



Article

Exploring the Relational in Relational Wellbeing

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Abstract: This paper explores the different ways that relationships and the relational figure in the integrative approach, relational wellbeing (RWB). These are (1) conceptualising persons as relational subjects; (2) relationships as the means through which people seek to address a wide variety of needs; (3) inter-relations between the experience of wellbeing and the underlying factors within persons and their contexts that either promote or undermine wellbeing; (4) relationships serving as conduits of power and the making of identities; and (5) inter-relations between the concepts and methods of research with representations of (persons and) wellbeing. The main thrust of the paper is theoretical, but it is anchored in long-standing research into wellbeing in the global South and practical experience in applying RWB in the global North. Empirically, it draws, in particular, on a case study from Zambia of a ‘meshwork’ of relations between birth and foster parents and children moving between households. This places the relational, rather than the individual, at the centre of analysis. It shows how different dimensions of wellbeing may coincide, but there may also be trade-offs between them. Relationships are bearers of power, and it is the interactions of structure and agency that ultimately limit or engender opportunities for sustained individual and collective wellbeing.

Keywords: relational; wellbeing; relationships; relational subjects; power; research methods



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1. Introduction

“I feel that the NHS Trust cares about me as a whole person of BAME background, not just as a member of staff.”

This statement represents what wellbeing at work would mean for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)¹ staff at a National Health Service (NHS) hospital trust in the UK, as formulated by them in a recent workshop we held. It captures the essence of a relational approach to wellbeing; that at the heart of wellbeing is the interactive experience of being seen, known, respected, and even loved (‘cared for’). It acknowledges, in addition, the interconnections between different aspects of life (‘as a whole person’) and how being is situated in particular contexts (‘of BAME background’). This reflects the core inspiration of the Drawing Together project, which has catalysed this Special Issue: that young refugees should be recognised and appreciated as whole, rounded people, reflecting particular histories, and growing and developing as they interact with near and distant others. The statement calls for a certain orientation, a person-centred approach, which needs to be complemented by structures, processes, and cultures that help sustain it. The main case study in this paper explores one such cultural institution: a meshwork of kin in rural Zambia, in which children move between different households to share resources, maximise opportunities, and give and receive care.

When we have presented the relational approach to wellbeing in different forums, one of the (critical) comments that has recurred is that ‘the relational is doing a lot of different work’. This is true, and in this paper, we seek to respond to this criticism by setting out more explicitly the different kinds of work ‘the relational’ is doing. This paper therefore explores

the different ways that relationships and the relational figure in relational wellbeing (RWB). These are presented in Figure 1.

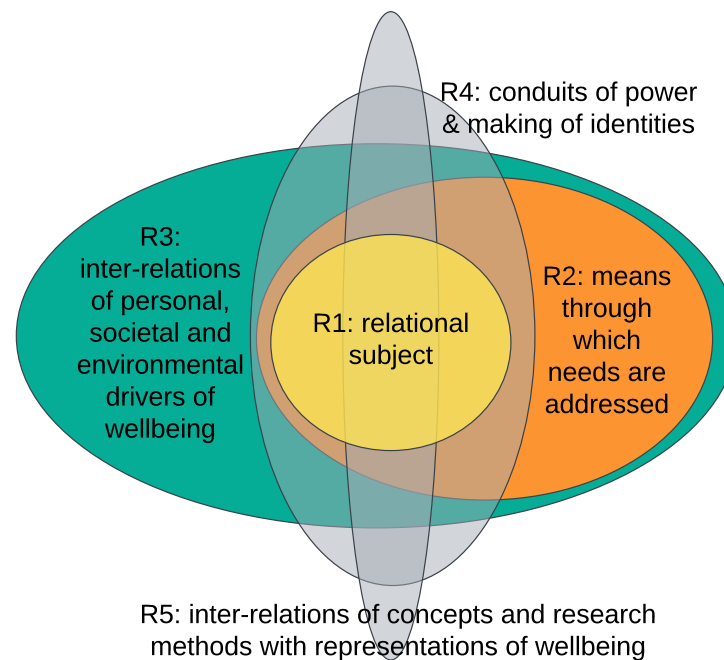


Figure 1. Relations in relational wellbeing.

First, (R1) and central is the conceptualisation of persons as relational subjects. This acknowledges people as subjects *of* their own lives rather than simply objects of other people's attention. At the same time, it recognises that people are subject *to* other forces, as they are forged in their relationships with others and their material and social contexts. The second (R2) way that relationships figure in RWB concerns the function of relationships. Relationships are seen not simply to be constitutive of people as subjects but also the means through which people seek to address a wide variety of needs. The third place at which relationships feature is the inter-relations between the experience of wellbeing and the underlying factors within persons and their contexts that either promote or undermine wellbeing (R3). We call these the 'drivers' of wellbeing. The fourth and fifth relational aspects do not focus specifically on wellbeing but draw on relational social science more broadly. We include them within the model because they are critical to understanding the RWB approach as a whole. The fourth function of relationships (R4) is thus to serve as conduits of power and the making of identities. This may be seen as an aspect of the relational subject but it is of such importance that it merits a distinct point of its own. The fifth (R5) points to the inter-relations between the concepts and methods of research with representations of (persons and) wellbeing. This cautions us to reflect that all conceptions of wellbeing are 'made things', constructs that we use to help us make sense of complex reality that bear the mark of the tools of their making and intentions of their makers.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of the relational approach and its understanding of the relational subject (R1). We then look more specifically at what this means for wellbeing and explain why we talk about three interlinked dimensions of wellbeing and resist breaking wellbeing down into separate domains. This inevitably raises the issue of the relationship between representations of wellbeing and the concepts and methods used to generate them (R5), which recurs throughout the paper. The next section considers relationships as the means to meet needs (R2). We look at how this is similar to and different from the ways that other wellbeing approaches consider the connections between relationships and needs and possible reasons for the differences. The following section presents a case study from our research in Zambia. This presents a 'meshwork' of relations between birth and foster parents and children

moving between households.² Taking such a focus allows us to place the relational, rather than the individual, at the centre of analysis and explore what these theoretical points mean in daily life. In particular, it enables us to observe how the different dimensions of wellbeing may coincide, but there may also be trade-offs between them. It also illustrates how different experiences of wellbeing can be traced to interactions between the underlying factors that shape persons and the context, which we categorise as the personal, societal, and environmental drivers of wellbeing (R3). The next section returns us to a more theoretical discussion regarding the implication of relational interactions in the transmission of power and the constitution of identities (R4). This is a major topic which we can only touch on here, but we wanted to include it for the sake of completeness. The conclusion seeks to bring all these arguments together and reflects on what they mean for the place of the relational in relational wellbeing.

2. Forms of the Relational

2.1. Relational Subjects (R1)

RWB is rooted in the broader field of relational social science, as [Atkinson et al. \(2020, p. 1914\)](#) describe:

“Relational theories reject the primacy, or even the pre-givenness, of the individual. . . . Instead, relations and interactions precede the definition of both individuals and collectives, of material things and immaterial values, of places and histories; relationality is inherent to who the individual is.”

This is a significant challenge for wellbeing research that has overwhelmingly conceived of wellbeing as an individual and largely inner state. It requires most immediately a shift to conceiving individuals not as independent sovereign entities but as relational subjects forged in their relations with others and their societal contexts. It suggests, in addition, that if we want to understand what promotes—or undermines—wellbeing, we need to move our focus from the individual to these relationships. Most radically, it suggests that wellbeing may be sustained by, and even a property of, interactions within a relational meshwork rather than belonging to individuals at all.

As with many apparent polarities, the individual–relational axis is more a continuum than an absolute binary. There are some theories, without question, which assume individuals to be completely independent units, rational actors who act single-mindedly in pursuit of individual interests. The majority of social researchers, however, recognise that some degree of relational interaction is fundamental to the process of becoming human (and also many other forms of being). Examples of theorists who emphasise the importance of relationality span the historical and disciplinary spectrum, including Marx and Engels in political economy, Einstein in physics, [Buber \(1970\)](#) in theology, [Benjamin \(1988\)](#) in psychoanalysis, [Bowlby \(1969\)](#), [Bronfenbrenner and Morris \(2006\)](#) and [Gergen \(2009\)](#) in psychology, [Deleuze and Guattari \(2004\)](#) in philosophy, [Thaler and Sunstein \(2008\)](#) in economics, [Putnam \(2000\)](#) in political science, [Bourdieu \(1977\)](#), and [Emirbayer \(1997\)](#) in sociology, among many others, including almost all in social anthropology. Relational thinking is also evident in the worldviews of Indigenous peoples, which are characteristically founded in the interdependence of humans with other beings and the earth ([Artaraz and Calestani 2015](#); [de la Cadena 2010](#); [Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009](#)).

The question then is not so much *whether* relationships are important, but *how*. The spectrum runs from those who see individuals as essentially independent beings who require relationships with others to flourish, to concepts of assemblage which radically de-centre the human person, emphasising the coming together of multiple forms of structure, affect, materiality, technology and life forms in particular times and places ([Deleuze and Guattari 1987](#); [Atkinson et al. 2020](#)). Rather than fixing our position at one point along this spectrum, we seek to hold in tension the multiplex dimensions of human experience. These mean that the importance of being recognised as ‘a whole person’ with a unique identity that has some continuity over time and across different spaces, exists alongside knowing oneself essentially intertwined with others and having expressions and experiences of self

and others that shift markedly between different contexts. Identifying persons as relational subjects does not require fixing a single form that relationality can take. Rather, a major component of the relational approach is greater awareness of the influence of context, which affects both the experience of personhood and the stories we use to describe it.

This influence of context is evident not only in everyday experience but also in the ways that different forms of research construe wellbeing, which we characterise as R5 in Figure 1. There is a clear interaction between the observer and what is observed. Questionnaires and interviews and statistical and narrative forms of data and analysis have been shown to shape research outcomes in very different ways (e.g., Schwarz 1999; Camfield et al. 2009). As we explore further below, the questions you ask and the methods you use to pursue them thus have a significant impact on the representation of persons—or wellbeing—that you produce (White 2016).

2.2. Relational Wellbeing

If ‘being’ is, as Gergen (2009, p. xxvi) remarks, ‘ambiguously poised as participle, noun, and gerund’, what does this mean for wellbeing? Most straightforwardly, and most commonly, the ‘being’ in wellbeing is used as a gerund (a verb used as a noun), which is attached to a particular (human) Being, a noun. While one of the key promises of a wellbeing approach is to provide an integrated ‘whole of life’ perspective, wellbeing has increasingly been re-colonised by the predominant academic and professional tendency towards subdivision and specialisation. Wellbeing thus becomes divided into different segments, which reflect different aspects of life. So subjective wellbeing (SWB) is defined as being happy or satisfied with your life (e.g., Diener 2000), and psychological wellbeing (PWB) is defined as optimal psychological functioning or feeling fulfilled (e.g., Ryan and Deci 2001). Wellbeing in the context of health and wellbeing (HWB) is understood as a positive state of physical and mental health. Less common but gaining in salience is economic wellbeing, which considers how people are doing in economic terms. Following this logic, ‘relational wellbeing’ is also used by some to refer to the ‘relational segment’ of life, using it to assess the strength or extent of family relationships, for example (see, e.g., Greenfield and Marks 2006). Alternatively, ‘relational wellbeing’ may be used somewhat differently to describe the quality of relationships themselves (see, e.g., Flora and Segrin 2003). This application is more similar to that of ‘environmental wellbeing’, which usually refers to the functioning of ecosystems or quality of biodiversity, rather than a measure of what degree of benefits people are gaining from their interaction with the physical environment.³

There are two further aspects to note about this segmentary approach to wellbeing and its tendency to slip back into the old ways of doing things. First, while the ‘well’ qualifier suggests a shift from a deficit to an affirmative model of human beings (White 2010), these terms increasingly identify dimensions of human beings which do not necessarily carry a positive charge. Thus, feeling sad is described as having low SWB, not as having subjective illbeing. Second, a process of reification has taken place, in which the segmented terms have come to appear not as aspects of a unitary wellbeing but as ‘real things’ in their own right. Thus, ‘economic wellbeing’, ‘psychological wellbeing’, and ‘health and wellbeing’, amongst other terms, have taken on lives of their own, designating distinct areas of intellectual, employment and business specialisation. They have become new market niches, and thus new creators of value across a broad range of academic, professional, and commercial activities, each with its associated set of experts and interests (see also Davies 2015).

In our approach, we aim to position ‘being’ as a participle rather than a gerund or noun. This reflects our view that wellbeing is better seen as a process that happens over time, emerging via the interactions between people and other beings, places, and things, rather than an inner state or an aspect of life which belongs to an individual. Viewing wellbeing as a process does not imply that it is constantly fluctuating or unstable. Since processes are often repetitive and recursive, they may produce reasonably durable equilibrium states. As Capra (1982, p. 287) comments with respect to systems, however, it is important to

recognise that such states are not inert and given but the 'flexible yet stable manifestations of underlying processes'.

Seeing wellbeing as a process emphasises the interflow of different dimensions of wellbeing. Thus, when we asked people in rural India and Zambia what it meant to live well⁴, they typically mentioned first the material dimension of 'having enough'. This, however, was rarely considered at an individual level but overwhelmingly in the context of the relational concerns of being able to *care* for one's family and *share* with wider kin and neighbours. Here, we encounter the corollary to the emphasis on being *cared for* that was proposed by BAME staff at the NHS hospital trust: caring is a reciprocal activity, both caring and being cared for matter, and the two often go together. This reflects the second, relational, dimension of wellbeing, which we can summarise as 'being connected'. The third, subjective dimension ('feeling good'), was expressed both in terms of how people felt about themselves and how they were viewed by others. The following statement, in which a Zambian man explained why he had given his brother-in-law such significant support, demonstrates how closely the material, relational and subjective are intertwined and how reciprocal relations of care can extend across the generations:

"By helping both the sides I was not looking at my direct personal benefit because they being relatives, I felt maybe at one point that you never know who is going to help whom; because maybe if I helped my relatives maybe at some point they also help me or my children, or maybe it is their children who help my children. My wife's relatives also look at me as being a good person."⁵

Conceptualising wellbeing in terms of co-constituting dimensions also speaks to the BAME staff's concern with being cared about as 'a whole person'. RWB does not divide aspects of life into different 'domains', which can then be separately assessed. The reasons for this are primarily philosophical but also practical. While domain models are valuable in drawing attention to different parts of life, they are fraught with boundary problems: what goes where? These may arise at the design stage as different analysts construct domains and place items very differently. They also raise serious issues about the value of cross-study comparisons, especially where single domain scores are used, which may carry similar labels but be comprised of very different items from one study to another. What researchers have in mind may also be quite different to the way that research subjects see things. Such discrepancies can become evident if cognitive debriefing is undertaken in conjunction with numerical scores. For example, our research with a domain model of wellbeing used mixed methods, giving us both a verbal answer and a score in response to our questions (White and Jha 2014). We frequently found that when we asked a question about one domain, people would answer by talking about another. For example, a question about family relationships might bring a response about economic circumstances: 'How can there be harmony in the house when there is no rice?!'.⁶ Factor analysis can also demonstrate such discrepancies, as items fail to load onto the domains they were assumed to represent. In our research, for example, we found that all questions about anxiety tended to correlate with each other, suggesting that people were answering in terms of their feelings of worry rather than the focus of those worries, as we had expected when designing the questions.

As the examples above show, the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of wellbeing are interleaved and co-constitutive. While analytically we may distinguish them, we need to hold this lightly. We need to remember that these are *our constructs* and ways of thinking that help us obtain a better grasp on complex realities rather than 'real things' out there in the world. In particular, we need to resist the danger of separating out 'material wellbeing', 'relational wellbeing' and 'subjective wellbeing' as if they were distinct entities. To do this takes us back into domain thinking and a mechanical model which views wellbeing as the sum of the three dimensions. However, it is important to note that being inter-related does not mean that the dimensions are necessarily in harmony. There may, on the contrary, be significant tensions and trade-offs between them, as we explore through the Zambia case study below.

2.3. Relationships as the Means through Which Needs Are Addressed (R2)

While the definition and specification of needs may vary, few would deny that for wellbeing to be experienced, needs must be addressed. How needs are defined is a major debate in itself, of course, which is beyond the scope of our present discussion. In broad terms, however, RWB follows the capability approach in conceptualising needs in terms of what people can do and be, think and feel, rather than as the material goods or other entities that may be the means to satisfy such needs. For example, what people need is the capability to be well nourished rather than a particular form of food or even calorific intake (Sen 1983). We follow Amartya Sen in maintaining that the core capabilities should be elaborated within contexts rather than Martha Nussbaum in seeking to establish a universal list (Sen 1993; Nussbaum 2003).

The distinctive addition of the RWB approach is to point to the role relationships play as the means through which needs are addressed—or capabilities achieved. Here again, it is important not to overstate the difference with other wellbeing approaches. Subjective (SWB), psychological (PWB), and multi-dimensional approaches to wellbeing all recognise the significance of relationships in meeting needs.⁷ The difference is in the range of needs that relationships are seen to meet, the range of relationships that are therefore considered and the character that relationships are understood to have. With respect to needs and types of relationships, wellbeing approaches generally emphasise primarily the psychological and emotional support that personal relationships bring to individuals. Those with a stronger grounding in political science or economics may, in addition, draw on social capital theories to acknowledge the collective benefit (e.g., at the neighbourhood level) of relational goods such as trust and conviviality. With respect to the forms of relationships, in both cases, relationships are generally seen as a ‘good thing’ and as optative—one may choose to have or not to have a relationship. This is linked to relationships being generally seen as positive; according to this theorisation, if a relationship becomes negative, one simply opts out (Adams 2005).

In RWB, relationships are seen to enable a far wider range of needs to be addressed, not simply the psychological or emotional. This is consequent on the relational understanding of wellbeing itself, which concerns how people are doing materially and the terms on which they are able to interact with others, in addition to how they are thinking and feeling. Placing the relational at the centre of both personhood and wellbeing also means that relationships are not seen as a matter simply of individual choice; by virtue of being human, one is intrinsically in relation to a whole range of other beings. Rather than relationships being seen as intrinsically good, this means they simply *are*—solidary and contradictory, supportive and ambivalent, moral and instrumental, fluid and stuck.

When we look into the disciplinary and methodological ancestries of these different perspectives on wellbeing, there are two possible reasons for the different readings of the relational in RWB compared with mainstream approaches: geographical/cultural and methodological. SWB, PWB and most multi-dimensional approaches to wellbeing have been generated via psychological and clinical testing in the global North, allied with statistical analysis of large-scale survey data. RWB has been generated instead via sociological and anthropological qualitative research in the global South. Let us consider the geographical issue first. Put simply, this is the question: are the societies where RWB has been developed simply ‘more relational’ than those where SWB and PWB originate? There is indeed some evidence for this. If we suspend our qualitative sensibilities for a moment and imagine a global cultural spectrum between an emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy at one end and an emphasis on harmony and responsibility to others at the other, numerous studies show that societies of the ‘North’ and ‘West’ tend to cluster at the former end, while those of the ‘South’ and ‘East’ tend to cluster towards the latter (Miller et al. 2011; Triandis 1999).⁸ Compounding this, it may well be that relationships are particularly omnifunctional in contexts where there is a large informal economy and an absence of much (or anything) in the way of state-based welfare (see, e.g., Wood and Gough 2006; Gough and McGregor 2007). This would suggest that relationships are more central and

more multiplex in the kinds of societies where RWB has been developed than they are in the global North. We also, however, need to take note of the classic claim of anthropology that in seeking what is to be learned from another society, one can come to see more clearly neglected aspects of one's own. Recognising the importance of relationships to wellbeing in other contexts may thus help to draw attention to their significance 'at home'. This encourages us to reflect not only on the role of relationships in our personal experience but also on the strong sociological and anthropological tradition pointing to the significance of relationality in the North and West (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Brownlie 2014; Connell 1987, 1995; Mattingly 2014; Young and Wilmott 1962).

Whatever the 'real' differences regarding the relative salience of relationships in different societies, there is no doubt that these are dwarfed by the disciplinary and methodological differences in the genesis of RWB and other wellbeing approaches. The different ways in which approaches to wellbeing perceive the relational can be traced ultimately to the diverse purposes for which those approaches are designed. This question of purpose is the hidden element that underlies the differences in concepts and methods. The predominant purpose of most contemporary wellbeing approaches is to assess, to produce comparable scores at different levels, and to produce standardised rankings across diverse cases. SWB is the purest version of this, with its focus on 'how happy' people are. This may be assessed either by a single variable (usually life satisfaction) or across three dimensions of current emotion (affect), overall life satisfaction, and a sense of meaning or purpose (or 'eudaemonic wellbeing'). PWB is rather different in that it is concerned more substantively with what makes for good psychological health or optimal psychological functioning. Nevertheless, it is also commonly about assessment in a clinical or quasi-clinical (self-help) setting. Multi-dimensional approaches, such as the OECD's 'better life' index, are also about comparative assessment, this time typically in a public policy context.⁹ While RWB can indeed be used for comparative assessment, this is not its primary purpose. Its purpose is to understand the experience of wellbeing in people's everyday lives, as far as possible, in their everyday language and then to explore the underlying factors that make wellbeing more or less likely, again first via observation of the dynamics at play and then via critical analysis. The basic orientation of RWB is the particular, towards capturing the quality of wellbeing within the specific context, rather than extracting distinct elements which can be ranked quantitatively against those from other contexts. In RWB, comparative assessment tends thus to concentrate on the case as a whole, exploring whether the dynamics that have been observed in one example hold true in another.¹⁰

In the previous two sections, we considered some of the theoretical underpinning of relational wellbeing: the relational understanding of personhood comprising both multiplex individuals and interconnection with others, the constitution of wellbeing via three interlinked dimensions, the inevitability of relationships and their importance in enabling people to meet diverse forms of needs, and the significance of research methods and objectives in shaping representations of wellbeing. In the next section, we present a case study from our research in Zambia, which explores how these theoretical points appear in social practice.

3. Case Study: A Meshwork of Kin

Children shifting between households is a common feature of kin-based support across much of Africa, as well as other parts of the world (see e.g., Carsten (1991) on Malaysia and Leinaweaver (2008) on Peru).¹¹ Specific practices differ, and we describe here only those we encountered in the course of our own research in Chiawa, Zambia. Reasons for children moving varied but generally involved the provision of care and/or labour. Stays ranged from short-term visits to virtual adoption. Motivations were often mixed. A wealthier relative might take the child of a poorer household, for example, at once to relieve his parents of an extra mouth to feed, to offer him the chance of better schooling, and to bring in another pair of hands to help with housework and the care of their own children. Children also sometimes initiate a move. People explained the practice to us via a general

idiom of collective identity ('they are all our children') and a generalised web of reciprocity ('you never know who is going to take care of the other one day'). Such terms reveal a textbook case of the relational subject introduced above: the sense that one's own identity is fundamentally intertwined with that of others and that this is sustained via material, as well as other forms of interconnection and support.

Our study location of Chiawa is a rural area of Zambia adjacent to a national park. We undertook research for two periods of approximately three months each in 2010 and 2012. This involved a survey conducted with an average of 390 people in each round of fieldwork, plus 46 case study life histories. Chiawa is an area of great contrasts. Large agri-business plantations existed alongside villages in which most households farmed at least some land, but few had irrigation or access to any but the most basic implements. Petty business or odd jobs also helped to eke out a living. The main source of employment was luxury safari lodges, where approximately 20% of the men we interviewed worked, mainly in domestic service on short-term, insecure contracts. A few women took on very low-paid work on commercial farms. Local amenities were very basic, with major markets, hospitals and government offices across the river, accessible only by a ferry that ran from dawn until dusk.¹² A fuller description of the methods, data, and analysis on which this section draws is available in [White and Jha \(2021\)](#).

The idea of 'meshwork' is set out by the anthropologist of material culture, Tim [Ingold \(2016\)](#).¹³ [Brown \(2022, p. 59\)](#) describes it as follows:

"Ingold starts from Mauss' metaphor that humans find a place for themselves by sending out tendrils with which to connect and bind to others ([Mauss 1954](#) cited by [Ingold 2016, p. 10](#)). These lines are dynamic, and framed as 'lines of becoming', in the sense that they can be used to visualise people's growth and movement ([Deleuze and Guattari 2004, pp. 224–25](#), cited in [Ingold 2013, p. 132](#)). In places, many lines may be bundled together, twisted, looped and intertwined; in others, lines may travel alone ([Ingold 2013, 2016](#))."

The 'meshwork' that these lines together create is not an inert settled grid, but living and growing as the lines interweave, knot, persist together, or connections unravel as people move on within their lives. It is never complete or made but always in the making. In this case, the loops, twists, and knots which constitute various forms of fostering relationships are the means through which individuals, households and family groups seek to sustain and advance wellbeing. Viewed as a whole, the meshwork may itself be seen as a collective attempt to ensure that as many as possible children and others who are vulnerable do as well as they can in a situation of high dependency ratios, in part due to HIV/AIDS, and generalised economic precarity ([Harland 2008](#)).

While the meshwork as a whole may seek to sustain wellbeing, that does not mean that wellbeing is inevitably assured for the individuals and households connected within it. In fact, fostering can pose serious risks to wellbeing, with trade-offs and contradictions evident both between different actors and between different dimensions of wellbeing. Recalling their time as a child spent in others' households, people often spoke of mental and physical hardship, discriminatory treatment, and sometimes outright cruelty. While adults might subscribe to idioms of kin unity, it was clear that these were in contest with narrower notions of self and self-interest, which favoured 'one's own' over 'other' children. There was a general understanding that for the child and the family of birth, fostering involved a trade-off between the subjective comforts of living together at home and the hoped-for material benefit of going to stay with better-positioned kin. Thus, some who had lived in kin households as a child described how they felt emotionally abandoned, believing that birth parents could not love them, as they did not come to save them from intolerable treatment. Birth parents spoke of suffering the loss of their children's companionship and worrying about their children's welfare. Mothers talked of the fear that children would 'forget I am their mum'. Samuel, who had suffered as a child in kin households and yet placed his own children with kin who lived nearer to better schools, described this trade-off quite explicitly. When his children told him of problems in their foster families, he said, he

counselled them to endure and obey their foster parents rather than forfeit their education by returning home:

“Sometimes you pretend all is well. Sometimes you have to pretend that certain situations are just ok when they are not.”

Children from poorer households may experience an immediate material benefit in moving to live with wealthier kin or from village to town. They do not necessarily enjoy, however, the same food or standard of living as others in the household and may have to do significant amounts of labour. This may reduce the material benefit they experience, for example, if their household labour restricts their access to school or the energy and time they have for their studies. Even if an overall material benefit remains, such treatment may cause emotional and psychological harm, as their experience of being exploited clashes with their expectations that they should receive fair treatment at the hands of kin. More generally, in addition to trade-offs between the material and subjective dimensions of wellbeing, there is a temporal one: the hope that hardship endured now will result in improved quality of life in future. Much of this rests on expectations of schooling, which in Chiawa, like many other places, is seen as the portal to employment and a better life. However, while schooling is typically promised as part of the fostering package, it may not always be forthcoming, and even if it is, it may not necessarily translate into better outcomes in the longer term.

Children’s movement between households can similarly have contradictory effects on the relational dimension of wellbeing. If things go well, the pre-existing relationships are strengthened. A child’s close connections with wealthier relatives may prove a valuable resource for her whole birth household, providing a basis on which to seek help in times of trouble. If things go badly, the relationship may be harmed, especially if the birth parents feel they need to intervene on their child’s behalf. But there is another danger, too. This is that the relocation will be too successful, that the child will come to identify with her new household rather than the household of birth. This has both a relational aspect—that the original parent–child bond will be compromised—and a material one—that the child will give any future support to the foster family rather than her family of birth.

In this section, we viewed the meshwork in terms of the wellbeing outcomes that it secures. This shows that while the meshwork may help to sustain higher levels of wellbeing overall, the benefits are not equally shared, and some participants may actually experience harm. Relationships may be contradictory, as well as solidary, and there are trade-offs both between present and future and between different dimensions of wellbeing. In the next section, we investigate in a little more depth some of the reasons for this differentiation of outcomes, as we consider the underlying factors that promote or undermine wellbeing.

3.1. Inter-Relations of Personal, Societal, and Environmental Drivers of Wellbeing (R3)

Viewing wellbeing as a process and particular experiences of wellbeing as the outcome of the interaction of other underlying factors leads inevitably to the question: what are these factors? Researchers from different traditions will inevitably answer this in different ways, but our research has led us to identify three kinds of ‘drivers’ of wellbeing: personal, societal, and environmental. In categorising the drivers in this way, we again seek to resist the academic tendency towards segmentation. Personal drivers generate variability between individuals. They include factors such as personality, personal history, personal endowments, and direct interactions with others. Societal drivers, on the home ground of sociology, characterise the structures and processes that generate variability between social groups. They include factors such as the organisation of the economy, forms of social difference and inequalities, policy and politics, institutional structures and processes, technologies, social norms, and culture. Environmental drivers recognise the interdependence of all living beings and the earth. They draw attention to issues such as space, place, built environment, climate and biodiversity, pollution, and ecological sustainability.

As with the dimensions of wellbeing, these forms of drivers are constantly interacting and empirically intertwined. While there is a ‘givenness’ to individual variability, such

as a person's genetic inheritance, the way this develops depends vitally on how it is engaged with the social and environmental context. What is important is to hold all aspects in tension, not to lose individual differences to an overarching social or environmental determinism, nor to ignore the role of social structures and processes in shaping individual lives or the biosphere.

Having set out some of the theory behind the drivers, we now explore how they appear in the social practice of the child-fostering meshwork. It is the personal dimension of drivers that is most immediately evident at the surface of the interview transcripts. Narratives described foster parents' dispositions as kind and generous or mean and calculating. In general, it was the characters of others that appeared most highly coloured, especially when things had gone wrong. However, the self emerged as a relational presence when people described how they overcame hardships or resolved problems. The statement of Deborah, a widow who was HIV positive and had placed her three children each with different relatives, gives an example of this.

"I think what gives more faith in myself is the way that I look at life, the way I do things especially . . . the most important thing is I value the life of my children. . . because I look at myself as one. If I don't do it, if I don't have faith in what I am doing, I don't [have] faith in myself . . . how am I going to support my children? Because for now although I am a single woman my children are happy. I am able to find the few things that they need at school."

Deborah's comment 'although I am a single woman' refers to the fact that both economically and culturally, women who are without a husband tend to have it hard in Chiawa. In her case, however, she has been able to counteract this 'societal driver' via her intelligence, endowments, strength of character, and skills in social navigation¹⁴. During her husband's illness, Deborah took over the family finances and became a successful entrepreneur. This financial capacity meant that she was able to bear all her children's expenses so they would not be felt as a burden on their households of residence. She also guarded against any problems arising via staying in close touch with all her children, either via good relationships with the foster parents or the support of friendly intermediaries. This helped significantly to reduce the tensions and anxieties attendant to having one's children at a distance. Here again, we see the interweaving of subjective, relational, and material dimensions of wellbeing.

The same combination of strong moral character and relatively advantaged social and economic position was evident with Samuel (introduced above). By contrast, Faith, a very poor widowed mother of five, expressed great ambivalence about her oldest son's placement in the home of her husband's niece. The strong, active descriptions of Samuel and Deborah are replaced by an uncertain, anxious, passive narrative in which all of the initiatives are taken by others, and Faith feels at the mercy of people whose motivations she doubts. While she recognises that her son is better off in his new family, she fears that he will be lost to her:

"What will happen is that they would not like my son to come to me. They would prefer for him to be closer to them because then, when he is employed, he will support them. That will somehow pay them back for having supported his education."

Across the case studies as a whole, this interlinkage between strong personal character, better socio-economic endowments, and being able to negotiate more extensive personal networks on more positive terms is striking. Directions of influence are multiple. In Samuel's case, for example, he was born into a relatively advantaged household (his father had a regular salaried job) and was able to obtain a relatively good education despite suffering serious disruptions as a child due to the breakdown of his parents' relationship. He is also part of the lineage from which the Chieftainess of Chiawa is drawn; although as the lineage is large and the play of power within it complex, the social advantage this gives him should not be overstated. At the same time, Samuel has had to work hard to attain

his current position, which is significantly due to his own initiative, intelligence, industry, and social dexterity. His situation is, in turn, structured via wider societal factors. These include the opportunities that have been open to him because of his gender and the laws regarding the ownership and use of land, which mean that he cannot gain legal title to the land he farms and is vulnerable to its expropriation.

It is important also to situate the ‘societal drivers’ within the particular context. In Chiawa, while social differentiation is clearly visible among the local population, no one outside a very small elite is very well off. As we have seen in Samuel’s statement above, the relationships remained very delicate. This is in part due to the ‘societal driver’ of the meshwork as a whole: kinship. While some kin may be quite wealthy while others are very poor, statements such as ‘they are all our children’ indicate a strong ideology of unity and mutual support. In general, kinship may produce a somewhat levelling effect and certainly constituted an extra motivation to maintain good relations. For example, even when he was clearly wealthier and more socially influential than the people with whom his children were lodging, Samuel was extremely cautious about saying anything that they might experience as criticism and sought, above all, to keep the relationship good, even if he felt he needed to withdraw his child to place them somewhere with better prospects.

What, then, of environmental drivers? Geographical proximity is clearly an issue: it is easier to nurture relationships when people are nearby, and you can have regular contact. Distance is, of course, relative. Both Faith and Deborah had a son living with kin in the capital city, Lusaka. Deborah kept in regular touch via the good offices of a local lorry driver, through whom she sent whatever her son needed. Faith, on the other hand, was dependent on her son’s visits home to hear how he was doing. For her, Lusaka might almost be another world.

Looking beyond differentiation between individuals to the system as a whole, the poverty and vulnerability which animates the meshwork is underwritten by an environmental context of exposure to drought, flooding when the dam upstream opened its sluice gates, and threats to life and livelihoods by wild animals. This physical precarity is aggravated by the societal driver of regressive land laws noted above. This points to a larger pattern that societal and environmental drivers are deeply intertwined, just as we noted above for the societal and personal. Another example is geography. We have seen how important the lack of good schools in rural areas is in motivating households to place their children with others. At one level, this is about the local environment—what amenities are available. At another, of course, it is about politics and economics, the choices about where governmental resources should be invested, and the broader position of Zambia in the overall distribution of global resources. As we have seen most catastrophically with climate change, while it is vital to pay proper attention to the earth and other beings on their own terms, their evolution is critically shaped by societal conditions and the human activities to which they give rise.

3.2. Conduits of Power and the Making of Identities (R4)

In this section, we introduce very briefly the final function of relationships, their role as conduits of power and the making of identities. In some ways, this returns us to where we began with the relational subject, as it requires us to consider in more detail the making of subjects and subjectivities and the ways that interpersonal interactions are implicated in the making of social difference.

In approaching this topic, we follow Foucault’s (1978) argument that power relations are not exterior to, but immanent within, other types of relationships (such as economic, family, or sexual relationships). This means that

“power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations”. (Foucault 1978, p. 94)

Power constitutes relationships and the immediate effects of the inequalities within them. Rather than emanating from ‘above’ from an abstraction like ‘the state’ or ‘the bourgeoisie’, Foucault sees power as generated from below, such that

“Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations” (*ibid.*)

In feminist and anti-racist work, such abstractions are brought closer to home as theorists explore how gender or race are ‘done’ and how forms of social difference are not just given but achieved via everyday social interactions. For example, [West and Fenstermaker \(1995, p. 9\)](#) describe how

“Rather than conceiving gender as an individual characteristic, we conceived of it as an emergent property of social situations: both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and a means of justifying one of the most fundamental divisions of society.”

Individuals perceived to belong to a particular category are encouraged to ‘live up’ to the expectations associated with that category (e.g., that women should behave in an appropriately ‘feminine’) way and engage in action ‘at the risk of’ an assessment according to the expectations of that category (e.g., black students in majority white societies being expected to excel at sport but not in other subjects) ([West and Fenstermaker 1995, pp. 23–24](#)).

[Mama \(1995\)](#) takes this further into quite intimate relationships as she studies

“the nuances and intricate sets of social etiquette and behaviour, of betrayal and collusion, of inversion and resistance that constitute racism as a social process” ([Mama 1995, p. 46](#))

Noting how women friends of Nigerian descent in London challenge one another as to whether they are ‘black enough’, for example, [Mama](#) shows that policing of behaviour happens within social categories as much as it does across them.

Following these theorists encourages us to push the analysis of relations within the meshwork a little further. This would see the impoverishment and disempowerment of Faith as an *outcome* of her engagement in the meshwork on very disadvantaged terms, succumbing to ‘the risk of’ gender assessment according to local stereotypes regarding women living without a husband. By contrast, Samuel’s economic viability and social standing would appear as the outcome of his ability to ‘live up to’ gendered scripts about ‘a man of power’ who is

“self-reliant, hardworking and successful. He provides all his family’s needs and helps his kin. He does not show fear, he is always calm and decisive, slow to anger but will defend his own and his family’s honour. He does not complain in hard times or show pain. He is generous and people come to him for advice”. ([Dover 2001, p. 99](#))

Considering this example makes it clear how such interactions occur not just between people but also within them. Such internal dialogues may lead people to conform to positive expectations, as in Samuel’s case, or to combat negative ones in Deborah’s, as she seeks to make a good life for herself and her children “although I am a single woman”.

4. Conclusions

This paper uses a combination of theoretical discussion and case study analysis to explore how the relational figures in relational wellbeing. It sets out a distinctive approach to wellbeing that derives from a relational ontology and qualitative research in the global South. Our experience of applying RWB with BAME staff in the NHS hospital trust shows that it transfers without difficulty to global North contexts, using both participatory methods and quantitative assessment. In setting out the basics of the approach here, we therefore invite others to see how it can be tested and extended in different contexts and using other methods.

The paper shows RWB to be an integrative approach, which approaches wellbeing ‘in the round’ as having at once material, relational and subjective dimensions. While these dimensions often reinforce one another, they may also be in tension, and people may

consciously trade off present wellbeing in the hopes of a better future. People use relationships to satisfy a wide range of needs, especially in contexts where resource distribution is profoundly unequal, and state welfare provision is very limited. While we can imagine such relationships as a meshwork, with multiple overlapping loops, ties and knots which make it seem substantial, we also recognise that these relationships are living things; they need to be tended to and nurtured; and they can be damaged, severed, or simply wither away. Navigating the relationships which sustain wellbeing involves considerable skill, both at the personal and the collective level.

If the surface of wellbeing comprises the meeting of needs, including the capabilities to be connected and feel good, these 'outcomes' are generated by the interactions within a set of underlying drivers. Just as the dimensions of wellbeing comprehend both the 'inner' and 'outer' aspects of human existence, so too do the drivers extend from the personal through the societal and environmental. Acknowledging all three forms of drivers helps to overcome disciplinary divisions that emphasise the individual while ignoring the systemic, or the structural to the erasure of agency, or the human to the exclusion of the wider biosphere. But viewing the drivers in this way also has a practical dimension: in mobilising for change, people need both to acknowledge and confront resistance within themselves, and identify and address external obstacles, while becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which these at once interact and are distinct.

Underlying all of this is a relational ontology, which views people as relational subjects, navigating their own lives while being essentially intertwined with others. Critically, however, when wellbeing discourse is typically rather shy of power, we have seen that these relationships are not neutral but bearers of social difference and inequality. Different people begin with different endowments of personal characteristics, social positioning, and environmental access. Interpersonal interactions may exacerbate or ameliorate such differences, as they are shaped by broader resources, systems, and structures. Agency that is exercised at this level will serve to mitigate, reinforce, or combat hegemonic dynamics of domination and enablement, and it is these that will ultimately limit or engender opportunities for sustained individual and collective wellbeing.

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Notes

¹ We recognise the limitations of this amalgamated term, 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic'. We use it as shorthand, whilst acknowledging that it is an artificial category that implies a unity across multiple diverse communities.

² This case is discussed in much more detail in [White and Jha \(2021\)](#).

3 Economic wellbeing may also be used in this more expansive way, to describe how the economy as a whole is doing.
 4 ‘Wellbeing’ was not a term that was familiar to people in these local contexts. We therefore asked people about ‘living well’,
 which as a more tangible construction was more easily understood by our research participants.
 5 This quote is drawn from our research in Chiawa which is introduced in the case study section below.
 6 Comments like this are very common, and have been noted many wellbeing researchers.
 7 We describe these different understandings of wellbeing in much more detail, including their approach to relationships, in [White \(2016, 2017\)](#).
 8 We recognise that these are deeply flawed indices of polarity, and use them only as shorthand. As has been amply demonstrated,
 these compass point categories suppress critical differences between highly diverse societies, and are markers of cultural politics
 rather than real geographies. Nevertheless, as these are terms commonly used in academic wellbeing debates, we feel we must
 address them here.
 9 The OECD Better Life index can be found at <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/#/11111111111> (accessed on 20 October 2023).
 10 Our paper considering whether the tenets of self-determination theory are supported by our Zambia data is an example of this
 kind of comparative approach ([White and Jha 2018](#)).
 11 Naming these practices is contentious—locally they are simply seen as parenting. ‘Fostering’ and ‘adoption’ can evoke formal,
 state-aided processes. ‘Circulation’ suggests a systemic process, and ‘child mobility’ may stand for migration. ‘Fostering’ is the
 most common term in the literature. For simplicity, therefore, we use this term here, and distinguish linguistically between ‘birth’
 and ‘foster parents’, despite the fact that this is not the practice in Chiawa.
 12 A new bridge and road have since been built.
 13 Other writers also use the term, see for example [Escobar \(2008\)](#).
 14 For more on social navigation see [Vigh \(2009\)](#).

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