INTRODUCTION

Living well: Histories of well-being and human flourishing

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How have the social and behavioral sciences studied the meanings and conditions of human well-being and flourishing? And how have these sciences presented themselves as having the special expertise needed to understand and promote such matters? Consider the following indicators of recent academic interest in this area, including the formation of new programs, international forums, and special journal issues:

Under the umbrella of the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University, the Human Flourishing Program was founded in 2016, with a mission "to contribute to, bring together, and disseminate knowledge from various academic fields on topics fundamental to human flourishing, and to develop and implement systematic approaches to the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines." Noting that "a robust empirical research literature on these topics has now developed from sociology, political science, economics, education, psychology, medicine, public health, and other empirical sciences," the Institute’s website emphasizes the goal of integrating knowledge from the quantitative social sciences with knowledge from the humanities about "questions of human flourishing" (https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/).

Two years later, in 2018, Grenoble Alpes University in France hosted an International Forum for Living Well. The goal was to bring together researchers from a variety of fields, including biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, law, and politics, for the purpose of examining and discussing "the conditions of sustainable development in our contemporary societies and the well-living of their members" (https://bienvivre2018.org/en/home-page/). Similarly, in 2019, the journal Perspectives on Psychology published a special issue "devoted to highlighting the ways that psychological scientists are currently applying their knowledge and skills to make the world a better place," by building a "Healthier, Happier, and More Sustainable World" (Gruber, Saxby, Bushman, McNamara, & Rhodes, 2019).

These statements illustrate several salient features of recent approaches to the study of human well-being in the social and behavioral sciences, as do related articles and books on the sciences of happiness and human flourishing (e.g., Kaufman, 2019; Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017). They emphasize empirical, measurement-oriented assessments of happiness and well-being. They prize interdisciplinary research and collaboration. And they advocate for the popular dissemination and policy uptake of their work in the name of broader social improvement.

In contrast, during the past decade, many cultural critics and scholars have questioned what Sara Ahmed has called "the promise of happiness" as a normative model for human well-being (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Ehrenreich, 2009). Such critiques, informed by a variety of perspectives...
including feminist theory, queer studies, critical psychology, and neo-Marxism, have analyzed the historically changing meanings of well-being and happiness, as well as their recent alignment with consumer culture. They have also highlighted the focus on individual fulfillment and personal responsibility that undergirds much work in positive psychology and allied fields, without significant attention to broader social, political, and economic conditions and inequalities.

As a large body of historical scholarship attests, debates about the meanings, conditions, and measurements of human well-being are hardly new, however. Historical studies on a wide array of topics have examined, and sometimes critiqued, efforts by the social and behavioral sciences to improve human welfare. Currently, the state of research in this area is rich, but it is also diffuse as scholars pursue a number of worthwhile lines of investigation but typically with little cross-fertilization among them. Thus, a central aim of this volume is to foreground the question of how the social and behavioral sciences have engaged with matters concerning happiness, wellness, and human flourishing and to encourage sustained historical examination of related issues in the future.

This volume began with a call for papers framed in broad terms, by inviting essays that consider “how the social and behavioral sciences have attended to the meanings and conditions of living well and human flourishing.” We expressed interest in historical studies that investigate scientific work on these and related topics, that examine the social and intellectual contexts that have shaped such scientific inquiry, and that analyze the uptake of such work in the broader society. In the end, with the help of peer review evaluations, we selected four essays for inclusion.

Before introducing these essays, it will be useful to consider the state of scholarship on relevant topics. Below we highlight four major areas of inquiry in the history of the social and behavioral sciences that have engaged with questions of betterment, well-being, and flourishing, even if those questions were not always the primary focus of particular authors. We intend our discussion to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. One could find other studies worth including, and one could divide up the body of literature in other ways.

One noteworthy area of study has centered on the development of broad theoretical frameworks that invoke the language of progress to understand social change, along with implicit or explicit implications for living well. Here, we encounter a rich corpus of investigation on the evolution of western thought and social science since the Enlightenment, including works by such well-known figures as Adam Smith, Condorcet, Auguste Comte, and Karl Marx (Baker, 1982; Bourdeau, Pickering, & Schmaus, 2018; Hanley, 2016; Manuel, 1997). Many of their theories of social progress attributed a key role to scientific study, presenting it as the best way to gain knowledge about nature, human nature, and society, and as a powerful tool for stimulating social improvement. Their theories often drew contrasts between groups, for example, between so-called civilized and savage peoples, in ways that made these exclusionary delineations constitutive of the meaning of progress. In developing their theories of social progress, these figures took stock of a wide array of developments and factors that could impede or contribute to the well-being of the individual, even though their accounts did not focus narrowly on individual psychology and states of subjective well-being. For example, in his analysis of the conditions favorable to economic growth and the wealth of nations, Adam Smith offered a conception of a liberal society in which citizens enjoyed considerable political and personal freedoms and in which the state provided protection against various threats to their well-being, including violations against private property and external aggressions against society.

The Cold War history of modernization theory, which was elaborated by prominent social scientists including Talcott Parsons and Walt W. Rostow, offers a more recent example of a grand vision of social change with far-reaching implications for individual well-being. Modernization theory’s advocates posited a general movement from so-called traditional societies, which seemed to suffer from grave problems including widespread poverty, hunger, and disease, to modern societies, in which the ostensible amelioration of such problems rested on advances in modern science, technology, and medicine along with modernized political and social institutions. Modernization theory did not enjoy scientific respectability for long, however. By the late 1960s and 1970s, it had come under mounting criticism because of its questionable empirical foundations and worrisome policy uses, but also because the underlying ideas linking scientific advance to social progress and individual well-being were, according to some
critics, steeped in western assumptions and ethnocentric biases, thus rendering the theory deeply ideological rather than soberly scientific (Engerman, Gilman, Haefele, & Latham, 2003; Gilman, 2003; Rosembllatt, 2014; Scott, 1999). Moreover, some social scientists criticized the grand scale of modernization theory itself as an impediment to human flourishing and well-being (Immerwahr, 2015).

A second significant area of historical investigation has focused on the 20th-century rise of the psy-sciences and psychologically inflected views of the good life (Herman, 1995; Rose, 1999). The emergence of a therapeutic culture has accompanied this historical shift (Aubry & Travis, 2015; Illouz, 2008; Lear, 1983; Moskowitz, 2001). From the history of advertising to that of self-help movements, therapeutic culture, including the growth industry of psychotherapy, has informed the development of modern American consumerism, and vice versa. Other historical studies have examined how scholars from a number of fields, including psychology, biology, and psychoanalysis, developed theories about healthy emotional and psychological development and then promoted those theories in literature on parenting advice and other popular forums (Grant, 1998; Vicedo, 2013). As scholarship on antipsychiatry, health activism, and radical therapy has shown, historical actors, as well as historians and social critics, have bemoaned the individualistic focus of therapeutic visions of living well at the expense of broader challenges to structural inequalities, racism, and other prejudices (Richert, 2014; Staub, 2011).

The literature on therapeutic culture and self-help points to a broader nexus between the development of psychological and medical approaches to well-being, whose investigation constitutes a third relevant area of historical scholarship. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists of medicine have analyzed the shifting meanings of "health," framed not just as the absence of disease, but as a conceptually rich, and often ideologically normative, category. As Jonathan Metzl argues in Against Health, "'Health' is a term replete with value judgments, hierarchies, and blind assumptions that speak as much about power and privilege as they do about well-being" (Metzl, 2010, pp. 1–2). How, these scholars have asked, have medically inflected notions of health, wellness, body size, and behavior been held out as markers of living well and flourishing? And what roles have various groups of experts and other interested parties played in changing cultural, political, and scientific understandings of health and its relationship to terms such as happiness, wellness, and social progress?

The fourth line of historical investigation has aimed to contextualize, understand, and evaluate the recent burst of scientific scholarship that focuses on subjective measures of well-being and promises to illuminate, often with the help of quantitative analysis, such questions as, What makes individuals happy? How is being happy related to leading a fulfilling life? How is the Gross National Product related to the happiness of nations? How much control do people have over their level of subjective well-being? Much of the work in this area comes from fields that became established as distinct, recognizable areas of scholarly inquiry only in recent decades, including positive psychology, happiness studies, and behavioral economics. Yet in a rather short period of time, this work has become enormously influential, both within the academy and in the wider society (Ahmed, 2010; Horowitz, 2018).

The four areas mentioned above do not cover all of the historical scholarship that speaks to the questions raised in this special issue. But the general point should still be clear: namely, that even though historians of the social and behavioral sciences have not focused on matters of betterment, well-being, and flourishing as a central object of inquiry in a broad sense (within and across a wide array of contexts), the relevant literature from various streams of inquiry is extensive and rich.

With that in mind, this special issue contributes to the project of historicizing the scientific study of well-being. In the first paper Francis Mckay, an anthropologist, begins by noting the recent surge of western interest in modern mindfulness-based therapies (MBTs) and their connections to the eastern tradition of Buddhist meditation. Mckay then asks whether MBTs do, in fact, promote human well-being and flourishing as some of their proponents have proposed and as is suggested more generally by studies within cognitive science and psychology that have pointed to many benefits of mindfulness. In addressing this question, McKay develops a skeptical position rooted in a broad historical analysis of one key concept in the mindfulness literature: equanimity. Traversing an extensive time span and with reference to many different thinkers and traditions, McKay shows that equanimity, together with related ideas such as peace of mind and tranquility, was once commonly seen as an important moral virtue tied to good
character. However, especially since the 18th century, western scientific developments encouraged the view that equanimity is largely a matter of physiological calm. This process went hand in hand with what McKay calls the "de-ethicization" of equanimity. That, in turn, set the stage for the widespread recent interest in MBT's and the associated sciences of mindfulness, but with little connection to human flourishing in the sense of living a moral life and having a good character.

If ideas about religion and moral virtue have been deeply connected to notions of human flourishing, so too have attitudes about the body. The second paper, by historian of biology and medicine Nicolas Rasmussen, situates mid-20th century debates about the definition of obesity in the US in the context of the medicalization of morality, particularly in relation to the moral stigmatization of being overweight. Focusing on the influential physiologist Ancel Keys, who studied diet and cardiovascular health, Rasmussen investigates how Keys challenged the standard definition of obesity as excess weight in favor of his preferred understanding of obesity as high body fat content, or "adiposity." Keys also campaigned to replace obesity as measured by relative weight with the body mass index, claiming that the latter worked better as a predictor of heart disease. As Rasmussen shows, the debate over this technical distinction in obesity's definition was indebted to early 20th-century life insurance statistics, a surge in post-World War II popular interest in heart disease, and efforts by the insurance industry, the US Public Health Service, and epidemiologists to study and combat obesity as one of the risk factors for heart disease and thus a major impediment to living well.

The third paper, by historian of medicine Jessica Parr, examines the interface of popular psychology and self-help culture with American consumerism and dieting trends following World War II. In Parr’s story, commercial group weight loss programs, epitomized by Weight Watchers, harnessed the sciences of nutrition, behavioral psychology, and exercise physiology to a pre-existing, group therapy model of dieting. This combination served to shore up Weight Watchers’ profitability while also helping to redefine popular conceptions of healthy living in the US. In addition, this article highlights the contested character of expertise when it came to understanding and promoting human wellness during the 1960s and 1970s, which, Parr proposes, opened up a space for the emergence of a type of hybrid expertise based partly on professional science and partly on personal experience.

Business interests, as the previous papers suggest, have also been deeply intertwined with changing conceptions of well-being. From the 1960s to the 1980s, a funny thing happened in this area: after a wave of social criticism that attacked corporate work for inducing alienation and mind-numbing conformity, a radically different viewpoint that championed the workplace as a fertile site for human fulfillment became ubiquitous. To understand the nature and implications of this surprising development, historian of the human sciences Kira Lussier focuses, in our fourth and final essay, on the crucial role played by Abraham Maslow’s famous hierarchy of human needs and the uptake of this theory in the corporate world. Lussier’s analysis reveals the importance of management experts who studied, interpreted, translated, and implemented Maslow’s ideas so that corporate workers—including managers themselves—could fulfill their ostensibly higher psychological needs while contributing to corporate profits. Lussier also emphasizes that Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs as well as its appeal in corporate America must be understood in relation to other hierarchies rooted in racial, class, and gender inequalities.

As the authors of these essays make clear, the question of human betterment and its treatment in the social and behavioral sciences has been deeply influenced by broad historical trends and powerful social, economic, and political movements. In particular, their articles highlight the complicated interface of religious and psychological approaches to human flourishing, reveal how social scientific and medical understandings of health and well-being have intersected, and underscore the roles of consumer and corporate culture in these histories. In short, histories of living well as conceived of, studied, and promoted by these sciences are also histories of religion, medicine, expertise, capitalism, and the body. At the same time, these essays also underscore the considerable influence of particular individuals and interests, with various connections to the social and behavioral sciences, on the development and promotion of historically specific approaches to well-being.

This special issue encourages us to examine how the social and behavioral sciences have approached the matters of human betterment, well-being, and flourishing in historically and culturally specific contexts. We might
begin by asking: What did practitioners from these complex, multidimensional fields of scientific investigation mean in the first place when they talked about, and developed strategies for, living well?

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