The Values Problem in Subjective Well-Being

William C. Compton
Middle Tennessee State University

The American Psychologist should be applauded for its January 2000 special issue on happiness. This area is an avenue for research and scholarship that deserves increased attention. The research in this area, however, is also complicated by a unique problem that was not sufficiently addressed in the special issue.

The problem is that any definition of well-being, happiness, or the good life is intricately tied to values. Over 40 years ago, M. Brewster Smith (1959) concluded that it is not possible to create a value-free definition of psychological well-being. The basic problem is that although human beings may have certain biologically given emotional responses (Plutchik, 1984), it is the psychological interpretation of those physiological reactions that provides meaning (Schachter & Singer, 1962). Messages about how people should create meaning, a sense of reality, and a sense of self are socially given and vary over time, within societies, and among cultures (Baumeister, 1987; Berger & Luckman, 1967; Kitayama, Markus, Matsutomo, & Norasakunikins, 1997). All of these factors contribute to decisions about what kinds of experiences people should desire, as well as what kinds of relationships with other human beings may be ignored without consequence.

Over 2,500 years ago, Aristotle defined the good life as *eudaimonia*. This is not simply fulfilling one’s potentials or having what is desirable. Rather, it is having and desiring that which one should desire. The explicit appeal to values was necessary to avoid that which is pleasurable or enjoyable but is ultimately destructive to the individual and the society. That is, for Aristotle, descriptions of the good are always teleological. They should point people toward those goals in life that are deemed the best, that illustrate the highest potential of the species, or that instill nobility and honor on the person. The problem for a psychological science of well-being is that science must exclude values in the search for presumed universal and ahistorical laws of human behavior.

The dangers of eliminating the influence of values from theories of well-being can be illustrated with an example. Evidence indicates that officers at Nazi concentration camps would probably score quite high on current measures of happiness and satisfaction with life. That is, they thought highly of themselves, felt in control of their lives, enjoyed evening concerts of Mozart with their friends, and believed they were involved in an important cause that gave their life meaning and purpose. Of course, their well-being was only possible by systematically ignoring the humanity of those they mercilessly sentenced to death.

Therefore, the recent special issue presents a wonderful first attempt at exploring the potentials for research in positive psychology. However, the fact that conceptualizations of well-being are inexorably tied to values presents psychology with a fascinating challenge. This unavoidable issue will require a different approach to research, one that will most likely not be entirely empirical. Historical, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and other modes of inquiry must inevitably be added to the research mix if this research area is to remain both valid and relevant to real-life struggles toward happiness.

REFERENCES


Correspondence concerning this comment should be addressed to William C. Compton, Department of Psychology, Box 87, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. Electronic mail may be sent to wcompton@mtsu.edu.
peak experiences. Paradoxically, Maslow mused that transcendence might be less happy because of their enhanced vision and insight (e.g., consider the burdens faced by Albert Einstein and Mother Teresa).

Viktor Frankl (1967, 1986) pointed out that happiness cannot be sought as an end in itself, but rather is the side effect of the normal pursuit of meaningful activities. He stated that when self-actualization "is made an end in itself and is aimed at as the objective of a primary intention, it cannot be attained" (Frankl, 1967, p. 63). To Frankl, a self-centered focus prevents growth; the person can only "find identity to the extent to which he commits himself to something beyond himself" (Frankl, 1967, p. 34). Both ideas are analogous to Seligman’s (1998) observation that self-esteem cannot be taught directly but must be the by-product of hard work and earned accomplishment.

Frankl (1967, 1986) asserted the existence of three dimensions of human existence: soma (the physical), psyche (including the emotions), and noetic (of the spirit). To Frankl (1967), illness manifests only in soma and psyche, not in the noetic dimension. Logotherapists are trained to assess whether the philosophical stance of the individual is materialistic (mechanical) or teleological (spiritual).

Like Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Roberto Assagioli (1965) argued that psychology had for too long focused on pathology instead of health and wholeness. He proposed psychosynthesis, the discovery and formation of a dynamic relationship of the personality with a spiritual Self. The goal is not bliss, but a creativity, service, and practical livingness exemplified by geniuses and Mozart. The two stages of psychosynthesis involve the attainment of the following: first, individualization and self-identification in the personality and, second, the discovery of—and identification of the personality with—a transpersonal, spiritual Self.

How can these theorists, taken collectively, be supportive of a positive psychology? Each proposed two processes of wellness in the human being. The first is the development of individuation or personality unfoldment. The second involves alignment of that personality with a spiritual or transcendent function, one explicitly concerned with traits emphasized in positive psychology, such as collective well-being, optimism, resilience, and faith. Indeed, many of the traits mentioned by positive psychologists (such as peace, love, faith, hope, patience, and joy) are identical to qualities emphasized by all world religions, including Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions.

The notion of two processes of normal, healthy human growth is crucial to an emerging science of positive psychology. First, it provides a theoretical framework that can be empirically tested. The traditional methods of scientific research may be used to understand the more mechanical functions of soma and psyche as they are integrated into a fully functioning personality. However, the emergence of a transcendent function may be far more difficult to study because the assumptions of traditional statistical methods remove the uniqueness of the individual. Specifically, if psychologists are looking for the one thing that a person can do better than ten thousand others, as stated by Seligman in (1998), then a wise, intuitive guide may be more appropriate than a multiple choice inventory. Qualitative approaches may better help positive psychologists to identify qualities that define the uniqueness of each person.

Unquestionably, those who pursue the empirical study of psychological health have much exciting work ahead. Success will require empirical consideration of the ideas of such as Jung, Maslow, Assagioli, Frankl, and others, who advocate a psychology of health. Moreover, development and validation of new methods will be needed for studying two simultaneous processes of wellness in the human being: the unfolding of personality and the alignment of that personality with a point of transcendence.

REFERENCES


Correspondence concerning this comment should be addressed to Charles L. McLafferty, Jr., Department of Human Studies, University of Alabama at Birmingham, 207 Education Building, 901 South 13th Street, Birmingham, AL 35294-1250. Electronic mail may be sent to cm@uab.edu.

Rediscovering Hope in American Psychology

Naji Abi-Hashem
New Life Clinics, Seattle, WA

I was delighted to see the American Psychologist's January 2000 special issue dedicated to happiness, optimism, excellence, and hope. What better way to start the new century and millennium than to emphasize the positive aspects of psychology and the bright side of life? It is refreshing to see the current attempts to rediscover contentment and courage and to reemphasize the place of hope, the role of wisdom, and the importance of purpose in the lives of individuals and communities alike.

Indeed, people do not find true meaning in mere individual accomplishments and material accumulations, though these may bring some temporal satisfaction, but essentially in family, faith, and friends, as Myers (January 2000) eloquently wrote. These seem to really count, especially as people come to the end of their life journeys. Across the ages, philosophers and thinkers have repeatedly reached that conclusion, and now Western psychologists are coming full circle to rediscover the place of hope, the importance of spirituality, and the centrality of connections within the realm of community.

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (January 2000), if Americans continue to accumulate wealth and ignore the human needs of others around them, such a course "is likely to lead to increasing selfishness, to alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair" (p. 5). It is possible that the same factors that made the United States such a strong, wealthy, and powerful country could be the ones, I am afraid, that will cause its strong, wealthy, and powerful country could be the ones, I am afraid, that will cause its