

26 July 2021

Submission on *A fair chance for all: Breaking the disadvantage cycle inquiry*

To: The Productivity Commission

Dear Dr. Nana, Mr. Sweet, Professor Pacheco, and Dr. Rosenberg

I am a student at Massey University studying in the Master of Applied Social Work programme and I am doing a student placement with migrants and refugees in Hamilton. The policy suggestions that follow in this submission have developed from resources that I have wished to be able to access that are not currently available that I believe would help my clients break free from their cycles of poverty.

Yours sincerely

Deborah Robertson

027-448-0146

deb.louise.nelson@gmail.com

Introduction

In this submission I will present my opinion of the main dimensions of persistent disadvantage that I believe the Productivity Commission should investigate to break the cycle of poverty in New Zealand. I will address the Productivity Commission's question posed to the public to develop the Terms of Reference, namely "What outcomes are crucial for the wellbeing of Aotearoa's tamariki, whānau and communities?".

I suggest that crucial wellbeing outcomes can be summarised by using Martin Seligman's model of five components of wellbeing, using the acronym PERMA: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievements. Seligman's PERMA wellbeing model is a scientifically tested development of Abraham Maslow's highest level of his wellbeing model of a hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation (Madeson, 2021). Seligman is an international authority on wellbeing research. He is a former president of the American Psychological Association with decades of experience researching what people believe the necessary conditions are to make their life worth living (Seligman, 2011).

I propose that disadvantage arises when the PERMA components are not addressed. I will discuss each wellbeing component then suggest a possible social policy solution for each one. I believe these components directly impact wellbeing and that if these policy solutions are implemented, they will improve people's wellbeing outcomes, and help break the cycle of poverty.

For the purposes of this discussion, wellbeing refers to the eudaimonic definition of wellbeing in which the emphasis is on a person finding satisfaction by realising their potential and the meaning of their life (Burrus et al., 2012, in Vella et al., 2019).

I will be using the word poverty to mean relative poverty which refers to the level of restrictions inhibiting a person from participating in society and enjoying a sense of belong (Cheyne et al., 2008). This term derives from the moral belief that no one in a society should have to live below a certain income relative to what others in their society have access to. Anyone living on an income below the median income of their society is usually classified as living in poverty (Greve, 2019).

Wellbeing Outcome One: Positive Emotions

Seligman's first component of wellbeing that I propose should be considered a crucial outcome of wellbeing for tamariki, whānau, and communities in New Zealand are positive emotions.

Wellbeing is about feeling good about yourself and evaluating your life positively, feeling satisfied and fulfilled, and being able to function successfully to carrying out daily tasks. At a minimum, this includes the active experience of positive emotions, and minimal negative emotions (Diener et al., 1997, in Vella et al., 2019). This doesn't mean never experiencing negative emotions; instead, it is about having a healthy balance of emotions about yourself, others, and your relationships (Raciti & Vivaldi Vera, 2019).

Positive emotions are crucial because they build a person's resilience and increase their overall experience of wellbeing (Israelashvili, 2021). A positive psychologist, Barbara Fredrickson, has conducted randomised controlled experiments of her broaden-and-build theory of wellbeing in which she shows that inducing people to dwell on positive emotions, like love, joy, and contentment, when faced with a difficult decision, increases their ability to think of a broad range of actions they could do to

respond effectively to difficult situations, called thought-action repertoires. Frequently experiencing positive emotions has been shown to build up a person's inner resources over time, helping them physically and psychologically respond to difficulties in more effective and creative ways (Fredrickson, 2001).

Studies measuring eudemonic wellbeing indicate that as people's levels of deprivation increase, their emotional wellbeing decreases proportionally. Therefore, people trapped in cycles of serious poverty commonly suffer from low emotional wellbeing levels (Raciti & Vivaldi Vera, 2019). I propose a social policy that provides funding for three free optional sessions for all Work and Income New Zealand clients identified by case managers as living in high poverty circumstances to teach them how to use Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory to cultivate positive emotions to increase emotional wellbeing in the face of poverty and broaden their thought-action repertoires. Fredrickson's research is supported by New Zealand statistics that indicate that when people are happy, they are more productive, are less likely to get sick, and get along better with their colleagues. This has positive benefits for the economy and contributes to making New Zealand a better international economic competitor (Weijers & Morrison, 2018).

Naseem and Khalid's (2010) research shows learning positive emotional skills helps people to cope with stressful life events and leads to health benefits regardless of whether their material situation improves. Therefore, at the very least, even if their circumstances don't change, learning positive thinking skills will improve the emotional wellbeing of people trapped in cycles of poverty. In the best-case scenario, a policy implementing the broaden-and-build model will equip clients trapped in poverty to broaden their thought action repertoires, leading to innovative ideas for better ways to

improve their economic and social circumstances so they are well equipped to make effective decisions to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Wellbeing Outcome Two: Engagement

The second crucial outcome for New Zealanders' wellbeing that I propose is engagement, also known in the literature as flow. Engagement occurs when someone is so absorbed in an activity that they are no longer conscious of themselves because all their emotions and thoughts are channelled towards concentrating on their activity, and they merge with the object of their focus (Seligman, 2011). During the state of engagement, a person experiences complete undivided concentration and superior control of their thoughts and actions. They lose track of time and the experience of doing the activity is intrinsically rewarding (Tse et al., 2021).

People who extensively pursue activities that induce a flow state demonstrate overall increased mental and physical wellbeing, report having higher satisfaction with their life, and have higher confidence in their skills and capabilities, compared to people who do not frequently engage in flow-inducing activities (Tse et al., 2021).

Swimming is known to be an activity that induces a flow state for many people (Houston, 2021, June 8). I propose a policy that makes access to public swimming pools fully subsidised by the government for people with a community services card. For New Zealand families trapped in cycles of poverty, free swimming pools would provide an accessible opportunity to engage habitually in a flow activity to regularly increase their sense of wellbeing.

In addition, fully publicly funded swimming pool access would give families who struggle to pay the power bill free access to regular hot showers. This would

increase hygiene levels which is an essential step to breaking free of poverty, specifically hygiene poverty, which impacts all other aspects of wellbeing, such as getting employment to earn funds to support their family. Children from families living in impoverished conditions commonly experience social rejection at school and in their communities because of their insufficient personal hygiene habits, which negatively impacts both their physical and psychological wellbeing (Ramos-Morcillo et al., 2019). Taking care of basic hygiene frees up the mind from focusing on shame and discomfort of low hygiene, to instead invest in flow activities.

Wellbeing Outcome Three: Positive Relationships

International research is increasingly confirming the important role of positive social relationships in cultivating wellbeing (Weijers & Morrison, 2018). Positive relationships with other people are the most reliable source of encouragement and protection against life's difficulties (Seligman, 2011). Therefore, I believe a crucial wellbeing outcome for New Zealand tamariki, whānau, and communities is strong positive relationships.

Active participation in a positive, supportive social network is associated with improved physical health outcomes and helps preserve cognitive abilities into old age (Siedlecki et al., 2014). An essential component of positive relationships is curiosity. People who regularly demonstrate curiosity about others are more likely to enjoy interpersonal interactions and build close positive relationships with others (Petersen & Seligman, 2005).

Communication problems are one of the top predictors of relationship breakdown between married and cohabitating couples. Poor communication skills and neglecting to invest in the relationship or spend time together has been shown to predict

repetitive arguments between couples and relationship deterioration leading to separation (Barlow et al., 2018). This particularly impacts couples living in poverty because relationship support services are difficult for low-income families to access, and instead have become markers of the well-educated and economically privileged (Randles, 2014).

Randles (2014) suggests developing a social service that provides government funded relationship skills education for low-income couples to help them build strong positive relationships as a protective factor to manage the stresses of poverty. I propose a policy that makes publicly funded relationship skills workshops available for low-income couples that includes teaching people how to be actively curious about others and pursue interactions that build and strengthen relationships. In economic wellbeing surveys of different family compositions, married couples consistently score highest in net wealth compared to all other family types (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). This indicates there is significant financial benefit in investing in relationship skills that will preserve a marriage from dissolution as this improves the chances of the family's economic wellbeing later in life.

By helping impoverished families communicate better, this will improve positive relationships in the family, increase positive emotions at home, and strengthen chances of family longevity and stability which is a predictor of financial and general wellbeing (Randles, 2014).

Wellbeing Outcome Four: Meaning and Life Purpose

The fourth component of the PERMA model is finding meaning and purpose in life. I believe finding life purpose should be considered a crucial wellbeing outcome for New Zealand tamariki, whānau, and communities.

Identifying meaning in life is an integral part of overall wellbeing (Oishi & Diener, 2013). When a person has life purpose, they have life goals, and their life is moving in the direction they want it to go in. Purpose is about expressing your spirituality and believing that your life and your work have significance that make them worth fighting for (Vella et al., 2019). Studies measuring levels of people's sense of life meaning and purpose in the world show that higher levels of purpose and meaning are associated with longer life spans, and better health outcomes. Conversely, people who indicate no clear life purpose experience less life satisfaction and increased health difficulties (Madeson, 2021).

Seligman suggests doing something selfless for others improves wellbeing and gives life meaning and purpose. Controlled experiments have shown participants who engage in generous, selfless behaviours towards others physically interpret the ambient environment as warmer compared to participants who did not help others (Hu et al., 2016). Spontaneously doing an act of kindness for someone else offers an opportunity for people to use their personal strengths to meet someone else's needs which results in a sense of gratification. This experience commonly co-occurs with the experience of flow, mentioned above, because philanthropic acts often totally engage the person's mind leading to an absorbed experience where they are not conscious of themselves while they are completing the act. People who engage in spontaneous acts of kindness report experiencing increased positive emotions for the rest of the day (Seligman, 2002).

Social workers frequently work with people trapped in cycles of poverty. These people often mention feeling disempowered due to the stress and discrimination they experience trying to navigate institutional systems (United Nations, 2020, July 7). During this process, people lose focus of their life meaning and feel helpless and dependent on others as their identity becomes associated with being a user of welfare, rather than a contributor to society. One of the core roles of a social worker is to empower their clients to achieve their own wellbeing (Hare, 2004). I propose a policy that makes it a required standard procedure for social workers to actively incorporate a plan for how poor families can participate in philanthropic activities as a form of empowerment, as part of their wider intervention plan for receiving help. By having the opportunity to help others, these people trapped in poverty will have an outlet to find meaning and purpose by using their strengths to selflessly give back to the community. This will improve their psychological wellbeing and increase people's experience of physical warmth, which both contribute to positive wellbeing outcomes.

Wellbeing Outcome Five: Achievements

Finally, I propose that feeling a sense of pride in one's achievements is a critical outcome of the emotional wellbeing of our tamariki, whānau, and communities.

Seligman (2012) explains that people experience a feeling of achievement when they maintain self-motivation and perseverance to successfully master their goals. When people achieve realistic goals that still stretch them, this contributes to a sense of pride in themselves which increases overall wellbeing.

Low socio-economic status has been found to interfere with people's executive functions and decision-making processes (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea, 2017). This

impacts their ability to set realistic goals. In surveys of welfare recipients' experiences, benefit users suggested that having a personal case manager who invested in helping them set and achieve realistic goals was the most beneficial service they received in helping them experience a sense of achievement and work towards becoming independent (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018).

This is one of the primary roles of an occupational therapist. A core principle of occupational therapy is client-centredness in which the therapist helps the client to articulate goals that matter to them, and then works with them to develop an intervention that will allow them to successfully achieve their goals and measure their progress in a concrete way (Ohman & Asaba, 2009).

A common measure used in OECD countries to determine a low wage threshold is to calculate $2/3$ of the median national income (Cochrane et al., 2018). I suggest a policy be developed in which all New Zealanders under the low wage threshold are offered a personal government funded occupational therapist who will help them set manageable goals and help them to achieve them. By working with people trapped in cycles of poverty, occupational therapists can help people to identify patterns of coping that are obstructing them from achieving their goals and reinforcing their cycle of poverty. They can help them think outside the box and dare to set goals that they have been too afraid to aim for, and teach them to draw on their personal strengths, and use their limited resources in the most frugal and effective way to achieve their goals. This will show people they are capable of more than they believed they could achieve and instil a sense of pride and achievement in them (Seligman, 2012).

Conclusion

I have argued that Seligman's PERMA components of wellbeing represent crucial outcomes for the wellbeing of Aotearoa's tamariki, whānau, and communities. Cycles of poverty are perpetuated when each of these five components are not addressed. I believe that if the policy recommendations I have made for each of the components are used to inform the Productivity Commission's Terms of Reference, then we will make progress in our fight to free New Zealanders from the trap of persistent disadvantage.

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