Reviewer’s report

Title: A theory of public wellbeing

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Reviewer: Sarah Stewart-Brown

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for asking me to review this paper. Understanding the nature of wellbeing, its role in public health and potential approaches for promotion are all critical to the future of public health practice and papers such as this putting forward new ideas and synthesis of knowledge are vital to that process. The latter will advance through debate and counter debate and in this context this paper makes a very useful contribution. And it is therefore not critical that it has 100% coverage of what has been written about wellbeing in the context of public health

However the UK Faculty of Public Health's report Better Mental Health for All in 2016 (https://www.fph.org.uk/media/1644/better-mental-health-for-all-final-low-res.pdf) does need to be acknowledged not least because it addresses many of the issues discussed in this paper and put forward as 'new'. These include the role of the stress response, the need for a view of mental wellbeing than combines the hedonic and eudemonic, and solutions that addresses both environmental/social change and change at the level of the individual.

As the author points out the stress response is fundamental to the relationship between SDH and health, disease and wellbeing. S/he also draws attention to the importance of childhood but not the extent to which the adult stress response is profoundly influenced by the relational environment in childhood. So for example propensity to negative social evaluation (p13) is primarily determined by very early childhood experiences of 'social' evaluation by parents. The concept of trauma and particularly childhood trauma (adverse childhood experiences) is not mentioned and needs to be incorporated because it is prevalent in discussions about social determinants in contemporary public health. Concepts of trauma (like complex PSTD) extend understanding of the stress response and the autonomic nervous system to include the freeze and fold response (probably carried in the dorsal branch of the parasympathetic vagus nerve) which is so important to understanding of Status Syndrome and thus the biology of SDH. The concept of resilience as a bounce forward phenomenon dictated to an important degree by childhood experience is also highly relevant (Stewart-Brown S. Resilience and well-being In Oxford Textbook of Public Mental Health (2018), Dinesh Bhugra, Kamaldeep Bhui, Samuel Wong and Stephen Gilman (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018).
The papers section on Implications for Theory and Practice (p18-on) do mention childhood determinants (on p24) but do not address how it is possible to enable parents whose stress response has been set by the relational environment pertaining in their family home to respond to their infants and children in a way which minimizes trauma and promotes self-regulation and resilience. This area of public health practice is essential to complement approaches to enhancing self-regulation in adulthood (eg presence activities - eg in nature) and approaches which create a more health enhancing physical, social and working environment.

As a small point the WHO identified 3 components of wellbeing in 1946 - mental, social and physical. And as this paper points out, through the stress response, all three aspects are closely linked. However it remains that this paper addresses theories about the mental and psychological components of wellbeing and this should be stated explicitly.

If these points can be addressed then the paper should be published

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No competing financial interests
I work on mental wellbeing which is presumably why you have asked me to review this paper.

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