



Towards an interdisciplinary approach to wellbeing: Life histories and Self-Determination Theory in rural Zambia



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ABSTRACT

What are the prospects for a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and methodologically plural approach to wellbeing? This question is addressed using Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a psychological theory based on quantitative empirical methods, to structure qualitative analysis of wellbeing in life history interviews in Chiawa, rural Zambia. Enquiry goes beyond simply reading across methods, disciplines and contexts, to consider fundamental differences in constructions of the human subject, and how these relate to understandings of wellbeing. Field research took place in two periods, August–November, 2010 and 2012. Analysis draws primarily on 46 individual case studies, conducted through open-ended interviews. These were identified through a survey with an average of 390 male and female household heads in each round, including 25% female headed households. As SDT predicts, the interviews confirm its key elements of autonomy, competence and relatedness as vital to wellbeing. However, these are expressed in ways that highlight material and relational, rather than psychological, factors. Key findings are: the mutual constitution of autonomy, competence and relatedness; the appreciation of autonomy as independence in action; the importance of social competence; and the centrality of relatedness. People appear as social and above all moral subjects. The paper concludes by endorsing SDT's utility in interdisciplinary approaches to wellbeing, but only if it admits its own cultural grounding in the construction of a psychological subject. This would go beyond recognising that autonomy, competence and relatedness may take socially and culturally distinctive forms, to questioning their universal status as basic psychological needs. Implications for organisations working on wellbeing are discussed.

1. Introduction

Is wellbeing universal, or does it take culturally specific forms? Responses generally divide by discipline and methodology, with quantitative researchers (especially in psychology and economics) tending to favour universality, while qualitative researchers (especially in sociology and social anthropology) tend to emphasise diversity. This paper seeks to speak across this divide, asking whether qualitative analysis of life history narratives supports the key tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Based on quantitative methods, wellbeing is theorised in SDT to result from the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). To provide a hard case for claims of SDT's universalism, our study's participants are men and women in rural Zambia. This contrasts with most studies of SDT, which draw mainly on educational and urban contexts, predominantly in the Americas, Europe, Australasia, and East Asia.

The paper explores three questions: 1) Does qualitative analysis of

Zambian life histories, generated through open, minimally structured interviews, identify competence, autonomy and relatedness as critical to wellbeing? 2) If so, *how* do competence, autonomy and relatedness appear, and does this confirm or challenge the ways they are identified in SDT? 3) Do the tenets of SDT, which assume a psychological subject, hold for a societal context where people may not prioritise the psychological in their representations of self? The enquiry thus goes beyond simply reading across methods, disciplines and contexts, to considering fundamental differences in constructions of the human subject, and how these relate to understandings of wellbeing.

The broader context of this paper is widespread interest not only in thinking about wellbeing, but also in working on and with it, across a broad range of health, social care, education, employment, and project, programme or policy evaluation settings. Talking with people who work with wellbeing in service delivery was in fact what inspired us to write this paper. They repeatedly raise three issues. First, they want a simple, robust model of wellbeing that can be translated into practical terms for programmatic use. Second, they feel the typically quantitative

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concern for comparative measurement of progress and perhaps wider generalisation of results. Third, they share the typically qualitative concern with context, that the measures they use should be appropriate for the population they serve and the particular programmes they provide.

Generic measures of Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) as life satisfaction and/or affect balance are attractive as being light and easy to apply and widely validated. They have, however, two limitations. First, they provide insight into hedonic aspects of wellbeing but not eudaemonic concerns with meaning, fulfilment or flourishing (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Stone and Mackie, 2013). Second, they indicate levels of happiness or wellbeing, but provide no substantive content as to what these reflect. Interpreting the meaning of SWB scores may thus not be straightforward, as it requires psychometric or econometric analysis which is beyond the scope of many organisations focused on service-delivery.

We decided, then, to look for a more substantive approach, that specified some content rather than simply measured levels of wellbeing. There are many of these, from domain-based models of Psychological Wellbeing (e.g. Ryff, 1989) to multi-level frameworks which look towards organizational and community change (e.g. Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2006). We chose SDT for the following reasons. First, SDT seems to combine optimum levels of specification and openness, being sufficiently defined that it clearly identifies key variables, while sufficiently open that these can take contextually specific forms. Second, its key concepts are capable of evaluation through a variety of methods. Third, SDT goes beyond simply modelling wellbeing, to being a theory about what promotes it. Fourth, the concentration within SDT on three key dimensions makes it practical for wider adoption. The more complex the model, the less portable it becomes.

While the paper arises from concern with the application of wellbeing in programmes and projects, its primary focus is the way we think about wellbeing, which ultimately structures planning and action. We begin by considering the construction of human subject that underlies different approaches to wellbeing. Cultural perspectives on SDT are then explored, followed by a review of how ethnographic research in Zambia identifies competence, autonomy and relatedness. The methods and findings of the present study are then described. The paper closes by considering whether the key tenets of SDT are supported in this context, and thus the prospects for a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and methodologically plural approach to wellbeing.

2. Modelling the subject of wellbeing

Central to constructions of wellbeing is the understanding of the self. This is, however, often so taken for granted as to go unremarked. In cross-cultural studies it is more likely to be noted, and is rendered most commonly through the contrast between individualism and collectivism. This identifies cultures as varying according to whether they promote personal growth, independence and self-reliance on the one hand or accommodation, interdependence and reciprocal support on the other (Miller, 2002). This is expected to affect construals of wellbeing. Triandis, for example, states:

‘well-being for collectivists depends on fitting in and having good relationships with the in-group ... while for individualists it depends on satisfaction with the self ... Thus, individualists sample mostly personal emotions, while collectivists sample mostly norms, obligations, duties.’ (Triandis, 1999, p.129).

As Miller (2002) remarks, the collectivism/individualism binary still assumes the ontological primacy of the individual, who in individualist cultures prioritises his/her own interests, and in collectivist cultures subordinates them to the group. Other branches of psychology suggest instead that persons are fundamentally inter-related (Christopher, 1999) or being itself is intrinsically relational (Gergen, 2009). In anthropology the social and cultural construction of personhood is a long established and lively debate, with a strong emphasis on more

relational perspectives (e.g. Carsten, 2004).

Overlaying such debates is a distinct but related question: what kind of subject are humans taken to be? Different disciplines have their own constructs, with political science constituting people as political subjects, sociology as social subjects, economics as economic subjects, and so on. But beyond this is a strong trend within contemporary Euro-American culture, to represent human beings as above all *psychological* subjects, prioritising how people are thinking and feeling over other dimensions of life (e.g. Rose, 1998; Thomson, 2006). While its cheerleaders may be psychologists and behavioural economists, this is a broad cultural trend which spreads far beyond the academy. The explosion of contemporary interest in happiness and wellbeing is itself an expression of this trend, and has brought a shift in the way wellbeing is understood. From earlier debates about politics and welfare, wellbeing is now commonly viewed as a property of individuals and predominantly construed in cognitive or affective terms (Sointu, 2005).

Research on wellbeing in the global south has, by contrast, emphasised how subjective experience is intertwined with material and relational dimensions of welfare and wellbeing (e.g. Gough and McGregor, 2007; White with Blackmore, 2015). Michael Jackson (2011), for example, argues that understandings of wellbeing amongst the Kuranko people of Sierra Leone are grounded in their experience of material scarcity. Wellbeing is thus ‘less a reflection on whether or not one has realized one’s hopes than a matter of learning how to live within limits’ (Jackson, 2011, p. 61). Wellbeing is also profoundly relational. The challenge is not to subordinate one’s own interests to those of the group, as Triandis suggests, but:

‘to find a more bearable balance between personal needs and the equally imperative needs of others. By implication, well-being could not be found within oneself but only in relation to significant others.’ (Jackson, 2011, p.184).

The underlying model here is not a psychological, but a social subject. This does not deny the importance of thought, feelings and reflection, any more than a psychological subject denies the importance of inter-personal interaction. What it does, however, is ground the individual in the social, giving priority to social relations and practice as the primary focus of investigation and source of explanation. It is a social, rather than psychological, subject that is found in ethnographic representations of Zambia and Africa more broadly. This also resonates with the ways people in Chiawa describe wellbeing and narrate their selves, as described in more detail below.

3. Self-Determination Theory in cultural perspective

Inspired by humanistic psychology, SDT defines wellbeing as ‘the actualization of human potentials’ (Ryan and Deci, 2001, p.143). Wellbeing follows the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs, ‘innate, organismic necessities’ which must be met, or harm will result (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p.229). These are competence – the ability to tackle challenging tasks successfully; relatedness – connection with supportive others; and autonomy – defined not as independence from others, but that choices are self-determined. This definition of autonomy is critical to SDT’s claims to universalism: what matters is not whether values are individualist or collectivist, but whether the individual fully endorses them.

In SDT a dialectic is posed between psychological processes and social contexts which provide different levels of ‘ambient support’ (*ibid.*) for the fulfilment of these needs. If contexts are ‘excessively controlling, over-challenging, or rejecting’, positive, growth-oriented psychological processes will be replaced by negative, defensive ones (*ibid.*). Contextual, cultural and developmental factors are acknowledged to affect ‘the modes of expression, the means of satisfaction, and the ambient supports’ for basic needs (Ryan and Deci, 2001, p.147). However, the main thrust of cross-cultural research on SDT has been to emphasise the universal and essential role of autonomy (e.g. Chirkov

et al., 2011).

Miller et al.'s (2011) comparison of the cultural experience of autonomy amongst European American and Hindu Indian university students, confirms the claim within SDT that choice is universally central to agency. However, they also find that individuals in the 'collectivist' cultural context may so internalise social obligations that they choose to honour them, rather than experiencing them as external demands. This speaks to the second research question of the current paper, as Miller et al. (2011) find that the form in which autonomy appears does indeed differ by cultural context, and argue that scales used to assess SDT should be adjusted to reflect this.

Devine et al. (2008) take further the issue of the salience of autonomy and its cultural forms, through interviews and focus groups in Bangladesh. While they discuss SDT, they also review a broader range of philosophical sources, linking their theorisation of autonomy more to action than the primarily psychological definition of SDT. Despite this 'strong' view, they find that autonomy is valued by all respondents, across rural and urban settings, though expressed differently by age and gender. Differences also occur across domains, since a person may be able to act more freely in one context than another. What emerge are 'situated autonomies', conditioned by their relational context, that may take covert as well as overt forms, and involve subtle and ambiguous strategies (Devine et al., 2008, p.131). Autonomy, Devine et al. (*ibid.*) argue, 'is determined not only by the agential capacities of an individual but also by the nature of relationships he or she may enjoy with others.'

In his comparison of 'enemyship' in Ghana and the USA, Adams (2005) shows that understandings of relationship, like autonomy, may differ by culture. While in Ghana it is normal to have enemies, North Americans assume defaults of friendship or neutrality. This is because, Adams (2005, p.950) says, individualist constructions of self in the U.S. 'frame interpersonal connection as a discretionary and often tenuous arrangement of more basic, unconnected selves.' By contrast, 'selfways' in West Africa 'locate self-experience in pre-existing fields of relational force' (*ibid.*). As a result:

'concepts like *relational* or *interdependent* ... refer not to value orientations or prescriptive beliefs about how things should be, but instead to constructions of reality or descriptive beliefs about how things are.' (Adams, 2005, p. 951, p. 951)

In the U.S. relationships are seen as positive because they are viewed as optional. This renders hatred, malice or envy the antithesis of relationship, while in Ghana these are viewed themselves as relational phenomena.

4. Autonomy, relatedness and wellbeing in Zambia

Having explored how the key tenets of SDT are discussed in the broader literature, we now consider how they appear in the ethnography of Zambia. Phiri and Abebe (2016) describe the importance of material (food/shelter/livelihood) and relational (harmony in the home) factors in perceptions of poverty and wellbeing amongst rural children in Zambia. While this in itself is unsurprising, what is significant is the way they link the two together – good relationships at home are critical to avoid poverty. This indicates a dimension of relationality that receives relatively little attention in the mainstream wellbeing literature: its significance for the material business of securing a living. Relationships amongst people in poorer communities are not simply or even primarily important as sources of emotional support. Rather, they are the medium of production, consumption and exchange of goods and people, the making and sustaining of life (Gough and McGregor, 2007; White with Blackmore, 2015). Ferguson (2015), reflecting on many years of research in southern Africa including Zambia, points out that this is as true in urban, contemporary monetized contexts as it was in pre-colonial times. Local constructions of reality admit no opposition between 'love' and 'money', rather:

'People seek money, and engage in exchanges, within the context of dense social relations of mutuality, just as they tend their relationships by fully deploying the powers and potentialities that access to money can enable.' (Ferguson, 2015, p.133, p.133)

While kinship provides the rubric for relationality in Zambia, this is far from an inert set of given ties. Rather, as Ferguson (2015, p.134) explains, 'kinship is not really something you *have* – it is something you *do*.' Cliggett (2005) thus describes how elderly Tonga people mobilise relationality in their livelihood strategies. Older men retain control as long as possible of wealth in cattle, agricultural implements and people, ideally with at least one younger wife and adolescent children still in the house. Older women need to develop 'excellence in pleading' on the basis of their vulnerability and their identity as mothers, along with a skilful expansion of those in the category of 'proper kin' on whom they can legitimately make claims (Cliggett, 2005, p.163). This points to the importance of *social* competence – the ability to navigate relationships effectively – which emerges strongly in the life history narratives below.

Crehan (1997) explores negative relationality amongst Kaonde people in Zambia. Remarking that kinship conjures a moral community, Crehan notes the breadth and flexibility of kinship categories. These set up, she argues, a tangle of extensive expectations of others and sense of duties towards others that appear at once binding and fluid. The result is rich potential for resentment that others have not done for you what they should and anxieties that you have not done all for others that you might. These find cultural expression in suspicions of witchcraft, which can explain both one's own misfortune, and the excessive good fortune of others.

Dover (2001, p. 135) challenges easy categorisations of Zambian culture as collectivist, as he describes how in Chiawa, people may be described by their social roles, but are judged as individuals. A strong emphasis on social responsibility and support to others is matched by cultural valuing of self-reliance, hard work and accomplishment. While men emphasised their personal achievements, success was demonstrated through their ability to act as patrons and provide help to others. Relationality and autonomy thus appear complementary, rather than in tension. For men at least:

'the achievement of adult personhood is the attainment of autonomy *through* responsibility.' (Dover, 2001, p.151, p.151)

The Zambia ethnographies prioritise the social in their accounts of human being. This does not dissolve the individual into the collective, but sees relationality as the medium through which individuals emerge. Discussion of autonomy and relatedness is grounded in the quotidian demands of making and sustaining a living. Success inheres not in *independence*, but the successful cultivation of *dependence* – whether as one who is needy and able to press one's claims, or as one whose power is demonstrated through the ability to command and support others. These issues are explored further in the field study, the context of which is discussed below.

5. Context

Chiawa is in Lusaka province, Kafue district, and has a population of 11,000 (Zambia census, 2010). It is marked by poverty and marginality in comparison to Zambia as a whole. During our research local amenities were basic: a primary health centre; an agricultural extension office; a community development office; one community school, four primary and two high schools, and churches. Major markets, hospitals or government offices and some jobs lay across the river, accessible only by a ferry that ran from dawn till dusk. Since our research, however, new roads and a bridge have been built and there are plans for mining in the adjoining area.

Located beside a national park, villagers are exposed daily to threats to livelihood, injury, or even death from wild animals. Most of the best land is taken by agri-business plantations or luxury safari lodges, the

latter providing the main source of salaried employment for men. A few, mostly women, work as labourers in commercial farms. For the majority with no formal job, local livelihoods are extremely precarious. Farming is low technology, vulnerable to drought, flooding if the dam upstream opens its sluice gates, and predation from wild animals. HIV/AIDS has resulted in high rates of mortality amongst adults of reproductive age.

6. Methods

We visited Chiawa first in 2009, invited by Oxfam Hong Kong to work with them and their local partner organisation, Hodi, on developing indicators of wellbeing for monitoring and evaluation. We returned in 2010 to conduct independent research. Hodi's representative in Chiawa provided us with an introduction to the community and assisted us in recruiting local staff. Thereafter we worked independently from Hodi. The organisation dissolved before our research was finished, although Oxfam continued to sponsor a skeleton programme of livelihoods, health and school support.

The field research took place in two periods, August–November, 2010 and 2012. The fieldwork was conducted by the second author and a team of three local peer researchers, plus one research assistant, recruited in 2010 from the UK, and in 2012 from Lusaka. Ethics clearance was given both by the University of Bath and by the University of Zambia.

The project was a mixed method study of poverty and wellbeing. The main research instrument was a survey, conducted with an average of 390 people in each round, through face to face interviews, undertaken in a conversational style. Respondents were adult household heads, male and female, with each partner interviewed separately. We primarily employed convenience sampling, but used the local knowledge of our research team to ensure this reflected the socio-demographic profile of Chiawa. Our research design included households headed by divorced or widowed women as 25 per cent of the sample, as these are known to face particular socio-economic challenges. 59 per cent of our respondents were thus female. The mean age was 39, the minimum 18 and the maximum 84.

This paper includes some descriptive statistics from the 2012 survey, but the main source is 46 life history case studies, recorded through qualitative interviews. Through the survey we identified themes that were critical to wellbeing locally: land, livelihoods, and human-wildlife conflict; marriage, care of children and personal or social support. We then used purposive sampling to select people for life history interviews, identifying through the survey respondents whose experience would enable us to follow up different dimensions of these themes in more depth. The profile of case studies is similar to the surveys: 61 per cent women, with 26 per cent women heading households alone. Ages range from 27 to 78, with a mean of 40.

The interviews invited participants to recount their own stories from their childhood onwards. There was no structured schedule, as we wished to understand people's perspectives in as near to their own terms as possible. However, we did probe for the key wellbeing themes (as above) to ensure broad comparability across the sample. Some interviews involved a single sitting of an hour or two, while others spread across several sessions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Nine were conducted in English (all of these were with men) and the rest were translated simultaneously. Interviewees chose the language in which they felt most comfortable and there is no discernible difference in the depth or quality of information relating to the language in which the interview was conducted. All names have been changed.

Interviewers gained informed consent at the outset of each session, and re-confirmed this verbally at regular intervals during extended interviews. We did not offer any payment for being interviewed and took care to emphasise in particular that we were not a conduit of influence on Hodi. At the close of the research we produced a briefing

paper for policy-makers which summarised the main challenges that local people faced. Together with two village elders, who took the leading role in directing our discussions, we presented this in Lusaka to a range of national and international organisations. This enabled the villagers to prioritise the issues most pressing for the community, and gave them a level of access to those in positions of power that they had not otherwise been able to achieve.

Our primary analytical approach was narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993). This enabled us to appreciate how instances of autonomy, competence and relatedness fit together in the broader context of individuals' lives, as well as the twists and turns of the narratives in themselves. Text was coded both by substantive theme and by narrative logic. We did not ask people directly about autonomy, competence or relatedness, as we did not want to influence their accounts. Interviews were therefore coded to these themes during data analysis. This resulted in an immediate difficulty, that pieces of text did not simply divide between the three categories: many, if not all, combined at least two, and often all three. Multiple meanings within a particular piece of text is a common issue in qualitative data analysis (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). As anticipated above and argued further below, however, in this instance we believe this reflects the empirical reality that autonomy, competence and relatedness are vitally intertwined.

The findings draw on analysis across the case studies. However, to help convey how competence, autonomy and relatedness combine as dimensions of wellbeing for particular individuals, we take illustrative quotations primarily from three people, who together represent a range of issues and experience.

Faith, aged 40, is a widow with five children, who has struggled to make ends meet since the death of her husband a decade earlier. She survives through a mixture of petty business (brewing beer, buying and selling fruit) and a little farming. Distrust of non-married women as potential poachers of other women's husbands puts Faith on the social margins. Support comes primarily from her own natal kin. Relations with her late husband's family are ambivalent at best.

Samuel, aged 56, is the married father of eight children, and stepfather to two more. A community leader, his influence far exceeds his rather modest wealth. He depends mainly on farming, augmented by short-term contracts when available. Like Faith, he sees the wider community in equivocal terms, perhaps rooted in a very difficult childhood after his parents' divorce. In general one who provides, rather than receives, support, Samuel nonetheless identifies one or two men in his life who gave him critical help at particular times.

Hattie, aged 48, has two grown up and three younger children. Known widely as a widow, she in fact divorced her husband secretly some years before he died. She is well integrated socially, attracting none of the stigma of other women living without husbands. However, she struggles to make ends meet, doing some farming but relying mainly on 'piece-work', watering people's gardens or doing their laundry on a casual basis.

7. Wellbeing, competence, autonomy and relatedness in Chiawa

7.1. Wellbeing

Asked what wellbeing means, people in Chiawa describe the ability to achieve a reasonable livelihood, fulfil responsibilities for provision and care and support one's children (and/or siblings) through school. The following comment by a 30 year old married man is typical:

'Well, if one is to live a good life in our community ... I think first of all one must have enough food for his family ... for himself and his family. And must also have something to share with the community, because like you don't just say, "No, this is for my family alone," but you've also got some other relatives, some friends who can come and ask for things.'

Given the harsh conditions and material scarcity of village life in

Chiawa, it is not surprising that economic sufficiency ('having enough') comes first. This is immediately, however, set in a relational context. The point is not simply to 'have enough', but to have enough to *care* for one's family. There is a strong gender dimension to this. Where women are more likely to mention the importance of good relations within the family, for both men and women ideals of wellbeing rest strongly on men's responsibilities for provision as husbands and fathers. As the statement above makes clear, however, the orbit of care is not limited to the immediate family. Wellbeing also involves the ability to *share* with others, especially wider kin.

There is clearly a marked distance between this economic and social framing of wellbeing in Chiawa and the psychological theory of SDT. The sections that follow explore whether competence, autonomy and relatedness nevertheless emerge as significant factors that contribute to wellbeing, as people tell their stories in more detail.

7.2. Competence

The economic and social provision that characterises local constructions of wellbeing is the primary context in which the issue of competence arises. The low level of public provision, paucity of local opportunities and marginal returns on most forms of enterprise mean that just making ends meet is a considerable achievement. This typically involves an assemblage of multiple activities – some farming, some business, some odd jobs, some relief maize, perhaps some, often seasonal, employment. People express doubts in themselves and fear of failure, that they will not be able to provide for their families as they should. They also express satisfaction when they have managed things well. Faith gives an example. Asked about moments of happiness, after a life story full of pain and hardship, Faith responds:

'The moments that give me happiness are when I have managed to sell my goods at the market and I get a bit of money. That gives me enough hope to say, "Ah, I think I can solve one or two of my problems."'

The main specific competence that people discuss is education. Our survey showed that overall education levels were low, with only 18 per cent of men and 4 per cent of women reaching (and not necessarily completing) the three final grades of high school. Women in particular express regret at their lack of education, many saying that it was simply not a priority for girls when they were young. The strongest regrets come from women who have given up school to get married or have children and then encountered marital difficulties, meaning they couldn't rely on their husbands' support. The need to ensure children's education is one of the most frequent reasons given for major life decisions, regarding e.g. (re)marriage, work or where to live.

Competence in providing for yourself and your family also enables autonomy. This is noted by women in particular, who present themselves as more liable to others' interference. A woman whose husband left her claiming she was infertile, provides a striking example. To prove him wrong, she undertook one relationship in which she conceived a son, and another in which she conceived twin daughters. Asked whether this caused a scandal she responds robustly:

'Even if they were saying a lot of things I just said, "it's not their burden because I am going to take care of the children on my own ... whatever they are going to say let them say it!"'

While explicit recognition of competence arises in relation to work, education, and the ability to provide for the family, at least as important is competence in managing people, negotiating social norms, and managing oneself in a social context. Where access to material resources strongly depends on personal relationship, this social competence can make the difference between getting by or not. Asked for an example of a problem she had solved, Faith describes how she overcame her family's hunger the previous year by petitioning her aunt for some land on which she could grow maize. This also indicates inter-

relations between competence and relatedness. Faith's practical competence in growing food for her family depended on her social competence in identifying someone who could help and successfully pleading her case, and so mobilising kin-based relatedness.

Samuel provides a strong example of social competence, seeing himself as a natural leader with an innate desire to help others. He describes how he was recognised as a leader very young, and in senior school his headmaster entrusted him with responsibilities such that even the staff would consult him. Explaining his success in leadership roles Samuel indicates both forms of competence. First, he was bright, so other students valued his judgement. Second, however, he treated everyone respectfully, whatever their age. The proper expression of respect is a central value in Chiawa (Dover, 2001). While he was given authority over students older than him and he enjoyed this, Samuel exercised it carefully, recognising, 'even if I have authority I think I also have to respect him because he is my senior.' This pattern of occupying fully the space available and yet also respecting the limits hints towards Samuel's particular way of inhabiting autonomy, which is considered in the next section.

7.3. Autonomy

SDT suggests that autonomy in contexts like Chiawa is likely to be shown in individuals integrating collective norms within the self. By contrast, the Chiawa data replicates Devine et al.'s (2008) findings in Bangladesh, that autonomy is both critical to wellbeing, and associated with scope for independent action.

Faith gives a clear example of this fusion of autonomy and freedom of action in her early married life. She talks with evident delight:

'I had my own house; I could do whatever I wanted to do at any time - I could eat at any time without anyone saying I ought to be doing this or that. Nobody was giving me any instructions - I was giving instructions to myself!'

It is important to note, however, that this autonomy is within a relational context. Faith's joy in her ability to run her home as she liked was grounded in a loving relationship with her husband and child, and a secure livelihood enabled by his salary and her farming.

In listening to what people are saying in accounts of their lives, it is important to understand local conventions of discourse. These may value the denial of choice, rather than its assertion. In accounts of marriage, for example, it is conventional in Chiawa to present oneself as acceding only because of social pressure. Anna, a happily married 30 year old woman, illustrates this tension over admitting one's desires in an unusually frank account of her marriage negotiations. She begins with the conventional story of resistance, but later corrects this, saying how she had genuinely refused earlier proposals, but with the man she eventually married, her refusal was simply observing conventions:

'I think this time I wouldn't say I was forced by my parents, even if I was refusing but inwardly I had already accepted. So I was pretending that I was refusing. Because even at first there were some people that came to me and wanted to marry me, I would refuse, my parents they were getting the money, but I never accepted. But this one, even if I was saying "No, no, no", inwardly I said, "Yes, this is the one for me!"'

For other women, it is only by ending a bad marriage that a sense of autonomy could be regained. Hattie presents a strong example of this, having ended a marriage in which her husband failed to provide for her and the children, was often absent, and undertook multiple affairs. She explains:

'You know I was not very, very free when I was with him, even my prayers were being disturbed. I couldn't have managed to be fighting with almost every girlfriend that he goes to. So I was in any case quiet and angry all the time, not even talking over anything that he

was doing. But now that I remained single it's like now I was free and it was easy for me to start praying nicely without being disturbed.'

This apparently strong statement of independence is again within a relational context. Since the divorce Hattie has become a full member of the Catholic church, and this has given her a new network of support and social status. The ability to develop a new relationship with God, too, has been transformational, as she has 'painted over my old ways'. Hattie goes on:

'It's like God helped me so much and I was happy and I am still happy in the state in which I am I wasn't happy, I became happy after I am single.'

The relationship with God appeared in many interviews as a support to autonomy. Samuel shows how this may take the form of a retrospective endorsement of the turns life has taken, as he describes his experience of God's help and protection and his acceptance of what happens as Providence. Asked if he has ever felt like giving up Samuel reacts strongly, 'No, giving up is not in my way!' Although his coming to Chiawa was precipitated by a dispute which caused him much grief and material loss, he believes God intended him to come so he could help local people. Samuel explains:

'So maybe I think it was God's plan for a certain situation to develop so that a certain situation could be fulfilled. So I accept both the situations even though it is difficult at times to accept certain situations but later I feel that it happened because that situation wanted me to be what I am today or what I am doing.'

This active occupation of a responsive mode of being is characteristic of Samuel's narration of self. It captures well how autonomy appears in Chiawa, where fortunes are so uncertain. While the language of acceptance sounds acquiescent, it in fact reflects an assertive choice to find meaning in misadventure, to transform harm dealt by others into a positive place to stand.

The cases of both Samuel and Hattie also point to a strong pattern evident across the interviews, that autonomous self-assertion emerges from the failure of others to fulfil their relational responsibilities. Samuel was badly, and repeatedly, let down by his father throughout his childhood and young adulthood, culminating in his step-mother blocking his chances to develop a professional career. Hattie's husband's failure speaks for itself, but as described below, she also has highly ambivalent relations with her natal kin. Deborah, a 39 year old widow with three children, describes how she came to realise that her brothers would not look after her children following her husband's death. Initially she felt aggrieved – she had helped her brothers get through school so expected some reciprocity. However, taking on the responsibility to provide for her children has brought her an inner freedom:

'Yes ... before I could manage supporting myself ... that is when I was getting annoyed to say, "these people are not helping me, how am I going to survive?" But now that I am taking care of myself I am not even worried with what they are doing.'

Being self-reliant does not mean complete independence, but engaging relationally to achieve her goals. Deborah has placed her three children with kin, in the hopes of achieving better schooling. However, having nursed her husband through 11 years of illness, with herself as the sole provider for the family for more than half that time, Deborah is clear that she values her current independence:

'... if I got married today it will mean my husband will not give me the freedom that I have now to do my business. ... I will become a house servant, I will be forced to be at home and then it will be difficult to send my children to school.'

This reverses the usual assumption that husbands are the main providers. If she ever gets married again, Deborah says, it will not be

until after she has seen her children through school.

7.4. Relatedness

Good close relationships are important supports to wellbeing in Chiawa as elsewhere. Faith's early happiness with her husband and baby is described above. Samuel similarly remembers the joy of his first marriage: 'When I am out, as soon I come in the home, she would run after me, then hug each other - yes, that is life!' The energy is unmistakable in Anna's description of her feelings for her husband, 'Yes, this is the one for me!' While the emotional side of marriage is important, however, what people emphasise more is practical support. Asked whether it was hard to leave her husband, Hattie refers to his failure to provide: 'I didn't even have a *chitenge* [cloth women wear over a skirt or trousers]! I would do piece-work for me to get one.' As noted above, the material and emotional are closely intertwined. Love is expressed in providing.

The bigger story of relatedness in Chiawa is of course about kinship. As described above, this sets up norms of responsibility and entitlement which are not necessarily followed, but provide the context within which negotiations must take place. A married man of 31 provides a classic statement of kin-based reciprocity as a ballast against uncertainty, though unusually locates key ties with his wife's rather than his own family:

'The way we are living now ... with me even if I stop working, the other one, all my brothers-in-law ... they can all help me. Things may change - this year maybe things are one way but the next year they may change'

By contrast, Hattie describes the tensions between formal claims and social practice. When her marriage failed she moved back to her father's household, but has uneasy relations with her half-brothers. They are, she says, like fritters – individually fried – rather than (soft-batch) rolls that are joined together. As the senior sibling she is called on for example to celebrate a niece or nephew's coming of age, but the underlying dynamic of their relationship is equivocal. She expresses this metaphorically:

'If a snake is in the house people will call me, but if a rat [prized source of meat] they will kill and eat themselves.'

Although kin are the primary sources of support, friends can also be significant. Faith describes how she and another widow help each other out with food if either falls short, but what matters most is the keeping of confidences:

'I trust her because she keeps everything that I tell her to herself and everything that she tells me I keep to myself. Neither of us reveals any of this to anybody else, even to any other friends - it is all between us.'

While the immediate import of this is the pleasures of close friendship, it also carries a darker message: the dangers of sociality. These were frequently referred to. People talked ruefully of sharing secrets only to find them the talk of the village; or how they bore in silence unhappy or violent marriages for fear of becoming the subject of gossip. 'You never know what is in people's hearts' was a constant refrain. This is an implicit reference to witchcraft, which may take advantage of any point at which your guard is down. A woman living with HIV thus explained that she needed to keep her status secret for fear that people would perceive her vulnerability and so use witchcraft against her. Witchcraft may also be an expression of envy. Faith attributes the death of two daughters and then her husband to people's envy of their happiness. This chimes with Adams' (2005) observation of the wide scope for negative relationality in societies identified as 'collectivist'. It also recalls Deci and Ryan's (2000, p.232) recognition that the 'ambient social context' may undermine rather than support well-being. Relationships, as they say, may be over-controlling or rejecting,

or as here, fraught with ambivalence and fears of treachery.

8. Resisting the psychological subject

As noted above, the identification of the human subject as social, economic, political, or psychological can be attributed in part to disciplinary interests. ‘Confirmation bias’, whereby researchers find what they are looking for, is also well-known. In our case, however, while our sociological training and focus on wellbeing made us anticipate social and psychological subjects respectively, we found that people presented themselves in rather different terms.

The aspect which struck us first was people's resistance to questions about their subjective experience, thoughts and especially emotions. Although invited to represent themselves in psychological terms, they repeatedly stressed the material and/or relational. This happened even when the context seemed to us a clearly emotional one. For example, after Faith expressed the delight in her early married life reported above, it emerged that her husband was then working in a safari lodge, meaning he was away for at least a month at a time. When we asked whether Faith found this hard, she robustly returned to the material:

‘I was happy because I knew that he was out there looking for money that was going to help us.’

Another example concerns the accounts that people give of childhood hardship. Several of our participants had spent time as children in the houses of kin, with some experiencing exploitation and neglect. Their narratives however, emphasise almost exclusively what was done to them – being beaten, starved, or over-worked – rather than how they felt. Anna tells how she ran away to her aunt in another village to avoid going to school. After her uncle died, she returned with her aunt to live in her parents' village. Asked how her parents felt about her being so close and yet not living with them, Anna's answer is prosaic – her mother had a cousin helping her with work, so wasn't too bothered about Anna.

The second challenge to our presumptions came during analysis. Encompassing the social subjects we anticipated, people presented themselves above all as *moral* subjects, concerned not simply with the practical demands of daily life, but with being, and being seen to be, a particular kind of person. This is most obvious in their repeated references to God or faith when asked how they cope with daily struggles, what gives them the strength to carry on. It is, however, not limited to this. Wellbeing, essentially enwound as it is with responsibility to and of others, is above all a moral concept. The representation of self and others in moral terms is clearly evident throughout Samuel and Hattie's narratives, in particular. Of course this cannot simply be taken at face value. The stories we tell about ourselves may be different from those others tell about us, and the tendency for people to present a virtuous self was greater in formal interviews than it was in day to day ‘off-script’ discussion. However, describing people as moral subjects does not imply that they always behave well. As Laidlaw (2013, p.3) says, what is at stake ‘is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative.’

There is, however, a darker side to this issue of the moral subject. This again is characteristic of all the narratives, but is clearest in Faith's. Just as Adams (2005) argues that people in Ghana expect to have enemies, people who seek to do them harm, so people in Chiawa feel themselves to be at constant threat of malice or evil, expressed most obviously in the frequent references to witchcraft. Faith's social and economic marginality is reflected in a keen sense of the contradictions of relationships, and the dangers of others' self-interest and envy. In the cultural context of Chiawa, being a moral subject does not relate only to ethical projects of the self (Laidlaw, 2013). It also involves a lively awareness of potential evil, and the need to defend oneself as best one can against attack (see also Thornton, 2017).

9. Discussion and conclusion

The underlying ontology of SDT builds on a biomedical model of individual organisms, is largely cognitive in orientation, and reflects humanistic psychology's strong, positive, and active view of human life as the pursuit of growth, learning and integration. The construction of competence, autonomy and relatedness as basic psychological needs arises from this ontology. Their empirical identification also reflects it, in placing emphasis on the mental acts of internalization (for autonomy) or the conscious sense of achievement or personal connection (for competence or relatedness). This is challenged by the context of Chiawa, where people resist psychological representations, and present instead material, relational and especially *moral* accounts of self and others.

The first research question asks whether competence, autonomy and relatedness emerge as significant to wellbeing in Chiawa, as SDT predicts. The answer is clearly affirmative. The second research question asks *how* these qualities appear in Chiawa. Here we see some differences with SDT. In part these derive from the methods - open-ended interviewing and inductive analysis. But – as our third research question suggests - they also reflect differences in ontology, specifically, the priority that SDT gives to psychology in its rendition of human being, as compared with the more social accounts found in ethnography and in many poorer parts of the world.

In Chiawa understandings of wellbeing are fundamentally grounded in the material and relational – being able to provide for one's family and having something to share with others who ask. The forms taken by competence, autonomy and relatedness reflect this. They concern typically the quotidian demands of sustaining a life and livelihood: competence in providing for one's family; autonomy in running one's home as one chooses; relatedness as the context within which needs are met and resources generated. This also suggests that, in the context of Chiawa at least, competence, autonomy and relatedness do not appear so much as distinct psychological needs, but mutually constitutive modes of being.

Deci and Ryan (2000) relate competence to having an effect on one's environment and completing a task well. This is clearly evident in Chiawa in people's satisfaction at business achievements, for example. The evidence points, however, to a further dimension: social competence, the ability to nurture relationships and negotiate astutely the degree of flexibility within social norms. This is often an unconscious skill which people take for granted, but clearly emerges in the interstices of narratives and is sometimes the object of explicit reflection. As with autonomy and relatedness, expression of competence may differ by gender. Typically – though not inevitably – men's narratives are in active voice while women present themselves as responding to the actions of others. This may reflect real differences in men and women's scope to experience wellbeing. However, it should also be recognised that forms of expression may vary by gender, so more subtle or implicit manifestations should not be overlooked (Jha, 2018).

The definition of autonomy within SDT as ‘the feeling of volition that can accompany any act’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 74) has been central to claims of the theory's universality and ability to transcend cultural divides. Confounding expectations of Zambia as a ‘collectivist’ society, however, in Chiawa autonomy is more often expressed through freedom of action, which skilfully navigates local norms or even directly flouts them. This does not mean, of course, that thought is unimportant, but it isn't what people prioritise in the ways they narrate their selves. Autonomy is never complete independence, it may rather represent shifts in terms of *which* relations are activated and which denied, and *how* they are engaged. This recalls the point of Devine et al. (2008), that autonomy is determined not only by the agentic capacities of individuals, but also by the nature of their relationships.

The Chiawa data also draws attention to the temporality of autonomy. While autonomy is typically considered in terms of actions in the present and anticipation of the future, it can also be signalled in

readings of the past. In Chiawa, acceptance of past hardships often involves an intimation of divine purpose. This may appear to deny autonomy, but in fact represents a choice to find positive meaning in difficult experience.

While competence and autonomy are clearly important, wellbeing in Chiawa is most profoundly relational. This contrasts with the balance in SDT, in which competence is identified as proximal in all motivation, autonomy as critical to intrinsic motivation, and relatedness as only a 'distal support' (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 235). The primacy of relatedness in Chiawa is consistent with the ethnography of southern Africa, which shows relationality to constitute the context of and arena for action. As love, relatedness is itself a source of wellbeing, but comprehending and surpassing this, relationality is the medium through which wellbeing travels and out of which wellbeing is generated. Social competence is *relational* competence and the ends of competence are relational ends. Autonomy is always relational autonomy, a space for action carved out of some relationships and embedded in others. However, it is important not to romanticise relationship, not to read, as Adams (2005) warns, a prescription of what ought to be onto a description of what is. Relationality is deeply ambivalent, carrying harm and vulnerability as well as support and joy. It is founded in hierarchy and produces difference even through mutuality. It is this duality of relatedness that makes social competence so important. Relationality is inevitable, but must be negotiated with care.

What then does this mean for the prospect of a simple and practical model of wellbeing that is capable of assessment through multiple methods and responsive to a range of cultural and institutional contexts? That competence, autonomy and relatedness appear significant even in the context of rural Africa and even when assessed through purely qualitative methods, suggests both that an interdisciplinary framework is possible and that SDT provides a good basis to build on. However, the ethnographic evidence also draws attention to SDT's own cultural grounding in the construction of a psychological subject. To acknowledge this would go beyond recognising that autonomy, competence and relatedness may take socially and culturally distinctive forms, to admit that their identification as basic psychological needs may be an artefact of SDT's intellectual grounding, rather than an essential ontological truth.

The implication of this is that organisations adopting this model for work on wellbeing in policy or practice would need to reflect on how autonomy, competence and relatedness appear in their particular context and so what methods and indicators would be appropriate for their assessment. Recognising people as social or moral, not just psychological subjects means being open to going beyond the established cognitive measures of SDT to assess the tangible and practical dimensions of 'having enough' materially, scope for choice and room for manoeuvre, chances to build and exercise one's abilities, and the quality of engagement with others.

For those working in service delivery, the ontological status of the human subject is rarely a central concern. What they do seek, however, is an approach which has been validated as demonstrating academic rigour. As 'a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession' (Klein and Newell, 1997, p. 3), wellbeing is an obvious candidate for this rigour to appear in interdisciplinary form. Instead, the main approaches to wellbeing are either narrowly technical or deeply discipline-bound, and thus unable to reflect critically on the conditions of their own production. For academics, working across disciplinary and methodological divides is inherently risky and transgressive. For ethnographic purists, employing an external analytical framework risks distorting local realities. For SDT purists, letting go of the psychological subject may be a step too far. The question this paper poses, is whether the prize of an approach that is both able to respond effectively to context, and reflect critically on its own assumptions, makes engaging on wellbeing across disciplinary orthodoxies a price worth paying?

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