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EDITORIAL

Understanding flourishing: Evolutionary baselines and morality

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In recent years "flourishing" has been a topic of interest to multiple fields, particularly economics (e.g. measuring well-being; Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development, 2013), philosophy (e.g. LeBar, 2013; Russell, 2012) and psychology (e.g. Keyes & Haidt, 2002; Seligman, 2011). We hope the papers in this special section will inspire you to expand your understandings of flourishing, inclusive of different perspectives. I make some preliminary remarks with a few distinctions and suggest a definition according to appropriate baselines, a definition that brings into the circle of concern non-humans.

Notions and definitions

First, what do you think of when you hear the term "flourishing"? Health? Well-being? Resilience? How is the concept of flourishing different from other positive concepts like resilience or health? Typically resilience refers to the capacity to rise above less-than-optimal conditions (typically judged according to United States (US) middle-class values such as school achievement, mental health, steady relationships, working and not being caught for violating laws). For example, a young person who grows up in a violent family and neighborhood but who graduates from high school and gets a job in the regular economy is considered resilient. So, too, is a child who loses a parent but still enters and graduates from college. Generally, resilience has to do with a person *not* getting into trouble despite having a background heavy with risk factors (Masten & Garmezy, 1985). Of course there are issues of timing—when does the observer decide a person is resilient? Observers typically look at transitions within schooling (grade transition, diploma) or in life (marriage, job). According to these criteria, Robert Jones, Jr. (discussed by Eligon, 2015) would not have been labeled resilient in adolescence because he did
AQ2 not finish high school after his mother died but became a drug user and then a scavenger (working outside the regular economy). But he is still alive at age 62,

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despite his risky lifestyle, looking resilient. So it seems that people can move in and out of resilience, and what looks resilient at one point may not be at another or vice versa.

Overall, resilience generally refers to the capacity to return to 'good enough' functioning from negative conditions. Though it might be about 'doing the best you can' within the circumstances, resilience is not about flourishing in the biggest sense of optimality. Instead, resilience can be a signaling component of flourishing but is not the same thing: those who flourish are resilient, but those who are resilient are not necessarily flourishing.

If we shift away from the disadvantaged, the typical focus of resiliency research, do we find flourishing among the 'advantaged'? For example, how about people who are physically and mentally healthy (according to contemporary Western criteria)? Does having good health and an enjoyable job count as flourishing? I'm afraid that in modern individualistic societies like the US, with the help of consumerist culture, the notion of flourishing is sometimes transformed into a narcissistic individualistic feature so that Wall Street financial whizzes can be said to 'flourish' because they demonstrate high IQ, cleverness and monetary success. But really, the wolves on Wall Street, designing ways for a few to enrich themselves, or an Enron employee, bilking grandmothers out of their pensions, show forms of 'autistic flourishing', if we could even suggest such a term, a type of flourishing for self at the expense of others. Autistic flourishing almost makes sense in the West where psychology has emphasized independence from others as a sign of health. Independence and an egoistic worldview, just like living alone, would not be considered healthy or good, but disordered and a cause for concern in most societies (Sahlins, 2008).

What, then, is flourishing for human beings? The focus of most discussion of flourishing has taken place recently primarily within positive psychology. As in most fields, the focus is on adults or presumptive of children as 'mini adults'. Little attention is paid to the dynamism and critical periods of children's development that affect flourishing for life. Yet development is a layered process: early neuronal and hormonal systems are the foundations or ingredients for later-developing networks. At any point during the foundational development in the first years of life (e.g. neurotransmitter function, immune system ratios), a system may be undermined by inadequate support, shifting to a suboptimal trajectory from which it is impossible to recover because the sensitive period has passed and other systems are building on the early foundations.

However, even in developmental psychology the focus has been on child resilience (although I am told that more recently 'resilience' has expanded to include well-being). In my view, flourishing is not about a 'good enough' life but about fulfilling human potential. And because each human being is a biosocial system, flourishing begins with the shaping and markings of early life experience when many systems are establishing their parameters.

Baselines

Not surprisingly since they are grounded in Western individualist culture, most definitions of flourishing have been focused primarily on individual life satisfaction

and enhancement. The assumption typically is that self-interest dominates human life (indicating a lack of attention to reliable anthropological and archeological data (Fry, 2006, 2013), missing out on the deep communalism that is part of humanity's heritage.

Clearly, we need a definition of flourishing. We know about flourishing in other domains. For example, if we think of familiar plants, we can recognize when they are flourishing and, based on observation and experiments, we have an understanding of what they need to flourish (good soil, water, sun, air). When we see an unfamiliar plant, we can guess, because it is a plant, that it also needs some combination of soil, water, sun and air to flourish. So it appears that it is important to know what a thing is before one can determine whether it is flourishing. To understand human flourishing, we have to understand who humans are.

What is a human? The answer requires interdisciplinary resources. Of course, humans are animals and need food, warmth and autonomy to survive. But they are also social mammals. Based on observation and (intentional and unintentional) experiments (see for example Harlow, 1958), we know that social mammals need touch, social bonding and community support (Panksepp, 1998). If we understand that humans are social mammals of a particular sort—more immature at birth and more socially embedded than other social mammals—it guides our examination of flourishing. Neuroscientists can map the homologies with other mammals regarding normal and abnormal brain development and function (Panksepp, 1998), and clinicians present data on how things go wrong (Schore, 1994, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2013).

In order to understand human flourishing, we must also examine more closely what humanity's evolved heritage is. Archeological studies can illuminate the history of the species (see for example Ferguson, 2013a, 2013b). Anthropological data shed light on the conditions in which humans evolved (see for example Hewlett & Lamb, 2005). To find baselines for when things go right, anthropological and other first-contact reports of first-nation peoples are helpful. About 99% of human genus history was spent in small-band hunter-gatherer (SBHG) societies. We have evidence for particular SBHG lifestyles existing for thousands of years, foraging in regular patterns across a particular landscape (e.g. at least 60,000 years for some Australian Aboriginal groups; Tindale & George, 1971). The data show that these societies around the world demonstrate not only similar social practices and well-being, but similar adult personalities (Ingold, 1999). Adults demonstrate joyful interaction most of the time, with frequent singing, dancing and laughing (Narvaez, 2013). The set point for social interaction is positive. In current lingo, they show high social capital. SBHG live close to the earth and demonstrate stable but fluid groups, with flexible but resilient individuals. Their physical lifestyle seems extremely onerous to us, but they live with the ebbs and flows of the earth as all other animals do. Death is not feared but part of a recurrent cycle of life–death-transformation. In contrast, our modern lifestyles are more like those of animals in zoos, divorced and protected from the ebbs and flows of life. Some argue that zoo animals are not their true selves, so it should not be surprising to think that 'civilized' humans are not their true selves either.

Here are some things we know. Humans are born terribly immature, meaning that multiple systems unfinished at birth are epigenetically wired postnatally

(Trevathan, 2011). As with other animals, evolution designed early nests or niches and sets of support to match up with the maturational schedule of the offspring, optimizing development. The human evolved developmental niche (EDN) is particularly intense because of the profound immaturity of infants. Not surprisingly, EDN-consistent, or species-typical, care has been documented in SBHG all over the world: soothing perinatal experiences, breastfeeding on average for four years, nearly constant touch in early years, multiple responsive adult caregivers, positive social support and free play in nature (Konner, 2005). Neuroscientific research is demonstrating how important these practices are for *normal* development. These practices provide children with the support their neurobiology needs to develop and function in ways humans are supposed to function (Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, & Gleason, 2013). My colleagues and I find that these experiences all contribute to moral development in young children and are related to adult well-being and moral functioning (Narvaez, Gleason, et al., 2013; Narvaez, Wang et al., 2013; Narvaez, Wang, & Cheng, 2015).

Gleason and Narvaez (2014) present an inclusive definition of child flourishing that better represents this heritage. Flourishing includes not only an individual's well-being but his or her sociomoral capacities and networks. The emphasis is on *proactive* morality (as evident among rescuers in World War II), which requires perceptual, interpretive and action capacities (moral effectivity) that are easily deployed in necessitating circumstances (Narvaez, 2010). So this is not the quiet, obedient child, with a reactive morality to adult preferences who does not cause trouble to adults. This is a self-confident, well-mentored morality that sees what needs to be done and does it (Varela, 1999) and extends not only to known family members but to all human beings (Monroe, 2004), inclusive of future generations (Martin, 1999).

AQ3

Aristotle pointed to the nature of flourishing as communal (Norton, 1991). The nature and status of one's relationships are key to a good self and a good life. This idea fits with notions of flourishing in most societies. Whereas in the US we rarely count relational health as central to the notion of self, in collectivist societies interdependence is considered normal and good. For example, the African notion of *ubuntu* combines notions of virtue and flourishing. It represents the ongoing processes of being empathetic to others, being respectful to self, others and the cosmos, and upholding social justice. Ubuntu is demonstrated in a person's character, her 'practice-in-relationships' (Karenga, 2004, p. 254). 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti, 1969, p. 214).

> 'To be a human being (ukuba ngumuntu) is a social practice; it requires one to co-operate with others by doing good, thereby promoting the balance that is thought to characterize the universe … This idea points to a being that is constantly in motion, as he/she engages with other people in order to maintain the orderedness of the cosmos' (Mkhize, 2008, pp. 40–41).

But aren't modern (especially Western) humans the ones who are flourishing as indicated by the fact that the modern lifestyle is proliferating whereas SBHG societies have diminished? Again, the proximal/distant viewpoint one takes matters. To ourselves, we seem to be flourishing because we are dominant and we are writing the history books. The short human history is written by the victors, of sorts. But from

the distal view, those writing the stories are not flourishing because their way of life is destroying human habitat and the biologoical and cultural diversity of the planet. Humans in the last millennia have been acting like 'pioneer invading species' which are typically 'individualistic, aggressive, and hustling' and 'attempt to exterminate or AQ4 suppress other species' (Naess & Rothenberg, 1989, p. 182). Although they learn to live in unfavorable circumstances 'they are ultimately self-destructive … replaced by other species which are better suited to restabilise and mature the ecosystem' (ibid, pp. 182–183). Indeed, the oceans are filled with plastic instead of fish; the soil, air, waterways and animal bodies are full of toxins as a result of intentional and unintentional human activities. The world has half the animal species that were around in AQ5 1970 (World Wildlife Fund, 2014). I could go on and on.

The problem with undermining flourishing in early life is that we create distorted humans who learn from their mistreatment to become oppositional to nature and others, creating worlds that are dangerous for all creatures. Relative to the First Nations viewpoint, the West has produced self-regarding, relationally blinded offspring who depersonalize non-humans as objects or beings without autonomy and purpose. Such blinded offspring succumb to greed and self-aggrandizement, destroying the earth with impunity, from removal of forests and prairie to wiping out indigenous peoples, predators and mountain tops. This has been underway for millennia with increasing pace since 1492 and in the last century (Merchant, 2003). Distorted humans display impaired awareness of and capacities for responsible connection. Note that it is not humanity per se but a particular cultural ideology, emerging from impaired neurobiology, which is driving the demise of the planet: belief in human exceptionalism and in a voiceless/personless natural world for human taking, and an endless optimism of consequence- and emotionally disconnected human agents (Martin, 1999; McGilchrist, 2009; Quinn, 1997).

In Western thought, autonomy and communalism are often considered in AQ6 opposition (Bakan, 1966), as if one's liberty requires standing against others (other people, nature). But this is not a universal concern. To consider the goals of autonomy/independence and relatedness/interconnectedness in opposition is a Western division of self–other. On the contrary, high communalism and high individual autonomy are both practiced in SBHG in most societies (note: Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, & Dunlop, 2012; found both to be high in moral exemplars). Although some argue (Maryanski & Turner, 1993) that modern societies are more like SBHG than agrarian societies, this would only be true for autonomy. The feeling of interrelatedness and interconnectedness that allows for full flourishing is often absent in modern societies. In my view, opposition between autonomy/independence and relatedness/interconnectedness is a consequence of shifted social baselines, inadequate early supportive care and cultural narratives that emerge from those experiences (for a full discussion, see Narvaez, 2014). As noted above, individual flourishing at the expense of community can be termed autistic. It emerges from a disjointed, disembedded sense of self.

Towards a definition of flourishing

In my view, flourishing is necessarily about virtue—doing the right thing in the right manner at the right time—in consideration of one's relationships with others.

A person who is flourishing helps others flourish. Flourishing in my view is generative (as Snow aptly points out in this issue). Flourishing individuals have everything in good order, at least in traditional SBHG societies: social fittedness, self control, prosociality, practical intelligence, growth into wisdom, in-place moral inheritances of engagement and communal ethics. Flourishing necessarily encompasses other-regarding actions—feelings of gratitude, empathy, love, forgiveness and reverence, all require a receptive attitude which is only possible when one is not feeling threatened. When one undercares for babies, they build threat reactivity into their neurobiology, setting up barriers to other-regarding mindsets (i.e. self-protectionist ethics; Narvaez, 2014). When babies are dishonored (not provided with what they evolved to need), they grow up to dishonor others (Narvaez, 2015). Unlike with resilience, one does not return to or reach flourishing in the fullest sense ('wholeness') if one has been damaged earlier. Thus, species-typical EDN-consistent care is required for flourishing.

However, something is greatly missing. Flourishing is about more than humans. In discussions of flourishing, the focus is typically on human flourishing but also almost from an imperialist attitude. For example, McAdams and colleagues (1998, p. 12) include in their definition, 'belief in the goodness or worthwhileness of the human enterprise'. This may be representative of the fatal flaw that has brought us to the current global ecological crises. The 'human enterprise' as envisioned by Western ideologies of human exceptionalism and superiority to non-human entities has toxified earth, air and seas, and eliminated most of their species. But it is a short-sighted 'human flourishing' because if the earth doesn't flourish, humans will not either. Moreover, it is a poor ethic that aggrandizes one creature by undermining the flourishing of all others because, to put it in rights language, 'the unfolding of potentialities is a right', and all earth creatures 'unfold' (Naess & Rothenberg, 1989, p. 164).

A shift in perspective is needed. The vast majority of cultures, also during 99% of human history, operated according to nature's 'gift economy' of constant sharing and cooperating, taking food and giving back waste that feeds others—the cycle that keeps the natural world in balance. When humans move away from such practices, fewer creatures flourish, and perhaps none do, viewed in the widest sense of biodiversity.

Thus my proposal is that flourishing and generativity should have an all-inclusive *ecological* frame in the broadest sense of biocultural diversity. We need a 'super-comprehensive' notion of flourishing that is holistic, involving more than thought and ideas but also relationally cooperative *feeling* and *action*. The *feeling for all* necessarily starts with a feeling for, connection to and action for creatures and entities in close proximity (*this* tree, *that* mountain). Just as empathy development starts with those in close proximity–mother, father and other caregivers—with maturation, development and experience it extends to strangers. Similarly, our concern for the non-human entities we personally know prepares us for empathic concern that radiates outward to all creatures[1] Ecological wisdom is nurtured from the ground up, through the shaping of our neurobiology, attention and perception grounded in an awareness and embrace of humanity's earth 'creatureliness'. Learning to resonate with and treat respectfully our companions on earth are biosociocultural endeavors

requiring families and communities to cooperate with nature's ways. For flourishing across the biosphere to occur, our humble cooperation is an ethical imperative.

Special section

AQ10 First in the special section is Nancy Snow's (2014) Kohlberg Memorial Lecture presented at the 2014 annual meeting of the Association for Moral Education in Pasadena, California, US. She discusses the importance of generativity, an other-regarding intent to leave a legacy beyond one's lifespan. Using Aristotle as a guide, she suggests that generativity is a necessary part of flourishing, but not vice versa. Rachana Kamtekar provides a philosophical commentary on Snow's paper, reviewing and clarifying the arguments and in the end suggesting that Plato may be a better guide than Aristotle for Snow's contentions. John Snarey, whose work is cited by Snow, provides a psychological commentary, focusing on Erik Erikson's theory, also cited by Snow. Erikson emphasized intergenerational flourishing, AQ11 inspiring Snarey's (Snarey, 1993) own concept of a generative ethic of care, which he applied in particular to fathers.

AQ12 There are two additional papers in this special section, Hyemin Han discusses purpose as integral to flourishing but views it as a second-order virtue that shares features with other second-order virtues, like *phronesis*, and which indirectly AQ13 facilitates flourishing through achievement of long-term goals. Merridy Wilson-Strydom and Margaret Walker discuss flourishing in and through higher education framed with a capabilities approach (focusing on what a person can be and can do; Nussbaum, 2011). They illustrate their discussion with cases of South African university students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We hope that these papers will generate further submissions on the topic of flourishing from multiple perspectives and disciplines. Enjoy the discussion!

Notes

AQ14 In terms of adult flourishing, what criteria do we use? I suggest that we use SBHG. Why use these societies?

Note

1. For a full discussion see Narvaez (2014).

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