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## Valuing individual variation within 'big data': What anthropological approaches can contribute

By Shanti George

What matters to whom?' How can we best elicit from different kinds of people what matters most to them when it comes to the well-being of their children? And what about categories of people who are very likely to be overlooked or to be labelled 'hard to reach' through questionnaires and other formal investigation tools?

The immigrant woman who acts as a protagonist within the story narrated below might well have been bypassed in this way, had it not been for the sensitivity and skill of a young woman anthropologist who proved capable of engaging with her daily experiences. Within this process, the 'core capacities and practices' of the Learning for Well-Being approach helped to bridge what might be described as 'everyday inquiry' by ordinary people themselves and more formal academic research.

### What matters to Maryam (one of the 'research subjects')?

Maryam migrated to the Netherlands as a young girl with her family, and now herself has three children below age ten, within an arranged marriage. Maryam is extremely committed to her children doing well in the Netherlands, and does her best to ensure that the children achieve well at school, with a view to good employment prospects. Having gone through the Dutch educational system herself, to the minimal vocational level, Maryam tries to monitor how her three children in different grades are doing. She examines the notebooks that they bring home, to check for any written remarks by the teacher and to puzzle out what these indicate. She chats with her children to ensure that they are happy in school, and she attempts to smooth out any difficulties that they encounter. She keeps track of varied aspects of their lives – their health, their appetites and diets, their friends and acquaintances, their play and leisure activities. Maryam is engaged in ongoing assessment, sharing her impressions with her husband every day. He might ask, 'What makes you think that Karim is finding maths easier?' and she replies 'There are far fewer red marks in his maths notebook than last year.' Maryam's antennae are constantly on the alert for indications of her children's well-being or ill-being.

Karim's teacher is aware of how committed a parent Maryam is, even though Maryam hesitates to take up the teacher's time. One day, at the end of class, the teacher distributes a printed document to parents who have come to collect their children and whose first language is Dutch. Maryam wonders what is in the document and glances at one that a mother near her is carrying. The teacher comes over to Maryam and hands her a copy, explaining that the document asks questions about Karim's health and happiness – his *welzijn* (Dutch for 'well-being') – and that Maryam needs to tick the relevant boxes. 'Karim can help you with this,' the teacher says, 'I've explained about this investigation to the children.' Maryam hesitates, then shakes her head in polite refusal and walks away with Karim. (*'Investigation' sounds intimidating. Suppose she ticks the wrong box, out of nervousness and lack of clarity? Karim might then lose out on something -- he might even be moved to a lower class.*) Maryam describes to her husband her relief that the 'Investigation' was not compulsory and at the same time her regret that Karim might lose out because she did *not* fill in the document. Since her children's *welzijn* is paramount to her, this experience involves something of a cruel choice.

The next day, at the end of class, some parents have brought back the document, filled in, and other parents see this and mutter that they must fill in theirs. Maryam continues to feel that she has missed out on something that could have benefited Karim. Today his teacher is accompanied by a young Dutchwoman, and Maryam wonders whether this is a new trainee. The teacher points Maryam out to the young woman, who approaches. Maryam experiences trepidation (*could this be because she didn't fill in the Investigation?*). The young woman smiles and holds out her hand in greeting, introducing herself as Saskia from one of the Dutch universities. She beckons Maryam over to a wall newly covered in children's drawings and shows her the drawing with Karim's name on it. All the children have drawn the moment when they 'felt very good' recently and Maryam at once recognises that Karim has sketched the Eid celebration at home. Her face lights up as she notes the details that he has included. Karim runs over with his school bag and begins talking about his drawing in Arabic with Maryam. To her surprise, Saskia joins in, and says that she learned some Arabic during research in Morocco, although this was in a city far removed from Maryam's family village.

Maryam has to hurry over to where her older two children are waiting elsewhere in the school, and Saskia walks briskly along, continuing the conversation. The next day Saskia is there again in the classroom, and this time she accompanies Maryam to the little space in the inner city with a few swings and a roundabout where the children like to play for a while on their way home from school. The following day Saskia escorts the family to their door, and the day thereafter Maryam invites Saskia in for a glass of tea while she supervises the children as they unpack their bags and settle down to a little food and drink. The two women shift between Arabic and Dutch as they speak, depending on the topic and each one's relative fluency.

Now Maryam feels comfortable enough to raise the subject of the Investigation – does Saskia know anything about it? Saskia nods and takes a copy out of her bag; she flips through it first in a quick explanation and then goes through it in detail. Maryam is relaxed and starts ticking the boxes. Karim climbs onto her lap and participates keenly in deciding on the answers. Some questions are not relevant to Maryam’s life and she feels at a loss. Saskia circles those questions and comments, ‘That needs to be changed.’ Maryam feels better. One question is about how many square metres Karim has to himself. Karim and his older siblings argue playfully about which is his space and which is theirs. Since Maryam sews clothes for the family, she can estimate quite easily how much a square metre is. She explains embarrassedly that they do not yet have enough money for a bigger house and so Karim does not have a room to himself right now, but a bed is made up for him in an alcove near his siblings’ room every night. ‘Will Karim lose points because of this?’ Maryam asks fearfully. Saskia responds: ‘Of course not. He clearly enjoys a sense of well-being. That question too must be changed. People have to understand that well-being means different things in different settings.’ Maryam is relieved. She finds it easy to ask Saskia what the Investigation is for. Saskia replies that it is in order to find out what makes different children feel good – as expressed for example in their drawings – and how to build on this to make children and parents and teachers feel happier. Maryam is delighted that such an Investigation is underway and that she and Karim are part of it.

Saskia continues to join the little family on their daily walk home after school, even though the Investigation has been filled in. The two women continue to discuss the subjects touched on earlier, and often Saskia asks ‘Do you mind if I switch on the tape recorder on my phone so that our project leaders can hear the interesting things that you are saying?’ Maryam is flattered. Since the two are discussing subjects closely related to the three children, the young ones usually join in and here again Saskia asks if she can record what they are saying. The children love to listen to bits of the recording being played back and often add, ‘Actually what I meant was...’ or ‘I also wanted to say...’ Sometimes Karim’s older sisters warn, ‘This is important, Tante [Aunt] Saskia, so please record it on your phone.’

Maryam confides in Saskia: ‘That Investigation sounds like a good thing, but what a lot of paper they used! So many little little questions... I ask myself many of the same questions about Karim, Nafisa and Safiya, but I join the little questions together so that I can understand a whole situation – say, each one of my children at school, each one of them at home, what they are feeling at a given time – also then joining things up more, Safiya as a person, Nafisa as a person, Karim as a person... If the Investigation joined up the answers to all the little questions, that might be more useful.’ Saskia assures her that the project leaders plan to join up the answers, and that she will in any case pass on Maryam’s advice.

One afternoon Saskia explains to Maryam that she will have to stop coming for a while at the end of the week because she has to work on the report with the project leaders. 'We will bring the report to school to share with the teachers and parents and children. See, in this earlier report, we had a little 'box' in which a parent like you told their own story. Can I make such a box about you? I will show it to you first to make sure that you are comfortable with it.' Maryam is very pleased. Saskia asks if she can use Maryam's photo. Maryam is reluctant and brightens up when Saskia agrees to illustrate the 'box' with Karim's drawing instead.

## An anthropological researcher's perspective

In the following weeks, Saskia misses the animated walks home with Maryam and her children. Instead, she spends long hours with others in the project team as they work hard on putting together the report about children's well-being in the city. Saskia often remembers Maryam's exclamation 'What a lot of paper!' as draft after draft is printed out and further revised. One of the team leaders has several other reports open on her desk and is trying to collate what all of them say, as an introduction to the new report. She groans: 'So much has already been written on measuring children's well-being – we have to find something fresh to say!'

Saskia enjoys writing up her talks with Maryam, capturing the little details that bring their discussions to life, looking for the right Dutch words to convey what Maryam had meant when she used a particular Arabic word or phrase, and weaving in the children's vivid statements ('*Sometimes, Tante Saskia, my heart hurts when the teacher scolds me in front of everyone*' or '*Listen to the song I just made up*' followed by a nonsense jingle). The document that Saskia produces is much too long for a 'box', but she doesn't know where to cut it without distorting or diminishing Maryam's story, so she gives it to one of the team leaders with the request 'Please cut it ruthlessly – I just can't.' The team leader rolls her eyes as if to say 'You are supposed to be my assistant,' but once she starts reading she becomes absorbed. Later she speaks with the other team leader in a low voice. The next day they tell Saskia that rather than cut the document down to 'box' length, it will go in full into the report, as an annexe to illustrate the importance of cultural sensitivity in research on children's well-being. 'Just as well we recruited an anthropologist,' Saskia hears one team leader remark as they walk off together. 'That annexe will look great on your cv,' another research assistant says enviously, but Saskia is mainly happy that Maryam's story will appear in its rich detail.

'Please insert some references to the literature in your annexe,' Saskia is told. Again, she finds herself enjoying the task. She straightaway mentions some anthropological classics, notably Clifford Geertz on the need for 'thick description' of ordinary lives, and Claude Levi-Strauss' view that anthropologists must act as pupils and witnesses to the joys and sorrows of people in marginalised groups. Saskia also adds references about the significance of qualitative research, including Bert Flyvbjerg's writing on the central importance of case studies and how they complement

statistical generalisations. She draws on Melanie Eijberts' doctoral research demonstrating the keenness of Moroccan and Turkish women immigrants in the Netherlands that their children should integrate well.

Saskia makes sure that she ties her annexe in with current debates around well-being research. 'Measuring what matters: The role of well-being methods in development policy and practice' – a recent publication from the Overseas Development Institute in London, by Alistair MacGregor and others – discusses two complementary approaches to assessing well-being. One is a 'top-down' perspective based on formal conceptual frameworks and the other is a more 'bottom-up' process that draws on engagement with the people whose well-being is under discussion. Saskia notes that the latter was the case in her research with Maryam, and she wonders how best to articulate bottom-up with top-down approaches.

Saskia picks up a report commissioned by the Netherlands Youth Institute, on the Learning for Well-being framework, and reads further about this conceptual framework. She sees it as a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, because the Learning for Well-being framework is very close to first hand engagement with daily life – at the same time that Jean Gordon and Linda O'Toole have demonstrated in a timely article that this framework articulates smoothly with theoretical discussions as well as with everyday experience.

Learning for Well-being's emphasis on holism, and especially on re-integration after analytical disaggregation into separate elements, reminds Saskia of Maryam's musings:

'So many little little questions... If the Investigation joined up the answers to all the little questions, that might be more useful.'

Saskia finds that Learning for Well-being puts forward '*core capacities and practices*' – formulated in everyday language by Linda O'Toole – that are very close to what Christie Kiefer describes as the more 'naturalistic' methods used by social sciences like anthropology.

- *Relaxing* on Maryam's part – after her fears related to the research process were allayed – allowed her to open up and share her perceptions and experiences in the conversational manner encouraged by anthropologists.
- *Enriching sensory awareness* – by going beyond the printed word of a questionnaire to animated verbal exchanges in the everyday surroundings of the schoolyard, the playground and the home – brought context vividly to life.
- *Paying attention* closely to what Maryam had to say about her children meant that Saskia stimulated Maryam to think further and to go deeper in their continuing conversations.
- *Subtle sensing* and the consequent imaginative and intuitive engagement between the two women and three young children allowed Saskia to grasp more immediately the shifts in Maryam's

emotions as she spoke candidly and deeply.

- *Reflecting* by Maryam as she thought aloud was accompanied by Saskia's own responsive reflection, each reinforcing the other.
- *Listening* intently to one another – as Saskia elaborated on the questionnaire and Maryam described her concerns and daily routines – enhanced the quality of their mutual engagement and understanding.
- *Inquiring* maintained a trajectory that followed Maryam's articulation of experience and stimulated her to take this further in coherent directions.
- *Empathising* was crucial to this shared process of exploring Maryam's daily world and persuading her that Saskia followed and understood the realities that were being evoked.
- *Discerning patterns and systemic processes*, as connections emerged through shared reflection, enabled Maryam to identify certain relationships between events and processes that Saskia could then put into her report and build on further.

Interestingly, these same core capacities and processes are in play when Maryam interacts with her children – she encourages them to relax, her sensory awareness comes actively into play in order to monitor their well-being, she pays close attention to them, she can sense subtle changes in their moods, she reflects aloud to her husband as well as quietly to herself on the quality of their lives, she listens carefully to them, she inquires constantly about factors that affect their well-being, she empathises with their emotional highs and lows, and she is continually alert to patterns that emerge from their behaviour and to the processes that generate behaviour patterns.

In other words, there is a double loop and mutual reinforcement in the capacities and practices that an engaged and caring parent brings to bear on her children's lives, and the capacities and practices cultivated by a sensitive and competent researcher. Saskia has benefited from the synergy between these two loops, capturing in her report both Maryam's insights and her own.

Maryam has in turn gained from the shared exercise of these capacities and practices. Her continued monitoring and analysis of her children's daily lives are enriched – by the reflective processes that she experienced through articulating her thoughts to Saskia – and are stimulated to new levels.

## Conclusion

The two women remain friends, and once a week Saskia accompanies Maryam and children home from school. Saskia tells Maryam that her boyfriend is keen to start a family together, but that Saskia would like instead to embark on doctoral research about how parents monitor their children's well-being, both intuitively and more consciously, in different ways. When she gains funding for this research, Saskia says, she will recruit Maryam as a research assistant. 'To talk to the Moroccan mothers?'



Maryam asks. 'No, you and I will talk to all parents together,' Saskia responds, 'and we will compare our different insights and perceptions.' It is a hard struggle to find funding for research, Saskia sighs, especially anthropological research. 'Research must be expensive,' Maryam agrees. 'All that paper...'

## Author

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