

New directions for social wellbeing through extending deliberative democracy to enhance representation

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Abstract

This paper discusses a project funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Project with the South Australian Department of Health, Flinders University, University of South Australia and Neporendi Forum Inc, an Aboriginal NGO. The co-researchers (comprising academics across a range of disciplines, service users and providers) address wellbeing in terms of their lived experiences of what works, why and how. The outcome is the development of prototype software that is co-owned and designed by the partners. We chose one of the most difficult problems in the Australian context, namely social exclusion, unemployment, health, housing and addictions (gambling, alcohol and other drugs), with the hope that if we could create an interactive policy tool for a 'complex wicked problem' with many interrelated variables and with a strong value base (see Rittel et al 1973), we would be able to adapt the model to other less complex problems to inform policy on the basis of evidence of what works, why and how and on the basis of 'if then' scenarios to address the common good.

User-centric design is based on telling narratives and exploring perceived ontologies or meanings. The next step is to analyse the discourses for patterns (Christakis and Bausch 2006 and Van Gigch 1991, 2003 on meta modelling). Making sense of perceptions is through identification of patterns and making meaning/sense of the patterns based on weighting the choices. The number of times particular themes were raised or particular service choices made equals a weighting. The approach demonstrates the ability of people to design the content of the software and thus to engage in participatory design, e-governance and e-democracy which could be used to extend democracy to the marginalised and socially excluded. In the Australian context these include Aboriginal Australians, refugees and young people without the vote who will have to live with the decisions in the future. The current research is only with Aboriginal stakeholders aged 18 and above and it needs to be extended in the next phase to include younger Australians. The software can be viewed at: <http://www.socsci.flinders.edu.au/av/pathways/binder.php>