**Happiness on your doorstep: disputing the boundaries of wellbeing and localism.**

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*Introduction*

Over the last decade there has been an intensification of activity in wellbeing research and measurement. This has been manifested in various ways, mainly across the OECD and EU countries, but a key event was the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress established in 2008 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and led by Nobel prize winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen. This commission reported in 2009 and identified eight components of wellbeing: material living standards; health; education; personal activities including work; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; environment; security - economic and physical (Stiglitz *et al*. 2009). In the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron announced his intention to consider the use of wellbeing measurements in public policy in November 2010, shortly after being elected as leader of the Coalition Government[[1]](#endnote-1). He charged the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to create a ‘national debate’ about wellbeing and to ‘measure what matters’ (Cameron 2010). In 2011 the ONS conducted workshops across the UK and developed a series of wellbeing measures including a national survey of subjective wellbeing (SWB).

A number of factors have contributed to the growth of interest in wellbeing in the UK including: concern over climate change and a mainstreaming of sustainable development; the accumulation of evidence regarding subjective wellbeing; the emergence of psychological governance influenced by the positive psychology movement and behavioural economics literature; discourses of a ‘broken’ society and the influence of social capital ideas; a criticism of neoliberal economic growth agendas (intensified post 2008) and the search for a more holistic measurement of quality of life (Tomlinson and Kelly 2013; Jones *et al.* 2012; Scott 2012). In addition, the influence of a number of key actors who work transnationally in the OECD and EU has had a significant effect on the translation of wellbeing ideas across national boundaries, although those ideas will be manifested differently in different countries (Bache and Reardon 2013).

Interest in wellbeing in the Conservative Party can be traced back to pronouncements by David Cameron in 2006 as leader of the opposition regarding the need to measure ‘gross national happiness’ and the setting up of their Quality of Life working group. In a search for a ‘Tory Third Way’, influencers such as Philip Blond (2010) promoted ideas of ‘progressive conservatism’ or ‘Red Toryism’ which promoted a mixture of localism and traditional values, where wellbeing was embedded within and engendered by ‘strong’ local communities:

I really believed in the politics that Cameron was trying to bring about…for the first time in British politics, somebody was talking about wellbeing; about broader categories of human happiness and satisfaction, and civic and local solutions.’ (Philip Blond, *The Guardian* Saturday 8 August 2009).

A core policy for the Conservatives (and hence the Coalition) has been localism, central to their promotion of ‘The Big Society’ and formalized by the passing of the Localism Act 2011. The move ‘from big government to big society’ included: more freedoms for local government under a ‘general power of competence’; new rules to facilitate community groups buying local assets; the right for third sector organisations to bid for the right to carry out service provision normally provided by the council; reforms to the planning system; and elected mayors in major cities. David Cameron made the link between wellbeing and localism clear:

# It's about enabling and encouraging people to come together to solve their problems and make life better. Some people say that there are no big ideas in politics anymore. But I think this is about as big as it gets. It's not the big state that will tackle our social problems and increase wellbeing. It's the Big Society.’ (Rt Hon David Cameron: Speech ‘Our 'Big Society' plan’, March 31 2010)

Wellbeing is a useful concept politically due to its malleability. Therefore, it is important to scrutinise how and why it is being mobilised, and with what effect on whom. This paper presents findings from a discourse analysis of UK Coalition government policy documents and speeches from 2010-2013 to investigate how the UK government has engaged with the concept of wellbeing. It considers what political work the concept does and how it is articulated with the localism agenda, a central plank in the Coalition government’s plan to mend ‘Broken Britain’. This paper does not set out to compare these framings against any definition of what wellbeing is or should be, and space limits restrict a full account of how it has been conceptualized in the wider literature (for this see Scott 2012). This paper concentrates its efforts in exploring how wellbeing is framed by the Coalition government and offers a discussion on the ways this links to their localism agenda and the potential effects of this. Firstly though, I offer a brief discussion below as context to this research.

*Discourses of wellbeing and localism*

In a 2004 paper on ‘New Localism’ Gerry Stoker argued that in the light of global complexity and a change from government to governance there has arisen a ‘boundary problem’ where lines of responsibility have become increasingly blurred in many public policy areas (Stoker 2004, 119). He offers the example of healthy eating and drinking: is it the individual, the state or the private sector who should take responsibility? To effectively deal with such complex problems he argued for multi-level governance which recognises both ‘diversity in communities and a concern with equity issues’ (Stoker 2004, 118). Localism is part of the answer, but in conjunction with a responsive and enabling state which has higher powers to promote progressive policies and the redistribution of resources. However, many argue that any political move to localism can only be an authoritarian imposition while neoliberalism represses the freedoms and abilities of communities to properly thrive (Davies 2009; Harvey 2005). As noted by many, in UK New Labour government (1997-2010) discourses of localism went hand in hand with increased centrism and the imposition on local government of a large burden of reporting mechanisms and centrally set targets. In the light of unmanageable global transformations the local was seen as the remaining site where policy transformations could occur and therefore the solution to social problems became increasingly market-led and focussed on local innovation and entrepreneurialism (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Amin 2005). Disadvantage was associated with a lack of social capital and the ‘social’ and ‘local’ therefore became regressively merged (Raco 2005; Amin 2005). The politics associated with localism contain ‘deep ambiguities’ between ideas of empowerment on the one hand and on the other the responsibilization of local communities for situations beyond their control (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 342). For a number of writers the emergence of such narratives represents evidence of the ways in which western states are rolling back and ‘shifting their modes of intervention’ (Raco 2009, 236). Therefore it is important to pay close attention to how discourses of human wellbeing are involved in negotiating this terrain.

A critical discourse perspective has allowed scholars to view constructions of wellbeing and their relationship with social and political practices. As many have argued, selective views of human wellbeing and quality of life have being deployed in UK political discourse since the 1980s to normalise a series of controversial reforms within a neoliberal context where human wellbeing is conceptualised through the lens of enhanced choice and consumption (Raco 2009, Rapley 2003; Rose 1992). It is through such consumption that the aspirations of citizens are to be met, turning the ‘politics of expectation’ based on rights and equality into a ‘politics of aspiration’ based on ability and opportunity (Raco 2009). For example, recent work at the local governance level by Atkinson and Joyce (2011) shows how, although wellbeing is variously constructed by different local authority partnerships, a dominant discursive feature was ‘individual responsibility’. However, more positively, they state that the inherent ‘instability’ of the term gave it the potential for ‘enabling the local expression of voices contesting dominant ideologies of the self, responsibility and governance’ (2011, 146). Therefore they argued:

The key task for releasing the potential of wellbeing as an emergent tool of neoliberal governance is boundary work to narrow the scope of how the concept is practised and this should be the key arena for resistance (2011, 147).

Discursive boundary work on meanings can also perform work on the boundaries of responsibility that Stoker talks about. The meaning-making that is created by language has social effects, with pervasive influence on many areas of social life (Fairclough 2003). However, as Atkinson and Joyce (2011, 134) found, ‘there is almost no analysis to date that explores how well-being is conceptualised in relation to different governance regimes’. This paper seeks to address this research gap.

*Methodology*

Discourse characterised as constitutive social practice allows us to look at the role language plays in meaning making and creates a ‘positive problematic’ where we do not just deconstruct but also engage in normative arguments about how to reconstruct (Griggs and Howarth 2011). The methodology here follows Fairclough (2003) in promoting critical discourse analysis allied with a systematic investigation of language. This research sought to understand how wellbeing is being conceptualised by the current government, focussing on the Measuring National Wellbeing project, and how this is articulated with the localism agenda. The focus was on the main groups in government with interest in and/or responsibility for these agendas. Therefore, although this paper predominantly focuses on the Coalition government documentation since 2010, it does not exclusively restrict analysis to Conservative or Liberal Democrat politicians nor does it seek to compare wellbeing discourses along party political lines. A number of key departments within government were identified. These included the Cabinet Office (including the Behavioural Insights Unit), Department of Communities and Local Government, Defra, the Treasury, and the Office of National Statistics (ONS). It also included key cross-party groupings (such as the All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics,) and working groups with a wide participant/advisor base (National Wellbeing Steering Group and Technical Advisory Group). Key policy actors were identified which included Prime Minister David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, Francis Maude MP, Nick Hurd MP, Eric Pickles MP, Greg Clarke MP, Gus O’Donnell, Oliver Letwin MP, Jo Swinson MP, Jill Matheson (National Statistician), David Halpern (Behavioural Insights Unit). Documentation analysed included: speeches and pronouncements by key actors, policy statements, research reports, House of Commons debates (for instance the Localism Bill at second reading stage), meeting minutes, early day motions and questions in the House of Commons, accounts of workshops and presentations.

A total of 34 documents (including some collated material) were imported into NVivo 10 software for coding. Material was organised into three main folders: sources representing the National Wellbeing Measurement agenda; sources representing the Localism agenda; and sources representing general strategic statements of policy. The latter included for example *The Coalition: our programme for government* which outlines national priorities, and the speeches of key actors at the annual party conferences as examples of policy priority. The top-down organisation of data in this way facilitated comparison across the three source categories. This was useful in understanding, for example, how far the term ‘wellbeing’ was used across localism or strategic policy documents. Ereaut and Whiting (2008) devised key questions for carrying out discourse analysis regarding wellbeing and to this I added other nuances/questions informed by political discourse analysis methodologies (Fairclough 2003 and Chilton 2004) (table 1). Analysis was developed around questions including:

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| --- |
| Is wellbeing an individual or collective concept?  |
| Subjective or objective? |
| A state or process – a place or journey? Is it evoked as an attainable or aspirational state?Permanent or temporary state? |
| A neutral state (nothing wrong) or a positive state?An end in itself or necessary to another end? Is wellbeing a minimum standard, a full glass, or something that can keep growing?General or specific? Reducible to components, or an irreducible holistic totality?What problem is a focus on wellbeing addressing? What are the incentives/rewards of wellbeing?Whose responsibility? What or who are its ‘agents and patients’? How is the government’s capability and intentionality towards wellbeing expressed? What temporal, scalar and spatial aspects of wellbeing are being evoked? What is expressed as scientifically ‘true’ and what as morally ‘right’ in terms of wellbeing? What other concepts is it equated with, related to, contained within or set in opposition to? How is wellbeing expressed regarding a public/private dichotomy? What alternative meanings of wellbeing are possible but not present or not promoted? |

*Table 1: Key questions for discourse analysis of ‘wellbeing’. Informed by Ereaut and Whiting 2008*

*Findings*

Through systematic analysis I identified three main discourses: *wellbeing as free enterprise*; *wellbeing as social capital*; and *wellbeing as good investment*. I discuss each of these in turn but before that, I would like to offer some general findings. Firstly, the term ‘wellbeing’ is rather confined to the documents which are specifically about wellbeing. It doesn’t feature in a significant way in the localism or strategic policy source categories other than a very occasional and general usage. This may be explained in several ways: that wellbeing is a fairly new concept in political discourse which has still some way to travel; that wellbeing is considered a discrete policy area (wellbeing measurement); that wellbeing is being used very specifically (e.g. to mean subjective wellbeing or ‘happiness’) rather than generally; that wellbeing is being used to support other more central concerns in government rather than being used as an over-arching rationale for policy. Concepts commonly associated with wellbeing (but not necessarily synonymised with it) included: ‘family (friendliness)’, ‘civility’, ‘law and order’, ‘health’, ‘responsibility’, ‘social relationships’, ‘social trust’, ‘volunteering’, ‘giving’, ‘fairness’, ‘freedom’, ‘choice’, ‘control’, ‘power’ and ‘community’. These concepts travel more widely, occurring regularly across all three source categories. In addition, phrases such as ‘making life better’, ‘improving their lives’, ‘getting on in life’ emerged regularly across all source categories and these are often associated with social mobility constructs. Although the term wellbeing doesn’t travel, these associated terms were analysed in all source categories to understand how narratives of wellbeing and localism were intertwined through common language and ideas.

Secondly, a key feature in the texts examined was the use of ‘wellbeing’ adjectivally to describe the following entities: agenda, aspects, angle, benefits, boards, classes, champion, choices, considerations, curriculum, elements, education, economics, evidence, factors, impact, indicators, index, information, measures, objectives, outcomes, plan, project, policy, research, syllabus, strategies. The effect is that there is a bundle of entities which can be described as ‘wellbeing’ and another set of entities which fall outside that description and are therefore ‘other’:

We propose that existing public health education capacity, as it moves into local authorities and re-shapes its objectives, broadens its remit to inform people also about wellbeing factors affecting their lives…Ante-natal classes are also a useful example for other public health interventions, which should similarly expand their role to cover wellbeing aspects.

 (‘A new purpose for politics: quality of life’. Liberal Democrat Policy Paper 102, 2011).

The inference here is that public health education in general, and ante-natal classes in particular, don’t currently cover wellbeing. Consider the different meanings allowed by an alternative wording (using wellbeing as a noun) of the last line: *‘…which should similarly expand their role to cover other aspects of wellbeing’*. Note that two other important inferences are made here: firstly, that ‘wellbeing aspects’ can be taught and secondly, that this can be a relatively simple add-on to classes, rather than requiring any radical restructuring or cost. Another important effect of using wellbeing adjectivally is that these entities *become* wellbeing, like a blue book becomes blue. In other words, wellbeing exists because wellbeing entities exist: ‘wellbeing information’, ‘wellbeing champion’ and ‘wellbeing classes’. This analysis is supported by looking at how these terms are used in context. A close reading reveals a repeated assertion that wellbeing itself will be increased through providing data and educating people about wellbeing. There is subsequently a large focus on education and measures with the effect that they *in themselves* not only become the delivery mechanisms for wellbeing but also the evidence that it has been delivered.

*Wellbeing as free enterprise*

A major discourse of wellbeing identified across texts is one which meshes the concepts of freedom, choice and control (over one’s life) with concepts of (social) enterprise and (social) mobility. In this discourse, actors are rational individuals who, given the right information, can make informed choices about improving their own lives. Moreover, given the right opportunities and support, actors are able to act on those choices in order to maximise wellbeing. Therefore this discourse is fundamentally utilitarian where the state is an enabler, providing basic assurances and opportunities to allow individuals to ‘get on in life’. Wellbeing is constructed predominantly through the lens of happiness or life satisfaction with many references to subjective wellbeing evidence. The emphasis is very clearly at the individual level:

The point is that human problems cannot be dealt with through technical and bureaucratic solutions...it is equally wrong to think that economic structures determine whether we are happy or not happy. Far more variation in wellbeing is driven by variation in personal rather than societal factors: temperament and physical fitness for example. These personal factors are linked to the kind of actions that the research shows tend to increase wellbeing: propensity to engage with others, to give of your time, to take notice of the world, to keep learning about the world, to take exercise. (Jonty Olliff-Cooper, the Practical Politics of Wellbeing, Progressive Conservatism Project, Demos 2012,).[[2]](#endnote-2)

In this way, scalar dimensions are invoked, where a move from central to local and from state to community or individual is promoted, offering implicit and explicit links between wellbeing and localism. Social mobility in these narratives also has an explicit spatial dimension, focussing on the actual physical movement of people for example, between health settings and schools. The emphasis is on the choice of where rather than how people get treated. The inference is people can and do vote with their feet. Again, intermingled within these themes is a reduction in bureaucracy:

The contention is that just as we can create the climate for business to thrive – by cutting taxes, slashing red tape and so on – so we can create a climate in this country that is more family-friendly and more conducive to the good life...

People who feel in control of their own destiny will feel more fulfilled. That’s why we’re giving parents real choice over schools and patients real choice over where they get treated. (David Cameron, Wellbeing Speech, 25 November 2011)

In the wider context of this piece Cameron is not explicitly saying that cutting red tape is more conducive to the good life, he is saying that governments have a role in affecting positive change. However, the position of the clause about ‘red tape’ in the middle of the sentence lends meaning to both parts of the sentence and this is characteristic of the way that a narrative of reducing bureaucracy is implicitly associated with wellbeing by inferring that red tape has been ‘strangling’, ‘holding back’ and ‘suffocating’ people’s desire to do more for themselves and their communities. The underlying assumption is that getting rid of this bureaucracy will have a positive effect on wellbeing:

Trying to improve people’s lives by imposing decisions, setting targets and demanding inspections from Whitehall simply doesn’t work. It creates bureaucracy. (Greg Clarke, Forward in DCLG *A Plain English Guide to the Localism Act* 2011, 1)

Greater freedom and flexibilities for local government are vital for achieving the shift in power the government wants to see. But on their own, these measures will not be enough. Government alone does not make great places to live, people do. People who look out for their neighbours, who take pride in their street and get involved- from the retired teacher who volunteers once a month in the village shop, to the social entrepreneur who runs the nursery full time. (DCLG *A Plain English Guide to the Localism Act* 2011, 8)

Enterprise and social mobility is a central concept: ‘Britain on the rise’ is a metaphor for individuals as well as the country in general where successful countries are characterized as ‘lean, mean and enterprise obsessed’ compared with ‘fat, lazy, sclerotic, welfare obsessed’ countries ‘on the slide’.

 ‘And for us Conservatives, this is not just an economic mission – it’s also a moral one. It’s not just about growth and GDP, it’s what’s always made our hearts beat faster – aspiration; people rising from the bottom to the top. Line one, rule one of being a Conservative is that it’s not where you’ve come from that counts, it’s where you’re going’. (David Cameron, Leader’s Speech, 9 October Birmingham 2012)

Alongside social mobility, the concept of ‘fairness’ is often deployed. The Government’s role is to provide wellbeing education with a basic framework of social justice in place, where social justice is the provision of support to those in need to become socially mobile. Wellbeing measures, education and tools are therefore important because they form part of this provision of support by helping individuals in need decide on their wellbeing options.

*Wellbeing as social capital*

Another clear strand of discursive framing around wellbeing focussed on (social) relationships, (social) trust, ‘volunteering’ and ‘giving’.

Volunteering and charity fundraising provides strength to the social fabric, by spreading awareness of the needs of others and by increasing the sense of interdependence of those who give and those who need and by fostering a sense of community endeavour, benefiting giver and receiver alike. (Liberal Democrat Policy Document 106, 2011)

The Community Life Survey is a new survey commissioned by Cabinet Office to provide Official Statistics on issues that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities, including volunteering, giving, community engagement and well-being. (Community Life Survey - Cabinet Office 2012)

In discussing society in general, a key feature was to characterise it as ‘broken’ and in need of ‘building’ or ‘delivering’ a ‘bigger’, ‘stronger’ and ‘happier’ society. A key narrative within this and across all texts is ‘social capital’ and related concepts such as ‘social cohesion’, ‘social relationships’ ‘social involvement’ and ‘social networks’. Terms which describe a qualitatively different type of ‘social’ like social progress, social inequality and social justice were much rarer and associated with ONS documents or technical papers rather than ‘position papers’ or speeches. In the context of ‘social care’ (mentioned only four times across all texts) the personalization narrative is clearly apparent with a focus on the greater choice and control which individual budgets for social care provide. Within these discourses, a distancing of ‘social’ from socialism occurs, where the latter is characterised as state level bureaucracy and the former as communities getting together and doing it for themselves. Truth claims about the nature of humans (and therefore wellbeing) are heavily reliant on narratives of social capital and subjective wellbeing:

As human beings, it is in our nature to join together to achieve common goals. There are two ways in which this joining can work: From the top-down, through hierarchy mediated by bureaucracy - and which invades civil society by sucking everything towards itself in the name of "stakeholding." Or from the bottom-up, through diverse forms of self-organisation. The former is what defines socialism. The latter is what defines conservatism - and, for that matter, liberalism. (Greg Clarke MP, ‘Turning the Tide of Centralism’ Speech to Policy Exchange, 27 July 2010)

A distinction is made between ‘societal’ which is often synonymized with ‘structural’, and ‘social’ which refers to civic associative behaviour and benefits. The ‘social’ is characterized as a mutually beneficial exchange between individuals in community relationships, where helping others enhances one’s own wellbeing. Discourses of social capital and the correlation of volunteering with subjective wellbeing find much purchase with localism discourses of community empowerment and mutual support at the local level. A dominant feature which does the majority of the work in the intensification of localism in these discourses, is that bureaucracy is forcefully mobilised as an anti-wellbeing entity, where arguments for individual, community, local, small-scale interventions are made instead. An obvious contradiction here, is that on the one hand structural factors are played down as having little effect on peoples’ lives yet on the other, a bureaucratic state is assumed to have a very detrimental effect. A recent review revealed a complex and problematic relationship between localism and community empowerment (Painter *et al.* 2011). This builds on much previous work which highlights the different costs and benefits of community engagement for different social groups. Yet, it is clear that the discourses explored here do not exhibit a serious engagement with that literature, or the problems and challenges of localism and community empowerment.

*Wellbeing as good investment.*

A third, less prominent but distinctive, discourse of wellbeing is clearly drawing on behavioural and positive psychology influences. Jones *at al*. (2012) document the relatively rapid rise of the psy-sciences in terms of governmental agendas. They argue that, because of their political malleability, they have appealed to both left and right, acting as a practical way of implementing both the Third Way and the ‘Big Society’. This research finds that this discourse constructs humans as basically able, but essentially flawed because we don’t always do what’s good for us or we engage in irrational behaviours. The distinction between what is good for us (according to the evidence) and ‘doing good’ is often elided obscuring the social complexities and costs of volunteering or community participation. The distinction between education of free citizens and so called ‘nudging’ is also elided and indeed, according to Thaler and Sunstein (2008), nudging poses no threat to liberalism as individual choice remains intact. The role of government is to make it easier for people to do the right thing (where ‘the right thing’ is constructed in the ways described here), and to educate them in positive behaviours to maximise subjective wellbeing, while at the same time delivering social wellbeing through various forms of giving:

Activities such as training or volunteering that are associated with strong positive externalities – effects that benefit others as well as the individual – tend to be ‘under‐invested’ in by rational individuals. In the case of giving, evolution seems to have offset this to some extent, but at the same time busy modern life sometimes means that we give less than we might wish. Behavioural science gives us some useful clues about how we might nudge ourselves to give a little more. For example, it might lead us to give more publicly – signalling to others that a cause is worthwhile and triggering further giving. It might even make us a little happier.

 (*Giving, well‐being, and behavioural science* Policy Note by David Halpern)

In this discourse, certain types of behaviour or indeed negative thoughts pose the biggest barrier to wellbeing. Structural factors are almost absent from these narratives except where they are referred to as entities which are beyond governmental or individual control (‘modern busy lives’ in this example). What can be controlled are behaviours and thoughts to achieve better subjective wellbeing where wellbeing becomes a means to other ends, better performance, longer life, better relationships, more opportunities:

The [wellbeing] classes have been popular with young people and the school says that they are linked to improved academic performance. (Liberal Democrat Policy Paper 106)

Wellbeing is not a finite entity or an end in itself but an open-ended potential which unlocks other benefits. It is promoted like a good investment, one which is both ethical (the right thing to do) and one which will show increasing private and public returns.

However, while positive psychology ideas and behaviour change policies may start from a premise that everyone needs to be helped to make the right choices for wellbeing, the danger is that resulting policies become (even more) regressive and target those groups of people presumed to be making bad decisions on a regular basis, their decisions presumed to be contributing to, rather than resulting from, disadvantage. Thus targeted groups may have their choices circumscribed or structured in subtle ways (Jones *et al*. 2012).

*Discussion*

This paper was a response to the assertion by Atkinson and Joyce (2011) that in order to resist neoliberal usage of the wellbeing concept, we should be careful of narrowing its discursive boundaries. Over-prescription of the concept of wellbeing can pose a threat to the heuristic value of the term in democratic debates (Scott 2012). Conversely however, vague and under-developed notions of wellbeing can also be used to avoid accountability for controversial or regressive policies (Scott 2012a). So perhaps it is not the narrowing of the scope of wellbeing as a concept per se which should be resisted, as clearly some discursive boundary work could be beneficial to clarity of policy aims, (including drawing the boundaries of responsibility and therefore accountability). What is more important is greater transparency about how and where the boundaries are already being drawn and more discussion of where they *should* be re-drawn, by whom, for what reasons and for whose benefit.

Whilst recent empirical research finds that sources within government view Cameron as having a genuine commitment to wellbeing (Bache and Reardon 2013) the resulting approach to wellbeing measurement in the UK has been heavily critiqued for its orientation towards subjective wellbeing or ‘happiness’. While the UK wellbeing index is much broader than subjective wellbeing, comparative analysis has shown that it does not reflect the EU or OECD wellbeing indices where there is a greater focus on inequality, unmet needs and social exclusion (Tomlinson and Kelly 2013, 14). The research presented here, which focusses on the wellbeing discourses of UK central government, concurs with this finding. This study finds that the UK Coalition work on Measuring National Wellbeing has been heavily involved in discursive ‘boundary work’ on the concept of wellbeing such that its range of meanings are being circumscribed in specific ways which align with other more central agendas. Wellbeing is variously characterized in the discourses discussed as: a decrease in bureaucracy and a feature of enterprising individuals who become socially mobile; a product arising from a mutually beneficial exchange between individuals in community relationships; a return produced by ‘good’ thoughts and behaviours which can then secure other goods like success, long life and good relationships. Despite pronouncements by Cameron that a focus on wellbeing signals a paradigm shift for society and government beyond narrow economic growth agendas, the concept of wellbeing has been tailored to suit an increasingly neoliberal agenda which has been searching for more appropriate attire in a post 2008 climate. Wellbeing is not a main policy idea across all source categories and does not signify a sea change in government thinking; rather the emphasis is very clearly on localism which is set in opposition to the stranglehold of socialist bureaucracy. Findings from the evidence base on subjective wellbeing (e.g. positive correlations between SWB and volunteering) are being used across many government documents to implicitly and explicitly support localism narratives. In these narratives greater freedom, choice and control of local people is promoted as the main mechanism for wellbeing, where additional resources for education and nudging will deliver the behavioural changes needed to engender greater individual happiness and social capital.

Concepts of freedom and choice are a clear feature of many wellbeing accounts and sets of indicators, based on statistical evidence of SWB but also on philosophical accounts of social justice (e.g. Nussbaum 2000) and empirical participatory accounts of wellbeing with local people (Scott 2012). So it is clear that control over one’s life and the ability to make choices is a fundamental need and human right. However, it is important to be aware of *how* choice is being characterised and where it is being circumscribed. The discursive links between choice, freedom, responsibility, behaviour and subjective wellbeing are clear in many of the documents analysed. A reductionist and individualistic view of wellbeing, mobilised in discourses of freedom and choice, however genuinely intended, is performing a handmaiden role to the localism agenda, rather than being a meta-narrative for policy in its own right. In addition, the economics of subjective wellbeing, or utilitarianism, cannot answer fundamental social policy concerns with distribution. The recent focus on subjective wellbeing evidence can bring a fresh perspective but it needs to be underpinned by a ‘substantive theory of social justice’ (Burchardt 2006, 157). If not, one clear risk is that resources will be allocated to and accessed by more efficient, aspirational and entrepreneurial subjects. In addition, the social justice problems associated with ‘adaptive preference’ (poorer people may be happier with less) are not addressed. The constructions of wellbeing described here are being promoted without proper reference to structural inequalities or the complex social relations that constitute communities, as such they are in danger of supporting neoliberal narratives of individual and/or local aspiration and enterprise as a solution to social problems. As a result the ‘boundary problem’ which Stoker highlights has been partially addressed, where the boundaries of responsibility for wellbeing have become clearer, based on government responsibility to educate and individual/community ability and responsibility to implement *certain* freedoms, choices and behaviours at the local level.

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1. Following the 2010 general election a Coalition government was formed between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This corresponds exactly to exhortations in a new economics foundation publication ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ (Aked, J. & Thompson, S. 2011) which distils evidence from subjective wellbeing research into the key actions for increased wellbeing: Connect: Give: Take Notice; Keep Learning; Be Active. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)