

## UNHAPPINESS STUDIES

*Kinds Come First: Age, Gender, Class, and Ethnicity Give Meaning to Measures*

By Jerome Kagan. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019. 216 pp. Hardcover \$30.00.

I was reminded – for reasons that may seem incongruous but will become clear – upon completing this slim volume from developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan of a monologue from playwright Will Eno wherein a solitary character (identified as Man) speaks with droll poignancy of existential states like displacement, exile, and mortality. “I’m not from here,” the monologue begins. “I guess I never will be. That’s how being from somewhere works.” Written at the midpoint of the “hope and change” Obama presidency, Eno’s monologue serves as a contrarian’s caution that it is precisely when we do not see a cliff’s edge that the edge might be closest. Furthermore, and instructively, Man declares: “Maybe I’ve been adapting to the wrong surroundings” (Eno, 2012).

I was reminded as well of the recent wealth of psychological research into what has come to be known as positive psychology or, more informally, happiness studies. It is a field famously propelled in 1998 by Martin E. P. Seligman in his American Psychological Association presidential address in which he called for psychology to become “a reoriented science that emphasizes the understanding and building of the most positive qualities of an individual: optimism, courage, work ethic, future-mindedness, interpersonal skill, the capacity for pleasure and insight, and social responsibility” (Seligman, 1998). He could scarcely have imagined the extent to which his call would be heeded. In the two decades that were to follow, Seligman and associates (backed by huge infusions of cash from the conservative and Christian evangelical John Templeton Foundation) birthed an entire movement to life, one that has grown to spread the

good news via fresh academic journals (e.g. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *Journal of Positive Psychology*), invigorating TED talks (e.g. Seligman, Jonathan Haidt, and others), university courses crammed to capacity, military resilience training exercises, popular media of every imaginable stripe, and (increasingly) via not just private but also lots of federal monies. What is it that positive psychology promises? In his history of this phenomenon, American Studies scholar Daniel Horowitz notes that the timing of positive psychology's ascent cannot be coincidental. "Incomes have been stagnant for vast stretches of American society, achieving economic security became more elusive for millions, politics have been deadlocked, and inequalities of wealth and income have grown dramatically," writes Horowitz. "In such circumstances, positive psychology promised tens of millions of ordinary people that they could rely on individual experiences to bypass, temporarily forget, or transcend social, political, and economic difficulties" (Horowitz, 2018).

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At first blush, Kagan's newest book would appear an unlikely antidote to the brouhaha/gravy train/bonanza/chutzpah that is positive psychology. Yet this can be one highly illuminating way to read *Kinds Come First*. Kagan makes abundantly clear that he has little truck with any celebrity pundit or psychologist – Nicholas Kristof and Stephen Pinker are cited – who expounds on (and profits from) a viewpoint that our present era is the best of all possible eras (cf. Kristof, 2019; Pinker, 2018). Kagan scoffs at this "sunny perspective," noting that such a position can only have been reached if we "cherry-pick the desirable material outcomes while failing to devote equal time to their costs" (p. 115). By some measures, yes, humans are collectively better off. We have indoor plumbing and electricity and smart phones, and our life spans are longer. But by many other measures, our species is a hot mess. We have "increased

pollution of air, rivers, and oceans, the killing of large numbers of animals, nuclear and non-biodegradable waste, climate change, an electronic interconnectedness that is vulnerable to cyber attacks that can cripple a nation's functions, online scams, theft of bank account numbers, vulnerabilities to infectious agents that have developed resistance to antibiotics, and, among Americans, increases in loneliness, deaths due to opioid overdoses, and the highest suicide rate in over 70 years" (p. 116). To which we can add: There has been in the United States an administration (2017-?) blissfully unconcerned that the planet and its people are in dire peril. Nearly every day there are news stories that regulations that might protect us are being eliminated or relaxed (L. Friedman, 2020). This despite report after report that our global existence is being threatened by impending environmental catastrophe. Black humor may be our last best recourse; an Australian bookstore posted a sign in its window during the devastating fires of January 2020 that swept through New South Wales: "Post-Apocalyptic Fiction has been moved to Current Affairs" (Flanagan, 2020). And if the fires don't get us, rising seas might; another recent report concludes that "150 million are living on land that will be inundated by midcentury" (Lu & Flavelle, 2019).

As Kagan observes, unhappiness is rampant. There are indications of this both large and small. Support for euthanasia is high (p. 117). More Harvard undergraduates than ever now choose to pursue careers for which they have little passion or real interest (p. 118). He mocks the notion that technology adds a whit to a person's sense of satisfaction. "I do not want an app that makes my coffee and toasts my bread before I get to the kitchen," he writes (p. 119). For someone who does not necessarily sound like a kvetch, Kagan certainly expresses a good deal of negativity in these pages. And, I hasten to add, not without cause.

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The perspectives articulated in *Kinds Come First* are not novel for Kagan. In his several books published since the turn of the millennium, Kagan has repeatedly called critical attention to the problems he sees with current methodological fashions in psychological investigation. Already more than a dozen years ago, Kagan had cautioned that “disagreement is frequent in psychology because investigators often use the same concept to describe very different kinds of evidence” (Kagan, 2006). There can be, Kagan has stressed, no useful interpretation outside of *context*. “A lion can be described as a large, dangerous mammal, one of many species found in Africa, or a caged attraction at zoos. Change the context, and the psychological meaning of the object is altered” (Kagan, 2006). Observing that an “understanding of the local context” is always essential, Kagan also effectively uses humor: “A friend hearing me say, ‘Bill cut the grass,’ can immediately eliminate many thousands of intended meanings, but at least two possible meanings remain. I could have intended to say that Bill used a mower to cut his lawn or a knife to cut some marijuana” (Kagan, 2007). The circumstances, such as specifically where Bill was, who Bill is, not to mention who the friend is, determine which of these two possible meanings prevails as most apt at a given moment.

Kagan has continued to press these points in recent years. “Effective programs implemented by one group of psychologists often fail when a different group of investigators apply the same rituals with another sample because the contexts have been altered” (Kagan 2017). It is a lesson, Kagan writes, also missed by numerous neuroscientific researchers. “These investigators continue to write sentences such as ‘The amygdala mediates fear,’ ‘The nucleus accumbens mediates reward,’ ‘The intraparietal sulcus mediates number,’ or ‘The hippocampus registers locations.’ These contextually naked statements contain no information on the agent,

the setting, the procedure that generated the evidence, or the particular form taken by the fear, reward, number sense, or location” (Kagan, 2017). Or to put the matter in starker and more declarative terms: “The temptation to fall in love with an abstract idea and search for proof of its existence in evidence produced by a single procedure administered in a single setting is a major reason for the slow progress of the social sciences” (Kagan, 2013).

Now in his seventh decade as a psychologist – he entered graduate school in 1950, accepted his first faculty position in 1954, and arrived at Harvard in 1964 – Kagan can track the *longue durée* of his profession better than almost anyone. *Kinds Come First* only deepens a sense that the psychology Kagan has known and valued is slipping away. He bemoans the fact that so much psychological research relies on evidence taken from white middle-class adults, even though “many functional relations discovered with middle-class white adults do not apply to all combinations of class and ethnicity” (p. 126). He objects to calls for younger psychologists to engage in aggressive self-promotion and to “market themselves as if they were young entrepreneurs trying to build a business” (p. 9). Such incitements will only result in lousy research, due to pressures which lead “younger faculty seeking promotion to begin a study ASAP,” and thereby pursue “experiments that lack the controls that might invalidate the claim” (p. 16). He is dismayed that newfound emphases on impact factors and speeded-up publication records have led to the “hyping of results, willful fraud, and [the] seeking [of] media publicity” (p. 8). It is equally disappointing to Kagan that prestige journals allow “fabricated results supporting a political position” to appear in their pages because the view expressed “favored that [political] perspective” (p. 106). Can we even feign bewilderment when we read that psychology has struggled with nonreplicable results?

Kagan offers especially pithy remarks about psychologists who have come to see neuroscientific tools as the be-all and end-all of methodological panaceas. As Kagan writes, when psychological researchers with the aid of an EEG or fMRI “label neuronal patterns with psychological terms because they do not have a vocabulary able to describe the varied brain profiles they record,” their inferences will more than likely be “empirically meaningless” (p. 23). Kagan cites an egregious example (from a book published by Yale University Press): “The brain is continually scrambling to link together scraps of information” (Chater, 2018). To which Kagan acerbically replies: “Neither brains, neurons, nor circuits ‘scramble’” (p. 23). Small wonder, then, that “many psychologists” arrive at “bizarre inferences” in their experiments – whether with fMRI or otherwise – when they elect to “violate the requirements of the statistical procedures used most often to control for gender, class, or ethnicity” (p. 37).

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The three central chapters in *Kinds Come First* address a multitude of ways that “kinds” can influence outcomes. In the chapter on developmental stage, Kagan lays out the four main achievements of the second year of life: symbolic language, “ability to infer thoughts and feelings in others,” awareness that actions can be either punishable or praiseworthy, and “conscious awareness of the self” (pp. 45-46). One of his major arguments concerns the controversy over what “infants know” already in the second half of the first year of life (p. 57); Kagan is adamant that flawed premises will lead to invalid conclusions. A coda to the chapter builds on the fact that children “rely on more than one kind of code to represent experience” to consider implications for artificial intelligence (AI) programs (p. 60). Kagan scorns scientists who think that AI may be able to mimic the processes of the human mind. “AI will produce better robots, more accurate rockets, and more profitable investment choices,” but “no program

exposed to 100,000 famous paintings by nineteenth-century European artists can generate Picasso's *Guernica*" (p. 61).

In the chapter on sex and gender, Kagan says at the outset that "the consequences of socialization and societal values" exert "a greater influence than biology on more of the psychological traits that differentiate the genders" (p. 63). Yet biology continues to matter, as Kagan additionally amasses cross-cultural evidence that gender differences know few borders. He considers the ways that gender differences appear across cultures in tensions between competitiveness and helping, as well as in differentials in spatial and math abilities – and he explores the consequences for the self-confidence of talented women (p. 87). Yet he again critiques the methods of his profession, noting for instance with regards to a *PNAS* study that concluded that women are risk averse: "[F]emales are not risk averse when a child, husband, or parent is in danger. Nor are women risk averse when they agree to have unprotected sex in order to please their partner" (p. 67). And he reiterates the point he has made so well in this book and others: "Naked predicates, such as risk averse, are ambiguous until an agent, target, and setting are specified" (p. 67). Nonetheless, this chapter does tend more uncritically to accept contextually naked assertions that elsewhere are dismissed. That men with "broad faces" do better in business (p. 70). That females worry more than males (p. 77). That transgender men were tomboys as kids (p. 82). And so on. Here it might have been helpful if Kagan had thought to include the significant perspectives of feminist scholars on sex and gender, starting with developmental geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) and sociomedical scientist Rebecca M. Jordan-Young (2010).

Kagan's final chapter turns to social class and ethnicity. Issues of confidence, pride, and embarrassment, and their relationships to inequality are centrally addressed. Kagan has excellent

things to say about how working-class individuals often feel “inadequate and ashamed” (p. 96). He cites studies about “a poverty syndrome,” a condition that includes “low motivation, drowsiness, and boredom” (p. 93). He notes that “a compromised class rank is correlated with decreased functional connectivity during cognitive work, less cerebellar gray matter, less surface area in cortical sites involved in language and executive functions, and less white tract integrity” (p. 92). He underscores the devastating multidimensional impact that poverty can have on a person’s full capacity and sense of self-worth. Yet at another point he reminisces about a past era when the City University of New York enjoyed “elite status,” a status that has now been “removed” because CUNY, however “reasonable” the decision was, began to “admit more students from less advantaged minority groups, some of whom were not ready for college because of inadequate preparation in high school.” This has caused, Kagan asserts, less “pride” and “prestige” to be attached to a CUNY degree than in days of yore (p. 103).

Is there still a wider context it would have been helpful to include? Absent is any acknowledgment of the chronic underfunding of public schools, and the vast inequities that structure the national educational landscape (Ravitch, 2013; Kozol, 2005; Meier, 2017). Kagan also misses a chance to examine how elite institutions work to reproduce the elite – stacking the deck in their own ways since, after all, “more than 20 percent of the white applicants” admitted to Harvard between 2010 and 2015 were legacy students (Editorial, *New York Times*, 2019). Why do these students not feel ashamed and inadequate? How do they rationalize their own entitlements? No doubt class matters here too.

This last chapter becomes a meditation on how low status can do lasting physiological, neurological, and psychological harms. It is valuable for this reason. Yet again the context might usefully be expanded. As a keen observer noted more than fifteen years ago, while arguments



that emphasize the damages done to “young brains subjected to deprived conditions” can “inspire a liberal social agenda,” it remained also possible that a “reading of the data” could “all too easily fuel defeatism” and “just as readily be invoked in the service of a deeply pessimistic position that was not at all what they intended” (Hulbert, 2003). The question is how we interpret and use psychological research findings – particularly in the absence of what is most needed, namely vigorous antipoverty programming. This is a dilemma that also psychological researchers who earnestly care about the toll on young brains due to low socioeconomic status (SES) have themselves pondered. Cognitive psychologists Martha J. Farah and Daniel A. Hackman write: “Although the cognitive neuroscience of SES has the potential to enable more appropriately targeted, and hence more effective, programs to protect and foster the neurocognitive development of low SES children, it can also be misused or misunderstood as a rationalization of the status quo or ‘blaming the victim’” (Hackman & Farah, 2009). This is an entirely valid – indeed growing – concern and it would have been great to learn of Kagan’s perspectives on it.

Kagan looks to Europe and especially the Scandinavian nations for models of better and fairer systems for improving overall psychological outcomes. By contrast, Kagan sees our American tradition as dominated largely by an individualistic rags-to-riches Horatio Alger ethos (p. 97). He takes special aim at cultural norms that fixate on the destructive idea “that the primary purpose of life is to be a winner” (p. 118). One wonders again how the psychological evidence might shift in meaning if we bring in an even broader context: that the United States is built on land not only violently appropriated to satisfy the needs of a settler colonialism (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), but also on land where vast (white) fortunes were accumulated (both in the North and the South) thanks to slavery’s capitalism (Beckert & Rockman, 2016). These historical

developments have had their own context-specific effects on the psychological status of every American – regardless of ethnicity, race, or class.

Our great commentator on the American psyche, James Baldwin, once wrote: “To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it” (Baldwin, 1963). He said it in a quite precise context, but I apply it here nonetheless. Accepting our history of race and subjugation, property and capital, crime and punishment, and not least, the misuses of psychological measures, intelligence tests, and behavioral concepts, and how these have all together, and separately, or in a myriad of complex interactions, had profound effects on our perceptions of (and our social policies and legal precedents with respect to) racial and class identities in the United States right up to the present day might potentially allow us to learn how to put that history to productive use (Rothstein, 2017; Staub, 2018; Scott, 1997; Alexander, 2010; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Muhammed, 2010; Raz, 2013; Hinton, 2016).

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At the outset, I quoted from a monologue: “Maybe I’ve been adapting to the wrong surroundings” (Eno, 2012). *Kinds Come First* mentions the catastrophic numbers of suicides in the U.S., but this is only a piece of the current emotional morass. A 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health determines that 17 million people had a major depressive episode in the past twelve months; the American Psychiatric Association finds 36% of adults reported to being more anxious in 2017 than they had been one year earlier; it is estimated that close to 20% of adult Americans – or 40 million people – suffer from anxiety disorders (Siegel, 2019). These statistics only compound the tragic data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention documenting that the climbing suicide rate is hardly limited to adults; one person between the ages of 10 to 24 dies by suicide in this country every 90 minutes (R. A. Friedman, 2020). A

decade ago I opened a book with “Depressed? It might be political,” but I never fathomed how pervasive and severe our national sense of unwell-being would become, and in so relatively brief a time (Staub, 2011).

Kagan’s book is not centrally about the political stakes of our present moment. Its core argument is more prosaic, namely that a quest to locate “universal truths” when it comes to human behavior is a fool’s errand because time and place, setting and situation, gender and class, and race and ethnicity (in sum, and again: context), along with the infinite intricacies within social groups, all matter in ways that laboratory researchers ignore at their peril (p. 9). Kagan returns recurrently to his complaint that there persists the unfortunate “current faith in single measures” (p.17). In this sense, Kagan’s book amounts to an extended lament that psychology in the more than half century he has toiled in the discipline has gone astray. This book’s most remarkable passages – at least to a reader trained in the interdisciplinary, history- and culture-focused field of American Studies – revolve around Kagan’s firm and frequently biting assessments of what he sees as unsettling tendencies in the professional world that he has known and thrived in for the entirety of his adult life. Kagan remains eloquently and steadfastly unwilling to adapt to wrong surroundings.

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