The science of well-being

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chapter on international, cultural perspectives ('Living, and thinking about it'). American and British authors dominate this book, but examples from low- and middle-income nations are included in Delle Fave and Massimini's chapter 'The relevance of subjective well-being to social policies'. Their insight into well-being for people with disabilities, related to the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Functioning*, is illuminating. Another chapter with international dimensions, Galtung's 'Meeting basic needs', includes diverse theories (from Bhuddist *panetics* to Cuban *bienes fundamentales*) but is so poorly written the impact is diluted. Uneven literary quality is the Achilles' heel of multi-author books. The most disappointing chapter ('Relationship with reality and its role in the well-being of young adults') is written in some sort of short-notes style. However, many chapters are eminently readable, bringing fresh material on brain evolution, physical activity, nutrition, work and well-being. Burns's beautiful chapter 'Naturally happy, naturally healthy' illustrates the significance of connecting with nature. NHS Health Scotland could benefit from Huppert's chapter 'Positive mental health in individuals and populations'.

Overall this book offers a rich variety of perspectives from synaptic to spiritual. Without a 'science' of well-being, opinion-makers will continue to make tragic errors about patients' wellness, such as 'health promotion makes people ill' (Fitzpatrick,

2006). The editors of this trail-blazing book make no attempt to 'integrate' all the disciplines represented. Perhaps someday such an integrated science will become a pillar of psychiatric training?

Argyle, M. (1992) *The Social Psychology of Everyday Life.* Routledge.

Cronin de Chavez, A., Backett-Milburn. K., Parry, O., et al (2005) Understanding and researching wellbeing: its usage in different disciplines and potential for health research and health promotion. *Health Education Journal*, **64**, 70–87.

Fitzpatrick, M. (2006) How health promotion makes people ill. *British Journal of General Practice*, **56**, 231.

National Institute for Mental Health in England (2005) *Making it Possible: Improving Mental Health and Well-Being in England.* NIMHE.

Royal Society (2004) The science of well-being: integrating neurobiology, psychology and social science. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, **359**, 1331–1451.

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Social Capital and Mental Health

Social capital, embraced by New Labour and the World Bank, is currently the intellectual equivalent of Marmite, loved and loathed in equal measure. Cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems – or Emperor's new clothes? Like most agnostics, the editors of this book are not entirely sure but hedge their bets, just in case. Arguments for and against are marshalled in the best British tradition of fair play. On the one hand, social capital is the 'missing link' of social epidemiology, the glue required for effective societal functioning; on the other, it is poorly theorised, inadequately defined and unreliably measured. Up until now an industry in social capital research has been driven, and sometimes undermined, by the intuitive appeal and conceptual elasticity of the term itself. While this makes for great sound bites, the rhetoric is rarely matched by high-quality evidence. And when the findings do

not fit, the theory is changed instead. If you cannot explain something by too little social capital then maybe the problem lies in too much of the wrong kind?

This neat, readable little book confronts these inconvenient truths head on, and makes an excellent starting point for sceptics, too. The editors have sandwiched reports from five innovative studies in between balanced reviews of current theory and practice. Even if there is a hint that the best bits of cutting-edge research have been saved for peer-reviewed publication, these primary research narratives make compelling reading. Where else would you find an evocative account of an idyllic summer's afternoon on a city farm in Camden (complete with blackberry picking) juxtaposed with a death-defying description of working with teenagers in urban Columbia, homicide capital of the world?

While unlikely to convert many heretics, this book does make clear what is needed if social capital research is ever to deliver on the promises of its evangelists. If nothing else, the concept has encouraged people to look afresh at social ills and has inspired genuine efforts to relieve suffering and hardship.

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