

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND WELL-BEING

John Haworth PhD. Visiting Research Fellow. Research Institute for Health and Social Change. Manchester Metropolitan University.

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Social institutions and well-being are of crucial interest to researchers, policy makers and politicians of all parties. David Willets, an acolyte of Margaret Thatcher, and Shadow Secretary for Innovation, Universities and Skills, stated in 'Society Now', Spring 2009 issue 3 p28. 'I think the (financial) crisis has shown the importance of the idea that institutions matter' And David Cameron has flirted with positive psychology and well-being as a facet of Conservative party policy. Yet there is an essential divide underpinning the left and right in British politics based on the balance of the role of the collective and the individual in relation to social institutions and well-being

Social institutions and personal agency

The social psychologist Maria Jahoda (1982, 1984, 1986, Haworth 1997 Chapter 2) in her ground breaking analysis, argued for the centrality of the social institution of employment in providing five categories of psychological experience which are conducive to well-being and that, to the extent that the unemployed are deprived of these experiences, this contributes to the decline in their well-being. These experiences are: time structure, social contact, collective effort or purpose, social identity or status and regular activity. The wage relationship present in employment provides traction for people to engage in work, providing these categories of experience as unintended by products of purposeful action, which they may or may not find enjoyable. While the detrimental effects of poverty on the well-being of the unemployed are acknowledged, Jahoda was concerned to bring into visibility the

important supportive effects social institutions can have on behaviour, habits and traditions. Considerable research has shown the importance of these categories of experience for well-being (see Haworth 1997 chapter 3). They have been incorporated in the environmental factors proposed by Warr, (1987, 2007) as important for well-being.

Jahoda emphasises that in modern society it is the social institution of employment which is the main provider of the five categories of experience. While recognising that other institutions may enforce one or more of these categories of experience, Jahoda stresses that none of them combine them all with as compelling a reason as earning a living. Jahoda does recognise that the quality of experience of some jobs can be very poor and stresses the importance of improving and humanising employment. Jahoda also emphasises the important influence the institution of employment has on shaping thought and behaviour. She considers that since the Industrial Revolution employment has shaped the form of our daily lives, our experience of work and leisure, and our attitudes, values and beliefs. Jahoda (1984, p64) believes that

The relationship between ideologies and the external life, or...the problems of habits and traditions in thought, is extremely difficult to grasp, because what is commonly called thinking represents a mixture of elements determined by tradition, emotion, social conditions, and speech habits of which only one thing is clear from the outset; it has almost nothing in common with the logical laws which are supposed to determine our thinking

Jahoda argues that if it were not for the comparative stability of traditional thinking, the capacity of the human mind would probably be insufficient to deal with reality; and that without traditions and habits of thought the infinite variety of life would overwhelm us. But she states, that ‘on the other hand its existence accounts for the discrepancy between ideas and behaviours and for the logical unreliability of a world in which the great majority of individuals is not capable of bringing behaviour and ideology into harmony with one another’(p65) The process of adaptation, she emphasises, takes time .

Jahoda (1986) agrees that human beings are striving, coping, planning, interpreting creatures, but adds that the tendency to shape one’s life from the inside-out operates within the possibilities and constraints of social arrangements which we passively

accept and which shape life from the outside-in. A great deal of life consists of passively following unexamined social rules, not of our making but largely imposed by the collective plans of our ancestors. Some of these rules meet basic human needs, even if we become aware of them only when they are broken by, for example, the enforced exclusion from an institution as in unemployment (p.28). Jahoda regards dependency on social institutions not as good or bad but as the *sine qua non* of human existence.

Personal agency and personal characteristics are important in the interaction with social institutions in sustaining well-being. Warr (1987, 1999, 2007) has combined the research of Jahoda on social institutions and categories of experience with the research of Fryer and Payne(1984) and Fryer (1986) on the importance of personal agency for well-being to produce an important interactive model. Warr (1987) identified nine ‘situational’ factors, or ‘Principal Environmental Influences’ important for well-being, measured on several dimensions. These factors are: opportunity for control, environmental clarity, opportunity for skill use, externally generated goals, variety, opportunity for interpersonal contact, valued social position, availability of money, and physical security. These features of the environment, including jobs, are considered to interact with characteristics of the person to facilitate or constrain psychological well-being or mental health. Warr produced a classification of ‘enduring’ personal characteristics which interact with situational factors on mental health. These person factors include baseline mental health, demographic factors such as age and gender, values, and abilities. Baseline mental health includes several features often considered as elements of personality, such as neuroticism, self-confidence, hardiness, and locus of control.

The nine factors were devised in the light of considerable research into both jobs and unemployment, which Warr (1987) summarises. Research conducted at Manchester University (see Haworth 1997 chapters 4&5), shows strong associations between each of the nine Principal Environmental Influences (PEIs) and measures of mental health, and also discriminates between patterns of PEIs important for well-being in different occupational groups.

An important development of the model, Haworth (1997 chapter 6) Haworth (2004), is the inclusion of the role of enjoyment in well-being. Research by Haworth, Jarman, and Lee (1997), suggests that enjoyment and situational factors are conjoined, and that enjoyment can give rise directly to well-being. The study also suggested that enjoyment and feelings of control might enhance the personal characteristic of locus of control, which in turn may lead to enhanced well-being either directly or through greater access to PEIs.

Rotter (1966,1990) emphasises that locus of control is a learned expectancy, rather than a fixed trait. Feist, Todd, Bodner, Jacobs, Miles and Tann (1995) suggest that dispositions such as optimism can filter perceptions of daily experience, and that daily experience can in turn influence dispositions. Furnham and Steele (1993) also note that while locus of control beliefs may influence experience, the reverse may also be true. They suggest that positive successful life experiences probable increase internal locus of control beliefs through optimistic attributions. These may increase confidence, initiative and positive motivation, and thus lead to more successful experiences. Rotter (1982) indicates the possible importance of ‘enhancement behaviours’, which he viewed as ‘specific cognitive activities that are used by internals to enhance and maintain good feelings’. However, Uleman and Bargh (1989) also indicate the importance of subconscious processes in well-being, and Merleau-Ponty (1962) in his Embodiment theory of consciousness indicates the importance of both non-reflective and reflective interactions in Being, (see chapter 7 on Embodiment and quality of life in Haworth 1997). Such conceptions have some resonance with the views of Jahoda on the nature of thinking. Conceivably, positive subjective states could influence person factors, such as dispositions, coping styles and life themes etc, through both reflective and non -reflective interactions. In turn, person factors could influence well-being directly, or indirectly through access to situational factors important for well-being. Clearly, there is an interaction between opportunities provided by the social institution and the experiences and characteristics of the person, in relation to well-being.

Although experiences of work vary across different socio-political and cultural contexts, Haworth and Lewis (2005) indicate that some general trends are nevertheless emerging across national boundaries. A qualitative study looking at

work, family and well-being in young adults in eight European countries (*Transitions*) showed a drive for more efficiency and an intensification of work across all the countries as fewer people are expected to do more work. The study also revealed a widespread implementation gap between policies to support the reconciliation of work and family, whether at the state or workplace level, and actual practice; and persisting gender differences in work-life responsibilities and experiences in a range of social policy contexts. The *Transitions* case studies (Lewis and Purcell 2007) also showed that both managers and work colleagues have a decisive role in creating the organisational climate and culture that contribute to the well-being of employed parents. While workplace policies and practices are shaped by national and local regulations, they are also increasingly a matter of daily and informal negotiation with managers in local organisations. Well-being for parents varied across departments, highlighting the discretionary application of informal, trust-based policies. However, even when managers and their working practices did enhance parents' flexibility and autonomy over work and family boundaries, this tended to be undermined by other factors, particularly long hours and the intensification of work. Combating the intensification of work may require joint effort by cross-national institutions.

Embodied Mind

As noted earlier, the views of Jahoda on the nature of thinking have some resonance with modern theories of mind. Our conceptions of how we come to know and understand things are undergoing significant change. Traditional representationist views of the mind conceive the world as being independent of the observer, and perception being a representation of pre-given properties of the world, much like a camera records a picture of some object. This cartesian dualism of mind and body is now being challenged. Perception and our knowledge of the world are considered to be generated by our interaction with the world which takes on a specific form due to the nature of our bodies and our individual and social experiences in the particular culture in which we live. This 'new' view emphasises the importance in seeing and understanding of 'embodied mind', 'embodied practice', and 'situated cognition'. Perception is not simply consciousness of an existing factual situation, and learning is not simply a process in which the learner consciously internalises a ready formed body of objective

knowledge. Rather, knowledge and understanding are tentative and generated through lived experience and histories of mutual involvement and social relationships, and can largely reside below the level of conscious awareness, but nevertheless significantly influence behaviour.

In *The Embodied Mind*, Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) see cognition not as representation of the world but as embodied action. Perception and our knowledge of the world are considered to be generated by our interaction with the world which takes on a specific form due to the nature of our bodies and our individual and social experiences in the particular culture in which we live. Truths and ideas are thus cultural objects, rather than absolute certainties. Yet this does not detract from their organising force, and they may give a firm focus to action and thought. In presenting cognition as embodied action, and emphasising the temporal and reciprocal intertwining of the organism and the environment, Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) acknowledge the seminal influence of the philosopher and psychologist, Merleau-Ponty. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) in their book 'Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought' emphasise that the mind is inherently embodied. They stress that thought is mostly unconscious; and that abstract concepts are largely metaphorical. They discuss in detail how the body and the brain shape reason, contrary to traditional Western Philosophy which sees reason independent of perception and bodily movement.

Haworth and Hart (2007) in the edited book 'Well-Being: Individual, Community and Social perspectives', note that, considered together, the chapters show the emergent influence on research into well-being of the experiential model of consciousness and being proposed by Merleau-Ponty, (1962) emphasising the intertwining of experience and being, and the importance of both pre-reflexive and reflexive thought in knowing and understanding (see Haworth, 1997 chapter 7). Merleau-Ponty (1962) also emphasises that our perceptions of the world, our commitment to activity, and our response to change are all influenced by our past history, and that our past experiences and perceptions help create, largely unconsciously an 'intentional arc' (or life-trajectory) which helps trace out in advance our path, or style of what is to come.

Positive psychology and well-being.

In recent years in the USA there has been a focus on 'Positive Psychology' concerned with factors leading to well-being and positive individuals (e.g. Special Edition of the American Psychologist, January 2000; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 2006). Positive psychology is seen as concerned with how normal people might flourish under benign conditions -- the thriving individual and the thriving community. Positive Psychology changes the focus of psychology from preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life to building the best things in life. In the USA, the field of Positive Psychology at the subjective level is about positive experience: well-being, optimism, hope, happiness, and flow. At the individual level it is about the character strengths--the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, and genius. At the group level it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: leadership, responsibility, parenting, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.

Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (2006), in an edited book on what makes life worth living, highlight the importance of personally meaningful goals, individual strengths and virtues, and intrinsic motivation and autonomy, in what makes people happy and life meaningful. Positive emotions and the development of personal resilience are also important in optimal functioning (Fredrickson, 2006).

A European positive psychology net work has also been established (www.enpp.org) This promotes regular conferences and publications (e.g. Linley and Joseph, 2004; Delle Fave, 2006).

The positive psychology programme is very praiseworthy, and is stimulating much needed research in many countries. However, it focuses primarily on individual influences on well-being. It is strongly influenced by the individualistic American culture. Yet recent advances in research in social neuroscience show the essentially social nature of human mind and brain (www.socialmirrors.org) The positive psychology programme could thus be enhanced by the study of the influence of social institutions on behaviour and well-being (e.g. Jahoda (1982). Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2007) argue from

extensive studies that wellness is achieved by the simultaneous and balanced satisfaction of personal, interpersonal and collective needs.

Chapters in the edited book by Haworth and Hart (2007), which has its origins in a series of transdisciplinary seminars on well-being funded by grants from the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, collectively show that

- Well-being is complex and multifaceted. It is considered as a state and a process. It is a contested concept.
- Well-being includes personal, interpersonal, and collective needs, which influence each other.
- Well-being may take different forms, which may conflict across groups in society, requiring an overarching settlement. Well-being may also take different forms over the life-course of an individual.
- Well-being is intimately intertwined with the physical, cultural and technological environment, and requires a global perspective.
- Interventions to enhance well-being may take different forms. They should be conducted at individual, community, and societal levels, ideally in concert. Interventions need to recognise diversity and socio-economic inequalities in society, and be concerned with the unintended as well as the intended consequences of action.

From the material presented so far it can be reasonably argued that in considering the balance between social institutions and the individual on well-being, the emphasis cannot be primarily on the importance and responsibility of the individual. Rather, to improve the conditions of individual lives and make a better society it is crucial that we also act collectively.

Financial Institutions.

In addressing the recent global financial crisis and the failure of the banking institutions, Hutton and Schneider (2009) point to the failure of the philosophy of regulation through market failure. They note that the presumption has been that in general markets work and that States do not. Only in exceptional circumstances-where a particular market is proven to fail- is there any case for government action, which should, in any case, be temporary. The paper argues that this idea of the self-regulatory effect of market failure has failed,

and that State regulation on a permanent basis is essential. They advocate a 21st Century Keynesianism.

After the pioneering lead of the British Government in financially supporting the failing banks, followed by other countries, Will Hutton in *The Observer* 29 03 09 p33 said the G 20 'is the first international summit to make substantive progress regulating global finance since 1994' He adds that it is public opinion that is forcing such change, and that the protestors must keep up the good work. A point echoed by Jackie Ashley in *The Guardian* 30 03 09 p29 'Sometimes there is wisdom in crowds'. The need for global solutions and the work of the G20 continues. The banks are multinational

The British Government has continued to support the economy through making money available, termed quantitative easing, to support businesses and industry, and reduce the degree of unemployment caused by the banks failures, even though this increases public debt, which is opposed by opposition parties, with the government also being criticised for not doing enough to combat increasing youth unemployment with its impairment of the development of positive life trajectories. Paul Krugman, a Nobel prize winner for economics, and professor at Princeton University commenting on the situation in America, says that it seems that there isn't going to be a second Great Depression after all; and that what saved America is, basically big government. He says that '-unlike the private sector the federal government hasn't slashed spending as its income has fallen. This has helped support the economy in its time of need, in a way that didn't happen in the 1930's, when federal spending was a much smaller percentage of GDP. And, yes, this means that budget deficits-which are a bad thing in normal times- are actually a good thing right now' *The Guardian* 11 08 09 p26.

Yet regulation of the British banks is proceeding slowly, perhaps understandably given the complexity of the task and the nature of social institutions; and considerable concern is expressed in the media that an opportunity for effective regulation will be missed. It is widely reported that the culture of big bonuses is back for investment bankers, which is considered to have played a part in encouraging excessive risk in financial systems, leading to the collapse. The introduction of bonuses by some banks has been seen by them as essential to recovery, though, arguably, it could be an example of situated cognition reflecting a traditional way of perceiving and understanding, one which may not now be

so efficient. Certainly, a letter from twelve professors of business management at British Universities does not think the return of the bonus culture appropriate (The Guardian 12 08 09 p29) The Financial Services Authority, charged with bringing in new financial regulations, is reported as saying that it cannot put a lid on bonus payments, and that this is one for politicians and society as a whole, (The Guardian 12 08 09 p20). Yet the power of share holders, for example to effect regulation, has been found wanting.

The recent publication by the Financial Services Authority (FSA) of the code on the regulation of bankers' pay was met by claims reported in The Guardian on the 13 August 2009 that it did not go far enough. It was suggested that this may in part be through a fear of hindering economic recovery, and in part because of weakness in the face of intense lobbying by the financial sector. However, it was also claimed that the current plans go further than other countries, which should follow suit. The Government is also looking to the Walker review on corporate governance, and has scheduled a bill designed to toughen the powers of the FSA. The issue of bonuses is, perhaps, just an indicator, of the need to devise effective social institutions which have a concern for the well-being of the population as a whole. The task is obviously difficult, and is one which needs sufficient committed long term support from the government and the people, including a willingness to contribute to valuable social institutions and society through fair and socially just taxes.

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