

# The 11th Commandment: Thou shall be well and happy

[ B O O K R E V I E W ]

Cederstrom, Carl & Spicer, André (2015)  
**The wellness syndrome.** Cambridge: Polity  
Press. ISBN 978-0-7456-5561-1 pbk. Pages 163

**Annah Dingani**

School of Applied  
Human Sciences  
Discipline of Psychology  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Durban

Over the last decade there has been an effusion of a wellness discourse that is not only circulating the corporate world but academic, religious and social communities as well. This wellness movement has emerged around empirical knowledge production about processes and mechanisms that make people feel happy. This wellness discourse is supplied with intellectual resources by interested institutions and individuals who on the surface level seem to have the general population's health interest at heart, but on the other hand also seem to have a vested political interest or dependence on it.

In this regard, **The wellness syndrome**, offers an insightfully, fascinating modern satire which unpacks the wellness ideology, set against the backdrop of everyday mundane activities, such as working, exercising, enrolling for university or simply choosing a meal. The authors' successfully set out to elicit some critical reflexivity on how contemporary, neoliberal culture with its fixation on optimum health or wellness for everyone creates individuals who are not only "orthorexic" but over worked workaholics as well. One can easily identify with the need for achieving this somewhat elusive "quest for perfection" where the naturalised common sense is to transform oneself into a creative, self-regulating, self-directing, motivated entrepreneur in keeping with the "new [fluid] spirit of capitalism".

The authors' light-heartedly use case studies to unravel how the rhetoric of wellness articulates a specific conceptualisation of health, for example, "non-smoking", "lean", "happy individuals" which subtly promotes individuals to develop the "social character of capitalism" in a society where technological advances have obscured the boundary between work and non-work. Cederström and Spicer humorously describe the process of how individuals learn to accept practices and ideas like self-tracking, morning dance parties, treadmill desks, life logging and so on, that not only work against their own best interests but also maintain the status quo. It is this kind of one dimensional, disciplining thought process which the book attempts to expose, and that which it effectively does.

The chapters in the book illustrate how pervasive this wellness ideology is as individuals strive to stay within acceptable modes of thought and behaviour often to their own physical and emotional detriment. Those that adhere to this ideology or process of governance also unconsciously marginalise others who fail to conform. Foucault's (1978) concept of governmentality describes a way of acting and thinking that embodies the various attempts to know how to govern the health, happiness and wealth of populations. In the current neoliberal context, the focus of government has changed from focusing on contextual conditions or even human behaviour to governing techniques which focus on building the internal capacities of *homo economicus* in an ambivalent way, and so it is the individuals' own choices that increase or decrease their wellness or economic attractiveness. For example, in chapter 2 the idealised worker is an "exercise addicted corporate athlete who is able to carry out a hard day of creative labour while happily leading an exercise class after work" (p 38). Similarly in chapter 3 employees' decisions to be happy become the key to potentially enhancing organisational effectiveness. In both these chapters, the authors direct the reader's attention to the way in which happiness, which is traditionally an elusive construct, is now being used to structure and interpret employees' organisational life. This is because managers can use the empirical evidence of the studies conducted by social scientists, such as positive psychologists, to show that happy workers are more committed to the organisation and are able to withstand organisational pressures more than unhappy workers. However, within this statement lies a dialectical contradiction because worker commitment, ability and resilience does not necessarily mean one is happy as "the harsh economic realities of the great talent lottery [known as the labour market ] create some serious existential problems for the wo/men of now"(p 116). This paradoxical dilemma is wittingly captured by the title of the book as well.

Throughout the book, the authors explicitly state that their main concern is not with wellness but how it has become an ideology which "people may find seductive" (p 3). It is therefore important to understand the broader socio-political and economic environment of this movement and what values and interests are produced as well as what is obscured

by this network of interests. This ideology conceptualises the individual as a subject who exercises free choices while operating between the intertwining constructs of functions (the valuable things a person can be or do) and capabilities. These constructs are an essential precondition for political subjectification or “exploitation” as they set up a framework for “biomoral” conduct in which an individual is either making value choices as prescribed by a “free market economy” or valueless choices thereby deeming that individual a “bad person”. As such the book does a good job in highlighting how the wellness discourse impacts the identity or psyche of individuals in the most insidious way, where an esteemed individual is one who subscribes to the “moral demand to be happy and healthy” (p 5).

However, in the last chapter we see that certain groups within the society are rebelling against this wellness discourse even though they too become entrapped in a different type of “antibiomorality”, where feeling sick, accepting fat and proactively seeking HIV infection (bug chasing) “open up new spaces of respite [where] the illusion of limitless human potential is abandoned” (p 134).

Although the authors’ presentation of the content is light-hearted the aim of exposing the political rationality of the wellness discourse is not lost and this is what makes the book a delightful book to read. It is aimed at a wide audience and encourages from that audience an attitude of critical self reflexivity as the reader can relate to the case studies discussed in the book.

In sum, the book is a satirical analysis of neoliberal governance, where a new “truth” regime has emerged in the form of wellness or health for all, however on closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that this regime focuses on building the internal capacities of the economic being (*homo economicus*) in an ambivalent way. This is because the neoliberal model views human capital as an “asset”, which can be creative, self-regulating, self-directing, motivated entrepreneurs who are able to adapt their skills and competencies to suit the ever changing, fast paced, fluid neoliberal market economy where individuals “scientifically manage” themselves. The book provides a thorough and enjoyable dissection of the wellness movement.

## References

Foucault, M (1978) Governmentality (Lectures at the College de France, 1 February 1978), in Burchell, G, Gordon, C Miller, P (eds) (1991) **The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality**. Hemel Hempsted: Harvester Wheatsheaf (pp 87-104).