

1 Introduction: The Battle of the Books in Well-Being Studies

How can we make happier lives for more people? In a growing number of developed countries, experts and politicians consider this a fundamental question. In the twenty-first century, people's subjective experience of their own quality of life has become a key metric for assessing policy. In 2011, the United Nations unanimously adopted the resolution 'Happiness: Toward a Holistic Approach to Development'. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared that 'while material prosperity is important, it is far from being the only determinant of well-being'.¹ The *World Happiness Report* has since ranked nations based on the levels of citizens' overall sense of their perceived quality of life. Dozens of countries now deploy well-being accounts to supplement GDP and other economic measures (Diener et al., 2015; Durand, 2018).

The focus on 'gross national happiness' has been prompted by the growing realization that economic growth does not necessarily make people happier. Once national prosperity reaches a certain level – around \$10,000 in GDP per capita – further growth has a limited effect on human flourishing (Kahneman et al., 1999). But policies focused on increasing general levels of well-being have suffered a few setbacks. The common modern assumption, that economic and technological progress would ensure 'the relief of man's estate' (Bacon, 1960 [1620]: xxvii), has been compromised in many post-industrial societies by such phenomena as growing social alienation and atomization,² increasing depression rates, and pharmacological excesses. There is now evidence to the effect that young people no longer embody the idea of joyful and carefree life; rather, they are becoming victims of debilitating anxiety and despair (Foa & Mounk, 2019; Hellevik & Hellevik, 2021).

If economic growth will only take us so far, what could we try instead? Well-being scholars strive to answer this question. Positive psychology has been a thriving field since a 1984 article by Ed Diener, the recently passed founder of subjective well-being studies (Bakshi, 2019). Research on well-being has been called the 'hottest topic in social science' (De Vos, 2012). But considering the scholarly and political focus on making people happier – and our growing knowledge on drivers of human flourishing – experts are surprisingly unable to prescribe and implement policies that work. Their powerlessness is predictable. In spite of neurobiological advances, human nature remains an enigma with regard to what really makes us flourish and prosper.

¹ On 2 April, 2012, in a meeting chaired by Jigmi Y. Thinley, the Prime Minister of Bhutan, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, the first *World Happiness Report* was presented to review evidence from the emerging science of happiness; see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=400&nr=617&menu=35>.

² This atomization is more acute in authoritarian, than liberal, countries.

Most Western philosophers and psychologists refer to *happiness* as a value term, roughly synonymous with well-being or flourishing. In this reading, happiness is both an emotional and cognitive state involving positive experiences such as joy, love, curiosity, interest, and satisfaction. However, even a peremptory overview of the wealth of scholarly literature on well-being, shows a plethora of often contradictory definitions and conceptualizations. There are studies of *hedonic happiness* achieved through experiences of pleasure and enjoyment, and explorations of *eudaimonic happiness* gained through experiences of and purpose and harmony in one's life (Røysamb & Nes, 2016). Some psychologists talk about a *relational happiness*, dependent on positive (or negative) affects deriving from our interaction with family, friends, and strangers (e.g., Holmes & McKenzie, 2019; White, 2017).

Things are not made easier by philosophers, writers, and sages who have captured an often personalized, contextual nature of happiness. For Socrates, the key to happiness was self-knowledge. For Nietzsche, only cows were unequivocally happy; the great men could not be happy without suffering. Einstein supposedly believed that 'if you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things'.³ In short, happiness and well-being are 'mongrel concepts', to invoke Ned Block's (1995) apt formulation. Their uses and interpretations point to a mess. Similarly, the measuring of well-being is a subject of an ongoing controversy, though international ranking of countries of according to various – supposedly universal – happiness indicators have become an established practice of psychologists, UN commissions, and mushrooming happiness research institutions (Adler, 2019; Austin, 2015).

In this Element, we treat happiness as a positive, but often fleeting, affect which is but a component of a more comprehensive concept of well-being. We argue that well-being is a cumulative – cognitive and emotional – state involving happiness and a sense of direction or purpose – or meaning – which creates the durable basis of a fulfilled life. We can make do without enjoyment for a while, and even with little satisfaction. But if we lack the meaning of life – which often takes a lot of effort and sacrifice to find – we can be utterly lost. Without it, we cannot navigate life's inevitable challenges and crises. When we do have a sense of meaning, we can more easily face life with hope and inner peace, even in the most adverse conditions.

The notion of well-being is not only conceptually challenging. On a cultural level, it has become increasingly clear that the well-being field has relied too much on Western notions of what a good life should consist of. When the

³ <https://thomas-oppong.medium.com/why-einstein-said-if-you-want-to-live-a-happy-life-tie-it-to-a-goal-8063915f4515>.

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American Dream sanctified ‘the pursuit of happiness’, the project of maximizing pleasure and contentment became a transcultural aspiration. The United States Declaration of Independence portrayed such a pursuit as an unalienable right of all humans. But, as we know too well, there are always painful limits to unalienable rights, especially in the twenty-first-century United States.

Scepticism aside, for a long time it has been assumed that liberal democracy and individual rights were the keys to human flourishing. Diener contended that individualism is strongly predictive of well-being (Diener et al., 1995), a position with clear policy implications. Such West-centrism is now under siege. There is a growing strain of influential scholarly studies showing that Western perceptions of happiness have been too dominant and too intrusive in international indexes and rankings. There is now a more nuanced perception both of distinctive, cultural determinants of happiness, and of the ways in which positive psychologists have conceptualized and misconstrued well-being, be it in surveys or in qualitative research (Krys et al., 2021a, 2021b; Rappleye et al., 2020; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009; Uchida et al., 2009).

To mention but a few examples, in cultures influenced by Confucianism, well-being is more of an interpersonal concept. Since good relationships and social harmony are primary, it is assumed that well-being should be pursued in an interdependent manner, highlighting the role of roots and community as opposed to more independent and individualist Western avenues. In cultures where people are meant to do well together, individuals who pursue success and happiness on their own can be viewed as a threat to group flourishing. There is an increasing realization that in these cultural contexts, well-being should perhaps be assessed as a group phenomenon. Diener argued that the ways in which positive psychologists have measured well-being are ‘inherently democratic’ (Diener et al., 2009b), but, again, his concept of ‘democratic’ comes from a distinctly Western tradition (Henrich, 2020).

Individuals and cultures may also be averse to happiness. Some radical Buddhist schools of thought view a desire for happiness as misguided, if not outright harmful, much like the Western Puritans who closed theatres and abolished Christmas.⁴ In the Muslim world, there are subcultures that associate happiness with sin and shallowness. Many East Asian societies regard happiness as often deriving from immoral motives and actions (Joshani & Weijers, 2014; Uchida et al., 2004). These perceptions present a stark contrast to the

⁴ In 1647, the radically Puritan English Parliament outlawed Christmas services and the celebrations that went along with them; see www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Cromwell-Puritan-Christmas/; www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2022/december/who-waged-the-very-first-war-on-christmas-.html.

dominant Western views of individual happiness being closely entwined with satisfying individual appetites and aspirations (Braithwaite & Law, 1985).

World cultures represent a mosaic of multiple notions of the ideals of good life and human flourishing. Though space does not allow us to delve into detail, Hindu beliefs are especially intriguing as early intuitions and representations of evolution as a complex progress towards an ever-increasing well-being. The Hindu notion of the *Purusharthas* – or the fourfold path to human self-realization – seeks to create cultural conditions for the pursuit of the four goals of happy life: from the lower one, emphasizing sensuous and material pleasure (*kama*), through the pursuit of wealth and power (*artha*), ethical goodness (*dharma*), and on to attaining spiritual transcendence (*moksha*) (Parel, 2008: 41).

We shall return to the discussion of cultural determinants of well-being in successive sections. What well-being should entail, beyond covering basic needs, remains elusive. Scholars highlight a variety of possibly fundamental features, including the hedonistic (pleasure), eudaimonic (self-realization), cognitive (satisfaction), or objective (lists of goods) (Røysamb & Nes, 2016). Disagreement is also considerable with regard to well-being strategies. Should we really strive to maximize positive and minimize negative affect (Gruber et al., 2011)? Ideally, should everyone's ambition be to strive for everlasting happiness? Or was the Auschwitz survivor Victor Frankl right when he concluded, 'It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness'?

Another conundrum is offered by the conflict between individual and social strategies as these relate to the quest for happiness. We must consider the fact that many important sources of happiness derive from competitive success, which can include *schadenfreude* at another's loss. If I successfully pursue happiness, I may outcompete you in a manner that makes you less happy. When I win my dream job, partner, or other rival goods, others do not. The saying 'comparison is the thief of joy' seems particularly accurate in this context. If happiness depends on doing relatively well, then almost all individuals who compare themselves with their neighbours or peers are doomed to feel as failures at some level. One cannot be better in all things.

Paradoxically, since in-group contests tend to have more losers than winners, encouraging people to try harder to win what makes them happy is likely to entail a reduction of society's overall happiness. More competition might drive economic growth, but this may not benefit society as a whole. According to the *Easterlin paradox* (Easterlin, 1974; Hellevik, 2011; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008), an increase in GDP per capita is often not followed by an elevation of the population's overall sense of well-being. In our responses to income as a potential source of happiness, we resort to relative, rather than absolute,

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comparisons. An increase in national prosperity beyond \$10,000 GDP/cap makes little difference for the population's well-being (Kahneman et al., 1999). By contrast, when individuals earn more money and members of their comparison group do not, the extra income can have a significant effect on the individual's subjective sense of well-being.

The relational aspects of affluence beg the question: if we derive happiness not from what we have, but from what we have that those in our comparison group don't have, are happiness pursuits a zero-sum game? If so, there would be little policymakers could do to increase a population's overall happiness. An evolutionary inquiry into this and other questions within positive psychology can shed new light on the complex dynamics between the human desire for well-being and a whole palette of factors, from genes and cultural perceptions, to the role of altruism and cooperation, as well as the quest for meaning.

1.1 Outline of Sections

In this Element, we investigate human well-being through the evolutionary lens and assess the potential of evolutionary insights to inform policy and institutions designed to maximize human flourishing. We critically review influential literature that highlights what some scholars consider to be both biological and cultural universals – such as collaboration and altruism – and their relation to well-being (Bowles & Gintis, 2013; Haidt, 2006; Sober & Wilson, 2013; Welzel, 2013; Wilson, 2015, 2019).

In Section 2, we explore a strain in research on happiness that highlights cultural differences with regard to the ideals of good life and developmental paths (Krys et al., 2021a, 2021b). Large efforts are underway to develop quantitative surveys that – unlike the *World Happiness Report* – privilege culturally sensitive approaches to human well-being, studying the uniqueness of diverse normative patterns and ideas of social development. The question of whether the culturally sensitive and universalist approaches are at loggerheads is perhaps spurious. We argue that these perspectives complement one another by shedding light both on the distinctive traditions within, and on meeting points between, cultures.

In Section 3, we discuss the relationship between well-being and the ideas of good life as they evolved over millennia and across cultures. In spite of the cultural variety of eudaemonic ideals, there are striking parallels between various traditions that associate the good life with balance, working for the good of others, and the importance of compassion. These similarities spring from cultural learning and cross-pollination, but they also have a source in the evolutionary sciences' idea of a shared human nature. The increasing evidence

for the commonalities of human nature calls for revisiting the philosophical stance of cultural relativism, which undergirds the constructivist approaches of social anthropology and the humanities. We highlight the work of David Sloan Wilson's ProSocial agenda, as he comes closest to crafting a comprehensive vision of well-being as anchored in the ethos of work for the betterment of humanity and the planet.

In Section 3.2, we discuss an intriguing reversal in the dynamic relationship between the social and evolutionary sciences. Well into the twenty-first century, the agenda of the humanities and the social sciences rested on the idea of social improvement. Evolutionary biology was largely identified as the study of selfish genes that were taken to stand in the way of human moral advancement. In the last decades – while social scientists plunged into declinism – evolutionary thought moved to a hopeful history of humankind based on the salience of altruism, prosociality, and cooperation. What are the implications of this intellectual transition?

In Section 4, we present a novel, multilevel selection (MLS) model for well-being, which emphasizes how human evolution has occurred under two often conflicting pressures: individual and group selection. Individuals are incentivized to be selfish to outcompete in-group members. At the same time, individuals are compelled to cooperate with in-group members in order to strengthen the group for competition against other groups. We propose that it can be profitable to think of human well-being as having evolved to motivate individuals affectively to contribute both to their own and their group's success. Our contention in this Element is that approaching happiness and meaning as connected rather than disjointed involves a double-fold dividend. First, it counteracts a conceptual overabundance in the field of positive psychology. Second, it draws attention to how experiences of well-being help individuals manoeuvre between the potentially conflicting pressures of individual and group selection. We sum up these insights with the equation: 'Happiness + Meaning = Well-Being'.

Section 4 is supplemented with insights from seminal works of narrative psychology relevant for our focus on well-being and meaning. Jerome Bruner (1990) adds valuable narrative perspectives on the human search for meaning, as does Viktor Frankl (1946) with his groundbreaking work on logotherapy in the treatment of concentration camp survivors.

In Section 5, we draw attention to the Nordic countries – with Norway in the spotlight. We explore challenges to these nations' transition from being welfare states to becoming well-being societies. In the twenty-first century, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland have increasingly let their policies be guided by a shifting emphasis from welfare, whose basis is largely socio-economic,

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to highlighting human well-being – that is, creating institutional structures for helping citizens to create better lives for themselves. An important part of Nordic policy has been to socialize citizens into engaging in altruistic activities. A shift from economic growth to concentrating on citizens' well-being is not without frictions but it is increasingly part of the Nordic governments' agenda.

In Section 6, we sum up our findings and reinspect the policy implications of applying the evolutionary lens to well-being. Both insights from the literature we scrutinized and our multilevel selection model of human well-being inform an integrative approach to human flourishing, one that draws attention to its non-zero-sum sources. Our purpose is to offer a cross-culturally applicable framework for well-being that can be used to identify which policies are most likely to create happier lives for more people.

2 A Century of Well-Being Studies

The earliest scientific happiness studies seem to have sprung from Abraham Myerson's efforts around WWI to establish a field of 'mental hygiene'. The Harvard neuropathologist referred to his programme of *eupathics* as 'the more gracious sister' of eugenics. Instead of eliminating the unfit, eupathics aimed for 'the well-being of the normal' (Myerson, 1917: 344). Myerson equated well-being with happiness, understood primarily as a positive mood. Systematic happiness research developed in the following decades. In the 1920s and 1930s, subjective measures were employed in marriage studies, educational psychology, and personality psychology. This methodology was further refined in research within mental health, gerontology, and the social indicator movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Angner, 2011).

After 1960, large surveys of happiness began sampling entire nations. A main concern was to identify which personal characteristics correlated with feeling good. Warner Wilson concluded that the happy individual is typically a 'young, healthy, well-educated, well-paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry-free, religious, married person with high self-esteem, high job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex, and of a wide range of intelligence' (Wilson, 1967: 294).⁵ The complexity of survey results led researchers to conclude that happiness was not a uniform experience, but consisted of different affects driven by a variety of individual and social factors (Diener, 2009c).

The World Values Survey – administered in seven 'waves' from 1981 to 2020 – drove the emergence of global happiness studies. Over 100,000 respondents from around 100 nations have rated their life satisfaction on a 10-point scale. Since they also answered questions about values, income, education,

⁵ It is worth noting that Wilson's study does not consider race.