



Knowledge and practice mobilities in the process of policy-making: The case of UK national well-being statistics



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the creation of the UK's 'Measuring National Well-being' statistical programme, drawing on accounts given of the creation of the programme in official sources and primary interviews. Focusing on the microspaces of public consultations and advisory panels, it argues that the construction of this statistical object was simultaneously the construction of a knowledge-object for academics and of a policy-object for policy-makers. As such, the statistic drew on and fed into domestic and international networks of statistical, academic and policy usage. The programme was shaped by the needs of these multiple networks, creating an object that they could hold in common but which did not necessarily fully satisfy any of them. Understanding the creation of objects in this way extends understandings around policy transfers and mobilities by showing how policy-objects arise through the transfer and mobility of things which are not policy. Simultaneously, what arises from policy mobility is not simply policy. Instead, what arises is multiple objects, which are the product of the intersection of travelling policy, knowledge and practice and they feed back into existing networks of knowledge, policy and practice. In doing so, the paper shows the inter-relations of knowledge and practice with policy, revealing them to be situated in place, contingent and compromised. It also contributes to the understanding of how official statistics, as a key technology of the state, are created.

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1. Policy mobilities and official statistics

Policies, in the sense both of the programmatic and the technical aspects of governance (Rose & Miller, 1992), do not appear from nowhere. This is true both in a conceptual sense, policies having intellectual contexts and antecedents, and in a spatial sense. Building on, and reacting to, work in the political sciences on policy transfer (see Benson & Jordan, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2012 for reviews), a geographical literature has been established around policy mobilities examining how policies travel across international and inter-regional borders (for example, Bebbington & Kothari, 2006; Clarke, 2009; Larner, 2009; Larner & Laurie, 2010; McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010b; Prince, 2012; Stone, 2004, 2008; Ward, 2006). The focus on *mobility*, rather than the initial conceptualisation of *transfer*, attempts to capture the dynamism of moving policies, understanding them not as reified objects to be selected, relocated and applied by rational actors, but as variations on themes constructed by actors situated both in specific places and

within networks distributed across space (McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011a; Prince, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013).

Policies which are mobile are translated, rather than transferred (Peck and Theodore, 2010a). That is, they are not picked up as complete objects and inserted into a new governance context but rather policies occurring in one context are interpreted by agents in another, this interpretation then being applied as an adaptation suitable for a new location. Often such interpretation is collaborative, with policy-agents emulating, learning from, and working with each other in the construction of policies in multiple places. The result is not a duplicated version of the original policy; the difference between the original and the applied context (in terms of local governance structures, resource allocations, legal infrastructures, and so on) mean that such duplication is impossible. Instead, as McCann and Ward put it, the policy which arises in the new locale is a mutation of the old. It retains a family resemblance, but in the mediation of actors between places, new elements will have been added and old elements removed (McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013; see also Peck and Theodore, 2010a).

This understanding of policies in movement has opened the space to consider the actors and networks involved in mediating

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objects and ideas. Bebbington and Kothari (2006), for example, have examined the role that international development organisations play in facilitating transfer and mobility across borders (c.f., Larner, 2009), while Prince (2012) and Stone (2004, 2008) have written about the roles of epistemic communities in supporting and enabling such transfers. Larner and Laurie (2010) have called for more attention to be paid to 'travelling technocrats', the individuals who make up networks of policy transfer and mobility, travelling between organisations and polities bringing policy with them. Such organisations, communities and individuals form what Peck and colleagues have called 'fast-policy networks' (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2010a; Peck, 2002, 2011b), formal and informal groupings of actors which translate policies between institutions of governance operating at multiple geographic scales.

From this starting point, that policy-making involves non-policy actors, the present paper develops the literature on policy transfer and mobility by recognising that it is not just policy which is being transferred when policies travel. Peck (2011a, p.791) characterises the field of policy mobility as "socially and institutionally constructed, being populated by a wide array of actors and institutions." By recognising that knowledge and practice communities, as part of a 'wide array of actors and institutions', serve their own ends beyond the construction of policy-objects it is possible to see both how a particular local tokens diverge from non-local exemplars but also how objects across different actor networks align. That is, Peck and colleagues (e.g., Peck, 2011a) argue that the apparent international convergence of policy-objects arises because the same or related actors create objects in multiple places. In the same fashion, it is possible to see connected policy-, practice- and knowledge-objects arising through the co-operation of actors from multiple networks. On this argument, epistemic knowledge is not drawn on by practice or practice communities, but is co-created as knowledge- and practice- and policy-object through the interaction of actors from across these networks.

One way of considering fast-policy networks is in terms of the actors who comprise them, as, for example, Larner (2009) and Peck and Theodore (2010b) have done. Another is to examine what Larner and Le Heron (2002) term 'globalising microspaces', the places in which such actors come together. Such spaces are both the physical (and, increasingly, virtual) locations in which discussions and debates occur, but are also the discussions and debates themselves. A conference, for example, bringing together actors from multiple locations to sell, explain, debate, lobby for, and learn about a policy is a globalising microspace in this sense. It is in such places that a policy instantiated in one location is translated for application in another.

This paper examines the construction of a programme of official statistics as it occurred within a globalising microspace. Official statistics can be thought of as a 'policy-object', a category introduced by Peck to indicate what is actually mobile when policy travels (Peck, 2011b, p. 791). An 'idea, innovation, technology or model' (*ibid.*), the policy-object is a more-or-less stable component of a situated policy, something self-contained which can travel unaccompanied and from which policies can be built. In practice, it is unlikely to travel alone, the object will generally travel with the idea which justifies it. In principle though, it could; as the context to which the object travels will be different from that of its origin, the object's original ecosystem of supporting objects may fall away, resulting in a very different object and a very different overall policy in its new location.

Policy-objects are constructed in microspaces, they influence and will be influenced by the networks which such microspaces join. These are not only networks of policy-making actors. As previous authors have observed, non-governmental actors

(Bebbington & Kothari, 2006; Larner, 2009) and members of epistemic communities (Prince, 2012; Stone, 2004, 2008) are also closely involved in the formation of policy and policy-objects. As a coarse typology, such actors may be characterised as belonging to practice and knowledge networks. By a 'practice network' is meant a network of actors involved in the non-policy development or application of objects, those for whom the construction of an object has an impact on their practical activities. By a 'knowledge network' is meant a network of actors involved in the definition and discussion of objects as means to understand the world. Such a tripartite division is crude – it potentially does injustice to those involved in advancing cultural or social aims, for example – but has the advantage of simplicity in identifying non-policy-actors and so allowing an exploration of their actions.

A characterisation of this sort is necessary because if non-policy-actors are meeting with policy-actors in a microspace, then that microspace is not only joining policy networks together, but also networks of those involved in creating other types of object. Official statistics are made, simultaneously, as objects for the policy-makers, academics and statistical actors who created them, are fed back into their networks and become the basis for actions elsewhere. Similarly, the actors meeting in the microspace at that moment form not only part of their own networks involved in creating objects of use for themselves, but contribute to the networks of others. Academics become, albeit briefly, policy-makers, practitioners develop knowledge-objects, and so on.

2. The 'Measuring National Well-being' programme and statistics as policy-objects

To illustrate the argument outlined above, this paper explores the case study the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme, a collection of official statistics developed by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) between 2010 and 2014.¹

Covering the whole of the UK (see, for instance, Office for National Statistics, 2014, 2015), this programme brings together a diverse selection of statistics previously collected by the ONS and central government departments, and a small set of novel statistics developed specially for the programme, primarily those dealing with 'subjective well-being'. These latter are measures of how well individuals feel themselves to be doing and are collected through the *Annual Population Survey*. As something discrete and closed, a component which informs wider policy and sets the terms for practical and academic debates around 'well-being' (see, for example, O'Donnell, Deaton, Duran, Halpern, & Layard, 2014), the programme is a policy-object in the sense outlined above.²

The programme went through several stages of development, starting with a well-subscribed public consultation (*What matters to you*, see Beaumont, 2011, p. 34; Matheson, 2011; Oman, 2015), two different high-level advisory panels (the *Advisory Forum* and *Technical Advisory Group*) and numerous statistic-specific calls for views (for example, Office for National Statistics, 2012a,b). These stages, microspaces in which networked actors met, are documented in meeting minutes, consultation documents and official

¹ These dates represent the official launch of the programme by UK Prime Minister David Cameron on 25 November 2010 (Cameron, 2010) and the awarding of the 'National Statistic' kitemark for the programme by the UK's statistical watchdog, the UK Statistics Authority in June 2014 (UK Statistics Authority, 2014). While not marking the end of development, as official statistics continue to be adjusted throughout their lifetimes, this latter date represents the end of major development.

² It is not possible here to engage with the literature on the critical politics of 'well-being' which inform the statistical programme, but introductions to this can be found in Scott (2012, 2014) and Tomlinson and Kelly (2013).

statistical outputs. Additionally, some of those involved in various of these have produced their own accounts (Allin & Hand, 2014; Tomlinson & Kelly, 2013).

In the summer of 2014, analysis of these secondary sources were supplemented with interviews undertaken with fourteen actors from practice, knowledge and policy-making communities who sat on the two advisory panels. These interviews, which lasted between 25 min and an hour, explored the social dimensions of statistical construction, such as how actors from different networks with different aims and objectives negotiated the policy-object. Such social aspects, integral to the operation of a microspace and so to the mobility of policy, are often overlooked in official minutes and public accounts of decision-making processes. By analysing private, interview, accounts alongside public, secondary, data, it is possible to bring to the surface debates which would otherwise be hidden, excavating the process of discussion and debate which resulted in the production of a policy-object. This paper draws particularly on interviews which highlight the interactions of actors from different networks: policy-actors, from central government departments; knowledge-actors, from a range of academic disciplines; and practice-actors, from the Office for National Statistics itself.³

These sources will be used to explore the nature of the creation of official statistics as policy-, practice- and knowledge-objects through an examination of three moments within the statistic-making process: the origins of the statistic within policy and practice networks, the tension between the needs of policy- and practice-actors in the development of measures, and the debates practice- and knowledge-actors had over the wording of survey questions. In these moments, it is possible to see the coming together of multiple networks of diverse actors with varying aims and objectives. While illustrating the way that policy-objects move across geographic boundaries, it also illustrates how more than policy moves, and how more than policy is created and mutated in such moves.

3. The co-construction of policy, practice and knowledge-objects within microspaces: three moments

3.1. Origins: well-being measurement as policy- and practice-objects

“[T]oday the government is asking the Office of National Statistics to devise a new way of measuring wellbeing in Britain. And so from April next year, we'll start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life.” (Cameron, 2010; np.)

The 'Measuring National Well-being' programme might initially be read as a domestic policy innovation, originating in policy networks of professional political actors: politicians and their advisers. When David Cameron established it, it became only the second statistical programme to be launched by a sitting Prime Minister⁴. It marked the fulfilment of a policy objective that had been held by Cameron since he took up the leadership of the Conservative Party (Cameron, 2006; Quality of Life Group, 2007) and had been a

manifesto commitment for his party in the election which brought him to power (Conservative Party, 2010, p.38). Such commitments sat within a context of historical policy-objects, such as the previous Labour administration's 'Sustainable Development Indicators' (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999). There was a domestic policy discourse around well-being pushed particularly by the think-tank nef (New Economics Foundation, 2011a), whose later work shows cross-party support for the measurement of well-being (New Economics Foundation, 2011b).

This domestic policy discourse does not occur in isolation, but continually refers to a wider international movement towards well-being measurement which crosses networks of policy, knowledge and practice. In the questions following his launch speech, Cameron makes reference to international interest in well-being and hopes that the ONS programme places Britain “in the vanguard of doing this rather than just meekly following on behind” (Cameron, 2010; np.). The possibility of 'meekly following' was a real one. A joint declaration on the desirability of improved social indicators was made in the 'Istanbul Declaration', a joint statement issued by policy-representatives of the European Commission, OECD, Organisation of the Islamic Conference, UN, UNDP and World Bank in 2007, shortly after Cameron's first public expression of interest (Cameron, 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2007). In 2008, the French President commissioned an influential report from a panel comprising largely of academic economists which called for official measures of well-being to be developed (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). The desire for more and better social data from statisticians was reiterated by the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2009) and the same point was made by the leaders of the G20 (2009, para.5). Around the same time, a similar programme was started by the influential international think-tank the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2011). Cameron's comments, quoted above, suggest a knowledge of this diverse international discourse, but also a separation from it, his fear being that international developments would lead to the creation of a policy-object, a set of statistical measures, which would be an international standard yet unsuitable to the UK context.

On this initial reading, the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme that is being commissioned is simply a policy-object: UK policy-entrepreneurs in an incoming administration, building on a domestic history around social and environmental statistics, commission a statistical programme from state statistical actors to support the establishment of policies around 'well-being'. This version of events, is supported by accounts such as that of the National Statistician who oversaw the programme (Matheson, 2011, p. 2).

However, alongside and overlapping with this discourse within domestic policy networks, there was also a discourse within networks of practice-actors. Various sources within the Office for National Statistics argue for the development of a statistical sensibility around well-being, pre-dating large-scale domestic and international interest. For example, Allin, who initially headed up the ONS programme, is keen to rebut media claims that the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme was merely 'Mr Cameron's Happiness Index', stressing that the Prime Minister only launched the programme and did not commission it, the initiative coming from the ONS itself (Allin & Hand, 2014, p. 221). A similar argument was made in interview with Oscar, a senior figure within the programme at the ONS, who cited an article in the ONS' in-house journal *Economic Trends*⁵ as evidence that the ONS were

³ As these interviews were not recorded, they are cited here in indirect quotations. While not a verbatim record of what was said, all quotes have been approved by interviewees as accurately reflecting the content of the interview. Participants have been anonymised. For more details, see Jenkins (2016).

⁴ The other having been the publication Social Trends, launched by Wilson in 1970 (see Moser, 2000; Nissel, 1970).

⁵ Probably actually Allin, 2007, in the successor publication *Economic and Labour Market Review*.

considering societal well-being prior to the 2010 election (interview with Oscar, 11 September 2014). This article occurred in the context of the ONS' stated work programme for 2007–08, which included a plan to develop statistics on 'societal welfare' (Office for National Statistics, 2007, p. 2).

As argued above, those developing well-being measurement as a policy-object do so with an eye on international developments occurring at the same time. The same watchfulness is true of statistical actors, but their embeddedness within international contexts and networks is more pronounced. The *Economic Trends* article (Allin, 2007) grounds domestic statistical development in work undertaken at the OECD level, particularly the Istanbul Declaration (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2007; above). While domestic innovations are discussed (particularly the *Sustainable Development Indicators*), there is no evidence presented of any local policy discourse demanding well-being measurement over and above what was already being collected. That is, the construction of the practice-object of well-being measures is not being driven by a desire from policy-makers for a policy-object. It is the other way around, that once there is a set of statistics, policies might follow.

The embeddedness of statistical actors within wider networks of practice was a key influence on the development of the programme. The report of the French President's Commission (Stiglitz et al., 2009; see above) served as a further motivating factor for independent work by strengthening the international statistical discourse around well-being measurement. Oscar, a senior figure in the ONS' programme, noted in interview that three UK-based academics (Atkinson, Oswald and Stern) sat on the Commission which gave the UK a national interest in its recommendations and meant 'we couldn't ignore it'. As a further challenge to the ONS, the French state statistical agency INSEE had provided administrative support for the Commission, meaning that the Office was 'getting messages through standard channels and had to pay attention' (interview with Oscar, 11 September 2014). There is potentially an element of professional pride to be seen here, paralleling Cameron's desire 'to be in the vanguard' of statistical development (Cameron, 2010; np., quoted above). Oscar went on to say that 'Developing a programme as a response to Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi would allow us to look Eurostat in the eye, showing that we were taking the report seriously.' (interview with Oscar, 11 September 2014). The desire to look international associates in the eye is not an issue at the level of policy, but at the level of the practice-actor; it is driven not by domestic political needs, but the needs of a domestic statistical body to maintain its position within a wider network of statistical actors.

These two different aspects which Oscar highlights, the nationalised construction of academics and knowledge and the international networks of statistical producers, introduces a third network of actors working around well-being measurement, with their own conceptions around the object of 'well-being measurement'. The three UK-based academics sitting on the Commission are operating to reproduce ideas in multiple places, travelling abroad to seed ideas that return to the UK partly as a result of their initial transportation. The act of exporting their ideas becomes a reason for the ONS being interested in them, the call for well-being measurement in France justifies a call to measure it in the UK. All three of these 'travelling technocrats' (Larner & Laurie, 2010), as well as both Sen and Stiglitz, later sit on the first of the two advisory panels which the ONS establish, the Advisory Forum, further linking the UK programme with the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report. At the same time, the ONS acts a part of a larger statistical network, which includes both informal relations with their counterparts overseas, but also formal relationships with Eurostat and the OECD, both of whom supported the Commission's work. These relationships

provide an awareness of developing statistical norms elsewhere.

On this reading, the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme is not a domestic policy-object. Rather the Office for National Statistics is creating a domestic practice-object, responding to an international statistical discourse around the measurement of well-being. Such initiative separates the idea of producing statistics from any specific policy need in any particular domestic context. Official statistics, and well-being statistics in particular, are reified as an end in themselves. As the Istanbul Declaration has this, "Official statistics are a key "public good" that foster the progress of societies. The development of indicators of societal progress offers an opportunity to reinforce the role of national statistical authorities as key providers of relevant, reliable, timely and comparable data and the indicators required for national and international reporting." (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2007, p. 1). That is, measurement will create policy, policy has not created measurement.

It is of little import which of these two origin stories is 'correct', that they both exist shows a clear division between policy-actors and practice-actors working within the UK context. Both sets of actors feel themselves to have ownership of the programme, and both are part of wider international networks. These networks influence their actions to different extents; the policy-object is designed in reference to international opinion, while the practice-object explicitly refers to objects created elsewhere. In the micro-space in which the 'Measuring Well-being Programme' is created, these networks meet, with the actors creating an object which draws on the aims and objectives of their networks and which will be fed back into those networks.

3.2. Development: shaping the policy-object according to the needs of practice networks

It is in this context of intersecting international academic, policy and statistical networks that 'Measuring National Well-being' programme was developed. The project opened with a national consultation, 'What matters to you?', which ran between November 2010 and April 2011. This consultation aimed at surveying public views on individual and national well-being which could then be reflected in the ONS' measures (Matheson, 2011, p. 4; although see also Oman, 2015). During the later stages of this consultation, the Advisory Forum was established "to discuss the main themes emerging from the national debate and help design new measures." (Advisory Forum Terms of Reference, para. 2). While envisaged as a body meeting "around every two months, starting in January 2011" (*ibid.* Para. 6), it actually only met twice, five months apart, in January and July 2011 (Minutes of Advisory Forum, 5 January and 25 July 2011). A second panel, the Technical Advisory Group, was established in February 2011

"to provide advice on the development of subjective well-being measures for inclusion in ONS social surveys; to consider and provide advice on other broader measures of well-being, for example development of income measures relating to the national accounts and environmental accounting and sustainability issues; to advise on the development of conceptual frameworks for the measurement of national well-being; to provide advice on the presentation and reporting of national well-being statistics"

(Technical Advisory Group Terms of Reference, para. 3).

This group met eight times between February 2011 and April 2013. A further, more limited, public consultation ran between October 2011 and January 2012 eliciting responses on a proposed

set of measures for the programme. The first statistical release was made in July 2012 ([Office for National Statistics, 2012c](#)).

The two advisory panels consisted of staff from the Office for National Statistics, representatives of central government departments, academics and members of national and international think tanks. The meetings of these panels, their circulated documents and formal and informal communications acted as microspaces in which these networks of actors came together and interacted. In these microspaces, the ideas, aims and objectives of networks, embodied in the actors, were negotiated. While the ostensible aim of this negotiation was to create a policy-object, statistical and academic actors sought to create objects for use within their networks; practice- and knowledge-objects.

Considering the emphasis given it in Terms of Reference of the Advisory Forum, the central component of the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme would appear to be the public consultation, 'What matters to you?' (a point also made by [Everett, 2015](#)). The first advisory panel, the Advisory Forum, is established explicitly to discuss the results of the consultation (Terms of Reference, quoted above). The need for such a panel is partly a response to a lack of direct policy need underlying the movement to well-being measurement. Oscar, who was a senior figure at the ONS involved in the process, said in interview that 'All the time we were conscious that we didn't know what the requirements of the programme were, how the data would be used, even what "well-being" was – so we set out to consult' (interview with Oscar, 11 September 2014; see also [Allin & Hand, 2014](#), p. 146; [Bache & Reardon, 2013](#)).

This gesture towards domestic consultation is, however, contextualised by an explicit placement of the programme within international statistical norms. William, another senior figure within the ONS programme compared the measurement of well-being with more established statistics:

If you compare it with the National Accounts, for instance – they're largely determined internationally, with UK input, but they're overseen by the UN through the System of National Accounts. Unemployment is greatly influenced by the ILO. The OECD provide a lot of guidance. But there was very little that existed already to guide us, particularly on subjective well-being.

(interview with William, 12 September 2014)

This comment positions the policy-object, a statistical programme which suits the interests and needs of the UK public, within the needs of the practice-object, a statistical programme which meets international norms. However, at this point in time there are no norms specific to well-being measurement. While there have been calls within statistical networks for the establishment of a practice-object (discussed above), the ONS is the first to move on such calls.

The public consultation is a pragmatic response to this situation. As well as generating ideas towards a development of 'well-being' for measurement purposes, it has the potential to legitimate the programme as grounded in the stated interests of the public (see Minutes of Advisory Forum, 5 January 2011, p.3), thus fulfilling both practice and policy aims. However, the public do not gain an independent voice within the microspace as a network of actors alongside statisticians, academics and policy-makers. Instead, their desires are mediated by the statistical actors of the ONS, who work to formulate them into a set of coherent statistical measures (for details of which, see [Oman, 2015](#)). As one interviewee from a central government department expressed this challenge,

ONS conducted their public consultation (they asked people 'what matters most to you?') and the range of answers they got is enormous – everything from 'work is important' to 'going to the beach and making sandcastles with my children is important'. Some poor soul then has the job of making sense of that.

(interview with Emily, 11 September 2014)

William, of the ONS, played this challenge down somewhat, 'It's more of an art than a science. We read through them all [the public's responses] and looked for common themes we could fit them under. And there were common themes.' (interview with William, 12 September 2014).

As portrayed in these responses, the 'national' of the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme refers to the specificity of the concept of 'well-being' as much as it does to the territorial extent of the programme, it arises from domestic interpretations of domestically-gathered opinions in response to a lack of pre-existing international models. In actuality, the process was much less insular, with domestically gathered opinions read in light of developing international measurement programmes. In the first meeting of the Advisory Forum, which had been set up explicitly to respond to the national consultation (see Terms of Reference, quoted above), that consultation is only agenda point five. Before that, there is a presentation by Forum members Cotis and Radermacher, practice-actors from, respectively, INSEE, the French national statistical bureau, and Eurostat, the statistical bureau of the European Union and who, together, chaired the working group on measuring society of the European Statistical System, the correspondence body of European state statistical bureaus. This presentation plays several roles. One is to ground the UK programme within international technical norms of "robust statistical quality (using the guiding principle of the statistical code of practice)" (Minutes of Advisory Forum 11 February 2011, p.1), emphasising the ONS' position within a wider network of practice. Another is to warn statistical actors against innovation in the programme. Cotis presents on work already being done elsewhere, before Radermacher argues:

"that the UK already has a rich source of potential indicators related to well-being and should focus on supplementing these rather than developing a completely new set of measures. The UK could play a key role in helping Europe and the Commonwealth countries and the US to work together in developing standardised measures of well-being."

(*ibid.*)

The movement, then, from public statements that sand-castles 'matter to them' to "Average rating of satisfaction with family life" ([Office for National Statistics, 2014](#)) is not a simple matter of 'fitting answers under common themes' as William suggests above. There is a wider international statistical context which is setting the field of possibility for the programme. In effect, a single practice-object is being created by actors in multiple places. The possibilities available within the microspace for the construction of a policy-object are, in this way, constrained by conditions in extensive statistical networks.

In addition to international constraints on the practice-object, there is the more subtle matter of international comparison, exemplified through Cotis' account of work being done in France and at the European statistical level. Such comparison has the effect of limiting local innovation, and again producing a co-development of measures in different places. The relation between these two is blurry, with what starts as international comparison hardening to

internationally agreed definitions, as Radermacher suggests in his call for the UK to 'help' standardise measures internationally (see above). Here the microspace of the advisory panel is acting as a nodal point within statistical networks, under the influence of actors creating similar programmes elsewhere. It becomes nodal in part because it incorporates ideas from elsewhere and is not solely a local response to domestic policy needs.

A further form of constraint within the microspace lies between these two influences and arises out of statistical actors' conception of their place within wider networks of practice. The 'Measuring National Well-being' programme includes a measure of 'Human Capital', an accounting measure which seeks to place a monetary value on stocks of skills and capacities within a population (see Richard Jones & Fender, 2011; c.f., Becker, 1980). In the second public consultation, which related to measures the ONS proposed in response to the first public consultation, this measure was widely criticised. As one respondent expressed their objection, "The scope of this domain is the stock of human capital in the labour market' is this a way to discuss your fellow human beings?" (Office for National Statistics, 2012a, p. 169). Such concerns were shared by the methodology watchdog for UK official statistics, the General Statistical Service's Methodology Advisory Committee. One member "said that he found it odd that such a monetary approach had been used to quantify human capital as part of measuring national well-being" (Minutes of GSS-MAC 21 November 2013, p.15).

The ONS' response was not to remove the measure, but merely to suggest re-naming it (Beaumont, 2012, p. 19). This response could be read as a professional body balancing the opinions of the public gathered in two consultations against their own, expert, understanding of what well-being consists in and what a programme must include to serve policy. However, human capital is explicitly discussed as part of the French Commission's framework, where it is included as part of a set of measures to "extend the asset boundary" of national accounts (Stiglitz et al., 2009, p. 103). As such, along with environmental accounts, measures of human capital form part of a programme for extended national accounts, separate from any considerations of well-being. There is an international movement to develop accepted methodologies for such a measure which corresponds to that of well-being (Lui, 2011). This discourse, being connected to debates around the system of national accounts (which are standardised and regulated internationally) may result in the future in the ONS needing to incorporate Human Capital into the national accounts as part of its established statutory responsibilities. Having secured funding for a well-being programme, there is money available for the ONS to develop a human capital measure, despite its ill-fit with 'well-being' and public objections. In doing so, they would be cognizant of the fact that, "ONS also have to consider future international compliance with Eurostat, OECD etc." (Minutes of Technical Advisory Group, 11 April 2011), creating statistics when money was available rather than gambling on it being available later. The practice-object is serving purposes beyond that of any immediate policy need.

To summarise, the statistical programme which was launched by policy-makers as an object to aid policy is subject to constraints arising from its simultaneous nature as a practice-object. These originate in the position of the ONS within international networks of practice, which influence its actions within the microspace in two ways. They limit the possibilities for innovation, restraining options within developing international models. They also lead to a hedging against future practical requirements, leading to the inclusion of features not demanded by any current policy brief (but which may be demanded by a different one in the future).

The shaping of the programme by the needs of international networks is an iterative process, rather than being one in which the

actors of the ONS passively follow established standards. Several of those sitting on ONS advisory panels are simultaneously involved in their own institutional programmes, most notably Durand and Smith of the OECD (who sit on the Advisory Forum and Technical Advisory Group respectively). The OECD produced guidance on measuring subjective well-being in 2013 (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2013), which were greatly influenced by the work of the ONS programme particularly around the testing of potential questions (see Minutes of the Technical Advisory Group, 3 December 2012, p.7). The representatives of the OECD are in a position to shape the UK programme through their involvement, but also have the UK programme influence their own work. Practice-objects are not flowing between nodes in a network here, but actors are; moving between microspaces, they construct practice-objects in multiple places. In the UK, this practice-object is constructed with the intention that it then enters policy-making networks.

3.3. Subjective well-being: the divergent needs of knowledge and practice networks

Alongside policy- and practice-actors, academic networks were represented within the microspaces of the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme. The example of the three UK-based economists on the French President's Commission has been noted above. The work of such academics is interesting because it is essentially international in its outlook; 'well-being' is conceptualised as a universal construct, the nature of which is independent of place (Diener & Seligman, 2004; c.f. Bordieu & Wacquant, 2001). Such a universalisation can be taken as a necessary premise for academic or statistical knowledge, that the same thing is being talked about in different cases and places. As a result, the official statistic is always-already universal. It rests on an ontological claim that 'well-being' is a common property of individuals and nations, and an epistemological claim that it can be measured. This universalist approach and basis for knowledge about well-being has implications both for the way which the practice-actors drew on knowledges in informing its creation of a statistical practice-object, and in the way that academics attempted to shape a knowledge-object.

Through the Advisory Forum statistical actors attempted to make use of knowledge embodied in individuals based internationally. Alongside four representatives of international statistical bodies (Cotis and Radermacher discussed above, and Durand of the OECD and Giovannini of the Italian state statistical organisation) are five academics based in North America (Helliwell, Kahneman, Kreuger, Sen and Stiglitz). These, and the UK-based academics recruited, are major names in their fields, potentially offering high levels of both expertise and of legitimacy for any developed measure. However, as noted above, the Forum is limited in fulfilling its aims: it meets less frequently than intended, and its final meeting opens with an observation from the chair that attendance is poor (Minutes of Advisory Forum, 25 July 2011, p.1). It was a microspace of limited effectiveness, with knowledge-actors little involved in shaping its objects.

International representation on the Technical Advisory Group, which followed the Advisory Forum, was more modest, with just one North American academic (Helliwell) and one representative of an international statistical organisation (Smith of the OECD). By this point in the development of the programme, several important decisions had already been taken, most notably around the area of subjective well-being. This area is of particular interest as it was one of the few in the programme to produce novel statistical measures and one of the objectives of the Technical Advisory Group was to assist in its development (Terms of Reference for Technical

Advisory Group, para. 3, objective 1). Specifically, the ONS had commissioned a scoping paper by three economists, [Dolan, Layard, and Metcalfe \(2011\)](#) which argued for four subjective well-being questions asking about satisfaction with life, anxiety, happiness and whether the individual being asked found their life to be worthwhile. By the time of the first Technical Advisory Group meeting, the ONS were preparing to ask these questions in the *Integrated Household Survey* (Minutes of Technical Advisory Group, 4 February 2011, p.2), establishing a path-dependency which carried these four questions through into the final programme.

The recruitment of economists to select the measures for testing as part of the programme illustrates a heterogeneity of both interest and influence between knowledge-actors within the micro-space of the Technical Advisory Group. The choice of these four subjective well-being questions is not uncontroversial, and their selection in advance of the formation of the panel left its non-economist members advising on statistics they did not believe captured 'well-being'. For example, Huppert, who designed the psychological well-being module of the *European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* argued "Life satisfaction muddles experience and expectation. Satisfaction not used in health, advertising etc anymore. 'How good is your life' is a better question." (Minutes of Technical Advisory Group, 4 February 2011, p.2). This was an argument supported in interviews, where it was noted that the four subjective well-being questions were difficult to combine into a coherent picture, hard to summarise and communicate and, as a result, somewhat tokenistic (interview with Jessica, academic working in public health, 22 August 2014). However, such objections were always after-the-fact, as a particular knowledge-object, 'subjective-well-being-as-well-being', had already been established within the microspace through the economists' scoping paper.

This establishment served different but aligning purposes for practice- and (economist) knowledge-actors. For the statisticians, it provided a conception of well-being which was amenable to large-scale surveys: it required only four questions to be inserted into existing survey vehicles, while alternative conceptions would have required more, and it treated subjective well-being as an outcome which could be correlated with other survey variables as inputs to suggest potential areas for policy intervention. For (economist) academics, it opened up a new dataset, rich in variables, which would allow them to further research agendas around the economics of happiness.

This coincidence of interests was not complete, however. While practice-actors only required a feasible measure of subjective well-being, the (economist) knowledge-actors ideally wanted a knowledge-object which was consonant with existing datasets. The importance of shaping the ONS' measures to existing academic models was reiterated by (economist) knowledge-actors throughout meetings of the Technical Advisory Group. For example, the minutes of 4 February 2011 (p.2) note four academics raising objections to the wording of the proposed questions, including these, from two economists:

Dr Christian Kroll (LSE) – Why change from established questions? International comparability needs to be considered.

Professor Lord Layard (LSE) – UK is less likely to set international agenda if introducing unnecessary changes.

There are two points being made here. One is that, in a similar way to the need of practice-actors to co-ordinate measures across international networks, for knowledge-actors the value of the knowledge-object is, in part, a function of its embeddedness in established networks of comparability. The other is that, similarly

again, 'setting an agenda' is constrained by boundaries of international acceptance. These arguments occur without reference to the needs of practice- or policy-actors, to any question of whether or not the new wording more accurately captures the underlying construct or better serves local needs. These questions, if considered relevant at all, are less important than situating domestic measures within international knowledge contexts; that is, it is better to have an accepted measure which incompletely measures 'well-being' in the UK than a novel measure which is incompatible with existing academic models. This is presented as a matter of comparability for the statistical office ('does a UK national figure represent the same construct as one elsewhere?') but is also for academics ('is the new data source the ONS are creating compatible with the established data we already have?'). Both knowledge- and practice-object are being influenced by international networks, and these are pulling in different directions.

4. Discussion: the convergence of actors and the construction of multiple objects in microspaces

Three broad types of actor involved in the creation of the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme have been examined in the empirical material above. There are the statisticians of the ONS, practice-actors who operate within both a domestic context and an extended professional network subject to international regulation and norms. There are academic knowledge-actors, whose subject matter is largely assumed to be universal but which is developed within the discourses of the Global North. Alongside these two, and somewhat off-stage in the existing account once the statistic-making process has been set in train, are policy-actors, commissioning a statistic as part of a wider process of policy formation, again in relation to international discourses and norms. All three have an interest in the official statistic as an object which can be used within their own networks, and the different uses to which their networks will put the object ensures that their interests do not fully align. These actors come together in the microspaces of the ONS' advisory panels to construct an object in common.

It should be clear from the above that this summary is a simplification, and that, even within these groupings, actors represent different interests and form parts of different networks. Economist knowledge-actors had different understandings of 'subjective well-being' to non-economist knowledge-actors, the two groups tried to shape the statistic in different ways. What became a knowledge-object for the economists did not behave in the same way for non-economists, it did not meet the needs of their networks and so could not be fed back into them. In other microspaces, the balance of power might be different and produce different results. The Scottish government, for example, include measures from the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale, an assessment of positive mental functioning, in the place of subjective well-being questions ([Scottish Government, 2016](#)). Similar observations could be made of policy-actors, who may serve different policy-making or policy-consuming agencies, and also of practice-actors, who may have different functional roles within their organisation. The policy objective of measurement becomes exemplified by different practice-objects, which serve different policy and knowledge networks.

All three of these groups existed within international networks, and acted to contextualise the UK programme within their own understandings of those networks. As a policy-maker, Cameron, in launching the programme, grounded it within domestic concerns but hoped that the programme would be internationally influential, fearing what international programmes might arise in the absence of a UK programme. The practice-actors of the ONS were looking

continually to the work of their counterparts in Europe, hoping their work would meet eventual international norms. Knowledge-actors were seeking to create a source of data comparable with existing sources and which expressed the universal construct they believed they had found. All three are involved in creating the local programme as an expression of wider international concerns. In as far as the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme was designed to serve the interests of the public who were consulted so extensively, it was to serve them as instantiations of wider international types, rather than as a uniquely situated local object. There is, for each set of actors, a 'model logic' which supposes 'well-being measurement' (as a policy-, practice- or knowledge-object) is the same where ever it is applied (Peck, 2011b, p. 176). The reason for such a logic varies between the actors, but has the same effect of dis-embedding well-being measurement from local concerns and instead instantiating it as a token of a universalist type.

The model logics of these three networks do not align. For example, any unique construction built as a policy-object around domestic conceptions of well-being created by the national consultation would not provide knowledge-actors with data comparable with their existing datasets. It may also leave statistical practice-actors vulnerable to international requirements to create alternative statistics. Such similar concerns give these two networks an interest in common in using four subjective well-being questions. However, while statisticians may find a use for existing academic questions on subjective well-being, they do not require them in the same form or wording as academics do. The academics are presented with a knowledge-object close to those which already exist in their networks, but not identical. There is a continual balancing of the interests of these three networks within the microspaces of construction, resulting in a programme which meets no one's needs fully but which is integrated into all three networks. It then serves as a touchstone for projects elsewhere, often promoted by the same actors.

The promotion of the statistical object across networks can be seen in the movement of academics between international programmes and commissions, and in the co-development of international statistical programmes by statistical actors working in multiple places simultaneously. In it can be seen a version of the 'insistent churning' of policy which Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2012, p.279) discuss; each national instantiation of a programme is unique and imperfect, reflecting both local and networked interests, and the combinations of different actors within their microspaces. Each programme's imperfections become incorporated into an international repertoire of options, but only within certain limits. The ONS programme informs OECD best practice (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2013), which is in turn implemented elsewhere in partial or adjusted forms. Innovations which go beyond international academic, policy or statistical norms are rejected at the planning stage, ensuring that the new statistic is consonant with existing or emergent models, strengthening those models as norms.

Apparent in this is a movement from the idea of a local programme, defined around responses to a national consultation as presented by Cameron and Matheson (Cameron, 2010; Matheson, 2011), to an international one, constructed by travelling technocrats and with reference to wider networks of policy, practice and knowledge. Small variations, mutations and translations in Peck and Theodore's sense (2010a), are introduced and these feed back into developing international norms. The ONS looks over its shoulder at Europe, as the OECD draws on the ONS' work; the programme becomes 'world leading' only in as far as it follows developing models.

The advisory panels established by the Office for National Statistics become, as Larner and Le Heron (2002) put it, 'globalising

microspaces', spaces where policy-makers and incoming experts meet and mix. They are spaces which share their actors with similar nodal points elsewhere, notably in this case with the French President's Commission, OECD and Eurostat, allowing policy-, practice- and knowledge-objects to be co-produced simultaneously at multiple sites. They are also an 'informational infrastructure' in McCann's (2008) sense, an infrastructure which frames and packages knowledge, presenting it to certain audiences. Meetings and position papers were established in which academics and international statistical actors were able to present their ideas, shaping discussions around policy, and simultaneously forming both the statistical programme and conceptions of 'well-being'. The disagreements between conceptions are hidden within these infrastructures, as the output of the programme shows only the conclusions to the debates. The output itself becomes an infrastructure within the internationally forming policy norm, serving to legitimate particular conceptions and de-legitimate others. This becomes an iterative process; the testing of questions in the UK became an input for the OECD, whose subsequent guidance is fed back into later meetings.

The existence of such spaces explains why a single statistical programme is able to balance the needs of these three distinct networks of actors. *A priori*, there is no reason why a programme which provided policy-makers with the means to promote well-being would meet academic requirements for data commensurate with their own conceptions of 'well-being'. The panels of the ONS become a space in which 'well-being' is defined, where an otherwise vague notion is given concrete form. The 'well-being' of policy-makers becomes the 'well-being' of academics and statistical actors, and vice-versa. This correspondence across networks is strengthened when, as Larner and Laurie (2010) observe, actors travel not just between places but also between networks, embodying and carrying norms with them. Allin, who ran the programme, is for example now a visiting academic at Imperial College London from where he publishes work on well-being measurement for academic presses (see Allin & Hand, 2014; Allin, 2014); O'Donnell, and Mulgan served in government but are now heading think-tanks promoting well-being and social policy respectively (see O'Donnell et al., 2014); Halpern started in academia but was heading a government agency by the time he sits on ONS panels; and there are numerous other examples. Indeed, for some individuals, like Sen or Stiglitz, their involvement in similar microspaces connected to policy-making make it hard to tell where they end as academics and where they begin as policy-makers. Such movements help to align the interests of intersecting networks of actors, creating both communities of individuals who know each other and common understandings of aims and objectives. They also act to carry knowledge across community boundaries, bringing the positions of different groups closer together.

Multiple actors passed through the microspace of the advisory panels and consultations of the Office for National Statistics, including those both formally attached to state institutions, such as the ONS, and those who weren't, such as academics. It also included both those who were based within the territorial extent of the state, and also those allied to other states and supra-state organisations. That is, ideas of the 'national' created through the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme were shaped by those outside of the nation state, international statistical actors and academics sought to create a 'national well-being' which reflected emergent international norms and universalist academic conceptions. This process illustrates Painter's (2006) model of the state as imaginary, a porous and shifting set of structures and associations whose boundaries are not fixed or well-defined. While they were involved in the construction of policy-objects, North American academics were as much a part of the UK state as were the permanent civil servants of

the ONS. The inverse is also true; those civil servants became part of academia, constructing knowledge-objects and continuing to construct secondary datasets which formal academic-actors can draw upon.

It is worth noting the power relations inherent in this process. The lay public were allowed to speak through the national debate, but their words were filtered through expert knowledges. [Bourdieu and Wacquant \(2001\)](#) speak of the 'technocratic expert' who acts to interpret and translate lay accounts. 'Subjective well-being' becomes the questions that economists have asked for decades, modified slightly for a statistical context, it is no longer the individual making sandcastles with their child. That it is economists who are made the experts on well-being and not, for example, those in public health or philosophy (to take two other groups with an interest in well-being), establishes 'well-being' in a particular form and as amenable to certain uses. It is noteworthy that well-being data is now used in cost-benefit analyses for government expenditures ([HM Treasury, 2011](#), appendix 1), policy being directly shaped by the experts who were allowed to define the constructs on which it was based. Ideas of well-being pass from the realm of public and democratic debate and into the realm of efficiency, completing the process of translation from lay to expert knowledges.

Such co-production gives the impression of a widely dispersed movement. In the literature around the ONS programme the development of programmes elsewhere was noted, particularly the work of the French President's Commission ([Stiglitz et al., 2009](#)), while work on well-being measurement performed elsewhere has pointed to the ONS programme as evidence of a growing international consensus that well-being should be measured ([Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2013](#), p. p.22). Such consensus, however, represents the work of a relatively small pool of actors, moving between closely connected programmes. The existence of programmes elsewhere acts to restrict the possibilities of local development, as innovation is discouraged both by travelling actors and by demands made by statisticians and academics for comparability.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined policy mobility by focusing on a 'globalising microspace', the point at which multiple different networks of individuals and ideas meet. It has been argued that this point of focus has allowed the creation of the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme to be seen not merely as the creation of a policy-object, but as the simultaneous co-creation of policy-, knowledge- and practice-objects relevant for different networks of policy-, knowledge- and practice-actors. This extends the policy mobility literature by recognising the policy-object as a complex object, co-created by and feeding into multiple networks. It shows the ways in which particular configurations of actors coincide to produce local objects which do not fully align with those already existing within networks, appearing instead as translations or mutations of existing policy, practice and knowledge.

In taking as its subject the creation of an official statistical programme, this paper has contributed to the understanding of a hitherto under-examined area of state activity. While the official statistic plays a key role in the grounding of state actions, and in the theoretical models of the state proposed by governmentality theorists (see, for example, [Rose & Miller, 1992](#), p. 185), little has been written on how statistics are actually created (although see [Government Statistician's Collective, 1979](#)). This paper has pointed to an inherently peopled process in the manner of [Jones \(2007\)](#), in which embodied ideas are negotiated by actors with diverse and conflicting aims and objectives. The approach taken in this paper,

and its conclusions around the interaction of networks in microspaces, may be usefully applied in other areas of state activity where objects – ideas, innovations, technologies, models – are established; such as in the creation of Green and White Papers, in the work of Parliamentary Committees and public enquiries, and in the formation of manifesto commitments.

Such areas represent similar microspaces in which networks of different kinds come together. While they are undoubtedly sites of policy-making, they draw on and include actors from elsewhere. As the debates around 'evidence-based policy' ([Davis and Nuttall, 2002](#); [Legrand, 2012](#); [Pawson, Wong, & Owen, 2011](#)) and 'New Public Management' ([McLaughlin, Osborne and Ferlie, 2002](#); [Levy, 2010](#); [Siltala, 2013](#)) show, these spaces are not only productive of policy-objects, but also of objects used by practice- and knowledge-actors.

This paper examined statistical construction through publicly accessible microspaces, those already document in official secondary sources. Such distance between the research and the site of research is a common feature of policy mobilities and transfer research. However, by focusing on the microspaces of meetings and consultations, the study saw the more spectacular moments of mundane activity, the moments of disagreement and negotiation. In this study, it has led to the somewhat crude characterisation of actors with affiliations to single networks, acting in line with the interests of those networks, which are sketched as mutually exclusive. This paper, and the field as a whole, would benefit from more participatory research, following practice-, policy- or knowledge-actors as they went about their daily activity. Such research would make visible the more quotidian aspects of object-making, such as how actors go about balancing the interests of their own and other networks, and the grounds on which these decisions are made.

Of special interest here are the 'travelling technocrats' of [Larner and Laurie \(2010\)](#), not only those who have travelled over space, but those who have travelled across networks. This paper, as an initial move into a new area of study, has treated networks of policy, practice and knowledge as distinct and separate, but they are not. Rather, they are heterogeneous within themselves and porous between each other. The former fact will serve to increase distinctions between networks, while the latter will diminish them. How this plays out in the co-creation of objects and influences the objects which are produced would be better addressed from a vantage point closer to individual actors within microspaces than has been possible here.

There also remains the question of what happens to the objects created in microspaces after their creation, at the point at which they enter circulation within networks as practice-, policy- or knowledge-objects. It has been observed that within any individual network, the object once created stands as an example and as a justification for similar development elsewhere, often by the same actors, but that these new developments are subject to translations and mutations. The process of mutation would suggest a process of divergence between the objects created in common across networks as time goes on. How these objects interact and refer to each other on an on-going basis is an open question.

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