

# The Positive Psychology Movement

Robert L. Campbell and Joe Duarte

TAS/TOC Summer Seminar

July 6, 2006

# Origins of Positive Psychology

- **Parallel to humanistic psychology, though with a stronger emphasis on academic research**
- **Defined in opposition to “negative psychology”**
- **Studies**
  1. **Positive emotions**
  2. **Positive traits**
  3. **Positive institutions**

# What's negative?

- **Psychoanalysis and behaviorism were the old model of negative psychology**
- **Today there are different adversaries**
  - sociobiology
  - Hobbesian social psychology
  - ideologies of victimhood
  - motivation-free cognitive psychology

# Key players in Positive Psychology

- **Martin Seligman**
- **Mihály Csikszentmihályi**
- **Edward Diener**
- **The Gallup Organization**

# Seligman

- **Initially trained as a behaviorist**
- **Discovered learned helplessness in rats**
  - **A learning to learn phenomenon beyond the explanatory reach of behaviorism**
- **Developed techniques to promote learned optimism in human beings**

# Csikszentmihályi

- **Innovative researcher**
  - Technique: experience sampling
  - Theory: “flow”
- **Best known for his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience***
- **Interested in ancient ethics (Aristotle and the Stoics)**

# Diener

- Known for his survey research on happiness and “subjective well being”

# The Gallup Organization

- **Gallup's leadership believes that Positive Psychology has important applications to its business consulting, and more generally to "civil society"**
- **Has backed Positive Psychology financially since the movement was officially proclaimed in 1996**
- **Hosts the annual Positive Psychology Summit**



# Eudaimonism

- Academic psychologists have largely ignored eudaimonism
- Moral development research was largely inspired by the post-Kantian theory of Lawrence Kohlberg
- By contrast, Positive Psychology makes an explicit appeal to human flourishing
- Seligman credits Daniel Robinson with getting him to read Aristotle

# A largely Aristotelian conception of ethics

- **“Character strengths” or virtues**
  - The key to living a good or meaningful life
  - The major positive emphasis in Positive Psychology
- **Morality is not understood as either**
  - Complying with impersonal rules of duty
  - Deciding by calculating impersonal utilities

# Uniqueness of Positive Psychology

- **The only school of thought in psychology in which eudaimonism predominates**
  - **Talks about practical wisdom *are to be expected* at a Positive Psychology conference**

# Different takes on eudaimonism

- **Objectivism is concerned with foundations**
- **Positive Psychology is not always clear about foundations**
  - **What is the natural end or ultimate standard of value for human beings?**
  - **The Values in Action project was guided by different criteria**

# Unity and disunity

- **Rand, like the ancients, believed that the virtues form a unity**
- **Positive Psychology does not assume the unity of the virtues**
  - **Virtues are not *supposed* to contradict other virtues, or preclude them**
  - **But each individual is expected to have character weaknesses, as well as “signature strengths”**
  - **Cultivating signature strengths is (often) recommended over firming up weaknesses**

# Different hierarchies

- Objectivism aims to develop a single hierarchy of *values* based on individual human life as a standard
- Positive Psychology puts forward a hierarchy of *meaning*

# Seligman's hierarchy of meaning

1. The pleasant life
2. The good life
3. The meaningful life

# Something greater than the individual?

- **The meaningful life consists in finding some purpose greater than oneself**
  - Often construed as service to others
- **This *may* draw from the communitarian tendencies in Aristotle**
- **It definitely draws from the prior moral commitments of the researchers and practitioners who have taken to Positive Psychology**



# Descriptive and normative

- “It would be disingenuous to deny that I personally value the meaningful life above the good life, which in turn I value above the pleasant life. But the grounds for my valuing these lives are external to the theory. I value contribution to the whole above contribution just to the self and I value the achieving of potential over living for the moment” (Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, p. 303)

# Positive Psychologists need to appreciate

- Spontaneous orders
- Relationships that work to mutual benefit
- The nobility of self-interest
- Passionate purposes that *define* the self, instead of being *greater than* the self

# Win-win relationships

- “Could it be that positive emotion, then, has evolved to motivate and guide us through win-win games? When we are in a situation in which everyone might benefit—courting, hunting together, raising children, cooperating, planting seeds, teaching and learning—joy, good cheer, contentment, and happiness motivate us and guide our actions.”  
*(Authentic Happiness, p. 257)*

# Values in Action – The Virtue Project

---

# The Values in Action (VIA) Project

- **An effort to identify and classify the human virtues**
- **Descriptive more than prescriptive**
- **An attempt at cultural universality**
- **A classification, not a taxonomy**

# Criteria for a virtue

- **Contributes to the good life**
- **Valued in its own right**
- **Does not diminish others**
- **Stable, traitlike – not fleeting**
- **Embodied in consensual paragons**

# Wisdom and Knowledge

- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Open-mindedness
- Love of learning
- Perspective
- **What about *rationality*?**

# Courage

---

- Bravery
- Persistence
- Integrity
- Vitality



# Humanity

---

- Love
- Kindness
- Social Intelligence

# Justice

---

- **Citizenship**

- Pury's studies of courage (Pury & Campbell, 2005) show that students who recalled acting in a morally courageous way ranked Citizenship significantly lower than those who described a physically courageous act

- **Fairness**

- **Leadership (transformational)**

# Temperance

- **Forgiveness and Mercy**
- **Humility and Modesty**
  - Accuracy vs. transcendent smallness
  - Pride not a virtue, but a positive emotion about one's past
- **Prudence**
- **Self-Regulation**

# Transcendence

- **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence**
- **Gratitude**
- **Hope**
- **Humor**
- **Spirituality**
  - **Religiousness, Faith, *Purpose***

# Objections

- **Baggage, lots of baggage**
  - Altruism, Judeo-Christian modesty
- **Lacks an explicit theoretical framework, but imports lots of assumptions**
- **No clear standard of value**
- **The search for cultural “universality” compromises the science**

# Current Research – The Broaden and Build Theory

## Positive Emotions – What Good Are They?

- **Fredrickson proposes that they *broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires***
- **And they build resources – *physical and psychological – for future challenges***

# Testing the hypothesis

- **Induce the positive emotions of contentment and amusement**
- **Induce the negative emotions of anxiety and anger**
- **Compare global vs. local processing**
- **Assess quantity and quality of thought-action repertoires**



# An evolutionary perspective

- Negative emotions yield specific action patterns
- Positive emotions broaden scope of awareness and action
- The *undoing effect*

# Conclusion

---

# Opportunities

- **Positive Psychology avoids hyperspecializing**
- **Appeals to practitioners and clinicians as well as researchers**
- **Brings rigor to the self-help world**

# For Objectivists Interested in:

- **Self-esteem**
- **Personality**
- **Moral psychology and development**
- **Efficacy of therapy**
- **The role of emotions**
- **Organizational and business psychology**
- **Happiness and “Public Policy”**