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EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF WELLBEING LITERACY AND STORYING METHODS

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A Background to Storying and Participatory Methods in Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a complex concept that can incorporate both objective and subjective experience. As such, defining wellbeing involves both describing what it is and evaluating what it should be – a philosophical concept known as a 'thick concept' (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022). When such a concept is defined and measured by a limited group, such as academics, it can fail to capture the nuances of how people experience wellbeing in their daily lives. To address this issue, scholars have argued for a more inclusive approach to understanding wellbeing in context, where knowledge is co-produced with the people being studied (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022; Hayes et al., 2012; Henriques et al., 2014). Participatory research methods offer a way to achieve this and can contribute to a more holistic understanding of wellbeing.

Story-based methods are a powerful example of participatory approaches that provide a democratic means of illustrating and informing theories about the nuanced experiences of wellbeing. Stories, defined simply as "discourse designed to connect a series of happenings" (Webster, 1969), are a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world and communicate experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Phillips & Bunda, 2018). As human beings, we are 'storying' beings (Chawla, 2011, p. 16). Stories are a natural mode of expression used by people of all backgrounds, and using storying methods can democratise the research process by allowing diverse voices and perspectives to be represented (Gottschall, 2012; Hutchens, 2015).

Holman Jones (2016) eloquently describes the benefits of sharing stories to create deeper understanding as a "dance of collaborative engagement"

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between the story-sharer and listener (p. 229). Indeed, narrative methods have long been used in psychology and other disciplines to foster a more nuanced understanding of complex experiences like wellbeing. However, in many narrative methods, the researcher (listener) takes the lead in interpretation (Riley & Hawe, 2005). Phillips and Bunda (2018), however, argue for a more participatory term: 'story/ing', defined as the "act of making and remaking meaning through stories" (p. 8), more reflective of the collaborative dance described by Holman Jones. The verbification of 'story/ing' is intentional, as they position the process of storying throughout the entire research cycle: from conceptualising the investigation, collecting stories, analysing and theorising, and finally, in the presentation of the research. It is relevant at this juncture to distinguish storying from the term storytelling. While Mair (1988) posits that we live in and through stories, it is the co-creation of sharing stories that Phillips and Bunda reference as a core principle in their approach. This relational understanding differs from the more unidirectional nature of story*telling* with the intention to 'tell' or communicate key messages rather than create shared understanding.

Phillips and Bunda (2018) locate five principles of researching through, with, and as storying methodologies. These include (a) storying nourishes thought, body, and soul; (b) storying is embodied relational meaning-making; (c) storying intersects past and present as living oral archives; (d) storying claims voice in the silenced margins; and (e) storying enacts collective ownership and authorship. These principles of storying facilitate a more democratic and embodied process to understand the unique experience of wellbeing in different contexts. They additionally point to the possibility of enabling wellbeing through the exploration of sharing stories.

Storying is not limited to those that can share through oral methods. Images, like stories, also tap into methods used in everyday life as we create, interpret and use images, often without conscious attention (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Images can be used to express complex human experiences, highlighting both concrete and abstract concepts in an economical manner, making them an excellent source of knowledge production (Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Arts-informed methods, such as image-based modes of representation, draw on aesthetic ways of knowing, best understood as emotional, perceptual and sense-based forms of knowledge (Archibald & Gerber, 2018; Douglas & Carless, 2018). Incorporating these methods into research and practice enables awareness and new ways of understanding that can tap into preverbal sensory and emotional knowledge that may not be facilitated through language-based methods of inquiry (Archibald & Gerber, 2018; Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Through the use of metaphor and symbolism, visual images can communicate underlying theories effectively and eloquently (Knowles & Cole, 2008). They allow the

capacity to simultaneously view the whole and interrelationships between the parts, which makes their use an ideal method for understanding the complex dynamic experience of wellbeing.

Pictorial mapping diagrams, like rich picture maps, are a good example of a storying tool to create a shared understanding of an experience like wellbeing (Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022). The value of rich picture maps lies not in their objective representation of reality but rather as a technique that can prompt systems thinking, surfacing mental models and identification of interconnected relationships that can generate new insights (Bell & Morse, 2013; Conte & Davidson, 2020). Drawing a rich picture map invokes a process of iterative thinking, understanding and refining understanding through the creation of the map (Fathulla, 2008; Monk & Howard, 1998). Additionally, rich picture maps can be used throughout an inquiry process to engage participants in sense-making and/or as an output to engage key stakeholders in a reflexive process on the insights from the research (Bell & Morse, 2013; Conte & Davidson, 2020). These multimodal methods provide a rich toolkit to uncover and develop a deeper understanding of how different cohorts experience and understanding thick concepts like wellbeing.

Wellbeing Literacy: From the Mechanics to the Dynamics of Language Use

Oades et al. (2021) proposed the capability model of wellbeing literacy – conceptualising how we intentionally communicate about and for wellbeing and adapt to the context of the communication. This was developed as a formal model (Table 11.1) so that it could be used to conceptualise language-use in multiple language contexts, with the overarching value commitment to wellbeing (i.e. thick concept) of the communicators. The capability model can be a useful way to make sense of some of the mechanisms that underpin a participatory storying method.

Within this model, wellbeing literacy is multimodal (using different modes of communicating, e.g., speaking, writing, visual imagery), reflecting a real-world, societal view of literacy (Perry, 2012). The multimodality is recognised formally within the model in terms of how *comprehension* of wellbeing information occurs through reading, listening, and viewing. In parallel, *composition* of wellbeing occurs through writing, speaking, and creating (ACARA; *Literacy*, https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/literacy/) (Table 11.1). Literacy is understood here as pivotal for relationships and wellbeing, as a sociocultural phenomenon, and as occurring between people (Gee, 1991, 2005). Hence, wellbeing literacy, like contemporary versions of literacy, is more than reading and writing, that occurs in a fluid and ongoing

TABLE 11.1 Capability model of wellbeing literacy

Component	*Mechanics and dynamics*	*Description and relevance to storying*
1. Vocabulary and knowledge *about* wellbeing	The 'what' and denotive use of language. *Mechanics*	Words and information about wellbeing – possessing words (vocabulary) and knowledge about wellbeing
2. Comprehension related to wellbeing	The 'how' of receptive communication. *Mechanics*	Comprehension in multiple modes including viewing, listening, and reading about and for wellbeing. We can view, listen or read stories.
3. Composition related to wellbeing	The 'how' of expressive communication. *Mechanics*	Student's expression in multiple modes, including writing, creating and speaking about and for wellbeing. We can write, create and tell stories.
4. Context awareness and adaptability	The 'who' and 'where' of language use. May be considered a higher order skill. A form of adaptation to external conditions. *Dynamics*	Awareness of differences across contexts and adapting use of language to fit the relevant context. We can modify comprehension or composition of stories depending on context (see Jayda example below).
5. Intentionality *for* wellbeing	The 'why' of language use and adapting for context. A form of internal/external regulation. *Dynamics*	Habit of intentionally using language to maintain or improve wellbeing of self or others. We may deliberately comprehend or compose, new, old or evolved stories about and/or for wellbeing.

way across society, in real-life contexts, not only in educational contexts. Literacy is a sociocultural phenomenon, humans use language together in dynamic contexts – language use is relational by definition – that is, there is no such thing as a private language.

To further examine the interactive and relational aspects of the wellbeing literacy model, and assist with its understanding as a capability, the terms 'mechanics' and 'dynamics' are useful. Using the analogy and language from physics, of mechanics and dynamics to understand important differences between the first three components of the capability model of wellbeing literacy and the latter two components, as illustrated in Table 11.1. The first three components

(vocabulary and knowledge about wellbeing, comprehension of wellbeing language and composition of wellbeing language) may be considered the mechanics of wellbeing language use. If mechanics deals with the behaviour of bodies when subjected to forces, these components examine how people best read, listen and view information about wellbeing, or how they write, speak or create about wellbeing – what helps put them in motion. Dynamics is more about what happens when they are in motion using language, that is they are using wellbeing vocabulary and knowledge, using the skills of reading, listening and viewing, and the skills of writing, speaking and creating. It also speaks to the dynamics within and around them: how does their language use change because of context (e.g. interpersonal interactions) or development of intentionality? This is an underdeveloped area of the capability model of wellbeing literacy, and the concept and practice of storying provide an excellent opportunity to elaborate the notion of wellbeing literacy as a capability, particularly in terms of the potential enabling and limiting influences of dynamics.

Storying as a Capability

Storying supports both the composition of wellbeing literacy through sharing of stories and the comprehension of it through listening. It requires the utility of the mechanics of Wellbeing Literacy (Table 11.1) and is influenced by the dynamics of the individual and context. Stories – the content of storying – are inherently situated within context (Creswell, 2013) including the subjective, rich complexities and meaning that an individual layers into them. Locally situated truths take primacy over objective truth (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) as stories narrate a time-based journey of experience (McAdams, 2001), create a coherent thread of meaning and insight, and provide insights to causal factors for specific experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

How might storying be a capability that supports wellbeing?

In the Capability Approach (CA), economist Amyrta Sen suggests that for a conceptualisation of wellbeing to be effective, there must be a genuine opportunity to experience it in a way that makes sense for the individual (Sen, 1980, 1985, 1993). This shifts the emphasis away from wellbeing measures that focus on economic resources or pre-defined outcomes, to what Sen refers to as capabilities: 'what people can be or do'. Capabilities comprise the things that are of value and that people seek to 'be and do'. These are referred to as 'functionings' and may be as simple as eating breakfast and going to the market, or more complex, such as the desire to love and be loved or to be culturally aware. It is likely that an individual will hold multiple functionings in their lives and at multiple levels.

A unique aspect of the CA in contrast to other economic models is its recognition that resources or achievements (functionings) are only valid as measures of a society's wellbeing if they can be 'realised' into meaningful

wellbeing achievements as defined by the individual. Capabilities are the opportunities (or 'freedoms' as Sen conceptualises them) that allow that conversion to take place. The Capability Model of Wellbeing Literacy presents wellbeing literacy as a mediator (or moderator) in the wellbeing experience; a capability that influences the experience of wellbeing. Could storying similarly be a capability that mediates the experience of wellbeing?

Although stories are used in everyday language and are a natural way in which we make sense of our experiences, there are conditions that influence how – or if – we share them. The Inside-out Outside-in (IO-OI) model (Williams et al., 2016) suggests that the experience of wellbeing is influenced by factors 'outside' of the individual and factors 'inside' the individual. *Outside factors* are those that are in the external context that influence an individual's experience such as the social environment (e.g., family, friends, culture), economic and educational environments (e.g., employment, national economy, availability of schooling, resources and infrastructure) and physical environments (e.g., safety, clean drinking water, pollution). *Inside factors* are the personal attributes that influence an individual's experience and include physical considerations such as health and psychological ones including identity, values, beliefs, and attitudes. The IO-OI model further suggests that it is the dynamic interplay between inside-out and outside-in factors that will influence an individual's experience of wellbeing.

IO-OI is a useful framework to analyse storying practices as an example of wellbeing literacy as it speaks to the 'contextually embedded' nature of storying developing as a capability. Stories shape and are shaped by 'outside factors' such as social and cultural structures and power dynamics; in turn, these broader stories can also shape the 'inside factors' of people's experiences, thoughts, and behaviours, which inform the stories they hold about themselves and share into the world. This highlights a potential emancipatory function in storying, through the ability of vulnerable or disenfranchised groups to envisage an alternate story of their future. However, it also highlights some of the limits to the democratic function, noting that capability is influenced by the contextual environment. We suggest the relationship between inside-out and outside-in factors may create and enable storying 'freedom' (capability) or limit/prevent it at three levels – Me (intrapersonal), We (interpersonal), and Us (sociocultural) (Jarden, 2015), and that these *dynamics* operate independently from the *mechanics* of storying (Table 11.1).

For example, Jayda is the eldest child in her family and has four younger brothers. Every day, she and her mother look after the family home and two youngest boys while her father and the two eldest sons work in a local factory. Jayda is intelligent, and whilst formal schooling is not available to her, she is keen to learn and has taken every opportunity she can to learn to read, draw and write. She has hopes beyond life with her family and, using her vibrant imagination shares stories of future adventures with her younger brothers as they walk to and from the market each day.

The mechanics and dynamics for wellbeing literacy (Table 11.1) are all present in Jayda – she has the right intentionality, knowledge, and vocabulary and can comprehend and compose language to a high level. However, she also has context sensitivity, and this tells Jayda that when her father and brothers are home, her sharing of stories must stop. She has an internal belief that she must be 'seen and not heard' (inside-out, Me level), an external environment experience with her Father shouting at her to be quiet that reinforces this (outside-in, We level), and a broader cultural context that normalises this attitude towards females (outside-in, Us level). Despite the storying *mechanics* available to Jayda, the *dynamics* at each of the three levels limit her storying freedom (capability) and as such also her experience of wellbeing.

Bringing This to Life through the 'Stories of Hope' Project

Let us now illustrate the power of storying and participatory-based methods to build wellbeing literacy through the story of a research project designed to understand how hope emerges in university students. The investigation was a multi-phased qualitative study that sought to incorporate youth voices into our research inquiries using Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI). PNI is a storying approach that senses patterns in the social system through the shared exploration of stories, prioritising participants as experts in their own experience (Kurtz, 2014). PNI can be used as a research or community change methodology, moving through three core phases to foster collective understanding and reveal insights that can shape practice (Figure 11.1). These phases include participants sharing stories of their experience (*story collection*), working together to make sense of these experiences (*sense-making*) and then

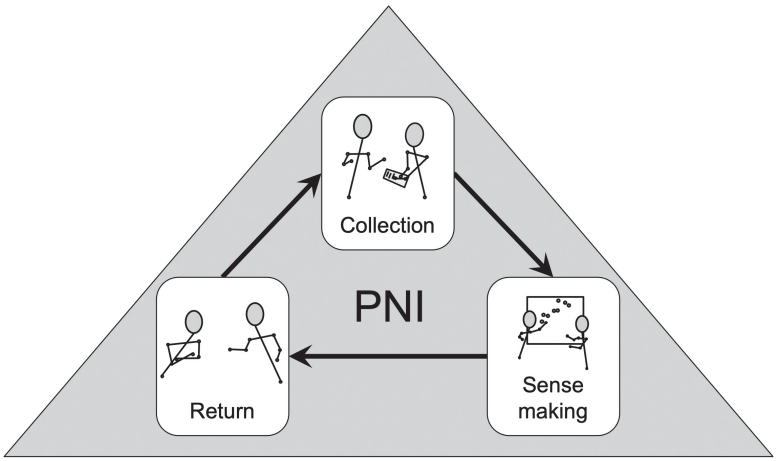

FIGURE 11.1 Three core phases of PNI methodology.

Source: Image used with permission from Kurtz (2014).

considering how to story the collective experiences back to the community to create a call to action (*return*).

The project drew on multimodalities of expression to uncover how participants used language to understand and make sense of their experiences of hope. Participants were invited to share a story of an experience of hope in text form, including identifying some of the factors that enabled hope in their story. A subset of participants were engaged as co-researchers in a series of sense-making workshops, using a variety of storying methods, such as rich picture mapping, visual depictions, and storyboards to depict the common themes they identified in the shared stories of hope. An example of some of the images they created to communicate how hope is experienced is depicted in Figure 11.2. A crucial part of enabling the efficacy of these methods resulted from the environment that was designed to create a sense of safety and trust for participants to share their stories and work together to foster shared understanding. Intentional practices were built in to create the *outside*-in conditions for these storying capabilities to emerge.

Participants' sense-making of the stories moved beyond examining some of the factors that students considered central to the experience of hope to a shared understanding of how they see the dynamic interplay *between* these factors leading to the experience itself. For example, students determined that social enablers inspire hope in the individual and activate their own internal resources that elicit the ideation of potential pathways and motivational energy. The use of different modalities facilitated a richness to this sense-making that could not be enabled solely through verbal or written modes. That is, such capabilities were enabled through broadening the mechanics that participants could draw upon to story their experience of hope.

As we have explored in this chapter, language is a powerful mechanism for communicating ideas and creating shared understanding across different audiences. Perhaps this is best illustrated by Wittgenstein's (1953) famous quote: "the meaning of a word is in its use in the language" (p. 43).

FIGURE 11.2 Visual images created by students to depict the experience of hope.

Social constructionist scholars pose that language is not only used to describe concepts but as a communication system that is used to process ideas both intrapersonally and interpersonally (Burr, 2015). In fact, the role of language in shaping the psychosocial realm is well evidenced across cultures and contexts (Brooks et al., 2017; Sivak et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2020). Not only does language help communicate our understanding of a particular concept, but language also influences or constructs our experience, that is we understand experiences through language (Brothers, 2005). Therefore, not only is it imperative to discern the language that populations use around hope, but this language may also be used as a lever for making shifts in the experience of hope. This was certainly evident in the data from the student co-researchers experience in the project.

The co-researchers identified a range of generative benefits through participating in the research, building their knowledge of hope through their explorations while also deepening their critical analysis skills. They reported that the methods expanded their understanding and pathways to hope through their exploration of other student stories, including experiencing a sense of hope in the process. Wellbeing literacy poses that if you have more words, you have more concepts to construct your experience (Oades et al., 2021). In essence, literacy builds agency, which is a core component of hope (Snyder, 2002). The co-researchers also reported experiencing a sense of wellbeing and growth through this process, which could be explained by some of the processes used to integrate need-supportive practices and facilitate the *outside*-in environmental conditions for wellbeing to emerge. These examples may help illuminate how storying methods like those used in PNI approach can help in building wellbeing literacy capabilities.

Finally, it is worth noting that methods that enable the coproduction of knowledge, such as PNI, can also enhance research translation to practice as we learn more about how language can be tailored to better communicate to our target audience (Conte & Davidson, 2020; Oades et al., 2021). For example, students spoke about possibilities, not pathways, and willpower, rather than agency. Intentionally drawing on the language that resonates with students is one of the pathways through which we can develop wellbeing literacy, which has been suggested as an important mediator or moderator between interventions and outcomes (Hou et al., 2021; Oades et al., 2020).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the powerful synergy between storying practices and developing wellbeing literacy. Stories are a fundamental way that humans make sense of their experiences and share understanding across cultures. From ancient oral traditions to modern digital narratives, storying taps into our natural capacity for contextualising complex concepts and

awakening empathy (Smith et al., 2017). As such, they can be useful methods through which we can develop wellbeing literacy capabilities. Creating the freedom to share stories of wellbeing experiences in a safe and trusting environment not only enables the story sharer to construct and make sense of their experience but also fosters the necessary empathy that can give voice to diverse perspectives.

This chapter has shone a new light on the capability model of wellbeing literacy by elucidating the dynamics that influence language use for wellbeing, beyond just the mechanics. Rather than reducing people's experiences to decontextualised data points, stories and arts-based methods can holistically illuminate some of the dynamics that interact to enable or inhibit wellbeing (Colla & Kurtz, 2024). The Stories of Hope project illustrated some of the processes through which participatory storying approaches can build wellbeing literacy capabilities in generative ways. By sharing personal stories through multiple modalities like writing, visuals, and mapping, participants expanded their vocabulary and concepts around the experience of hope, while the sense-making process facilitated greater contextual awareness as they explored patterns across stories.

Looking ahead, participatory storying methods offer a valuable process through which we can further explore the capability model of wellbeing literacy. Identifying the necessary conditions for such capabilities to emerge could provide useful insights into how we foster wellbeing literacy in different contexts. By democratising whose experiences of wellbeing are included and uplifting diverse ways of knowing, we can construct more emancipatory and action-oriented models to facilitate wellbeing. We believe that storying is a profound capability through which people can, not just describe, but reshape the outside-in and inside-out dynamics influencing their own and others' wellbeing journeys.

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