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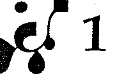
Contents

	Lists of Tables and Figures	vii
	Acknowledgements	viii
	List of Contributors	ix
Introduction	Anthropology, Happiness, and Well-Being *Gordon Mathews and Carolina Izquierdo*	1
	PART ONE: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	
Chapter 1	Why Anthropology Can Ill Afford to Ignore Well-Being *Neil Thin*	23
Chapter 2	Is a Measure of Cultural Well-Being Possible or Desirable? *Benjamin Nick Colby*	45
	PART TWO: WELL-BEING IN SMALL-SCALE SOCIETIES	
Chapter 3	Well-Being among the Matsigenka of the Peruvian Amazon: Health, Missions, Oil, and "Progress" *Carolina Izquierdo*	67
Chapter 4	Embodied Selves and Social Selves: Aboriginal Well-Being in Rural New South Wales, Australia *Daniela Heil*	88
Chapter 5	The Shifting Landscape of Cree Well-Being *Naomi Adelson*	109
	PART THREE: WELL-BEING, CULTURE, AND THE STATE	
Chapter 6	Well-Being: Lessons from India *Steve Derné*	127

 1

Why Anthropology Can Ill Afford to Ignore Well-Being

Neil Thin

> The goal [of ethnography] ... is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world ... what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him. In each culture, the values are slightly different; people aspire after different aims, follow different impulses, yearn after a different form of happiness. To study the institutions, customs, and codes or to study the behavior and mentality without the subjective desire of feeling by what these people live, of realizing the substance of their happiness ... is ... to miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man.
>
> Malinowski 1978 [1922], 25.

In his foundational text, Malinowski urged anthropologists to explore diverse views on happiness and the meaning of life. Imagine how you would feel if, similarly assuming sociocultural anthropology to be about things that humans care about, your proposals to study well-being received the following advice from colleagues:

> "That doesn't sound very anthropological: it's too individualistic and psychological. Not to mention ethnocentric and value-laden. We study relations, structures, and networks, not motives and feelings. We don't make evaluative judgments."

> "If you must explore psychology, avoid emotions and stick with cognitive psychology: explore mental maps, terminologies, and symbolic patterning, but not motives and feelings."

> "If you do look at emotions, focus on collective representations of these—rituals and language, not private experience."

> "If you still insist that emotional experience matters, dwell on the *adverse* emotions. Look at anger, hate, suffering, depression, fear, shame and embarrassment. Give love, aspiration, joy, and satisfaction a wide berth."

> "If you're still insistent on 'well-being,' you could treat it as a health issue, or use it as a heading but actually write about the things that go horribly wrong with people's lives."

Exaggerated though this may sound, academic social anthropology does seem to have been imbibing this kind of advice despite Malinowski's initial pleas. Sociocultural anthropology has been institutionally averse to the study of well-being. In his introductory textbook, Eriksen briefly alludes to the discipline's recent and marginal interest in the emotions, noting that "many anthropologists still take them more or less for granted and presume that they are inborn." Next, he notes the rise since the 1970s of attention to the "social construction of emotions" (1995, 227). The implication? Only when recognized as "socially constructed" are the emotions deemed worthy of anthropological study.

Though no serious anthropologist could deny that emotions are *both* inborn *and* products of cultural learning and social construction, and both private and public, in practice most anthropologists have treated them as natural and private, and therefore irrelevant to social analysis. We have been particularly reluctant to address *subjective* well-being, the experience of feeling happy, which is arguably how most humans feel most of the time (Diener and Diener 1996). Anthropologists have been far more interested in pathologies and oddities than in normality. Yet a responsible exploration of the human condition, surely, must from the outset offer some basic description of normal happiness. We could then try to interpret the great wonder of this almost universal achievement. How is well-being achieved, by different kinds of people, at various stages in their lives, in diverse contexts, despite the ever-threatening sources of harm and misery? Are these achievements really as uninteresting as Tolstoy implied in his brash opening of *Anna Karenina:* "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"?

Clearly meant as a teaser, Tolstoy's aphorism is often quoted as an intellectual sneer at the banality of happiness. Most anthropologists have similarly assumed well-being to be too boringly uniform to merit attention. Exceptions have largely been confined to the "lost Eden" myths that tell us how happy or affluent people were until modernity started spoiling everything. Famous examples of naïve romanticism and anti-developmentalism include Lévi-Strauss's claim in *Tristes Tropiques* that it "would have been better for our well-being" if mankind had stayed in the Neolithic stage of evolution (1973 [1955], 446); Lorna Marshall's book *The Harmless People* (1959), which portrayed the !Kung as happy and peace-loving, overlooking the appalling rates of !Kung-!Kung violence and murder; Turnbull's *The Forest People* which portrayed Mbuti life as "a wonderful thing full of joy and happiness and free of care" in which people remained blissfully insouciant towards the hardships and dangers of the forest (1961, 29); Sahlins's "Original Affluent Society" essay, claiming that hunter-gatherers are like Zen monks who attain well-

being by choosing simplicity (1968); Michelle Rosaldo's expressions of sadness at the advent of development that had robbed Ilongot men of their head-hunting fun (1980); and Norberg-Hodge's assertions that Ladakhi people had little experience of ill-being and poverty until development came along, but that their ancient sense of "*joie de vivre*" has survived despite these modern sufferings (1991, 83). Even Chagnon, whose gleeful cataloguing of grotesque levels of violence is somewhat at odds with the biblical Eden, changed the title of his well-known book from *Yanamamö: The Fierce People* (1968) to *Yanamamö: The Last Days of Eden* (1992).

Such texts lack any plausible theory of comparative well-being. Similarly, the credibility of our discipline is not helped by the kind of uncritical romanticism exemplified by Bodley's entry (2004) in the online edition of *Encarta,* which assures readers that anthropologists don't believe in progress, that their relativist approach has allowed them to reveal "that every cultural group lives in a way that works well for many of its people," and that "anthropologists work from the assumption that a culture is effective and adaptive for the people who live in it ... [and that] a culture structures and gives meaning to the lives of its members and allows them to work and prosper." I trust that most anthropologists today would not pretend that all cultures are equally good, and would recognize in principle that some cultures, or institutions, beliefs, and practices, are better than others at allowing people to achieve well-being and to achieve meaningful lives.

Anthropologists do seem to be allowed to refer to the goodness of life in their book titles, but only on condition that the main text is actually about the badness of life. You can write a book about the *Anthropology of Welfare* that is almost entirely about ill-fare (Edgar and Russell 1998), or a book about *Mental Health* that is entirely about mental illness (Desjarlais et al. 1995), or a book about *Human Rights* that is entirely about human wrongs (Wilson 1997), or, hedging your bets, you can write a book on *Contentment and Suffering* purporting to cover both sides of the story, but then largely forget about the "contentment" part (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994). Or you can just be an honest Tolstoyan, decide that extreme forms of ill-being and suffering are more interesting than well-being, and write about these without pausing to discuss what normal well-being might look like (Scheper-Hughes 1979, 1992; Kleinman and Good 1985; Kleinman et al. 1997).

Any discipline reluctant to study normality is going to have trouble studying well-being. It is this institutionalized incapacity that bedevils anthropology. It detracts from our relevance to the real world, and from our claims to scientific rigor and ethical standards. I am not arguing

against the study of oddities as a route to understanding normality. But communities of scholars must be prepared to find themselves odd too. *The cold-shouldering of well-being by anthropologists is itself a bizarre feature of the culture of academic anthropology, one that begs to be analyzed.* How can a discipline that for over a century has promoted holistic analysis of the important dimensions of human life have had so little to say about well-being and its place in cultural debate and narratives about the meaning or purpose of life? How can so many of us have explored meanings, processes, and patternings of society and culture with scarcely a glance at the ways in which humans enjoy their lives, or at their views on well-being?

My argument is in part normative: to be relevant and respectable, anthropology must (not just could or should but *must*) do much more than it has so far done to theorize and collate our contributions to the understanding of well-being (and of its pursuit and moral valuation) in diverse cultural contexts. My argument is also intellectual and introspective: by analyzing the well-being deficit in anthropology, we can learn much about the history and culture of our discipline.

Background: A History of Interest in Well-Being

In the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the philosophers whose work eventually made modern social science possible wrote extensively about "happiness" and related concepts like "welfare" and "utility." Locke, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Condorcet, Marx, Comte, and Spencer were all explicitly interested in promoting better understanding of happiness, and also in its relevance to social analysis and social policy. Adam Smith and Malthus both affirmed that happiness is the ultimate human goal—although the replacement of happiness with wealth soon earned the discipline of economics the title of the "dismal science," and by the start of the twentieth century, Alfred Marshall (1902) was to declare that economics was no longer directly concerned with well-being but rather with material goods.

Durkheim's strong interest in happiness, life satisfaction, and health is evident in all of his key texts. The psychological traditions were also steeped in happiness theory until the silencing of happiness crept in. Wundt and Freud wrote extensively on the meaning of happiness and its role in social life. It is most prominent in the work of William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is almost obsessively focused on happiness—as the ultimate good, as a personality trait of religious entrepreneurs and hence as the source of religious faith, and as a moral objective for programs of mental self-control. Given the silencing of research into happiness that took place during the first half of the twentieth century, it wasn't until the 1960s that even a tiny minority of psychologists began to follow his advice and focus on positive emotion and its manipulability.

Well-being research throughout the twentieth century has largely been dominated by philosophers, theologians, moral crusaders, self-improvement gurus, and more recently by psychologists and economists. Even writings on cross-cultural perspectives on happiness are authored almost entirely by psychologists (e.g., see Diener and Suh 2000, whose nineteen authors are all psychologists). Reference books and introductory texts on anthropology (including even key textbooks on psychological anthropology such as Bock 1980, 1988; Harré and Parrott 1996 [1985]; Schwartz et al. 1992; and Segall et al. 1999) typically have no entries on happiness or well-being. Rapport and Overing's (2000) collection of sixty essays on "key concepts" in anthropology includes none on well-being, happiness, human flourishing, emotion, or quality of life. The subject index of the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Barnard and Spencer 1996) skips blithely from "habitus" to "harmonic regimes" and "haruspicy" without a thought for happiness, and from "warfare" to "Wenner-Gren Foundation" with no nod towards well-being. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Veenhoven's introduction to the *World Database of Happiness* (1997), which heralds a breakthrough in social science research on happiness as a complement to nonempirical philosophizing, and which argues in principle for cross-cultural comparative studies of happiness, recommends no anthropological readings on happiness.

Identifying and Interpreting the Deficit

Anthropology can contribute to the cross-cultural understanding of well-being, but not without theoretical debate, a foregrounding of well-being in the discipline, engagement with the research on well-being in other disciplines, and some careful consideration of why hitherto the anthropology of well-being has been so weak and inexplicit. In an earlier paper on the anthropology of happiness (Thin 2005), I argued that the cross-cultural study of happiness was inhibited in twentieth-century anthropology by four sets of factors, each of which is similarly applicable to the well-being deficit.

First, there has been a *relativist/adaptivist* bias against evaluation and evaluative comparison, and in favor of naïve romanticism about some

non-Western cultures. In *Anthropology by Comparison,* Fox and Gingrich remind us of the sense of public responsibility that anthropologists felt in the 1920s and 1930s, part of which was to offer cultural comparisons that would be in the public interest. Since then, and particularly in the last two decades of the twentieth century, they argue, we have been neglecting cross-cultural comparison (2002, 1–3). Anthropologists have described situations and analyzed patterns without coming to explicit judgments about the good or bad quality of human experience. In anthropology and in cross-cultural or multicultural studies, relativism has acted as a strong deterrent against cross-cultural comparative moral judgments (for an excellent if pathological critique, see Edgerton 1992).

Second, the *pathological/clinical* bias has been more recently evident in the tendency to focus on suffering, ill-being, and adverse emotion. I have discussed this pervasive pathologism in the social sciences in my book *Social Progress and Sustainable Development* (2002). With well-being assumed as the default, ill-being attracts more commentary than well-being. Hollan and Wellenkamp tried to assess both "contentment" and "suffering" but focused on the latter, saying that for the Toraja they spoke and lived with, "happiness and contentment can best be defined as the occasional and fleeting absence of suffering and hardship" (1994, 28). Edgerton's critique of nonevaluative anthropology would have been better still if he had complemented his litany of maladaptive cultural practices with some portrayal of what an "adaptive" or "well" culture might look like.

Third, the *cognitivist/social constructionist* bias has steered anthropologists away from interpretation of emotions and experiences in social analysis. In part this bias arose in reaction to the excessive naturalism of biological determinists' and evolutionary psychologists' accounts of "basic emotions" and of their imputed influences on culture and social institutions. Rodney Needham's *Structure and Sentiment,* a structuralist manifesto against psychologism, epitomizes the cognitivist bias. He declared psychological interpretations of kinship systems to be "demonstrably wrong" (1962, vii–viii), and seemed oblivious to the simple point that no kind of account of kinship—whether it is descriptive, analytical, or normative—can reasonably be proposed without reference to the ways in which people emotionally experience kinship systems. Could this man be in some way related to the Rodney Needham who, just nineteen years later, was writing a scathing attack on anthropologists' failure to write about "inner states" as understood through "indigenous psychology" (Needham 1981, 56)? In this later work Needham exemplifies social constructionism, arguing reasonably

enough that anthropologists' naïve belief in universal inner states had made them neglect psychology. Social constructionist anthropologists since then have produced a great deal of interesting work on emotion, but this has been marred both by its pathological bias and by its often clumsy attempts to portray social construction as a better alternative to evolutionary psychology rather than as complementary to it (for good critiques, see Lyon 1995; Reddy 1997, 2001).

Finally, the *antiutilitarian* and *antihedonistic* biases combine to restrict anthropological understanding of motives and pleasures. Starting with Frazer's preface to Malinowski's *Argonauts,* anthropologists have shunned so-called utilitarian motives and explanations, rejecting as ethnocentric Western economists' assumptions about rationality. In doing so, they have revealed their own ignorance of utilitarian philosophy. Malinowski claimed to be antiutilitarian, but was wrong to think that by describing Trobrianders as spending effort on yam cultivation that was "unnecessary … from a utilitarian point of view" (1978 [1922], 60), he was showing the irrelevance of modern economics to the interpretation of culture. Trobrianders *do,* as individuals, see such efforts as necessary for their well-being, as part of the meaning-making project of life. As Elvin Hatch has recently pointed out, Malinowski's own functionalist theory "assumed a universal standard of good" and "rested on … a version of utilitarian theory whereby the practical benefits of institutions served as a standard for making judgments" (1997, 373). And since "utility" for utilitarians ranges from pleasure (Bentham 1948 [1776]) to "worthy" happiness (Mill 1863), anthropologists wanting to engage with economists or moral philosophers would need to be able to make subtle distinctions among diverse kinds of pleasures and motives. Yet antihedonism has prevented us from taking pleasure seriously as an object of enquiry. When Plath proposed research on enjoyment in Japan, his colleagues "regarded the project as preposterously amusing" (1964, 8). In the happiness-embracing culture of the 1970s US, Freedman found many thousands of people willing to answer questionnaires on happiness, but his research assistant found ethnographic enquiry almost impossible as people would only discuss it frivolously in groups and were too embarrassed to discuss it at all in private (1978). Clark's chapter 9 in this book is an effort to redress the anthropological neglect of pleasure.

To summarize the implications of these biases:

- The *relativist/adaptivist* bias impedes our willingness to make evaluative comparisons of the performance of social institutions, cultural beliefs, and practices in generating well-being.

- The *pathological/clinical* bias limits our ability to say what makes people well or have a good life, as opposed to what makes them suffer and have a bad life.
- The *cognitivist/social constructionist* bias inhibits the discussion of feeling, impoverishing our descriptions and interpretations. When we do address feelings, the constructionist bias inhibits recognition of the intertwining of culture with genetic and biological factors in the generation of feeling.
- The *antiutilitarian/antihedonistic* bias prevents communication between anthropologists, moral philosophers, and economists on the meaning of utility and its relation to motives, and inhibits due recognition of the diversity of motives that are related to pleasure.

Three Kinds of Interest in Well-Being

"Well-being," like "happiness," may be too broad for analytical purposes. We must distinguish three kinds of reasons for studying well-being: to understand *feelings, evaluative meanings,* and *motives.*

- *Feelings:* Following the leads of the "anthropology of experience" and the "subjective well-being" movement, we must try to understand how people feel—about themselves in general, about relationships, institutions, processes, and events, and about the nonhuman environment. The idea of "feeling well" is the core meaning of "happiness." For psychologists, feeling well has two independent dimensions: having good feelings, and minimizing bad feelings. Many of our individual efforts and social policies are aimed more at minimizing suffering than at optimizing happiness.
- *Evaluative meanings:* Following the leads of moral philosophy and the "quality of life" and "social indicators" movements, we must try to understand how people make meaning in their lives by evaluating the quality of their own lives and those of other people, both in general and with reference to specific domains. This secondary meaning of "happiness" is better called "life satisfaction." As many famously miserable creative geniuses have shown, it is possible to "live a good life" (in that you and/or others evaluate your life positively) without much happiness. Many commentators on so-called collectivist societies have noted that people are less concerned with feeling good than they are in individualistic societies, because instead they emphasize living well in the prosocial sense (see Derné, chapter 6).

- *Motives:* Following the leads of various approaches to the study of motivation (in psychology, economics, and religious studies, as well as within anthropology itself), we need to explore the ultimate motives that end in themselves. Motives include not only the desire to feel good but also the desire to have a life that is "good" in the sense that it is meaningful and judged well by other people in accordance with social principles. Further, religious motives include the desire to be judged well by supernatural beings and to live well in an afterlife, and nature-lovers want to harmonize with the nonhuman environment.

Universals and Diversity in Well-Being

Building on these distinctions, I propose three assumptions about attitudes to well-being that have perhaps universal cross-cultural validity despite occasional skeptical or countercultural philosophies:

- In all cultures, most people most of the time want to feel good and want to make the other people with whom they empathize feel good. Concepts of well-feeling play central roles in individual and collective motives.
- All cultures distinguish "feeling well" from "living a good life," and base much of their moral debate and existential meaning-making on this distinction.
- All core moral codes (despite rhetorical countermoralities) endorse the idea that it is better in principle (i.e., in the absence of exceptional strategic reasons such as punishments) to try to help other people to feel well and to live a good life than to try to make other people feel bad and live a bad life.

In response to academic neglect, such statements assert the universality of popular interest in well-being and remind us that well-being matters in diverse ways that aren't just about individuals feeling well. Far from pushing well-being into the background domain of uninteresting truism, these claims about universals pave the way for careful analysis of how approaches to well-being differ among individuals and according to cultural context.

The diversity of well-being concepts and motives are worth exploring more fully than has been done so far. We must recognize that individuals, cultures, and specific cultural contexts vary in their degree of emphasis on hedonism (valuing good feeling, wanting to feel good,

and by extension wanting to make others feel good) versus evaluative meaning (valuing lives that are rich in meaning). In some philosophies, happiness is defined as just one among several life purposes—ranking alongside rather than above others such as virtue, religious merit, and knowledge. We may all want to feel good, but we vary greatly in the degree of deferment that we are willing to accept. Some individuals and cultures may see lifelong daily happiness as the desired norm. Others put much more emphasis on working, suffering, and deferring pleasures now in order to achieve happiness later in life or in an afterlife.

Discussions about altruism can similarly be helped by exploring unities and diversities in attitudes to well-being. People vary in the extent to which they see their well-being as dependent on other peoples' well-being, or on their contributions to others' well-being. The concept of altruism itself can refer either to making other people feel good, or to helping them lead worthy lives. Furthermore, there are diverse views on how to achieve well-being, and great variation in people's ability to imagine and respect other people's and other cultures' alternative routes to well-being.

Norms for the display of well-being are also highly variable. Attitudes or principles concerning the display of happiness vary in terms of whether it is good to display it in general, and in terms of whether happiness display is more or less appropriate for young or old people, men or women. Situations vary too (is it good or bad form to be happy at weddings or at funerals?) as do relational contexts (is it good or bad form to be cheerful and smiling in the company of a superior?). So too with the meaningfulness or worthiness of lives: this may be a matter for public display or something to be kept strictly private.

Axes of Semantic Distinction

To understand how "well-being" is used, we must identify the axes along which differentiations of meaning are made. The list below suggests some lines of enquiry that would help us to identify how the terms are used.

Positive versus Neutral

Well-being sounds positive, but can be used in a neutral sense as in common neutral uses of height or breadth or health. Ironically, this neutral usage allows well-being to be used as a heading for texts on ill-being. It is also theoretically possible to distinguish *value-laden* or *normative* versus *value-free* uses of "well-being": for most people the term implies values and value judgments, but it is possible to describe well-being concepts without being judgmental.

Residualist versus Constructive Approaches

The World Health Organization has made famous the idea that health is more than the absence of illness, and that well-being is more than just the absence of ill-being. Yet most institutions and texts relating to health and well-being still treat these concepts in a residualist way as the (hypothetical) absence of avoidable suffering or impairment. Most activity and policy under the health and well-being rubrics is about ridding people of illness and avoidable suffering. The need for constructive rather than residualist approaches arises in part because well-being requires not just an escape from harm but a set of balances between undesirable extremes. The UN buzz-phrase of progress as the "expansion of choice" arose from recognition that poor people have restricted choice, but as a slogan for progress it is inept, since people need enough choice to pursue well-being but not so much that they are confused all the time. Nor are *security* or *peace* equivalent to social goods if they are too complete: individually and collectively we depend for our happiness on some amount of indeterminacy and disturbance in our lives, so the removal of insecurity and conflict are not in themselves viable strategies for well-being.

Short-term versus Long-term Orientation

Pleasure and *joy* tend to refer to relatively short-term or momentary well-being, whereas *life satisfaction, happiness,* and *fulfillment* tend to refer to long-term orientation. Much of the debate about the morality of hedonism turns on the semantics of pleasure, and specifically on whether or not it means mainly private, short-term, and bodily pleasure or more prosocial, lasting, and mental or "higher" pleasures.

This-worldly versus Other-worldly Orientation

Most people worldwide anticipate an afterlife. Many also aspire to and apparently enjoy experiences or states of being called, for example, "ecstasy" or "bliss" that are "otherworldly" in that they happen outside normal consciousness. The Buddhist concept of nirvana shares some of the semantic meanings of well-being and happiness, but is also distinctive to the extent that it emphasizes detachment from normal sources of both well-being and suffering.

Experiential versus Conceptual or Evaluative Orientation

Accounts of well-being can be about people's actual *experiences,* or about their *conceptualizations* of their experiences. Too many reports from surveys eliciting information about self-reported happiness forget this crucial distinction, and slip too easily from factual assertions about self-reports to speculative assertions about how happy people are. Mathews in chapter 8 recommends that anthropologists focus mainly on concepts rather than experiences, since the latter are too elusive for study. A different but closely related distinction is between *emotional* and *cognitive* meanings—between *feeling* well and *thinking* we are well.

Subjective versus Objective Well-Being

Subjective well-being means happiness in the sense of feeling good. Hollan in chapter 10 sees individual subjective experience as the core meaning of well-being. But both of these terms may be extended to include assessments of well-being, which, although still focused on individuals' experience, are also objective to the extent that they treat the experiencer (who may be the self doing the appraising) as an object to be studied. When social psychologists ask people questions like "Taking all things as a whole, how well would you say your life is going?" they are assessing life satisfaction, but they often call this "subjective well-being." Actually these are *objective* assessments (by researchers) of *objective* assessments (by informants) of their own *subjective* feelings.

Aggregative versus Integrated Assessment

Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian ideal of a "felicific calculus," never implemented despite his detailed lists, is the defining example of an aggregative approach to well-being. He saw happiness as the sum of pleasures minus pains. Most people more sensibly recognize that the process of assessing well-being, while it may involve some degree of mental addition and subtraction, is more importantly a process of *meaning-making,* interpreting the quality of life in an integrated way.

Domain-specific versus Holistic/Inclusive Assessment

Inclusive (or "global") assessments of well-being are problematic because of noncomparabilities between different domains of experience. Some researchers find it more meaningful to assess well-being in specific domains. The kind of happiness we seek or expect at work might be seen as utterly different from the kinds of happiness we associate with family life or leisure activities or religion. Whereas terms like *flourishing* and *happiness* are multidomain inclusive terms, *flow* can be either inclusive or can refer to good feelings that derive from a very specific activity, and *fun* refers to the moods or feelings deriving from a fairly restrictive set of activities belonging in the leisure domain.

Physiological versus Metaphysical Assessment

Well-being is commonly used restrictively as a fashionable synonym for health. In English, the core meaning of *well* is understood as referring to the body, so that "feeling well" in the health sense can be distinguished from "feeling good" in the more holistic sense, including mental well-being. For this reason, anthropologists wanting to make more inclusive analysis of well-being might sensibly choose a more obviously inclusive term like *flourishing,* or complement attention to well-being with attention to *happiness,* which clearly has metaphysical meanings beyond health alone.

Egocentric versus Sociocentric Assessment

Most discussion of well-being focuses primarily on individuals, and only secondarily on the social systems and relations that facilitate or inhibit individual well-being. Arguably, though, well-being and related concepts can be applied to aggregates of people. Nations or cultures are sometimes described as "well" or "sick," and social occasions can be "happy" or "sad." Not everyone readily understands the idea of assessing well-being from an egocentric point of view. The stereotypical North American/European view of happiness as a personal pursuit has been said to be anathema to people from collectivist societies who assess well-being in sociocentric ways. This is discussed at length by Derné in chapter 6 and by Heil in chapter 4.

Arousal versus Calm

Is the quality of a person's life best evaluated according to its excitement or according to its quietude? This kind of question has long exercised philosophers, and it occasionally surfaces in anthropology—explicitly in Hollan and Wellenkamp's discussion of Toraja views on contentment as the fleeting absence of suffering (1994, 28), and implicitly in Rosaldo's sadness at the demise of head-hunting that had allowed men to enjoy a high-contrast life of indulgence in peaks of high-energy rage followed

by periods of calm (1980). "Happiness" poses analytic problems because it covers both extremes of the arousal-calm continuum, serving as a synonym for both exuberant joy and quiet contentment.

Where Would Anthropologies of Well-Being Fit In?

There are a number of key areas of anthropological study that simply *must* make well-being central to their enquiries. Research and writing on morality, value, development, human rights, poverty, health, and mental health all fall into this category. All offer promising opportunities for engagements with happiness studies, moral philosophy, and the social indicators movement. All these areas of anthropological enquiry, to varying degrees, have fallen short of adequate engagement with discussions of well-being.

The well-being deficit is most conspicuous in the anthropologies of morality and value, which have been rightly declared by their exponents to be strikingly weak areas of anthropology (Edel and Edel 1959; Overing 1985; Howell 1997; Laidlaw 2001; Graeber 2002). Laidlaw has argued, reasonably, that "there cannot be … [an] anthropology of ethics without … an ethnographic and theoretical interest … in freedom" (2001, 311). But like most of the anthropologists writing about ethics, Laidlaw misses the most fundamental weakness, namely the lack of any theorizing of well-being in both anthropological ethics and in the anthropology of ethics. We need to ask the question: "Freedom to do what?" We could then argue that there cannot be an anthropology of ethics or of freedom without developing an anthropology of the ultimate goods that we might be free to choose. You cannot plausibly discuss good behavior without discussing people's views and rationales concerning good feelings and good lives.

So while ethnographies and cross-cultural analyses of value systems and moralities have provided helpful insights for the study of well-being, they have not themselves been evaluative in relation to a set of well-being criteria. Ethnography is not entirely nonevaluative. Many anthropologists have written passionate accounts of avoidable suffering, violence, and repression, telling of children denied the opportunity to play, adolescents and circumcised women denied sexual enjoyment, commoners denied livelihoods and dignity, and women battered or murdered by husbands and kin. But without a basis in some comparative account of universals and diversities in well-being concepts and experiences, such moral critiques are on shaky ground even when they resonate with the "gut feelings" of most readers. This comment applies

particularly well to Raoul Naroll, whose ambitious and idiosyncratic work *The Moral Order* (1983) is a rare attempt at systematic cross-cultural comparison of well-being and morality. Seeking to demonstrate that "moralnets" (dense networks of good social connections) are the key to happiness worldwide, Naroll approached this challenge without a clear concept or theory or ethnography of well-being, and by measuring not well-being but a list of "social ills."

Similarly, it is embarrassing for the discipline to have professional codes of ethics (e.g., ASA 1999; AAA 1998) that pontificate on the good behavior of anthropologists, and on their responsibilities towards the well-being of the people they study and of humanity in general, with no reference to any theories or empirical studies of well-being or happiness. It is similarly awkward that collections of secondary texts discussing anthropological ethics (Fluehr-Lobban 2002 [1991]; Caplan 2003; Meskell and Pels 2005) show virtually no interest in well-being.

In clinical anthropologies of development, human rights, poverty, health, and mental health, anthropologists are indeed concerned with well-being, but in a residualist way. The problem here is largely with the emphasis on pathology that has prevented these anthropologists from distinguishing the avoidance of ill-being from the promotion of well-being. Anthropologists involved in applied work in these domains have focused mainly on the avoidance and relief of harm and suffering, downplaying the different challenges of conceptualizing, assessing, and promoting well-being. Development anthropologists focus on poverty and/or on the harm done by bad development policies and projects. Human rights anthropologists, like human rights theorists and activists more generally, focus almost exclusively on human wrongs, as I have mentioned. Arguably the most striking and important instance of the pathological bias is the *World Mental Health* report (Desjarlais et al. 1995). This was perhaps anthropology's biggest opportunity to make a global impact on the cross-cultural understanding of well-being. It made useful contributions to the appreciation of the diverse concepts, causes, and treatments of mental illness, but had little to say about mental health. After acknowledging that "mental health is not simply the absence of detectable mental disease but a state of well-being" (1996, 7), the authors forgot about well-being altogether.

Health ethnographies use the term *well-being* from time to time, but largely without exploring its meanings. Wallman and her coauthors' book *Kampala Women Getting By: Wellbeing in the Time of AIDS* is an interesting ethnography, but lacks any substantial analytical contributions to the understanding of well-being. Well-being is mainly understood here as a slight broadening of the concept of health, not as a

focus for discussion of ultimate human values or the rich diversity of valued experiences. Still less in evidence is any overall ethical conclusion about quality of life. Some effort was made to elicit women's views on "feeling good," but the book has little to say about how they actually feel about life in general, and concludes lamely that "inevitably questions of feeling are subject to interpretation and not suited to empirical survey" (Wallman et al. 1996, 108–10), thereby implicitly condemning as worthless all social psychologists' efforts to measure happiness, but not offering anything else in their place.

In the third of three volumes on "social suffering," Das et al. (2001) give an unfulfilled introductory promise that the essays are about the "reimagination of well-being" and about people remaking their lives after severe social traumas. Interpreting such accounts can offer important insights based on the extraordinary fact that people continue to remain alive and human at all, let alone achieve well-being, following such obscene shocks and suffering. Yet the essays don't address well-being as an achievement or as an aspiration, nor do they discuss the relevance of these extreme scenarios to other kinds of human situations. Similarly, Kleinman's other contributions to the anthropology of mental illness and suffering could have been more instructive if they had included cultural accounts of well-being. Scheper-Hughes's *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* (1979), a popular classic on mental illness, unhappiness, "demoralization," and "cultural disintegration," offers 240 pages of unmitigated misery without pausing to consider who, in rural western Ireland in the 1970s, was mentally well, or what their aspirations and concepts of well-being were.

Another set of problems in these clinical domains arises from a focus on interim processes rather than ultimate values and outcomes. Edgar and Russell's *The Anthropology of Welfare* (1998) promises in its promotional blurb to "provide an overview of what anthropology has to offer welfare studies and vice-versa." Yet by using "welfare" in the ethnocentric and narrow sense of European state policies for addressing particular kinds of unmet need and suffering, it forgets the cross-cultural approach altogether. The book also ignores well-being, focusing instead on dependency, community support, and service provision to disadvantaged people. Worthy though such accounts may be, it is baffling that authors didn't think to base their (usually implicit) advocacy for improved welfare services on any kind of theory of well-being and its causes, and that they did not think a cross-cultural perspective on well-being and on welfare services might have helped. By contrast, the social psychologist Ruut Veenhoven (2000) did systematically analyze well-being and welfare services across forty nations from 1980 to 1990: his findings show a controversially awkward lack of correlation between so-called welfare investments and well-being outcome measures. Since part of the controversy turns on how to define well-being across such diverse contexts, it is easy to see how some detailed ethnographic data and analysis on well-being could helpfully insert itself into policy debate.

Two other major recent collections of well-being studies conducted mainly by sociologists—Bradshaw's review of *The Well-being of Children in the UK* (2002) and Hermalin's four-country study of *The Well-Being of the Elderly in Asia* (2002)—might perhaps have been greatly enriched through the contributions from anthropologists' qualitative ethnographies and holistic analysis. But neither anthropologists nor even the theme of well-being itself got invited to the party. Look beyond the cover or the title of most "well-being" texts and you will find little about well-being. Just as the majority of "mental health" texts are actually about mental illness, so "well-being" is typically used as a euphemism for discussions of poverty, ill-health, and suffering. To team up effectively with other social scientists in order to enrich understanding of well-being, anthropologists will have to fight not only for recognition of the value of cross-cultural and ethnographic approaches, but also for recognition of well-being in the positive, constructive sense that the term implies.

In addition to these areas where explicit interest in well-being is essential, there are many other strands of anthropological enquiry that could clearly benefit from insertion of well-being themes. These are indicated in Table 1.1.

Conclusion

People everywhere show concern for the well-being of people they encounter and care about. To be humane, indeed to be authentically anthropological, anthropologists must show that they share this concern. Conventions for greetings show some of the diversity of this concern. When I first visited India, I was struck by two kinds of greetings uttered in Indian English. People would often ask me: "Have you taken your meals?" or "Your parents, they are there?" Both enquired about my well-being, but quite differently from the "How are you?" question I had been brought up with. The "meals" question shows a strong cultural emphasis on food as an idiom of social relations. If someone is hungry, it is a potential constraint on the relationship you may have with them: either you must be polite and feed them, or avoid them. Among poorer

Table 1.1 Potential Engagements between Anthropology and Well-Being Studies

1. Essential engagements	
Anthropology of...	**Rationale for engagement**
Morality, value, altruism, philanthropy, and religion	Serious discussion of morality is not possible without reference to theories of the good, or what it means for a human life to go well. The anthropology of religion offers important insights into the collective generation of well-being, and into concepts of well-being in utopian visions and beliefs about after-life rewards.
Development, human rights, and progress	Activities and policies aimed at promoting "goods" and/or eliminating "bads" must be based in analysis of how ultimate goods are defined.
Ill-being, poverty, suffering, and harm	While ill-being is not just the converse of well-being, the two concepts are closely related and in part mutually constituted, so no analysis of ill-being is adequate without theorizing of well-being.
Health, mental health	These two concepts between them account for a major part of what "well-being" means. Yet most anthropological writing under these rubrics actually belongs under the "ill-being" rubric, and its inadequacy stems from a generalized failure to consider what people consider health or mental health to be.
2. Desirable engagements	
Anthropology of ...	**Rationale for engagement**
Politics	The "who gets what, when, where, and why" questions beg for analysis of the different well-being outcomes for different categories of people under different kinds of political regimes and processes. Political anthropologists could also discuss what utilitarian policies and their outcomes might look like, and how they might be interpreted, in different cultural contexts.
Violence and peacemaking	It is time to overcome the pathological bias and explore the cross-cultural understanding of the peace, security, and excitement components in well-being.
Consumption	Consumption theorists could go beyond their analysis of symbolic meanings of goods, displays, and exchanges, and link the analysis of the desire for goods with the analysis of well-being concepts and aspirations.
Work	Studies of work are inadequate if they do not represent the affective and meaningful dimensions of the quality of working life.
Leisure, play, sport	Given their close association with pleasure and fun, leisure activities are essential components in all people's conceptions of the good life.

people, at least in the past, the ever-present threat of hunger would no doubt lead to a close equation between well-being and food. The question about the "thereness" of my parents is rather more complex, seeking assurance of my basic social connectedness but perhaps also revealing a deeper concern with the existential dimension of well-being.

Two anthropological articles on well-being have recently discussed this theme. Charlton's speculative article on evolution and "the meaning of life" (2002) argues that humanity evolved as a species that felt (as hunter-gatherers) both "happy" and "at home in the world," and that feelings of division and alienation are by-products of cultural change since the development of agriculture. In this account, concern with well-being would have been unnecessary for most of humanity's existence as hunter-gatherers. Agriculturalists would later have developed concern for well-being as part of their worries about the food supply and about the social placements through which production, distribution, and consumption of food is organized. This latter is well illustrated in Beverly and Whittemore's account of how rural Mandinka people in Senegal enquire about well-being. Adult greetings are not "How are you?" "I am well" but "Where is your mother?" "She is there." Such exchanges "express the ideal state of well-being. ... To be 'there' where one is supposed to be, is to be fine and at home in the Mandinka world" (1993, 270). These two items, like the ethnographies in this collection, well exemplify the rich interpretive possibilities of the anthropology of well-being.

This chapter has identified the inadequate attention to well-being in most anthropological work so far, and explored the causes of that inadequacy and the damage it does to the discipline. Anthropological engagement with the fundamentals of moral debate has been embarrassingly weak, and to set that right we must make the comparative analytical and empirical study of well-being central to our concerns. Without such attention, we cannot expect to offer adequate descriptions of human experience or human nature. By developing an anthropology of well-being, we will greatly improve our ability to offer culturally sophisticated contributions towards making the world a better place for people to live in.

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2

Is a Measure of Cultural Well-Being Possible or Desirable?

Benjamin Nick Colby

Any study of well-being, however characterized (cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, social) must consider both the level and objective of analysis. At the very simplest, one can measure a psychological state, a state of subjective well-being or happiness with a five-item questionnaire about how satisfied respondents are with their lives (Diener and Suh 2000). One can go further by asking people what makes them happy, or how they define a successful life. These answers can be ranged along different levels of generality. A more detailed ethnography of people's goals, values, and attitudes will produce a large amount of data that then must be processed ethnographically. However, aside from ethnography-based, or primary-data approaches, there is a different, theory-based approach that has rarely been attempted by anthropologists in the study of cultural well-being. In this chapter, following a discussion of the nature and history of the anthropological study of well-being, I discuss the foundations of one such theory. But let me begin with the problem of culture.

The Problem of Culture and Cultural Relativism

A major reason why anthropologists have shied away from investigation into well-being, and a major hurdle that theory-based approaches to well-being have to surmount, is the problem of cultural relativism. This problem is illustrated by what I call Freud's impasse. In his *Civilizations and its Discontents,* Freud speculated that it would be quite possible for an entire culture or civilization to be psychologically sick (he said neurotic) just as an individual might be (1961 [1930], 102). However, Freud went on to point out a difference between the diagnosis of a culture and that of a single person. Individuals can be judged to be sick on the basis of how they differ from the norm. But who is to say what the norm for a culture or an entire civilization might be? There

is no way, Freud argued, to determine norms for such an entity (1961 [1930], 103).

I am convinced that Freud was wrong, in that he based his argument on an inadequate theory of culture. He was using the conventional view of his day—one that happens to be, in its essentials, the same notion of culture used by anthropologists and the general public even now. This is the notion of culture as superorganic, as an autonomous entity that transcends individual human beings. This was applied to everything from a civilization to a band or tribal society. Most subjects of ethnography in the first half of the twentieth century lived in relatively small groups, localized in some particular geography. With the shift in compass from a broader civilization to a narrower island view, the word *culture* was often used in the plural or used as a count noun rather than a mass noun, that is, a specific set of patterns in some coherent configuration rather than a broader, less bounded view of culture as a mass, like water or sand. In either case, however, culture was seen as above and beyond biology and hence "superorganic." This attached to culture a sense of spurious natural history. Just as people classified butterflies or other orders of animals, so also might one distinguish and classify different cultures by their often strange or colorful characteristics.

This superorganic notion, and its numerous variations as a spurious natural history unit, was handed down from Boas through Kroeber, Herskovits, Benedict, and other anthropologists among Boas' students in the first half of the twentieth century. That same notion, usually in the narrower island or tribal variant, is still with us. As long as we keep to this view of culture as a count noun, as something over and above the biology of individuals, ethnographic studies of cultural well-being are not likely to provide a cumulative basis others can build upon with any success.

The major reason for Freud's impasse in determining the normality of culture was the relativism usually associated with this idea of culture, rendering comparison impossible: each bounded culture, this view holds, has its own unique patterns and ethos that cannot be judged vis-à-vis other cultures. But there are other problems closely tied up with cultural relativism. The locality of culture is a major one. First of all there is the matter of geographical locality. But then there is also physiological (does culture reside in our heads?) or even metaphysical locality. Before thinking about just where culture resides (and the question does seem relevant if we use culture as a count noun) we have to consider just what culture is, an ontological question.

Early on, anthropologists studied personality as separate from culture. Those studies were classified as "culture and personality." Later, especially with the rise of cognitive anthropology and the interest in

language as part of culture, there were cracks in the superorganic idea. Does culture reside in people's heads, or is it outside, an entity, however ethereal, to which people belong? Is it a mere abstraction invented by anthropologists? Regardless of one's answer to these questions, culture was still seen as disjunctive with biology. Culture remained a nebulous concept, sometimes as patterned but with little systemic specification. Without a biological connection, there was little accounting for the emotional sources of motivation. There was thus no source of dynamics, no explanation of culture change; hence, the key process of culture transmission was given little attention in the detail needed.

This static, unworkable conventional view of culture carries over to other matters that create exclusionary contrasts: theory versus description, questionnaires versus interviewing, testing versus thick description, single cultural unit description versus cross-cultural comparison. An anthropology of the future will have to set aside these either-or characterizations. In the years ahead, anthropologists will likely find themselves active on both sides of such contrasts in their work.

Anthropology will require many perspectives, methods, and interdisciplinary contacts to meet the unprecedented challenges that lie in our future. Fresh, new approaches will be needed. Yet within the discipline it is rare to find answers to this call. Up until now, urgency for anthropological research has been for people whose culture is rapidly changing or disappearing, as, for example, studies supported by the Anthropologists' Fund for Urgent Anthropological Research. In the future, however, problems may beset the world as a whole, including some of the richest countries of the West, where many anthropologists themselves live, and where large-scale natural disasters and socioeconomic disruptions can negatively impact culture change in the direction of markedly lower levels of cultural well-being. The studies in this book, directed as they are to different approaches and ideas relating to well-being, represent a beginning in the answer to this call.

Now, under threat of political changes inimical to democracy, environmental changes due to technological culture, and the threat of pandemics, we are questioning who we are, what kind of society we live in, and, in the midst of so many changes ahead, both natural and technological, what kinds of lives we want to lead and what kinds of lives our fellow humans will have elsewhere on the planet in what is likely to be a very different future. Suddenly, cultural relativism seems to be weakening as a predominant feature of the anthropological landscape; even more pervasively, it is weakening in everyday speech.

The word *culture* has increasingly taken on an evaluational component in the public realm, in direct contradiction to a neutral relativis-

tic view of particular "cultures" many anthropologists have tended to hold. These days we read about "the predatory culture of Enron," or "the culture of newsrooms" (described negatively). The increased occurrence of the term *culture* among the politically concerned public points to a rising focus on the quality of culture and the life that can be lived in today's social environments. Much of the public in the United States doesn't want to be relativistic about the dishonest executives at Enron, or take a relativistic stance with regard to the culture of torture in the military and in covert agencies, or the dismantling of cultural institutions set up to protect and support members of a society when they find themselves in difficulty.

Is this evaluating usage of the word *culture* to remain simply a vernacular usage, or do we need a parallel development in anthropology itself? The studies of well-being reported in this book show that there is a need, a response to the times, by anthropologists. The difficulty in such an enterprise, however, lies in two formidable problems: the relativity question, responsible for Freud's impasse; and the social complexity question, where the enormous variety of sociocultural elements characteristic of modern societies today poses real problems and calls for a more precise, scientifically useful theory of culture.

Often questions about cultural well-being or pathology come down to particular practices, beliefs, or attitudes on the part of one segment of the population toward another. This can become enormously complex when ideas about cultural relativity and multiculturalism conflict with ideas about well-being. In Holland, for example, 5.5 percent of the Dutch population is Muslim, yet half the women in battered women's shelters are Muslim and there are many more suicides among Muslim women than non-Muslim ones. There are similar statistics elsewhere in Europe. Honor killings of Muslim girls for dating non-Muslims have occurred, and female genital mutilation starting at six years of age is practiced among a subset of Muslim immigrants. Many other Muslim differences exist that create a radical divergence from the norm in Dutch society. Dutch commitment to cultural relativism as a form of tolerance may thus have had an adverse effect. It encouraged the continuance of feminine apartheid among Muslims and in so doing has resulted in major disruptions in the larger society in Holland. When a Muslim murdered an activist opposed to Muslim customs, the resulting reactions among the far right in Holland led to burning mosques and Islamic schools. The more liberal Dutch element finds itself divided over what to do. Through a hands-off tolerance, the Dutch have contributed to, rather than ameliorated, the repression of Islamic women immigrants in Holland.

Where does that leave the ethnographer? Ideally ethnographers surmount their own ethnocentrism through multicultural experiences that allow them to reach a higher level of generality, away from culture-bound attitudes and specificities towards broader dispositions. Even so, to maintain some degree of objectivity, it was thought important to avoid any evaluative intrusions into one's ethnographic efforts. However, as Bennett notes,

> The relativist view may be methodologically sound as a rule for the ethnologist to follow to avoid bias, but it makes little sense from the standpoint of problems of human existence, most of which are moral and which require judgments of good and bad, evil and benevolent (Bennett 1998, 361–2).

How Should We Study Well-Being through Culture?

So what standard or values do we use to define cultural well-being? Are we anthropologists to go out into the world to make pronouncements about what is good or bad about a society? After all, that is what missionaries do, and the results are mixed, to say the least. However, if we have benefited from the experience of living in societies alien to those in which we grew up, if we have had a wide range of ethnographic experience along with graduate training, we may have (to some extent at least) liberated ourselves from many of our own cultural demons and prejudices. But can we count on that kind of supracultural awareness? It is one thing to observe people starving, impoverished, or suffering from war trauma, and describe the obviously low level of well-being among them. It is another thing, however, to notice more subtle effects among people who are in less dire straits, or simply to make intuitive judgments on values among broad categories of groups, be they Muslim, Japanese, American, or any other. Do we need to have a theory of well-being or do we just add the topic of well-being to our ethnographic agenda and start writing? Answering that question takes us back to another question: what do we want anthropology to be—one of the sciences, one of the humanities, or some combination of the two? If we think anthropology ought to be a science, we should be concerned with matters of objectivity and ethnographic validity. These are matters that have been the subject of much debate in the past: the Lewis-Redfield differences over the description of Tepotzlan; the Mead-Freeman controversy over accuracy in Samoan ethnography; the dispute over Colin Turnbull's characterization of the Ik; and the emic-etic distinction that similar disagreements led to the 1960s and 1970s. If, on the other hand,

we think that anthropology should be one of the humanities, the focus shifts to matters of responsibility toward one's ethnographic subjects, or to the wider context covered by social theorists from Marx, Durkheim, and Weber to Habermas and Foucault; one leans toward sociological, economic, and political issues, including the role and influence of investigators themselves, and to philosophical issues relating to these matters. Fortunately we don't legislate these matters in anthropology. It all depends on the ethnographer, the situation, and what the broader social needs might be.

Let's take the broader social needs for a moment. When anthropologists see the egregious mistakes in foreign policies that arise from a stultifying ignorance of the anthropology of regions, ethnicities, and religions around the world, we ask, "Why don't governments consult anthropologists?" Are anthropologists less equipped theoretically or ethnographically than other social scientists to take on advisory roles? Look at economics. There is an enormous input of advice to governments; but usually the input solicited, or hired, represents branches of the discipline, or individuals, that are most friendly to the ideology of whatever administration is in power. In short, there is a lot of politics in economics. Can we say that there are fewer political interests in anthropology? That question brings us back to the matter of objectivity. There are two paths anthropologists take toward greater objectivity: (1) our concern for the native point of view in an ethnography-based approach, and (2) a theory that has some claim to universal validity as, for example, one rooted in established biological principles.

As for (1), the fallback position for ethnographers is to ask the natives themselves what they think, or believe. That would mean some assessment of how representative each answer might be for whatever group is being described, which brings us eventually to a statistical approach. It also can bring us to a network approach, where we can study the relationships and features characteristic of that network. But why can't statistics and network analyses be interlarded with a more humanized, contextual approach as well? We can use the numbers and interpersonal network relations as a guide for open-ended questions to ask some of the subjects themselves. Oral narrative distributional analyses (Colby 1973; 1975), statistical approaches (Colby et al. 2003), and network analysis (White and Johansen 2005) need not be mutually exclusive with traditional, contextualized ethnography.

Short of these more formal or systematic approaches, the ethnographer must rely on his or her own perspicacity and implicit ideas about what increases or decreases cultural well-being. This returns us to the same questions that have haunted ethnography from its beginning. How might we as ethnographers assess the needs of our subjects and how might we, as outsiders but often with knowledge, technology, and facilities not available to those we study, help out as well as simply describe?

As ethnographers, most of us have provided some form of assistance to friends among the people we study. Often it includes transportation, such as driving a sick child to a medical facility, or it might include assisting in some educational form or in any number of other ways. What happens, however, when we, as ethnographers, see the wider problems that impact the society we study? These are difficult matters and sometimes there may not be all that much difference between anthropologists and activists who address injustices that clearly are perpetrated at higher national and international levels.

When writings get closer to actuality, to naming names and citing events, as in the works of Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Arundhati Roy, Amy Goodman, and numerous other social critics, there is less theory to chew on and simply a compilation of facts concerning specific policies, events, and institutions. These writings are close to being ethnographies themselves, albeit ethnographic descriptions of policy consequences in a highly explicit sense of what is just and democratic versus what is hypocritical, dishonest, or self-serving. In any case, these writings have an explicit concern with well-being. Such writings relate in different ways to academic disciplines. Zinn sees his roles as historian and activist as one and the same. Chomsky, on the other hand, sees no connection between his activist writings and his role as linguist. What, in fact, are the differences between an ethnographic report on the well-being of some local situation and the writings of activists in some other category? Do we anthropologists really have something unique to share with the world? Do we have greater credibility because of our presumed cultural sensitivities? One of the problems with politics is that an observation pointing unambiguously to a wrongdoing is treated as a biased political opinion by the wrongdoer. We are living in an age where the pros and cons of torture are discussed by two talking heads on television as if each side were balanced in terms of morality. Perhaps ethnographers have more credibility than reporters and activist critics because they don't roil the waters. If they do, however—if they point to poverty and its causes in a region, for example—will they be treated as lacking in science because of political bias?

If one chooses to reveal what otherwise would remain hidden, how far up the chain of command of corporate or government behavior does one go? Will the processes of globalization (as influenced by the World Bank, the IMF, and other powerful entities) require that ethnographers, in order to write a full description of what is impacting well-being in

their local area, bring national and international institutions under their purview as well, and from those institutions the social forces that created and maintain them? Any serious ethnography of the entire process would have to range from top-level economic forces down to the impact of their policies on the grass roots under the close eye of the ethnographer. Those top-level forces have a large component of sheer greed and drive for dominance cloaked in a legitimizing rhetoric and ideology. If that is the case, at the higher levels of investigation one would have to become an investigative reporter, seeking out textual materials in the form of memos, press statements, and books, including books by whistle blowers for the whole enterprise (Perkins 2004). Such activity is usually is considered off-limits to the anthropological enterprise. If we look at past studies of cultural well-being, we rarely see any disturbing of the political waters. But in the view of some observers, a disturbing of the waters is becoming increasingly necessary because hierarchical wealth-based connections are so often globally harmful in their consequences, and possibly irreversible.

A Brief History of Past Studies of Cultural Well-Being

Issues of cultural well-being and cultural pathology have been addressed in the past, but such attempts have not been widespread and are limited to only a few anthropologists, each with a different approach. Nevertheless, they are noteworthy and illustrate different approaches within the discipline.

Ruth Benedict's concern for prosocial values and behavior led to a concept she called "cultural synergy." At its simplest characterization, Benedict's ideas of cultural synergy emphasized cooperative and socially facilitative behavior—in currently popular terms, she meant a culture where most behavior was win-win, rather than win-lose. Sadly, her work was not taken up in anthropology and she dropped the idea herself to do other work. However, one of her students, Abraham Maslow, gained attention in psychology with his extension of her cultural synergy idea into the field of personality study. By applying Benedict's cultural synergy to individuals, in addition to his own original work, Maslow came to the idea of the "self-actualized" personality (1950).

Benedict's ideas about cultural synergy made intuitive good sense, but they lacked a full-length ethnographic treatment illustrating how her theory translated into actual ethnographic observation. She instead used scattered examples. Furthermore, some of her illustrations from ethnographies of societies she did not have first-hand acquaintance with were themselves ethnographically weak. In fairness to Benedict, however, all we are going on are lecture notes. She did not follow up on it, and Maslow, even though doing fieldwork among the Blackfeet in Canada, did not see how to deal with cultural synergy in any broad way. It was much easier, he found, to look at individuals and their personalities and values.

Raoul Naroll (1983) offered a more theoretically developed and testable approach, based on a cross-cultural viewpoint. Furthermore, he was the first anthropologist to address the problem of cultural well-being and pathology by means of what historians of science call a "theoretical program" (Kuhn 1970; Lakatos 1970) involving tests of hypotheses. The program focuses on what Naroll called "core values" and the review of social indicators along with a review of the state of the social sciences generally. Finally, after the crucial step of testing theory, Naroll went beyond this, to proposing actions to cope with problems identified in those tests.

Naroll's approach was to choose ten personal and family troubles studied cross-culturally: alcoholism, suicide, family disorganization, child abuse, juvenile delinquency, neglect of the elderly, sex roles, sexual frustration, and mental illness. These troubles could be studied through a constellation of social indicators, "scoreboards" he called them, which can give a general idea of how entire nations are coming along. Even with social indicator scoreboards, however, there is no way to deal with the dynamics that result in those indicators alone. A theory of well-being based on the kind of social indicators Naroll and sociologists usually use would have to include biological connections to well-being, child-rearing practices, institutional policies relating to economics, education, and a host of other areas. Actual ethnographic study in the field would be the ultimate, truly grassroots approach for arriving at a better contextual understanding of the dynamics that result in indicator scores. Finally, Naroll's moral categories (e.g., peace, order, and tolerance of diversity) were selected intuitively—hence, from a theoretical perspective, arbitrarily. There also is an assumption in Naroll's writings of cultural evolutionary progress (with pain and problems along the way). That assumption may be understandable for the times in which he wrote, but today seems less certain given the present world situation with all its vulnerabilities and misfortunes extending to many millions.

We have examined theory-based approaches to well-being and pathology; let us now turn to ethnography-based approaches. Oscar Lewis (1959, 1961, 1966) described a culture of poverty in the slums of cities around the world that, once started, became a self-perpetuating patho-

logical culture. Its characteristics were authoritarian attitudes and behavior, violence, lack of family solidarity, focus on instant gratification, male abandonment, crowded living quarters, early awareness of sex, and a fatalistic or cynical world view. Lewis raised hackles among some of the politically correct element in anthropology. The whole idea of a self-perpetuating loop or of a pathology of culture did not sit well with a culturally relativistic stance. Since Lewis' work was primarily descriptive, there was no explicit theoretical basis that could generate testable hypotheses. Nevertheless, his ethnographies have had wide readership and did much to alert the general public to the social and cultural problems of extreme poverty.

Very interesting and useful, but less systematic and not theoretical, is Robert Edgerton's *Sick Societies* (1992). This is a tour de force, a compendium of every conceivable type of maladaptation an anthropologist might encounter. The results of those maladaptations run the gamut from alienation, despair, deprivation, fear, and hunger to sickness and death. He argues that all societies have some beliefs and practices that may be maladaptive, whether for everyone in the society or for some of its members. Yet he holds to a conventional concept of culture, one that draws a line around people who are inside the culture (and hence might try to initiate changes) as opposed to outsiders, who should not do anything to help except, perhaps, to serve as teachers or advisors to members of "the culture":

> A scholarly discipline that can illuminate the sources of these kinds of human misery should command a large following, and with better understanding of the sources of maladaptation may come means of reducing human suffering. We have no mandate to change other cultures because we find that some of their beliefs or practices are harmful to them, but we do have an obligation to understand and, when possible, to teach (Edgerton 1992, 208).

A very different approach is to be found in Jules Henry's book, *Culture Against Man* (1969), where he characterized aspects of American culture as pathological. This interesting ethnographic approach to American society did not receive a lot of attention after the initial reviews because, I suspect, anthropologists didn't know just where or how to place Henry's approach in the prevailing scheme of things anthropological.

There are undoubtedly other instances of anthropological concern with well-being in the course of ethnographic research. Martin Orans (1981), for example, has taken a dynamic approach to self-reported happiness as it relates to economic institutions and social ranking. Indeed, any time major culture changes occur in an area under ethnographic attention, the evaluative element very often comes in: Who benefits from the change? What brought about the change? George Appell suggests that with the kinds of massive changes that some populations undergo today, there develops a sense of bereavement from a past that no longer exists. He describes this as a "social separation syndrome" (1980).

After reviewing these past attempts at treating well-being, I suspect that the present book represents a major change, a tipping point of sorts within anthropology. When we compare the number of anthropologists in a single volume here to the sparseness of anthropologists in the previous century who were concerned with some form of cultural well-being, it is most encouraging. Those earlier studies were all by lone individuals. They did not represent a school, or tradition, or even any particularly influential theoretical program. Benedict's ideas did live in a way through Maslow's self-actualization writings, and Oscar Lewis had a wide reading public but has seldom been cited by anthropologists in recent generations. The others mentioned were similarly not followed by any significant number of ethnographers. To be sure, the present book does not represent a school or movement, but the fact that so many authors see their contributions as falling under the well-being tent suggests that what is different between now and the earlier history of well-being studies is that the zeitgeist is calling for it, and some of us are responding. The diversity of approaches in these chapters is in itself a strength and a sign of a broad change of orientation in the discipline.

The audience for studies of cultural well-being and pathology goes well beyond the anthropological profession. The great proliferation of NGOs and relief agencies show that there are hundreds of thousands of people willing to devote their lives to improving some small part of the world even at a low income level, or at home willing to go into an underpaid teaching profession to help children grow intellectually and morally. In short, I see the field of ethnographic attention to well-being as covering an enormous range of human endeavors extending well beyond card-carrying anthropologists. The world is desperately in need of more ethnographies of every type, especially those that give a full contextual description, that tell it like it is, whether they are written by anthropologists or by other investigators seeking, in a sophisticated and culturally sensitive way, to make the world a better place.

Let me explain this with my own example and history. My choice of an abiding theoretical program focusing on well-being began shortly after my ethnographic studies of the Ixil Maya of Guatemala. In the early 1980s, Guatemalan troops with US-trained officers were battling insurgents, Indian and Hispanic, in the lowlands of Guatemala and in the Ixil "triangle." The troops massacred entire hamlets and villages, men, women and children. Death squads were torturing and execut-

ing. Word about these atrocities among the Ixil and other Maya groups was not getting out to the rest of the world. I published letters in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and started a book about what was happening, essentially an ethnography of a war, but the more I learned the more it became evident that the ultimate cause was the political culture of foreign nations, most especially my own. So I had to make a choice: either devote the entire future to working on a theory of cultural pathology and well-being, or document what was happening among the people I already had been studying. Others came to the area and began studies in the Ixil triangle (Stoll 1993) and elsewhere in Guatemala. The word was getting out. With that responsibility covered, I chose the theoretical rather than the ethnographic approach. Elsewhere I have published a condensation of work during the ensuing twenty-five years in the study of cultural well-being and cultural pathology. It has included the theoretical generation of statements and the testing of those statements on students, and different ethnic and age groups in Orange County, California, some of it supported by a grant from the National Institute on Aging (Colby 1987, 2003; Colby et al. 2003). It also has included my research among the Ixil. I will start with the chief theoretical problem I thought had to be solved as the basis for such a theoretical program—the units of cultural analysis.

Theorizing Culture as "Self-world"

Freud's impasse was due to the prevailing ideas about culture, ideas that continue to dominate the meaning of culture even today. If one is to get around Freud's impasse, there has to be a revision in the conventional way culture is viewed. The first step is to deal with the three chief problems with conventional culture theory as it is currently used in anthropology. The first of these three problems is already partially attended to by the view of culture held among cognitive anthropologists (most explicitly by Ward Goodenough [1996]) and some psychological anthropologists (Schwartz 1978). This is the locus of culture—where does culture reside (if anywhere)? Cognitive anthropologists and many psychological anthropologists now see that locus as in people's heads. But actually that is only a partial solution, as I will get to below.

The second problem is the lack of a biological connection, when obviously there is a powerful connection between culture and our biology. The third problem is the assumption of cultural relativism. I will briefly expand on the first below and then develop solutions to the other two problems.

The problem of location can be addressed through the concept of "self-world." With the increasing complexity of society today, with migrations, refugees, and entire businesses moving across national boundaries, the superorganic view of culture—whether in the small (where the world is populated with a great number of "cultures" as count nouns) or in the large (where *culture* is used as a mass noun equivalent to *civilization*)—is inadequate, as earlier discussed. One way to deal with the location problem is to distinguish between schemas inside our heads, and culture patterns observed in our surroundings. In such a tandem view, we focus on the interchange between schemas and patterns in terms of a self-world unit of analysis. Culture patterns are located in behavior and in the built environment. The vehicles for these patterns are people and material culture. With schemas to perceive patterns as they come through to the mind, a major division is within the brain—a division between (1) the perceptual mechanisms that allow us to recognize patterns observed in the outside world and replicate them or modify them in our own thinking and (2) the effecting of behavior through effector schemas in the mind. The second, quite obvious division is simply between mind and the cultural patterns perceived to exist in the surrounding world.

By focusing on culture as a process between mind and surrounding world, culture is thus a process, an interacting tandem of schemas in the mind and patterns in the outside world. In sum, cultural patterns are carried by vehicles: other humans, as expressed in what they say and do; artifacts (including spoken words and symbol-laden artifacts like books); and the built environment.

As long as "the culture" is the unit of analysis, we can never get to cultural dynamics. If we seek to describe "a culture" as a unit, a set of values in some coherent configuration, we will miss the effects of conflicts and disharmonies within the society that holds that "culture." Furthermore, we will miss the crosscurrents from cultural patterns that originate outside the "culture." This is particularly the case with the globalization of culture through the media and through economic effects.

In this emerging global age, my Ixil Maya assistant, Shas, can walk down the road from his house to the center of his village in the western mountains of Guatemala and for a small fee, log onto the internet and send me e-mail, whereas during my first visit to the area many years ago, there was not even a television set anywhere in the village. On my third trip in the 1970s, there was one television set in the town hall, which when I watched, was presenting the Dick van Dyke show (popular in the US in the 1960s) dubbed in Spanish. So obviously we cannot continue with the old conventional view of culture as a bounded entity,

coinciding with tribe, island, or even language, whether occupying a narrowly delimited space or characterizing an entire nation, religion, or civilization. Nor can we accept the superorganic assumptions that culture and biology are totally separate. That does not mean giving up on culture as a viable concept. Clearly we cannot do without culture; we just need a different view of culture and different units of cultural analysis.

Maslow went from Ruth Benedict's cultural synergy to individual psychology because there was just no way to deal with an entire "culture" as conceptualized during Benedict's time. However we can shift culture theory toward the person with yet another unit, the self-world, similar in some respects to von Uexkull's *Umwelt* (1957). Von Uexkull describes his unit in terms of perceptors and effectors in studies of animal behavior: "All that a subject perceives becomes his perceptual world and all that he does, his effector world. Perceptual and effector worlds together form a closed unit" (1957, 6). We can do the same. With the self-world as the basic unit of cultural analysis, we are better able to examine the dynamics at work within a society of any type, of any ethnic, ideological, religious, or language mix. At the same time, to be more rigorous, individuals can be linked to other individuals as nodes in social networks with different bases of linkages (friendship, contact frequency, profession, birth origin, language, professed values, and so on). Social networks, in turn, can be referred to in casual ethnographic text, on some observational basis, or more precisely through computers, as in formal network analysis.

Within the self-world, the chief division is essentially that between the perception of patterns and the matching of those patterns with schemas (or schemata). The self-world thus consists of the self and two surrounds: the immediate surround of first-hand experience, and a second surround of hearsay or indirect experience (i.e., through accounts of someone else's experience) and in the print and electronic world, primarily the public figures encountered through television and newsprint. The self-world is a convenient construct for trying to represent inner views, if need be, through the usual procedures of interviewing and observation as well as through questionnaires, sentence completion test, TATs, autobiographies, and diary records, not to mention recordings of actual events through video and photos. With the individual person at the center of the self-world, the individual's cognitive schemas, motivations, emotions, values, and attitudes as well as the physical body are all part of the mix.

The beginnings of a theory of well-being and adaptive potential distinguish within the self-world three realms of concern. Today neuropsychological evidence suggests neural bases for this tripartite division (Colby 2003), but much earlier Malinowski used it in organizing how he thought about culture and its institutions. I characterize this tripartite division as follows: First is the natural and cultural ecology as perceived and as accessed by the self. It also covers one's own biology and physical body. Included further in this realm is the ecological inheritance biologists speak about when discussing niche construction of animals (leaf cutter ants and their earth constructions, beavers and their dams) and of course for humans that also means the built environment. I describe this as the *material or biophysical realm*. Second is the *interpersonal realm* where the individual normally operates in face-to-face interactions with other people. I have used the term *interpersonal* rather than *social* to emphasize that this realm is primarily an interactive one between persons, and only secondarily does it go to a wider coverage of everything else that is social, which often includes a more abstract representation than simply interpersonal interactions. Third and last, there is the *symbolic realm* involving higher-order thinking and language and all forms of symbolic behavior.

A similar tripartite division of realms was made by Malinowski (1960, 136) when he said that culture originated from an integration of three lines of development:

> 1). "the ability to recognize instrumental objects, the appreciation of their technical efficiency, and their value, that is, their place in the purposive sequence" (i.e., enhancing one's ability to wrest a living in the nonsocial material and biological realm)
>
> 2). "the formation of social bonds" (the interpersonal realm)
>
> 3). "the appearance of symbolism" (the symbolic realm)

In each of these three realms I have developed measures of what I describe as conditions of adaptive potential. Measures in the material and interpersonal realms have inversely correlated with measures of physical and mental symptoms. This shows a direct linkage to biology, and through that to evolutionary theory (Colby 2003). At the moment, my measures for conditions in the symbolic realm are undergoing major revisions, going beyond the originally postulated conditions of creativity and metaknowledge to include goal orchestration and the separate components and processes involved with invention and creative behavior. So, until more exploratory research is completed for conditions in the symbolic realm, tests of the theory will be based on conditions in the material and interpersonal realms. The results of those tests are reported elsewhere (Colby 1987, 2003; Colby et al. 2003). Here, I will

briefly describe the history and current exploratory findings with the symbolic realm.

I began by postulating creativity as the primary condition of adaptive potential in this realm. The link to evolution is obvious, for it is through creative endeavors that humans and human culture have advanced to where we are today. However, creativity is exceedingly hard to measure, particularly with the kind of questionnaire that I have successfully used with the first two realms. It turned out that in regression analyses, my measures of creativity did not add to the power of my regression analyses in the company of my measures in the first two realms. Exploratory analyses suggested that this is because the symbolic realm sits atop the material and interpersonal realms and in many ways is a more abstract mirroring of those first two realms. I have begun to think more in terms of findings concerning neurological development, particularly the evolutionarily more recent prefrontal cortices. A key element to be measured in this area is likely to be the ability to delay instant gratification. That means decisions and behavior in keeping with cultural appropriateness. Forethought often suggests that for some behaviors there are situational preconditions where often a later time for some behavioral action would be more beneficial for the long-term success of the individual.

In addition to timing is consistency of values and sense of self. Consistency includes the ability to see connections and to bring cultural elements and patterns into coherent relationships for a more meaningful and successful life. I now see the primary condition of adaptive potential in the symbolic realm to be coherence and timing, with subcategories of coherence-building processes (such as creative processing and goal orchestration). I have not yet been able to fully develop a way to measure this broad and very subtle mix of cognition and valence (the marking of goals with past and imagined future emotional experiences), and so I leave that aside here while awaiting a test of measures for conditions in the symbolic realm along the lines I have just sketched out.

It is the testing of adaptive potential theory that returns us to the crucial aspect of biology and evolution. The conventional view of culture, especially the ignoring of the fundamental linkage that exists between biology and culture, precludes a proper attention to emotions, the basis out of which value systems emerge. Too long have developmental and evolutionary biology been regarded as irrelevant to cultural processes. Yet a moment's reflection confirms that culture is intimately linked to biology in both these fields, not the least of which is through emotional systems of neuronal wiring and hormonal infusions, which surely affect our values as well as our cultural experiences.

Is a Measure of Well-Being Possible or Desirable?

So, finally, we return to the question in the title. At the simplest level, we can always ask the people we interview how happy they are, what makes them happy, and what makes them unhappy. Simple and obvious though it may be, such questions can be enormously productive. Diener studies responses to questions on happiness as "subjective well-being" (Diener and Suh 2000). Many other techniques are possible. William Dressler inventoried the material culture in people's houses and rated individuals in those houses according to the kind of lifestyle aspirations represented by those material artifacts. Adding other variables, such as income, he came up with a measure of lifestyle incongruity. The more the incongruity, the higher the blood pressure, and for young people, the more likely was there to be depression (Dressler 1990, 1991). Since biology and culture are intimately related, these connections can be the source of interesting clues to biocultural dynamics that are moving beneath the surface of explicit recognition. When these currents involve stress, they take a toll on the body and therefore lower the probability of an extended life span.

With the adaptive potential measure (Colby 2003), preliminary tests in the material and interpersonal realms support the statement that the greater the score on adaptive potential, the fewer the symptoms of physical and mental ill health. These and similar measures can be used to test the theory that human values that promote quiescent (parasympathetic) bodily states promote longevity and survival and hence link core cultural values to our biology and to evolutionary theory as well as to other aspects of culture in a coherent and meaningful way.

There can be many different ways to measure adaptive potential. I used questionnaires together with thematic apperception stimuli (pictures) to get spontaneous texts from the individuals in the sample (Colby et al. 2003). It is my hope that a system of content analysis might also be applied in tests of the theory. If the theory seems to be intuitively a sensible theory, one can simply use the theory as a new kind of *Notes and Queries* during ethnographic study, as a guide to questions and directions one might want to use in interviews, the preferred technique of most ethnographers, in addition to direct observations and participant observation.

Earlier I argued that a major support for cultural relativism was that it obviated value judgments on the part of the ethnographer, and hence an ethnography that eschewed any value judgments or political commentary on the situation of the people being described was more likely to be treated as objective, or scientific. This rationale no longer holds.

There are many obvious uses of a truly objective theory of well-being. Testing for adaptive potential or for some general measure of well-being, for example, can provide a form of feedback after some ameliorative intervention for a society, or after some historical change. Moving away from subjective, opinion-based ideas can lessen the intrusion of politically motivated arguments, to something that is more objective and hence less influenced by vested interests and idiosyncrasies.

One of the arguments brought forward in postmodern anthropology was that the ethnographer cannot be completely immune to making value judgments, and indeed should be willing to actively assist in the well-being of those being studied, often an assistance going beyond local help to activism at some higher level. Perhaps the best analogy is with health. Doctors try to improve the health of their patients and they can be objective in describing what is good health and what is bad health. At higher levels, however, activism among physicians takes a different form: Doctors Without Borders, Physicians for Social Responsibility, etc. Since those higher levels go beyond proximal causes of ill health, they bring medical people directly up against government and corporate policies that may be impacting the health of people. The major area of difficulty, of course, is the equation of high adaptive potential with liberal or progressive politics and low adaptive potential with authoritarianism and right-wing fundamentalist groups in any religion. The theory was developed out of a thought experiment, tested, and supported. It was only later that I recognized how close the conditions of high adaptive potential were correlated with real democracy, and how low adaptive potential links to repression and sham democracy. Can anyone seriously argue against high affiliation, prosocial autonomy, trust, and altruism—all conditions of high adaptive potential in the interpersonal realm? When the consequences of public or foreign policy are breaking down those conditions at home and abroad, it is time to think about a cultural well-being audit just as economists look to and audit the economic well-being of a society.

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PART TWO

Well-Being in Small-Scale Societies