

## P R E F A C E

It was July 2000 when I first encountered the people whose lives would change mine. I sat in the secure reading room at the Henry A. Murray Research Center at Harvard, one of the leading archives in the country for longitudinal research in the field of human development. It houses seminal studies conducted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that have shaped our basic knowledge about how people behave, think, and feel as they traverse the course of life. I was on an exploratory visit looking for a baseline data set that I might use in a follow-up study of how the most successful members of our society experience their lives, particularly their well-being. I wanted to know whether going to the best schools and having the most recognized and remunerated careers delivered the prize widely believed in America to result, namely, a good life. I needed longitudinal perspective to know whether competitive success results in a core feature of its promise: a significantly changed emotional experience.

A dumbwaiter raised from the temperature-controlled basement three archival boxes of folders labeled “King and McArthur” (McArthur & King, 1992). I opened the lid to one of the boxes and pulled out a file stamped with a four-digit participant ID. Fingering its pages with care, I was carried back to the early 1960s and the life of William Young as a freshman at Harvard College.

Young came from a rural part of the country, his family was poor, his father was a tradesman, and William had graduated near the top of his high school class. Making it to Harvard was not merely an achievement; it also served as an escape from his father’s explosive tantrums, suggestive of mental illness, and his family’s stifling Christian rigidity. A gifted artist and an accomplished intellectual, Young seemed determined to make his mark in the world as an

artist, though he also betrayed deep concern about the prospect of failure. As I skimmed, Young struck me as a Horatio Alger story in the making with a complex psychology. William Young's file, by the time of his graduation, was several inches thick and contained 493 pages of verbatim transcription of 20 in-person interviews and test sessions from the time he was seventeen until he was twenty-one. Young was in his late fifties as I was skimming his file.

It took me only a few moments to realize that Young's file and the files of forty-eight other Harvard undergraduates much like it—packed with manually typed, crisp pages full of correction marks and faded-ribbon ink—constituted rare gems, only a few of their kind likely to exist anywhere in the world. Here before me was a record of a living man's psychological past, more extensive and revealing than any I had encountered in the field of human development. Young and his classmates who had been exhaustively studied as undergraduates were now approaching sixty years old, their retirements, and the transition out of the middle adult period of life. As this central period of their adult lives was coming to a close, I wondered how things looked on the other side. The jury on their lives as successful competitors in the US world of education and careers would now largely be in. Did they still have the same goals? Had they changed as people? How did they feel about the way things had turned out?

I wondered: Had William Young realized his ambitions as an artist? Was his father still living and had their relationship changed? Did he have a family? Curiosity overtook me. I wanted to meet him.

And so it was that the fifteen-year investigation reported in this book was launched. I tracked down William Young, flew to his city, and spent more than ten hours with him during four interviews discussing his life. Forty other participants also granted me in-person interviews of similar depth and intensity. In all, I traveled to twenty-five cities in the United States to meet these men and find out how their lives had turned out. Along the way, I would serendipitously gain access to—and follow up—207 participants in a larger paper-and-pencil study from which Young and his classmates had been selected for intensive interviewing. This effort would result in a longitudinal study of human development spanning almost half a century.

I don't think it would have deterred me at the time to know the vast time, devotion, and resources required to complete the undertaking. I was propelled by central questions that had arisen in my own life, which cut to the heart of fundamental American beliefs. I was in my thirties and was unclear why I was pursuing the competitive strivings at the heart of my career. I had gone from Amherst College to investment banking to high-tech start-ups and had also

earned an MBA at Harvard. I made the decision to change course, first training as a clinician and then entering the academy, in pursuit of answers. The men whose lives I encountered at the Murray Center resonated with me and at the same time stood for something much larger. A generation older, many seemed propelled by strivings similar to those driving my own educational and professional trajectory. Graduates of an elite university and members of an elite professional class, these men were icons of an American ideal. I knew that their experiences in the competitive journey, now largely played out, had the potential to unravel a central unanswered question: Does the pursuit and realization of competitive success deliver on its promise of a good life? The question in my life was no less about a fundamental belief in America.

Most people assume that the social and economic opportunities afforded by competitive success translate into clear psychological benefits. In fact, a surprising number of people do not even consider the two notions separate; for them, competitive success is the *equivalent* of the psychological experience of well-being. For others, who perceive a cause-and-effect relationship, psychological benefits are seen to accrue from advantages in rearing and educating children, getting good health care, and pursuing rewarding work. Competitive success also affords pleasure and ease from material conveniences and luxuries such as comfortable homes, vacations, and transportation. And it often confers dignity, pride, and self-respect from realizing the American Dream.

But do these benefits translate into psychological benefits? What are the costs of competitive success, and what effect do they have? Is careerism in fact an American scourge, robbing people of their spirit and reducing opportunities: for relationships, creativity, self-expression, and self-realization? Might the endless anxiety of the pursuit define the experience, outweighing the benefits?

Men like my research participants devote decades of their lives to pursuing professional success. It is a deeply organizing commitment over the course of adulthood whose roots begin well before adulthood. These men, and women like them, are adherents of an intensifying form of American individualism. More now than when my participants grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, getting into a competitive college is seen as a necessary stepping-stone to professional success. Getting a son or daughter past the looming college admissions choke hold is treated by many parents as a critical race whose outcome will determine the professional and general success and well-being of the future adult.

No small number of parents are already concerned about their child's future admission to a selective college well before the child enters school. It is not uncommon for kindergarten to be seen, especially in competitive urban cen-

ters, as a gateway to adult privilege. By the time high school hits, the frenzy of the race is in full swing.

Competition for admission to Harvard began to intensify almost a decade before my research participants matriculated. Other competitive institutions have, of course, moved in parallel. The *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of colleges and universities, established in the 1980s, have come to embody competitive success as a kind of tyrannical force drawing both colleges and universities and aspiring students into its orbit. Whether graduate or aspirant—or parent, partner, child, or sibling of graduate or aspirant—most of us will readily recognize the pressures of keeping up or getting ahead as our own.

It would seem imperative to know whether winning the competitive game translates into winning in the game of life, where happiness is the outcome and the stakes of succeeding could not be higher. Do the prizewinners' advantages translate into a better life? If so, does someone need to go to a selective undergraduate institution, excel in a competitive professional career, and be worth at least millions to be fully happy?

If we don't obtain a resounding answer in the affirmative that this quintessentially American credo of competitive success delivers on its promise, the revelation has the potential to open up a tremendous fault line in a foundation of American life. If it is not benefiting the individuals who "benefit" most, or if its benefits are modest, or its costs too high, the logic of living by such a credo would be fundamentally misinformed. This book, based on a longitudinal study of Harvard men, is dedicated to reevaluating this American promise. Its findings, I will argue, are applicable well beyond this cohort of men and graduates of an elite undergraduate institution.

When I first considered the research question, I assumed that the correlation between competitive success and well-being had been established by previous research. Many in my profession—academics studying human development and, more generally, social scientists—do. If the pursuit of competitive success is such an important part of the American way of life, then its salutary effects on individual well-being must have been thoroughly examined and established. Cause and effect along the success–well-being continuum must have been documented via close studies of the lives of people embodying this ideal. I was surprised not to find a cache of studies definitively answering this question.

Prior scholarship provides only a partial and insufficient answer. It comes from the field known as the scientific study of happiness and is a version of a common maxim: that money and success do not buy happiness, once basic needs are met. The income required to meet basic needs is well below that of

privileged earners. Policy research in economics about the relation between material prosperity and national well-being adds a twist to this summary, but its findings remain relatively unimportant to individuals. The answer provided by the scientific study of happiness offers little insight into people and their experiences. It focuses on broad concepts of happiness and their correlates, which are hard to interpret.

To answer the question, one would need to conduct a psychological study of the life experiences of such individuals that would go beyond survey questionnaires or other summary methods of capturing internal states. Such a study would not only examine the role of educational and career success in the well-being of such individuals but would take a broader view of their lives. It would give a rich sense of how they had come to experience their lives and how centrally and in what ways competitive success versus other factors had figured in. It would reveal what mechanisms are at work in their well-being and what, if any, are the trade-offs of succeeding in the competitive journey. It would use a method of observation capable of explaining the *nature* and the *origins* of a person's apprehension of his life and well-being.

Such an approach is centrally featured in this book, namely, a life history approach to the study of individual lives. The book applies this approach to an entire sample longitudinally. It describes the meaning and well-being of lives, seen from where subjects stand, gleaned from their life histories. It does this at different points in time, and it provides explanations for outcomes. The book shows its findings in particular and general forms. It profiles several protagonists in short biographical sketches over the course of the study and identifies statistical patterns in the sample, placing them in relation to other research on the US population. It presents a story of privileged lives and—drawing on other published research—shows how their patterns appear broadly in the lives of other groups of Americans. Given the novelty of its approach, the book also attends to how its story is generated.

While it reaches nominally a similar conclusion as happiness research—that success beyond the meeting of basic needs does not deliver happiness—the book delivers a substantively different explanation of what does shape happiness. It accounts for well-being by looking at what it is in the lives of individual people rather than the averages and abstract generalizations of survey-based research. Its paradigm—holistic, specific, and context-sensitive—is applicable to individual lives in a way that clinicians think about individuals. It explains the experiences of competitive prizewinners by locating them in a larger set of forces shaping the course of their lives. This account replaces an American myth of success and happiness with a carefully researched theory of human

development. Readers who pick this book up out of scholarly interest may find its conclusion about the competitive journey resonant personally—in their own lives.

Core variable relationships observed in general research on demographically varied populations by class, sex, race, generation cohort, and so on resonate strongly with the central insights of this book. But the book deepens understanding of how these relationships solidify—not only in the Harvard sample but in other groups—into a unified picture of happiness, long-term development, and the experiencing human subject. I address how this paradigm translates to the experience of groups whose lives differ from those of the Harvard sample in the opportunities, resources, and norms shaping the social landscape on which their lives unfold.

As it turned out, it was not a single mystery but many in how lives unfold that the research reported in this book would unravel. The privileged view my participants afforded me of their lives over almost fifty years has revised my understanding of people and reshaped the view I have of my own life. It has also brought into sharper relief prior research weighing in on the success-happiness relationship and the opportunity for a more integrated, developmental, and humanistic understanding of how lives unfold.

Knowing what I know now, I would readily take this journey of discovery again. Whether you are a general social science reader, a clinician, or a researcher engaged with happiness, personality, study of lives, or human development, this book will, I hope, be a journey of discovery for you, as well. I invite you to join me as I retrace the steps, sharing the main findings and their far-reaching implications.

Chapter 1 surveys how the basic question of the book—How does competitive success affect well-being?—has been previously asked and answered. It also describes the origins of the study of Harvard graduates upon which the book's answer is based. From there the book proceeds in three parts. Part 1 portrays participants' lives from college to late midlife in psychobiographical sketches that illustrate a spectrum of well-being in the sample and trajectories of stability and change in well-being over time.

Part 2 presents the study's innovations in well-being research: a qualitative method for capturing well-being, two models explaining well-being—one of stability and one of change—and key new understandings of the human subject's experience of well-being linked to development. They lead to a novel, integrated, and rich paradigm of adult life grounded in qualitative evidence and retested using quantitative techniques. The qualitative method captures

well-being in expansive clinical life history interviews carried out in college and then in late midlife. The longitudinal models—developed qualitatively, retested quantitatively—are sharpened and extended by mixed-methods integration. End-of-book and online ([press.uchicago.edu/sites/kaufman/](http://press.uchicago.edu/sites/kaufman/)) appendixes document evidence and research tools supporting the book's conclusions.

Participants come to college with a worldview and a central tendency of well-being or ill-being already formed in family, school, and community growing up. In the most common trajectory, stability, that worldview functions as a prism through which new experiences are understood, and it also leads participants to seek out similar experiences of validation or invalidation, particularly in adult family and relationships. In the second trajectory, applicable to a sizable minority of participants, fundamental change in worldview and well-being comes about due to internal and external disruptions to the processes in stability. Part 2 concludes with a decisive broadening of the book's argument that becomes clear from the book's new paradigm: not only is socioeconomic attainment unrelated to participant well-being, but even for these professionally successful men, family life is more important than career experience to well-being.

Part 3 significantly alters conventional understandings and explanations of well-being in lives beyond the Harvard sample. It shows personality and cultural influences that distort respondent reports of experience detected in this study's method but undetected in a widely used survey approach. These distortions lead to the omission of key factors in explanations of well-being. Despite these differences, a surprising convergence exists between core variable patterns observed in this book and those found in happiness and personality research on general samples. Using the book's understanding of well-being and development linked to the experiencing human subject, a decidedly different and richer paradigm of adult life grounded in qualitative evidence, part 3 helps to illumine lives in other groups. The book's rare empirical underpinnings attest to a picture of adult life distinct from those offered by established theories in adult development and narrative personality psychology.

After the journey of steps developing a new approach to the study of happiness and a new paradigm for understanding adult life, the book spells out the implications for the cultural belief that a good life is rooted in competitive educational or career success. This careerist value system and its saturated discourse in American society are misinforming the public about what truly matters: the developmental forces shaping our well-being.

