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Social Capital and Well-Being in Ireland

*Tom Healy*¹

Introduction

The future of Irish society is uncertain. We have emerged from a period of extraordinarily rapid growth in *measurable market income* (let's be careful with our language and descriptions!). Before that we had a period of extraordinary economic crisis characterised by high unemployment, emigration, stagnant or falling incomes and continuing poverty for many.

Now we are at a crossroads.

What sort of society do we want for the future – our future in what sort of world? And what sort of economy, education system, community development, governance do we want and need to realise the society of the future? Through education and other means, are we to 'meet the needs of the economy' or is 'education', the 'economy' and many other things to meet the needs of real people in a society? These are tough questions and involve a lot of thinking and a lot of hard work. They are not necessarily the stuff of immediate response, marketable ideas and measurable returns to investment.

¹ This paper is written in a personal capacity and the views expressed therein do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Education and Science. The paper is, also, a contribution to on-going research work at the Policy Institute in Trinity College Dublin. I am grateful to Dr Séamus Lillis for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Any views or conclusions are my own.

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Let's start by trying to work out which are the right questions we should be asking right now. In this paper, I am speaking in a personal capacity. No solutions are on offer – only questions – some of them on the tough side perhaps. In this presentation I begin by revisiting the notion of welfare or well-being. Then I look at how societies – Irish society in particular – might provide for well-being. Finally, I re-assess the role of 'social capital' as one element in an overall social response to the well-being challenge.

How are we doing on well-being?

Like many other things in life, the concept and term 'well-being' is a slippery one. At its simplest, David Myers defines well-being as: 'the pervasive sense that life has been and is good. It is an ongoing perception that this time in one's life, or even life as a whole, is fulfilling, meaningful, and pleasant.' However, well-being goes well beyond mental states of pleasure, happiness or satisfaction for individuals, important as that is. Social well-being concerns the match between our goals and the kind of life we experience. In other words it concerns what we value and seek and how we evaluate our lives in this light. You could say that it concerns personal, collective and organisational values that, strictly speaking, are of no *controlling* concern of the State or the Market.

But the notion of a 'good society' is as old as the Greeks and older. To simplify a long and tortuous debate about the nature of well-being, morality and the 'good life' from Aristotle to latter-day philosophers like Amartya Sen we can say that well-being involves a coherence between the moral ends and chosen values of an individual or society, and the objective circumstances of life as perceived by them. It is as much about the *freedom to achieve* the life they perceive as best suited to them as the fact of particular achievements. This shifts the focus in studies of well-being from pre-determined outcomes such as health, education and income to the freedom to live a particular life in which

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people can flourish. Surely, health, education and income are vital components of, and means towards, a life well lived. However, income alone is an inadequate measure of well-being. In fact, there are thousands of studies to show that the returns to happiness from additional income for those above particular thresholds (I suspect most of the people reading this) is almost negative or negligible. All our striving after, competing, long hours and concerns over relativity and social status is ill-placed if you can believe what the ‘well-being’ research is saying (and what our grandparents would have told us anyway).

We are deemed to be a happy lot – at least up to recently. On every recent international survey of happiness/life satisfaction/subjective well-being², the Irish emerge as being well above the European or international averages (Fahey, Hayes and Sinnott, 2005). We are up there with the Scandinavians although I suspect for different reasons unless we subscribe to a theory that distance from the equator and the weather are determining influences!

The comparison of happiness shows no definite trend in Ireland between 1981 and 1999 (Table 1). However, there does appear to have been an upward shift in reported levels of happiness by persons aged 50 or more (at the time of the survey) and a possible fall in respect of 18-29 and 40-49 year olds. Levels of reported happiness (or separate measures of life satisfaction) have not changed significantly, in the aggregate, over the last two decades. This is not to say that there are some very unhappy people in our midst and the data on rising numbers of people taking their own lives reveal another dimension to trends in well-being. Internationally, some of the countries with highest reported *average* levels of well-being have, also, the highest levels of *reported* suicide. They also happen to have the highest *measured average* levels of social capital in terms of data on trust and civic engagement. There is more going on than appears on the surface.

² All of these terms have slightly different meanings. Refer to my unpublished Thesis (Healy, 2005) for elaboration.

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Is there a problem with the trends, level and distribution of well-being in Ireland? I suggest three reasons not to be complacent:

- It is possible, but not certain, that many of the factors that made for above-average happiness here are changing and even eroding. Hence, strength of family ties, marriage, religious belief, as well as institutional and cultural factors that have been helpful cannot be taken for granted in the future³.
- The distribution of happiness is very uneven. People who are in poor health, unemployed and struggling to make ends meet as single parents or others on low income are well below the average (space does not permit, here, to show in detail how various factors are related to reported subjective well-being in multivariate model – however, some summary bivariate indicators are shown in Table 2, below).
- A society composed of people who report happiness and satisfaction may contain within itself reserves of injustice, unhappiness for some as well as the seeds of future conflict and dysfunction.

Age group	1981	1990	1999
18-29	40	48	35
30-39	41	41	51
40-49	51	39	42
50-64	37	43	44
65 +	25	40	38
Total	39	43	42

Source: European Values Survey: Computer File (2003), Release 1, Tilburg University and Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung, Cologne (ZA), Germany.

³ There is a developing literature on the impact on well-being of inter-personal relationships, religion, trust, health and the overall state of governance in a region or country. See, for example, Helliwell (2004).

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Table 2		
Levels of Self-reported Life Satisfaction in 2002		
<i>("All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days. Where would you place yourself in terms of overall satisfaction on a scale of 0 to 10 where '0' means you are 'very dissatisfied' to '10' which means you are 'very satisfied'")</i>		
	Average SWB score	Standard Error
<i>Gender</i>	7.74	0.048
Male	7.57	0.072
Female	7.91	0.064
<i>Age category</i>		
18-29yrs	7.55	0.088
30-39yrs	7.82	0.108
40-49yrs	7.71	0.118
50-64yrs	7.75	0.112
65+yrs	8.05	0.112
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married/living with partner	8.02	0.061
Widowed	7.69	0.167
Never married	7.50	0.084
Separated/divorced	6.77	0.230
<i>Residential location</i>		
Dublin/large town (10,000 inhabitants+)	7.72	0.067
All other areas	7.75	0.071
<i>Educational completion</i>		
Below leaving Certificate	7.75	0.073
Leaving Certificate or higher	7.72	0.064
<i>Religiosity</i>		
Frequent Church attendance (monthly at least)	7.84	0.062
Less frequently	7.55	0.079

<i>Owner-occupier</i>		
Owns home	7.78	0.053
Does not own home	7.46	0.130
<i>Employment status</i>		
Paid employment	7.68	0.062
Retired	7.91	0.164
Unemployed	6.43	0.263
Domestic duties	8.11	0.103
Full-time student	7.81	0.141
<i>Income (net weekly)</i>		
First Quartile	7.73	0.174
Second Quartile	7.40	0.150
Third Quartile	7.61	0.120
Fourth Quartile	7.81	0.073

Source: Unpublished Thesis (Healy, 2005). Data are based on the National Economic and Social Forum Survey of adults undertaken by the ESRI in August 2002.

We need to pay closer attention to the ‘causes’ of well-being as well as their implications for community practice and public policy. Research, including analysis of data from a survey of adults in Ireland (Healy, 2005⁴), confirms the widely established finding that the extent and quality of inter-personal ties and social support are important explanatory variables of subjective well-being. In line with other international research, the analysis of Irish data confirms no statistical correlation between level of completed education and reported life satisfaction (taking other differences into account). In other words, on the face of it more education like more income does not make you happier if you have some already. Of course, it is worth increasing education and income – especially for those with relatively little. However it is defined, *some* measures of ‘social capital’ (measured as inter-personal trust, social support and number of friends) is a strong correlate of well-being. More about social capital later. First, there is a digression.

⁴ These results will be presented at a forthcoming seminar in October, 2005.

Staring out from a linear and determined universe.

Thinking in a world dominated by the print and, now especially, the image media we are used to following linear pathways. The following is a cartoon image. We start out with:

- 1 a well-defined problem – for example poverty, young male suicide, low literacy levels, social dysfunction of one sort or another. Then...
- 2 We think about ways in which society – a society – could ‘fix’ this problem in part or in whole. However....
- 3 An obvious way to ‘fix’ this problem is to engage a more efficient public service delivery or to facilitate a solution based on market competition or a bit of both. Somewhere along the way, other entities get a mention – communities, families, voluntary groups and associations, etc. So...
- 4 The instruments to achieve a solution need to be carefully chosen. And, we need ‘evidence’, ‘facts’ (statistics!) and ‘research’ of various kinds to tell us ‘how the problem is spread’ and which things are associated with the problem so that we can think up effective strategies, responses, programmes, interventions, partnerships, etc to ‘fix’ the problem or at least ameliorate some of its worst effects and attributes.
- 5 Living in a democratic society we need some measures of accountability – how well do our efforts and investments pay off? Especially, if we are guardians of some public service we need to be held to account. Hence, enter the world of ‘indicators’, ‘target-setting’, ‘performance measures’, ‘evaluation of performance’, etc. ‘Business Planning’ is everywhere and ‘Evidence-based Policy’ is the new mantra.
- 6 Armed with ‘Evidence’ we can draw up ‘Models of best practice’. Like Michelangelo we can chip away at the stone until the ‘Model’, ‘The Model’ begins to emerge. Note, that we are not talking of ‘models of good practice’ but ‘best practice’. Hence, every institution is on the way to ‘world class excellence’, ‘leading edge innovation’ and ‘premier customer service’. But...

- 7 Every 'Model' needs to be tested. Hence, 'indicators' – plenty of them – serve to test the performance of the model. Now, indicators do seven things:
 - i. they Separate things out into measurable components (the meaning of 'analysis' is to break things down into components);
 - ii. they Standardise people, events, relationships;
 - iii. they create a Unit of measurement or comparability;
 - iv. they place everything on a 'linear' scale (or a linear, non-linear scale for the mathematically inclined)⁵;
 - v. they allow people to identify Deterministic and causal pathways/associations; and thereby
 - vi. they help us to Predict the impacts of this or that intervention; and
 - vii. they enable other people to monitor, Control, test.
- 8 Finally (!), the end goal of all of the above is the 'satisfied customer' – whether satisfied through a market-based solution or a public service one or some combination of the two or some combination of the two with the 'third sector'.

Fixing problems in a linear way and top-down world...

Fixing problems – according to the above description is, ultimately, meant to be about controlling people, things and relationships for the customer. One set of people tend to prefer that public institutions do this on behalf of the people. Others tend to place greater reliance on impersonal markets to do the job.

Most of us fall somewhere between these two poles. Lord Kelvin (William Thomson) – scientist and Ulsterman from the 19th Century – summed it up in the following words ascribed to him:

⁵ This scale can be ordinal as in 'bad', 'good' 'better' and 'best'.

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‘If we can’t express what we know in the form of numbers, then we really don’t know much about it, and if we don’t know much about it we can’t control it and if we can’t control it, we are at the mercy of chance’.

Lord Kelvin, if he were around today, might be MD of Kelvin Associates – consultant to Governments, Universities and Enterprises. Anyway, all of the above is perfectly reasonable, rational, self-evident and logical. It’s linear, causal and control-based. I would argue that it is very necessary and unavoidable to some extent and in some ways. But, is it sufficient? As a way of thinking and acting it may not be *sufficient* to the extent that it does not cater for at least two awkward and essential realities in life:

- concrete and complex human beings
- concrete and complex human beings situated in concrete and complex networks of communities.

Mechanical systems from which the metaphor of social science draws are a poor representation of living, organic and messy eco-systems of which human and community development are an integral part. The empirical and ‘scientific’ paradigm is seductive but stumbles over the sufficiency test. Hence, we need new ways of imagining, connecting and evaluating.

The emphasis in government action has, traditionally, been on uniformity of services, universality of access and centralised control over allocation of resources allied to enforced accountability of those in receipt of State support. However, given the complex nature of the environment in which Government policies and actions are developed, a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of service delivery is out of kilter with the way diverse communities function. The role of the State (whether at local, national or supra-national level) as sole arbitrator of decisions involving diverse communities and individuals is seriously open to question. This, also, has serious implications in some countries and for

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some parts of the education world for the development of curriculum, teaching methods and community education.

The prevailing models of public governance supported by empirical evidence all tend to focus on needs, wants and functionings in the market place or society as judged, measured and administered by someone other than the people being served. Efficient public administration or customer-focussed market service delights in the needy customer or recipient. It tends to miss out on the empowered citizen and community to *co-produce* solutions that linear pathway systems fail to imagine. My claim is that hierarchical, rigid and compartmental structures of public governance are ill-suited to the necessary task of reforming the public service system and helping it to relate more effectively to a renewed civil society. Centralised and over-controlling models of governance undermine the *motivational* base for actors other than Government. They fail to make effective use of the resources of other actors in decision-making and provision.

However, we are at a loss because it is easier to say what is lacking in the prevailing models of governance and research than to give examples of alternative or more inclusive approaches to understanding human development. The major challenge is to take a (i) whole-systems view in which we can see the connecting parts and (ii) recognise the actual and potential capacity of all human individuals and communities to be self-organisers. Which approaches or examples could be considered?

Helping others to define their own capabilities and solutions

How do we re-design policies to reflect better the realities of complexity, inter-relatedness and localism in which primacy is given to 'self-organising networks of relatively autonomous players' (Stewart-Weeks, 2000)? A number of important design principles would be useful to consider:

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1. Cultivating mutual help and self help;
2. A movement away from identifying ‘needs’ only to identifying unique community ‘capabilities’;
3. Promoting trust through equality and respect for rights;
4. Letting go of excessive and over-detailed control (empowering and trusting communities to be responsible);
5. Valuing, rewarding and recognising voluntary effort and achievement.

In this way - the State could move to being supportive and enabling more than controlling. In any society, distance from power, lack of meaningful consultation, absence of deliberative mechanisms and a general sense of not being included in key decisions tend to generate a lack of trust and engagement. Therefore, *letting go* and *empowering* emerge as critical areas for urgent policy attention.

Creating a basis for equality and trust among various social groups entails measures to raise basic income levels AND to redistribute income from the well-off to others. Sorry, there is no free lunch. If we want Berlin-type social services, free early childhood education, smaller classes in schools, better quality school buildings, shorter hospital waiting times, better and more integrated services to the old, the very young and the sick, more opportunities for the long-term unemployed, persons with disabilities..... then someone has to pay. We either let the market do it mainly or entirely in which case some people simply don't make it to the finishing line because they don't even get a head start in an unequal tournament, or, we let the State do it mainly or entirely in which case we can't afford to be around the bottom of the international tax league. There is, also, a role for civil society – possibly in partnership with the State and the market. However, there are no easy options or quick-fix solutions here. Someone has to pay and responsibility needs to be taken and appropriately shared.

But, achieving greater equality of well-being is about more than just addressing low income or lack of employment and education

opportunities. It also about practicing what I refer to as the four Rs. These are:

- Recognition
- Respect
- Redistribution
- Representation

Recognising, naming and valuing difference is a liberating experience. Too often and especially in the past we didn't recognise particular groups or individuals in our communities. If we recognise human need and potential we must also respect it. This seems basic. But, how often is real respect lacking in the way we deal with each other? Respect for people should be at the heart of every public policy and community initiative. I have mentioned redistribution. But, redistributing things is about more than redistributing income or tangible wealth. It is also about redistributing power – real power – which is invisible, pervasive and intangible at many levels of Irish society and in many sectors of business, legal, church, public administration life. We prefer to avoid the obvious truths that stares us in the face and seek refuge in 'customer-service' language when in truth many 'customers' are not respected, recognised, empowered or represented. 'Power is everywhere' as a sociologist once remarked. Access to power – decision-making – is more than just having the occasional focus group meeting or 'consultation'. One is weary from consultation. How about effective and effectual representation in the decisions that really matter?

What the National Economic and Social Forum described some years ago as 'the unequal distribution in relationships of love, care and solidarity with others' has huge implication for participation by individuals and groups in society. The transparency, accountability and respect that authorities – political, civil, religious – demonstrate in their internal and external relationships has an important impact on trust as well as the capacity of individuals and groups to play a more active and effective role in society

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Some questions arise:

- Are we tapping into the various types of community energy and capability?
- Are we open to the needs of ‘others’ as expressed through their voice and not just our own interpretative systems?
- Are we seeing ‘needs’ only and not ‘capabilities’?
- Are their ‘needs’ really ‘our needs’ or is it that we are ‘needy’ to control, help, fund, resource and feed others in their ‘neediness’?
- What does equality really mean to us?

The place of social capital in all of this

After a digression I return to ‘social capital’. So, where does ‘social capital’ fit into all of this? Social capital is about social ties of trust, mutual obligation and engagement. Underlying these are the values – some we share and some we don’t – that shape what we aim for and how we should get there. I find it useful to refer to this as ‘capital’ not because ‘economics’ should take over the world or because everything can be given a price (it cannot). ‘Capital’, ‘power’, ‘capability’ and ‘agency’ could be viewed as closely complementary.

Trust, voluntary endeavour, giving and solidarity have a real impact on people’s well-being. People have rights – social, economic, cultural as well as fundamental rights to personal liberty, life and happiness. But, for every right there is a responsibility. As a society in the 21st Century we are still struggling like a new rich kid on the international block to figure out: Who is responsible? For what exactly? How? and Why? If we want to achieve a more just, a more equitable and a more caring society then we have to critically re-evaluate our own practice at many levels. The State cannot do it all. But, it can do some things and it can do a lot differently to the way it is doing it now.

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A series of sustained public conversations on values and the perspectives of various groups is needed. Places like the media, the Oireachtas, Third Level institutions and community fora are meant to be for this. But, could we imagine more participatory forms of dialogue in which people genuinely seek to listen - possibly even places where people can be vulnerable to others. This might take a lot of social capital in the form of trust and reciprocity and could be dangerous without some level of prior trust and engagement. So, small steps are one way to begin – led by communities, young people

A huge issue not touched on in this presentation is that of diversity – ethnic, identity, other. As Ireland becomes a more diverse society there is a major challenge to engage seriously with different ways of living, seeing and being community. We have hardly begun to address the issues from the standpoint of what it means for ethos, inclusion and cross-community links in various ‘public places’ – schools, hospitals, public services, residential facilities, etc.. Are we the welcoming, inclusive and friendly society that we like to believe that we have been? Were we not once strangers in a foreign place? A social capital perspective could help us to ask questions about the nature, depth and extent of contact, friendship, support, trust and expectation among various groups. Designing places in which to live, work and learn will need to pay a lot more attention to issues of ‘bridging social capital’⁶

It would be all too easy to go from one ‘deficit model’ to another by reinventing ‘social capital’ as a means of identifying that which communities lack and, therefore, need more of (whether from Government or some other source). An intelligent use of ‘social capital’ could be about identifying what communities and individuals already have and which needs to be recognised, valued and ‘liberated’. It is hard to do this if we want to keep things constantly under control and in a state of perpetual monitoring and form-filling.

⁶ ties among groups who are not ‘alike’.

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There is a role and place for various ‘communities’ – families in all their diversity, voluntary and community organisations, new social movements as well as cultural and sports movements that are an important life blood of villages and cities. Ultimately, well-being is everyone’s business because your well-being is important to someone else – perhaps in a 100 years time. There is no magic programme for Government to create new social capital over night or to replace old social capital that may be fraying. There are important design issues at the heart of most government programmes, policies and practices that impact in ways that we cannot yet fully understand.

Conclusions

Organisations, communities and Governments are constantly faced with choices and decisions. Even individuals are: you and me. The nature and extent of impact of these choices and decisions in 10, 20 or 50 years is unsure. But, that they have an impact *is* sure. Without a vision the people perish – said a prophet of the Old Testament.

Recently, writing in a staff magazine in the Department of Education and Science a colleague wrote:

‘Are you distracted by a worry? Do you fail to see the point in what you are doing? Take a minute to put it in perspective. In one hundred years time the world may be different because you were important in the life of a child. Work in the Department of Education and Science is crucial to children. You can take pride in the part you play in their lives’.

Let’s think about that for a moment. Substitute the name of your family or indeed your organisation, community, business or Department if you are not fortunate enough to work in the Department of Education and Science!

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