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New Zealand books on wellbeing: a review essay

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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews three recent New Zealand books on the topic of wellbeing, against the backdrop of the world's first Wellbeing Budget delivered to the New Zealand Parliament on 30 May 2019. The essay argues that the different perspectives offered by the three books are examples of a rich history of distinctive Australasian contributions to wellbeing economics and public policy. Each contains valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for public policy to contribute to expanding the capabilities of persons to lead the kinds of lives they value—and have reason to value. The article concludes it would be useful in New Zealand to pursue a research agenda that provides new knowledge on the intersection between families and public policy in the context of promoting wellbeing.

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Introduction

New Zealand's 'Wellbeing Budget' in 2019 attracted considerable international attention (Anderson and Mossialos 2019). Dalziel (2019) recently suggests that the Budget, including the Treasury's Living Standards Framework that underpinned it, are part of a rich history of distinctive Australasian contributions to wellbeing economics and public policy going back to Dame Marilyn Waring's (1988) influential book, *Counting for Nothing*. This history includes the Ministry of Social Development's *Social Report* series, published annually between 2001 and 2010, with a further volume in 2016 (MSD 2016), which shares many similarities with the Living Standards Framework. Thirty years later, Waring has published a new book, *Still Counting*, revealing her despair at what she calls a missed opportunity 'to establish a working policy framework of open architecture and modern relevance' (Waring 2018, p. 8). New Zealand authors have published two further books on wellbeing in 2019: *Wellbeing and Aspirational Culture* by Kevin Moore, and *Intergenerational Wellbeing and Public Policy* by Girol Karacaoglu, Jacek Krawczyk and Anita King. The former is pessimistic about the scope for improving wellbeing, since 'the aspirational culture we are all locked into is fundamentally detrimental to the wellbeing of persons' (Moore 2019, p. 216). The second book is enthusiastic: 'good public policy contributes to individuals' wellbeing by enhancing their capabilities and opportunities (i.e. substantive freedoms) to do so' (Karacaoglu et al. 2019, p. x).

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The purpose of this essay is to review these three books in the context of the Living Standards Framework (LSF) summarised in Treasury (2018). The essay begins with Waring (2018), since her book focuses directly on the LSF. Two sections then discuss Moore (2019) and Karacaoglu et al. (2019) respectively, before a brief conclusion points to a future research agenda.

What counts for public policy?

The United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA) sets out rules used by countries for calculating key statistics for measuring economic performance such as gross domestic product (GDP). The original designers in the early 1950s made choices about what activities to include. They excluded work performed within a household for its own members, such as caring for children, and defined people fully engaged in family work of this type (overwhelmingly women) as outside the labour force. They also excluded impacts of human activities on the atmosphere, the oceans and (with some exceptions) the natural environment more generally. Waring (1988) famously analysed how these ‘production boundaries’, which remain in place, value market activities over care for families and care for the environment in public policy trained to prioritise GDP growth (Bjørnholt and McKay 2013; Saunders and Dalziel 2017).

Consequently, the Government’s decision to introduce ‘a tool and framework that will make the wellbeing of our people a measure of our economic success’ (Arden 2018) was an opportunity to recognise healthy families and healthy environments as essential for wellbeing. In that context, Waring (2018) analyses the Living Standards Framework and its accompanying Dashboard of statistical measures. Beginning with healthy families, the Treasury recognises that ‘family’ could have been a conceptual element in the LSF, but it did not pursue that option in favour of concepts based on domains, capitals, risk and resilience (Treasury 2018, pp. 8–9). Further, ‘the LSF Dashboard does not include direct measures of the wellbeing of children and young people’ (idem, p. 16).

The Treasury acknowledges these gaps, and promises further work. Nevertheless, Waring points out that any policy framework devoted to *intergenerational* wellbeing must include the reproductive work of pregnancy, giving birth, lactation and parenting. Without this vital work, there is no next generation. Waring provides an insightful analysis of how gender impacts on health, education and other opportunities in ways that are invisible in the data collected in the LSF Dashboard.

The environment is included in the LSF. It is one of 12 domains contributing to current wellbeing, while natural capital (defined as ‘all aspects of the natural environment needed to support life and human activity’; Treasury 2018, p. 6) is one of four capitals that together provide foundations for future wellbeing. Nevertheless, Waring has criticisms. The first statistical measure for the environment domain, for example, is the national annual average PM₁₀ concentration. Waring points out that a national average is of little use in domestic policy-making, which requires ‘the specific textured data we need to safeguard health’ (Waring 2018, p. 64). Waring also objects to the phrase ‘natural capital’ in strong terms: ‘What a bizarre idea, that elements of our environment and eco-systems, our social relationships, our spiritual beliefs, our cultural treasures, can be reduced to a “capital”’ (idem, p. 43).

Waring is critical that the LSF is simply an adapted version of an international well-being framework created by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2017). Waring argues that the OECD perpetuates the ‘patriarchal and social construction [that] has reigned supreme in the “convenient” boundary of production imposed on women for over 60 years, with the consequent policy outcomes’ (Waring 2018, p. 55). More importantly, beginning top-down with an international framework fundamentally misunderstands the bottom-up capability approach of Amartya Sen, upon which both the OECD and the Treasury draw heavily (idem, pp. 67–72). Sen insists we must begin with communities engaged in their own reasoning about what wellbeing means in their own context.

Waring therefore focuses on ‘the everyday reality of most people’ (Waring 2018, p. 96). This requires close attention to the largest sector of the nation’s economy—caring work performed in households, as measured in time use surveys. It requires close attention to how our activities damage natural environments, which harms human wellbeing. It requires close attention to New Zealand’s bicultural partnership founded on Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including support for Te Kupenga (the Statistics New Zealand survey of Māori wellbeing). It requires close attention to the great diversities of our population.

Waring’s book contains ‘a lifetime of thinking about wellbeing, women’s work and policy-making’ (Waring 2018, p. 9). It is teeming with insights that deserves close attention.

What is a person?

Dalziel et al. (2018, p. 3) began their study of wellbeing economics with the proposition that ‘the primary purpose of economics is to contribute to enhanced wellbeing of persons’. That emphasis on ‘persons’ echoed Sen (1999, p. 18), whose aim was to expand ‘the “capabilities” of persons to lead the kinds of lives they value—and have reason to value’. The Treasury’s LSF Dashboard has three sections. The first is Our People, which presents data on nine domains of current wellbeing across New Zealand persons aged over 15 (Treasury 2018, p. 13).

Kevin Moore is an Associate Professor in Psychology at Lincoln University. He agrees that ‘the prime focus of our wellbeing concerns are—and possibly *should be*—persons’ (Moore 2019, p. 6), but his book asks, what is a person? Outsiders might think psychology would have much to say about this question, but Moore explains this is not the case.¹ Psychology has addressed concepts such as minds, selves and egos, but ‘the person, nevertheless, is almost entirely absent from our theories of wellbeing and, in fact, from most psychological theories’ (idem, p. 110). A central aim of this book, therefore, is ‘to reformulate wellbeing theory and research around the notion of the person’ (idem, p. 7).

Moore’s approach to personhood synthesises research by Rom Harré, Jack Martin and their respective colleagues. A human is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, but a feature of this species is the pervasiveness of culture. Thus, ‘personhood is created and sustained by the constant coming together of our biological endowment and human culture’ (Moore 2019, p. 146). This means persons are ‘sociocultural artefacts formed by and through sociocultural activity’ (idem, p. 215). Nor is this simply a matter of inherited cultural norms:

for the first 20 years or so of life, we are in a ‘social womb’—or, to use a less biological metaphor, a neurological ‘tool-making factory’—that fashions the neurological apparatus we get to use to generate personhood in line with the requirements of our culture. (idem, p. 147)

Moore argues that following the adoption of agriculture some 10,000 years ago, human culture achieved the extraordinary evolutionary feat of becoming ‘aspirational’, to the extent that ‘aspirational culture is now baked into the bedrock of human civilisation’ (idem, p. 38). Aspiration here means the pursuit of progress.

To be a fully-fledged and acknowledged person in our culture—and therefore to see ourselves as fully competent persons in that culture—we have to achieve not just the ‘extrinsic’ aspirational goals of ‘success’ but also show that our ‘self’ manifests the achievement, or at least is in pursuit of, the appropriate ‘intrinsic’ aspirational goals. (idem, p. 164)

Moore argues that, except for a lucky few, aspirational culture requires tasks of persons that are too difficult, and provides tools for sustaining personhood that are too weak. Consequently, aspirational culture is fundamentally detrimental to the wellbeing of persons.

Moore cites damaging trends in mental health and other wellbeing indicators, particularly among young people, as evidence of a bleak outlook (idem, pp. 21–27). ‘To put it in a nutshell, life, as a person, has just become too hard’ (idem, p. 213). He dismisses any contribution that modern Positive Psychology proposals might make for personal wellbeing, but struggles to suggest alternatives beyond demanding a world that allows us to be the persons we already are (idem, p. 229).

This reviewer found much to digest in Moore’s tightly argued and evidence-based analysis, and I welcome his attention to cultural heritage in shaping personal and collective experiences of wellbeing. I am reluctant to accept its pessimistic conclusions, however, and offer two possibilities where the analysis might develop to produce fruitful pathways for improving wellbeing.

My first observation is the Moore’s analysis rests on some dualisms where the reader must accept one and reject the other. Thus, ‘person are “doings” rather than things’ and we ‘exist in action, not in brains’ (idem, p. 149). More importantly, Moore claims, ‘persons are sociocultural artefacts that have no *internal* psychological complexity’ (idem, p. 150, emphasis in the original). I may be revealing my own shallowness, of course, but while I can accept personhood as a sociocultural artefact, I also experience what feels like internal psychological complexity. In Moore’s language, I can conceptualise myself as ‘person’ and ‘self’ simultaneously; indeed tensions between the two seem to be an important aspect of my lived existence. Consequently, I am not so ready to dismiss the potential value of Positive Psychology, such as the five ways to wellbeing (Dalziel and Saunders 2014, p. 24).

Second, like the current Living Standards Framework, there is no place in Moore’s narrative for families (apart from a brief discussion of Bordieu’s concept of habitus). Instead, agency resides with ‘culture’, to the extent that culture is said to generate persons in pursuit of its own aims. To illustrate the implications, chapter 2 begins with this sentence: ‘A lot can be learnt about a culture from the kinds of stories it tells its children’ (Moore 2019, p. 31). The agent in this sentence is culture. This returns us to Waring’s complaint of the LSF: ‘Notice once more that ... parents have nothing to do with imparting skills and knowledge’ (Waring 2018, p. 85).

An alternative approach is to recognise that human beings are born into particular human cultures, and that persons—including parents in their daily choices—actively transform their cultures in each generation (Dalziel et al. 2019). During Waring’s childhood, for example, women in Western culture were the second sex (de Beauvoir 1949) constrained by the feminine mystique (Friedan 1963). Second wave feminists redefined the cultural meaning of female personhood, expanding the capabilities of women to create and sustain wellbeing. Subsequent feminist movements in different countries and at different times have continued this transformation of cultural practice.

Is wellbeing more than consumption?

Girol Karacaoglu was chief economist at the Treasury when it first developed the Living Standards Framework, and is now Head of the School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington. Jacek Krawczyk was an academic specialising in computational economics and applied mathematics at that university for more than thirty years, before retiring in 2016. Anita King is a senior analyst at the Treasury, where she is the longest-serving member of the team working on the LSF. These authors have collaborated to analyse ‘the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policy when the objective is to improve and sustain intergenerational wellbeing’ (Karacaoglu et al. 2019, p. ix).

Their book is in two parts. Although included in Part I, Chapter 1 is a stand-alone overview. It explains the broad policy objective is ‘to make it possible for individuals to live the kinds of lives they value—in the present and in the future—without compromising others’ rights to do the same’ (idem, p. 4). It argues that robust evidence means we have a broad sense of the common elements of valued lives, summed up in the eleven domains of the OECD’s (2017) Better Life Index. The authors distil these into a ‘wellbeing frontier’ with five points: social cohesion, equity, potential economic growth, resilience and (bringing the other dimensions together, and linking them to intergenerational wellbeing) sustainability. They identify four capital stocks as the ultimate sources of wellbeing: natural capital, human capital, social and cultural capital, and economic capital. These elements underpin the mathematical models developed in Part I.

It is perhaps necessary to explain that economists place great weight on mathematical models in economic analysis. As the authors indicate, the main purpose of such models is ‘to provide a structure for thinking, *in a rigorous way*, about the matter at hand’ (Karacaoglu et al. 2019, pp. 29–30, emphasis added). It therefore boosts the credibility of the LSF among economists if analysis demonstrates it is possible to represent its major features in a coherent mathematical model. The move in this direction is one of the book’s important achievements.

All models involve some sacrifice of realism. To access existing economic models, the authors conceive persons in a particular way: ‘*Intergenerational wellbeing* is the discounted present value of the utilities derived by current and future generations from comprehensive consumption’ (idem, p. 31; see also Figure 2.1 on page 29). Simply put, persons are consumers. In the language of Moore (2019), the task given to persons in this world is to maximise their ‘utility’, and the tools provided to achieve this task are the components of ‘comprehensive consumption’.

The use of that term indicates that wellbeing in the model depends on more than the consumption of goods and services provided in the market economy. It depends also on

the consumption of ‘a clean environment, social cohesion, equity across society and generations, and enhanced resilience’ (Karacaoglu et al. 2019, p. 88), and indeed on the consumption of all eleven domains of current wellbeing in the OECD model cited above (idem, p. 112). In a similar way, wealth in the model is ‘comprehensive wealth’, since it includes a wider range of assets than physical and financial capital. Having made these adjustments, the modelling proceeds using mathematical techniques that are standard in the economics literature.

The modelling focuses on implications for public policy. Indeed, the government is easily the most interesting agent in these models. The government acts as steward of all forms of capital assets on behalf of current and future generations (idem, p. 11). It coordinates and undertakes activities that individuals have decided to pursue collectively (p. 36). It can take a longer-term view than the private sector to promote the wellbeing of future generations (p. 85). It builds resilience to systemic shocks (p. 102). It runs the country, influences much of the economy, and has at its disposal several tools for improving citizen wellbeing (p. 125).

Consequently, it is little wonder that there is again no need for families in the analysis. The authors acknowledge ‘quality of family and other relationships’ as ‘one of the most important factors affecting subjective wellbeing’ (idem, p. 114), but this does not carry over into the formal model. Work-life balance, for example, relies on a measure of quality-adjusted leisure time, and family does not feature in the analysis of education and subjective wellbeing (pp. 119–121). As Waring (2018, p. 105) wryly observes, ‘Human and social capital just arrive fully fledged, workforce-ready at fifteen, thanks to market and public investment.’

The book’s narrative changes dramatically in Part II of the book. The introduction to chapter 5 recognises serious weaknesses in the model of Part I, and so aims to increase relevance at the expense of precision. It does this by addressing radical uncertainty and complexity, which are crucial factors in reality. The implications are profound (Karacaoglu et al. 2019, p. 141).

There are no specific policy buttons to push, to achieve well defined outcomes with any degree of certainty. Instead, the framework is one that emphasises the creation of environments (or ecosystems) within which individuals and communities can continue to pursue the kinds of lives they value, and possibly even improve them. There is an equal emphasis on protecting valued ways of living by preventing environmental, social, and economic catastrophes. Finally, there is a strong insistence on the absolute necessity of involving the communities for which policies are designed, in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies.

Consequently, chapter 6 offers ‘viability theory’ as a useful policy tool. This is a relatively new branch of mathematics. It aims to identify viable trajectories that do not violate systemic constraints, such as minimum standards of wellbeing and key planetary boundaries (the doughnut model of Raworth 2017). To illustrate the use of this tool, the authors show that

if one wishes to maintain positive economic growth, while also ensuring a clean environment and a reasonable level of equality, one needs to deliberately change the structure of production and consumption, through deliberate investments in ‘clean technology’ and associated labour skills. (Karacaoglu et al. 2019, p. 200)

Conclusion

This essay began by citing Dalziel's (2019) suggestion there is a rich history of distinctive Australasian contributions to wellbeing economics and public policy. The books reviewed here are important contributions to that tradition. All three contain valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for public policy to contribute to expanding the capabilities of persons to lead the kinds of lives they value—and have reason to value.

The final chapter of each book summarises key lessons or recommendations for policy. Karacaoglu et al. (2019, p. 222) derive three lessons from their material:

- Public policy focused on improving individual and collective wellbeing on a sustained basis must use a framework that recognises the interdependencies between environmental, social, and economic influences on wellbeing.
- When radical uncertainty and complexity are key features of the world, we need to be prepared to complement optimisation theory and associated models with others, such as viability theory.
- In such a world, the design, implementation and evaluation of public policy need to involve communities in substantive ways.

Moore (2019, p. 230) concludes that 'the only real cure follows from the fact that persons are sociocultural artefacts'. This leads him to the following recommendation.

- The main task has to be challenging and changing the aspirational structures, practices, and institutions of today's world.

Waring (2018, pp. 106–113) makes 22 recommendations specific to New Zealand under five headings:

- The environment;
- UNSNA and GDP data, and Treasury;
- Our Treaty partnership;
- Time use; and
- The General Social Survey.

Her central focus, however, concentrates on public policy to support the reproductive work of women (*idem* p. 114):

The key investment focus of intergenerational wellbeing should be pregnant women—ensuring they are safe and healthy, have good nutrition, support and healthcare, and can enjoy a non-polluted environment internally and externally, as well as ready access to housing, support services and heating. My counterfactual focuses and invests here: in pre- and post-birth nutrition, midwifery, healthcare, maternity leave, nursing mother spaces, secure and decent housing, refuges from violence, drug and alcohol treatment, and financial capability—whatever, in short, will lead to better education, health and justice outcomes for each mother and child.

These lessons and recommendations offer insights for the New Zealand Treasury as it develop its Living Standards Framework for the next version due in 2021 (Treasury

2018, p. 1). A major theme of this essay, inspired by Waring (1988, 2018), has been to insist that families—currently downplayed in the LSF—are vitally important for intergenerational wellbeing. This does not suggest it is easy to analyse families, or to understand how public policy can best expand capabilities of families for creating and sustaining wellbeing (see Dalziel et al. 2018, chapter 3). Sligo et al. (2017, p. 53), for example, observe in a New Zealand context that ‘even children within a single household can live in different “families” and experience different levels of complexity and change’.

This suggests it would be useful in New Zealand to pursue a research agenda that provides new knowledge on the intersection between families and public policy in the context of promoting wellbeing. Waring’s research over thirty years in this field was acknowledged in the New Year Honours List 2020, but there is still much more work to be done.

Note

1. A referee agrees this is true for many branches of psychology, but suggests that the general claim seems to overlook the work of Edward Diener and Martin Seligman.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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