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Critical Policy Studies and Historical Sociology of Concepts: Wellbeing and Mindfulness in Education

Julie McLeod and Katie Wright

Introduction

It is *Mindful in May*, or so our work email told us, as we scrambled to finish a multitude of tasks while retaining a positive outlook. A message to staff reported that "It's now accepted that people practising mindfulness have much lower rates of serious illness and recover better from illness, and it is strongly associated with better mental health" (university wide email, April, 2018). Such advice resonates with calls to manage work/life balance and, increasingly, to attend to our personal wellbeing. The rise of programs to support the self-management of work pressures is not a new phenomenon, and nor is the well-documented intensification of work in many occupational sectors, accompanied by the rise of precarious work in others. Such polarisation within the labour market, when viewed alongside the widespread and enthusiastic embrace of a technique like mindfulness, speaks to how the emotional pressures of over or under-work are addressed therapeutically rather than structurally.

It is an obvious point to make that work/life balance, for example, or insecurity of employment are not adequately addressed

by interventions that focus on helping individuals to become adaptable, resilient, or more mindful. In this sense, the rise of mindfulness in work and educational settings can be understood as part of a repertoire of techniques that sit within and help constitute 'therapeutic culture', a concept that describes "the social, cultural and political influence of psychology and, importantly, the diffusion of practices and beliefs typically associated with therapy and counselling" (Wright, 2018, p. 178). Critiques of this cultural and political turn abound, and come from multiple vantage points (Wright, 2011), with some seeing it as representing a weakening of the social and moral order (Furedi, 2004) and others as a way of holding individuals responsible for managing social ills (Brunila, 2016, 2018; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). As we discuss below, however, the practices and norms associated with therapeutic cultures have more ambivalent and unpredictable effects than are typically acknowledged. Drawing on concepts from critical policy studies, and informed by Foucauldian genealogy and debates within historical sociology, we examine the rise and reach of mindfulness, framing it as one instance of wider wellbeing agendas. We show the value of these theoretical and methodological approaches for historicising the construct of mindfulness and for situating it within a network of concepts and policy discourses.

Analysis of these discourses is advanced in three main ways. First, taking the methodological strategy of "problematization" as developed in Foucauldian scholar ship, we turn to Carol Bacchi's

(2009, 2012) approach of *What's the Problem Represented to Be* [WPR], to identify how specific issues are defined and then made problematic. Second, as an example, we develop an analysis of mindfulness employing the WPR approach. Third, the distinctive insights afforded by an "historical sociology of concept formation" (Somers, 2008, p. 172) as applied to these matters are elaborated. Overall, we argue that such practices of problematization require critical attention to not only the invention of policy problems but also to their conceptual networks, genealogy and effects. Finally, while acknowledging the complex histories of these concepts, we insist on attending to the ambivalent effects of mindfulness programs and wellbeing agendas.

Before working through the stages of this analysis, the influence of mindfulness in relation to wellbeing and education is briefly considered. This serves as illustration of the phenomena we are trying to understand, and a reference point for engaging with the concepts and approaches noted above.

Wellbeing and mindfulness at school and beyond

Being present in the moment, paying attention, acting purposefully, accepting without judging—these practices are the heart of mindfulness. Drawing on core ideas from Buddhism, mindfulness has become a mainstream and fashionable "psychological aid" (Farias & Wikholm, 2015). It is widely utilised by psychologists and counsellors as a therapeutic tool (Hofmann et al.,

2010), but it is also within reach of anyone with access to the internet, a smartphone, a bookstore or a library.

A simple YouTube search of the word mindfulness returns almost 1.5 million results, offering a seemingly endless array of choices to draw on in being guided through the practice or in learning about its manifold benefits for body and soul. An astonishing number of mobile apps exist to help one become mindful, while thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of books extend the long tradition of self-help through a turn to mindfulness. Beyond the clinic and the easy access to technology, facilitated "how to" guides and traditional books, mindfulness has been institutionalised in schools, workplaces, prisons, and even in the toughest of government agencies, the military (Purser & Loy, 2013). Mindfulness is everywhere. It is the focus of the popular month-long global fundraiser, *Mindful in May*——a social enterprise that teaches people to meditate while also collecting donations to "build clean water projects in developing countries". The campaign offers a tantalising promise: "Give me 4 weeks, I'll give you changes for life!", with the reassuring message, "It takes just 10 minutes a day to transform your mind … and the world" (Mindful in May, 2018).

The benefits of mindfulness as a practice and aspiration are advocated for school students as well as teachers, supported by departments of education and marketed by the growing

entrepreneurial "care of the self" sector. It has been estimated that the "global wellness industry is worth trillions of dollars", with mindfulness being a lucrative part of this (Doran, 2018). In the corporate sector, consultants offer programs to enhance productivity and efficiency, reduce absenteeism and help foster the sorts of "soft skills" that can bolster careers (Purser & Loy, 2013). Introducing quiet spaces, massages, yoga classes, colouring in books and meditation rooms has become a way for businesses to "care" for their employees by reducing stress and enhancing wellbeing (Patty, 2005). Short courses and weekend retreats are available for teachers to refresh and refocus so they can be more effective. As one organisation offering this proclaims, "As educators, we need to fill our own up first…so we can then help fill the cups of others!" (Mindfulness Classroom, 2018). With teachers themselves equipped with the knowledge and skills to practise mindfulness, they are in a strong position to introduce this into their classrooms, along with a range of other techniques to improve well being. Attending a workshop provided by Mindfulness Classroom, for example, offers teachers the opportunity to experience "peace, bliss and calm" during a weekend stay at a monastery, while "taste testing" a range of modalities that can be helpful at home and at work, from Tai Chi, Yoga and Chakra Healing Meditations, to Sound-Baths, Laughter Yoga, Drumming Circles, Art Therapy, Aromatherapy and Kirtan (Mindfulness Classroom, 2018).

Mindfulness is now well integrated into school systems. In the United Kingdom, the charity, Mindfulness in Schools Project

(MiSP), reports that it has delivered mindfulness training to 350,000 primary school children to help them "flourish academically, socially and emotionally" (MiSP, 2018). The MiSP program is now taught in more than 20 countries and its curriculum translated into a range of different languages (Ricci, 2015). In the United States, the Mindful Schools organisation estimates that its 10,000 graduates have reached more than 2 million students. In Australia, the KidsMatter mental health initiative for primary schools includes a "Mindful Schools" program for children as well as a program called "Headrest" for teachers. The benefits cited typically point to the effectiveness of mindfulness-based skills in "reducing stress, increasing concentration and better managing distractions" (KidsMatter, 2018).

Is this a problem?

The growing popularity of mindfulness in schools and workplaces may be usefully understood as part of current agendas to improve the mental health and wellbeing of particular groups—students and workers. But it also reflects wider cultural imperatives to address problems of mental health and wellbeing at the level of entire populations. Organisations that promote mindfulness, and individual schools adopt mindfulness practices, link them not only to a positive sense of mental and physical health but also, crucially, to improving efficiency and outcomes. In schools, wellbeing is now a well-established part of the educational lexicon. It is the latest iteration in a long history of initiatives that have targeted individual

subjectivity and conduct and which have straddled both equity concerns and wider aspirations to improve academic outcomes—such as the introduction of student counselling in the first half of the twentieth century and the attempt to raise self-esteem that came later (Wright, 2014; McLeod, 2015). Notions of resilience and flourishing, which along with mindfulness, are key words animating the wellbeing imperative, point to the pervasive influence of positive psychology and its remarkably successful offspring, positive education. The Patron of the Positive Education Schools Association (PESA), Martin Seligman, asks "What do you really want for your children?" Embracing positive education, he asserts, is an approach whereby schools "teach both traditional skills for learning and help teach students the skills to lead a flourishing life" (PESA, 2018). This involves applying the "scientifically informed principles of Positive Psychology within an educational setting" to combat the mental health crisis facing young people and equip students with the skills needed to achieve happiness and fulfil their potential (PESA, 2018).

The embrace of wellbeing as an educational aspiration may be read, on one level, as a reflection of a more humane and enlightened approach to schooling, one which views students holistically and recognises them as people first, not simply learning machines to be pushed through the system. As such, it would appear to be a self-evidently good thing—what could be wrong with aspirations to improve student wellbeing by adopting

techniques like mindfulness, which aim to enhance life and learning through techniques that foster a different way of being in the world?

What is problematisation and why do we want to problematise?

In trying to tease apart what may seem, at first glance, to be an unproblematic issue—promoting student wellbeing through mindfulness in schools—we turn to the methodological strategy of "problematisation" as developed in Foucauldian scholarship and built upon in the work of others, particularly that of Carol Bacchi (2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi's approach, *What's the Problem Represented to Be* [WPR], provides a framework for identifying how certain issues come to be defined as problems, and which in turn call for particular types of solutions. Developed as a tool to analyse policy "problems", Bacchi's approach is useful for thinking afresh about wellbeing, not only as a policy problem but also as a wider social imperative. Central to the WPR approach is Foucault's (1996) strategy of *problematisation*. Using our example of wellbeing, this involves raising questions about how the notion of wellbeing emerged and evolved, and in particular, how it has become a key concept in education and in wider society and culture for understanding what constitutes health, happiness, success and a good life. As Foucault observes (1996, pp. 456–457):

Problematization doesn't mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn't exist. It's the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that make something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought.

How, then, has wellbeing been constituted as an "object for thought"?

Before unpacking the usefulness of the WPR approach, it is helpful to begin by thinking of wellbeing as a *keyword* in contemporary social life and educational policy (Wright & McLeod, 2015). This step is important to recognising the influence and effects of particular words and concepts. As Fraser and Gordon (1994, p. 310) remind us, "the terms that are used to describe social life are also active forces shaping it". In their genealogy of dependency as a keyword of the US welfare state, they draw on Foucault to "excavate broad historical shifts in linguistic usage" of the term with the aim to "defamiliarize taken-for-granted beliefs in order to render them sus ceptible to critique and to illuminate present-day difficulties" (Fraser & Gordon, 1994, pp. 310–311). In a related approach, also influenced by Foucauldian gen ealogy, but engaging a different suite of conceptual orientations, Talburt and Lesko (2012a) demonstrate the value of historicising keywords. This not only provides insights into how meanings change over time but also reveals "the enabling structures, paradigms, and assumptions of the concepts" (p. 7). Their method is one that "problematizes the very terms and concepts

through which we know and understand a topic" by interrogating when, how and why particular terms emerge and become popular (Talburt & Lesko, 2012b, p. 11). In grappling with "wellbeing" as an object for thought, we pay critical attention to historicising well being as a socially constructed concept, one that is invented in different times and places for different purposes. Importantly, in problematising wellbeing we are not suggesting that educational approaches aiming to improve wellbeing are necessarily misguided. Rather, our aim is to examine this issue through a critical lens, one that seeks to illuminate other ways of understanding the appeal, movement and effects of this keyword. In the midst of the pervasiveness of wellbeing and mindfulness dis courses, stepping back from the taken for granted value of these ideas and practices is to embark on a task of defamiliarisation.

Bacchi's (2012) WPR approach offers a disarmingly simple but especially useful framework for defamiliarisation and for challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about wellbeing and the associated ideas and practices of mindfulness. The WPR offers an approach to analysing the organising and normalising ideas of policy dis courses, but it can also be usefully applied to everyday discourses and is used in a variety of research fields. Guided by Foucault's notion of problematisation, the WPR approach challenges the idea that policies can be understood simply as a response to problems that exist in the world. Rather, Bacchi (2012) shows how the policy process itself is fundamental to the very constitution of what we

understand to be a problem that needs "fixing". In other words, WPR "starts from the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic" (p. 21) or should be changed. Analysing policy, then, involves uncovering the "*implicit* representations of what is considered to be the problem" (p. 21). This is referred to as "problem representations" (p. 21). WPR involves six questions. As these questions intersect and overlap, the six "steps" as presented in WPR "serve a heuristic function" rather than providing a strictly ordered sequence of how this analysis should be conducted (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 19).

1. What's the "problem" (e.g., "gender inequality", "drug use/abuse", "economic development", "global warming", "childhood obesity", "irregular migration" etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem" (*problem representation*)?
3. How has this representation of the "problem" come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?
5. Can the "problem" be conceptualised differently?
6. What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?
7. How and where has this representation of the "problem" been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been, and/or can it be, disrupted and replaced?

(Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 20)

Putting problemisation to work—wellbeing and mindfulness

This list of questions is designed to be applied to various "problem representations". *Illuminating the* "*problem*" is an important first step and this involves making implicit assumptions explicit. For our analysis, we can understand wellbeing as an aspiration and a perceived solution to a set of "problems" of contemporary life—with mind fulness a technique that can be employed to achieve wellbeing. The US-based Mindful Schools website outlines the problems that mindfulness can solve, stating that the modern education system is burdened with "toxic stress", which impairs students' attention and has a negative effect on their physical and mental health. For educators, toxic stress is said to decrease their productivity and creativity, which can escalate into more serious problems such as anxiety and burnout. While in the home, toxic stress is blamed for parenting styles that are more akin to management based on "to-do lists" than present-centred relationships (Mindful Schools, 2018). Mindful Schools thus provides a useful example, for it makes explicit what is often implicit in wellbeing and mindfulness discourses.

The second question regarding *deep-seated assumptions* is closely linked to the "problem". As our example shows, the inherent stress of contemporary life is a key assumption. To dig a little deeper, we can also see that the solution is largely

individualised—the need to find a new way of being in the world, rather than focusing on how structural problems may be rectified. To be sure, the structural problem is commonly acknowledged, yet the proposed solution is one of adaptation. The implicit assumption is that self-change is do-able. Yet changing the social is somehow inconceivable. How this "problem" has come about is an important question here. Rising rates of mental health problems is one clear example (Wright, 2014). Techniques such as mindfulness are seen as a means of fostering wellbeing, which is assumed to be helpful in mitigating against mental ill-health. Yet solutions have not always been so individualised. In the 1970s, for example, educational efforts to raise the self-esteem of girls were employed as another way of moving towards more gender equitable social arrangements (McLeod, 2015). This links to the fourth question, about how the problem (or solution) could be understood differently. As we discuss below, drawing on historical sociological approaches to supplement WPR provides a way of using historically grounded analysis to challenge contemporary taken-for-granted ideas.

The question of *What is left unproblematic* in the representations and discourses of wellbeing and mindfulness could be analysed in various ways. To provide one example here, the potential problems and unintended consequences of the wide spread embrace of these ideas is a key issue. There are now a growing number of critiques of mindfulness at work and in education, some of which are captured in the notion of "McMindfulness" (Safran, 2014). This term alludes

to the evolution of mindfulness from Buddhist meditation practice to consumable product, with echoes of the fast food industry underlining the capitalist commodification of such orientations. “It’s the marketing of mindfulness practice as a commodity that is sold like any other commodity in our brand culture” (Safran, 2014). In this process, the complexity of mindfulness and its foundation as a spiritual practice is stripped away and it becomes another lifestyle choice, or the latest educational fad. What is left unproblematic also extends to the ways in which research evidence is used to sell the idea that mindfulness works. As Safran notes, “never mind the fact that the research that has compared mindfulness based cognitive therapy to traditional cognitive therapy … finds that the emperor has no clothes” (Safran, 2014).

As with the other questions, *the effects that are produced* can be considered in various ways, and we offer here an example of what this looks like. First, it should be noted that the same period that saw increasing concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of young people coincided with the rise of positive psychology, which has taken a leading role in developing solutions that can be applied in educational contexts. While positive psychology promises a more holistic, less pathological, approach, the ways in which wellbeing discourses circulate through educational settings suggest that it is largely a proxy for mental health and that the “solutions” continue to be largely individualised. Moreover, despite the lofty aims of positive psychology, there remains considerable potential for

pathologisation and stigmatisation, particularly in schools (Graham, 2015; Harwood & Allen, 2014); especially worrying in this regard are the ways in which social and structural disadvantage are situated as problematic for mental health. Can mindfulness mitigate poverty? Also at stake is the very conceptualisation of young people—indeed the way we view the human condition—and one of the key critiques of the rise of "therapeutic education" is that it promotes a diminished view of the self (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). While strong arguments can be made against such pessimistic assessments—as we have shown (Wright & McLeod, 2015)—it never theless remains the case that positive psychology proffers increasingly influential solutions to the perceived problems of personhood that we are facing today, be it in the classroom or in the workplace.

We have already pointed to some of the ways in which this "problem" has been produced, disseminated and defended, and this analysis could be taken further if space permitted. Before turning to how the WPR could be enhanced, a brief response to the sixth question on *how problem representation may be disrupted or replaced* is in order. While it is hard to argue with wellbeing as an aspiration, once a critical lens is applied, important questions arise that can allow a reframing of its remit and effects. We have elsewhere considered in more depth the ways in which the enthusiastic take up of wellbeing agendas can be unsettled by situating them in a longer and wider history of reforming the self

via psy-knowledges (McLeod, 2015; McLeod & Wright, 2015; Wright, 2015). By tracing the movement and effects of concept networks in wellbeing discourses, we have sought to refocus attention on their practical and technical aspects, not only their aspirations. That is, we looked to the mundane ways in which young people's health and happiness are the subject of educational reforms, and we considered how wellbeing agendas might be reframed in less individualised ways, with more attention to the structural conditions that give rise to powerful asymmetries in the experiences available to young people—regardless of the reach of McMindfulness.

Connecting concepts

In our work (McLeod & Wright 2015), we usually supplement the WRP approach with what Margaret Somers (1995, 2008) calls an "historical sociology of concept formation". By this, Somers means analysing the history of key concepts, how they have evolved and gained purchase, and the character of their intersections with other linked concepts. She argues that concepts are relational, "they exist not as autonomous categories" (Somers, 1995, p. 134) but are part of relational patterns. Part of the analytic task is thus to show the history of relational networks between concepts, to unpick how they work and to trace their effects. This helps us, Somers proposes, to "*analyze how we think and why we seem obliged to think in certain ways*" (1995, p. 113, original emphasis), and, as such, this approach advocates analysis of the "historicity of thinking and reasoning

practices" (Somers, 2008, p. 173).

This approach complements an historical investigation of a particular keyword— such as welfare, or wellbeing—by bringing critical and methodological attention to assemblages of, and the lines of connections between, keywords. Such a focus on the relational networks between concepts aligns with the interrogative strategies of the WRP method but brings into view a more explicit historical lens. In this way, an historical sociology of concept formation is also a strategy for developing a his tory of the present, in the genealogical sense adopted in Foucauldian scholarship (O'Farrell, 2005; Foucault, 1984).

In the case of mindfulness, there are numerous kindred concepts, as we have noted above, and they rise and fall in different ways. Mindfulness is at home in positive education movements as a do-able technique to advance wellbeing agendas: it purports to aid effective attitudes to education, work and to life; it is associated with processes of reflective self-discovery; and it supports growth of self-esteem. Beyond these instances of psy-concepts and tactics, mindfulness promises a more contemplative alternative to the fast and sometimes brutalising pace of contemporary life—an antidote to materialism, to consumer culture and to stress. Mindfulness does many things, but all its claims and promises are embedded in particular ways of understanding the self in the modern world.

On one hand, the rise of mindfulness can be easily parodied, and cynically dismissed for the way it represents the monetisation of a kind of soft counter culture and over-valuing of self-improvement and self-responsibilisation. On the other hand, it can represent a welcome alternative to the dominance of clock time and greedy managerialist and capitalist practices. Nonetheless, whatever way one approaches mindfulness, developing an analysis of its mean ing and effects—and its kindred concepts, like wellbeing—requires situating mindfulness discourses and motifs in reference to larger social and cultural frames. And, in turn, this can then help to illuminate changes and concerns in educational practice and policy.

Conclusion

Problematising wellbeing and mindfulness discourses in education requires looking beyond the school walls and towards the broader cultural take-up of the care of the self in the current era. Recognising the wider cultural and psycho-social resonance of mindfulness is not to ignore or deny the dangers posed by its grandiose and over-reaching ambitions, as if a spot of quiet meditation or a walk in the park can resolve multifaceted systemic or subjective difficulties. At the same time, however, to not seek out ways to address the complex affective injuries of contemporary work and life can also be limiting and risk a pessimistic, if not fatalistic, sense of (im)possibilities for change.

In this chapter, we have outlined an approach to problematising keywords and connected concepts in education, taking mindfulness and wellbeing as illustrations. While responses to the movements built on these concepts are, of course, mixed—sceptical, enthusiastic, pragmatic—we have argued that, for analytic, historical and political reasons, a more cautious and ambivalent assessment of the effects of these agendas is required. In other words, to properly study the movement of ideas and their effects—in the manner Ahmed (2010) has suggested—and, as an historical sociology of concepts also indicates, we are obliged to attend to their diverse and unintended effects. The goal is not simply to revert to the old "good and bad" judgements but to identify the contradictory and mixed-up effects of things, even if that is at odds with what we might like to see.

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