Positive Psychology: East and West

Roger Walsh

University of California, Irvine

I don’t think I have ever been as excited by an issue of the American Psychologist as I was by the January 2000 issue on positive psychology edited by Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. At last the leaders of the American Psychological Association are focusing on the positive rather than only the pathological and are discussing topics such as happiness, well-being, and creativity. I feel happier already, and I applaud their efforts.

At the same time, I feel compelled to point to an unfortunate gap: The issue is ethnocentric and lacks attention to, or even mention of, non-Western psychologies and therapies, as well as the field of transpersonal psychology, which has worked to integrate Western and non-Western approaches. This is especially unfortunate because it is now apparent that certain Asian psychologies are not only sophisticated systems with effective techniques—meditation and yoga being the best known—but also focus specifically on positive well-being and exceptional development.

For example, the Indian psychologies of Buddhism and yoga lack information on the nature and treatment of major psychopathology. However, they contain a wealth of information on exceptional psychological health, postconventional transpersonal development, exceptional abilities, and the methods for cultivating them (Tart, 1992, Walsh, 2000). A large body of research—several hundred studies on meditation alone—suggests that meditation and yoga have effects ranging across psychology, physiology, and biochemistry and can enhance both psychological and physical health, sometimes to exceptional degrees.

In the psychological arena, personality, performance, and perception may be enhanced. Intriguing findings include evidence for enhanced empathy, perceptual sensitivity, creativity, lucid dreaming, rational satisfaction, and a positive sense of self-control. Studies of transcendental meditation suggest that it can foster maturation as measured by scales of moral, ego, and cognitive development, intelligence, academic achievement, self-actualization, and states of consciousness (Alexander, Rainforth, & Gelderloos, 1991; Murphy & Donovan, 1997; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; West, 1987). A variety of specific meditations exists to cultivate exceptional capacities such as concentration, compassion, and altruism, although little experimental work has been done on these (Walsh, 1999). Researchers of positive psychology have a theoretical and practical gold mine of more than 2,000 years of exploration of positive psychology on which to draw.

The field of transpersonal psychology draws on this data and has developed theories that integrate Asian ideas with Western concepts and research. As such, it has begun to develop the outlines of a global integral psychology, best exemplified in the writings of Ken Wilber. A valuable overview of his ideas can be found in Wilber (1996), and a denser survey can be found in Wilber (2000) or in his collected works.

In drawing attention to the omission of Asian perspectives and the work on them already done by transpersonal psychologists, I do not wish in any way to detract from the superb work done by contributors to the American Psychologist on positive psychology. I wish only to urge Western psychologists to look beyond Western psychology and culture to incorporate the best of all psychologies and cultures.

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Correspondence concerning this comment should be addressed to Roger Walsh, Department of Psychology, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697-5100.
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, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 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 eudaemonia. 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 pleasures 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, and 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 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 lives 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.

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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.