programme within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the UK's ministry of culture. A key strand of the programme was to understand and assess the benefits of cultural engagement. The project assessed in terms of subjective well-being the value to the individual of participation in sports and engagement in cultural activity (CASE 2010, 5).

In a policy area often criticized for its lack of investment in research and evidence-gathering, the size of the programme alone – £1.8m for an effort that brought together all the main cultural policy organizations in the UK – could be taken as a sign that the “well-being agenda” held out some promise for cultural policy-makers.

Indeed, it could be argued that cultural activities, with their associations of conviviality, “flow-like” engagement (Csikszentmihályi 1992), and attention to questions of both meaning and belonging, offer fertile ground for policy engagement with well-being. Yet despite the rather startling finding that a visit to the cinema once a week had an income compensation value of £9,000 per household per year (CASE 2010), developing a well-being-inflected cultural policy is proving quite problematic.

Although debates about culture and the good life are of ancient lineage, our concern is with the UK policy regime of the last fifteen years or so, first under the New Labour government (1997–2010) and later under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. This corresponds with the growth of well-being as a policy discourse, both in the UK and internationally. Given that, we use the term “well-being” as is commonly done in policy circles to refer to a combination of subjective well-being with more eudemonic measures, although we recognize that these definitions are both contested and confused.

Although we understand “culture” in a broad sense to include the arts (visual and performing arts, music, literature, and so on), the media (film, TV, radio, videogames, and other social media), heritage (museums, built and natural heritage), and sport, the focus of this paper will be largely on “cultural policy” as it concerns the arts and heritage.

The link between participation in sports and well-being is reasonably well-demonstrated (Scully et al. 1998; Chatzisarantis and Hagger 2007), whereas media use is more often associated with debates about its role as a source of ill-being and a variety of moral panics (Kraut et al. 1998). Media policy-makers may legitimately wish to stress the well-being benefits of media participation, and in the case of film they sometimes do (DCMS 2012), but theirs is often a rear-guard action against the suggestion that media use is often harmful, particularly for children (Livingstone and Haddon 2009).

In the arts, however, the struggle for legitimacy, and hence the call for public spending, is generally stronger, and the use of instrumentalist arguments

for advocacy purposes is more fully developed. The arts have thus been the focus – along with heritage – of well-being-influenced policy discourse.

New Labour's Cultural Policy: The Emergence of Well-being

Until recently, the engagement of cultural policy with ideas about well-being in the UK has been primarily of two sorts: encouraging arts and creative activities as a part of education, and using arts therapy as treatment for ill-being of various sorts.

The latter form has perhaps the longest history: from the therapeutic benefits accorded to visual expression for sufferers of schizophrenia and other forms of psychosis, to the use of art as a form of therapy for depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses (Staricoff 2004; Heenan 2006). Although well-being in its current policy incarnation is influenced primarily by the ideology of positive psychology (Seligman 2002), and therefore by the argument that focusing on mental “illness” is in fact part of the problem with psychology, art therapy (which includes dance, drama, and music as well as painting and sculpture) remains a core element of the case that is made for the well-being benefits of cultural participation.

A perennial issue is that well-being is itself instrumentalized in these initiatives – treated as a way to improve pupil engagement and hence exam results – rather than an end in itself.

Similarly, the case for an “arts-rich” educational curriculum has for some time stressed the potential of cultural activities in school for developing the characteristics or attitudes associated with well-being, from communication skills to self-esteem and confidence (Bamford 2006). Much of this currently goes under the more fashionable description of “creative learning,” which unhelpfully blurs the distinction between creativity as associated with the arts and culture and a more general notion of creativity as “new ideas” (Oakley 2009).

Such ideas were pervasive under the New Labour government, influenced as it was by knowledge-economy rhetoric, which stressed the

need for a more innovative workforce as the way for a country such as the UK to avoid a low-wage solution to its economic ills (Garnham 1990; Reich 1993). An influential report published in the late 1990s, *All Our Futures* (Robinson 1999), argued for the need to introduce more “creativity” into the school curriculum in order to develop a generation of young people able to participate in global markets, feed the (then) fast-growing creative industries, and adapt to technological and social change.

The Creative Partnerships initiative, which followed this report, ran from 2002 to 2011 in a large number of schools across England. Cultural practitioners – from DJs to architects – were to be brought into schools to work with pupils on a variety of extra-curricular projects. As is characteristic of instrumental policies, the stated aim of Creative Partnerships shifted at various times, and while never losing its overriding economic rationale, switched from an initial focus on improving educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, to a broader set of outcomes, including those associated with well-being.

A recent review of such initiatives (McLellan et al. 2012) suggests that although Creative Partnerships was not explicitly focused on promoting well-being as an outcome of its activities, some of its effects could be seen as promoting an environment conducive to improved pupil well-being. These included: supporting cooperative activity in schools (in contrast to the more competitive school ethos encouraged elsewhere in educational policy); giving young people a greater voice in school decision-making; and strengthening pupil autonomy via more exploratory pedagogical methods.

As might be expected, the evaluation of initiatives such as Creative Partnerships tends to find mixed results (McLellan et al. 2012). Common findings are that pupils’ confidence and self-esteem are improved, with the implication that this improves efficacy and sense of well-being. But the questions of what well-being is for and how it valued vis à vis other policy goals are also raised by this research. A perennial issue is that well-being is itself instrumentalized in these initiatives – treated as a way to improve pupil engagement and hence exam results rather than an end in itself. Perhaps as a consequence of this, well-being gains tend to

decline throughout a pupil's schooling, as emphasis on exam results and hence performance pressure increase.

Well-being and culture had been linked in adjoining fields for some time via art therapy and education. But the middle of the New Labour period (2004 onwards) saw well-being take a more central role, as concerns about the direction of cultural policy became more pronounced. The bundling of a variety of cultural practices – from architecture to videogames – into the “creative industries” was used to set them within a policy narrative stressing their importance to the economic future of the UK and elsewhere (UNCTAD 2010). What was seen as the dominance of economic logics was accompanied by social instrumentalism, which sought to use arts policy to address a variety of social-policy issues from crime to unemployment. This could be characterized as the residual social-democratic strand to New Labour's otherwise neoliberal economic policies (Hall 2003), or, more accurately perhaps, as an example of what some scholars have called “after” neoliberalism (Larner and Craig 2005), where state agencies try to distance themselves from the more market-oriented approaches of their predecessors while seeking to ensure some social amelioration, and to provide a check on the most damaging outcomes of market forms of governance. New Labour's cultural policies consistently displayed such an attempted balancing act, and although we would argue that its social aims were often undercut by its economic policies, even in the cultural industries (Oakley 2011), the government was also criticized for the social instrumentalism of its cultural policy (Holden 2004; Mirza 2006).

In response, Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture between 2001 and 2007 (under some direct pressure from leading arts world figures such as conductor Simon Rattle and playwright David Hare) published a “personal essay”: *Government and the Value of Culture* (Jowell 2004). This sought to restate the legitimacy of public funding for culture in terms beyond both economic growth and social instrumentalism. The essay instead drew on thinkers like John Ruskin to describe culture as part of the good life, offering “personal happiness and fulfilment” (Ruskin 1860/1985; Jowell 2004, 8) and even arguing for an escape from measurement, from the “evidence-based policy making” so dear to New

Labour (Oakley 2008).

“When we undertake policies... we might engage focus groups or undertake market research to tell us what the view of people is. In terms of the intrinsic value of culture, the lives of citizens, I'm not sure we need it,” she claimed boldly (Jowell 2004, 13), but although the essay was well received in some quarters, its immediate policy influence was limited. In a political culture characterized by managerialism (Bevir and Rhodes 2003) and in a policy department that was weak and seen as lacking in “evidence” to support its policies, claims for the ineffable quality of the arts would always be viewed suspiciously in some quarters. Any purported link between culture and increased well-being would have to be empirically demonstrable.

Making the CASE

Although Jowell's essay was seen by some as the start of a backlash against New Labour's “targetolatry” (Davey 2012), whether we “needed” it or not, the cultural ministry was still expected to make the case for public spending in terms commensurate with other government departments (Belfiore 2004). It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the most prominent use of the concepts and tools associated with developing well-being in cultural policy was a research programme, CASE, designed to provide measurement of any purported link between culture and well-being.

In the case of CASE, well-being is a technical tool that provides evidence of the costs and benefits of interventions for cost-benefit analysis.

The programme was grounded in a fundamental policy aim under New Labour to increase levels of participation in government-funded cultural activity (Miles and Sullivan 2010). Understanding why people engaged in cultural activity (drivers), what the results of that engagement might be (impacts), and finding a way to place a value on that experience, in language understood by the Finance Ministry (values), formed the basis for DCMS's use of ideas associated with well-being.

Well-being was central to the discussion of the

“values” part of CASE, as it was seen as a way to bridge the gap between criticisms of the reduction of cultural activity to economic value(s) and the demands of the Finance Ministry for cost-benefit analysis (CASE 2010). CASE adopted the emerging technique of using well-being measurement data, drawn from the Office for National Statistics’ British Household Panel Survey (CASE 2010), and those data’s relationship with income, to develop prices for cultural activities that could fit within the Finance Ministry’s model of policy-appraisal and evaluation. Individuals were asked to estimate their well-being on a numeric scale, and then valuations were derived by a two-stage process. In the first instance, data were analyzed to understand the impact of an event or activity on well-being and then, second, this information was used to estimate the amount of income that would be required to achieve the same change in well-being based on the relationship between income and well-being. This technique is known as income compensation. When used by CASE (CASE 2010, 34) the relationship between well-being and income was used to derive prices for cultural engagement including:

- Participating in sports at least once a week has an income compensation value of £11,000 per household, per year.
- Going to a cinema at least once a week has an income compensation value of £9,000 per household, per year.
- Going to a concert at least once a week has an income compensation value of £9,000 per household, per year.

However, these figures proved difficult to adapt to media and public discussions of cultural policy, based both on what seemed, on first reading, as high values (as the caveat of per household per year was often obscured) and the inherent difficulty of explaining the method that provided the figures.

The result of this use of well-being data is that, rather than suggesting a commitment to those versions of well-being associated with improving national happiness, well-being fit quite neatly into the existing, market-failure-led framework that has come to dominate the professionalized policy-making process within Whitehall (O’Brien 2012). Well-being data strongly suggest that interventionism may be appropriate in certain policy areas, for example, to encourage full

employment, based on the very strong relationship between unemployment and lower levels of well-being (Davies 2011). However, this type of approach is, without question, not on the current agenda of either major political party in the UK.

In the case of CASE, well-being is a technical tool that provides evidence of the costs and benefits of interventions for cost-benefit analysis. This is, of course, part of a wider mode of neoliberal policy-making that seeks to disguise political decision-making under a seemingly neutral managerial framework (the development of evidence-based policy-making; the rise of audit culture within public institutions; and the use of numerical and statistical data for policy making) with politics presented not as a set of conflicting interests but as a sort of nonpolitics (Duggan 2003).

But this use of well-being data was also an expression of the relative weakness of DCMS as a policy-making department. Having been set up by New Labour when it took office in 1997, DCMS continued the consolidation of policy responsibly around culture, the media, and sports (as well as gambling), begun by its predecessor, the Department of National Heritage. As the new name suggests, DCMS was to symbolize New Labour’s desire to associate itself with the modern and forward-looking. In developing its idea of the “creative industries,” which bring together a variety of cultural practices and economic models, DCMS sought to establish a position for itself, if not at the heart of economic policy-making, then at least as a player on the active fringes. Yet despite this, and perhaps because the creative industries idea itself was often seen as either opportunistic or incoherent, the cultural ministry remained marginal in policy-making terms.

The managerial nature of public policy-making at the time took several forms, including the use of inspections and reviews for individual ministries within central government. DCMS was the subject of particular scrutiny from the 2007 onwards, when a “Capability Review” carried out by fellow civil servants in central government was critical of DCMS’s performance, including its lack of research and evidence capability (Cabinet Office 2007).

The CASE programme was a direct response to this recommendation, and its remit was thus shaped by a need to provide evidence of the beneficial impacts of existing public spending on culture,

rather than, say, a set of policy proposals for enhancing well-being via cultural means. The use of well-being to translate cultural participation into financial figures for use in cost-benefit analysis represented the latest stage in DCMS's attempts to grapple with the value of culture following the debates over intrinsic and instrumental values that dominated cultural-policy discussions in the 2000s. However, as is often the case with income compensation figures, the results somewhat undermined the seriousness of what was being attempted.

Since that time, after the change of government in the 2010 election and the constraints on public spending that followed the global financial crisis, the CASE programme has been transformed from a longer-term research programme to a more reactive series of research projects. The initial aim for CASE was both to develop research capacity and to generate empirical data useful for cross-Whitehall working, specifically with the Finance Ministry as part of spending reviews. The most recent work from CASE has been a smaller-scale series of research projects driven by specific ministerial concerns, such as fundraising or increasing volunteering (CASE 2011a; 2011b), along with attempts to reinvigorate the very low take-up of the initial CASE findings on drivers, impacts, and values.

The transformation of CASE reflects both a changed status of research within the current administration and a broader capacity issue as government departments cut staff.

Culture and the Problems of Well-being

This brief account of the career of well-being as policy thread within UK cultural policy leaves us with a series of questions about the role of well-being as a driver of public policy in general and some specific questions about its appropriateness for cultural policy in particular.

The first question regards the seeming inability of well-being as a notion in public policy ever to get beyond debates about the measurement of well-being. This traps it in a technocratic discourse that on the one hand leaves it rather vulnerable – as the CASE example shows – and on the other seems not to promote any fuller discussion of what policies might actually promote well-being.

The irony of this is that in the UK at least, the promise of well-being for cultural policy-makers was that it would enable them to move beyond the “box-ticking” that was seen by some to characterize instrumentalism. Jowell’s essay wrestled with this in what might be regarded as classic New Labour terms in that it did not allow for the possibility of contradiction among multiple goals.

As a Culture Department we still have to deliver the utilitarian agenda, and the measures of instrumentality that this implies, but we must acknowledge that in supporting culture we are doing more than that, and in doing more than that must find ways of expressing it. (Jowell 2004, 10)

As this fails to acknowledge, however, both the act of measuring and the outcome of measuring shape what kinds of policies are undertaken in the first place; “doing more” or “moving beyond” measurement cannot simply be decoupled from its findings.

Second, the policy implications of well-being findings are stark. Not only are there indications that employment and health are the essential determinants of well-being (CASE 2010), suggesting that policies to promote full employment, rather than, say, arts education, are the logical conclusions of the well-being agenda, but also levels of well-being are highly unevenly distributed (ONS 2012). According to Blanchflower and Oswald, happiness is U-shaped throughout a person’s lifespan; higher among those who are women; higher among whites, the highly educated, full-time workers, married people, and those on a high income (Blanchflower and Oswald 2011, 6).

There appear to be well-being benefits from cultural participation, but they remain captured by those healthy, happy, and educated enough to participate in them in the first place.

Similarly, well-being across the UK is spatially uneven, corresponding to other patterns of social and economic inequality. This has particular implications for cultural policy, which already has a seriously skewed distribution of benefits, both socially, particularly in terms of class, and spatially.

Although participation in what might be termed

“high culture” (opera, ballet, theater) is a minority pursuit in most countries, even a broader conception of culture (to include popular music, film, sport, and so on) displays strong patterns of socially stratified participation in the UK (Bennett et al. 2009). Despite a large increase in overall cultural funding in the New Labour years, and a strongly stated commitment to broadening access, participation, particularly in publicly funded cultural activities, remains dominated by more advantaged social groups (Miles and Sullivan 2010).

There appear to be well-being benefits from cultural participation, but they remain captured by those healthy, happy, and educated enough to participate in them in the first place. More disturbingly, research on activities such as volunteering, which are correlated with well-being benefits, seems to suggest that it is easier to improve the well-being of people who have relatively high levels of well-being to start with (Oakley 2008; BOP 2011).

Concerns about the distribution of benefits could apply to any area of public policy, but there is a third set of concerns, which, if not unique, is particularly pronounced in the cultural sphere. This might be baldly stated as: do we want a cultural life that promotes well-being?

In terms of cultural funding, there is little or no evidence that we have moved beyond measuring well-being to using it to inform decisions.

From the time of Bentham’s famous claim that, “Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry” (Bentham 1830, 206), cultural commentators have always been eager to demonstrate that the arts generally offer a more complex experience than simply one of pleasure, and that if poetry is “better” for humans than push-pin, this is in part because the pleasures that it offers are superior, and in part because it gives access to human experiences other than pleasure.

The “compulsion” to be happy is often treated skeptically, particularly in literature. Huxley’s dystopia *Brave New World* famously suggests that the way to make people happy is to make them “love

their servitude” (Huxley 1962, 149). Sara Ahmed, in her book *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed 2010) argues for the right of the “troublemaker” to resist the “happiness script,” when that script is devised in an unjust society. Taking Maggie Tulliver from George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* (Eliot 1860) as her example, Ahmed relates how Maggie’s desire to speak out about injustice is attributed as the cause of her unhappiness. Her inability to be dutiful, and thus happy, is contrasted with her cousin Lucy, for whom happiness is avoidance of the difficult: “I’ve always been happy,” Lucy says, “I don’t know whether I could bear so much trouble” (quoted in Ahmed 2010, 389).

In terms of cultural funding, there is little or no evidence that we have moved beyond measuring well-being to using it to inform decisions, but the concern must be that rather than enriching cultural policy-making, well-being simply provides another rationale that helps it avoid some of its own central questions.

Although the last thirty years or so have seen the (welcome) subvention or loosening of cultural hierarchies through the destabilization of the boundaries of legitimate and popular culture, the question of aesthetics in cultural policy will not go away (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt 2005). For a while the radical potential of popular “cultural industries” appeared to hold out the promise of a cultural policy that was pluralistic but not afraid to make judgments. The replacement of this with a more economically focused “creative industries” notion, and still later with a notion of creativity allied purely to innovation, appeared to go to great lengths to avoid engaging in questions of taste, value, or judgment, though such notions keep anxiously reasserting themselves under the guise of “cultural value” and so on. Overall, policy still struggles with clear articulation of what kind of cultural practices should be supported outside of the market, and why.

The fluid definitions of both culture and well-being that exist in much policy discourse often seem to exacerbate this problem. Documents on “culture and well-being,” whether produced by local governments or national funding agencies, tend to provide definitions of culture that veer away from the arts toward the anthropological (Mills and Brown 2004; Lambeth 2010). It is difficult in these documents to see what is specific about the

contribution that the arts can make, and indeed it may be that any form of social participation can help raise well-being. In that case, arts advocates are left struggling to identify their own particular contribution, particularly in art forms that are viewed as more challenging or more solitary.

Conclusions

It is not the aim of this short paper to suggest that participation in cultural activities cannot improve well-being, nor that policy-makers and arts advocates should cease to investigate potential links between the two. But it is far from an unproblematic relationship, and even a cursory examination of the area suggests some of the concerns that may arise when well-being discourse is translated into public policy.

Despite the global economic crisis, Western governments continue to evince interest in the measurement of well-being, but acting upon its implications is regarded as politically unthinkable, whether in terms of full employment, increased spending on public services, or reductions in inequality. Arts advocates – generally keener to embrace new rationales for public support than they are to rigorously examine them – have seen well-being policy as a cause to be rallied around, at least as far as it seems to suggest the potential for increased cultural funding.

Yet the way in which well-being has been taken up in the UK has been dominated by an emphasis on measurement and the need to provide evidence of the perceived effectiveness of existing public spending, rather than to suggest new “well-being-friendly” cultural policies. This paper further suggests that even if this were to be the case, two further problems may arise. First, the current skewing of cultural spending toward the better off is unlikely to be addressed, as the evidence suggests that it is easier to improve the well-being of people who have relatively high levels of well-being to start with, and well-being is correlated with wealth, educational levels, and health (BOP 2011; Blanchflower and Oswald 2011). A cultural policy aimed at raising individual well-being through participation therefore is likely to exacerbate the current inequalities of cultural spending. Second, we need to question the kind of culture that might result from a well-being-influenced policy and

particularly the degree to which it might veer away from cultural activities viewed as difficult, upsetting, challenging, or simply solitary.

It may be that well-being as a policy goal holds out the possibility of progressive policies that concern themselves with goals beyond economic growth and utility maximization, but the use of well-being within UK cultural policy has so far proved rather inadequate to that task.

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