

Wellbeing Machine

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Wellbeing Machine
How Health Emerges from the Assemblages of Everyday Life
Kim McLeod

Wellbeing Machine

*How Health Emerges from the
Assemblages of Everyday Life*

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Series Editors' Preface

Wellbeing, Illbeing, and Well-Becoming

*Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart**

Wellbeing has become a key concept in systems of health care, as a part of a growing set of realizations that biomedicine has to be extended to take psychological and social factors into account. As the perspective of wellbeing opens up, issues such as cultural notions of personhood, relationality, embodiment, and emplacement all emerge as a suite of contextual influences. All this takes us quite far from the stereotypical view of biomedicine as the science of treating pathogenic conditions in individual bodies by means of specific curative treatments.

This opening up of perspectives on health, seen not just as the absence of disease, but as a holistic state of being 'well' provides the by now firmly established background to Kim McLeod's present study in this book. McLeod takes the discussions about wellbeing several steps further by dispensing with the idea of the individual as the referential focus of identity and replacing it with a network image of agency that includes non-human components working together with humans to produce what she calls the *Wellbeing Machine*.

A question that may arise here at the outset is whether this approach is ontological or heuristic in character, or somewhere in between. McLeod's intentions are very serious, and are motivated by her wish to obviate the pathologies of blaming that often go with mental conditions of depression as people seek for causes and therefore for ways of dealing with the phenomenon itself. Because she attributes the blaming process to the availability of the construct of an 'individual', she wishes to start from a different analytical perspective. Abol-

ishing the individual in this way leads her to develop an entirely new vocabulary of discussion, beginning with her chapter two on the agency of assemblages, connective labor, and power. The interviews she conducted with particular interlocutors indicate very clearly that these persons operated naturalistically with ideas of themselves as individual actors with individual bodies.

McLeod then turns her analytical lens on to look at the data and explain how these ideas and practices of the interlocutors have been co-produced among a number of agencies and are the result of affective labor within a network of such agencies. She does not challenge the interlocutors' sense of themselves as (culturally constituted) individuals, but she transforms their accounts into her own network analysis of co-producing actors and actions.

Cultural ideas are strongly present in all of the testimonies McLeod records, and the alternative conceptualizations she gives us, based on work by Deleuze and Guattari and others, form the discursive counterpart of these ideas, deconstructing them and reconstructing them in terms of her model of the 'machine' constituted by an assembly of human and non-human agencies. Yet this is clearly not a 'post-human' anthropology, since humans and their conditions of wellbeing or illbeing, and how they try to work with these conditions, remain central nodes in the discussion.

The idea of the *Wellbeing Machine* can be looked on as a double metaphor. In the first stage of the metaphor humans and machines are seen as working together. In the second stage the whole assemblage of agencies involved in treatment is seen in quasi-cybernetic terms as a kind of complex machine for producing particular outcomes. In this regard, we may compare such an idea of a complex web of relations among agents to the workings of an extended local system of kinship ties, such as those anthropologists have classically studied in 'technologically simple' societies in remote corners of the world (see examples in Strathern and Stewart 2011). Of course, any assumption that such a machine works perfectly immediately falls foul of the objections to functionalist analysis in anthropology that led to the abandonment of the original structural-functional approach. But the parallel is, for this very reason, worth making. On one hand, it leads us to recognize that structures do perform functions. On the other, it indicates that such functions are contingent on the agencies of the performers. The same therefore would apply to the wellness machine structure.

In a further sense the parallel or analogy with a locally functioning kinship system is helpful. Such a system does not work in the abstract but in an emplaced, embodied, and material way through cycles of subsistence, reproduction and exchange. The kinsfolk in it are enmeshed in a material world that they sustain and which sustains them. Their whole life pattern operates as a

kind of wellness machine; and this is particularly so in the case of illness. As we have noted many times in our own writings (e.g. Strathern and Stewart, 2010), in the Mount Hagen area of Papua New Guinea sickness is often attributed to the workings of anger (*popokl* in the local language) and dealing with anger requires a collective response within the kinship group or network. Correlatively, since the causes of anger arise within this same network, the network can operate as an illness machine, and this machine has to be switched by ritual means into another modality in order to become a wellness machine.

McLeod's exposition of the characteristics of the wellbeing machine can be understood as capturing a large number of elements that conduce to positive mental (and physical) health and are recognizable from efforts that people in general make in pursuing everyday life, whether they are considered to be therapies for depression or not. Fundamental to her ideas is the concept of affective labor, undertaken by humans through the mediation of material objects, such as photographs, the placement of items, and very significantly the development of ritualized and routinized modes of conduct. It is not that her model denies human agency, because it patently implies a great deal of agency encapsulated in the concept of affective labor itself. Rather, as we might put it, she wishes to remove from her model of wellbeing those ideological aspects of individual personhood that place blame on individuals for their pathology and stress that autonomous labor is needed to overcome the pathology. By contrast McLeod's model brings to light the collectivity of agencies that are involved in the production of affective status, and the crucial role that emplacement, materiality and ritual have in this process of production. Once the matter is expressed in this way it becomes evident that what she is highlighting is a set of processes that underpin the production of all social life, not just the production of illbeing and wellbeing. A part of affective labor, for example, in her scheme is the exercise of the imagination and the deployment of creativity, capacities that are important across the spectrum of human activity. With this in mind, we can appreciate the very general significance of her work as a contribution to the de-medicalizing of mental conditions and the re-production of them in social and affective terms. In this argument, it is not that pills lose their importance. Rather, the pill itself acquires sociality through its use in collectively orchestrated strategies.

McLeod's study goes deeply into the worlds of the depressed and how they can emerge from those worlds. As such, it repays close attention both for its theoretical and for its applied ramifications. We are also left to rethink the human/non-human interfaces of action in the world and where to place individuality. McLeod's research focus transcends the individual, yet individuals are portrayed within it, and at some level they must still be important in the

'machine'. We may be reminded of the film about robots under control of a central computer, whose power could be broken only when one of the robots evolved in an individual way to think for itself.

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Preface

Wellbeing Machine provides a precise, non-blaming and non-pathologising account of how wellbeing arises in the intimate processes of daily life. Wellbeing and illbeing are generally seen as interior states of the individual, which can readily be linked to individuals being blamed for the status of their wellbeing. This book expands the limits of human-based accounts of wellbeing by shifting attention away from the individual, and onto the collective body. Deleuze's assemblage is mobilised throughout this investigation of wellbeing, which contributes an innovative methodology called 'orientating to assembling'. This approach generates a conceptual entity called the *Wellbeing Machine*. The *Wellbeing Machine* is made up of four assemblages which each represent different affective capacities and different responses to the challenges of everyday life experienced by people with depression. The *Wellbeing Machine* reveals fresh insight into wellbeing. It shows how wellbeing emerges from assemblages that transform in a sustainable way over time and is experienced by the emergent 'well' individual as affective flux. In a series of changing assemblages, those associated with illbeing are repositioned as generative and vital to the production of wellbeing. This book specifies the ontological objects, practices, and the nonhuman and human labour involved in creating a series of modulating assemblages and emergent wellbeing. *Wellbeing Machine* shifts discussion about the wellbeing bioeconomy into new terrain. It investigates the intersections between emergent wellbeing, labour, power, and capitalism. This book contributes to debates about how to cultivate wellbeing. It suggests resourcing the formation of sustainable assemblages wherever they are needed or desired. *Wellbeing Machine* shows it is possible to produce knowledge about wellbeing that does not contribute negative associations about individuals' wellbeing levels.

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