

「苦與樂」研討會

「苦與樂」專題討論第三節

Well-being in Anthropological Perspective

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Many social scientists shy away from terms like "happiness" and "suffering" because they seem inherently subjective; instead, terms such as "well-being" have become commonly used. Various global institutions and academic research groups offer yearly ratings as to "well-being" in different societies. Based on factors such as life expectancy and per capita income, these organizations calculate and compare "well-being"; but how valid are these ratings? Anthropologists are skeptical, arguing that "well-being" is culturally specific, and cannot be understood apart from how, in a particular cultural setting, well-being is conceived of and experienced; but, like "happiness," "well-being" thus runs the risk of falling into the trap of subjectivity, rendering cultural comparison impossible. In this paper, I explore well-being through a Japanese concept that may help to surmount this problem: *ikigai*, which is in one of its definitions "that which makes one's life worth living," whether work, family, dream, God, or revolution. The term *ikigai* exists only in Japanese, but the concept is valid beyond its Japanese context, and, abstracted, may be useful in understanding "well-being" in a range of societies. I argue that *ikigai* may be conceptualized not simply as "that which makes one's life worth living" but also as "one's deepest bond to one's social world," rendering it not only an internal but also an interpersonal concept. *Ikigai* may serve as a way to compare individuals in different societies in terms of well-being: not in their subjective senses of well-being, but in the cultural formulation, social negotiation, and institutional channeling of their *ikigai*. This paper uses cross-cultural examples from interviews to illustrate how, through the concept of *ikigai*, individual bases of well-being in different societies can usefully be anthropologically compared, with neither the false empirical rigor of the hard social sciences, nor with the subjectivism that may beset more humanistic endeavors.