The Process of Wellbeing develops an anthropological perspective on wellbeing as an intersubjective process, which can be approached through the prism of three complementary conceptual framings: conviviality, care, and creativity. Drawing on ethnographic discussions of these themes in a range of cultural contexts around the world, it shows how anthropological research can help to enlarge and refine understandings of wellbeing through dialogue with different perspectives and understandings of what it means to live well with others and the skills required to do so. Rather than a state or achievement, wellbeing comes into view here as an ongoing process that involves human and nonhuman others. It does not pertain to the individual alone but plays out within the relations of care that constitute people, moving and thriving in circulation through affective environments.
THE PROCESS OF WELLBEING

Conviviality, Care, Creativity

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Abstract: The Process of Wellbeing develops an anthropological perspective on wellbeing as an intersubjective process, which can be approached through the prism of three complementary conceptual framings: conviviality, care, and creativity. Drawing on ethnographic discussions of these themes in a range of cultural contexts around the world, it shows how anthropological research can help to enlarge and refine understandings of wellbeing through dialogue with different perspectives and understandings of what it means to live well with others and the skills required to do so. Rather than a state or achievement, wellbeing comes into view here as an ongoing process that involves human and nonhuman others. It does not pertain to the individual alone but plays out within the relations of care that constitute people, moving and thriving in circulation through affective environments.

Keywords: wellbeing, anthropology, care, conviviality, creativity
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1 Introduction

While the social sciences have historically tended to focus on social problems and pathologies, this Element invites us to think about what it means to live well with others. By exploring living well in its own right, making it a focus of study, we are afforded a new and enlarged view of the person or self and of society at large – a view different to that which arises from attention to the pathological. Without doubt, striving for a better understanding of social problems and crises is of the utmost importance, but studying pathologies can only get us so far when it comes to understanding wellbeing, which is not simply an absence of suffering or an inversion of the problematic, challenging, or undesirable. Living well and wellbeing are, of course, closely related, in complex ways, to negative and challenging aspects of experience. In many cultural settings, suffering and wellbeing are not seen as polar opposites but as mutually constitutive and entwined aspects of the human condition. Departing from this insight, this Element is underpinned by two central and related questions: How do people living in different kinds of situations understand wellbeing and how do they strive to live well despite the many challenges they face?

I approach the discussion of wellbeing through the lens of three conceptual framings, which I refer to as conviviality, care, and creativity. I do not wish to imply that these are the “key elements,” “ingredients,” or components of wellbeing, or the prerequisites for achieving it. I have chosen these concepts, in the first instance, because they – along with some others including hope, vulnerability, resilience, and happiness – have been at the forefront of much productive work in anthropology in recent years. I draw on anthropological contributions to the discussions of conviviality, care, and creativity, which are not, for the most part, directed at the discussion of wellbeing as such but lend themselves very well to understanding social qualities of wellbeing and their embeddedness in particular cultural contexts. By exploring their relevance for wellbeing, and by making the connections more explicit, I therefore aim to offer a substantive contribution to cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary discussions – slightly shifting the way we use these concepts along the way. I do this from a distinctly anthropological perspective, namely one that combines theoretical analysis with nuanced ethnographic descriptions based on long-term engagement with research participants and aims at a “thick description” of their experience. Among other things, anthropology has the capacity to draw on ethnographic findings to show us other ways of organizing thought and practice. By attending carefully to the conceptual framings of others, we can better challenge and refine our own ontological and epistemological assumptions. The perspectives of those we meet in the field – our research participants and
interlocutors – can and do often encourage us to reconsider what exists and what we can know.

My own research has been mostly carried out in Japan, with older Japanese and, more recently, with young contemporary artists. In *The Process of Wellbeing*, however, I will draw on a broad range of examples. To those less familiar with an anthropological approach, this might seem surprising: Are so many examples from different parts of the world really necessary? Yes, they are, and they are not merely illustrative, although the textured description is helpful in itself. Most importantly, they provide the raw material that allows us to construct the argument. The method here is primarily inductive. Rather than departing from particular hypotheses, straightforward and clearly articulated, which are then “tested,” as it were, the inductive approach aims to build arguments gradually from the ground up. Ethnographic theory, at its best, draws on empirical examples from rich ethnographic descriptions; conceptual framings are developed and refined with reference to these descriptions, and stem from them, but are more abstract than the descriptions themselves. Rather than primarily relying on theoretical tools and concepts developed by Western philosophers, then, my departure points consist of concepts originating in the ethnographic description of diverse cultural practices around the world. By focusing on how people in a variety of different settings attend to conviviality, care, and creativity, we are well placed to reconsider, and expand, our understanding of the nature of wellbeing.

1.1 Culture and Wellbeing

Anthropologists have long concerned themselves with the different ways in which people not only live but reflect upon their own lives and with how they negotiate social models and personal preferences. Countless ethnographies have been written in which we may discern an underlying concern with what a good life is for a particular group of people, and yet, surprisingly, questions of wellbeing and happiness have rarely been explored explicitly. Neil Thin (2008) attributed anthropology’s evasion of the topic of happiness to four dominant influences in the social sciences more generally: alongside “anti-hedonism” and “moral relativism,” he identified what he described as “clinical pathologism” and “anti-psychologism.” The former refers to the prevalent attitude among social scientists that pathologies and problems are somehow more worth studying than the good aspects of life. The latter, meanwhile, has constrained analysis of the emotions either through the social constructionist rejection of the psychologists’ universalist assumptions about the unity of human psychological
makeup or through a cognitivist resistance to the study of emotional experience (Thin, 2008, pp.138–150).

On the other hand, happiness and its relationship to the good life have long been an overt object of attention among philosophers (cf. Brülde, 2007; Tiberius, 2004) as well as psychologists and social psychologists. The importance of wellbeing and related topics in psychology seems to be growing, and the study of positive experiences is fast becoming one of the central research interests in the field of personality psychology (Suh & Oishi, 2004). The philosopher Valerie Tiberius (2004) distinguished substantive accounts of wellbeing from its formal analysis, stressing that while cultural differences might be relevant for the first, they do not undermine the latter philosophical project, which strives to reveal the nature of wellbeing as a universal notion. As such, the philosophical project mostly limits itself to formal analysis of the concept, leaving the substantive accounts, which point to differences in sources and causes of wellbeing, to other disciplines. To date, this has mostly been undertaken by social psychologists comparing large samples of quantitative data. The need for other types of data, including in-depth ethnographic accounts, has been explicitly recognized by practitioners in the field (Diener & Suh, 2000; Suh & Oishi, 2004). Much has been written on the topic of wellbeing in cross-cultural psychology, but the contributions from anthropologists remain relatively scarce.

1.2 Wellbeing and Happiness

At this point, it is fruitful to examine more carefully some of the various key terms mentioned so far, particularly “wellbeing” and “happiness,” and their interconnections. Happiness is often equated with subjective wellbeing (SWB) (cf. Diener & Suh, 2000; Thin, 2008). Psychologists use the notion of SWB as comprising people’s affective and cognitive evaluations of their lives (Diener & Fujita, 1995, as cited in Triandis, 2000, p. 14). These evaluations include people’s emotional reactions to events, their moods, and judgments they form about their life satisfaction, fulfillment, and satisfaction with domains such as marriage and work. Thus, SWB concerns the study of what laypeople might simply call happiness or satisfaction. Furthermore, “SWB is one measure of the quality of the life of an individual and of societies” (Diener et al., 2003, p. 405). The notion of wellbeing triggers two opposed yet linked reactions among many anthropologists, as Lambek (2008, p. 115) has pointed out: On the one hand, the idea of measuring wellbeing bears resemblance to certain modernist interventionist ideas that have caused a number of difficulties – one need only be reminded of the pitfalls of social modernist planning, for instance. On the other hand, the need for engagement with the political, and the related need