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'Fracking': Promoter and destroyer of 'the good life'

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ABSTRACT

When discussing the effects of resource extraction in rural communities, academics commonly focus on specific and concrete impacts that fall nicely into the categories of environmental, economic, and social – for example, effects on water quality, jobs, and roads. A less common way of conceptualising effects of extractive industries, but more akin to the way in which rural residents discuss and experience the complex set of effects, is changes to way of life. A growing literature explores effects on 'wellbeing' and 'the good life' as important determinants of responses to development projects, and as necessary considerations for policies regulating such development. One approach to conceptualising the good life – Aristotle's ideas of eudaimonia (human flourishing) and the pursuit of eudaimonia (perfectionism) – remains underdeveloped as a means for characterising how rural residents respond to natural resource extraction. We use the example of unconventional gas development (UGD) to illustrate how definitions of human flourishing – and perfectionist pursuit of that flourishing – strongly motivate support for and opposition to a contentious extractive industry in the rural communities where development is occurring or is likely to occur. This occurs through commitments to: a rural way of life, retaining local population, beauty, peace, and/or quiet. Approximately fifty interviews across six US and three Canadian communities support this vital role for conceptions of human flourishing. The import of human flourishing to members of the public, and of them pursuing that flourishing through perfectionism, has crucial implications for communication and policy related to extractive development. Policy makers need to consider how the public's definitions for flourishing shape their support/opposition, and not just to focus on the economic and environmental impacts commonly discussed in policy discourse.

> 'All we have been doing is fighting to preserve the character of our rural area, our investments, the real and intrinsic values of the land and our quality of life as protected under the existing law.'
>
> – Sanford, New York, resident; quoted in the *Deposit Courier*, 24 April 2013

1. Introduction

1.1. Wellbeing and the good life

Over the last decade, nations such as Australia, Canada, and myriad European countries, have engaged in a concerted effort to redefine wellbeing (Bache and Reardon, 2016; Scott, 2012). In general, the trend is to move away from (purely) economic indicators of wellbeing and/or to supplement such economic measures (e.g., GDP) with more subjective indicators. Adopting a new focus has not, however, been straightforward. Bache and Reardon (2016) explain, 'Contestation over the definition, measurement and responsibility for wellbeing are a central feature of attempts to bring wellbeing into policy: it is a "wicked problem"' (pp. 5–6).

As one example of an approach to this definitional dilemma, the UK's institutionalised efforts to reconceptualise wellbeing have concluded, 'The well-being of the nation is influenced by a broad range of factors including economic performance, quality of life, the state of the environment, sustainability, equality, as well as individual well-being' (Self et al., 2012, p. 3). This last category includes overall satisfaction with life, beliefs about whether what one is doing is worthwhile or not, and whether one was happy or anxious on the day prior to the survey data collection employed to quantify wellbeing (Self et al., 2012). The policy implications of the evolving

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definitions of wellbeing are clear – if constructs such as happiness, life satisfaction, and perceptions of doing something worthwhile are to be maximised, regulators first need to know how potential policies will affect these indicators of wellbeing and then they need to understand how to tailor policies to respond to public concerns.

Whilst wellbeing has received attention recently from national governments, discussion about how to foster wellbeing is far from new. Bache and Reardon (2016, 1) declare, 'Debates on the "good life" and how the state might contribute to this goal date back at least as far as the ancient Greeks'. Scott (2012, 10) elucidates that the 'new discourses of wellbeing make much of Aristotle's notions of "oikonomia" and "eudaimonia"'. Oikonomia traditionally refers to the management of the household to increase the value of the household to all members in the long run, or, as Daly and Cobb (1994) assert, it is an 'economics for community'. Eudaimonia is human flourishing or happiness, achieved through virtue and/or excellence. Modern discussions of wellbeing have thus taken up Aristotle's age-old recommendations of considering happiness and the long run.

Like 'wellbeing', however, eudaimonia poses definitional problems. In ancient times, Aristotle argued with Socrates and the Stoics over the necessary conditions for human flourishing. Whilst the Stoics viewed exercise of virtue as sufficient for eudaimonia, Aristotle maintained that external, material goods were necessary as well, even if virtue exercised was the prime constituent of happiness. Much like these disagreements of old, debates endure within nations, regions, and communities today over what constitutes human flourishing and, thus, what facilitates the good life. Our argument herein is that the struggle to define human flourishing and then the pursuit of that flourishing (i.e., 'perfectionism' – discussed below) are key underlying factors affecting reactions to development projects in rural communities. Governments and regulators that attempt to promote wellbeing without accounting for how the public defines and pursues human flourishing will likely meet with substantial resistance to their policies.

Current scholarship on wellbeing argues that governments, regulators, and policy makers need to consider broader definitions of human flourishing that are more akin to Aristotle's visions of what constitutes the range of virtuous pursuits, compared to simple neoliberal indicators of progress that have dominated in previous decades (Scott, 2012). We take no issue with such claims, but add that this idea of human flourishing is not merely a lofty philosophical concept discussed in the academy or policy circles. We maintain that human flourishing is a primary frame through which members of the public evaluate decisions affecting them. Despite the renewed effort to consider wellbeing in national policy, researchers sometimes explicitly or implicitly ignore the possibility that considerations of human flourishing might also motivate public responses to policies. Whilst accepted as a prescriptive goal for policy, human flourishing is less recognised within descriptive accounts of public reactions to policies and actions within communities. Research on development in rural communities often discusses 'impacts'. Yet, members of the public may care less about 'impacts,' *per se*, and more about the underlying conditions that prevent or promote human flourishing.

Our research on rural communities in northeast North America exposed to (or potentially exposed to) unconventional gas development (UGD) suggests that the pursuit of one's own definition of human flourishing, and perceptions of whether UGD will foster or diminish that flourishing, are important underlying influences on people's responses to extractive resource development. In this paper, we assert that the public's commitment to pursuing human flourishing proffers a strong rationale for policy makers to: (1) understand public definitions of human flourishing, and (2) account for such varied definitions in policy. We have chosen to study human flourishing in relation to UGD because this is a highly contentious resource development issue in rural communities throughout North America, Australia, Europe, and elsewhere. The heated debate on this topic has generated much discussion about whether it is appropriate broadly, but also specifically whether it is acceptable and desired in individual communities. The content of such discourse about the appropriateness and acceptability of UGD within communities helps us understand how definitions and pursuit of human flourishing relate to support or opposition for UGD. Our research focuses on three communities each in the US states of New York (NY) and Pennsylvania (PA) and the Canadian province of New Brunswick (NB).

This paper proceeds with a theoretical treatment of 'perfectionism' (the pursuit of human flourishing), then briefly reviews the topic of UGD and the qualitative methods used for our data collection. The results tie together data from our forty-seven interviewees, identifying key ways in which presence of or potential for UGD led them to define and pursue human flourishing. We conclude with implications for policy and communication.

1.2. Perfectionism

The moral and political philosophy of 'perfectionism' originally stemmed from Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia or human flourishing – perfectionism was the pursuit of flourishing through 'arete' – virtue. Visions of perfectionism date back at least to Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, in which the ancient philosopher characterises the good life as one in which an individual strives for moral and intellectual virtue. Kant's Critique of Pure Reason advances similar overtures. Writ large, perfectionism identifies the components of a meaningful, complete, and virtuous life; living ethically is viewed as dedicating oneself to the pursuit of such an existence (Hurka, 1993). Hurka (1993, 3) states of perfectionism, 'this moral theory starts from an account of the good life, or the intrinsically desirable life'. It starts from the 'good life' or 'human flourishing' and then dictates that the best, and appropriate, way to live is through efforts to realise such flourishing.

One could pursue perfectionism in diverse areas, such as arts, music, athletics, chess, dance, chemistry, history, culinary ability, friendship, parenting, or aesthetic appreciation. Few people seek perfection in all areas (McArdle, 2010; Stoeber and Stoeber, 2009), which means that pursuit of perfectionism will look different in different people. Moral perfectionism can be distinguished as one particular form, comprised of two primary components: 'one dimension capturing perfectionist personal standards regarding morality, and one dimension capturing perfectionist evaluation concerns regarding morality' (Yang et al., 2015, p. 230). Therefore, moral perfectionism focuses on personally seeking to adhere to a virtuous lifestyle and avoiding actions that detract from human flourishing.

Whilst some actions that advance or detract from human flourishing are entirely personal, scholars argue that perfectionism is outward looking as well. For example, Cavell writes that perfectionism highlights 'the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and *of one's society*' (1991, p. 3, emphasis added). Guyer (2014, p. 6) explains that Cavell's concept of perfectionism '[holds] ourselves up to the idea of a better world and a better existence than we currently enjoy' – again focusing on the individual and society. Cavell (2004, p. 14) further links perfectionism to civic obligations when he contends that the perfectionist 'imagination of justice is essential to the aspiration of a democratic society'. The high moral virtue associated with perfectionism is, thus, an essential component of a society that represents all of its citizens' interests (Patton, 2014).

Scholars further argue that two different types of perfectionism

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