

# OSLOMET

Dona Gashi

---

**Narratives of Well-being:  
Exploring the Impact of Stories on Human Happiness**

### **Abstract:**

This thesis explores the dynamic relationship between narratives and subjective well-being, combining insights from narrative psychology, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and thick description methodology. Tracing the evolution of happiness from political discourse to its contemporary conceptions as "well-being," the study questions whether the pursuit of well-being is a widespread experience or varies across individuals and societies. To explore this, three novels, "The Age of Innocence," "Final Payments," and "The Alchemist," are subjected to comparative analysis, aiming to uncover narrative patterns that influence human emotions and well-being. The research extends beyond traditional psychological frameworks, offering insights for social welfare and health policy. The analysis shows that individuals navigate their needs and desires in unexpected ways, indicating that human experiences are highly subjective and resistant to a one-size-fits-all approach, challenging linear and categorical frameworks on wellbeing like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

### **Keywords:**

Narrative psychology, Subjective well-being, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, thick description, Fictional narratives, Comparative analysis.

## Index

1. Introduction.....	5
1.1 Prosperity and Well-being.....	6
2. Research.....	7
2.1 Research Questions.....	8
3. Theoretical framework.....	8
3.1 Hierarchy of Needs and Well-being .....	8
3.1.2 Alignment and Contestation .....	10
3.1.3 Forms and variations.....	11
3.2 Narrative and placebo.....	13
3.3 Narratives in Literature.....	15
3.4 The power of narratives.....	17
3.5 Gaps in literature.....	19
4. Methodology.....	21
4.1 Data Collection.....	22
4.2 Thick Description.....	23
4.3 Data Analysis .....	24
4.4 Narrative Analysis .....	24
4.5 Interpretation .....	24
4.6 Ethical Considerations .....	25
5. Analysis .....	26
5.1 Brief overview of the novels .....	26
5.2 Thick description of novels .....	28
5.2.1 Wellbeing - Social and Cultural Influences .....	28
5.2.2 Wellbeing in Relationships .....	31
5.2.3 Comparison .....	38
5.3 What the novels say about a hierarchy of needs .....	39
5.4 Narrative Psychology .....	41
5.4.1 Bathkin's narrative discourse theory .....	41
5.4.2 Isabel's narrative of self-sacrifice .....	43
5.5 Concluding remarks .....	44
6. Implications for policy .....	45
6.1 What evidence is needed?.....	49
6.2 Concluding remarks .....	50
6.3 Personal reflections.....	52
7. Literature .....	54
8. Attachments .....	58

**Master's thesis in International social welfare and health policy**

**Oslo Metropolitan University**

**Faculty of Social Science**

## 1.Introduction

The term 'happiness' gained a central place in western political discourse and was proposed as an individual and group objective in the 18th century (Jack, 2014). Even the American Declaration of Independence from 1776 is marked with the slogan "*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*" Although the word 'happiness' remains in common use today, its political connotations have shifted over time, transitioning from "standard of living" to "quality of life" and now to "well-being" (Jack, 2014). This linguistic evolution reflects a broader transformation in how we perceive and pursue happiness. In a global context happiness is shaped by cultural nuances and historical shifts and is not only defined differently but is also expressed and valued distinctively across various societies. (Stearns, 2012) Particularly Western cultures, influenced by religious convictions, had a slightly saddened and serious approach to life until the Enlightenment and a shift of values that propelled happiness into politics, highlights the fluid nature of this concept (Stearns 2012).

The attainment of wellbeing requires a certain level of ability to fulfill basic needs and access to certain commodity. In accordance with Maslow (1943), this encompasses "physiological needs", such as food, water, and shelter, "safety needs" like recourses, health and employment and needs for belonging and a sense of connection. In regard to these needs, global poverty monitoring initiated in the late 1980s shows a significant decrease in extreme poverty worldwide, dropping from over 40% to approximately 8%, according to the World Bank Group<sup>1</sup>. But Diener and Seligman (2004) argue that economic indicators are only important when it comes to the fulfillment of these basic needs and that after those needs are met, what contributes to higher levels of well-being becomes more diffuse and the factors more plentiful. But what exactly are higher level needs, and can they be categorized and hierarchically positioned? And more importantly what does subjective wellbeing mean to the individual and how does it express itself?

This thesis addresses these questions by employing the analysis of fictional narratives and characters as proxies for real-life subjects. By using thick description and narrative analysis,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>

the study aims to explore the role narratives play in individuals' sense of well-being. Drawing inspiration from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), the exploration seeks to understand how narratives influence the fulfillment of higher-level needs such as personal growth, self-discovery, and the pursuit of authentic and fulfilling lives and, in turn, contribute to subjective well-being.

Through an examination of three selected novels, this research aims to shed light on the complex relationship between storytelling, human experiences, and well-being, offering insights that extend beyond traditional psychological frameworks and have implications for social welfare and health policy. The use of fictive characters and invented narratives in research, although not common, is not new. Similar approaches have been employed by OsloMet's own Marit Haldar (2009), who used "Teddy Diaries" as a method to study family life and Erika Grubrium (2013) who analyzed three Norwegian novels for portrayal of the relationship between modernization, the new welfare state, poverty, and shame. Haldar's work will be further discussed later in the paper.

### **1.1 Prosperity and Well-being**

Diener (2000) points out that depression rates are higher in more economically developed countries, like the United States, compared to less developed ones. Richard Easterlin (1974) explored the connection between income and happiness, coining the phrase "Easterlin Paradox." His research suggested that happiness is relative, influenced by social comparisons and aspirations. In later years several papers have contested this, including a research paper by Stevenson and Wolfers (2008), which showed that richer countries and wealthier people are, on average happier. In a more recent paper, Easterlin argued that:

*"New data confirm that for countries worldwide long-term trends in happiness and real GDP per capita are not significantly positively related. The principal reason that Paradox critics reach a different conclusion, aside from problems of data comparability, is that they do not focus on identifying long-term trends in happiness." (Easterlin, 2016, p. 1)*

The Easterling paradox (1974) challenges the conventional wisdom that increasing income directly leads to greater happiness and posits that abstract inventions of societal positions,

like status, reputation and outer achievements have as much power over our state of wellbeing as safety, belonging and financial stability.

Narratives of personal growth, self-discovery, and the pursuit of meaningful well-being have come to the forefront in shaping our understanding of higher-level needs (Kendrick, 2010). These narratives redefine what it means to pursue happiness beyond basic material well-being and traditional societal expectations. Still, it is not clear if and how these higher-level needs express themselves in the individual and if there is a red thread concerning subjective wellbeing.

## **2. Research**

This thesis seeks to explore the relationship between narratives and subjective well-being. At the heart of this research lies the quest to understand how narratives intersect with and mold our conceptions of subjective well-being, focusing on higher-level needs. This study employs a mixed-method approach that merges insights from narrative psychology and Maslow's hierarchy of needs and conducts a thick description of the lives of characters in three fictional novels, who serve as a proxy for real life subjects.

The three novels that will be analyzed are, "The age of Innocence" (Wharton, 1820), "Final Payments" (Gordon, 1978) and "The Alchemist" (Coelho, 1988). I will conduct a comparative analysis of the novels characters, and their narratives, to examine how storytelling influences human emotions, and well-being. Further, I seek to identify recurring patterns and core themes within the novels, drawing parallels between the novels and their characters, looking for common patterns and experiences, such as how their environment and relationships influence their sense of wellbeing and how cultural context influences their needs.

This thesis does not align itself with the typical trajectory of evaluation or action research in international welfare and health policy. Instead, its primary focus is on the accumulation of knowledge regarding the intersection of narratives and well-being. It aims to contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of welfare and health policies in shaping subjective well-

being, particularly emphasizing the significant influence of narratives in this context of higher-level needs.

## **2.1 Research Questions**

The question this thesis will focus on are the following:

- How do narratives impact individuals' perceptions of subjective well-being?
- How do culture and societal structures influence individuals' narratives and perception of subjective well-being?
- In what ways can insights into narratives and storytelling be of value within the field of social welfare and health policies?

## **3. Theoretical framework**

Narrative psychology focuses on how individuals construct and interpret their experiences through storytelling. Subjective well-being contributes a lens through which to analyze individuals' personal evaluations of their lives, encompassing life satisfaction and emotional states. A frame of reference to measure subjective well-being is based on theories on a "hierarchy of needs", such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In addition to these theories, my analysis will incorporate insights gained from the examination of the novels mentioned earlier. This literary tool will be used to investigate how narratives influence characters' perceptions of well-being and to explore how stories can shape people's perspectives on their own lives.

### **3.1 Hierarchy of Needs and Well-being**

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological theory organizing human needs into a pyramid, provides a foundational framework for understanding human motivation and well-being. The hierarchy encompasses physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs. This structure suggests a neat progression from basic survival requirements to higher-level aspirations.

- 1. Physiological Needs:



According to Maslow (1943), the most essential human needs are those of survival, including, water, shelter, and air which need to be satisfied before being able to even think of any other need or desire. *“A person who is lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else,”* (Maslow, 1943, p. 5). Easterlin (1974) and Stearns (2012) indirectly touch upon physiological needs in their discussions. Easterlin's paradox challenges the assumed link between increased income and higher happiness, questioning the direct fulfillment of physiological well-being. Stearns (2012) examines the historical evolution of happiness, acknowledging changes in living standards that might align with fulfilling physiological needs.

- 2. Safety Needs:

Once basic survival needs are met, individuals seek safety and security (Maslow, 1943). Easterlin (1974) suggests that societal positions, such as status and reputation, influence well-being, potentially addressing safety needs at a social level. Stearns (2012) highlights that cultural shifts relate to societal expectations, emphasizing that the pursuit of happiness is intertwined with safety in the form of financial stability and social norms. Individuals may feel compelled to achieve a particular economic status to align with cultural norms. These norms encompass various aspects of life, including family structure, career paths, and lifestyle choices. Adhering to these norms can according to Stearns (2012) be seen as a way of securing one's social position and, consequently, a form of safety within the community. This further complicates the categorical and hierarchal division of needs as illustrated by Maslow.

- 3. Social Needs:

These involve interpersonal relationships, love, and a sense of belonging (Maslow, 1943). Maslow argues that with every level of need fulfilled, one will develop a longing for the next:

*“Now the person will feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children. He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the*

*world and may even forget that once, when he was hungry, he sneered at love.”*

(Maslow, 1943, p. 8)

Easterlin (1974) implicitly recognizes the pursuit of societal positions and the comparison of one's status with others as a manifestation of social needs, blurring the division of social needs and esteem needs.

- 4. Esteem Needs:

Esteem needs involve the need for self-esteem and the recognition of others (Maslow, 1943). Easterlin's (1974) emphasis on status and achievements aligns with esteem needs, suggesting that societal positions contribute to one's sense of self-worth. Stearns, particularly in the examination of the 19th-century emphasis on work ethics, family roles, and societal expectations, reflects the intersection of cultural values and individual esteem needs. (Stearns 2012)

- 5. Self-Actualization:

This is the fulfillment of personal potential and the pursuit of personal growth and self-improvement (Maslow, 1943). Both Easterlin and Stearns indirectly touch upon self-actualization. Easterlin's paradox implies that the pursuit of self-actualization may involve more complex factors than mere financial success. Stearns, through his exploration of the evolving culture of happiness, delves into changing perceptions of self-fulfillment and personal happiness, indicating a shift towards a more individualistic pursuit of well-being.

### **3.1.2 Alignment and Contestation**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a theoretical framework that Easterlin and Stearns suggest factors beyond basic needs contribute to happiness. However, the Easterlin Paradox challenges the direct link between increased income and higher levels of happiness (Easterlin, 1974). Stearns' insights challenge cultural assumptions about happiness, indicating that societal expectations play a significant role in shaping individual perceptions of fulfillment (Stearns, 2012).

### **3.1.3 Form and variations**

Maslow's theory assumes cognitive and developmental priorities align, but Kendrick et al. (2010) introduces variations, suggesting they may not always overlap perfectly and can dynamically change with context. Their revisions distinguish three levels: evolutionary function, developmental sequencing, and cognitive priority. While retaining elements of Maslow's hierarchy, the model no longer considers self-actualization as a distinct need. By discussing this alternative hierarchy, I aim to explore the complexities of human motivations and their connections to well-being. In subsequent sections, will clarify how this alternative hierarchy relates to my study.

As mentioned, hierarchies are traditionally illustrated as pyramids, including Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but over time, other thinkers have adjusted Maslow's hierarchy, by expounding on, dividing, or reordering the levels. While Maslow's theory provides a foundational framework for understanding human motivation and well-being, it's important to acknowledge alternative viewpoints. One such alternative is presented by Kenrick et al. (2010), who offer revisions to Maslow's hierarchy, introducing variations that suggest cognitive and developmental priorities may not always align. These priorities can dynamically change with context throughout an individual's life.

While retaining elements of Maslow's hierarchy, such as physiological, safety, and esteem needs, the revised model distinguishes three levels of analysis: evolutionary function, developmental sequencing, and cognitive priority.

Evolutionary function looks at the ultimate adaptive purposes of behavior, developmental sequencing considers life-span-specific inputs that sensitize individuals to particular cues, and the proximate level focuses on immediate triggers for behavior. Self-actualization is no longer considered a distinct need but is subsumed within esteem and mating-related motives. The top of this hierarchy now includes mate acquisition, mate retention, and parenting goals, depicted as overlapping rather than stacked. These changes reflect the ongoing importance of early motives throughout life. The article also explores broader implications for humanistic elements in understanding motivation, emphasizing the

compatibility of evolutionary theory with positive psychology and its potential to enhance human well-being. (Kendrick et al., 2010)

While Maslow's theory assumed that cognitive and developmental priorities align, Kenrick et al. (2010) argue that they may not always overlap perfectly. For instance, social concerns can suppress physiological needs, leading to a disconnect between developmental and cognitive hierarchies. Another aspect they point out is that the cognitive hierarchy can change:

*“dynamically with context at any point in an individual’s life. For example, although a successful artist is normally motivationally focused on higher concerns and can ignore physiological needs that would monopolize an infant’s attention, most artists focus on food if they are truly starving. Thus, the order of the development of fundamental motives, and a person’s currently conscious priorities, are two separable issues.”* (Kendrick et al., 2010, p. 4)

An example of this is found in Viktor Frankl’s book about his experience in Nazi concentration camps during the second world war. Frankl tells of several sensations one might not consider in line with a hierarchical need, given the gruesome experiences he and other inmates were subjected:

*“[...] the illusion some of us still held [of being rescued] were destroyed one by one, and then, quite unexpectedly, most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor. [...] When the showers started to run, we all tried very hard to make fun, both about ourselves and about each other. After all, real water did flow from the sprays! [as opposed to deadly gas]. [...] Apart from that strange kind of humor, another sensation seized us: curiosity. [...] We were anxious to know what would happen next; and what would be the consequence, for example, of our standing in the open air, in the chill of late autumn, stark naked, and still wet from the showers.”* (Frankl, 1946, p. 13)

The insights offered by Kendrick et al. (2010) on the dynamic nature of cognitive and developmental priorities in human needs are exemplified vividly in these personal accounts by Viktor Frankl. His narrative illustrates how, in extreme circumstances, the conventional hierarchy of needs may not align neatly. While the camp's inmates faced unimaginable

horrors, their behaviors and emotions took unexpected turns. Frankl describes how, despite the grim reality they faced, a sense of humor emerged among the prisoners, as they found reasons to laugh in the midst of suffering and even experienced curiosity about their uncertain fate, expressing an eagerness to understand the consequences of their horrific circumstances. Frankl's account of humor and curiosity, seemingly unrelated to traditional hierarchy, highlights the impact of immediate context and cognitive priorities on human behavior and well-being, as described by Kendrick et al. (2010). These experiences exemplify how the connection between long-term and immediate goals can be indirect and influenced by the context, making it essential to consider the interplay between cognitive and developmental hierarchies in understanding well-being (Kendrick et al., 2010).

### **3.2 Narrative and placebo**

The placebo effect holds explicit relevance to narrative psychology, acting as a bridge between the exploration of subjective well-being and the subsequent discussion of narrative psychology in this thesis.

In the context of subjective well-being, which encompasses the assessment of individuals' lives and emotional states, the placebo effect becomes a noteworthy phenomenon. As highlighted by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), the definition of pain emphasizes its emotional and psychological dimensions, linking it intricately to well-being. This insight prompts an exploration of how psychological and emotional factors interplay with the narrative construction of well-being. Mental distress, often manifesting in physical discomfort or pain, accentuates the intricate connection between psychological well-being and physical sensations.

Crum and Langer's study (2007), exploring the relationship between mindset, exercise, and health, exemplifies how narrative influences well-being. This study demonstrated that individuals who perceived their work as good exercise, without changing their behavior, experienced positive health outcomes. The study aligns with the placebo effect, emphasizing the profound influence of narrative and psychological factors on health outcomes. Similarly, Wampold et al.'s study (2005) examination of the placebo effect reinforces the presence of a robust placebo effect when clinical trials are interpreted thoroughly, considering theory,

methodology, context, and related research. This connection between narrative, psychology, and the placebo effect sets the stage for an insightful exploration of narrative psychology.

Transitioning to narrative psychology, it is crucial to recognize the explicit ties between narrative and well-being. Narrative psychology delves into how individuals construct and interpret their experiences through storytelling, offering a lens through which to understand the impact of narrative on well-being. The placebo effect aligns seamlessly with this narrative perspective, as it represents a unique form of narrative shaping individuals' experiences and perceptions.

Within the realm of narrative psychology, real-life stories, like those analyzed for their plots and concepts, echo the placebo effect's narrative influence. McAdams's concept of "redemptive narratives" reveals how life stories, whether true or fictive, contribute to shaping cultural myths and identities. Stories constructed with a plotline of redemption involves a transformation from suffering to blessing and moving from pain to redemption. According to McAdams, American identity itself is redemptive, which is illustrated in a range of stories, true or fictive, they are surrounded by:

*"[...] rags-to-riches" stories about "the American dream" have assumed a privileged position in the canon of those most cherished cultural myths from Americans along with transformative stories about being "born again," "escaping from slavery to freedom," and fully actualizing that good and innocent inner self so enthusiastically affirmed by no less than Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oprah Winfrey, affirmed to be each person's individual manifest destiny." (Mc Adams, 2006, p. 82).*

McAdams further suggests that narratives, particularly redemptive ones, impact psychological measures of "generativity," thereby influencing well-being. This observation strengthens the argument for the relevance of narrative psychology in understanding the placebo effect.

Similarly, narratives serve as tools for meaning making, influencing well-being, as evidenced by Victor Frankl's (1946) powerful narrative in "Man's Search for Meaning." In the book,

Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, recounts his experiences in concentration camps during the second world war and how he found meaning and resilience through his ability to construct a meaningful narrative about his suffering. To endure the horrors of the concentration camps, Frankl repeatedly told himself that his life had meaning and that he needed to survive to complete a manuscript he had been working on. By maintaining this purpose, he found the inner strength to endure unimaginable suffering and provide support to fellow prisoners. Frankl's ability to construct a meaningful narrative in the face of extreme adversity highlights the transformative potential of narrative on psychological resources for well-being and survival. This resonates with the placebo effect's role in shaping perceptions and outcomes based on the narrative context.

In a recent study, Luci'a Macchia (2023) explored the psychosocial dimensions of pain, revealing that an individual's income rank correlates with the perception of physical pain. This study underlines the power of social comparisons in influencing well-being outcomes and emphasizes the significant role of mindset and narrative perception in shaping perceptions of well-being, both mentally and physically. The interplay of psychological factors, narrative, and social comparisons highlights the intricate dynamics of well-being assessment.

In summary, the placebo effect provides a tangible link between the exploration of subjective well-being and the subsequent discussion of narrative psychology. It demonstrates the intricate interplay between psychological factors, narrative, and well-being, offering a cohesive transition between these two chapters.

### **3.3 Narratives in Literature**

Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001, p. 3) highlight the disconnect between the study of identity and narrative despite their significant presence in various academic disciplines. They note that these two areas of inquiry, identity, and narrative, have traditionally been explored independently within distinct disciplines and theoretical frameworks. The authors use the example of psychology, which often investigates memory, mind, and the self, and literature and literary theory, which delve into the linguistic aspects of the same facets of human existence. Despite the shared focus on essential aspects of human nature, such as memory

and self, these disciplines have, oddly enough, rarely intersected or engaged with each other. The authors emphasize the lack of meaningful connections between these intellectual realms, suggesting a missed opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration.

Michail Bakhtin's (1981) narrative discourse theory proposes a perspective where individuals are continually engaged in self-construction, perpetually capable of challenging any definitive portrayal of their identity (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001, p. 7). One of the key concepts from Bakhtin's work is dialogism, which emphasizes that language is inherently dialogic and involves an ongoing exchange of multiple voices and perspectives. This notion directly applies to narratives and well-being. Narratives, whether in literature or personal life stories, are not isolated monologues; they are dialogues. People construct their narratives in response to the narratives of others, whether these influences are societal, cultural, or personal. Recognizing the dialogic nature of narratives is crucial for understanding how they contribute to one's well-being.

Bakhtin's (1981) ideas also delve into how individuals construct their identities through language and narratives. The self is not a fixed entity but a fluid, evolving construction. Narratives play a pivotal role in this process. Individuals use narratives to make sense of their experiences, creating a coherent self-story. This self-construction through narratives directly influences one's well-being. A positive self-narrative, which includes elements of resilience, personal growth, and meaning-making, can enhance well-being, while negative self-narratives may hinder it.

In the realm of social science research, the concept of thick descriptions, as advocated by Geertz (1993), proves invaluable in validating insights drawn from fictional novels. Novels, known for their unique exploration of human experiences and societal dynamics (Sarbin, 1993), offer a rich tapestry of narratives and characters. Employing thick descriptions in the analysis allows for a nuanced understanding of the cultural, historical, and emotional dimensions embedded in these fictional worlds.

Thick descriptions enable researchers to delve into the intricacies of character interactions, cultural representations, and historical contexts within novels, ensuring a robust



examination of well-being and societal norms. This approach enhances the validity of the data by capturing the subtle influences of fictional narratives on readers and providing practical examples for navigating real-life challenges.

### **3.4 The power of narratives**

Fictional novels, offer unique insights into the complexities of human experiences, emotions, and societal dynamics (Sarbin, 1993). Even if the characters and stories are fictional, they illustrate actions and reactions that can influence the reader and provide them with practical examples of how to handle life's obstacles.

I've experienced this firsthand. As a young girl I grew up surrounded by other girls and women who would constantly brew over recent events and troubles, dissecting every word and action. TV shows and programs often casually made jokes about how women think too much, how they will not let go of past wrongs and frequently bring them up. On one hand these narratives taught me that all my thinking as a woman was "*over thinking*" on the other hand it taught me that it was natural for women to overthink. This notion changed with one scene in the HBO drama series "*Insecure*" of 2016, about the awkward experiences of Isah, a contemporary African American woman as she navigates her work life, friendships, and relationships. In this particular scene Isah's love interest suddenly disappears and cuts all contact with her. He doesn't pick up the phone or reply to her messages, and when she sees that he is active on social media, she is left puzzled and confused. But she does not act the way I had seen in all previous movies, tv-shows, books or real-life interactions. She looks confused and sad, but she sets aside her phone and accepts the situation, even though she doesn't understand what happened. Witnessing this reaction, even though it was fictional, instilled in me a narrative I had previously not been aware of being a possibility: being a woman that does not overthink, who is affected by others' actions, but doesn't dissolve because of them.

Hollis (1993, p. 9) writes that whatever might be 'real', to some extent it will be shaped by the lens through which people see reality. Fictional narratives present a lens through which to explore diverse perspectives and lived experiences. They are inherently embedded within cultural and historical contexts, making them powerful tools for contextualism. Timeless

cultural stories like the tales of heroes like Achilles and Odysseus not only provide entertainment but also serve as a window into the values and beliefs of ancient Greek society. Even today, the *Odyssey's* enduring appeal showcases how narratives serve as a bridge between generations, transmitting cultural wisdom and shaping individuals' sense of identity and belonging.

Narratives also profoundly impact individual well-being by evoking emotions and fostering empathy. *"To Kill a Mockingbird"* by Harper Lee (1960), a novel that challenges societal norms and prejudices through the narrative experiences of its characters, invites readers to develop emotional connections with the characters, experiencing their struggles and triumphs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel (1852) *"Uncle Tom's Cabin"* in the 19th century played a pivotal role in spurring anti-slavery sentiments in the United States, through the vivid portrayal of the horrors of slavery through the experiences of characters like Uncle Tom and Eliza Harris. The novel's emotional impact was so profound that it's often credited with influencing public opinion and even contributing to the outbreak of the American Civil War. This exemplifies how narratives can be catalysts for social change, shaping perceptions and attitudes on a national scale.

The settings, social norms, and historical events portrayed in fictional narratives like novels can serve as mirrors reflecting the values, challenges, and aspirations of specific time periods and societies. This contextualization provides a lens through which the thesis can explore how narratives have evolved over time, shaping perceptions of well-being, and influencing social welfare and health policies. Novels can illuminate the cultural narratives that underpin societal attitudes towards well-being, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these narratives inform policy decisions. The narratives can serve as case studies that illustrate the tangible impact of policies on individuals' well-being, offering a broader perspective that integrates theoretical frameworks with practical considerations. Incorporating fictional novels into the thesis not only enriches the analysis of narratives and well-being but also adds depth, relatability, and emotional resonance to the exploration of social welfare and health policies.

### 3.5 Gaps in literature

While acknowledgement of the potential impact of narratives on well-being exists, there is limited research that systematically applies this concept to the analysis of novels as rich sources of narratives. A gap in literature within the field of social welfare and health policy persists despite the well-established tradition of using literature as a mirror to explore human experiences, dilemmas, and emotions. But this gap is not unabridged altogether.

Sociology, psychology, and literature studies are familiar with using art as a tool to research wellbeing. Sociologist and OsloMet professor Marit Haldar explore narratives as a central tool for research within social science. An example of this is her research together with Randi Wærdahl (2016), titled "Teddy Diaries: A method for studying the Display of Family Life". In the study teddy bears and a diary are given to first grade children at school, to take with them and to write about their everyday live during the weekend they have the teddy bear home with them. They argue that *"teddy diaries both provide a lens with which one can read differences and have qualities that carry great potential for cross-cultural comparisons"* (Haldar & Wærdahl, 2016, p. 1142).

This research explores the use of circulated diaries, specifically teddy bear diaries, as a tool for studying family life and cultural norms. The diaries are used in Norway and China to bridge the transition between family and school for young children entering the first grade. *"The diary is used to record the teddy bear's experiences during these visits. These stories are shared with the others in class, and with families who, in turn, receive the teddy's visits."* (Haldar & Wærdahl 2016, p1142).

The strength of these diaries as a research tool lies in their circulation among members of the local community before reaching the researcher. This minimizes researcher intervention, keeping the data socially and culturally saturated. The method also allows for comparative cultural research, as evidenced by the examples from Norway and China, which adds richness and illuminates taken-for-granted norms. (Haldar & Wærdahl, 2016)

The diaries reveal the influence of previous entries on subsequent ones, creating a social bias that reflects cultural norms and value hierarchies. Since the adult in the family help the

child write the entries, the adult author takes on the child's perspective while maintaining control over the content, resulting in socially acceptable or truthful images of family life. The presence of the teddy bear challenges authors to represent family relations and actions from an outsider's perspective, thus encouraging the family to construct its own image.

Another example is Haldar's (2013) research article that investigates how young people conceptualize love and romance, focusing on the narratives written by 12-year-old girls and boys in Norway. The study employs discourse analysis and semiotics, analyzed within a sociological framework. The primary objectives of this research are twofold. One of its aims is to contribute to the methodology of collecting essays written by young people to gain insights into their conceptions of adult life. Secondly, it seeks to offer new findings regarding the specific topic of romantic love in contemporary society by examining how love is depicted in the narratives of young people.

The analysis of the narratives reveals powerful and complex gendered mechanisms within what is presumed to be a heterosexual framework of discourse. The study identifies different plots and subject positions, shedding light on the 12-year-olds' knowledge of love. It draws from a variety of theoretical perspectives on love, including historical and social constructionist viewpoints, feminist interpretations, and analyses of how love operates under different social conditions. In this way, Haldar's research uses fictive narratives, such as the teddy diary and children's stories about an imagined love life and combines them with theoretical perspectives within sociology, psychology, and literature studies.

In her studies, Marit Haldar delves into how narratives influence individuals' perceptions of reality and, consequently, their well-being. For instance, in her research on teddy diaries, she uncovers how these accounts, supposedly true representations of children's everyday lives, are influenced by the narratives created by both the children and the adults, reflecting their ideas of what is representable as truth. Similarly, her exploration of young people's narratives about their future love lives demonstrates how existing narratives in society shape the way these youngsters imagine their own romantic futures.

Much like Haldar's work, a novel can be seen as intertwined narratives; the author's vision, real-life behaviors, and imagined scenarios. "The Age of Innocence" (1920), in particular, provides an opportunity to delve into how the narratives woven into the novel reflect the rich backdrop of New York's elite society in the 1870s and the author's own experiences and imaginings. "Final Payments" (1978) offers a glimpse into the lives of young adults in recent times, religious communities, while "The Alchemist" (1988) highlights the philosophical aspect of meaning and wellbeing.

The connection between Haldar's work and my research lies in our shared focus on the fact that narratives can both influence human experiences and well-being as well as tell us something about their existing beliefs. While Haldar explores narratives in a sociological and psychological context, examining quantitative stories written by groups of people, my study extends this exploration into the realm of literature, examining how narratives within novels, written by authors concerned with larger societal groups. Even though an author is one person, writing stories, true or fictional, requires in depth research and knowledge of people, behavior, environments, and events.

#### **4. Methodology**

My research seeks to conduct a somewhat similar approach to that of Haldar, but instead of diaries from large groups of families and children, several author's fictive stories and characters as a primary data source for investigating the narratives that influence characters' perceptions of well-being. Specifically, I will use in-depth analysis techniques, including thick description, to investigate the intersection of narratives, subjective well-being, and the themes of hierarchy of needs. Thick description is the detailed observation of a subject in a particular situation and, according to Geertz (1993), it is necessary to understand cultural meaning. Geertz uses Ryle's explanation of a wink to explain thick description. If someone winks at you with their eye, you can't be sure of what the wink might mean without being provided with a context. Was it meant as a sign of flirting? Was it part of some sort of secret communication or understanding? The answer lies in the context, and Geertz argues that this is a fact for all human behavior. In contrast, a thin description would be just the wink with no inclusion of context or meaning (Geertz, 1993, 7).

By focusing on specific novels, comparing them and putting the narratives in context with real life cultural and societal phenomena, my research aims to examine narrative patterns and also explore the connections and variations among diverse narratives.

The methodology employed in this thesis reflects an approach that combines using thick description, conducting a narrative analysis and comparative analysis. The hierarchy of needs theory will serve as a backdrop to explore how different needs are expressed and built and how they are affected by narratives, well-being, and societal influences. This chapter will provide an in-depth overview of the research design and methods employed throughout the study.

#### **4.1 Data Collection**

The data collection process is rooted in the analysis of narrative elements within a selection of fictional novels. While "The Age of Innocence" (1920) by Edith Wharton serves as the cornerstone of this study, the analysis extends beyond this central text to incorporate several other novels, each chosen for their thematic relevance and narrative depth. These additional novels include "Final Payments" (1978) by Mary Gordon and "The Alchemist" (1988) by Paulo Coelho.

The inclusion of this diverse set of novels is driven by the aim to offer a comprehensive perspective on the influence of narratives on individuals' perceptions of well-being. "The Age of Innocence" (1920) is chosen for its rich portrayal of the lives of the affluent elite in late 19th-century New York, a setting replete with distinctive cultural values, expectations, and social rituals. This context provides an ideal platform for examining how culture shapes the behaviors and choices of individuals and how these cultural norms evolve over time. Additionally, the novel's focus on the lives of the privileged makes it particularly relevant, as it often serves as a model influencing broader societal trends. "Final Payments" (1978) by Mary Gordon adds a layer of complexity to the analysis. The novel delves into the life of a woman reassessing her choices and grappling with existential questions after her father's death. This introspective narrative provides an opportunity to examine how personal reflections and internal struggles contribute to the construction of well-being. The

exploration of familial ties and self-discovery within the novel enhances the study's depth by offering a contrasting perspective to the societal focus of "The Age of Innocence." (1920)

On the other hand, "The Alchemist" (1988) by Paulo Coelho introduces a different cultural and philosophical dimension. This novel follows the journey of a shepherd named Santiago pursuing his personal legend and its inclusion enables an exploration of well-being from a more spiritual and philosophical standpoint, emphasizing individual aspirations, dreams, and the pursuit of one's destiny. The novel's global popularity and its emphasis on personal growth contribute valuable insights into the varied ways narratives shape perceptions of well-being across different cultural contexts.

These diverse narratives are expected to offer a range of perspectives, contributing to the development of a broader and more nuanced comprehension of the interplay between narratives and perceptions of well-being.

#### **4.2 Thick Description**

In the context of my research, rather than relying on coding and quantification, thick description allows for a nuanced exploration of the characters, their experiences, and the narratives that influence their well-being. This approach embraces the rich contextual information presented within the novels and enables a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of human experiences.

Qualitative methodology like thick description assumes that "*the social world is always a human creation,*" in contrast to quantitative methodology where the social world is a discovery (Saratakos, 1998, p. 46). Thick description is employed as a method to explore the role of narratives in shaping individuals' perceptions of well-being.

This study adopts an interpretivist research model, recognizing that individuals construct meaning and understanding of their experiences within specific cultural and social contexts and aligns with the qualitative approach, emphasizing the importance of exploring the subjective experiences of individuals and the cultural codes that guide their actions.

### **4.3 Data Analysis**

The analysis of data collected from the novels will involve narrative analysis, comparative analysis, and thick description, interpreted against the theory of hierarchy of needs.

Narrative analysis will focus on identifying themes, plotline, narrative structures, character development, and the presence of well-being themes within the novels. Thick description, as advocated by Geertz (1973), will concern interpreting the symbols, signs, and meanings embedded in observed behaviors or events within the novels. This approach allows for a detailed examination of the cultural codes and symbols that guide the characters' actions, as well as their subjective interpretations and experiences. Thick description will provide a rich, detailed description of the observed phenomena, such as the physical environment, social relationships, emotional states, and relevant historical or symbolic elements. Narrative analysis and thick description will be conducted simultaneously, weaving events and context together throughout the analysis. In addition, the analysis will be including a search for hierarchy of needs to examine the character's sense of well-being.

### **4.4 Narrative Analysis**

The narratives of the novels will be examined to identify recurring themes related to well-being. This includes exploring concepts like happiness, identity, relationships, and personal growth and assessing how these themes are interwoven into the fabric of each story. A central aspect of narrative analysis involves tracking the evolution of character development and how each character's perceptions of well-being change over time. This will entail an exploration of internal thoughts, external actions, and the factors contributing to these shifts. Lastly, I will examine the presence of well-being themes by identifying specific instances and passages within the novels that directly address these themes. The aim is to highlight the ways in which well-being is portrayed, discussed, or questioned within the narratives.

### **4.5 Interpretation**

The interpretation phase serves as the culmination of the analysis. It involves connecting the narratives within the novels with well-being. Findings from the narrative and thematic analyses will be synthesized to discuss how the narratives contribute to characters'



perceptions of well-being. This will involve an exploration of consistent messages or variations in how well-being is understood. Additionally, I will provide insights into how cultural and historical contexts influence the portrayal of well-being within the novels. This will entail an explanation of how characters' well-being is situated within broader cultural narratives and societal values. Finally, I will reflect on how the narratives in literature might mirror or diverge from real-life narratives of well-being, offering insights into potential lessons or reflections that readers can draw from these fictional narratives.

#### **4.6 Ethical Considerations**

Respect for intellectual property rights and copyright is paramount in the analysis of fictional works. Proper citation and attribution of the novels used in this research will be ensured.

As the researcher, my own background, experiences, and perspectives may influence the interpretation of the narratives. To address this, I will maintain reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging my positionality and potential biases. Transparency in the research process will be maintained by documenting personal reflections and decisions made during the analysis.

Another limitation is the representativeness of the novels chosen for analysis. They may not fully represent the diversity of narratives and themes within the literary landscape. There are many books and stories I will not be able to read because of language barriers and access, time, and personal preferences, which also factors in, contributing to a discriminating result in choice. While I have tried to provide context where available, it is essential to recognize that my findings are centered on the perspectives and interpretations derived from the texts themselves. The absence of direct insight into the author's intent may introduce an element of subjectivity to my analysis.

I acknowledge that further research and a broader array of literary works would be necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse narratives prevalent in literature. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the significance of narratives and their role in shaping human understanding and communication, as observed within the boundaries of the selected sample.

## 5. Analysis

In the first part of the analysis, I will give a historical and cultural understanding of the novels' settings, to provide the context upon which the stories are built and influence the narratives of the novels. I will also briefly touch on the hierarchy of needs. The second part will introduce the different characters and explore different themes in the novels, such as personal desires, societal influences, shifts in narrative and their sense of wellbeing. I will compare the narratives of the different characters and seek to find if what they are experiencing is translatable to real life experiences. In the first introduction of the novels, the novels will be mentioned by full name. When referenced further in the analysis, the novels will be referenced as TAI (The age of Innocence), FP (Final Payments) and TA (The Alchemist).

### 5.1 Brief overview of the novels

**The Age of innocence (TAI):** "The Age of Innocence" is a novel by Edith Wharton, published in 1920. The story is set in New York City during the Gilded Age, in the 1870s, and revolves around the lives of the wealthy Newland Archer, his fiancée May Welland, and her cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska.

The novel begins with Newland Archer's engagement to May, a match approved by their social circles. However, their world is disrupted when Ellen Olenska returns to New York after separating from her European husband. Ellen is seen as unconventional and a potential threat to the established social norms.

As Newland becomes fascinated by Ellen's independence and unconventionality, he begins to question the societal expectations that govern his own life. Despite his growing feelings for Ellen, Newland marries May, adhering to societal expectations. The story unfolds as Newland navigates the complexities of societal expectations, love, and duty, ultimately facing the consequences of his choices. The novel explores themes of societal constraints, the clash between individual desires and societal norms, and the consequences of conformity. Wharton's portrayal of the Gilded Age society is both a critique and a reflection of the social mores of the time.

**Final Payments (FP):** "Final Payments" is a novel by Mary Gordon, published in 1978. The story revolves around Isabel Moore, a 29-year-old woman coming to terms with her past and facing the challenges of her present circumstances. The novel begins with Isabel caring for her father, who is on his deathbed. Isabel's life takes a turn when, after her father's death, she is left with a sizable inheritance. This unexpected wealth allows her to break free from the constraints of her previous responsibilities and embark on a journey of self-discovery.

As Isabel navigates her new life, she grapples with questions of identity, guilt, and personal responsibility. She becomes entangled in complex relationships with friends and lovers, each contributing to her evolving sense of self. The novel delves into Isabel's internal struggles and the external forces that shape her life, exploring themes of redemption, forgiveness, and the quest for personal fulfillment.

**The Alchemist (TA):** "The Alchemist", written by Paulo Coelho and published in 1988, follows the journey of Santiago, a shepherd boy from Andalusia, Spain. He has a recurring dream about finding treasure at the Egyptian pyramids and decides to pursue it. On his way to Egypt, Santiago travels through Tangier in North Africa, where he faces initial setbacks and learns important life lessons.

Throughout his journey, Santiago meets a crystal merchant in Tangier, who provides him with work and valuable insights about the importance of taking risks. Santiago then continues through the Sahara Desert, facing challenges such as tribal conflicts and the harsh desert environment. Along the way, he encounters an Englishman studying to become an alchemist and learns about the pursuit of the Philosopher's Stone.

One of the pivotal characters he meets is the mysterious and wise Alchemist who becomes his mentor. The Alchemist guides Santiago in understanding the Soul of the World, the language of nature, and the importance of personal legend. Together, they face further challenges, including encounters with warring tribes and the threat of war.

Santiago's journey is not just a physical one but also a spiritual and philosophical exploration. He learns about the concept of the Personal Legend, the idea that each person has a destiny to fulfill, and that pursuing one's dreams is a fundamental part of life's journey.

## **5.2 Thick description of novels**

Thick description involves going beyond a surface-level understanding of the novel, diving into the intricacies that make the narrative layered and meaningful. It requires a careful and attentive reading, often involving multiple readings to capture the nuances present in the text. I will conduct a thick description focusing on themes of wellbeing, hierarchy of needs, and narrative focusing on wellbeing in a social and cultural context and in the context of relationships. Finally, I will conduct a comparison of the characters and the novels.

### **5.2.1 Wellbeing - Social and Cultural Influences**

Here I will examine the impact of societal norms on characters' wellbeing and explore how cultural expectations and social pressures contribute to their emotional and psychological states.

**TAI:** One of the central themes of TAI novel is the relentless pressure to conform to rigid social norms and traditions of high society New York. The New York's elite class in the novel, is bound by a complex web of unwritten rules, dictating everything from attire to manners and, most crucially, marital choices. The characters in the novel are conditioned to believe that their well-being is dependent on conforming to the strict social norms and expectations of their social class. The level of this strictness is highly apparent from the onset of the story. At the very beginning, Newlands Archer arrives late at the Opera:

*“New York was a metropolis, and perfectly aware that in metropolises it was “not the thing” to arrive early at the opera; and what was and was not “the thing” played a part as important in Newland Archer’s New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago”.* (Wharton, 1920, p. 4)

Secondary characters represent the collective expectations and judgment of society. The importance of ‘from’ and ‘family’, referring to the strict codes of conduct, what to wear, how

to wear it, how to act, etiquette, as well as ancestry, family, relation, and connections is established by these secondary characters. These codes of conduct and one's place in a hierarchy of relational connection are introduced through several characters, such as Lawrence Lefferts, a young man who is part of the same social circle and occupies a similar social position as Newland Archer. Lefferts is introduced as the highest example of young men of upper-class New York, one that other young men should strive to be like and look up to when it comes to upholding good 'form':

*"One had only to look at him [...], to feel that the knowledge of 'form' must be congenital in anyone who knew how to wear such good clothes so carelessly and carry such height with so much lounging grace."* (Wharton, 1920, p. 8)

Another character that upholds the framework of conduct is Mr. Sillerton Jackson, an older gentleman who is introduced as an authority on matters of family:

*"For old Mr Jackson was as great an authority on 'family' as Lawrence Lefferts was in 'form'. He knew all the ramifications of New York's cousinships [...]. In addition to this forest of family trees, Mr Sillerton Jackson carried [...] a register of most of the scandals and mysteries that had smoldered under the unruffled surface of New York society within the last fifty years."* (Wharton, 1920, p. 8 – 9).

In another general description of the "world" in which Newland lives in: *"The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies [...]."* (Wharton, 1920, p. 14).

**FP:** FP is set in late 20th century and makes several references to the political landscape of its time and the cultural context of the main character's environment. Isabel's community and family life is centered around Catholicism. She has done her first communion with her two best friends Eleanor and Liz and as she describes in the first page of the book, which starts out with her father's funeral: *"Our house had always been full of priests, talking to my father, asking his advice, spending the night or the week [...]."* (Gordon, 1978, p. 1) The description of priests engaging in conversations with Isabel's father, seeking advice, and

even spending extended periods reflects the deep connection between the family and the Catholic community.

Isabel's initiation into Catholicism through her first communion is a symbolic rite that underscores the religious expectations placed on her. The communion, shared with her two best friends, Eleanor and Liz, serves as a communal experience that binds them within the religious fabric of their community (Gordon, 1978, p. 7). The weight of religious expectations is palpable, creating a cultural backdrop against which Isabel's sense of self and wellbeing is shaped. The communion not only signifies a spiritual commitment but also reinforces the cultural norms that define the characters' lives. Even characters like Liz, who Isabel describes as rebellious and was "slapped by the principal for passing notes", cowered when threatened to not be allowed to participate in the communion, and being excluded from being part of the community. (Gordon, 1978, p. 8)

Although Isabel lives in New York, Queens, she describes an environment deprived of culture and diversity: *"If it is hard for New Yorkers to believe that people live in places called Nebraska and Kansas, it must be impossible for all but a relative handful to understand the difference between Queens and 'the city'"*. (Gordon, 1978, p. 9)

*"One of the reasons our block was spared the interracial tensions of the sixties was that nobody ever moved out. Changes in status, although they were rare, did not encourage people to move."* (Gordon, 1978, p. 12)

From this we understand that she comes from a small place, where everyone knows each other, and few things ever change. This cultural stasis contributes to the stability of the community, offering a sense of familiarity and continuity that shapes the wellbeing of its inhabitants. The lack of diversity, while defining the cultural landscape, also introduces a sense of insularity, reinforcing the impact of community expectations on individual wellbeing. Much like in "The Age of Innocence" (1920) Isabel is born into a community with specific norms and rules:

*"If Vietnam divided the country, it did not divide our neighborhood. People who were against it got out. Like Liz, whom I now see would not have had to marry John Ryan in 1966 had she agreed with her parents about Vietnam".* (Gordon, 1978, p. 13) It is not explained whether Liz, one of Isabel's closest friends, was thrown out of her family home or if she chose to leave, but it is clear that the ideological disagreements surrounding the Vietnam War act as a catalyst for family discord, as illustrated by Liz's apparent separation from her family. This highlights the impact of political and cultural differences on familial relationships, underlining the interconnectedness of cultural influences, political events, and individual wellbeing.

**TA:** TA doesn't have a specific historical period, and it is unclear what time period the story unfolds. There are no references to either old nor contemporary mentions of cars, horses and carriages or any references to specific historical events. Santiago is a shepherd whose life is bound *"to that of the sheep, with whom he had spent the past two years, leading them through the countryside in search for food and water."* (Coelho, 1988, p. 4) Santiago's cultural context is deeply rooted in the nomadic life of a shepherd. He is connected to traditions that revolve around the land, the sheep, and the pursuit of sustenance. His wellbeing is tied to the rhythm of nature, mirroring the simplicity and harmony of a life unburdened by societal complexities.

### **5.2.2 Wellbeing in Relationships**

Here I investigate how relationships, both familial and romantic, affect characters' overall wellbeing and explore the dynamics of supportive or detrimental relationships and their influence on characters' mental health.

**TAI:** At the heart of Archer's world are characters who embody the exclusive high society of New York's elite. Lawrence Lefferts, Sillerton Jackson, and Mrs. Welland symbolize the arbiters of societal norms, dictating proper behavior, manners, and familial connections. Archer, proud to be a part of this elite circle, finds comfort in the familiarity and predictability of their world. *"And, in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which [Newland] prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind."* (Wharton, 1920, p. 27). However, even within this society, Archer

harbors modern thoughts and subtle criticisms, reflecting an internal tension between conformity and individuality.

Archer's engagement to May Welland exemplifies the societal pressures that shape his life. May, molded by her mother's influence, represents the epitome of a perfect society lady. The engagement, a symbol of societal expectations, becomes a source of internal conflict for Archer. The rigid adherence to societal norms clashes with his modern thoughts and desires for a more liberated existence.

**Ellen Olenska**, May's cousin, and Mrs. Manson Mingott, the feisty matriarch. These characters challenge Archer's preconceived notions and introduce a dynamic tension to his life. Ellen's free-spirited nature, her disregard for societal conventions, and her complex relationship with Archer push him to question the limitations of his world.

Newland curses the realizations prompted by Ellen's arrival and what this has done to his perception of his environment. As the people around him exhibit a double standard against Ellen's divorce and her arrival in New York, he is forced to examine his environment: *"[they] all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs"* (Wharton, 1920, p. 38) Newland starts to question why a man can divorce and be unfaithful without societal consequences, while a woman is ostracized if she gets a divorce, regardless of her reasons, even when she is being treated badly.

*"Such questions, at such an hour, were bound to drift through his mind; but he was conscious that their uncomfortable persistence and precision were due to the inopportune arrival of the Countess Olenska. Here he was, at the very moment of his betrothal – a moment for pure thoughts and cloudless hopes – pitchforked into a coil of scandal which raised all the special problems he would have preferred to let lie. 'Hang Ellen Olenska!' he grumbled, as he covered his fire and began to undress."* (Wharton, 1920, p 39 – 40)

**Ned Winsett**, the journalist and friend, offers a refreshing contrast to Archer's social circle. Winsett challenges Archer to explore thoughts beyond society's narrow confines, providing



an intellectual escape. Their friendship becomes a sanctuary for meaningful conversations and an outlet for Archer's more progressive thoughts.

Archer's internal struggle intensifies as societal expectations collide with his growing awareness of the limitations of his world. *"The case of the Countess Olenska had stirred up old settled convictions and set them drifting dangerously through his mind. His own exclamation: 'Women should be free – as free as we are,' struck to the root of a problem that it was agreed in his world to regard as non-existent. 'Nice' women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant, and generous-minded men like himself were therefore – in the heat of argument – the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them. Such verbal generousities were in fact only humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern. But here he was pledged to defend, on the part of his betrothed's cousin, conduct that, on his own wife's part, would justify him calling down on her all the thunders of Church and State."* (Wharton, 1920, p. 37)

Newlands engagement with May, while initially symbolizing societal success, becomes a cage that stifles his desires for true fulfillment. Ellen's presence, representing an alternative to societal norms, becomes both a source of liberation and a challenge to the stability Newland has known.

**FP: Isabel's father:** Isabel's wellbeing, connected to her father's convictions and the sacrifices she makes for him, is a complex dance between love, rebellion, and the search for identity. Her life orbits around her father, a man with unwavering convictions and a belief in hierarchical values. Her deep love and respect for him are evident in the sacrifices she makes, nursing him through a debilitating stroke until his death.

*"I attach to my father's existence less that a murderous importance. I gave up my life for him; only if you understand my father will you understand that I make that statement not with self-pity but with extreme pride. He had a stroke when I was nineteen; I nursed him until he died eleven years later. (...) He believed in hierarchies; he believed that truth and beauty could be achieved only by a process of chastening and exclusion. One did not look for happiness on earth; there was a glory in poverty. He would often talk about the happiness of*

*people in the slums, although he had never visited one, and he ignored the struggle of his own family against poverty (...) he would have said that the misery was worth it, for they were working to uphold a standard that was mor important than their individual lives."*

(Gordon, 1978 p. 2-3)

Isabel's commitment to her father is not a mere obligation; it is a source of extreme pride. She willingly gives up her life, finding purpose and certainty in caring for him. His every conviction, though sometimes harsh and exclusionary, holds great power over Isabel, shaping the contours of her identity.

Isabel is not blind to her father's limits and double standards. His rigid beliefs in hierarchies, the glory in poverty, and the dismissal of individual happiness for the sake of upholding societal standards create a complex backdrop. Despite being aware of his shortcomings, Isabel finds herself entrapped in the allure of his convictions. His indifference to the struggle of his own family against poverty, coupled with romanticized notions of happiness in the slums, unveils a dichotomy that Isabel grapples with.

Her father's stroke becomes a pivotal moment in Isabel's life, marking the end of her father's existence and the beginning of a profound shift in her own. The care for her invalid father becomes a straightforward and simple life, a refuge from the uncertainties of inventing her own existence. The news of her father's stroke brings a sense of relief, providing Isabel with certainty and purity. The possibility of visible martyrdom becomes a welcome escape from the dull misery of her previous weeks. Her father's relentless conviction of martyrdom push Isabel as far as to make her wonder if her father's stroke was "deliberate". During her father's funeral, Isabel encounters her high school boyfriend David Lowe that her father caught her sleeping with, the weeks before his stroke. Isabel reminisces of the days afterward, where David had proclaimed that if she had gotten pregnant, he would take responsibility and care for both her and the child.

*"I had never thought of a child (...) Perhaps it was a disappointment to my father (that I did not become pregnant) for several reasons. What would have pleased him more that going into his old age taking care of my child, discreetly hinting at rape or virgin birth as its origin?"*

*The violence of either possibility would have sustained him. And it must have disappointed him that for my act there was no clear punishment. So he had to invent one: the stoppage of his brain, the failure of his own body as a result of the pleasure of mine. Had I had a child (a son, of course, named after him) he would have been able to embrace an impossibly hale old age, walking his small grandson to the rectory every day where I would have worked, growing daily as pale as Magdalene, through the charity of the parish, who would never mention my crimes. And perhaps I wanted that, too, or if not that precise fantasy of public penitence, some scene that skated near melodrama with all its florid components: discovery, punishment, above all the chance for a clear, new life." (Gordon, 1978, p. 20-21)*

The absence of this dramatic narrative disappoints both Isabel and her father, leaving them in the ambiguous aftermath of her actions.

**Father Mulcahy:** Father Mulcahy, an elderly priest and longtime friend, plays a significant role in Isabel's life. His simple yet faithful love provides a stable anchor in the turbulence of Isabel's existence. Regular visits, dinners, and genuine care create a sense of continuity, offering comfort to Isabel. However, the obligation to maintain a facade of false cheer for his benefit becomes a constraint, adding complexity to their relationship. The need to project stability weighs on Isabel, shaping her interactions with Father Mulcahy.

**Eleanor and Liz:** In Eleanor and Liz, Isabel finds steadfast friends who offer companionship, understanding, and a semblance of normalcy. Their unconditional support becomes a crucial aspect of Isabel's social and emotional wellbeing during and after her father's death. However, moments of jealousy and the need to navigate complex emotions add layers of emotional intricacy to their relationships. Isabel both looks up to and is jealous of Eleanor and Liz, giving sly remarks to Eleanor and succumbing to the temptation to sleep with Liz's husband John Ryan. The subsequent reconciliation highlights the strength of their bond, a source of stability in Isabel's unpredictable life.

**John Ryan and Hugh Slade:** Isabel's romantic entanglements with John Ryan and Hugh Slade reflect her search for authentic connections. Initially drawn to John Ryan, Liz's husband, and his crude sexuality, Isabel soon rejects it, signifying her pursuit of more meaningful

relationships. In contrast, Hugh Slade, a married veterinarian and friend to Liz, and his gentle and understanding nature forms the basis of a deeper, more authentic connection. The affair with Slade becomes a turning point, emphasizing Isabel's desire for emotional depth and mutual understanding in her romantic pursuits.

**Margaret Casey:** For eleven years a woman named Margaret kept house for Isabel and her father, after Isabel's mother died in a car accident. To Isabel, Margaret posed a threat to her relationship with her father, as she feared Margaret's intention is to marry her father. Margaret becomes a part of Isabel's context in which she builds her character and both Margaret's presence, and later her departure, influence Isabel's sense of self.

*"The certainty of my childhood I owe to Margaret, for it was after she left that I ceased being a child. (...) And Margaret's unattractiveness and stupidity made the shape of my life possible. I always knew who I was; I was not Margaret. (...) I invented myself in her image, as her opposite. (...) Without her, I would have had to invent myself entirely. An exhausting process with the charm, perhaps, of originality, but with very little prospect of real quality."*  
(Gordon, 1978, p. 26)

Margareth's past connection to Isabel's family introduces an element of guilt and responsibility in their dynamic. Isabel's caregiving responsibilities for Margaret post-retirement become a manifestation of duty rather than genuine care. Margaret functions as a mirror for Isabel or what Isabel sees herself becoming if she renounces life and love sufficiently. When Father Mulcahy offers to find Isabel a position like Margaret's, as housekeeper or paid companion, their likeness is strengthened and Isabel is confronted with the identity of a woman with no family, no viable skills, and little to rely on except the Catholic church. When Isabel becomes aware of this identification, she initially rejects it, but when Hugh's wife confronts her for the affair Isabel is having with him, she relents and takes up Father Mulcahy's offer to move in with Margareth and care for her as a sort of penance, both for her own sexuality and for the potential guilt she carries regarding Margaret's dismissal in the past.

At this point Isabel cuts off all contact with both Liz, Eleanor, Hugh, who was willing to leave his wife for her and father Mulcahy. As she has demonstrated from the beginning of the novel, she had always been scared of inventing herself and living a dull life caring for someone who can't care for themselves, has always been an escape from personal responsibility. Yet the constant reminder of Margaret's distaste for life, and the relational experiences Isabel has accumulated with friends and lovers after her father's death, clears her vision and in the end, she finally decides to give Margaret the money she inherited, leave her shame and guilt behind and go back to the life she was beginning to build before she ran away to care for Margaret. *"It came to me that life was monstrous: what you loved you were always in danger of losing. The greatest love meant only, finally, the greatest danger. That was life; life was monstrous. But it was life I wanted"*. (Gordon, 1978, p. 304)

TA: Santiago's relationships are not as influential and constraining as those of Isabel and Newland. He sets out to become a shepherd and has almost no societal or relational constraints and hesitations. Early on his parents accept that he does not wish to follow their expectations and fulfill their aspirations for him. *"His parents had wanted him to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for a simple farm family. [...] One afternoon [Santiago] had summoned up the courage to tell his father that he didn't want to become a priest. That he wanted to travel."* (Coelho, 1988, p. 8) To begin with, his father tries to discourage Santiago's determination, arguing that he won't find anything more out in the world, than he already has at home. Santiago still persists on going and his father yields. He gives Santiago some gold coins to start out his journey:

*"And he gave the boy his blessing. The boy could see in his father's gaze a desire to be able, himself, to travel the world – a desire that was still alive, despite his father's having had to bury it, over dozens of years, under the burden of struggling for water to drink and the same place to sleep every night of his life."* (Coelho, 1988, p. 10)

Still, although there is no one to constrain or guide his way of life, and although he seemingly has achieved what Isabel and Newland seem to desire, namely the acceptance of their surroundings to follow their desires and inclination, like Isabel and Newland, Santiago is prompted to look beyond. He seeks change and to leave his life as a shepherd to pursue an

alleged treasure in a different country. He is 'forced' to confront the contentment of his routine life and explore the curiosity that is awakened by an old king he meets on one of his visits to a village, who tells him about a treasure in Egypt. The meeting with the old man leaves Santiago unable to forget about the adventure and the treasure, and he thinks to himself:

*"Curse the moment I met that old man, he thought. (...) He had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have. [...] There was nothing to hold him back except himself."* (Coelho, 1988, p. 28-29).

In this sense, like Newland who curses Ellens arrival, for forcing him and the people around him to be confronted with the boundaries of their way of life, Santiagos meeting with the old king, forces him to desire more. The other characters that he meets, like the crystal merchant, the Englishman and the alchemist, contribute to deepen his thoughts about life and people. Fatima, a woman of the desert whom Santiago recognizes as his soulmate, introduces an element of deep love and passion into his life. Their connection represents a spike in Santiago's wellbeing, offering a glimpse of profound emotional fulfillment. However, Santiago is torn between this newfound love and his overarching quest for the treasure. Fatima, much like Isabel's relationships with her friends and lovers, contributes to Santiago's complexity and adds layers to his journey of self-discovery.

In summary, Santiago's relationships and sense of wellbeing differ significantly from those of Isabel and Newland. Unburdened by societal and familial constraints, Santiago's journey is driven by internal quests for exploration and discovery.

### **5.2.3 Comparison**

While Newland grapples with societal expectations inherent in high society, Isabel confronts a blend of familial, religious, and societal norms. What influences and shapes these character's sense of wellbeing is tied to what they value as a source of framework. Isabel's world circles around her love and fear of her father. His every action, conviction, and opinion function as a both a safety net and something to rebel against. Newland on the other hand, while also caring about the opinion of his mother and sister, has no one person close to him

that represents such a frame of reference, instead he looks to all the people around him, both family and acquaintances, for belonging and an outlet of rebellion. Isabel both loves and hates her father. She sees his limitations and yet worships him. Newland both hates and loves the society he is part of, and both looks up to and despises people like Lawrence Lefferts, who set the tone of what is “form” and even Ellen Olenska, he both admires for her rebellious personality and yet despises for the fact that she shakes up the safety of what is familiar to him.

These contradicting relational ties, illustrate the complexity of not only relationships, but also the complexity of a hierarchy of needs. The characters exhibit a desire for safety, yet they want to break free. As Isabel contemplated at the end of the novel: *“That was life; life was monstrous. But it was life I wanted”*. (Gordon, 1978, p. 304)

### **5.3 What the novels say about a hierarchy of needs**

While Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a foundational framework for understanding human motivation and wellbeing, my analysis of the characters' journeys in the novels, show two ways in which the traditional hierarchical model by Maslow and even the revised model suggested by Kendrick et. al. (2010) become difficult to use:

- 1) My analysis shows that needs are not entirely hierarchical, and that they are individually perceived and constructed.
- 2) Some of categories of the different levels in the hierarchies are difficult determine or interpret in one universal way. For example, what is “love”? And what is “belonging”? The subjective way in which the characters interpret their needs also posits a problem for the categories introduced by the hierarchies.

Maslow (1943) positions several needs into one category. For example, "esteem" needs encompass, status, self-esteem, status, recognitions, strength, and freedom. But Newland's status is connected with his conformity to the expectations and rules imposed on him by his surroundings. He is not free to do as he pleases without the fear of losing his status.

"Love and belonging" needs in Maslow's (1943) pyramid encompass friendship, intimacy, family, and a sense of connection. Newland feels close to his mother and sisters, but they are part of a culture that does not allow true intimacy. You are not allowed to say what you actually think and feel without being reprimanded for it. Another predicament arises at the notion of love. To begin with Newland feels both love and pride in having May as his fiancé, but over time he realizes that his "love" for her is connected to his view of her as a status symbol and not really true love for her as a person.

His sense of connection is also closely linked to conforming to society and in contrast to other characters, who do not conform and still seem content, like Mrs. Mingot Manson, Newland places such high value on recognition, that he forgoes "Self-actualization" and the desire to become the most that one can be. But even this last observation is only partially true, for what is the most that Newland can be? Does he even know his possibilities and limitations? And like with the crystal merchant, does he even want to attain self-actualization?

Even Kendrick et. al.'s depiction of the hierarchical levels as overlapping instead of stacked on top of one another, as in Maslow's (1943) pyramid, the different levels don't answer why someone like Isabel's father would place status and esteem above immediate physiological needs and glorify poverty. Neither of the hierarchies consider the amount of power narrative holds over the characters experience of needs and wellbeing.

The complexities of relationships, societal expectations, and personal aspirations create a nuanced interplay that challenges the linear progression of Maslow's hierarchy. Isabel, Newland, and Santiago experience a dynamic and multifaceted pursuit of safety, companionship, and purpose, emphasizing the intricate nature of human needs and motivations. Additionally, alternative viewpoints, such as Kendrick et al.'s (2010) revisions to Maslow's hierarchy, suggest that cognitive and developmental priorities may dynamically change, further complicating the understanding of human motivation. In essence, these literary explorations highlight the richness and variability of human experiences that may not neatly align with established psychological frameworks.



## **5.4 Narrative Psychology**

The previous two chapters on thick description and hierarchy of needs intersect with narrative psychology, as narrative psychology also focuses on cultural and historical context, symbolic elements and imagery that contribute to the psychological depth of the narrative and characters and the examination of the impact of societal norms and historical events on characters' perceptions of self and others.

As this is not an analysis of the novels as literature, but as material that stands as a proxy to the analysis of real-life people, this section will focus on how narrative influences character development and their psychological development in regard to their wellbeing. Particularly the sections below will focus on Bathkin's narrative discourse theory and McAdams's concept of life stories that shape cultural myths and identities.

### ***5.4.1 Bathkin's narrative discourse theory***

The influence of Michail Bakhtin's narrative discourse theory (1973) becomes evident in the narrative analysis of the novels, shedding light on the characters' construction of identity, the dialogic nature of their narratives, and the impact on their well-being.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (1973), emphasizing the ongoing exchange of multiple voices and perspectives in language, is reflected in the characters' narratives. TAI exemplifies this through Newland's internal dialogue regarding societal norms and expectations. His narrative is shaped by a dialogic interplay between conforming to societal standards and his metropolitan views, illustrating the complex negotiation of identity and societal influence on well-being.

In FP (1978), Isabel's narrative reflects the duality and contradictions within her relationships. Her struggle to reconcile her father's convictions with her desire for personal fulfillment highlights the dialogic tension between societal expectations and individual aspirations, influencing her well-being. The conflicting voices within her narrative showcase Bakhtin's idea of multiple perspectives shaping identity.

Santiago's narrative in TA (1988) provides a philosophical perspective on the characters in TAI and FP. Santiago's pursuit of freedom and self-discovery contrasts with Newland's and Isabel's struggles within societal norms. The encounter with the crystal merchant in TA (1988) resonates with Newland's dilemma in TAI (1920). On his journey, Santiago meets a Muslim crystal merchant from Tangier who has dreamed for decades to save enough money to do "Hajj", the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a mandatory religious duty for Muslims. When Santiago asks the merchant why he doesn't go to Mekka, the merchant replies:

*"Because it's the thought of Mekka that keeps me alive. That's what helps me face these days that are all the same, these mute crystals, and lunch and dinner at that same horrible café. I'm afraid that if my dream is realized, I'll have no reason to go on living."* (Coelho, 1988, p. 57)

Santiago starts working in the crystal merchant's shop and draws in more and more customers through the changes he implements in the shop. One day he suggests serving tea in the crystal glasses they are selling, to attract even more customers. The crystal merchant responds:

*"I've had this shop for thirty years. I know good crystal from bad, and everything else there is to know about crystal. [...]. If we serve tea in crystal, the shop is going to expand. And then I'll have to change my way of life. [...]. I don't want anything else in my life. But you are forcing me to look at wealth and horizons I have never known. Now that I have seen them, and now that I see how immense my possibilities are, I'm going to feel worse than I did before you arrived. Because I know the things I should be able to accomplish, and I don't want to do so."* (Coelho, 1988, p. 59-60).

The crystal merchant's admission illustrates profound and complex aspects of wellbeing and narrative, and also about the hierarchy of our needs that lie above basic needs. In the beginning of Newland's story, he prides himself of "cosmopolitan" views and opinions and criticizes the environment he is living in as being too old fashioned. Yet when he is confronted with these old-fashioned attitudes through the way Ellen is treated by their

families and acquaintances, he curses her arrival and the fact that her presence is forcing him to fight for ideals he wished could have stayed just that. Ideals.

On the one hand, actually fighting for what one wants seems to feel much worse than not getting it. Both the merchant and Newland fear the realization of their dreams and the potential disruption to their established narratives, reflecting Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic self in a constant state of construction.

Bakhtin's emphasis on the fluid, evolving nature of identity is evident in the characters' narratives. Newland's failure to grasp the complexity of his environment and Isabel's constant tension between sacrifice and personal fulfillment illustrate the ongoing negotiation of identity through narrative construction, impacting their well-being.

The crystal merchant's fear of change and expansion resonates with Newland's reluctance to challenge societal norms in TAI. Both characters fear the unknown consequences of realizing their dreams, highlighting Bakhtin's insight into the challenges of self-construction and the influence of narratives on well-being.

#### ***5.4.2 Isabel's narrative of self-sacrifice***

In FP (1978) a prevailing narrative of self-sacrifice permeates Isabel's sense of identity, echoing McAdams's notion of a "redemptive narrative." (2006) This "martyr narrative" within the novel emerges as a cultural construction, fueled by religious ideals, particularly those fundamental to Catholicism regarding self-sacrifice. Isabel's story aligns with the broader cultural narrative that surrounds her, emphasizes the virtuous nature of sacrificing oneself for higher ideals, contributing to a sense of purpose and identity within her overarching cultural context.

McAdams suggests that narratives like redemptive ones, impact psychological measures of "generativity," and influence well-being, but in Isabel's case, the martyr narrative serves both as a source of well-being and as an escape from growth and development. She uses self-sacrifice as a measurement to "protect" herself from having to be confronted with the

unpredictability of life. *"Care for an invalid has this great virtue: one never has to wonder what there is to do. Life is simple and inevitable and straightforward."* (Gordon, 1978, p. 3)

While traditional interpretations of the hierarchy of needs emphasize the sequential fulfillment of basic needs before higher-level ones, Isabel's reliance on the martyr narrative suggests a complex interplay. Her choice to prioritize self-sacrifice, deeply rooted in cultural and religious ideals, serves as a coping mechanism, providing a sense of purpose and security. This challenges the linear progression of needs, illustrating that individuals may navigate and prioritize different levels simultaneously, seeking fulfillment in ways that diverge from the conventional hierarchy. Isabel's story underscores the intricate and subjective nature of human needs, shedding light on the diverse pathways individuals may take in their pursuit of well-being.

### **5.5 Concluding remarks**

The deviations from the traditional model of hierarchy of needs, emphasize the importance of recognizing the individuality of human experiences. Welfare and health policies often rely on standardized models that assume a linear progression of needs. However, the characters' dynamic and multifaceted pursuits suggest that individuals may navigate these needs in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways.

The nuanced depictions of human experiences in the analyzed novels prompt a reflection on the relevance of such findings in the context of welfare and health policy. While Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a valuable framework for understanding general human motivations and wellbeing, the complex nature of individual journeys, as illustrated by Isabel, Newland, and Santiago, indicates a need for a more adaptable and comprehensive approach in shaping social policies. But is it possible for welfare and health policies to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and achieve positive results? And more importantly, given the findings in the analysis, is it even possible to "capture" wellbeing and sustain it given the high level of subjectivity and fleeting interpretations illustrated through the characters? What interventions could have stopped Isabel from hiding herself away from life behind the guise of family matters all those years that she cared for her father? What would be the solution to Newland's sense of being caught between societal expectations, which he

also values, and wanting to break free? The crystal merchant in TA had complained and dreamed of enough wealth to travel to Mekka, but once he achieved this wealth through the help of Santiago, he admitted that his dream was always only meant as that, a dream.

In conclusion, my findings illustrate that human needs and desires might not be as straight forward as posed by hierarchies of needs or traditional understandings of wellbeing. Traditional understandings of wellbeing might not take into consideration the psychological aspect of human motivation and the way individuals, psychologically construct their reality. The subjective narratives that individuals create through a mix of societal and cultural influences and a mental cherry-picking process further complicates devising a general model to understand human wellbeing in regard to higher-level needs.

## **6. Implications for policy**

According to Majone (1989, p. 19) policy analysis is dominated by 'decisionism', emphasizing technical solutions to policy puzzles, tasking social scientists to use and generate 'evidence'. Lowndes (2016) asks whether policy analysis pays enough attention to the role of policy narratives, which deal with 'why' as well as 'how' questions. Even though policy making is dominated by evidence, Lowndes claims that "policy-based evidence-making" is more common and that what is recognized as "evidence" is altered to fit predetermined policy preferences (Lowndes, 2016, p. 103).

Lowndes highlights that *"some [policymakers] feel that the search for neutral evidence is misplaced anyhow, arguing that policy making should be explicitly a value-led process. Paying more attention to the role of storytelling and narrative can be a way of putting the politics back in to policy making and blowing the cover on claims for value-free evidence."* (Lowndes, 2016, p. 103)

The observations made by Rittel and Webber (1973) about the challenges inherent in addressing "wicked" problems in social policy lay the groundwork for understanding the complexities and intricacies of policy development. They argue that traditional scientific approaches, rooted in dealing with "tame" problems, fall short when confronted with the inherently dynamic and multifaceted nature of policy issues. The evolving landscape of

societal values and the growing heterogeneity within populations further complicates the formulation of effective, widespread applicable policies.

In examining the implications for policy development, particularly in the realm of well-being, the novels analyzed echo the sentiment that human experiences are highly subjective and resistant to a one-size-fits-all approach. The characters of Isabel, Newland, and Santiago illustrate how individuals navigate their needs and desires in diverse and unexpected ways, challenging linear frameworks like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

The intersection of Rittel and Webber's wicked problems and the nuanced depiction in the novels underscores the limitations of rigid policy structures. The traditional role of professionals in solving well-defined problems is contrasted with the increasingly intricate challenges posed by the diversity of values and perspectives within society (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 156).

In addressing wicked problems, the Rittel and Webber (1973) highlight the growing awareness of pluralism and the differentiation of values among publics. This acknowledgment becomes crucial when formulating policies that inherently involve competing narratives and diverse expectations. The lack of a unitary conception of public welfare emphasizes the need for a more flexible and responsive approach that considers the evolving sociocultural landscape.

Lowndes (2016) points out the inherent connection between policymaking, politics, and societal narratives. The recognition that policy decisions are influenced by political agendas, which, in turn, are driven by the demands and perceptions of the population, aligns with Rittel and Webber's critique of the lack of consensus in defining public good and equity. The evolving definitions of well-being in society prompt policymakers to expand the scope of welfare policies to address broader concerns, as exemplified by recent responses to loneliness and social connection issues.

The integration of narrative psychology theories and literary analysis into the discussion further emphasizes the role of storytelling and individual narratives in shaping policy. While

policy analysis has traditionally favored technical solutions and evidence-based approaches, the acknowledgment of narrative as a crucial aspect of policy development challenges the notion of value-free evidence (Lowndes, 2016). Stone contends that leaving narrative solely to politicians perpetuates this division, casting politicians as storytellers and policymakers as mere technicians focused on 'evidence' (Stone, 2011). Stone argues for rendering the political claims underlying scientific methods more visible and emphasizes that politics, as a source of creativity, offers value-laden narratives that enable individuals to see from different perspectives (Stone, 2011).

In the context of the Norwegian Social Services Act, which dictates financial assistance criteria, the impact of narratives on policy development is evident. The disruption caused by the COVID pandemic led to changes in the Norwegian social security system, reflecting the influence of public opinion and the loudest voices on policy structures.

The Norwegian Social Services Act<sup>2</sup> states that persons seeking assistance cannot be wealthy or financially well off when they apply for financial assistance. The NAV office in a municipality is free to assess each individual case; factors such as income and expenses, needs and living situation are among the criteria the offices consider. If the municipal NAV office determines that the applicant is too rich, the person concerned may be asked to sell assets in order to have the application approved.

At the end of March 2020, as a result of the pandemic, the Norwegian social security system was disrupted. Among the measures that were introduced was a so-called guide for *the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration's* (NAV) social benefits instructing the NAV offices in the municipalities to lower the requirement to be granted social benefits<sup>3</sup>. During the height of the pandemic, many middle-class citizens in Norway were temporarily laid off, and needed social benefits from NAV they hadn't needed before. Suddenly, the structure of the Norwegian social services was seen unnecessarily difficult, a long-held argument by long time welfare recipients and left-wing Norwegian politicians. But their pleas had landed on

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2009-12-18-131>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tv2.no/nyheter/innenriks/kritiserer-nav-for-a-vaere-for-streng-na-vil-rodt-hente-tilbake-korona-tiltak/15290625/>

deaf ears up until this moment, as they did not resonate with the majority of the population and therefore were not of interest for large political parties looking for to win favors with the general population. But now that the structure of the welfare system was affecting a larger part of the population, it became a bigger interest for loosen rules and regulations, at least that was the case until June 2022, when the guide was pulled back again. This illustrates that not only do people's opinions influence policy development, but often the loudest voices, regardless of objective measurements of wellbeing, influence the narrative and structure of policy development.

Sometimes political agenda and the needs of the loudest voices in the public come together and create societal narratives that are imposed on a whole population. In a study on equality and family life in a class perspective, Andersen and Aarseth (2012) highlight how the Norwegian political agenda to promotes participation in paid labor as a right and life goal, coincides with the educated middle class's perception of equality and disregards the working class's perspective of paid labor as a duty and family life as a goal.

Andersen and Aarseth point to studies that show that working-class women are concerned with creating distance from middle-class women's emphasis on career. A study based on interviews of female cleaners and shop assistants by May-Len Skilbrei (2003), referenced in Andersen and Aarseth (2012), illustrates that these women's ideas about what constitutes the good life and what a "real woman is" stand in opposition to those of middle-class women. These women's narrative of "real women" were connected to traditionally female tasks at home, which they viewed as a competence, while a job was something they did out of economic necessity. This narrative, Skilbrei argues is the reason these women experience the Norwegian "equality project", as it is formulated as a political agenda, as an attack on their values.

Another case that highlights the contrast between citizens and political goals is found in Kari Stefansen's study (2009) of parents from different class backgrounds, which finds that Norwegian working-class parents view childcare as a families' business, viewing children as vulnerable and in need of a safe home environment before starting kindergarten (Stefansen and Farstad, 2008, p. 128). In these families, the mother often stays at home with the child



until it turns two, and that the father's quota is used as an opportunity for the whole family to be together at the same time. The middle-class parents in Stefansen's study on the other hand, it was important that the father establishes an independent relationship with the child, and that the child started kindergarten at the age of one, to develop important social skills through socializing with peers, and by taking part in the educational scheme of the kindergarten offers (Stefansen & Farstad, 2008, p. 125).

Aarseth (2011) argues that the egalitarian family model, oriented towards increased individualization, fits perfectly with the values and career orientation of the middle class but meets partially resistance in the working class because emphasize the importance of everyday life and the family community in a different way and experience the demand for equality as an attack on this family orientation. The tension between objective evidence and the subjective construction of reality raises questions about the compatibility of facts and feelings in the realm of social science.

### **6.1 What evidence is needed?**

Highlighting these findings is not an attempt to make judgement on the rightness or wrongness of policies, but to *"highlight the necessity to map and re-map the connections between actors, ideas and institutions."* (Lowndes, 2016, p. 103). The aim is to highlight how narratives are prior to evidence and that evidence in terms of policies that affect people's lives, can use narratives as way of getting control over the assumptions of political dilemmas and make it possible to reach conclusions about what to do (Rittel and Webber 1973). As Lowndes (2016) argues, "politics" are an essential part of "policy" and should be put in the forefront of policy development to create a *"chronological account that helps actors to make sense of and argue about policy issues"* (Boswell, J., 2013a: 621–2). In terms of policymaking, *"we only know what kind of evidence we need, and how to evaluate it, when we are clear about the policy narrative."* (Lowndes, 2016, p. 103).

Lowndes' (2016) approach does not reject evidence in policymaking but rather places it within the context of narrative. Majone's distinction between data, information, and evidence emphasizes that evidence is intertwined with the narrative within which it is embedded (Majone, 1989). Social scientists, including policy analysts, engage with

policymakers through the intersubjective trading of stories, recognizing that storytelling is constitutive of the policy process (Lowndes, 2016). Fritz Mayer's work (2014) provides a compelling illustration of how storytelling addresses collective action problems in the realm of policy processes. For instance, consider a new policy initiative aiming to devolve selected powers from central government to city-regions in England. This policy seeks to attach itself to established narratives that celebrate 'the great Northern cities' of the Victorian era. By doing so, it attempts to overcome or ease the competitive pressures between individual municipalities asked to combine into new city-region structures.

Mayer's exploration (2014) emphasizes that policymakers often resort to storytelling to navigate complex collective action problems. In this case, the policy initiative strategically links its narrative to historical stories ('back stories') that resonate with the intended audience. This approach not only facilitates the communication of the new policy but also taps into existing narratives that carry cultural and historical significance. Consequently, Mayer's work demonstrates how storytelling becomes an essential tool for policymakers to address challenges related to collective action and garner support for their initiatives. Mayer's work illustrates how storytelling addresses collective action problems, emphasizing the integral role of narratives in policy processes (Mayer, 2014). Policymakers and social scientists cannot avoid storytelling, and it should be taken seriously in policy analysis (Lowndes, 2016).

## **6.2 Concluding remarks**

Going back to the initial research questions, the analysis shows the following:

- *How do narratives impact individuals' perceptions of subjective well-being?*

The analysis reveals that narratives play a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions of subjective well-being, illustrating how personal stories and experiences influence the understanding and pursuit of well-being.

- *How do culture and societal structures influence individuals' narratives and perception of subjective well-being?*

The research shows that culture and societal structure create a sort of “menu” for the individual to choose from, but it is not straight forward what parts of the society- or culture-narrative an individual chooses as a guide to measure and determine their wellbeing. Being exposed to people and settings in one’s environment that exemplify successful deviation from the norms, or contentment with the norms, still leads to the individual navigating their needs and desires in unexpected ways.

- *In what ways can insights into narratives and storytelling be of value within the field of social welfare and health policies?*

The findings underscore the value of incorporating insights from narratives and storytelling into social welfare and health policies, emphasizing the need for nuanced, context-specific approaches that recognize the subjective and diverse nature of human experiences.

In conclusion, the examination of policy implications, influenced by the perspectives of Rittel and Webber (1973), Lowndes (2016), Majone (1989), and others, unveils the intricate dynamics between policy development, politics, and societal narratives. The traditional reliance on "decisionism" and technical solutions to policy puzzles, as emphasized by Majone, encounters a critical challenge from Lowndes, who advocates for a more explicit acknowledgment of values, storytelling, and narrative in the policymaking process.

The notion of "policy-based evidence-making" becomes a focal point, urging policymakers and social scientists to recognize the interdependence of evidence and narrative. Lowndes’ (2016) argument that the search for neutral evidence might be misplaced resonates with Rittel and Webber's critique of the lack of definitive answers in addressing wicked problems. The discussion emphasizes that evidence is not devoid of narrative; instead, it is deeply embedded within the larger context of storytelling.

The integration of literary analysis and psychological theories further reinforces the importance of narrative in shaping policy. The characters in the analyzed novels illustrate the subjective and diverse nature of human experiences, challenging the idea of a uniform approach to well-being. This resonates with Rittel and Webber's exploration of wicked

problems, urging policymakers to consider the evolving societal values and heterogeneity within populations.

### **6.3 Personal reflections**

I end this thesis on some personal reflections and a story. I grew up with three siblings in a relatively poor family, with a violent father and a busy mother. I perceived my violent father as a natural disaster, not his actions, but him as a person. I did not feel that he was a person, but a mechanical, technical occurrence, with no substance, that would occasionally and unpredictably erupt. I did not perceive my relationship to my father, as a relationship between two people. I perceived myself as a person, and him as a “thing” or “event”, that just happened and needed to be survived. This narrative resulted in me never seeing violence or abuse as something normal between people or as part of a relationship. My siblings on the other hand, did view my father as a person and in later years connected their perceptions of him, with their perspective of life and other people. Some of them believe that relationships require a dynamic of violence or that the world and other people are dangerous if you get too close to them.

I also created a narrative that does not hold objective truth. I would see my busy mother, her serious and sad facial expressions after a fight with my father or when she came home from work and went right to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Without ever asking, I created a narrative that the people I love, don't have the time or the capacity to help me and that I should not bother them by asking for help. I never experienced not getting help, as I never asked, but my assumption resulted in the narrative that my need for help, will burden others. I distinctly remember the resolution to become strong and independent, based on this assumption.

My personal experience and the findings in this study, highlight that there is a level of subjective narrative construction of reality, that makes it difficult to construct parts of human needs and some level of wellbeing in a way that fits into scientific approaches of mathematical models, surveys, and theories, and that *“happiness does not really depend on objective conditions of either wealth, health or even community. Rather, it depends on the correlation between objective condition and subjective expectations.”* (Harari, 2011, p. 428)

In terms of social science, the human unpredictability and the search for precision and calculation in science, resonate with philosopher Alan Watts' talk on "Prickles and goo"<sup>4</sup>:

*"The prickly people are advocates of intellectual porcupineism. They want a rigor, they want precise statistics, [...]. And you know this very well in academic circles, where there are people who [...] accuse other people of being disgustingly vague and miasmatic and mystical. But the vague, miasmatic, and mystical people accuse the prickly people of being mere skeletons with no flesh on their bones. [...] And so, therefore, if you belong to the prickly type, you hope that the ultimate constituent of matter is particles. If you belong to the gooey type, you hope it's waves. If you're prickly you're a classicist, and if you're gooey you're a romanticist. [...] But we know very well that this natural universe is neither prickles nor goo exclusively; it's gooey prickles and prickly goo. You see, it all depends on your level of magnification. If you've got your magnification on something so that the focus is clear, you've got a prickly point of view, you've got structure, shape, clearly outlined, sharply defined. When you're a little out of focus it's gone bleeeagh, and you've got goo. But we're always playing with the two."*

In the context of social policy, the "prickly" elements align with the structured and well-defined aspects of policies, such as specific regulations, measurable goals, and clear frameworks. On the other hand, the "gooey" aspects in social policy encompass the more fluid, undefined, and subjective dimensions, including narratives, diverse personal experiences, and the subjective nature of well-being that are challenging to quantify precisely.

The recognition of this duality suggests that effective social policies cannot solely rely on rigid, one-size-fits-all solutions but should also consider the dynamic and subjective aspects of individual well-being.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/the-tao-of-philosophy-5/>

## 7. Literature

Aarseth, H. (2011). *Moderne familieliv. Den likestilte familiens motivasjonsformer*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Andersen, L. C., & Aarseth, H. (2012). Velferdsstatens familier. In *Velferdsstatens familier: nye sosiologiske perspektiver* (1st ed., pp. 191–214). Gyldendal Norsk Forlag. ISBN 9788205425002.

Bakhtin, M. (1973). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetic*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Boswell, J. (2013). *Evidence-based policy making in the social sciences: Methods that matter*. Bristol University Press.

Burner, J. (1990). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Coelho, P. (1988). *The Alchemist*. HarperCollins.

Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research*.

Dewsbury, D. A. (2003). Comparative psychology. In D. K. Freedheim (Ed.), *Handbook of psychology: History of psychology, Vol. 1*, pp. 67–84). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/0471264385.wei0104>

Diener, E. (2000). Subjective well-being: The science of happiness, and a proposal for a national index. *American Psychologist*, 55, 34–43.

Easterlin, R. A. (2016). *Paradox Lost?*. USC-INET Research Paper No. 16-02. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2714062>

Frankl, V. (1946). *Man's search for meaning*. Verlag für Jugend und Volk. Vienna, Austria.

Geertz, C. (1993). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana Press.

Gordon, M. (1978). *Final Payments*. Ballantine Books, Random House Inc.

Gubrium, Erika K. (2014) Poverty, shame, and the class journey in public imagination, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 15:1, 105-122, DOI: [10.1080/1600910X.2013.809370](https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2013.809370)

Jack, B. (2014, October 14). *The Novel and Morality: Samuel Johnson's Rasselas*. Gresham College. <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/novel-morality-samuel-johnsons-rasselas>

Harari, Y. N. (2011). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Dvir Publishing House Ltd. (Israel). Random House. Harper.

Hollis, J. (1993). *The middle passage*. Inner City Books.

Kendrick, D. T., Griskevicius, V., Neuberg, S. L., & Schaller, M. (2010). Renovating the Pyramid of Needs: Contemporary Extensions Built Upon Ancient Foundations. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(3), 292-314. doi:10.1177/1745691610369469

Lowndes, V. (2016). Narrative and storytelling. In G. Stoker & M. Evans (Eds.), *Evidence-based policy making in the social sciences: Methods that matter* (pp. 103–122). Bristol University Press; Policy Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1t89d4k.13>

Macchi Lucía. (2023). Having Less Than Others is Physically Painful: Income Rank and Pain Around the World. *Sage. Social Psychological and Personality Science*. [sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions) DOI: 10.1177/19485506231167928 [journals.sagepub.com/home/spp](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/spp)

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

Mayer, F. W. (2014). *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*. Oxford University Press, USA.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 100-122.

McAdams, D. P. (2006). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by*. New York: Oxford University Press.

McAdams, D. P., Bauer, J. J., Sakaeda, A. R., Anyidoho, N. A., Machado, M. A., Magrino-Failla, K., White, K. W., & Pals, J. L. (2006). Continuity and change in the life story: A longitudinal study of autobiographical memories in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality*, 74(5), 1371-1400.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist*, 61, 204-217.

Pennebaker, J. W., & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a story: The health benefits of narrative. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55(10), 1243-1254.

Sarantakos, S. (1998) *Social Research*. 2nd Edition, MacMillan Education Australia, South Melbourne.

Sarbin, T. R. (1986). *Narrative Psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. Praeger publishers. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 86-8130 ISBN: 0-275-92103-4 (alk. paper).

Skilbrei, M. (2003). Dette er jo bare en husmorjobb. NOVA, Rapport 17/03.



Stearns, P. (2012). The History of Happiness. *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 39(1), 18-23.

Stefansen, Kari & May-Len Skilbrei (2009): Klasseblind familiepolitikk. *Dagsavisen* 25. 3.

Sennet, R. (1974). *The fall of Public Man*. Penguin Group. London, England.

Stevenson, B., & Wolfers, J. (2008). Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2008, 1–87.

Stone, D. (2011). *The policy paradox* (3rd edn). New York: WW Norton.

Wampold BE, Minami T, Tierney SC, Baskin TW, Bhati KS. The placebo is powerful: estimating placebo effects in medicine and psychotherapy from randomized clinical trials. *J Clin Psychol*. 2005 Jul;61(7):835-54. doi: 10.1002/jclp.20129. PMID: 15827993

Wharton, E. (1920). *The Age of Innocence*. Penguin Random House UK.

World Bank Group. (2022). *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022: Correcting Course*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank. Internet: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b96b361a-a806-5567-8e8a-b14392e11fa0/content> ISBN (electronic): 978-1-4648-1894-3. DOI: 10.1596/978-1-4648-1893-6

## 8. Attachments

Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>5</sup>



# Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Kendrick et. al.'s revised hierarchy of needs<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4582571>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3161123/>

