Contributions of Barad's New Materialism to Well-Being Research

M. Isidora Bilbao-Nieva
*Universidad Alberto Hurtado*, isidorabilbao@gmail.com

Alejandra Meyer
*Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile*, acmeyerr@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Part of the Community Psychology Commons, Human Ecology Commons, Latin American Studies Commons, Place and Environment Commons, and the Social Psychology and Interaction Commons

**Recommended APA Citation**

This How To Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.
Contributions of Barad's New Materialism to Well-Being Research

Abstract
In this article, we discuss the contributions that Karen Barad’s theorizations can make to the study of well-being, particularly their ontoepistemological framework, “agential realism,” that emphasizes the inseparability of matter, ethics, and knowledge, as the relational entanglements of agencies. We use these ideas to imagine well-being as differential materializations, entanglements of human, and the non-human agencies that “intra-act” with each other and are inseparable from how we know about them and our responsibilities in their reconfigurations. From this perspective, we see well-being as a phenomenon, underpinning its dynamism and processuality. Analyzing an interview fragment, we exemplify how Barad’s theorizations can offer a different way to think about well-being, recognizing the differences within and the consequences of thinking about it as being otherwise. We argue that this approach opens new possibilities and research trajectories that expand the field of well-being studies, understanding well-being studies as a more local, dynamic, open-ended phenomenon.

Keywords
new materialism, agential realism, well-being, relational well-being

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License.

This how to article is available in The Qualitative Report: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol29/iss4/2
Contributions of Barad's New Materialism to Well-Being Research

M. Isidora Bilbao-Nieva\textsuperscript{1} and Alejandra Meyer\textsuperscript{2}
\textsuperscript{1}Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Santiago, Chile
\textsuperscript{2}Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

In this article, we discuss the contributions that Karen Barad's theorizations can make to the study of well-being, particularly their ontoepistemological framework, “agential realism,” that emphasizes the inseparability of matter, ethics, and knowledge, as the relational entanglements of agencies. We use these ideas to imagine well-being as differential materializations, entanglements of human, and the non-human agencies that “intra-act” with each other and are inseparable from how we know about them and our responsibilities in their reconfigurations. From this perspective, we see well-being as a phenomenon, underpinning its dynamism and processuality. Analyzing an interview fragment, we exemplify how Barad's theorizations can offer a different way to think about well-being, recognizing the differences within and the consequences of thinking about it as being otherwise. We argue that this approach opens new possibilities and research trajectories that expand the field of well-being studies, understanding well-being studies as a more local, dynamic, open-ended phenomenon.

Keywords: new materialism, agential realism, well-being, relational well-being

Introduction

Well-being is a multifaceted construct that has been studied from different disciplinary fields. One of those disciplines is psychology—particularly positive psychology—which is devoted to theorizing, operationalizing, and measuring well-being, developing dominant approaches to how the concept should be understood and studied (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). These approaches to studying well-being understand it as a psychological phenomenon—an individual, intrapsychic state in which people report being satisfied with their life and experiencing affects that are deemed as positive (Diener et al., 2017; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Economy and development studies are also dominant approaches to well-being, that focus on ensuring minimum living conditions, human rights, dignity, and distributive justice (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1987). This second approach does not emphasize the subjective experience, but rather on enjoying contextual conditions that allow people to flourish and live with freedom.

These differences are relevant because, many times, well-being is operationalized in a way that influences how regions and countries define their development priorities (White, 2017) with consequences on the public agenda, resource allocation, public policy designs, and priorities, among many others. Thus, well-being conceptualization should not be seen as apolitical. On the contrary, it can be examined in terms of their ethical consequences. For example, Sara Ahmed analyzed the consequences of measuring happiness and well-being using a homogenous, pure, and transparent concept based on self-reporting, as a way to reproduce certain social behaviors that are deemed as “causing” happiness, e.g., marriage (Ahmed, 2010).
Similarly, Cabanas and Illouz (2019) question positive psychology’s approach to well-being as if it was something that individuals can achieve by themselves, through will and self-management, relegating living conditions and social justice as negligible issues.

In that line, we argue that novel theorizations can contribute to expanding the notions of well-being toward less explored aspects of what well-being could be. In specific, we focus on relational approaches to well-being. These are a different set of conceptualizations that group theoretical developments and operationalizations of “well-being” that locate it within an interstitial space between individuals and their environments, recognizing the inseparability of people, their dwelled contexts, cultural values, social practices, discourses, and material conditions (Atkinson et al., 2017; White, 2017). Thus, relational well-being describes a phenomenon that is not intrapsychic or automatically determined by how people live but a psychosocial and local construction of meaning that communities share. Instead of describing well-being as an intrapsychic human condition, relational approaches position the concept outside the person, into the relationships they build with others and the territories in which they live. Well-being is then seen as an effect that emerges from dynamic and fluid situations.

By switching the focus from individual ontologies to relational ones, relational approaches to well-being decenter the analysis of the human and its processes and open it to an understanding that emphasizes contingency and ambiguity, in line with Ahmed’s (2010) ideas. Thus, if we reflect on the concept from another ontological perspective, we will naturally find different notions of what it might be and their effects. In this paper, we propose that certain aspects of Barad’s New Materialist theorizing – among them, “agential realism,” intra-action, and posthumanist performativity (Barad, 2003; 2007) – provide novel insights for studying well-being, particularly by offering new analytical possibilities to understand it from a different ontological approach, considering its relationality, and its decentering of the human in the analysis of the phenomenon. Following Barad’s ideas about the critical in opposition to critique (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2012), we do not mean to focus our attentions on criticizing the traditional or the dominant approaches to well-being, or its consequences in the social life – authors like Atkinson (2020) or White and Blackmore (2015) have written extensively about these issues. Alternatively, we aim to include some of Barad’s theorizations to think about well-being, engaging with a different perspective, and reading the differences within, that are provoked by including new insights. Through their idea of “agential realism,” Barad recognizes the inseparability of matter, ethics, and knowledge, which we take to imagine well-being as differential materializations, inseparable of how we know about them, and our responsibilities in its reconfigurings. The concept of intra-action, enlightens relational perspectives of well-being beyond the idea of well-being as something that occurs in the interaction with others and context, offering a generative idea of relation that allows us to imagine well-being as a dynamic and fluid phenomenon.

Well-being is a relevant and polysemic construct adopted by a manifold of institutions and disciplines as a central aspect of their goals and purposes. Discourses of well-being are pervasive in how people describe and think about their daily lives, themselves, their health and their living context, and have a vast influence in the construction of social practices (McLeod & Wright, 2016). We aim to provide new perspectives on the concept that also allow new conceptualizations to emerge, that recognize the inherent inseparability of the material from the discursive, and that simultaneously problematize social imperatives on the construction of such discourses. Barad’s theorizations are particularly suitable for these purposes.

**Traditional Approaches to Well-Being**

Several disciplines are involved in the study of well-being, often influenced by dominant discourses of what constitutes a good life. Among those, many are centered on the
The Qualitative Report 2024

study of human individuals, looking at subjective experiences and self-reported evaluations of life satisfaction, and foregrounding emotions deemed positive by society.

The terms “psychological well-being” and “subjective well-being” are commonly found in the literature and describe an intrapsychic experience marked by the presence of “positive affect” (e.g., levels of self-esteem for positive and depression and anxiety for negative) and the degree of satisfaction with life. Psychological well-being is seen as closely connected to an idea of personal flourishing ( Seligman, 2016) that has been operationalized as feelings of autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989), among others. Subjective well-being is also a well-used term in the field, and it is defined as the combination of experiencing positive effects and high levels of life satisfaction ( Diener et al., 2017).

Underpinning these conceptualizations are philosophical tenets of eudemonic and hedonic traditions. The first ones are those that understand well-being as a balanced and purposeful life—like Ryff’s psychological well-being—while the second ones are more oriented to enjoying positive emotions—like Diener’s subjective well-being. In both cases, well-being is understood as a human intrapsychic phenomenon that may or may not depend on relations with others.

The economist Amartya Sen (1987) and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2003) pose influential critiques of the use of operationalizations of well-being that rely solely on how individuals evaluate their own lives, since they can obscure unjust conditions, preventing social change. From this standpoint, well-being is a result of living under proper standards. What becomes prevalent is guaranteeing minimum living conditions that allow people to develop with freedom, while self-reported psychological states are unreliable sources of information to guide the efforts in increasing people’s well-being.

Other authors have also deemed the psychological approaches as problematic from other standpoints. For example, Parker (2010) poses that there is a risk in understanding well-being as an intrapsychic individual state, as it can be seen as depending on the individuals themselves, as if humans were autonomous and independent beings. Similarly, Nikolas Rose (1996) describes the role of the psy-disciplines in shaping people's everyday behaviors and analyses how the idea of individual well-being as achieved by merit and considered an individual responsibility serves the reproduction of neoliberal values marked by individualism. Authors contested these dominant discourses, arguing that they can be harmful as they support the idea of well-being as an individual responsibility without acknowledging the importance of the contextual forces that affect people's lives, often out of their control ( Evans, 2014), and pointing out that the study of well-being needs to consider objective living conditions alongside subjective evaluations. In this line, Isaac Prilleltensky promotes discourses that focus on social justice, ensuring minimum living standards, accessing the structure of opportunities, and designing multilevel analyses that advance well-being beyond the individual scale ( Prilleltensky, 2012).

A Relational Ontology for Well-Being

Although relevant and useful, these critiques mentioned above are mostly related to differences in epistemological terms, leaving the ontological dimension unchallenged. White (2017) and Atkinson (2013) have proposed a relational ontology of well-being which seems consistent with Barad’s relational ontology. A relational ontology recognizes that well-being arises from “mutually constitutive interactions among the material, organic and emotional dynamics of places” (Atkinson, 2013, p. 138) in the form of an effect determined by social, material, and spatially situated relationships. As an effect, well-being is a quality of relatedness and situatedness, a constant movement of affects that do not pertain either to the individual or their environment but to their inherent connection in certain spaces and times.
This conceptualization is different from the dominant way of conducting research on well-being, marked by an individual ontology in which well-being is seen as an intrapsychic matter that may depend on different degrees of the relationships with others or their context. It is also different from the approaches that consider well-being as a matter of adequate living conditions. Rather, a relational perspective on well-being would locate it as a phenomenon that emerges in and from social and material relationships.

Central to Barad’s ideas is the importance conceded to ontology or, in their words, ontoepistemology. Barad created this neologism to emphasize their non-modern understanding of ontology as inherently integrated with epistemology, not fixed but continually transformed and retransformed by material/discursive intra-actions (Hekman, 2010). This particular importance of ontology is a pillar of Barad’s theorizations. It sets the basis for understanding how the discursive and cultural have very real material consequences, as they are indissociable and, therefore, ontologically relational. Consequently, Barad does not use notions like agents or actants, as someone/something having agency, since those are humanistic notions that imply the independent existence of individuals (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2012). If we take Barad’s relational ontology, we will not understand well-being as something that happens to an individual in relation with their context, but within the relation itself. Barad questions the very notion of individual as a discrete entity, challenging views of stability as a being and as related to time, which also let the author question the idea of other, otherness, identity, and difference (Barad, 2012). We imagine the relationality of well-being through this unstable and challenged notion of individual, imagining the material consequences of understanding well-being in relation, and not as an exclusive human experience.

Entanglement of Human and Non-Human

New Materialism is a term that encompasses a set of theoretical approaches that recognize humans as within and in relationship with the world and, therefore, human phenomena are not separated from the environment (Gamble et al., 2019). New Materialism opposes dualist traditions that separate nature and culture, matter and mind (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2012). It is characterized by its emphasis on flattening the hierarchies between humans and nonhumans or the consideration of the more-than-human material world (Gamble et al., 2019). This approach reshapes how researchers see and study the world and its processes. An example of this is how Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) studies care, conceptualizing it as an effect of the assemblage of human and nonhuman agencies, acknowledging it ambivalences and recognizing that “care is a human trouble, but this does not make of care a human-only matter” (p. 2). In a similar vein, New Materialism offers a perspective that serves both a new conceptualization of how well-being can be understood and new methodological possibilities to study it, connecting renovated practices for social inquiry in general.

In this line, Barad (2007) describes how the material world and matter itself have been treated as passive, mute, and fixed without granting them any historicity or agency. From Barad’s perspective, too much importance has been conceded to language and too little to matter and its inherent dynamism. As Barad (2003) proposes it, the importance of matter to think about worlds’ phenomena is not only about its inseparability from language, but also about challenging the discursive idea that individuals are separated entities that have independent bodies with inherent characteristics and attributes, which exist before its representation. Barad grounds these assertions in quantum physics and how the boundaries between internal and external, which articulate the idea of individual entities, are rather blurry.

Drawing from Judith Butler’s concept of performativity (1999), Barad proposes what they call a “posthumanist performative approach” to study the entanglements and enactments of the human and nonhuman complex. Barad uses the word entanglement to highlight the
inherent inseparability of this complex, avoiding differentiating between human and nonhuman as if they were discrete entities that interact. Barad takes Butler's idea of performativity, which implies that there are no pre-existent essences, substances, or identities of anything, but extended it to incorporate the notion that what inaugurates the existence and attributes of things are the normative practices defined by sociocultural temporalities. Following this rationale, Barad proposes that instead of approaching knowledge through representing pre-existing objects, performativity describes scientific practices as “direct material engagement with the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 49), where the differentiation of entities is drawn in their agentic properties. In this way, Barad expands on Butler's theory moving beyond social interaction and human bodies towards an active performance that encompasses human and nonhuman as inseparable agentic entities and the way they perform changes in the world. From this perspective, the discursive practices become “material (re)configurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted” (2007, p. 148). While Butler emphasizes language and discourse in the construction of social practices, Barad highlights the materialization.

As it is a humanist concept, it is challenging to describe well-being as a phenomenon that is not located inside the psychology of (human) individuals. We believe that precisely because of the centrality that the notion of human individuals has in well-being conceptualization, Barad’s theorizations can expand well-being ideas and allow the configuring of new perspectives, inviting us to think well-being as a relational phenomenon that involves human and material inseparability. The inseparability of human and nonhuman is a call to challenge other often-used binarisms—social and material, discourse, and reality, or natural and cultural—redefining them as inherently entangled with each other. Through avoiding binarisms, Barad blurs the boundaries that humanities and other disciplines draw between the human and material world and grants matter “active participation in the worlds’ becoming” (2007, p. 136). Thus, the idea of entanglement does not only rely on the notion of material and human beings interwoven with each other but emphasizes their inherent inseparability, as there is neither independence nor prior existence of one over the other. Well-being is therefore not exclusive to humans because is not pertaining to a separated entity, and thus involves matter, as matter and discourse are never separated.

Using a New Materialist lens, the material world, often absent in social analysis, is reinserted, and fully considered in relation to the discursive. From this perspective, human and nonhuman are entanglements that produce specific subjectivities and enactments of possibilities (Mazzei, 2013). Following this logic, we see well-being as a phenomenon in which the relationships and entanglements of human and other-than-human materials inaugurate new possibilities and trajectories, offering alternative views for its conceptualization. Including the relation of human and nonhuman in the study of well-being accounts for the discursive-material entanglements that produce differences. Recognizing the implications of well-being as an effect that unfolds in the dance of agency of human and nonhuman entities provides new insights to engage with the world.

**Agential Realism as a Framework to Study Well-Being**

As an alternative to a dominant epistemological approach to feminism and linguistic constructionism (Hekman, 2010), Barad (2007) proposes an ontoepistemological framework they call “agential realism.” This framework rejects the traditional distinction between the discursive and material, arguing that both are inseparable. Instead, Barad centers attention on the agency of human and nonhuman entities, material and semantic, culture, and nature (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).
Traditionally, the idea of agency implies that it is only conceded to humans as something people have and do. In contrast, agential realism proposes that agency emerges from human and nonhuman entanglement as an enactment of practices and possibilities. The use of the neologism “agential” underlines its processuality and dynamism.

Barad emphasizes that knowledge production has material consequences. The term “realism” refers to the very real consequences, possibilities, and ethical responsibilities that emerge from being in the world and operating within it. This has particular implications for researchers, who are invited to imagine the ethical consequences of research, contemplating and analyzing the material consequences that result from theory production (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Within this framework, there is no original source of existence of things but a constant transformation and unfolding of ongoing materialized historicity, an “agential enactment.” Nothing precedes agency. This introduces a different perspective, rejecting the idea of “study object,” as if it was pre-existent to observation. In the production of knowledge, there is no such thing as the observed and the observer but a phenomenon in which those categories dissolve into fluid and continuous correspondences. As Barad (2003) puts it, from an agential realist perspective, in knowledge production matter comes to matter. Following this logic, we cannot detach our experience of well-being from its study, as it will play a role in the way it comes to matter. In Zielke’s words, “knowledge about wellbeing is performative of wellbeing” (Zielke, 2021, p. 7).

Thus, from this perspective, well-being researchers are involved in the exploration as performative agents, assuming that there is not a pre-existing state, subject, or situation to be examined but an emergent, open-ended phenomenon in which multiple material/discourses are integrated into an apparatus (Lenz Taguchi & Palmer, 2013). The apparatus does not consider researchers, participants, methods, or what knowledge is produced as differentiated entities but as an inherent imbrication (Hickey-Moody, 2018). This imbrication opens (onto-epistemic) methodological remarks for researching well-being, considering different encounters with "data," reports, and interviews as a way of setting up the apparatus of knowing in which they are immersed.

The Concept of Intra-Action

According to Barad, humans and nonhumans are involved in processes of intra-action, being mutually constituted. Intra-action is an alternative to the idea of interaction. Interaction understands that changes and processes occur in two differentiated bodies, in which causality and separations between subject and object are established. Transactional approaches to well-being—very well-known among Community Psychologists—are based on interactions. From a transactional perspective, well-being results from the interaction of people and their environments (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006) as two well-defined and separated entities in which agency is conceded only to the human actor. A major difference here is that the material world is often ignored, relegating it as a static piece of the structure of interactions. In that regard, research on well-being has failed to address the importance of materiality, separating it from humanity and often assuming it as inert. Either neglected or considered as immobile conditions, there is no recognition of its agency or of its inherent dynamism. Thus, the concept of interaction not only evokes two fully differentiated entities but also claims that only humans are capable of agency, and, different from what we propose, our knowledge about well-being would appear as independent from our own well-being.

Intra-action, on the other hand, refers to phenomena that occur within an entanglement of material articulations, not distinct or separable from each other. This idea of “material” includes the human, and it is inseparable from the language, discourse, bodies, and other-than-
human entities. In intra-action, the material and human realities are mutually producing and affecting one another, and therefore, agency is not exclusive to humans, as it is not something that someone or something does. What is entangled in intra-action is the “agencies” of the entities. Importantly, the human is not separated from anything—which constitutes a rejection of the classical distinction between subject and object—neither is preceding the agency. As Barad (2007) writes, those entities are differentiated in terms of agencies but not as discreet pre-existing ones. On the contrary, there is an entanglement of indissociable entities in mutual co-construction and change. Dynamism is therefore highlighted in intra-action.

A traditional concept of well-being, based on modern and humanist assumptions about its intrapsychic nature, is challenged by the concept of intra-action, as well-being is not considered to be an isolated process pertaining to an individual nor is it a fixed state. An intra-active understanding of well-being emphasizes inseparability, mutual constitution, and the idea of constant movement, dynamism, and change. As mentioned before, it is not located anywhere, but it is understood as an effect that results from the relationship. Intra-action expands the existent notion of relational well-being to include its fluidity, dynamism, and relationality. The notion of well-being is reconsidered here as a phenomenon that emerges from the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies. The concept of intra-action in this perspective is an invitation to think about how material/discursive practices are ongoing articulations that have agentic proprieties, producing ways of knowing independently of the humanist assumption of the intellective agent (Barad, 2007).

**Well-Being as a Phenomenon**

Barad emphasizes phenomena as the analytical unit, as it includes the intra-action of the observed, the observer, and the observation apparatus (Hekman, 2010). The phenomena corresponds to different intra-actions or to the differential realization of possibilities (Barad, 2007). Inversely, definitions and notions of well-being in traditional approaches understand well-being not as a phenomenon but as a fixed condition. It is also referred to as some form of goal, something that people can reach. Moreover, the very word "being" implies a state, not a process. From a Baradian perspective, one may be able to think about this phenomenon differently, as a living, changing, always in flux.

We see well-being as a phenomenon that exhibits dynamism and contingency compared to what has traditionally been understood as a state. We imagine well-being as an unfolding effect that emerges through its agency. Instead of being stable, it could entail different emotions, entanglements, and possibilities that suffer transformations during the phenomenon itself. To see well-being as a dynamic effect does not mean it can be framed as a particular moment or situation with a start and an end, since that would imply that one can do a clean cut in time and space to analyze such an event. Barad’s complex understanding of phenomena does not separate time and space, neither imagine a space and time in a linear fashion, but as an entangled configuring of “spacetimemattering” (Barad, 2007, 2012, 2015).

Additionally, seeing this phenomenon as the analytical unit, its study would include the inherently intertwined researcher and methodology. Importantly, Barad's perspective proposes that understanding the discursive material as an entanglement implies a different form of analysis, one that would recognize the performative implications of discourse and its material consequences and vice versa. For Barad, the phenomenon is actually an entanglement of ethico-onto-epistemological nature (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2012), which implies for well-being taking responsibility of the consequences of studying it, recognizing that our practices produce differences in the world (Barad, 2007), including those associated to knowledge production (Zielke, 2021).
In this sense, the mainstream discourses of well-being can be seen in a different light, reimagining their importance for the material world and their material consequences. Those discourses can also influence the daily lives of people and their "personal" decisions as they modify their behaviors and actions to pursue living trajectories and ways of being in the world according to what science proposes as better or more appropriate ways to achieve and increase well-being. We argue, therefore, that discourses on well-being are far from being neutral, as they become entangled fluxes of material resources, infrastructures, architectures, behaviors, and more.

In a similar line, based on Barad's (2007) agential realism, Lenz Taguchi and Palmer (2013) use a New Materialist approach to study the well/ill-being of girls at school. These authors understand well-being as a phenomenon that results from the discursive and its material consequences within school settings. The phenomenon is decentered from girls, flattening the human, and its presumedly individual psychology, with the environment in which they are immersed, e.g., architectonical characteristics of the school, light, and illumination of the building, smells, and objects within it. According to this analysis, the discourse is embodied, intra-actively, in producing an experience that “matters” in the whole sense of the word. Lenz Taguchi and Palmer (2013) replace well-being with “ill-/well-being,” to describe a complex and ambiguous form of experience.

Our position is that well-being can be seen from a Baradian standpoint as an open phenomenon that involves a manifold of differences, without needing to add the “ill-” prefix, which can be interpreted as an opposition. The complexity and difference within the phenomenon of well-being let multiple discursive-material consequences to emerge. As Barad explains when they refer to diffraction, “diffraction queers binaries and calls out for a rethinking of the notions of identities and difference” (Barad, 2014, p. 171). By avoiding a binary notion of well-being, in which something is opposing well-being—e.g., illness, suffering, discomfort, the direct antonym in Spanish, “malestar”—the analysis is not about the sameness but about the differences within the phenomenon of well-being. We carefully analyze what happens in the lived experience, without encouraging the duality of what can be named well-being and what cannot. Following these analytical strands, the next section uses a fragment of data to elaborate an analytical exercise using the instruments and tenets of Barad's theorization.

Re-Engaging Well-Being Through Barad’s Theorization

The following example is a re-engagement with a fragment taken from one of the interviews made by the first author's doctoral dissertation (Bilbao-Nieva, 2022). The dissertation was about gendered discourses of well-being, in which the researcher asked ten adolescent girls who live in Patagonia about situations in which they feel they experience well-being and identify what contributed (or did not) to such experiences. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed following traditional theorizations of well-being understood as a psychological phenomenon that depends to different degrees on participants' relationships with other people and their living conditions.

The interviewee's pseudonym is Antonia. She is a 15-year-old girl who lives in Chilean Patagonia. The interviewer asked Antonia about their well-being, and she started the interview by speaking about what was good and bad in her life. The first thing she describes is “what is good about home is that the three of us live together.” She is referring to her older sister (18) and her mother. They cook, bake, listen to music, and watch television, but these activities only happen rarely because their mom is usually at work. Antonia’s sister has a physical disability and cannot walk, and her mother has a full-time job and spends most of her day out of her home while Antonia acts as her sister's caregiver. Antonia explained that her sister is moody, and
when she is cranky, it affects the family and the home environment. She and her sister are usually alone at home and Antonia regrets that her sister needs constant attention:

She gets irritable. She is used to having everything as she likes. Or that we are always making her company (…), it must be frustrating not to be able to do certain things. Maybe this is the way she has for venting.

Then she explains a concrete situation that in her opinion talks about well-being:

She needs help putting on her shoes. Her feet always hurt when it is cold (…). Sometimes I stay with her when she is in pain. I lay next to her and try to cheer her up. I tell her we should watch TV together so she can forget the pain for a while. I make her company. (…) Let's say yesterday. My sister was in pain, and my mom needed to leave for work. It was about 2 p.m. My mom was going to bathe her before bedtime the day before, but I didn't turn on the heater. The house needs to be warm to bathe her. But I forgot to turn the heater on. So, I said to my mom, ok, I will bathe her tomorrow. Then my mom left (…). I waited until 3 p.m. to bathe her because it was sunnier. The house was warmer when I started the heater. Then I bathed her. Her legs were in pain. It was hard, but I bathed her. And she was still in pain. I cooked some milanesas to have with tea. Then we watched movies. The Little Mermaid, Cinderella, the kind of things she likes. And then she was calmed.

The fragment above stood out because of its difference from traditional definitions and understandings of well-being present in the literature. From a Baradian perspective, it is particularly important to recognize that Antonia describes it as a situation in which well-being was experienced. So what happens if this situation is not considered to be well-being? What differences do not matter? What ethical implications involve the deletion of this fragment from well-being knowledge production? How do we take responsibility from its inclusion? What happens to our knowledge about well-being if this becomes well-being to us?

We took it then to explore how an engagement with Barad’s theorization and conceptual tools might open possibilities to approach and think about well-being differently.

From an epistemological standpoint, if analyzed using mainstream theories of well-being as described at the beginning of this article, this fragment informs researchers about (fixed) living conditions that hinder well-being in each situation, as many of the conditions mentioned are traditionally considered barriers to well-being. From this standpoint, although Antonia intended to tell a story about well-being, the chosen theoretical framework transforms it into a different one. It becomes a story of vulnerability, fragility, precarity, gender injustices, overburden, and rights violations. The material conditions are understood as stable and defined, acting as barriers to achieving well-being. Matter and body vibrancy did not have a place, nor did the ambiguities and contingent relationality that seemed to sneak through the analytic cracks. Understanding this scene from predetermined patterns and binary categories of well/ill-being demanding a “victory narrative” (Lather, 1997) of true meaning in which Antonia’s narrative would be smoothed and “resolved” seemed insufficient and even absurd.

**Human and Other-than-Human in Relationship: Antonia’s Understanding of Well-Being**

Ontoepistemologically we re-engage with this fragment using Barad’s theorizations to think differently about well-being. The fragment evokes an event, an unfolding situation in which well-being emerged as an effect of the entanglement of human and nonhuman entities.
The flux of actions resembles a dynamic trajectory that starts with conditions in place in each moment—the sister's physical pain and Antonia's to not turning on the heater previously—and develops until the effect of well-being is described, leaving the situation open-ended—"And then she was calmed.” In that sense, the fragment describes an evolving and dynamic process and not a state.

The fragment shows different entangled material, affective, and symbolic strands that unfold. It does not separate Antonia’s experience or describe an interaction with the sister or with the non-human entities present in the fragment. Differently, Antonia refers to entities as *relata*, as terms of the relation. She talks about the heater and the time waiting until it starts working and the house is warm enough for the bath to happen. The intimacy of the bath—as an emotionally charged activity—requires physical effort and strength, patience, and of course, tools, techniques, and a particular infrastructure. It seems obvious that this was not the first time this situation has happened, which talks about the emotional history attached to the sisters' bodies and refer to material context, actualizing relational possibilities and trajectories that may ground future efforts. The notion of relational well-being proposed by White (2017) points out the emergence of well-being in situations that are marked by the relation with others in a given context, as “being” is seen as “in relationship”—of help, care, and co-dependence between humans, as the one described by Antonia. Taking White’s idea, we assume that relationality is expanded to the nonhuman entities that are operating in the same situation, since, as Barad refers, there is no separability in the phenomena.

The sunlight at 3 p.m. in a wintery Patagonia, with the luminosity and temperature it provokes, displays effects and transformations through the sisters' bodies and the other entities. The vitality of the temperature has a particular protagonism in the whole fragment as it notably affects and connects humans and nonhumans. Similarly, energy and particles are transmitted through Antonia's cooking, the flavors, the smells, and the warmness of the milanesa and tea, which in turn are inseparable from Patagonia's culture and shared meanings. In that line, the story engages all the human senses, and nonhuman entities gain a form of agency in a way that is very idiosyncratic of a particular place. The contents, sounds, and images of the movies blended with each other’s company. The effect continues into a calmness that embraces the person and the environment.

As the fragment shows, the flux from the cold house to a warmth that matches the human temperature makes and is made possible by the function of humans and artifacts, offering a very different direction of how well-being can be understood. It can be seen as an unfolding phenomenon, a dynamic entanglement, as a flux of materiality, bodies, affects, time, and practices that Antonia describes and frames as well-being when she was asked about it. More than deciding if this fragment is or is not about well-being, we consider what are the consequences of understanding it as well-being. The importance conceded to the relation becomes apparent, and the inclusion of entangled entities describes an extended version of what is usually seen as a human matter.

The fragment also shows how the living conditions are intertwined and are inseparable from the daily existence of Antonia and her family. Patagonia’s weather is harsh, and the region is isolated, which makes building materials scarce. These conditions imply that much of the conversations, domestic chores, clothes, energy systems, and daily lives revolve around inside/outside temperature, conferring warmness a very local importance and meaning. When these conditions are treated as simple context, they become static and the relevance of their inherent connection with daily life is diminished.

Antonia’s fragment is unique in the sense that she integrates this daily flow into her narrative without further judgments, free of the dominant discourses of precarity and their impositions of meaning. On the contrary, she takes this event as an example of how well-being looks like in her life. She provides a non-binary, processual description of a situation in which
she is very present but not the only or most important agent in it. Antonia flattened the hierarchies of human and nonhuman entities, where everything is entangled into an effect that is ambivalent, dynamic, embodied, and open-ended.

Perhaps one can argue that well-being was in Antonia’s feeling satisfied with her own performance or in the sister’s calmness and not being in pain anymore. But well-being seems much more than the feelings of ease and satisfaction. It seems reductive to frame it as either a set of tasks or the disposition of material conditions, which are clearly relevant but cannot be separated from the way they are experienced by Antonia –whose discourse is the only one available in our research, not the sister’s or the mother’s. That would neglect the significance of the everyday micro-exchanges that occur in Antonia’s life and will not address the complexity of the described situation. The possibility of naming the heater, the sunlight, or the bathroom is here related to their agencies, how they “intra-acted” with each other and with all the other entities there, provoking changes, and differential trajectories of the described situation. Such intra-action actualizes the possibility of an incomplete, unsettled, and transient flux of well-being emerging.

Instead of maintaining a binary view of well-being, in this fragment, hardship and pain, and serenity and content are seen as entangled and inseparable from one another. They participate in a terrain of symbolic, material, affective human, and nonhuman agency. Fluidity is emphasized as pain and comfort are part of this transit, inherently entangled in the effect of well-being. What becomes relevant about well-being is the unfolding trajectory in which pain, discomfort, or anguish are an integral part. Mainstream psychological theories of well-being are more devoted to examining when and why those effects that are deemed positive are reported by people. But we are more interested in noticing the unfolding processes that are happening in each situation that create an effect of well-being that is not circumscribed to certain affects, cognitions, or (human) entities. In this way, we aim to integrate those aspects that the dominant discourses left behind, opening new lines of thoughts and questions for a more situated understanding of well-being, recognizing the necessary changes that do not pertain either to the human psyche or the material conditions, but the relational nature of their entanglement. Well-being becomes then a locally produced unfolding phenomenon, without a previous definition (Smith & Reid, 2018). What becomes relevant is what can be accounted for as well-being and how such accounts produce changes in the world, expanding definitions instead of imposing pre-defined discourses that reduce possibilities and make the concept universal and its characteristics static.

New Encounters and Re-Engagements with the Fragment

We also consider ourselves inseparable from the knowledge production itself. The activity of re-reading this fragment is a continuation of our study trajectories from a theoretical and from a physical standpoint. Qualitative research demands researchers to have repetitive immersions in the data (Mullet, 2018), which means reading and re-reading the data over and over again. The re-engagement was possible because reading and re-reading meant to have an easier recollection of this event and because the authors gained new theoretical perspectives to reinterpret a complexity that was impossible to address before. We see this as a new encounter with this fragment, one that offers multiple possibilities of interpretations to imagine different ways of thinking about well-being.

This fragment has been seated with the first author for about five years. Arguably, the chosen theoretical framework did not make this fragment relevant for the dissertation analysis, as from a mainstream standpoint, it would emphasize precarity over well-being. Still, the richness of how Antonia described the situation made a big impression on the researcher, as it was both challenging and generative. Her discourse challenges the theoretical framework in
use, incorporating nonhuman entities and descriptions of flowing ongoing situations instead of making definitive assertions that would stagnate the idea of well-being. On the other hand, it was generative because the fragment unveils ways of thinking about intra-action and how well-being can be seen as an open-ended, ever-unfolding phenomenon. Antonia’s fragment opens the possibility of theorization, as Barad (2012) puts it, as an exercise of responsibility and responsivity to the world. New theorizations of well-being allow us to being more open and curious, embrace surprise, and imagine us being part of the new configurations of the world that emerge from theorization. This approach avoids binarism, making irrelevant the question about what is and what is not well-being. On the contrary the possibilities of new, local accounts of what can be seen as well-being become more plausible, and the idea of well-being can be more inclusive to material realities that are less explored or considered in the traditional literature.

When interrogating the reasons that made us think and re-engage with this fragment, our own stories are also relevant. We have experienced the pink luminosity of Patagonian sunset in winter, the anguish of hearing someone that one is caring for being in pain, and the subsequent relief when the pain is over, or even the personal individual memories assigned to the mentioned children’s movies, that joined our infancy as well. For us, the fragment involves a wide array of sensorial stimuli based on the particularities of our own life stories and how they have an influence on what we can interpret from this event. We do not separate from Antonia's story but have a new encounter with it, from a different place, to produce new enactments of what can be seen now as being otherwise.

As these well-being perspectives become local and in constant change, we imagine the consequences of this way of seeing well-being as affecting the way we revise the literature in the field, and we produce knowledge and practices about well-being. For example, we can imagine political agendas to promote well-being that are not circumscribed to isolated human experiences and their evaluation of their own lives but designed in consideration of their expanded effects on territories and the many ways their inhabitants dwell in them, their material realities along with their discourses, and their variations, transformations, and iterations over time, in a reciprocal relation. We can also foresee a research approach that shakes up the apparatus of knowing well-being centered on individual ontology by foregrounding complexity and dynamism. Engaging with Barad’s relational ontology makes it untenable to continue understanding well-being as a generic, univocal, predictable, steady, objective, pure, intrapsychic construct. Instead, we advocate for research that approaches well-being as an ‘alive’ unfolding process involving the encounter of many agentic human and non-human forces in which researchers are also implicated as performative and ethical agents.

Queering our understandings of well-being also nourishes our examination of the differences within well-being. This means incorporating experiences, identities, populations, and phenomena that are typically out of reach by the pre-conceptions on this concept. This involves some risks, as well-being can be entangled with precarious living conditions, suffering, human rights violations, or ecologically unsustainable human practices, among others, which can become unattended to and unchallenged. A careful examination of such possibilities is considered an ethical imperative that requires active questioning and demands for us to anticipate the possible effects of our knowledge production. We should aim for constant revision and problematization instead of stagnating well-being with static definitions and binarism.

**Discussion for the Study of Well-Being**

This paper aimed to review how Barad’s theorizations can offer possibilities for the study of well-being. Understanding well-being in this way adds complexity to the disciplinary
approaches that impose reductionist boundaries on the study of the phenomena. Disciplines and disciplinary traditions often treat phenomena as objects and reduce their complexity with conceptualizations and operationalizations that make them fit into the disciplinary discourse. Alternatively, well-being can be imagined as an open-ended phenomenon that does not need to be converted into a psychological object. We aim to propose new ways to imagine well-being, expanding its analytical possibilities and considering the ethical effects of theoretical-material entanglements that emerge from the research activity.

As a second implication, using this approach to well-being would allow researchers to avoid cultural impositions of what should be considered a good life. Imagining well-being as a phenomenon, in Barad’s sense, implies a different way of thinking about causality. Many traditional social science approaches tend to look for regularities and generalizability on how well-being (as a state) can be “caused,” which involves the conceptions of discreet entities following a clear path of cause-effect relationship. Instead of a caused state, Barad’s perspective can invite us to think about well-being in terms of a re-configuration of entangled entities without establishing a straightforward pathway that can predict the emergence of the phenomenon. While this can be seen as challenging, particularly to well-being research in psychology, it also represents an alternative way of thinking about different ways to promote well-being that would avoid disciplining individuals to be or do what has been "proved" as more often correlated to well-being.

The role of the researcher is also different from this standpoint. The study of well-being is traditionally linked to discourses regarding living conditions—what should be considered as minimum living standards, what constitutes precarity, or which conditions are beneficial for human lives. In our view, we recognize this as a fundamental discussion, and we argue that it can be enriched by a recognition of how those conditions can be seen as unfolding processes and trajectories that are not separated from humans. In other words, materiality needs to be a relevant aspect to consider in well-being research, but avoiding defining which specific conditions that must be in place for well-being to emerge. We do not see the material as fixed and immutable structures of living but as dynamic paths of possibilities. This means that our preconceived ideas of which conditions are adequate for well-being to emerge are less relevant to the research itself. What is illuminated here is a very local, unique, and concrete experience, and the possibilities that are unfolded here for well-being research that certainly involve us – as researchers and the scientific and social discourses that we reproduce – and transform us – as part of the “entanglement of inquiry” in which we are not separated entities from what we are studying but immersed in the entanglement that is the research apparatus (Rosiek et al., 2020). Furthermore, from a New Materialist perspective, the research involves transformations in the entanglement of bodies, materialities, discourses, methodologies, knowledge, and relations in which the researcher is inextricably present (Marn & Wolgemuth, 2017).

Another point that can be drawn here is the rejection of binaries in the study of well-being. From a New Materialist standpoint, well-being is not seen as opposed to illness or “ill-being” (Lenz Taguchi & Palmer, 2013). As a complex and nuanced phenomenon, the effect of well-being does not presume the existence of an ideal arrangement of conditions for well-being to emerge. That would imply the existence of non-ideal arrangements or oppositional effects. As an effect, well-being can be seen as a dynamic flow. In that line, instead of looking for concepts and operationalizations of well-being, researchers can consider that an open understanding of the term is actually positive for encouraging a wide range of interpretations of what can constitute a good life (Atkinson, 2013).

A New Materialist approach to well-being described in this document would be consistent with maintaining the fuzziness of the term, avoiding conceptual boundaries and operationalizations, and allowing a more fluid and diverse interpretation based on possibilities, on becoming instead of on being. When the Other, the nonhuman, and nature are considered in
the conceptualizations and study of well-being only as lacking or as external moderating factors, well-being becomes exclusive of identities and conditions of life of the same. On the contrary, if they matter—and become incorporated in the “apparatus of knowing well-being”—as entangled, contingent, and active participants of the phenomenon and its becomings, then the differences as those emerging from the fragment exhibited here about Antonia and her sister begin to matter. They begin to matter to our studies, to our positionality as social researchers, and begin to matter to the political and economic rationalities that influence our social practices through the idea of well-being.

Finally, Barad’s theoretical perspective contributes a renovated vision regarding the value, importance, and potentialities of matter for the study of well-being. Through the recognition of the inherent inseparability of material/culture, new ethical questions for well-being research can be inaugurated, particularly in social science. As Rosiek et al. (2020) asserted, such ethical questions describe issues related to the ontology of “being through inquiry,” reminding us how ontology, ethics, and epistemology are inextricably connected and, therefore, there is no separation between knowledge and values. The authors reflect on ethical reciprocity as a different way of thinking about the role of ethics in social science, one that rejects representationalism and the binary of reproduction/resistance to approach ethical questions.

This document is only a primer to the analytical possibilities of Barad’s perspective in the study of well-being for researchers. Through the reintegration of the material in the study of well-being, as it is proposed by Barad’s perspective, numerous new and unexplored ways for this type of research can emerge. These possibilities can be multiplied by analyses based on ideas from other authors under the same theoretical umbrella of New Materialism, offering openings for new analytical paths that have not been yet considered in the field of well-being studies, enriched by transdisciplinarity, creativity, and novelty.

References


Bilbao-Nieva, M. I. (2022). Discourses of well-being of adolescent girls living in Patagonia,


Author Note

M. Isidora Bilbao-Nieva, Ph.D., is a faculty member at the Psychology Department, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile. Her research focuses on well-being from gendered and contextualized perspectives. She uses qualitative methods and feminist approaches to explore the daily experiences of adolescent girls as ways to examine their discourses of well-being and how they are intertwined with the communities and territories in which they position and operate. Please direct correspondence to ibilbao@uahurtado.cl

Alejandra Meyer holds an M.A. degree in sociology and a Ph.D. in Education. She is especially interested in the intersection between educational policy and practice and the living experiences of children and people of the school. Her doctoral research explored the entanglement of educational trajectories with students’ identity categories, processes of discipline and normalization, and socio-affective components. Her work uses an ethnographic approach and visual and artistic methods with young people, as well as critical perspectives and post-structural thinking as analytic devices to think and explore educational justice and inclusion. Please direct correspondence to acmeyerr@gmail.com

Copyright 2024: M. Isidora Bilbao-Nieva, Alejandra Meyer, and Nova Southeastern University.
Article Citation