

Respecting the Subject in Subjective Well-Being Public Policy: Moving Beyond the Social Planner Perspective

Authors:

Mark Fabian, University of Cambridge, mf723@cam.ac.uk, *corresponding author*

Diane Coyle, University of Cambridge, dc700@cam.ac.uk

Anna Alexandrova, University of Cambridge, aa686@cam.ac.uk

Marco Felici, University of Cambridge, mf559@cam.ac.uk

Matthew Agarwala, University of Cambridge, mka30@cam.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

There is rising advocacy for public policy to be made on the basis of ‘wellbeing’. We compare and evaluate two competing paradigms within this space that we term the social planner perspective (SPP) and citizen perspective (CP) respectively, with the intention of improving interdisciplinary dialogue. We argue that most wellbeing public policy (WPP) proposals adopt the same SPP that undergirds conventional economic policy analysis. This perspective is broadly technocratic, emphasising scientific standards for what constitutes good policy and empowering ‘dispassionate’ experts. We argue that WPP could lend itself to a more transformative agenda, one that embraces the value-laden nature of ‘wellbeing’ as a concept. This is the CP. It would see WPP relinquish the SPP’s stance of detached analysis by technical experts and instead give a greater role to participatory and deliberative modes of policymaking to define, analyse, and measure wellbeing and ultimately make policy decisions. However, the CP is not without drawbacks. In particular, it is slow and logistically intensive. It is also relatively unsuitable for private, individual, and low-stakes domains of public policy. We present a preliminary framework for thinking through when the SPP or CP is more suitable to a particular area of WPP.

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Introduction

Reframing public policy decisions was at the heart of wellbeing science's narrative from the moment it first burst onto the scene some thirty years ago. In particular, wellbeing advocates often positioned themselves in opposition to neoclassical economics, adopting the rhetoric of going 'beyond GDP'. The rejection of the use of income as a measure of welfare in policy analysis became a central tenet (Diener and Seligman 2004, Stiglitz et al. 2009). An oft-invoked argument was that psychological metrics like life satisfaction are a more 'direct' measure of 'wellbeing', with wellbeing defined as a feeling or mental state, as in psychology, rather than the satisfaction of preferences or desires, as in neoclassical economics (Angner 2009). This focus on metrics is indicative of broader commitments on the part of most wellbeing scientists regarding how wellbeing public policy (WPP) should be designed and managed. In this paper, we argue that the vast majority of WPP advocacy on the part of scientific communities has adopted the same 'social planner perspective' (SPP) that undergirds conventional economic policy analysis. Essentially, WPP advocacy has to date sought to shift the *metrics* and *definition* of wellbeing employed by technical policy analysts rather than change the policy analysis *paradigm*. We argue that WPP could and should lend itself to a more transformative agenda, one that embraces both the value-laden nature of 'wellbeing' as a concept and the realities of public administration. This would see WPP relinquish the SPP's stance of detached analysis by technical experts and instead give a greater role to participatory and deliberative modes of policymaking to define, analyse, and measure wellbeing and ultimately make policy decisions. We call this the 'citizen perspective' (CP).

The SPP envisages the scientist, whether economist or psychologist, as a dispassionate expert adopting a 'view from nowhere' (sometimes called a 'wide reflective equilibrium') and offering advice on how to maximise social welfare to an equally dispassionate 'social planner' (Sugden 2018, ch. 2). The social planner is conceived as a kind of benevolent technocrat, outside the system they are analysing and influencing. In the traditional microeconomic framework, the social planner mediates between public preferences on the one hand and expert knowledge of how to maximally meet those preferences on the other (Fabian & Breunig 2018). WPP's redefinition of wellbeing from preference-satisfaction to 'happiness' or some other mental state alters this somewhat. It is assumed that individuals can assess their own wellbeing (for the most part), but they do not usually know what policies improve it (Diener et al. 2018). The expert performs the measurement and infers from data what policies the public needs, making recommendations to the policy maker. The evidence considered most reliable consists of quantitative survey data and randomised controlled trials (RCTs, Frijters et al. 2020). The citizen's role is simply to report their wellbeing in terms of metrics previously validated by scientific experts. The SPP in WPP is thus identical to the SPP in neoclassical economic analysis except in terms of the objective function.

The CP is based on a different ideal of knowledge and politics, namely the ideals of deliberative and participatory democracy (Dryzek 2002, Habermas 2001); and on a different understanding of the realities of policymaking, that of the public administration tradition (Wright 2015). The SPP, coming from the economic tradition, takes citizens' preference as

exogenous to its policy analysis. It thereby “chooses solved political problems as its domain”, in the words of Abba Lerner (1972, p. 259). The CP, in contrast, begins with politics. While decision-makers and policy analysts should strive to be impartial, policymaking is inherently political and value-laden. It is thus necessary to engage honestly and openly with whoever holds the power to make value judgements and control processes in policymaking. The citizen perspective recognises that only by including all relevant stakeholders in the policy process and centring the value-judgements and lived experiences of citizens can legitimacy and effectiveness in policy be achieved (Bovaird 2007).

The SPP is also driven by formal modelling of welfare outcomes, which relies heavily on the availability of a narrow and well-defined set of objectives to be maximised and metrics with which to track progress. The CP, in contrast, acknowledges the complexities of public service delivery, the multidimensional nature of the outcomes it seeks, and the need for systems thinking in evaluating it. These on-the-ground realities of public management confound the social planner perspective’s evaluation paradigm, which privileges randomised control trials (RCTs), along with other methods aimed at causal identification of the effect of a specific treatment, as a knowledge gathering device and contorts policy objectives, designs, and metrics to suit the needs of such tools. Scholarship in public management has demonstrated the necessity of sensitivity to local context, values pluralism, bespoke and multidimensional measurement, and qualitative analysis, all of which runs counter to the formal stance of the SPP. While the SPP undoubtedly has a role to play in WPP, it is important at this juncture to articulate the CP in contrast to it.

This paper makes three novel contributions. First, we develop an interdisciplinary synthesis of high-level, paradigmatic thinking about what WPP is and should be. The social planner and citizen perspectives are nascent constellations within the scholarship of WPP, splitting roughly along disciplinary lines – economists, psychologists, and philosophers on one side, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists on the other. Second, we articulate the social planner and citizen perspectives using both the language of economics and the language of public administration. This both clarifies these paradigms and allows their advocates to understand each other and communicate more effectively. It makes the stakes and concerns each side has clear. Third, we develop a preliminary framework for thinking about the comparative advantages of the SPP and CP as paradigms for WPP that illuminates what policy contexts are well-suited to each.

We begin by outlining the SPP, how it expresses itself in public management, and how it manifests in WPP advocacy. We then analyse its attractive features, before turning to its shortcomings. In the latter we focus especially on critiques from the public administration and wellbeing literatures. We articulate the CP in counterpoint to these critiques. Finally, we outline how the CP could be used in practice and conversely discuss where and why the SPP might be more appropriate.

Features of the social planner perspective

What is the social planner perspective?

The SPP undergirds economic analysis of the welfare effects of policy decisions. Owing to the dominance of economic thinking over policymaking in the second half of the 20th century, non-economists engaging in policy analysis, such as wellbeing psychologists, can fall under the influence of its paradigm. Economists generally analyse policy outcomes from the perspective of a benevolent social planner who aims to maximise aggregate utility as defined by a specified social welfare function (Samuelson 1977, Adler 2019). Aggregate utility is made up of rankings of relative preferences such that satisfying higher-ranked preferences provides more utility. Social welfare functions are mathematical means of aggregating individual utilities to enable collective analysis. They can embody various distributional criteria. This welfare analysis architecture is extremely powerful, able to provide rough estimates of the welfare consequences of climate change, compare the costs and benefits of competing infrastructure projects, and assess the impact of individual policy changes, for example. However, the notion of the ‘optimality’ utilised in this maximisation exercise rests on a series of assumptions underpinning the welfare theorems in economics that have been much debated and critiqued (Coyle 2020). The welfare theorems also involve a particular definition of improvement: a Pareto improvement is a change in allocation of resources that leaves at least one person better off and nobody worse off.

Social welfare assessment in economics also incorporates two less-widely debated philosophical stances. First, there is the assumption of separateness of facts from values. That is, the estimation of optimality is treated as a technocratic exercise, with values only entering when politicians decide to act on the evidence this exercise provides. This separation of positive and normative was articulated by Lionel Robbins in a 1932 publication, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, where he argued that political processes can make value judgements (for example, by selecting a social welfare functional form) on the basis of positive evidence provided by economists. Even though the Pareto criterion means there is in fact an ethical assumption deeply embedded in welfare economics, the Robbins separation protocol has a firm hold in economics. For example, it was famously reaffirmed by Milton Friedman (1953), and recently by Esther Duflo (2017).

Secondly, maximisation of social welfare by the social planner is a version of the ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel 1989). Dating back at least to Adam Smith’s idea of an ‘impartial spectator’, it demands that the interests of all members of society be taken into account. Behind this admirable idea is a less appreciated aspect: the analyst themselves is placed outside the society of which they are a member (Coyle 2021). Naturally, standing outside the society armed with all the necessary information, the analyst has to assume that no other necessary information (nor technical abilities) that the public may have are relevant for their decision.

A key feature of the social planner perspective is that it ideally wants a single objective to maximise and a unidimensional and cardinal measure of that variable, as this aids aggregation and comparison across individuals. In economics, the single objective is preference-satisfaction (i.e., utility). But note that preferences are heterogeneous across individuals. So in maximising preference-satisfaction, economic analysis seeks to realise a plurality of values. Defining welfare as preference-satisfaction allows the economist to wash their hands, they presume, of any need to make a value judgement about what is worthwhile to maximise – they simply maximise citizens’ ability to maximise whatever it is that those citizens value. Money is the metric of choice for these analyses because it is unidimensional, cardinal, and arguably a good proxy for preference-satisfaction. More of it allows you to buy more stuff

and thereby satisfy more preferences. Furthermore, owing to the nature of competitive markets, \$100 will provide approximately as much utility to each of two individuals even though they would spend that \$100 on a different set of consumption goods (see Adler 2019 for a thorough explanation). The maximisation of GDP as an overweening goal of policy is a natural extension of this analytic approach.

The social planner perspective in practice

The SPP manifests in public management in the form of a metrics-first approach to policy design, evaluation, and funding. It is implemented foremost by treasuries – ministries that fund policies but do not generally design or deliver them. There is a noble desire to fund only good policies, and to fund better policies before worse ones. This naturally leads to a demand for cost-benefit analysis (CBA), which is the principal technical fruit of the social planner perspective. CBA can accommodate multidimensional costs and benefits, but in order for cost-benefit ratios to be compared across projects this multidimensionality needs to be distilled down into a unidimensional index. For example, narrowing the objective of education to improving PISA scores allows a huge number of complex education programs to be straightforwardly compared in terms of their cost relative to their impact on this one metric. A natural extension of this approach is to focus on causal inference methods as an evaluation tool, as they can precisely identify the ‘treatment effect’ of a policy on an outcome of interest. These treatment effects are then fed into cost-benefit analyses. Textbooks on cost-benefit analysis argue that it would be rational for policymakers to calculate the cost-benefit ratio for all potential policies, rank them from highest to lowest, and then fund from the top of the list until you run out of money.

One of the strongest challenges to the social planner perspective within economics, especially in the context of policymaking, was the public choice movement (Buchanan 1964, Buchanan & Tullock 1962, Tullock 1965, Olson 1965), which introduced into the assessment of policy outcomes the interests of the policy-maker, challenging the notion that impartiality was possible. Public choice theory formed one basis for New Public Management (NPM), introducing practices such as target-setting to control the interests of bureaucrats (Lane 2000). However, NPM does not address either the notion of maximisation of social welfare—calculable by an analyst from outside the model given codified information—or the positivist presumption that the normative and positive aspects of a decision can be separated. Indeed, NPM is widely associated with the proliferation and entrenchment of metrics-based policymaking, cost-benefit analysis, technocracy, and other tropes of the social planner perspective (Muller 2019). NPM hoped that by making bureaucrats and decision-makers beholden to the maximisation of metrics validated by ‘science’, they would be forced to follow the evidence rather than their personal judgements or interests.

How does the social planner perspective manifest in WPP?

The SPP in WPP is an outcome of the way that academic research of wellbeing and the policy world have interacted in the recent decades (see Bache & Reardon 2013, Bache 2020, Jenkins 2018, Aked et al. 2008, and Scott & Bell 2013 for thorough historical overviews). Initial publications purporting to launch a new field of wellbeing studies, almost all in economics and psychology, began to appear mainly in the USA in the 1990s (Kahneman et al. 1999, Van Praag & Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2004), building on more sporadic earlier work. Soon its proponents began to translate this “new science” into policy (Diener & Seligman 2004, Diener et al. 2009, Graham 2011). They advocated novel indices to track wellbeing nationally and internationally, and policies to target wellbeing instead of or in

addition to conventional economic indicators. In the UK, this work was picked up by prominent economists and psychologists, and quickly acquired influential sponsors in government who began advocating for policy driven by wellbeing (Layard 2005, O'Donnell et al. 2014). For the most part, these ambitions to steer policy by wellbeing metrics were not realised, though the language of wellbeing and happiness entered the New Labour Government's decentralisation drive in the early 2000s. The arrival of the Coalition Government in 2010 produced more lasting WPP initiatives, but also moved away from New Labour's localism to an approach built on standardized wellbeing metrics. Wellbeing advocates such as Oliver Letwin in the Cabinet were able to institute changes at the national level. These included the start of National Wellbeing data collection by the Office of National Statistics, the birth of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, and the first mention of subjective wellbeing in the Treasury's Green Book (Fujiwara & Campbell 2011).

The wellbeing policy agenda has advanced significantly in a number of other countries. These include the US, Bhutan, UAE, and New Zealand. In the UK, wellbeing has remained the focus of prominent academic sponsors such as Richard Layard and his colleagues at the influential LSE Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) and continues to win significant attention at different levels of government including wellbeing focused policy agendas in the devolved nations and local government. The work of CEP, especially the book *Origins of Happiness* (Clark et al. 2018) and subsequent publications (Frijters et al. 2020, Frijters & Krekel 2021), clearly exemplify the social planner perspective. A recent endorsement of a similar expert-driven approach, emphasizing the need for common metrics and benchmarking of policies comes from the Nordic Council of Ministers, a body that speaks for Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland (Birkjær et al. 2021).

WPP advocacy emerging from the wellbeing science, with few exceptions, retains the social planner's focus on an "ultimate value" and a narrow (ideally unidimensional) metric for it that policy should aim to maximise. High profile psychologists Diener and Seligman (2004), for example, argue (p. 1–2) that "wellbeing should become a primary focus of policymakers, and that its rigorous measurement is a primary policy imperative...wellbeing ought to be the ultimate goal around which economic, health, and social policies are built". Leading happiness economists writing in Frijters et al. (2020, p. 144–145) make similar claims:

We argue that a useful approach would be to have an interactive process in terms of 'agreed-upon metrics and causal effects'. The idea is that the bureaucracy should adopt a current metric for wellbeing (i.e., life satisfaction) until a better one comes along. Similarly, it should maintain and regularly update a list of believed effects of various policies and circumstances on its chosen metric of wellbeing.

This advocacy also exemplifies the SPP's claims to the value-neutrality of such data and the ability of the social planner to offer objective advice on their basis. High profile psychologists Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (p. 24), for example, write that "we believe that measures of wellbeing are—and must be— exactly as neutral politically as are economic indicators. The indicators are descriptive, not prescriptive, and must remain so."

In keeping with the value freedom and 'outsidedness' ideals of the social planner and its technocratic, metrics-first practices, the legitimacy of policy in WPP advocacy is supposed to

be determined entirely by scientific standards (Scott 2012). Frijters et al. (ibid)., for example, argue that:

Because the list [of effects of various policies on wellbeing] would be so influential in setting priorities and generating effects, its elements must be arrived at via a transparent process and improvements should be as scientifically argued as possible ... Given the importance of openness, we think it is probably best to have a headline estimate derived from whatever the supposed 'best study' is on some topic, because that allows practitioners to see all of the elements of the process (i.e., the type of measurement, the type of individuals, the conditioning set of other variables, etc.). Of course, any such nominated 'best estimate' would need to be backed up by several other studies that have similar results, and if their methodology is close enough, one could advocate a meta-estimate of them.

Frijters et al. go on to argue, straight from the social planner textbook, that policymakers should decide whether a policy change is desirable on the basis of cost-effectiveness analysis, where "value is measured in units of happiness" and "the problem is how to maximise aggregate happiness of the relevant population." They assert that "the correct approach is then to rank all possible policies in terms of the extra happiness which they generate per pound of expenditure." In terms of implementing WPP, Frijters' et al. identify 3 pivotal areas for development: measurement, methodology, and government guidelines. Scholars must develop and debate the first two, while analysts must be trained in the later; then "ultimately, government needs to be empowered to apply the wellbeing toolkit for wellbeing to become the goal of policymaking," (p. 161). There are no citizens here or debates over values; there is only supposedly dispassionate analysis of solved political problems. This technocratic approach has been implemented in UK Treasury guidance on cost-benefit analysis, including an algebraic formula for calculating 'WELLBYS' in monetary terms, a quantity that determines whether a policy is worth pursuing (HMT 2021).

WPP advocacy preserves the SPP's assumption of an asymmetry of knowledge and wisdom between the social planner and the public. For example, Diener et al. (2018) argue that "Smoking seems to be related to lower SWB, and thus perhaps counterintuitively, cigarette taxes can actually raise the happiness of smokers." There is no suggestion here of asking smokers for their opinion, as their opinions would likely be riddled with 'cognitive bias' (Fabian & Pykett 2021). Prominent happiness economists similarly raise the issue of cognitive biases as a reason why citizens can only be trusted to report their life satisfaction and participate in politics, but not policymaking, which should be reserved for analysts (O'Donnell et al. 2014). The tacit and local knowledge of citizens and street level bureaucrats is here marginalised, with centralised technical knowledge endorsed instead. The social planner grants that the public has values, yet does not grant them knowledge about how to realise these values, which is why the policy-maker and expert work with each other rather than the public. Notably, the only role for citizens in Frijters et al.'s framework appears to be electing the government (p. 161).

The extent to which the social planner tradition allows for deliberation and localism is minimal. Minipublics and other deliberative exercises are sometimes briefly mentioned (see O'Donnell et al. 2014, pp. 69–70, for example), but used largely to ensure formal legitimacy, rather than discovery and development of new policies, or indeed new metrics (Oman 2021). The lack of commitment to two-way learning between experts and citizens is also reflected in the fact that WPP advocates take 'local wellbeing policy' to consist in empowering

communities to use wellbeing indicators *as defined centrally* and validated by experts (Scott & Bell 2013, Scott 2014). The social planner takes indicators to have been validated once and for all and then undertakes to spread their use as widely as possible with the goal of benchmarking and standardising evidence (Brown et al. 2017). Localism and metrics-pluralism undermines these essential features of the cost-benefit analysis approach to policy prioritisation. Since quantitative evidence is most likely to be standardizable, transferrable, and to fit with evidence hierarchies, it inevitably dominates decision making (Oman 2016, 2020, Oman & Taylor 2018).

Due in part to the influence of hedonic psychologists and happiness economists,¹ the social planner perspective in WPP described above is nowadays embedded in knowledge-broking organisations that work to translate scientific understanding into policy (Austin 2016). These include the OECD, which has published several reports on measuring subjective wellbeing, mostly recently in 2013, and who established a Centre on Wellbeing, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE) in 2012; the National Academy of the Sciences in the United States, which published the findings of a high-level panel on measuring subjective wellbeing (Stone & Mackie 2013); and, in the UK, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WWCW). The foreword to the OECD's (2013) guidelines makes explicit that it aims to "be most useful to governments and other decision-makers". The National Academies report targets a similar audience: "Could gathering data on subjective wellbeing help governments and organizations develop policies that better serve the needs of their constituents?" The WWCW is the only one of these organisations to include the public in its immediate audience. They describe their mission as "to develop and share robust, accessible, and useful evidence that governments, business, communities, and people use to improve wellbeing." These knowledge brokers are responding to a perception within 'expert' communities that the optimal mode of policymaking involves taking insights from science and delivering them directly to 'decision makers' in government and other powerful bodies.²

Evaluating the social planner perspective

The social planner perspective has much to commend it. We begin this section with an overview of these strengths before considering the perspective's weaknesses, with special attention to how these manifest in WPP.

The strengths of the social planner perspective

The social planner perspective has firm ethical foundations, namely welfarism. A variant of utilitarianism, this view holds that policies, rules, and regulations should be evaluated on the basis of their impacts on overall human welfare. It is a popular doctrine among moral

¹ We note that the many experts consulted by the OECD and National Academies for producing the reports we cite in this paragraph come almost exclusively from hedonic psychology and happiness economics. Other perspectives on wellbeing, such as those of clinical psychology or development studies, are absent.

² We must briefly acknowledge that there are some branches of wellbeing science that deviate to some degree from the SPP. There are some that implicitly adopt the SPP except in calling for a multidimensional conception of wellbeing (derived through expert debate) and associated metrics (for example, VanderWeele 2017, Haybron & Tiberius 2015). A more substantial divergence can be found in the capabilities tradition, where practitioners have taken to coproducing multidimensional wellbeing indexes and surveys in collaboration with local groups. These efforts are grounded in the citizen perspective, and we will return to discuss them later.

philosophers and economists (Bossert & Weymark 2004), with many high-profile advocates going back at least to Bentham arguing that governments ought to maximise happiness (Sumner 1996). There are sophisticated versions of welfarism that stand up to scrutiny better than earlier versions. The basic idea that everyone's welfare should count has been supplemented with many theoretical tools about how to identify and measure this quantity and how to incorporate into this calculation other ethical considerations such as equality and fairness.

Another substantial theoretical foundation for the SPP is the methodology of evidence-based practice, from which the social planner's emphasis on measurement, data analysis, and causal inference stems. This methodology in social science emerged out of evidence-based medicine and has exerted growing influence over policy in recent decades (Littell & White 2018). The social planner tropes of WPP advocacy are thus familiar to social scientists so life satisfaction measurement plugs straightforwardly into their existing practices.

Evidence-based policy's influence stems in part from its promise to 'rationalise' policymaking. In addition to acting as a counterweight to policies shaped by purely political calculation, compiling research results, official statistics, and policy impact studies can enable policymakers to abandon policies that are not working, scale up those that are, and identify opportunities to improve policies further. In a famous example, the 'scared straight' program, widely believed to reduce criminality among delinquent youth, was shown by a randomised control trial to have the opposite effect. Its consequent abandonment refocused public resources on potentially more effective policies (Breunig 2018). The framework of social welfare functions and the tools of cost-benefit analysis enables voters to know how much a given policy delivered and at what cost, aiding democratic accountability. In general, high benefit-to-cost ratio interventions should be funded, low ratio interventions should not, and when these heuristics are violated, flags are raised that can instigate further investigation (Dobes 2018). While often controversial, the methodology can apply a discipline to public spending that mitigates the construction of 'white elephants' and other patently bad value projects.

A final argument for the SPP concerns comparative advantage (Boswell & Corbett 2018). The public elects officials for the specific purpose of making decisions on their behalf. There are several advantages to this representation, ranging from the need for specialisation (policy makers have a unique skill set) to the quality of information and expertise available to government officials – citizens may reasonably expect policy makers to be better briefed to make important decisions because they have the civil service apparatus to help guide them (Heath 2020, Badano 2020).

The limits of the social planner perspective

When critiquing the social planner perspective, it is useful to distinguish between four dimensions: the ethical, the political, the epistemic, and the practical. In each of these dimensions, the social planner oversteps her bounds; that is, she claims to have knowledge and entitlements that she cannot plausibly have.

The ethical problem arises because the social planner perspective is typically articulated using the concepts of utilitarianism—a moral theory according to which the good consists in positive mental states and the right course of action is to maximise the quantity of this good.

Moreover, while utilitarianism itself is a wide umbrella term that admits of diverse articulations (Sinnott-Armstrong 2019), the ‘*wellbeing* social planner’ adopts a specific version of this philosophy. The good here is exhausted by positive responses to standard questionnaires, and the right course of action is to adopt whatever policy maximises these reports given the resources available. The wellbeing social planner thus has an especially narrow view of both the good and the right. People are treated as receptacles of utility who lack agency and knowledge of their own to improve their lives (a longstanding critique – see Smart & Williams 1973). The improvements happen *to them*, and policy is not done *with them*. These improvements are also not constrained by rights, obligations, or any other constitutional considerations. Clark et al. (2018, p. 123), for example, are quick to affirm a commitment to freedom when defending WPP against critiques, but only because freedom makes people happy.

Related to these ethical problems are political ones. The SPP embodies the political philosophy of technocracy, in which decisions about how to realise our values are outsourced to the expert. But since wellbeing is a value-laden concept, the expert must make value judgments about what it is and what data reliably measure it before they can conduct an analysis, thereby overstepping the technocratic remit (Singh & Alexandrova 2020). She ends up assuming a role that does not have legitimately in a democratic polity. One need not be a sceptic of expertise to see this. There is plenty of room in a democracy for division of epistemic labour and hence for the idea that some people know more about a complex technical problem than others (Moore et al. 2020). But the social planner claims more expertise about matters on which citizens themselves can clearly also claim expertise. To this extent the social planner tradition undermines democracy (Fabian & Pykett 2021, Davies 2015). It implicitly adopts the so-called ‘deficit model’ of citizens according to which citizens are too ill-equipped or biased to form opinions about policy. In speaking directly to the bureaucrats and policy-makers rather than the various publics engaged in political action, the social planner bypasses political processes on paternalist grounds (Haybron & Alexandrova 2013). The result is a democratic deficit, with citizens feeling shut out of the policies that affect their lives.

The epistemic line of criticism questions the ability of the social planner to be ‘evidence-based’. Discovery and confirmation of causal relations between wellbeing and variables that can be affected by policy is absolutely essential to this perspective and is perhaps the strongest card in the social planner’s deck. But how warranted is the social planner’s confidence in her evidence base? We see three reasons to worry.

The first is that the wellbeing social planner is cavalier about the ‘validity’ of data about wellbeing for policy applications. Most wellbeing data come from reported life satisfaction or other short questionnaires. It is customary to use headline psychometric indicators as evidence of their validity (Clark et al. 2018, Diener et al 2009). But it is well known that psychometric validity is always relative to a population in which a given survey was initially validated. In addition to this relativity, construct validation operates on purely correlational evidence – the point of construct validation is to check that a scale correlates with other variables that our background assumptions say are relevant (Alexandrova & Haybron 2016). As such, construct validation is silent about the psycho-linguistic process involved in mapping the underlying construct of interest (‘wellbeing’) to self-reports on the metric in question. Yet understanding this process is crucial for assessing the precision of these metrics, especially in welfare analysis applications (Fabian 2021). Partly as a result of our almost total ignorance about this underlying process, whether life satisfaction scales are

precise enough for things like cost-effectiveness analysis is hotly contested (see Fabian 2021, Fleurbaey and Blanchet 2013, Adler 2013, Benjamin et al. 2020). The kind of construct validity evidence presented by subjective metric enthusiasts to demonstrate validity – that life satisfaction went down during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example – does not address these issues of precision.

A related issue is aggregation. Traditional economic analysis relies on ‘objective’ metrics, notably income. Experts identify domains of wellbeing, gather the associated objective data, and analyse it, including in terms of applying weights and deciding on aggregation processes (Agarwala et al. 2014). This facilitates the comparison of results across individuals, as they are based on the same input data and aggregation process. In contrast, subjective wellbeing questionnaires rely on the individual being assessed to make these calculations for themselves. Its proponents tout this as the great advantage of subjective wellbeing (Frijters et al. 2020, p. 16), but they typically fail to mention the disadvantage. Each respondent may consider different domains of their life, weights, and aggregation methods. As such, the reporting process likely varies over individuals and/or over time. For example, Kapteyn et al. 2013 show that when vignettes are used to anchor responses to a common standard, differences in subjective financial satisfaction between US and Danish respondents disappear. If comparability is so opaque, then we must be careful about the inferences drawn from such data, regardless of the rigour of the statistical analysis.

The second epistemic challenge concerns the social planner’s ideal of assembling best practice about ‘what works’. Frijters et al. (2020, p. 128) want something akin to the Imperial Kew Gardens, which collected best agricultural practices to be exported to the colonies. But such a knowledge bank is poorly suited to dealing with problems of external validity and the context-sensitivity of wellbeing. The social planner is attracted to the idea that the ‘happiness equation’ has a common functional form and much happiness economics goes along with this assumption (Powdthavee 2011). For example, Blanchflower (2009) observes that the “structure of a happiness equation has the same general form in each industrialized country.” Local context, if it comes in at all, does so via different coefficients for the universal variables. But elsewhere in policy such an approach is widely rejected. In the debate around causal inference from randomised-control trials, whether a policy works and how it does so is considered a local matter (Cartwright & Hardie 2012). Work coproducing wellbeing indices with specific communities has thrown up a range of idiosyncratic factors that do not feature in the ‘universal’ variables of happiness equations, and push back on standardised metrics (Daniels et al. 2018). For example, people living in financial hardship collaborating with Fabian et al. (2021) questioned the appropriateness of life satisfaction scales. One coproduction partner in particular noted that when she had internalised patriarchy she thought her domestic abuse was normal and not something to be dissatisfied about. For a phenomenon as complex and heterogenous as wellbeing, a universalising ambition is problematic.

The third problem under the epistemic heading is the assumption, inherited from the standard economic social welfare maximisation approach, that the social planner stands outside the society she evaluates. The risk in this is a failure to incorporate the likelihood that the objects of study are in turn reacting to the expert studying them (Coyle 2021). Failure to account for potential reflexivity (which could range from strategic responses to wellbeing surveys to behavioural changes) is likely to lead to incomplete or irrelevant policy recommendations. For example, an excellent study by Bellet et al. (2019) uses exogenous variation in exposure to good weather in call centres to show that happier workers are more productive. Yet

employees might perceive new policy efforts at ‘workplace wellbeing’ on this basis as a cynical ploy from management to squeeze more work from them. This may inadvertently make them less happy and productive.

Finally, we turn to practical critiques, which concern the unsuitability of the SPP to everyday public management. We distinguish three clusters of criticism: localism, systems thinking, and administrative clumsiness. Together, these criticisms illuminate that the social planner perspective is especially awkward at the mid-scale of public management. Cost-benefit analysis, causal inference methods, and narrow goals and metrics brings clarity to high level agenda setting and precision to the evaluation of individual policies. However, they are unworkable with respect to the bulk of public management, which is characterised by policy *systems* pursuing multidimensional objectives and trying to appease a variety of stakeholders. Policy practitioners and the public administration scholars who study them have complained of this for decades. However, the SPP’s assumption of outsidedness downgrades the granular and tacit knowledge of practitioners on the ground, especially those of agencies and street-level bureaucrats that actually deliver government services, in favour of classified and aggregated knowledge. Scott (1999) persuasively argues that this aspect of the social planner tradition has been responsible for some of the great tragedies of ‘high modernism’, including famines and natural degradation.

Policymakers have come to realise that “community ideas, energy, social capital, and local knowledge are ... key ingredients for solving a range of entrenched policy challenges” (Eversole 2011, p. 51). However, they are stymied in their efforts to engage communities by the knowledge hierarchies inherent to the SPP. Communities voice a range of concerns and evidence them using locally accepted metrics. Policymakers are unable to process this information because they operate on outcomes dictated from on high and metrics validated centrally or even externally. As a result, studies of community engagement note time and again that it happens in a way that makes little sense to communities and fails to meet their local needs (Herbert-Cheshire & Higgins 2004, Taylor 2007). This is an acute threat to wellbeing policy, as coproduction efforts demonstrate that meanings and appropriate measures of wellbeing are often highly variable by locality, including not just geography but also demography, policy area, and administrative scale.

Most public services are delivered by a system, and systems resist the social planner’s paradigm of individual policy design and evaluation. Life expectancy, for example, a common metric in wellbeing indexes, is the result of a health system that includes medical research, pharmaceutical markets, hospitals, doctor training, and myriad other parameters. While RCTs have a role to play in evaluating aspects of this system, notably drug efficacy, it is obvious from a comparison of a mostly private and mostly public system (such as the US vs Canada) that a holistic evaluation of health care policy requires a system-level analysis (Podger 2018). Taking a system level view immediately reveals that the idea of comparing policies separately on a narrow criterion like ‘life satisfaction per dollar spent’ is inadequate at best. The marginal effect of general practitioner visits, for example, depends substantially on how the pharmaceutical market is regulated, how many hospital beds are available, the training general practitioners receive, etc. The notion of causal inference with ‘all other things held equal’ is of limited use in the context of a systems.

Tools for evaluation in the context of systems, like the agent-based model used by Kasman et al. (2019) to evaluate a whole-of-community childhood obesity intervention, acknowledge the need for a multidimensional approach to policy objectives and metrics that confounds the SPP. Some public management scholarship that has emerged in response to the on-the-

ground challenges posed by complex systems is even more radical. For example, human learning systems theory argues that public management should optimise for learning, not control (CPI 2021). This is often best achieved through *relationships* – qualitative insights, coproduction, corporate memory, mentoring and other forms of knowledge sharing that can handle the messiness of policy practice – rather than the analytical tools preferred by the social planner.

Scholars of contemporary public management have demonstrated the perverse and unintended consequences of governance by benchmarking, including loss of trust, disempowerment of frontline workers, notably teachers and nurses, and administrative bloat (Van Thiel & Leeuw 2002). The metrics-first approach to policymaking, at least as it manifests in NPM, leads policy to be contorted to suit the SPP, rather than analytical approaches being developed from within the needs of public management. To avoid repeating these errors, WPP should ask what contribution it can make to contemporary issues in public administration, rather than asking how public administration can implement the science of wellbeing.

Wellbeing public policy from the citizen perspective

In developing the CP as a countervailing approach to the SPP, we start by dropping the latter's commitments of value-freedom (the separation of facts from values), outsidedness (the 'view from nowhere'), privileging the identification of treatment effects and CBAs as evaluation tools, and prioritising the centralised creation of standard metrics. What would WPP look like without these? To reject value-freedom means to recognise that questions of wellbeing are not purely technical, but in fact thoroughly value-laden. As such, wellbeing policy should start with ethical arguments and political legitimation, not statistical inquiry. While it might be reasonable for researchers to keep these ethical and political matters in house for some scientific purposes, when they cross over into the policy domain, especially in a democratic society, these matters must be settled in the public sphere (Alexandrova & Fabian 2022). This would lead us to reject outsidedness: the policy practitioner and the wellbeing expert must be participants in a legitimate political process, rather than acting after it.

The first pillar of what we call a 'citizen perspective' should therefore be *participation* of the public in the generation and validation of knowledge relevant to WPP. There are several ways to implement such participation. At a minimal level, publics can be consulted about different ways of measuring wellbeing or different wellbeing policies. The 2010–2011 "What matters to you?" consultation by the Office of National Statistics was one way of inviting public input on what statistics should represent the UK's national wellbeing (ONS 2019). However, consultations are by their nature one-way and embody substantial power asymmetries between experts and the public. Experts decide what questions to ask and how to parse the data. Oman (2021) documents how this led to blind spots and the omission of many perspectives on wellbeing from the outcomes of the ONS process. In particular, the 'open response' data, where participants could write in what wellbeing means to them personally, were almost entirely overlooked in favour of quantitative data from 'check-box' questions prefilled with categories selected by experts. Such power asymmetries are characteristic even of some more deliberative processes where experts inform citizens about complex technical issues involved in a policy area, such as vaccine distribution, and then citizen deliver experts their value judgements after deliberating amongst themselves (Rawlins

2005). Such practices see experts structure the policy problem to be addressed, soliciting value judgements from citizens only to plug them in to an expert developed analytical framework.

One way of overcoming such asymmetry is more robust participatory processes. These are referred to as co-production, or sometimes co-creation, co-design, or collaborative governance (Bevir et al. 2019, Emerson et al. 2012, Fung 2015). Coproduction is a well-established practice in health and design sciences, local governance, and social policy. Coproduction requires an equal and deliberative process that includes and represents the views of relevant stakeholders, with technical experts classed as merely one stakeholder group among many. Power is shared by decision-makers with other participants in coproduction, and there is a strong emphasis on learning across the different participant groups. In the field of wellbeing, such coproduction exercises have long been conducted by scholars and policymakers working in the capabilities paradigm, especially in development policy and with indigenous communities (e.g. Greco et al. 2015, Dew et al. 2020). Charities and local authorities are also pioneers of the methodology (Mazzei et al. 2020). In contrast to the ‘general’ measures of wellbeing often sought by the SPP, these coproduction efforts often produce idiosyncratic wellbeing items and metrics reflecting nuanced local circumstances. Indigenous groups collaborating with Yap & Yu (2016), for instance, emphasised the quality of recent fishing at local water holes.

Alexandrova & Fabian (2022) develop a framework and method for coproducing WPP specifically. The key element of their proposal is to combine different varieties of expertise. ‘Lived’ experts, whom we refer to here as ‘citizens’, bring expertise over the value judgements WPP should serve and relevant contextual factors specific to the policy domain or local conditions. Coproduction of a regional development plan in a county dense with retirees, for example, might find local disinterest in attracting job-creating investment despite the popularity of this idea in the wider region. This helps to create precisely tailored policy. ‘Practitioners’, in most cases bureaucrats or representatives of organisations delivering policy on the ground, bring expertise about the practical requirements of WPP in the context in question. Representatives from the UK anti-poverty charity Turn2us involved in a wellbeing coproduction exercise pointed out that many-item questionnaires, common in psychometrics and capabilities research, were inappropriate for measuring the baseline wellbeing of their service users (Fabian et al. 2021). This is because people experiencing life changing events and in desperate need of assistance are turned off from seeking help by long surveys. Finally, ‘Academics’ bring technical expertise about the logical consistency of wellbeing theories and the validity of metrics. They also bring domain knowledge relevant to a particular WPP context. For example, a coproduced development plan to promote a town’s wellbeing may benefit from expert input on what changes to local planning regulations are required to attract what sort of investment.

Coproduction has attractive ethical and epistemic features. First, power sharing on the part of decision makers and practitioners with those agents directly affected by public policy promotes political equality in public management. Government agents are required to actively seek out typically disempowered agents like welfare recipients and include them in the process of policy design. The acknowledgement of the need for two-way learning in coproduction, especially between citizens and experts, works against the technocratic co-option of policy processes. In particular, it means that knowledge brokers are required to work with citizens to translate their insights into acceptable outcomes, metrics, and data for policy, rather than being able to dismiss those same insights as lacking rigor or scientific

validity. Furthermore, recognising that wellbeing policy requires an input of values into any analytical framework gives a central role to citizens in coproduction, and works against technocratic rhetoric of needing ‘objective’ scientific analysis.

Coproduction and related participatory methods necessarily involve *localism* and *contextualism* of a more robust kind than the social planner perspective allows, and this is the second pillar of the citizen perspective. The centre should not be aiming to convey to the periphery how best to measure and advance wellbeing, but instead to empower citizens on their own terms and within their context. This requires becoming more tolerant of locally specific indicators that do not translate straightforwardly to the standardized metrics ideal for central agencies. The latter have the advantage of being easily comparable and therefore amenable to aggregation (Allen et al. 2019). But participation at a local level may well result in idiosyncratic metrics and indeed in metrics that might change over time in line with cultural changes in a given community. As the need for aggregate statistics is inherently a matter of scale, the local is the level to bring in individual experiences and discussion as a basis for policy action (Jenkins 2018). It is important of course that, while sacrificing comparability, such metrics meet clear and transparent standards, such as reliability and validity. But the key point is that validity is relative to a context and a population and it may be hence appropriate to rely on different metrics at different scales (McGregor, 2018).

Similarly, the citizen perspective should be open to variation on the actual wellbeing policies that end up getting adopted. In contrast to the social planner’s intent to calculate the average impact of a given policy on wellbeing and apportion funds on this basis, localism embraces *multidimensionality*. Localism and participation also imply a different vision and a different expectation from wellbeing research: more of a toolbox of ideas about how to approach a social problem, rather than a clearing house of definitive, proven, or even probable claims about ‘what works’. It should focus on creating an institutionalised process that ensures rigour and quality but can be developed and applied locally, rather than on setting the outcomes centrally. Such an approach promotes the localist and participatory nature of the citizen perspective, without shifting all responsibility and control from the social planner to the local communities.

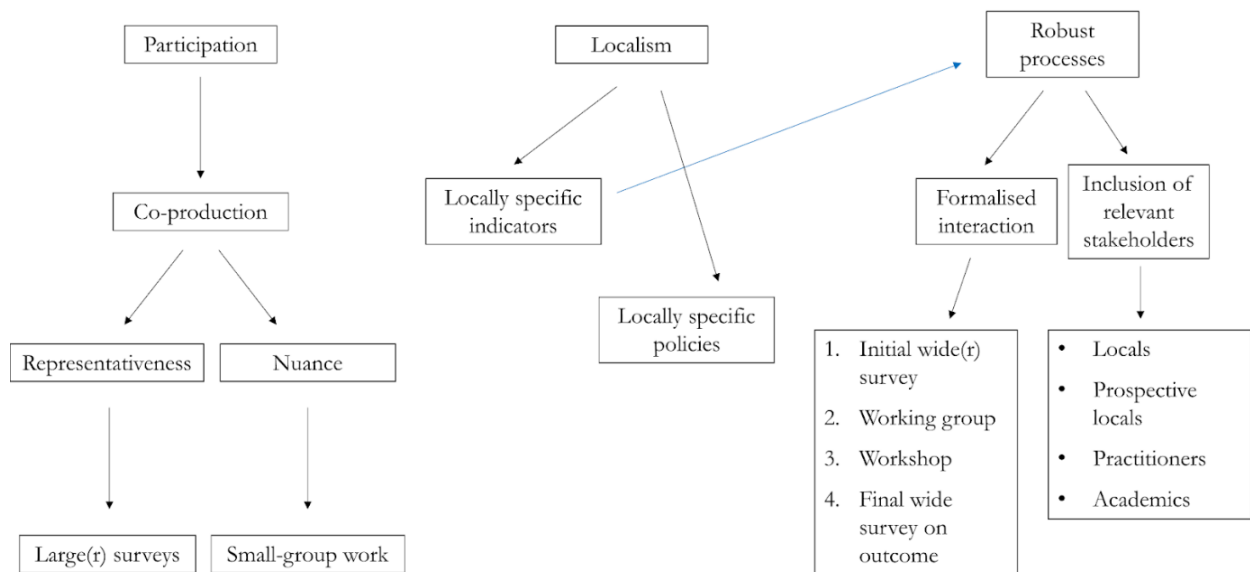
That WPP should be *process*-first, rather than metrics-first, is the third pillar of the CP. This is a recurring theme in the literature that implicitly challenges what we have been calling the SPP (Scott 2014, Jenkins 2018). Scott and Bell (2013) go as far as arguing that “Policy makers and scholars should place more focus on the process of developing indicators rather than the indicators that are produced.” This procedural emphasis accords well with the literature in deliberative politics. For example, referring to mini-publics, Setälä (2017) argues that they “could be better connected to representative decision making through institutional arrangements, which institutionalise their use; involve representatives in deliberations; motivate public interactions between mini-publics and representatives; and provide opportunities for ex post scrutiny or suspensive veto powers.” This last passage outlines two of the fundamental characteristics that an institutionalised process governing WPP should have to be effective: a formalised interaction between citizens and policy-makers, and ex post scrutiny of how citizens’ inputs have been included in the policy process.

Fabian et al. (2021) offer an example of the form this can take in practice: first an initial wide survey to gauge broad issues of interest, second a working group to delve deeper, third a workshop to receive preliminary feedback from additional stakeholders on the outcomes of the working group, and then a final wide survey to elicit further feedback aimed at increasing representativeness. In this framework, the involvement of citizens in the initial survey and in

the working group serve as the formalised interaction, while the workshop and the final survey serve as ex post scrutiny.

Critics of localism might legitimately raise concerns about the ignorance or parochialism of locals, whose views might benefit from an expert perspective. They might also chafe at the idea that locals should set policy that may have spillover effects on citizens at large, notably through taxation and public financing of local initiatives. For example, debates around re-zoning and other efforts to increase housing supply and renew urban landscapes in many OECD nations are hampered by well-organised local anti-development groups (Ahlfeldt 2011). Yet the perspectives of locals and other lived experts are not sacrosanct nor taken as exogenous in the process we outlined. They are merely centred in the policy process, which involve coproduction with other stakeholders, practitioners, and experts. We would expect this process to frequently change locals' perspectives endogenously. Similar methodologies have proven effective in ameliorating local opposition to waste sites in Canada (Kuhn & Ballard 1998). Even pandemic management, a collective but technically complex problem par excellence, is now recognised to require public deliberation through inclusive local processes (Norheim et al. 2021).

Figure 1: The three pillars of the citizen perspective



In summary, the CP on WPP demands participation, localism, and robust processes. We depict these three pillars in figure 1. Each is necessary to avoid the ethical, political, epistemic and practical downsides of the SPP. Participation means that people have agency and are not mere receptacles for wellbeing. Localism addresses the epistemic critique because local claims about validity of a pre-determined metric or a policy are far less contentious and more realistic to establish than general claims to that effect. Robust institutions that implement the processes of local participation are essential for avoiding their misuse. Like any good idea, participatory approaches can be abused: they can serve as a mere instrument to gain the appearance of formal legitimacy, while furthering hidden agendas, vested interests

of local NIMBYs, or even serving as corporate public relations (Blacker et al. 2021, Dahl and Soss 2014, Glasner 2001). Ideally, a well-designed and transparent process should prevent such abuses.

When to employ the social planner or citizen perspective

We have argued that the CP is the appropriate default mode for WPP. However, we would be remiss to claim that the SPP does not nonetheless have a substantial role to play. In this section, we provide some principles for thinking about when and why to employ each paradigm.

The first principle is *divergence*: the extent to which there are spillovers driving a wedge between *individual* and *collective* outcomes or interests. The economics of social choice, and the welfare theorems underpinning the social planner perspective, derive from methodological individualism and assume an absence of externalities or spillovers, among other conditions for optimality. Social welfare is constructed from individual welfare through a social welfare function expressing distributional choices assumed to be selected through political mechanisms. Absent spillovers, statistics on individual well-being, pooled by the planner according to the chosen social welfare function, are sufficient for good collective outcomes. But when there are spillovers, any social welfare calculation may be indeterminate because outcomes for a certain individual will depend on the choices made by others. Geographers, for example, have long noted that wellbeing is an emergent property of places, and thus is hard to analyse using only data on individuals (Pykett 2022). Where the collective interest and individual interest differ, policy choices need to be informed by participation and deliberation. This is political or value-laden territory: some individuals will need to compromise with regard to what they perceive as their own well-being interests. Politics is inevitable here, and WPP advocacy emerging from scientific communities needs to be humble when straying into this territory, which is not their remit or expertise.

The second principle is *proportionality*: the balance between how consequential the policy at issue will be for those affected –in terms of ethical or practical impacts – and the logistical challenges of staging participatory processes. Citizen-led policymaking is slow and costly compared to collecting regular survey data on well-being and analysing it. Nevertheless, it will be worthwhile for most significant policy decisions, both in outcome terms (improving well-being in the aggregate) and legitimacy of the process. The procedural justice aspect is especially important for ethically fraught decisions. Ireland’s experience with citizens’ assemblies is often cited as an example of successful participatory processes changing policy in some contentious areas (particularly repealing the constitutional ban on abortion) that could not have come about through a standard policy-shaping process. In general, the policy under consideration needs to be ‘significant’ enough to justify the cost in time and money of a citizen-based process. From this point of view, it makes sense that early efforts at WPP like the ONS4 consultations in the UK, the recent Nordic Council report, the OECD’s better life index, or New Zealand’s first wellbeing budget, were principally executed from the social planner perspective: it makes such exploratory efforts easier to get off the ground. Looking longer term, these initial efforts should not be used to entrench the SPP but rather to make space for the CP to be steadily implemented.

A final principle is *scale*. The logistical demands of the citizen perspective are much easier to implement at the local scales to which it is suited more generally. The contextual policy

objectives and bespoke measures that it gives rise to are similarly easier to apply at small scale. There are of course areas of policy that are fundamentally high scale, such as national statistics, defence and foreign affairs, or industrial relations. Here, the SPP has a comparative advantage. However, the CP can eventually evolve from small to large scale provided the policy has a small scale dimension where the CP can gain traction to begin with. A national wellbeing index, for example, could begin with numerous local wellbeing indexes that express contextual values and use tailored metrics. Many of these values will generalise across contexts, and so coproduction efforts at medium scales could identify a more parsimonious set of items and measures that apply to a larger area. Repeat this until you arrive at a national index. There is no reason why the conveniences of central departments should dictate what paradigm is most appropriate for WPP.

Conclusion

While the social planner perspective has understandable appeal to those concerned with budgets and statistics, if WPP is to constitute a transformative shift ‘beyond GDP’ and away from the deformations of economic analysis, it should pay greater heed to the citizen perspective. WPP aspires to redefine the goals of public policy. This is highly political and value-laden objective. It cannot be prosecuted legitimately without substantial involvement of the public, which must go beyond ticking boxes on surveys. Coproducing the outcomes and measures of WPP through collaboration between citizens, practitioners, and academics is one way to balance the political, practical, and technical issues inherent to WPP. As a methodology, it is especially well suited to issues of local governance and context-specific nodes of public policy like aged care, disability services, natural assets, and public amenities. Where the social planner perspective rests substantially on outmoded ideas about the nature of public administration and technocratic advice, the citizen perspective embraces cutting edge developments in deliberation, participation, and co-design. It is thus well-suited to a future-oriented and transformative agenda like WPP.

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