

Evaluating Policy and Practice Interventions that Aim to Develop Wellbeing and Resilience

Date(s) Wednesday 11th July 2012 (10:30-15:30)

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Background and context

Over the past decade, the idea of 'intervention' to develop individuals' and communities' resilience and/or well-being has become a high profile objective for public policy - and this is coming particularly to the fore as Local Authorities are now being charged with establishing Health and Wellbeing Boards to provide strategic oversight of developments across public health, social care, education, housing and economic development.



Research in this area links with work on wellbeing being undertaken under the auspices of the Public Services Academy with the City of Birmingham and other stakeholders in the health and voluntary sectors. *Health Wellbeing and Value* has been identified as a priority area in the recruitment of the next round of Birmingham Fellowships, and *Health and wellbeing* is defined as an emerging area for social science in the ESRC 2009-14 strategic plan.

Research issues

In the UK and internationally, there have been numerous initiatives, materials and activities designed in different ways to develop resilience and well-being. Yet, despite high levels of public investment, few of these interventions seem to be properly evaluated in terms of 'what works for whom and in what contexts' and so the empirical evidence for success can be inconclusive. Not only are terms such as 'wellbeing' and 'resilience' slippery, but their underlying principles and evidence base are drawn eclectically and in *ad hoc* ways from diverse theoretical bases. The Workshop aimed to address 3 related problems:

- 1) it is difficult to study this field systematically across disciplines and fields
- 2) it is difficult to show what does or does not transfer across different social and cultural contexts
- 3) there have been no attempts to relate current assumptions and practices to historical precedents and interests.

In order to address these difficulties, the workshop brought together insights from research, policy and practice in diverse fields including psychology, history, health, social policy, education, sociology and policy studies to explore how wellbeing and resilience have been conceptualized within different sectors and social contexts, and the sorts of interventions which are currently taking place.

This research theme builds on existing investment by the University into work on resilience but takes it in new direction by linking it to current policy interest in wellbeing.

Key themes coming out of the workshop

Concepts of resilience and wellbeing are poorly and inconsistently defined – although they are identified as the intended outcomes for a range of policy and practice initiatives. They may be seen as something that people may have (or not have) or may describe ongoing processes of action and interaction that may be situated within specific social and environmental contexts. At a theoretical level, the relationship between resilience and wellbeing is unclear. However, there would seem to be an important distinction between wellbeing and happiness - wellbeing is seen to involve agency, active engagement and a particular 'kind of power'

Current evaluations of particular initiatives can be of limited value with little ability to transfer learning across sectors. There is a need to shift from methodologies that just seek to measure individual attributes to ones which capture relational status e.g. social network analysis. Some initiatives – such as the PATHS approach to social and emotional learning that is currently being rolled out in Birmingham schools – would seem to have the capacity to be transformative not just for individual children, but also for families and communities. However, we need to know more about the role of contextual factors and how to assess longer term outcomes.

Should interventions be *targeted* at redressing social injury and discrimination or the *universal* provision of a positive good? How much resilience and wellbeing is 'enough' to bring everyone up to a certain 'threshold' – or do we aim to raise everyone's resilience and wellbeing across the board?

How are ideas around resilience and wellbeing influencing the narrative construction of practice within education, health and social care – and what may be the various impacts of this (negative as well as positive)?

A capabilities-based approach (Amartya Sen) may provide an appropriate (and original) theoretical framework for assessing and evaluating the impact of interventions and initiatives. This links to assets approaches to wellbeing within Public Health and, theoretically, to an analysis of multiple forms of capital. Assessing capabilities or assets may be a more productive way of assessing wellbeing and resilience, rather than trying to measure these variables directly.

There is an opportunity to use neuro-imaging to explore the impact of interventions at a physiological level – but there needs to be greater clarity about what are the key social, emotional and behavioural components of resilience or wellbeing against which any physiological changes could be mapped.

There was a consensus that this is an important and original area for interdisciplinary research with the potential for building strategic research partnerships with public and voluntary sector organisations (within the region or more widely) that are developing relevant programmes and initiatives. A useful first step would be to conduct a critical literature review to underpin this.

These cross-cutting themes could form the basis of a programme of related projects and events, including one or more collaborative research proposals (e.g. ESRC Changing Behaviour strategic priority theme), AHRC Connected Communities programme, NIHR and/or European funding). There was a sense that this could be a good time to 'go for something big'.

Internal Delegates

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External Delegates

Satpal Boyes	<i>Birmingham City Council</i>
Karen Jerdood	<i>Birmingham City Council</i>
Lynne Friedli	<i>Consultant and writer on resilience, well-being and mental health</i>
Tony Devaney	<i>Suresearch</i>
Andrea Docherty	<i>NHS</i>
Clare Wightman	<i>Director of Grapevine, Coventry and Warwickshire</i>

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