Psychological perspectives on using technology to enhance wellbeing: promises and pitfalls.

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ABSTRACT
The paper examines the topic of wellbeing from a psychological point of view. A number of ways in which psychological perspectives might inform the design process on wellbeing issues are outlined. It is argued that the use of technology must co-exist with a vision of the mind than is non-mechanistic. We need to examine the assumptions of the wellbeing movement, look carefully at what works, and take account of the ‘whole person’ in considering interaction design for wellbeing.

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Design, wellbeing, psychology, interaction design.

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)

INTRODUCTION
Although the topic of wellbeing has been the focus of philosophy and discussion throughout the ages, it has in recent years been the focus for much attention within academic and social arenas. In particular, psychologists have begun to study the topic from an empirical perspective [3,4]. The questions under study have included what is wellbeing, how can it be studied and how can people achieve sustainable gains in their wellbeing? The field of Positive Psychology has been influential in influencing Policy makers have begun to take interest in this field.

THE MEANING OF WELLBEING?
Wellbeing is comprised of happiness plus meaning [cf,4]. The topic of happiness has been the focus of much research in recent years. Research has identified barriers to happiness (e.g. social comparison, the hedonic treadmill – we adapt to our circumstances) but has also pointed out ways to increase happiness in sustainable ways. For example, gratitude exercises and focusing on personal strengths led to gains in happiness that were sustained six months later [3]. The meaning dimension is independent of happiness such that it is possible for someone to be momentarily unhappy but to be experiencing meaning (e.g. temporarily frazzled in the course of looking after a child).

Any definition of meaning would have to include a sense of person involved in something beyond themselves (in the sense of their own ego) - so according the formulation here wellbeing is the outcome of a process whereby a person is engaged in personally chosen goals of benefit to themselves and others.

WELLBEING: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT
The topic of wellbeing is currently the focus of much social and political interest. Technology has the potential to deliver information on wellbeing to wide sections of the population. For example, the Action for Happiness initiative in the UK was launched by Lord Richard Layard and invites people to download a ‘happiness action pack’ (www.actionforhappiness.org). The initiative is endorsed by Relate, the Children’s Society and British Psychological Society. At the time of writing, the web-site has over 20,000 members from over 100 countries. The question remains over how effective this initiative will be. In the UK, wellbeing is now being taught in schools, through the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) which was introduced during the past decade. It has only recently been subject to an evaluation by the University of Manchester that concluded there had been no quantifiable impact on children’s emotional wellbeing. The report concluded the ways in which the topic was taught varied too much to be effective. Hence, there is a need to critically examine the efficacy of interventions and the reasoning behind their adoption.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
How can individual differences and preferences be taken into account? In the area of wellbeing, a ‘one-size’ fits all approach may not be suitable. For example, there is evidence that positive psychology exercises may be harmful...
to those people with a tendency towards excessive self-criticism [4]. How can designers take account of individual personality dimensions, personal strengths and weaknesses?

Can technology be used to aid periods of calmness and reflection? Prolonged periods on screen (or even multiple screens) are becoming the norm in many working environments. However, feedback on psychological and emotional states might be fed back to people through peripheral information displays [1].

To what extent do we need to be aware of the unfolding political and policy agenda in the area of wellbeing? Is there a danger of shifting too much personal responsibility for mental health to individuals who social environments that are not conducive to wellbeing? The promotion of happiness as continuously attainable may be unrealistic and unhelpful.

How can designers include and honour the whole person? The use of technology must co-exist with a vision of the mind than is non-mechanistic. To this extent, we need a vision of the psyche that goes beyond surface consciousness [e.g.,5]. As such, perspectives from Jungian and Archetypal psychology may be helpful. These perspectives use archetypes such as Shadow to represent the hidden and unrealized potential of the human psyche. In terms of technology, what might be learned from the way filmmakers have created narratives have included ‘shadow’ elements? Stories and myths suggest that a state of ease and wellbeing is not arrived at easily. The hero usually has to make a detour to the underworld (representing a confrontation with the deeper forces of the unconscious, the unknown etc.) where he/she finds something of value (representing unrealized potentials etc.).

How can designers harness to power of narrative to delve into these deeper layers of the psyche?

Although the intersection of wellbeing research with interaction design is at its infancy, there can be much to be gained by considering a person’s social, political and psychological contexts. It is questionable whether sustained wellbeing can be achieved without taking into account the whole of a person’s psyche. Only by considering the whole person, can we build systems that have the potential to help people to realize true wellbeing.

REFERENCES