

From emotional and psychological well-being to character education: challenging policy discourses of behavioural science and ‘vulnerability’

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It is difficult to challenge a strong consensus that governments must intervene in a worsening crisis of emotional and psychological well-being. The article relates rising estimates of problems and corresponding calls for intervention in educational settings to the increasingly blurred boundaries between a cultural therapeutic ethos, academic research and policy. The recent revival of an old discourse of ‘character’ reinforces a search for better measurement as the basis for behaviour change strategies reflected in government interest in new ideas from behavioural science. In response to C. Wright Mills’ injunction that a sociological imagination should try to understand how social change reflects changing images of the human subject, the article explores the educational implications of these development. It argues that the depiction of well-being and character as a set of behaviours and the parallel drive to measure them are rooted in a diminished view of an essential human vulnerability. This legitimises the imposition of psychological interventions that avoid moral and political questions about the nature of well-being and character and the conditions needed to develop them.

Keywords: behavioural science; character; emotional and psychological well-being; assessment

1. Introduction

At a conference organised by the Young Foundation and the Macquarie Bank on 7 February 2012, Brigadier Rhonda Cornum told a receptive audience of community resilience project leaders, teacher educators and the media that the US army’s \$125 million investment in ‘reliable global assessment instruments’ and ‘emotional fitness’ training could be a basis for universal interventions in the UK, on the grounds that ‘if we know how to make everyone better, I think we would all agree that we should’ (Cornum 2012). Introducing the event, ex-Labour government Minister for Transport and now adviser to the Macquarie Bank, Gus McDonald, commended Prime Minister Cameron for his stated commitment that policy-makers should base effective intervention on ‘the best that science teaches us about how people behave and what drives their well-being’.

Political interest in applying behavioural psychology to education and other areas of social policy has ebbed and flowed since the 1920s, both in the USA and

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here (e.g. Myers 2011; Stewart 2009, 2011; Thomson 2006). Yet, while all governments hope to shape good citizenship, the current British Government's much-touted slogan 'from nanny to nudge' suggests an intensifying desire to find scientific evidence for more sophisticated strategies for behaviour change. Formed in 2010 as part of the Cabinet Office, the behavioural insight unit is exploring behavioural economics, social psychology and neuroscience for better ways of getting citizens to make better lifestyle choices, take on a more active role in areas traditionally run by local and national government (such as housing, youth work and social care) and develop their own and others' well-being (e.g. John et al. 2011; Sullivan 2011).

Cultural and political concerns about the emotional state of citizens are manifested in numerous countries through initiatives in education, welfare, legal and rehabilitation systems, survivor movements, political apologies and post-war reconstruction. A growing body of sociological analysis argues that they emanate from, and also fuel, a powerful cultural 'therapeutic ethos'. Through this ethos, ideas, claims and practices of psychologists, therapists and psychiatrists permeate popular culture, politics and social and educational policy settings and create new common sense assumptions about the state of the self, and accompanying vocabularies and practices (e.g. Brunila 2012; Durodie 2009; Ecclestone 2011; Ecclestone and Hayes 2008; Ecclestone et al. 2010; Furedi 2003; Lau 2012; Moon 2009; Nolan 1998, 2008; Pupavac 2001, 2009; Wright 2008). As I argue below, a cultural therapeutic ethos is integral to the current slip from discourses and associated practices of emotional and psychological well-being into a revival of an old discourse of character, and broader government interest in new ideas from behavioural science.

It is important to reiterate at the outset of my exploration of these developments that 'well-being' and 'emotional and psychological well-being' as a subset of it, embrace related but different concepts and concerns, and draw in diverse perspectives about important attributes, attitudes, dispositions and 'skills' that need developing (e.g. Coleman 2009; Ecclestone 2011; Watson, Carl, and Philip 2012). I use 'emotional and psychological well-being' as an umbrella that draws in an extensive set of 'constructs' seen as amenable to development. These include resilience, stoicism, an optimistic outlook, an ability to be in the moment (or 'in flow'), feelings of satisfaction, being supported, loved, respected, skills of emotional regulation, emotional literacy (or emotional intelligence) as well as empathy, equanimity, compassion, caring for others and not comparing yourself to others (e.g. Huppert 2007; Layard 2007; Seligman et al. 2009). As I show below, a renewed discourse of character embraces all these constructs whilst adding other attributes and dispositions as virtues in a long list of 'character capabilities' (e.g. Lexmond and Grist 2011).

I begin my analysis by exploring the increasingly blurred boundaries between political and public consensus about a crisis of emotional and psychological well-being and the common sense assumptions of a cultural 'therapeutic ethos'. I argue that this blurring normalises informal and formal assessments of people's emotional and psychological states, thereby legitimising universal programmes that aim simultaneously to prevent future problems and enhance present well-being. I then go onto argue that the revival of an old discourse of 'character' incorporates concerns with morals and virtues within a psychological depiction that embraces all the constructs of well-being within a more inclusive set of 'capabilities', and hopes to find ways to measure them. Behind these developments lies political interest in using new ideas from behavioural science as a basis for more sophisticated interventions a and

measures. In the final section, I argue that such hopes are rooted in a cultural sensibility that presents emotional vulnerability, not as an existential condition, but as a determining characteristic of the contemporary self which requires therapeutically based intervention. I conclude by proposing that this determinist view of human beings psychologises moral dimensions to well-being and character in a social project that aims to engineer them through state-sponsored behaviour training.

2. Consensus and crisis

2.1. *Responding to emotional and psychological vulnerability*

Positive psychology, or what its followers call the ‘new science of happiness’ has become highly influential in policy and practice, reinforced by bodies such as the World Health Organisation. This presents well-being as part of positive mental health in which we realise our own abilities, cope with the normal stress of everyday life, work productively and contribute positively to the community. Its acknowledged founder, Martin Seligman, ex-president of the American Psychological Association and promoter of high profile interventions for the US army and British Government, argues that learned optimism is at the heart of well-being, alongside psychological and emotional components listed above. He and supporters argue that these can be taught and transferred to life situations (e.g. Seligman 2011; Seligman et al. 2009). Richard Layard, a prominent British supporter suggests that science enables us to challenge existential beliefs that life involves suffering. Launching the Action for Happiness movement in April 2011, he argued:

Happiness is good for you ... Everyone wants to be happy, yet many are not. This has been the human condition for as long as anyone can remember – Samuel Beckett said that the tears of the world are a constant quantity. But what if the tears of the world are not so constant? What if it really is possible for individuals and whole societies to shape and boost their happiness? (www.happiness.org.uk)

In addition to its compelling challenge to fundamental existential beliefs, a crucial appeal of positive psychology is its rejection of traditional solutions to well-being such as redistribution of wealth or promotion of economic growth. Instead, policy-makers’ resurrection of the old adage that ‘money can’t buy happiness’ fits well with a view that capitalist materialism and alienation are key causes of its contemporary poor state (e.g. James 2007a; Layard 2005). In contrast, an epidemiological perspective correlates mental health with relative levels of wealth and inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). These contrasting arguments lend weight to arguments for intervention and measures for well-being. In further debate, the Institute of Economic Affairs argues that both analyses and their implications for economic growth are wrong, and it cautions against official measures and interventions (Booth 2012).

Conflicting views about the role of government and the economy in emotional and psychological well-being do not challenge powerful arguments for intervention made in studies which quantify factors that contribute to it. A typical estimate is that about 40% of its underlying ‘constructs’ are genetic or trait-based, 15% are affected by material conditions and social relationships and the rest are amenable to intervention (Huppert op. cit.). Other studies suggest that genetic or trait-based

factors comprise 50%, but the overall argument for promoting ‘equality of opportunity for happiness’ is the same (Fritjers, Johnston, and Shields 2011). A powerful impetus for intervention is fear that cycles of emotional and material deprivation, life chances and poor self-esteem are not only interwoven but create damaging emotional and psychological legacies for future generations. Since 1997, a cornerstone of social policy shared across political parties is that government must intervene in order to ‘*replace a vicious cycle with a virtuous cycle*’ (Duncan-Smith and Allan 2009, 9; see also Social Exclusion Unit 1999).

Over the past 15 years or so, a strong consensus has emerged that certain universal interventions prevent future mental illness whilst helping those with early problems (e.g. Bailey 2010; Bywater and Sharples this volume; Cornum 2012; Huppert 2007; Layard 2005). Calls for public investment go hand in hand with another compelling tenet of the new science, namely its rejection of individual psychopathology which has traditionally underpinned targeted strategies. By identifying measurable social and individual characteristics of subjective well-being, positive psychology aims to build upon the individual and communal assets that foster them in a form of ‘emotional inoculation’ (Layard op. cit.; Bailey op. cit.; Huppert op. cit.). This parallels attempt in welfare and health policy to develop ‘asset-based’ interventions (e.g. Foot and Hopkins 2011).

The US army resilience programme cited above is designed to prevent dramatically rising levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (Cornum 2012). Other alarming estimates of mental ill-health reinforce calls for intervention. For example, a study in 2007 for the Nuffield Foundation reported that more than a million children have problems, doubling the numbers of a generation ago. A survey of over 8000 children found that a third of those aged 14–16 had ‘conduct disorders’, such as aggressive, disruptive or anti-social behaviour, 4% aged 5–16 had emotional disorders such as stress, anxiety and depression, 2% had hyperactive behaviour or attention problems, 6% had conduct disorders and 2% had more than one type of disorder (Collishaw et al. 2007; see also Myers this volume). In promoting its resilience programme as part of a pilot project funded by the previous government in five local authorities, Hertfordshire local authority quotes Institute of Psychiatry figures in 2007 that ‘*the number of children with emotional and behavioural problems in the UK has doubled in the past 25 years ...*’ (Bailey 2010). Others offer different estimates (e.g. Bywater and Sharples this volume).

In parallel, popular texts reinforce consensus about a crisis. For example, a self-help guide to diagnosing mental health claims that 40% of the British public will ‘*undergo psychological difficulties at some time*’, defining someone with a mental disorder as having ‘*disabling psychological symptoms, an emotional or behavioural problem or dysfunction in thinking, acting or feeling ... all of which can cause distress and may impair how someone functions*’ (Connelly-Stephenson 2007, 6). Psychiatrist Oliver James argues that 24% of Britons will suffer emotional distress (James 2007b). In a book on emotional literacy for teachers and parents, educational psychologist Peter Sharp claims that ‘*approximately 1 in 4 of us will have a mental health problem at some time in our life, requiring treatment or support from the caring professions ...*’ (Sharp 2003, 7).

Slippery definitions and widely varying estimates of problems accompany apocryphal claims for long-term impact and costs. A commonplace assertion is that children diagnosed at five with single or multiple conduct disorders are significantly more likely to commit crimes, be unemployed, experience marital breakdown and

have drug or alcohol problems (e.g. Bywater and Sharples this volume). Such problems are often quantified precisely. For example, Hertfordshire local authority claims that 'a child with a conduct disorder costs the taxpayer £70,000 in crime, social care and remedial costs by the time they are 28 compared to £7000 for a child with no such problems' (Bailey 2010, 5). As Historian Thomas Dixon shows, the Victorians had their own, albeit unquantified, concerns about the pernicious social fall-out in crime and immoral behaviour seen to arise from a failure to train children's emotions (Dixon this volume).

Contemporary advocates of intervention argue that the number needing it grows in proportion to the population diagnosed with problems (e.g. Huppert 2007). Yet, estimates overlook the official sanctioning of a large increase in professional diagnoses through successive revisions of the American Psychiatric Association's highly influential Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). In the UK, this is used for formal diagnosis by clinically qualified professionals and as a general guide by educational psychologists and other professionals. Accounts by insiders and external analysts show how DSM has changed the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, expanded category disorders amongst children, turned previously rare syndromes and disorders into common ones and categorised behaviours once seen as antisocial, disruptive or merely commonplace as mental disorders: in this way, for example, post-bereavement grief and shyness have been medicalised (e.g. Horwitz and Wakefield 2007; Lau *op. cit.*; Myers this volume; Summerfield 2004). Use of DSM in the everyday mental health market has also expanded the range of symptoms drawn into professional remit (Lau 2012). In parallel, official technical criteria to categorise adults as 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' have shifted from the precisely delineated list created by the 1995 Law Commission to the much looser one offered by the 2006 Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults Act of 'anyone receiving treatment, health or palliative care of any description', including therapy (McLaughlin 2011, 120; also Eves 2009).

As historical analyses of changing fashions in psychiatry and clinical psychology show, diagnostic criteria and their resulting labels and assessments reflect scientific understanding in specific sociocultural conditions (Downbiggin 2011; Myers 2011; Thomson 2006). This means that although rising levels of mental ill-health are not merely social constructions, they cannot be divorced from cultural perceptions and preoccupations. At the same time, popular, political and professional interest in solutions offered by various strands of psychology, therapy and psychoanalysis are both reflected in, and fuelled by, the proliferation of popular accounts by academics about the lessons of their research for everyday life, self-assessment quizzes, pen portraits of diagnoses and symptoms, instruction and advice in self-help books and lifestyle magazines. Instructional guides include a guide to creating a 'well-being curriculum' and a clever parody of fairytales that explains disorders to parents and children (James 2007b; Morris 2009).

In everyday life and educational settings alike, a merger between academic, political and popular concerns normalises formal and informal 'diagnoses' of problems. These manifest themselves in the everyday prevalence of semi-serious claims to have 'anger management' or 'attachment issues', being 'a bit aspergers' or 'oppositional defiance disorder' or having 'an attention and hyperactivity disorder day'. Reflecting a cultural therapeutic ethos, such labels blur popular and professional understandings of our emotional and psychological selves (see Ecclestone and Hayes 2008; Furedi 2003; Nolan 1998). Studies in schools and colleges show

how this leads teachers and support staff to categorise certain children and young people as, variously, 'vulnerable', 'at risk', having 'fragile learning identities', 'no self-esteem' and being 'dysfunctional' and 'disaffected and disengaged' (Ecclestone 2010, chap. 5; Ecclestone and Bailey 2009; Gillies 2011). In these studies, such labels accompanied casual speculations about how cycles of emotional vulnerability and 'dysfunction' both arose from and created social and educational problems, anxiety about assessment tasks and difficulties in coping with various pedagogic demands. In a study of Finnish prison and young offender projects, some young men articulated therapeutic accounts of their emotional and psychological problems, learnt from sessions with youth workers (Brunila 2012).

If my analysis here is valid, everyday and cultural manifestations of assumptions about emotional and psychological legacies and their effects cannot be divorced from the parallel rise of 'treatment therapy' predicated on fears about rising levels of disorders and behaviours that warrant intervention and 'positive therapy' (or 'preventative' or 'enhancement' therapy) that turns many qualitative aspects of life and our experience of it into skills that can be taught and learned (Lau *op. cit.*). In a historical study of mental health, Ian Downbiggin argues that professional and popular diagnoses of new syndromes and disorders, and the interventions these create, are a paradox of diversity and inclusion that destigmatises mental health problems whilst creating new constraints on normality and new experts who tell us how to feel (Downbiggin 2011). Taken together, these cultural and professional developments contribute to a rise in professional forms of therapy and legitimise calls for state-sponsored interventions in educational settings.

2.2. *The rise of behavioural interventions*

Ranging from prescriptive sequences of scripted activities to instil positive thinking and certain responses to problematic situations, to activities such as 'circle time' based on Rogerian group counselling and consciousness-raising, there is strong support for universal, generic programmes to develop emotional and psychological well-being (see Bywater and Sharples this volume). Informed variously by cognitive behaviour therapy, psychoanalysis, positive psychology, self-help, reflective thinking and counselling, officially sponsored programmes include a version of the American Penn Resilience programme, piloted by the previous British Government in five local authorities, encompassing 700 secondary school teachers and over 7000 students and the Personal and Thinking Skills programme for primary schools (e.g. Challen et al. 2011; Curtis and Northgate 2007). Less prescriptive and more eclectic is the previous government's Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) strategy for primary and secondary schools, introduced in 2005 and withdrawn from formal government sponsorship in 2011 (see Craig 2007; Ecclestone and Hayes 2008; Humphrey, Ann, and Michael 2010; Watson, Carl, and Philip 2012 for discussion).

Promotions and evaluations of such initiatives have tended to reflect the slippery definitions and sense of crisis that characterise the field as a whole, often eliding conduct disorders, disaffection from formal class teaching, general lack of motivation, poor social skills, emotional difficulties, bad behaviour and lack of 'emotional literacy' (e.g. Challen et al. *op. cit.*; Curtis and Northgate *op. cit.*; Hallam 2009). This means that claims about effectiveness and impact seem often to be about simple disciplinary training, such as making students more proactive in their learning,

attend regularly, manage their homework and sports equipment and set realistic but challenging targets (e.g. Bailey *op. cit.*). Further difficulty in establishing a definitive evidence base arises from the incoherence of the field as a whole, where interest groups compete to define a problem and offer particular solutions. A key area of disagreement is whether skills-based universal interventions, child centred, holistic and relational approaches or whether teaching social and emotional learning through subjects are most appropriate (e.g. Craig 2007; Watson *et al. op. cit.*; Dixon 2011).

In the light of conceptual confusion, strong advocacy for intervention and competing claims about the best approach, it is difficult to see how evaluations of interventions can offer more than contradictory or inconclusive evidence. Nor, as Elias and Morceri acknowledge in this volume, do we yet know their long-term effects. Unanswered questions therefore remain about the extent and nature of problems and how best to respond. There are also ethical questions about the reductionist view of well-being that many interventions offer (see Dixon, Cigman *this volume*; Suissa 2008; Watson *et al. op. cit.*). A hitherto unaddressed question is about the images of participants reflected in policy discourses and associated practices that are used to justify behavioural interventions: as I argue below, this question also emerges through renewed interest in character development.

3. Building citizens of character

3.1. *The revival of an old discourse*

It is important to acknowledge that political and public debates about the role of schools in emotional development were evident before the first Education Act in 1870 but became more acute after it (see Dixon *this volume*). Unlike contemporary agreement that schools are key sites for intervention, there were fierce public and parliamentary debates about the respective roles of schools, the church, communities and families in ‘educating’ the emotions (*Ibid.*). In parallel, character has been an enduring focus for debate amongst numerous lobbying and pressure groups from the Victorian period to the present day (e.g. Roberts 2004; Wright 2007). In the late twentieth century, successive governments have attempted and failed to incorporate character in a ‘citizenship’ curriculum (Arthur 2010).

The current government’s reticence about formal initiatives for emotional well-being, noted earlier, enables schools to decide on their own approach (see Bywater and Sharples *this volume*; Watson *et al. op. cit.*). It also paves the way for a revival of interest in character already evident in support for emotional well-being on the grounds that: ‘*there is an overwhelming case for the state to intervene in the character development of every family*’ (Layard 2007). Contemporary fears about social and economic crisis and related problems with young people’s character parallel those in calls during the late 1890s and early twentieth century to intervene more actively in the shaping of character (Roberts *op. cit.*). Like the old discourse, the revival of a character discourse is politically and educationally inclusive. Its supporters invoke the more robust and virtuous sounding elements of emotional and psychological well-being, such as emotional regulation, resilience, stoicism and altruism, responsibility, early intervention and the importance of parenting, whilst adding notions of individual choice, agency and moral development (see Arthur 2010; Lexmond and Grist 2011). Predictably, historical parallels with older ideas emerge in associations between character and the ‘competitive playing fields of Eton’, but their contemporary version is embellished with positive psychology.

Anthony Seldon, headteacher of Wellington School (which appointed the country's first head of a well-being curriculum in 2007) commends it as a foundation for teaching qualities such as perseverance, courage, belief in justice, loving and being loved, curiosity, wisdom and humour, alongside traditional public school discipline, sport and loyalty to 'houses' (Seldon in Lexmond and Grist, op. cit.). Positive psychologists claim a scientific basis for a set of virtues identified as key character traits. A long list includes gratitude, awe, creativity, curiosity, diligence, entrepreneurialism, forgiveness, future-mindedness, temperance generosity, honesty, humility, joy, love, purpose, reliability and thrift (e.g. Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Unlike earlier discourses of emotional and psychological well-being, the new discourse appears to encourage moral and political questions. For example, some advocates challenge traditional conservative depictions of poor achievement and social problems caused by 'bad' or irresponsible individuals and attempt, instead, to reclaim the language of values, virtues and morals as part of a liberal-Left communitarianism (Arthur, Baggini in Lexmond and Grist op. cit.). There is also resistance to reducing complex aspects of emotional development, moral and character development to 'capabilities' that avoid questions about social and personal 'good' and desirable 'ends' and privilege state intervention over the responsibilities of families, communities and non-state organisations (Arthur op. cit.; Baggini op. cit.; Kristansson 2012).

Despite talk about values, virtues, discipline and public schools, it would be a mistake to dismiss the new discourse as misplaced nostalgia for elitist stereotypes of character offered in public school and 'officer class' interpretations, or for imposing certain moral values. Instead, a broad political and educational constituency aims to identify a broad set of *'capabilities (or virtues) that underpin a good and flourishing life, but which are also instrumental to success in a (comparatively) value-free sense'* (Lexmond and Grist 2011, 29). Indeed, far from imposing values and ends, the new discourse acknowledges questions about them but creates long lists of capabilities that avoid decisions about what they are. For example, some advocates argue that schemes such as SEAL offer *'one initiative that seeks to develop character through the taught curriculum'* (Gross op. cit., 91), avoiding prescriptive values by *'[seeking] to develop the underlying dispositions that will enable children to make wise choices – choices that will benefit others as well as themselves'* (Gross in Lexmond and Grist, op. cit., 94). This enables constructs associated with SEAL to transmogrify as character capabilities, such as resilience, empathy, setting learning goals, friendship, determination and application, anger management and staying in control (op. cit.). Capabilities also include a therapeutic, introspective dimension. For example, Liam Byrne, shadow secretary of state for work and pensions, argues: *'Our young people want to develop, not only their understanding of the things around them – but an understanding of the things inside them – self-confidence, self-esteem, ambition, motivation, nerve ...'* (Byrne quoted by Lexmond and Grist op. cit.).

3.2. *The search for better measures*

Powerful precedents for conceptual confusion and a behavioural and psychological interpretation of character have been set by earlier discourses of emotional well-being. These precedents reinforce a view that we can teach complex attitudes, attributes and responses to situations whilst tempering the reductionism of 'skills' with

a broader notion of ‘capabilities’. This accommodates the language of virtues and values whilst avoiding the disputes about them that have always undermined previous political attempts to develop character in schools (e.g. Arthur 2005). This, together with enthusiasm for finding novel ways to measure these capabilities, encourages a behavioural training approach. For example, Lexmond and Grist argue that *‘We need to get better at measuring the development of character capabilities and the range of outcomes to which they lead’* (2011, 137). Challenging narrow educational and economic measures of examination results and prosperity, they argue that these *‘miss out on most of the important things in life’* and that

capabilities important to good and successful lives (empathy, resilience, creativity, application and so on) and the outcomes that embody those good and successful lives (happiness, health, trust, beauty, connectivity and so on) are woefully undervalued by policy makers ... because they are so hard to quantify and the tools we have to measure them are so rudimentary. (op. cit., 137–8)

Proposals to find accurate measures draw in earlier initiatives such as training for parents and programmes to help children regulate their emotions and ‘behave better’, *‘using a proven technology – not just pious exhortations’* (Lexmond and Grist op. cit., 138). Overlooking the prima facie contradiction between using ‘proven technology’ and laments about ‘rudimentary measures’, advocates hope that more robust assessments might emerge from current character projects, such as ‘sophisticated tools’ to measure communities’ well-being (Ibid.). Other measures perhaps lie in the future, such as brain assessments of a newborn child’s ‘epigenetic’ code to see if it is already in ‘survival mode’ and *‘likely to be oversensitive or paranoid’* and therefore in need of different support environments, and even measures of communal epigenetic states *‘that help people to overcome adversity successfully or the types of cultural institutions – family, schools, community groups and so on – that support people to buck the trend’* (Ibid.). More prosaically, some advocates derive resilience ‘toolkits’ that help *‘shape a child’s character’* from practical experience of working with young people (e.g. Hart, Derek, and Helen 2007).

While the search for effective measures of character capabilities is a key continuity from earlier attempts to teach emotional and psychological well-being, it has much older roots in Victorian and Edwardian optimism that psychology would offer effective measures of character. For example, in controversies about hopes for a ‘science of character’, John Stuart Mill attempted to outline a robust ‘ethology’ while others explored eugenics (Roberts op. cit.). In light of these older debates, it is possible to see hopes that neuroscience might provide ‘epigenetic’ predictors of complex human behaviours, ‘emotional metrics’ and ‘global emotional fitness scales’ as manifestations of what Raymond Tallis calls ‘neuromania’ (Tallis 2011). However, although such hopes might be turn out to be fanciful, the state of the science is not the salient point for arguments in this article. Instead, I argue in the next section that these hopes arise from certain ideas that seem to be emerging about the nature of those targeted for behavioural training.

4. The political rise of behavioural science

4.1. Finding a convincing evidence base for intervention

The presentation of emotional and psychological well-being as skills and the temptation to depict character in similar ways have been encouraged by the previous

government's attempts to find scientific evidence for politically-sponsored interventions (Sharples 2007). Introducing a report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on well-being in the Classroom in 2007, Baroness Susan Greenfield said '*there is overwhelming sympathy for schools to do more to protect and promote the emotional well-being of children and young people*', calling for the group to support existing initiatives and to '*make recommendations that carry considerable weight both scientifically and politically*' (Ibid.). Reflecting a popular view that psychological science can now tell us how to understand and then work on our emotions, Matthew Taylor chief executive of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) argues that this is no more problematic than using scientific insights to improve physical workouts to get fit (Taylor 2008). Similarly, an invocation of 'emotional workouts' for 'emotional fitness' to promote the US army's resilience training programme was received enthusiastically at the conference cited above.

Such aspirations resonate with political hopes that economics, behavioural/positive psychology and sociology might illuminate the interplay between our rational, irrational, conscious and unconscious behaviours and the social and individual capabilities that lead to success and happiness, thereby providing a stronger foundation for social policy. A report for the RSA argues that:

A greater comprehension of cognitive pathways, social norms and moral motivations should join with a continuing understanding of instrumental factors in shaping government policy-making. Given the demands of co-production, and the limits to available finance, it could be argued that a shift to a more subtle range of interventions is essential to the future of public services. Our caution rests not so much over the ethical or political issues thrown up by such developments ... There is currently a gap between our understanding of general and psychological processes and capacity to ensure that these insights become effective tools for social engineering. (Stoker and Moseley 2010, 23)

Building on work started by the Labour government in 2007, the Cabinet Office's behavioural insight unit, formed in 2010, aims to develop a checklist of psychological effects that consciously and unconsciously influence our behaviour as a basis for finding better ways to change individual conduct in anti-social behaviour, pro-social behaviour and healthy and prosperous lifestyles (e.g. Dolan et al. 2011; *op. cit.*). Amidst these ideas, 'nudge' has caught popular and political attention as a basis for engineering what its advocates call 'choice architecture', namely the subtle signals and environments that affect our behaviour in specific contexts before we have chosen consciously to act in a certain way (e.g. John et al. *op. cit.*; Thayer and Sunstein 2008). According to a report for the Cabinet Office, because 'people are sometimes seemingly irrational and inconsistent in their choices', policy-makers' attention should shift from 'facts and information' and focus instead on 'manipulating' choice architecture in order to 'change behaviour without changing minds' (Cabinet Office 2010, 5).

4.2. Promoting a more sophisticated approach to behaviour change

As I observed above, British and American Government interest in behavioural psychology as a basis for attempting to define and measure behaviour is nothing new. And, as Dixon argues, Gradgrind's enthusiasm for instrumental education in 'Hard Times' would be encouraged by the drive to measure emotional well-being (this volume). Yet, contemporary behavioural scientists hope to persuade policy-makers

that they need to go beyond their traditional tools of regulation, information campaigns and skills training. Instead, they need to take more account of the ways in which our best intentions are invariably sabotaged by unconscious drivers from past experience, emotional reactions to situations and other irrational aspects of ourselves. Hopes for more sophisticated approaches are exemplified by arguments in David Brooks' book *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement* which were widely debated by British think tanks and policy-makers in 2011. According to Brooks, it is not that we are entirely determined by our unconscious selves and therefore, victims or dupes. Instead, shaped by the interplay of genes, culture, upbringing and education and the institutions and networks in which we live and work, it is possible for us to influence at least some of these. Following such arguments, we cannot master these factors: instead, the art of living well comes from knowing how to steer our natures and slowly remodel our characters (Ibid.). Popular interest in psychoanalysis, self-help and self-awareness reinforces a powerful therapeutic orthodoxy that better knowledge of the unconscious enables us to do this.

In this vein, and supported by policy-oriented bodies such as DEMOS and the RSA, Brooks argues for policies that strengthen 'character' and life skills, especially for those left behind by deindustrialisation and rising inequality (Ibid.). Such optimism belies an absence of evidence to delineate a pathway to such policies and the lack of, and underlying theoretical coherence in current behaviour change approaches. Positive psychology and cognitive behaviour therapy are predicated on instrumental rationalism that hopes to persuade us that learning certain thought patterns, emotional responses and habits can make us resilient, optimistic, etc. thereby enhancing relationships, educational and work achievement or merely enabling us to survive life more effectively. At the same time, therapeutically informed activities aim to enhance mindfulness about the emotional, irrational, unconscious causes of our behaviour, while nudge techniques offer 'light touch interventions' designed by 'choice architects' that aim to appeal to our unconscious desire to act in socially beneficial ways.

This theoretical eclecticism is able to draw in very diverse interests and advocates whilst also promising the possibility that more sophisticated approaches and measures might emerge from attempts to develop the psychological constructs of emotional well-being, now morphing into character capabilities. Yet, to reiterate an argument I made at the end of the last section, the salient question is not whether the underlying science and its theoretical or empirical base is robust or coherent. Instead, it is important to consider the images of human participants embedded in enthusiasm that better science might provide effective combinations of psychology as a basis for understanding and intervening in behaviour.

5. Challenging an essential human vulnerability

5.1. The role of social science in predicting and controlling human behaviour

The drive for better measures and interventions resurrects a warning made by Mills (1959), which is as relevant now as it was 53 years ago. For Mills, social science should not aim to predict and control human behaviour or engage in human engineering because such goals reveal an empty optimism rooted in ignorance of the roles of reason in human affairs, the nature of power and its relations to knowledge and the meaning of agency and moral action. Mills argued that talking so glibly

about prediction and control assumes the perspective of the bureaucrat to whom, as Karl Marx observed, the world is an object to be manipulated. Following this argument, attempts to predict and control behaviour substitute technocratic slogans for what ought to be reasoned moral choices (Mills 1959). In a philosophical challenge to current attempts to combine behavioural and social science, Tom Nagel argues that we need to go beyond simply discovering unacknowledged influences on our conduct and adapting our behaviour accordingly. Instead, we need to learn how to respond critically: *'even if empirical methods enable us to understand sub-rational processes better; the crucial question is, how are we to use this kind of self-understanding?'* (Nagel 2011, 2).

Of course, questions about the relationship between individuals' capacity for moral understanding and government's role in changing behaviour are old philosophical concerns. Writing in 1873, John Stuart Mill offered a prescient warning against turning complex aspects of human life and experience into measurable goals or outcomes. After a nervous breakdown in his 20s when he questioned his life's work in promoting happiness as a utilitarian end, Mill changed his mind:

I never ... wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy ... who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end.

Aiming in this way at something else, they find happiness by the way. The enjoyments of life ... are sufficient to make it a pleasant thing, when they are taken en passant, without being made a principal object. Once make them so, and they are immediately felt to be insufficient. They will not bear a scrutinizing examination.

Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life. Let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, your self-interrogation, exhaust themselves on that; and if you are otherwise fortunately circumstanced, you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe, without dwelling on it or thinking about it, without either forestalling it in the imagination, or putting it to flight by fatal questioning. This theory has now become the basis of my philosophy of life. And I still hold to it as the best theory for all those who have a moderate degree of sensibility and of capacity for enjoyment, that is, for the great majority of mankind. (Mill [1873] 1989, 117–8)

On the surface, although Mill's warnings appear to echo positive psychologists' promotion of a meaningful life as a pathway to authentic happiness, they contrast starkly with a contemporary depiction of many pursuits, whether learning a subject or skill, taking up a craft or sport, being altruistic or being an active listener, not as ideal ends but as instruments for skills that, in turn, enhance our emotional and psychological well-being. In light of attempts to make emotional and psychological aspects of human life targets for therapeutically informed skills training, Mill's warnings also illuminate two significant problems. First, in order to achieve these outcomes, modern behavioural science turns complex social and individual traits, attributes and dispositions into utilitarian outcomes. It then uses various forms of counselling, therapy and psychoanalysis that explore the interplay between conscious and unconscious and rational and emotional factors. In contrast, Mill

suggests that well-being or character can only emerge as by-products of being absorbed in worthwhile activities and curriculum knowledge shaped by lifelong experiences (see also Suissa 2008; Cigman, Pett this volume). Second, Mill's caution against 'scrutinising examination' flies in the face of both therapeutic explorations and straightforward skills training, since both require participants to scrutinise behaviours, attitudes and dispositions, account for the feelings and emotions that drive them, speculate about how to make them more effective both now and in future, and take part in formal or informal assessments. If Mill is right a second time, all this destroys the various constructs of emotional well-being or character in the process.

Lastly, the last line of Mills' warning goes beyond what might seem to be technical concerns about effectiveness. His assertion that '*the great majority of mankind*' [possess the] '*moderate degree of sensibility and ... capacity for enjoyment*' might be dismissed as elitist complacency that dismisses much human misery. It also comes, of course, from an era without access to the insights of therapy and psychology. Nevertheless, it returns me to the key question for this article, namely the underlying images of human beings that justify and normalise interventions.

Underlying a shift from a crisis of emotional and psychological well-being to concerns about character and moral development is general agreement that some form of therapeutic intervention is necessary. Behind this agreement, political and popular accounts of the contemporary self-depict, simultaneously, some people as more emotionally or psychologically vulnerable than others and all of us as potentially or actually vulnerable. According to Frank Furedi, these determinist images emerge from a prevailing cultural sensibility which sees life as inherently threatening and distressing, where '*most forms of human experience [are] the source of emotional distress ... [and people] characteristically suffer from "an emotional deficit and possess a permanent consciousness of vulnerability"*' (Furedi 2003, 110).

This sensibility turns vulnerability from an existential condition, and sometimes debilitating effect or symptom of difficult life experiences, social and economic change or oppression and inequality, into an ontological characteristic (Ecclestone 2011). Reflected in policy depictions of cycles of material and psychological deprivation and everyday assessments of our emotional states, a view that, in essence, we are all vulnerable, generates hopes that science offers more effective approaches to behaviour change. It is these determinist images of vulnerability that enable scientifically based interventions to avoid moral and political questions about values and to avoid engaging the human targets of intervention in considering such questions. According to Layard, '*we live in a scientific age ... and only science can and should persuade the young about the routes to a happy society*' (quoted by Furedi 2011, 182).

The confidence of such assertions highlights a stark contrast between Victorian and Edwardian debates about the moral and ethical implications of attempts to create a science of character and their contemporary manifestation. In contrast to older concerns, the science of well-being is already rooted in attempts to make the morals and virtues that underpin 'character traits' the target of science (e.g. Peterson and Seligman op. cit.; see Kristansson op cit for critique). According to Furedi, the '*high priests*' of the science of well-being set out explicitly to replace moral values with therapeutic assumptions and practices because they fear that a secular society cannot teach morals or offer a clear moral code (2011, 185). Following this argument, attempts to use psychological science to teach well-being or character are '*an*

attempt to recover moral meaning through the medium of psychology Yet, for Furedi, it will not work: *'it is likely that the confusion of psychology with morality will simply diminish the capacity [of schools] to communicate a system of shared meanings'* (Ibid., 185). In different ways, then, discourses of well-being and character both recast virtues and moral values as psychological constructs that can be trained without requiring moral engagement. According to Furedi, this is amoral because it perceives the treatment of the self as detached from a fundamental commitment to beliefs and values.

Conclusions

Continuities between discourses of emotional and psychological well-being and character are founded on hopes that science can offer better understanding and measures of a complex, lifelong evolution of attributes, virtues, habits and attitudes. One outcome is long inclusive lists of capabilities and skills that embrace behaviours, attributes, virtues, dispositions and moral choices. The search for robust measures of psychological states and desirable behaviours combines approaches that embellish appeals to our rational assessment of the need to learn better 'skills' with therapeutically oriented assessments of subconscious and emotional aspects of our behaviour that draw on relational approaches. At best, the conceptual and evidence base is inconclusive and fragmented. At worst, it is prey to 'advocacy science' or, in its worst manifestations, to simple entrepreneurship that competes for publicly funded interventions. On a technical level, these related problems create such diverse meanings that it is impossible to decide what is being diagnosed, taught and assessed or to challenge claims made by various vested interests.

Although technical questions about the scientific evidence for claims and proposed interventions are important, I have aimed to go beyond them in order to respond to Mills' injunction that sociologists should illuminate the kinds of human nature revealed in the conduct and character of societies in particular periods. Specifically, I have argued that the contemporary politics of behaviour change are characterised by a 'diminished' view of human nature that emerges from, and reinforces, a cultural therapeutic ethos rooted in determinist assumptions about emotional and psychological vulnerability. By combining historical, psychological and philosophical insights, a sociological imagination illuminates moral and ethical questions about the legitimacy of the normative interventions and assessments that flow from these determinist assumptions. It also highlights the scale of the critical challenge involved in resisting them.

Nevertheless, despite difficulties in challenging the determinist assumptions of contemporary behavioural science, it is important to resist the ways in which it acknowledges the realities and complexities of modern life but then roots behavioural solutions in images of an essential, determining human vulnerability. Such images enables the contemporary turn to behavioural science to shift well-being as a moral and social enterprise for 'human flourishing' to a psychological terrain. This sets out explicitly to avoid moral and political debate about the material conditions, knowledge and experiences that maximise opportunities for a broad balanced cultured life, the capacity for deep reflection and the ability to allow unhappiness (or to acknowledge the importance of pessimism) (see Cigman, Pett, Clack this volume).

At a conceptual level, it is therefore important to challenge the replacement of questions about moral meaning with therapeutic values that respond to diminished images of emotional and psychological vulnerability. It is also important to explore empirically the ways in which these images manifest themselves in everyday educational practices, and to look also for resistance and counter-narratives (e.g. Ecclestone et al. 2012; Rawdin 2012). Meanwhile, I would argue that we need a political and educational challenge to a social project that hopes to engineer emotional and psychological well-being and character whilst avoiding civic engagement in the political questions this raises. The problem is that if the human targets of therapeutically informed behavioural interventions accept their underlying emotional determinism, they are in no fit state to engage in these questions.

Notes on contributor

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