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What does wellbeing *do*? An approach to defamiliarize keywords in youth studies

Julie McLeod and Katie Wright

Abstract

Wellbeing has become a keyword in youth and social policy, a construct deployed as a measure of a good life. Often associated with physical and mental health, wellbeing encompasses numerous indicators, from subjective experiences of happiness and satisfaction to markers of economic prosperity and basic human needs of security. This article examines wellbeing as an organizing concept in discourses on young people and argues for defamiliarizing its truth claims and cultural authority by investigating what wellbeing does. We begin by examining the rise of wellbeing, drawing attention to its conceptual muddiness and ambiguity. Framed by the Foucauldian notion of problematization, the analysis proceeds along two routes: first, through an historical consideration of wellbeing as a relational concept with antecedents, focusing on 'self-esteem'; and second, through a reading of wellbeing in contemporary educational policy. Informed by Somers' historical sociology of concept formation and Bacchi's critical policy analysis, we illuminate the mixed dimensions of wellbeing's reach, placing it within longer traditions of youth studies and psy-knowledges and showing its transformative promise as well as its individualizing effects. In doing so, we elaborate a methodological approach that can be adapted to examine other keywords in youth studies and social policy discourse.

Keywords

Youth wellbeing; education; historical sociology; social policy; genealogy; defamiliarization; keywords; youth studies

Introduction

Wellbeing discourses are ubiquitous, within and beyond the field of youth studies. Concerns about wellbeing – what it looks like, how to promote it, and what to do in its absence – inform everyday understandings of young people,

policy discourses and social practices. Notions of wellbeing draw upon diverse disciplinary and practice traditions, from education and philosophy to economics and the psy-knowledges (Rose 1999). While aspirations to identify and enhance wellbeing circulate widely, there remains uncertainty about what it precisely means and involves, matched with surprisingly little critical interrogation of wellbeing as either a technical concept or an everyday term. Indeed, its taken-for-granted status is one of its more problematic characteristics. Over the last two decades or so, interventions to promote wellbeing have increasingly been deployed as a solution to myriad problems facing young people – from unemployment and insecure housing to low self-esteem, mental health disorders and uncertain futures. This is especially evident in the field of education, where ideas about student wellbeing saturate contemporary practices, from promoting healthy school environments, to dedicated programs and curriculum initiatives, as well as system wide and local school policies. Wellbeing has thus become a keyword in contemporary social life, an article of faith, an ideal to strive for, and a self-evidently good thing for individuals to have and for institutions to promote. It functions as a shorthand for a range of positive and measurable attributes, including health, happiness and prosperity. Yet it also signifies a cluster of less tangible dimensions, including personal orientations, moods and outlooks that are seen to be beneficial for everyone, but are difficult to actually pin down. As such, we situate wellbeing within a larger repertoire of concepts and expertise that are mobilized – historically and in the present – to govern, organize and make sense of young people's lives.

This article begins from the simple question of what exactly is invoked by this familiar term; and in particular what effects – intended and otherwise – does the circulation of wellbeing discourses have on expert and popular understandings of young people today, their own imaginaries and the social worlds they inhabit. Our questions are not only about what wellbeing means, or how it can be measured, identified, tracked, realized, hindered or enabled: they are about what wellbeing discourse *does*. In trying to answer this question, we seek to defamiliarize the epistemic authority of wellbeing, aiming 'to problematize' in Foucauldian terms (Foucault 1996) this everyday keyword through bringing historical and comparative perspectives to help analyze its currency in the present. In her study of the cultural politics of happiness, Sara

Ahmed describes her interest as 'not so much "what is happiness?" but rather "what does happiness do?"' (Ahmed 2010, 2). Similarly, our analysis is not simply concerned with how wellbeing has been defined and measured – what wellbeing *is*. Rather, it seeks to trace what the concept and promise of wellbeing *does* – in framing social and educational practices, in normalizing particular conceptions and calibrations of well and unwell ways of being and, in turn, regulating the circumstances in which youthful subjectivities take shape.

In interrogating the ambitions and effects of wellbeing discourses, we also elaborate a methodological approach that can be adapted to examine other keywords in youth studies and associated policy debates. This approach builds on and extends work we have been developing across several historical and sociological studies addressing questions of citizenship, identity and education (McLeod 2012; Wright 2014). Here we draw upon two synthesized historical case studies of wellbeing and its antecedents (McLeod 2015; Wright 2015) in order to illustrate the methodological framework we are advancing. First, we consider some of the ways in which notions of wellbeing inform contemporary discussions about young people, from transnational policy reports to specific programs, and chart some of wellbeing's shifting referents. Second, we outline the conceptual resources drawn upon and elaborate two modes of problematization. One builds on Somers' (1995, 1999, 2008) historical sociology of concept formation. This involves mapping wellbeing as a relational concept and bringing into view antecedents to wellbeing discourses and related youth and educational projects. The other, informed by Bacchi's (2009, 2012) critical policy analysis, looks at key assumptions guiding youth policies in relation to ideas and programs that aim to improve wellbeing. In the second half of the article, we begin a genealogical investigation of wellbeing through two historical case studies. The first looks to the self-esteem movement in schools during the 1970s, which we argue offers antecedents to and revealing contrasts with contemporary wellbeing agendas, notably self-esteem's connection to social change imaginaries compared to the more overtly individualizing strategies and ambitions of wellbeing discourses. The second considers the policy embrace of wellbeing in the late twentieth century, arguing that this reflects a shift from targeted mental health interventions to those that have a more universal address, potentially applicable to everyone, and as such casting us

all as equally vulnerable.

While the rise of wellbeing has a multifaceted history, these two case studies show how a genealogy of wellbeing might proceed, building from particular episodes, problems and links to related concepts. In our final comments we return to the framing questions about what wellbeing does, noting its contradictory dimensions, and its productive as well as negative regulatory potential, including the ways in which it calibrates and colonizes conceptions of youth subjectivity. But first, we consider some trends in how wellbeing is mobilized in different discursive arenas.

Conceptualizing wellbeing

A strong body of scholarship engaging with the concept of wellbeing exists in the youth studies field. This includes comprehensive overviews of wellbeing as part of a holistic approach to youth identities and pathways (Wyn 2009), and studies of the relationship between social and personal determinants of wellbeing, especially in regard to youth mental health (Wyn, Cuervo, and Landstedt 2015). Other work provides more specialist accounts of practices that enhance wellbeing in particular areas, such as the use of music in promoting positive mental health (Papinczak et al. 2015), or the impact of key transition events, such as going to university, on young people's mental health and wellbeing (Wrench, Garrett, and King 2013).

While there is usually some discussion of how to define wellbeing and what it might encompass, there is a tendency to then proceed with the concept itself untroubled. Yet, there is little consensus on how wellbeing should be conceptualized (Dodge et al. 2012). As Morrow and Mayall (2009, 221) argue, wellbeing is a pervasive but 'conceptually muddy' term, one that functions, according to Ereaut and Whiting (2008, 2), 'like a cultural mirage: it looks like a solid construct' but when closely examined, 'it fragments or disappears'. In many studies, the analytic focus is more on measures and relationships, links between practices and improved wellbeing and identifying vulnerable populations or points in the life-course. For example, in a study of the relationship between family functioning and adolescent psychological wellbeing (Shek 1998), the focus was on understanding the nature and direction of influences rather than on interrogating the constituent constructs

– such as family functioning or psychological wellbeing. While arguing for a greater acknowledgement of the term's definitional and conceptual difficulties, we are not simply suggesting that all studies should focus principally on problematizing wellbeing as a concept. Yet given the widespread adoption of wellbeing in scholarly and policy discourses, we argue that such an account is indeed now warranted and, further, that sustained critical engagement with the concept is needed more broadly so that it is not simply mobilized as a self-evident, benignly good or neutral construct.

The genealogical approach we elaborate here contributes to a small but growing body of work that develops critical perspectives on the concept and claims of wellbeing (Craig 2009; Taylor 2011; Cigman 2012; Wright and McLeod 2015). Focusing on the increasing preoccupation with wellbeing in schools, Craig (2009, 3), for example, suggests that current educational approaches, which draw on insights from psychology and mental health professionals, may, ironically, 'undermine young people's well-being rather than foster it'. Offering a complementary critique, Taylor (2011, 779) argues that 'a preoccupation with individual wellbeing alone has the potential to detract from the continued importance of collective welfare and the *social* provision of the material conditions in which much individual wellbeing is lived and felt'. A glimpse at international and national policy reports also points to the timeliness of a genealogical account of wellbeing, particularly with regard to policies and strategies for population management.

The development in recent years of global and national indexes measuring wellbeing attests to its salience as a marker for the quality of life for both entire populations and particular groups, including children and young people. Since 2011 the OECD has published reports on wellbeing: *How's Life* (OECD 2013) uses a multidimensional framework that covers various aspects of wellbeing, while its web-based tool, *Better Life Index* enables comparison of wellbeing indicators across countries (OECD 2015). While the OECD initiatives reflect concerns with the wellbeing of entire populations, more specific measurements have also emerged. *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index* (Goldin, Patel, and Perry 2014) provides an international ranking of the wellbeing of young people, while UNICEF

publishes league tables on child wellbeing 'to encourage the monitoring of children's well-being, to permit country comparisons, and to stimulate debate and the development of policies to improve children's lives' (UNICEF 2013). Data highlighting problematic dimensions of wellbeing internationally fuel debate about wellbeing – or the lack of it – in local contexts. As Myers (2012, 409) has noted, a series of reports published in the late 2000s and early 2010s indicated that young people in the UK were faring badly by international standards, sparking widespread concern about a 'crisis of childhood'. Such alarm commonly frames discussions about the wellbeing of young people, providing the impetus for the development of policy and programs that seek to redress these problems.

A further example of the institutionalization of wellbeing concerns is the establishment of organizations whose primary mission is to improve wellbeing. The Centre for Confidence and Well-being was established in the UK in 2005. Its objective is: 'To educate the public on the influence and inter-relationship of psychological, cultural, physiological and structural factors for fostering confidence and well-being at an individual, organisational and societal level'. While that organization has a broad remit that includes all sectors of society, others focus more specifically on young people. In 2002, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was launched, bringing together researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, with the aim of 'improving the wellbeing of children and youth' (www.aracy. org.au/about-us/our-guiding-principles). ARACY's founding Chairperson, Fiona Stanley, noted that 'it is modernity's paradox that increasing wealth and opportunities have led to greater social differences and more problems for children and youth', including an 'epidemic' of mental health problems (Giese 2003, 16).

The ambiguity of wellbeing as a concept and a measure means that it can be put to use in different ways for various purposes. This is evident in the changing referents of wellbeing over the last twenty to thirty years. Eeva Sointu (2005) notes that prior to the 1990s there was limited use of the term in everyday discourse. When it was deployed it was usually in relation to national health and economic indicators. By the last decade of the twentieth century, however, a more personal, psychological and therapeutic notion of

wellbeing emerged. Her analysis underscores a shift from concerns with 'the body politic' to 'the body personal' (Sointu 2005, 259). The widespread embrace of a more personalized concept of wellbeing is found in many national social, health and educational policies, often accompanied by a growing sense of urgency to address wellbeing, especially in relation to young people. More broadly, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of the term since the 1970s, with a marked acceleration since the 1990s, and a notable coupling of youth and wellbeing such that a new construct, 'youth wellbeing', is emerging (McLeod and Wright 2015, 4).

The simple statistical tool Google n-gram – which maps word frequencies in books – records a dramatic increase over the previous two decades or so in the use of the compounds (and variant spellings) 'youth well-being' and 'youth wellbeing', with both accelerating significantly from the 1990s, and continuing to show a significant upward trend into the 2000s.[1] Such data underscore the extent to which wellbeing has a particularly tight grip on the discursive and policy construct of 'youth'. Its currency serves to individualize the challenges experienced by young people – their personal wellbeing problem– and at the same time to offer a solution, a space of hope, a site of intervention, with attending to young people's wellbeing increasingly perceived as a do-able solution for a fix-able problem. Thus, while deployed in relation to diverse categories of people across the life-course, wellbeing has a distinct and potent resonance when attached to young people, such that 'youth wellbeing' has become a keyword compound that seems 'naturally' stuck together. Multiple circumstances have clearly given rise to this situation, such as an expansion in the category and duration of youth, and evidence of increasing disengagement and uncertainty. While a fuller elaboration of these factors is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that 'youth wellbeing' also arises in the context of neoliberal imperatives for responsibilization and the well-documented ways in which young people are solicited into this process (Kelly 2001; Furlong and Cartmel 2006).

Wellbeing discourse is thus aligned with wider social processes of individualization, reflecting the imbrication of neoliberalism and therapeutic culture (Rose 1996, 1999), suggested by the increasingly common practice of

measuring mental health and wellbeing and deploying wellbeing indicators. Yet, while there are extensive connections between the rise of wellbeing discourse and the reach of neoliberalism, simply gesturing to neoliberalism and its pervasive influence does not offer a sufficient account of wellbeing's prominence. Blanket and generalized ascriptions should not stand in for close analysis of how neoliberalism is differentially mediated via specific discursive regimes and everyday practices (Flew 2014). We have argued elsewhere, for example, that critiques of neoliberalism do not necessarily capture some of the ambivalences and contradictions of this cultural mood, especially as it intersects with emotional life (McLeod and Wright 2009; Wright 2011). In the context of contemporary wellbeing discourses, a related significant dimension is the movement of personal feelings – optimism, feeling positive, happiness and unhappiness – into public life (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011), a phenomenon which registers significant and not simply reductive or negative shifts between subjectivity and the social. Building on these arguments about the reach and ambiguity of wellbeing, we now turn to elaborate our approach to defamiliarizing wellbeing and its keyword status in policy and popular discourse.

A method for defamiliarizing keywords: the case of wellbeing

In historicizing the rise and reach of wellbeing as a keyword, we understand it is an invented category that has discernible effects on how identities, institutions and social practices are organized. This is not to suggest, however, that wellbeing is an invention without foundation, or that many young people are not 'unwell'. Rather, following Foucault's (1996) strategy of problematization, it is to question how the notion of wellbeing emerged, raising questions, for example, about how wellbeing became a category with which to think about what constitutes health, happiness and a good life. As Foucault asserts (1996, 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.

Such an approach to examining everyday terms, to make them an 'object for thought', has been influential in other related analyses of contemporary keywords.

In their genealogy of dependency as a keyword of the US welfare state, Fraser and Gordon (1994, 310) acknowledge the influence of Raymond Williams' cultural-materialist account of keywords, arguing that 'the terms that are used to describe social life are also active forces shaping it'. While this is now a relatively uncontroversial claim, it is important to recall the different emphases in approaches to analyzing keywords, with Fraser and Gordon (1994, 310) placing stress on power asymmetries and political struggles, on how 'particular words and expressions often become focal in such [political] struggles … sites at which the meaning of social experience is negotiated and contested'. Modifying an 'approach associated with Michel Foucault', they seek to 'excavate broad historical shifts in linguistic usage that can rarely be attributed to single agents' (310), with the aim to 'defamiliarize taken-for-granted beliefs in order to render them susceptible to critique and to illuminate present-day difficulties' (311). Fraser and Gordon distinguish their approach from Foucauldian problematization by including 'normative political reflection' in their critique of dependency, describing it as 'an ideological term' and employing a form of 'critical political semantics' (311).

This type of positioning speaks to an older debate about Foucault's work as not properly political, or as side-stepping normative and 'political' questions. Without rehearsing these well-worn arguments, it will suffice to say that these polarizing debates have been challenged by more recent engagements with Foucault's philosophy of ethics and contestations over how power and politics operate. We do not seek to problematize wellbeing only to expose it as an ideological construct – even though a case could be made for that, for the manner in which wellbeing converts structural circumstances into individual responsibilities, or experiences of failure into personal vulnerabilities. Our main aim is to highlight work that, shaped by Foucault's strategy of problematization, has identified and interrogated keywords in particular fields.

Also influenced by Foucauldian genealogy, but engaging a different suite of conceptual orientations, Talburt and Lesko (2012a) outline a case for historicizing keywords in youth studies. They show how meanings are made and changed as key concepts crossover various subfields and disciplines within youth studies, as well as the ways in 'which meanings are made and altered over time through contestations among diverse social groups or constituencies' (2012a, 7). Examining keyword effects, they argue for a focus on 'the enabling structures, paradigms, and assumptions of the concepts' (Talburt and Lesko 2012a, 7). Talburt and Lesko's analysis of youth studies keywords is concerned with initiating a 'partial *history of the present* of youth studies', by which they mean

> a method of historical analysis that problematizes the very terms and concepts through which we know and understand a topic. A history of the present starts with questions around categories and discourses in use and interrogates how, where, when and why they emerged and became popular. (Talburt and Lesko 2012b, 11)

In grappling with 'youth wellbeing' as an object for thought, we pay critical attention to historicizing wellbeing as a socially constructed term, as a concept that is invented in different times and places for different purposes. A further dimension to problematization, one which could be pursued in future empirical studies, is to understand the effects of keywords such as wellbeing: to ask what it does, in both a broad sense and in particular instances, to recognize not only its disciplining and negative regulation but also its productive effects.

Building on these previous approaches to defamiliarizing keywords, we now elaborate two routes by which our problematization of wellbeing proceeds, first via consideration of wellbeing as a relational concept with key antecedents, and second, via a policy analysis of the operationalization of wellbeing. To do so, we draw on two sets of conceptual resources: Margaret Somers' (1995, 1999, 2008) historical sociology of concept formation and Carol Bacchi's critical policy analysis (2009, 2012).

Somers (1995, 113) argues that 'Concepts are words in their sites'. That is, they are situated in discourses, within institutions and social

structures. An analysis of 'words in their sites' is central to Somers' (1995, 113) historical sociological approach, conducted for the purpose of seeking '*to understand how we think and why we seem obliged to think in certain ways*'. This requires turning a reflexive eye on the very concepts that we use to explain and evaluate the social world. Following Somers, then, we attempt to turn the notion of wellbeing back on itself in order to critically examine its rise, truth claims and effects. This kind of work, as Somers reminds us, 'is above all historical: it challenges us to explore the historicity of our theoretical semantics as well as our epistemological foundations (standards of knowledge), usually to discover that they themselves have histories of contestation, transformation and social relationships' (1995, 115). An historical sociology of concept formation

> looks for the conditions of possibility, or the conceptual networks within which concepts are framed and constrained. It aims to explain *how* concepts do the work they do, not *why* they do so in terms of interests, by reconstructing the public histories of their construction, resonance, and contestedness over time. (Somers 1995, 115)

Accordingly, the analysis here begins from the premise that the categories with which we analyze the world and, in this case, those that structure youth and educational discourses, are not self-evident but warrant interrogation, and that even seemingly benign concepts like wellbeing are 'historical objects', 'truth claims that are the products of their time' (Somers 1999, 134). Moreover, the meaning of such concepts is not stable; it is derived from their contingent relationship to other concepts and contexts.

A complementary research strategy is offered by critical policy studies (e.g. Bacchi 2012; Webb 2014), a body of work which underscores how policies do not simply respond to social problems already formed, but actively 'constitute the problems to which they seem to be responses' (Yeatman 1990, 158). As Bacchi (2009) elaborates, policy 'gives particular shape' to problems and is thus 'fundamental to the constitution of problems'. Bacchi's (2012, 21) 'what's the problem represented to be?' [WPR] approach thus 'starts from the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (and needs to change)'. In other words,

policies contain implicit representations of what is considered to be the 'problem'. The first task, therefore, is to make implicit policy assumptions explicit. It also requires interrogation of assumptions that underpin representation of the problem, attention to how such representation arose, consideration of what is left unproblematic and how the problem may be thought about differently (Bacchi 2012).

The kind of interrogations called for by Somers (2008) and Bacchi (2009) guide the following two historical examples. While we consider youth policy and programs in broad terms, our examples come primarily from the field of education, which is a particularly significant and rich site for wellbeing talk and programs directed at young people. The first case study examines self-esteem as an important precursor to the rise of wellbeing, and, informed by Somers' approach, analyses self-esteem as part of the relational network of concepts that cultivated a social and policy terrain conducive to the subsequent and explicit focus on wellbeing. The second case study is guided by Bacchi's WPR strategy, and considers shifting policy and program approaches to defining and managing youth mental health and wellbeing.

Historicizing wellbeing, remembering self-esteem

A number of important related concepts and antecedents to wellbeing immediately spring to mind, such as resilience, self-esteem and welfare. Each deserves close attention, but for the purposes of this article we turn to self-esteem as both an area of concern and as an object of policy and program interventions. This is because, like wellbeing, self-esteem accents positive and affirming dispositions, not only responses to difficulties, as resilience often implies, and both wellbeing and self-esteem have been shaped by the popularization of psychology and have a different lineage from a term such as welfare, with its historical associations of charity and benevolence. In exploring self-esteem, we take as a specific focus second-wave feminist educational initiatives and the integral role that self-esteem played as a site and strategy of personal and social reform, particularly in highlighting gender as a salient marker of difference in the negotiation and achievement of self-esteem. Remembering what is now the largely forgotten history of self-esteem offers a useful vantage point from which to interrogate wellbeing discourses in the present. One significant contrast is that the vision for

improving self-esteem was frequently connected to a broader educational and political project of social change, notwithstanding critiques of self-esteem's individualism, as noted below. In comparison, the achievement of wellbeing is more commonly articulated within the parameters of the status quo; in other words, current educational projects aimed at improving wellbeing tend to lack the social critique – of gender, class and ethnicity – that underwrote the enactment of initiatives aimed to build self-esteem, particularly for girls.

There have been extensive and well-justified criticisms of self-esteem, but aspects of its forgotten history are resurrected here in order to look beyond what are now commonsense understandings of it as a failed and flawed educational project. Such an historical account also brings into view the 'conceptual network' (Somers 1995) surrounding wellbeing by considering afresh this kindred concept. The embrace of both self-esteem and wellbeing in education is located within major social transformations of the late twentieth century and broader cultural moves pertaining to the increasing importance of emotions in the public sphere along with psychologized or therapeutic ways of understanding the self and everyday life (Wright 2011). Explanations for the rise of concepts like self-esteem or wellbeing within education should not simply be confined to the logic or internal policy machinations of a specific field of practice, such as education or youth and social care. The power and efficacy of these concepts is connected to wider cultural moods, to what Berlant (2011) calls 'public feelings' – an understanding of how feelings and emotions (optimism, despair, happiness) once considered private matters, can influence politics and social experience (Berlant 2011). This has resonances with feminism's ambitions to make the personal political, evident in the social orientation of feminist educators' appropriations of self-esteem in their reforming projects.

Calls for greater self-esteem were important features of radical and feminist politics and their diverse projects for social and subjective transformation. Schools were key sites for advancing non-sexist possibilities and for the self-realization of girls' and boys' potential. Enhancing students' self-esteem, and especially girls' self-esteem, was crucial to this, seen as necessary for their empowerment and emancipation. Anti-sexist initiatives during the 1970s targeted the lack of educational and work choices facing

girls and young women. Schools were positioned as crucial social agencies in not only opening up possibilities but also encouraging and equipping young women to create and seize choices (Yates 1993). Widening career and future opportunities for girls and young women was one strand of reform; a parallel strand attended to self-fulfillment and self-realization. Limited options at school and in imagined futures were judged to impede self-development and sense of personal capacity. Many of the pedagogical strategies developed to enhance girls' sense of possibility, such as values clarification and role play, drew on social psychological conceptions of the sex-role, and the radical potential to remake the self which they afforded (McLeod 1998). The cultivation of positive self-esteem – and the concomitant repair of low or damaged self-esteem – were central features of these feminist interventions. Low self-esteem was typically construed as having a collective and structural origin, linked to the sexist social order, and fostering self-esteem was essential as it provided the basis, beginning with the individual, for social and educational change.

Such ideas were enacted through pedagogical approaches and curriculum initiatives developed to foster recognition of sex-role stereotyping and modify behavior and attitudes. It was not only students who were subject to these interventions. Teachers also undertook professional development to alert them to their possible sexist practices and to help build the self-esteem of female students, broaden their horizons and imagine different and non-sexist futures (McLeod 1998). In delivering new programs and interventions, teachers provided the pedagogic conditions that could both ameliorate impaired self-esteem and enable pupils to refashion themselves as non-sexist.

In looking back to the self-esteem movement, its many limitations are immediately evident. Yet, feminist pedagogies that sought to enhance self-esteem were not simply superficial feel-good strategies. They were profoundly implicated in producing new norms and forms of (gendered) subjectivity, in part by repudiating then dominant ways of being male and female, girl and boy. Without over-correcting the critique of self-esteem, it is important to recognize the contradictory dimensions and productive effects of feminism's political and pedagogical engagement with the concept. Teachers and students were transforming themselves in the name of self-esteem,

undoubtedly embedded in personal enhancement agendas but also in a more collective radical politics of change – the personal was indeed political.

Critiques of self-esteem as a focus of school pedagogies and anti-sexist activities targeted the ways in which self-esteem solutions attributed students and especially girls with personal responsibility for structural gender-based inequality (Kenway and Willis 1990). This was seen as not only trivializing the extent of entrenched disadvantage but also the nature and scope of feminist political and educational projects, as if pointing out a mistaken sense of self was a sufficient strategy to combat inherited patterns of gender relations. Further, as Kenway and Willis (1990, 11) observed, there was a tendency to treat 'the issue of girls' self-esteem in a universalistic manner and thus to ignore the specific cultural circumstance of girls and the manner in which their culture intersects with gendered educational achievement and ambition'.

Such criticisms were undeniably well-justified, identifying the pitfalls and presumptions of a reform politics based on the mobilization of the self-esteem construct. They were vital in unsettling the rationalist dream of feminism bent on reforming the self through exposure to ever more and better advice and opportunity to abandon attachment to gender-based norms. Yet there remained an ambivalence at the heart of self-esteem endeavors, even in its critical reception, with its potential productive benefits not entirely dismissed. As Kenway and Willis (1990) acknowledged, their critique was not intended to undermine the work of teachers directed to improving girls' self-esteem or to oppose projects concerned with developing a positive sense of self among students. Even so, the overall tenor is skeptical, and calls for caution.

In domains like education or the self-help industry, the idea of self-esteem has given rise to a vast number of quick-fix personal strategies that have been criticized for contributing to the 'self-responsibilization of social problems and strengthening the hold of notions of the rational, self-knowing subject, always ready to be improved and praised' (McLeod 2015, 187). As Kristiánsson (2007, 249) has observed, 'all social problems become construed as personal problems of self-adjustment and self-affirmation: a nugatory

inward gaze toward a self-enclosed world thus replaces any serious attempts to change the external world for the better'. Yet such critiques represent only a partial account of self-esteem, as they do not register the wider feminist and social change context in which self-esteem took root. Moreover, simply repudiating self-esteem as individualistic and narcissistic fails to sufficiently historicize self-esteem in relation to associated enhancement concepts. As we have noted, and especially in contrast to current uses of wellbeing, there was a clear socially-critical element to 1970s self-esteem. Revisiting self-esteem from the vantage point of the era of wellbeing brings into sharp relief differences between these technologies of self-enhancement. In the present-day, wellbeing (like self-esteem) has a universalizing reach, yet unlike the highly gendered articulations of self-esteem, it tends to be gender-blind. This historicizing of commonalities and divergences is the kind of genealogical analysis of conceptual networks that Somers proposes, and which we are adapting as part of a methodological approach to defamiliarize key words in youth studies.

Acknowledging the transformative dimension of self-esteem, which has been somewhat neglected in recent scholarship, also helps throw new light on the invention and movement of wellbeing in the present: what are its diverse effects? What do critiques of wellbeing tend to notice and not to notice? Both wellbeing and self-esteem agendas risk individualized solutions, narcissistic introspection, and expansive aspirations along with vague definitions; and both are implicated in constituting particular norms about young people and in various ways oriented to ameliorating suffering and disengagement. Wellbeing agendas, however, appear more focussed on securing the status quo and with adjusting individuals to fit the parameters of contemporary social life, rather than advocating for the kind of radical transformations of self and the social envisaged by the feminist self-esteem movement.

Following Somers' historical sociology of concept formation, we have outlined an approach to problematizing wellbeing that links it historically and comparatively to related concepts such as self-esteem. This has situated wellbeing within histories and networks of psy-knowledges that have been operationalized in social and educational programs seeking to repair or

enhance individual efficacy and sense of self in the world. Such conceptual entanglements have significant implications for how young people are engaged, targeted, rescued and regulated in educational discourses and practices. The significance of shifting policy mobilizations of psy-strategies in relation to young people is considered in the following section, where we employ the WPR approach to consider a more recent operationalization of wellbeing, particularly in relation to its coupling with mental health.

Problematizing wellbeing as a policy aspiration

Since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of policy aimed at improving the wellbeing of children and young people. Frameworks are now commonly employed at all levels of schooling, as well as in early education and care settings, to guide programs and practices that foster positive social and emotional development and good mental health (e.g. KidsMatter Early Childhood 2012; KidsMatter Primary 2012; MindMatters 2012). Such frameworks typically adopt a three-pronged approach of mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. While the value of early intervention has long been recognized, and educational settings have long been regarded as key sites for both health promotion and the identification of psychological and behavioral problems, in the last two decades there has been a major shift in policy in this area. The hitherto dominant model of targeted interventions for young people diagnosed with disorders or considered 'at risk' of developing psychological problems has given way to large-scale, universal, preventative approaches aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of entire student populations (Wright 2014).

A key driver of this shift in education policy has been increasing concern about the mental health of young people and a growing body of research documenting this problem. By the late twentieth century, youth mental health was recognized as a major social and public health problem (Gore et al. 2011), arguably 'one of the biggest issues facing young people today' (e.g. headspace 2010). Promoting wellbeing has become an important preventative strategy, particularly in educational contexts. The rise of positive psychology and its concomitant concerns with happiness and flourishing played a key role in this development, as did the World Health Organization's (WHO) 'Global school health initiative', launched in the mid-1990s to

'mobilize and strengthen health promotion' (WHO 2014). More broadly, changing ideas about the role of schools in supporting mental and emotional wellbeing have emerged within a wider social context of increasing acceptance of the importance of psychological health, greater levels of openness about psychological problems, and recognition of the value of psychological intervention (Wright 2011). Indeed, it is now widely accepted that schools should promote wellbeing, not just provide remedial services for young people experiencing educational, social or psychological problems.

The policy solution of promoting wellbeing as a preventative strategy 'gives particular shape' (Bacchi 2009) to the way in which mental health is represented. It implicitly suggests that mental health problems result from an absence of wellbeing and that future difficulties may be avoided if wellbeing is fostered, for example, through programs that develop resilience and equip young people with the kinds of social and emotional skills deemed necessary to be 'well'. In addition, such policies position schools as having responsibility for the emotional and psychological health of young people. Indeed, 'building resilience, cultivating social and emotional skills, and fostering wellbeing have become key educational priorities, supplementing longstanding educational aims of knowledge acquisition, vocational preparation and the development of citizenship' (Wright 2014, 143). We are not suggesting that schools should not be concerned with the wellbeing of young people, or that they do not have a role to play in fostering positive mental health. Rather, our intent here in problematizing (Foucault 1996) this policy direction is to move beyond such taken-for-granted assumptions in order to consider its possible effects – intended and otherwise. Having illuminated the 'conditions and registers' (Webb 2014, 369) in which the mental health problem and its wellbeing policy solution have been articulated, we turn now to consider what is left unproblematic, and how these matters may be thought about differently (Bacchi 2009).

One effect of the pervasiveness of wellbeing discourse is that critical interrogation of its truth claims has become difficult. It is now widely accepted that teaching social and emotional skills enhances educational outcomes and that fostering wellbeing in schools is a useful strategy to prevent future mental health problems. The benefits of policy initiatives in

this area appear self-evident. Yet, as critical policy studies show, there is often a gap between policy and practice, outcomes do not always align with policy agendas and there are also unintended consequences to consider, including the reproduction of social inequality (Young et al. 2010). While there have been some thoughtful and complex intellectual engagements with the turn to wellbeing, educational research and associated policy debate remains largely uncritical (Ecclestone 2012).

One issue raised by a focus on wellbeing in educational contexts is the monitoring of young people for signs of ill-being, a strategy advocated in some frameworks (e.g. KidsMatter Early Childhood 2012; KidsMatter Primary 2012; MindMatters 2012). This entails teachers and carers looking for deviations from normal patterns of development, often in highly psychologized ways. A potential problem here is that social disadvantage can become normatively tied to perceived risks for developing mental health and wellbeing problems (Harwood and Allan 2014). Another issue is the distribution of resources and the funding of universal programs at the expense of targeted interventions for those most in need. This is a matter of critical importance in light of empirical evidence, which is equivocal on the effectiveness of whole school approaches to improving mental health (Kidger et al. 2012).

Educational policy approaches to promoting wellbeing have a variety of aims; key amongst these is improving academic outcomes and preventing mental health problems. The wider ambition, however, is to enrich quality of life more generally. Cigman characterizes contemporary approaches to promoting wellbeing as part of a broader enhancement agenda that 'aims to enhance so called positive emotions in children (optimism, resilience, confidence, curiosity, motivation, self-discipline, self-esteem, etc.) and inhibit negative ones' (2012, 449). Casting emotional states and subjective dispositions as either positive or negative is one problem she attributes to the embrace of positive psychology in wellbeing discourse. Another is that wellbeing becomes subject to neoliberal agendas of accountability. Might testing wellbeing become yet another measure of educational success, and if so, what happens to those who 'fail'? (Cigman 2012, 450).

An additional concern with ideas derived from positive psychology is an implicit belief in 'psychological immunization' and the possibility of 'inoculating young people against depression' (Craig 2009, 6). While this is central to the preventative promise of wellbeing, research has not shown a strong effect for preventative programs, especially those which take a whole school or universal approach (Craig 2009; Kidger et al. 2012). Other concerns are that the effects of programs promoting wellbeing are not long lasting, and that focusing on psychological and emotional states may lead to a neglect of the physical factors that foster wellbeing. Carol Craig of the Centre for Confidence and Well-being argues that there has not been enough emphasis on exercise in discussion of young people's wellbeing. She suggests that exercise may be viewed as a 'natural anti-depressant' and incorporating movement as 'an integral part of school life may have a more beneficial effect than psychological programmes' (Craig 2009, 20).

At the same time that wellbeing programs proliferate, we are witnessing a seemingly inexorable rise of diagnosable disorders. It is far from clear, then, whether so-called 'holistic concepts', such as wellbeing, are much different in effect from the damaging categorizations and production of pathologies associated with more traditional educational psychology. Finally, important social justice and equity questions also arise in the elevation of wellbeing as the solution to diverse social and individual problems. Put another way: 'To what extent does the focus on wellbeing, vis-à-vis older concerns with welfare, detract from what are the actual social [and material] determinants of wellbeing and the need to address those – not least of which is enduring social disadvantage' (Wright 2015, 12).

Employing Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach, we have canvassed here an approach to problematizing wellbeing that seeks to defamiliarize its policy promise. In doing so, we examined current concerns with youth mental health and the ways in which these intersect with and shape wellbeing discourses. Beginning with the question of how such representations arose, the embrace of educational frameworks and programs that take a universal approach to promoting wellbeing was noted, in contrast to historically narrow and problem-focused interventions. Prompted by our guiding concern with what wellbeing does, we considered some of the possible unintended effects of

current policy directions, questioning the extent to which the embrace of wellbeing overcomes the limitations of past approaches. Just as we sought to unsettle what have become accepted critiques of self-esteem, we have offered a reading of wellbeing that seeks to disrupt its current commonsense status and show how it works as an organizing keyword in education policy and youth studies.

Conclusion

In this article wellbeing has been positioned as a contemporary keyword that has particular force in policies and programs directed to managing young people and considerable currency in youth studies scholarship, evident in, for example, the rise of the construct 'youth wellbeing'. After documenting the reach of wellbeing discourses, we delineated some of their conceptual muddiness and located the expansive, multi-purpose ambitions of wellbeing in a longer history of psy-knowledges that are mobilized in youth and social policies. In attempting to defamiliarize and to make problematic the cultural and epistemic authority of wellbeing discourses, we have argued that this involves more than simply asserting the social construction of the concept or tracing its ideological origins. Posing the question, 'What does wellbeing do?' we have drawn analytic attention to the variable and unpredictable effects of wellbeing discourses and their connection to networks of enhancement agendas, both historically and in the present, particularly those that have targeted youthful populations. Drawing on the methodological resources provided by Somers' historical sociology of concept formation and Bacchi's WPR approach to policy analysis, we have investigated associated constructs and antecedents to wellbeing and its prevalence in mental health programs and policies.

The rise of wellbeing in youth and education policy was situated within broader cultural moves pertaining to the increasing importance of emotions in the public sphere and more therapeutic modes of population management. We have indicated the contradictory effects of such modes in the example of self-esteem, a strategy which has largely been dismissed as a failed educational experiment, narrowly concerned with making people feel good and leading to an epidemic of narcissism. Yet self-esteem also played a productive role in liberatory feminist projects. Acknowledgement of such

mixed effects is crucial to the kind of keyword interrogation we have proposed. This analysis seeks to contribute to a growing body of critical scholarship on wellbeing, and its effects in the historical present.

Beyond this, we have identified and illustrated useful methodological and conceptual approaches for interrogating key words in the youth studies and social policy fields. We have argued that these strategies require attention to both historical and contemporary meanings and mobilizations, as well as an alertness to related concepts. Keywords move and morph across time and place, and following this movement, asking what keywords do, what they open up and shut down, what they discipline and productively bring into view, is part of the task of historicizing their cultural authority and destabilizing their truth claims.

Note

1. books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=youth+well-
   being&year_start=1900&year_end=2000
   &corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cyouth%20
   well%20-%20being%3B% 2Cc0.

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