Conclusion

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The chapters in this volume affirm the value not only of specialized, discipline-specific research on the nature of well-being—its antecedents, and its consequences—but also of synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship into a coherent body of research findings, theoretical explanations, and policy recommendations regarding well-being. Each of the 20 chapters makes a contribution to more than one scholarly discipline, and many bridge the social sciences and the humanities. In some cases, a disciplinary expert engaged with the methods or findings of an outside discipline. Other chapters were co-authored by scholars in the both humanities and social sciences. Still others were written by interdisciplinary experts. Beyond the individual chapters, the volume as a whole informs the meta-conversation about how scholars might draw on their specific expertise to transcend disciplinary boundaries and contribute to the collective work of conceptualizing and measuring well-being in ways that effectively advance our understanding of and ability to improve population health. In other words, we believe bringing together work from across often siloed disciplines will provide important insight regarding how individuals and social organizations can pursue the good life and build better societies. We hope that readers will appreciate each individual chapter on its own terms while also gaining a broader awareness of how the study of well-being might benefit from more sustained interdisciplinary dialogue. Ultimately, we hope our volume will encourage further efforts at synthesis by identifying and then building on areas of emerging consensus (see, for example, Chapter 17). The prospect of a "well-ordered" interdisciplinary science of well-being might continue to serve as guiding principle for work going forward (see Chapter 6).

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Consensus and Disagreement in the Interdisciplinary Dialogue about Well-Being

Nearly everyone is in favor of promoting higher levels of well-being. But despite this bedrock consensus, many chapters in this volume—especially those describing the lively debate about measurement recommendations in Part 4—confirm that disagreements will invariably arise about how to go about measurement. How should well-being be defined? What are its essential domains? Are these domains in conflict with each other, such that tradeoffs are inevitable for the majority of people? How should the domains be measured? Which pathways to well-being or apparent effects of well-being involve causal relationships and which observed associations are actually spurious? Perhaps most fundamentally, philosophers have devoted substantial attention to the issue of whether a "radical kind of pluralism" (Chapter 7, p. 225) must eventually shipwreck interdisciplinary conversations because the term "well-being" refers to multiple incommensurate underlying constructs.

We expect that the "systematic cleavage" (Chapter 9, p. 278) between empirical measures of well-being and philosophical conceptualizations will continue to present difficulties. Across and within academic disciplines, different "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1980) understand well-being in ways that prioritize some domains, conceptualizations, and pathways over others based on the social standpoints and foundational assumptions that are shared by members of such communities. Conflicts are frequently generated by the presuppositional fault lines that separate such interpretive communities. Our introductory chapter reviewed some examples, including the focus on happiness and life satisfaction currently ascendant within social science disciplines compared to the primacy of more eschatologically "ultimate" concerns in some of the humanities, especially theology.

Our volume does not aim to resolve such tensions. Postmodern perspectives on human cultural variation would argue that a complete resolution is neither possible nor desirable. On the other hand, emerging post-postmodernist streams of thought contend that such relativistic views are not necessarily definitive and that coherent integration may in fact be possible. One conclusion is clear from the chorus of voices across the disciplines represented in our book: the interdisciplinary field of well-being will be enhanced when scholars more fully appreciate the cultural presuppositions that guide their conceptualization and measurement decisions (for explicit statements to this effect from theologians, see Chapters 10 and 11;

from psychologists, see Chapter 3; from philosophers, Chapters 7 and 9; from sociologists, Chapter 15; and from psychologists and a philosopher, see Chapter 13). Even the seemingly innocuous act of creating a composite measure of well-being implies a "philosophical commitment, to a kind of even-handed pluralism" (Chapter 13, p. 403). Margolis et al. (Chapter 13, p. 403) conclude: "There is no such thing as a value-free measure of human flourishing. We are all philosophers."

To affirm this point is not to suggest that synthesis is impossible or that we cannot make progress. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of participants in the Interdisciplinary Workshop on Happiness, Well-Being, and Measurement held at Harvard University that launched this volume were able to come to a consensus on a set of shared recommendations for selecting measures of well-being for various purposes (see VanderWeele et al., Chapter 17; but see also the dissenting viewpoint provided by Ryff, Boylan, and Kirsch in Part 4). As editors, we thought that it was fitting to conclude the volume with an active discussion and debate. After all, the free exchange of ideas has always enlivened the humanities and social sciences. We encourage the scholars among our readers to examine the arguments in Part 4, reflect on their own scholarship as well as on relevant debates in their fields of study, draw their own conclusions, and offer their own contributions to the ongoing dialogue. As Ryff, Boylan, and Kirsch (Chapter 18, p. 521) so eloquently put it, "the arbiters of such matters will not be the authors of the current volume, including ourselves, but rather members of the scientific community and government officials who must make difficult decisions in how to assess well-being."

We believe that such choices will be better informed if decision-makers follow the principles articulated by contributors to this volume. We have already mentioned the value of greater attention to presuppositions, and it is important enough that we reiterate it again. In addition, it will be helpful to adopt several other strategies when seeking to gain greater insight into population health and well-being, including giving greater weight to well-designed longitudinal studies rather than cross-sectional research (see Chapter 5), considering the thoughtful methodological advice provided by Tay, Jebb, and Scotney (Chapter 3), drawing on the extensive accumulated wisdom of those who have led large-scale investigations (Chapters 1 and 2), attending to important group differences with regard to the experience and expression of well-being (Chapters 4 and 16), and following the tried-and-true principles that guide well-ordered science (Chapter 6).

Even with these principles firmly in mind, reasonable people will disagree. To take just one example, the recommendations provided by VanderWeele and 18 co-authors (Chapter 17) accept the reality that some large surveys that guide policy decisions about well-being will have room for only a small number of questions about well-being itself. Ryff, Boyland, and Kirsch (Chapter 18) object to this approach. In their response, VanderWeele, Trudel-Fitzgerald, and Kubzansky (Chapter 19, p. 536) contend that "it is better to include one [well-being survey item] than none at all" (cf. VanderWeele et al., 2020). Ryff, Boyland, and Kirsch (Chapter 20, p. 547) dissent from this viewpoint and suggest that such a "stance perpetuates a simplistic view of well-being." This debate underscores two distinct types of risks. On the one hand, there is the risk that social policy will be determined in the absence of data about well-being. On the other, there is the risk that policy will be guided by overly simplistic data. In both cases, there is potential for inadequately informed decisions. We hope that decision-makers who find themselves on the horns of this genuine dilemma are able to benefit from the debate presented in this volume. With time, the right way forward—or some middle ground—may emerge although this, of course, may vary by context.

In addition to clarifying such dilemmas, contributors to our volume also offered examples of integrative thinking that underscore the complementary ways in which distinct disciplines and schools of thought might cross-pollinate to advance well-being. For example, a resourceful philosophical synthesis of the core ideas of Aristotle and Lacan—two thinkers who begin with radically different assumptions about human nature—contributes to an cohesive conception of well-being that supports a hybrid of objective list theories and desire theories (Chapter 8). And, despite significant differences, core philosophical and spiritual ideals from both East and West tend to support a unified view of inner peace that may be broadly applicable across cultures (Chapter 15). In addition, and contrary to concerns about epistemic crises across disciplines, traditional theological reflection on health and well-being supports a holistic view that views these outcomes as deeply interconnected with social, political, and economic forces, consistent with influential perspectives in social science and public health (Chapter 10; Link & Phelan, 1995; Subramanian, Kim, & Kawachi, 2005). Similarly, an integration of philosophy and psychology guided the creation of a more comprehensive measure of meaning in life (Chapter 12) and the use of a psychological measure to engage with the concept of friendship as understood by philosophers (Chapter 9). Also worth noting is that the development of a

measure appropriate to one religious tradition can serve as a template for the subsequent elaboration of measures for other traditions (Chapter 16).

What Is Well-Being?

We conclude by returning to the question that motivated this volume: What is well-being? Our chapters demonstrate some of the substantial progress already made across disciplines, but we expect this question will continue to animate scholarly debate for many years to come. This is partly because people prioritize different aspects of well-being and quite often sacrifice one domain to enhance another (Adler, Dolanb, & Kavetsos, 2017). For example, theological virtues such as "poverty of spirit" or humility might be considered vices—"slave morality"—by philosophers such as Aristotle or Nietzsche (Chapter 10; Lee, 2014). Furthermore, "human life, as we experience it and investigate it in this world, is always already a complex mix of the good and the broken" (Chapter 10, p. 288). In other words, experiences cannot be neatly dichotomized into well-being or ill-being. Physical illness and its attendant suffering provide a good example. From a biomedical perspective, illness must be prevented or cured and pain must be eliminated. But from a spiritual perspective, illness and the suffering it causes may be viewed as a good rather than an evil when it awakens a person to their spiritual complacency and prompts the acquisition of virtue and spiritual growth. Illness is thus part of the "divine pedagogy" that purifies and refines the "spiritual intelligence" through suffering (Larchet, 2002, pp. 60–61). On this view, people who avoid serious physical illness may waste their lives by becoming content with hedonic happiness and unconcerned about deeper forms of meaning and purpose or spiritual well-being. Illness, rather than health, may be a gift.

Or consider physical safety, another apparently clear indication of well-being that becomes much more complicated once we adopt Messer's awareness of the world as an admixture of the good and the broken. When the first author of this concluding chapter was conducting interviews for a research project on the religious call to benevolent service (Lee, Poloma, & Post, 2013), one of the interviewees described the serious injuries he sustained from a violent assault that resulted from his ministry in a high-crime neighborhood. But the interviewee quickly turned the notion of safety on its head when he explained that, while growing up, his mother would frequently tell him that he was "not called to safety," that "the most dangerous place for Christians is

to remain safe," and that Christians are "called to follow Christ, to suffer, to be with folks who are hurting." Within his interpretive community, an altruistic physical sacrifice was a small price to pay for the meaningful forms of well-being that he experienced through his benevolent work in a neighborhood that could well expose him to future assault and physical injury. Well-being, like altruism, is deeply interconnected with a group's moral code and ability to generate life-giving solidarity—in short, with culture (Lee, 2014).

We suggest that our starting question "what is well-being?" must eventually point beyond the individual to a deeper question: "What is well-being for?" Well-being is, of course, an end in itself, and it can often feel as if it is the sole responsibility of the individual to find ways to attain it. However, most philosophical and religious traditions connect the individual attainment of well-being with features of social organization, or even divine action, that promote or inhibit this outcome, with virtuous individual and group actions that benefit others rather than self, with healthy community and intergroup relations (Chapter 14), and, above all, with self-transcendent ends. Maslow (1970, p. 272), for example, argued that happiness and other conventional measures of individual well-being are not the proper aim of life; rather, the goal is to reach a higher level of human development, to become "a sound member of the human species." For Christian theologians, "at the core of the Christian ideal of the spiritual life stands the practice of neighbor love" (Chapter 11, p. 325). It would seem that happiness as a by-product of virtuous actions that benefit others is preferable, in most ethical systems, to just coping and/or selfish hedonism. Promoting good even in difficult situations and reliably doing what is right as a leader in a community is central to well-being.

Such virtuous awareness can extend beyond individuals to organizations and larger groups. For example, some business organizations have created a virtuous culture that socializes managers to take responsibility for the prevention of fatal worker "accidents," while organizations with nonvirtuous cultures may promote the belief that worker safety is beyond their control (Haines, 1997). The physical well-being of workers is therefore enhanced by the virtuousness of the culture and the organizational leaders, and the same may be true for psychological well-being. More generally, many contemporary organizations are rife with stifling practices, dehumanizing structures, unsatisfying relationships, and disengaged members, so it is no surprise that Gallup polls across a variety of economic sectors routinely find that only

about one-third of members are "engaged" (Laloux, 2014; Miller, Latham, & Cahill, 2017). As complete well-being (VanderWeele, 2017) has attained more prominence among scholars, laypersons, and policy-makers, awareness among organizational leaders, members, and stakeholders is shifting toward understandings of well-being rooted in wholeness and virtue. More people are understanding their role as *stewards of the larger system* in which their organization is embedded, rather than attending only to duties required by their specific organizational role (Laloux, 2014; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). There is now a broad social movement developing around the goal of helping systems become more responsible for fostering complete well-being and equity for all, which is shifting the interdisciplinary dialogue about not only measuring well-being but also about determining who (and what) is responsible for promoting well-being (Well-Being in the Nation Network, 2019; see also Willett et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The chapters in this volume have made significant contributions to our knowledge of the interdisciplinary conceptualization and measurement of well-being. More work is needed, including the psychometric validation of many of the new measures that have been proposed, adding the voice of disciplines that were not as well-represented among our contributors (e.g., history and yet further engagement with economics and political science) and a more complete engagement with both concepts and data drawn from outside Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Lambert et al., 2020).

As we write these final words, the social, political, and human costs of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to expand. Now, more than ever, we need clear thinking and effective policy-making to promote well-being for all. Scholars will not be the only voices in the debates to come about how to do this. But we believe that the tools of our trade—a commitment to learn from past wisdom, the application of logic and reason, the systematic search for empirical truths, an ability to make sense of patterns in the data—will continue to be of indispensable value. We hope that this volume inspires further work in these directions and provides some guidance about how to bring different disciplines into hospitable dialogue.

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