

Positive psychology – a well lived life

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What constitutes a well-lived life?

Defining the meaning of life and the conditions, traits and features of a well-lived life is a question that throughout history engrossed theologians, philosophers, artists and, more recently, positive psychologists. This essay outlines findings from a selection of the literature and research to answer this question with the aim of identifying whether happiness is the true sign and the ultimate goal and marker of a well-lived life.

This review of the literature has yielded findings that possessing a disposition towards gratitude is not only indicated to be present in a well-lived life but can enhance and improve mental, physical and spiritual life outcomes. The different research models used to explain, measure and identify the markers of a well-lived life are briefly outlined, and finally, further research directions are indicated to expand understanding about how gratitude affects life satisfaction outcomes in specific populations.

A challenge in researching this topic is that the literature describes happiness and well-lived in terms that are used by different researchers interchangeably and inconsistently. In this essay and in accordance with the literature reviewed, the terms happiness and the well-lived life are used synonymously.

Definitions

A problem with defining a well-lived life is that the terms well-being and happiness (Frey, 2011; Kristjansson, 2010), and the good life and happiness (Dunn & Brody, 2008) are used by researchers interchangeably.

Indeed Diener (2000) notes that the very term well-being has come to be known in common usage as happiness. Seligman (2011, pp 420) notes that sometimes the terms happiness and well-being define emotions whilst at other times refer to activities. This ambiguous terminology has caused some to criticize Positive Psychology but, as both Lazarus (2003) and Kristjansson (2010) point out, precise definitions to describe a well-lived life have also eluded philosophers and other academics for over 2, 000 years.

Imprecision of terminology aside, many have attempted to describe the conditions required to nurture a good or well-lived life. Some researchers have described the good life as one full of the hedonistic pursuit of frequent positive experiences (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Others have described it in terms of the result of employing unique talents to achieve abundance (Seligman, 2002), whilst still, others have argued that the good life involves personal growth (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005).

Seligman (2002) argues that these descriptions are all valid because there are different pathways to happiness, although it is by combining them that one lives a full or well-lived life. He describes these pathways as the pleasant life, concerned with hedonistic pursuits, the good life, concerned with gratification of desire and meaningful life, using one's talent to serve a higher purpose (Seligman & Royzman, 2003).

Research Findings And Challenges

Early studies involved in identifying precisely what elements contribute to life satisfaction involved field research with participant self-reported satisfaction ratings recorded against a range of factors (Diener, 2000; Lazarus, 2003; Lyubomirsky et al. , 2005). Self-reported satisfaction ratings

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are problematic because they are, as noted by Kristjansson (2010), by their very nature subjective. People in difficult situations can report themselves as living a good life, whereas people who are in happier circumstances can report themselves as having low life satisfaction.

Additionally, the factors used to measure life satisfaction are problematic because what some would consider critical to a well-lived life may be anathema to another (Bauer et al. , 2005) or not supported by the participant's culture (Diener, 2000; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park & Seligman, 2007). Further research is indicated to firstly identify what factors are actually desired in a good life, rather than simply measuring and reporting happiness levels (Kristjansson, 2010). Diener's (2000) and Peterson et al. (2007) findings appear to support Kristjansson's suggestion (2010). Both research studies identified significant cross country differences not only in the rates of life satisfaction but also the factors rated as important to life satisfaction. The findings appear to indicate that individualistic cultures, or those that place a high value on individual choice and desires, and collectivist cultures, where the needs of the group are paramount, prioritize factors contributing to life satisfaction differently (Diener, 2000).

By way of example, Diener (2000) notes that participants from collectivist cultures may sacrifice personal desires for the common good, and this is not a normative feature of individualistic cultures. Diener further notes that sacrifice in collectivist cultures may, in fact, benefit the individual by providing them with the knowledge they are performing their duty. The concept of personal sacrifice as a factor affecting life satisfaction does not appear to be studied in the literature reviewed for this essay.

Despite the significance of the findings in both studies, the researchers note a limitation of their design is that they relied upon self-selected participants who were motivated enough to complete the survey (Diener, 2000; Peterson et al. , 2007). This may have resulted in bias. Conclusions concerning differences in cross-cultural impacts upon life satisfaction levels and factors are not unanimous. A study conducted by Linley, Joseph, Harrington and Wood (2006) found no significant difference in life satisfaction ratings or factors amongst participants from different cultures, ages or gender.

A limitation of this research, however, as noted by the authors, is that the study only included a small number of countries with participants who could speak and respond in English (Linley et al. , 2006). It may well be that the participants who responded to the survey were Westernised. Linley et al. (2006) indicate that the study should be repeated using a multi-lingual questionnaire so that participants are drawn from a wider sample. The Social Component of a Well-Lived Life Examining the literature outlining models related to a well-lived life yields important clues towards determining the ultimate signs of a well-lived life.

The three pathways model of a full life which includes the pleasant life of hedonistic pursuits, the good life full of desire gratification and the meaningful life (Seligman & Royzman, 2003), has been criticized because the model could be applied to the nonethical, such as drug dealers, as well as those engaged in more ethical activities alike (Kristjansson, 2010). Seligman (2000) noted this as a possibility but argues this is not problematic because science is not concerned with morality.

Morality aside, anti-social activities do not necessarily promote relationships and research indicates that a well-lived life does indeed involve actions that promote positive social relationships (Bauer et al. , 2005; McCullough, Kimeldorf & Cohen, 2008; Peterson et al. , 2007). One way that Kristjansson (2010) suggests that the thorny issue of morality and psychology could be overcome is by applying values to define those behaviors that fall outside of societal norms, although this may result in other issues if these norms are restrictive.

Although Kristjansson is not a psychologist, the idea that a well-lived life should involve societal norms does seem to be supported by Diener (2000) who suggests that societal pressures do have some bearing upon individual life satisfaction reporting. Building on the concept that life satisfaction includes a social component, Bauer et al. (2005) argue that a well-lived life includes social experiences and the ability to ascribe those experiences to a positive meaning. They go on to explain that in psychological terms this translates to having a balance between social interactions and having positive feelings about them (Bauer et al. 2005). These findings imply that there is indeed a social element to a life well lived which is supported by further research. Peterson et al. (2007) found that the sociable character traits such as gratitude have strong effects on life satisfaction. Indeed Peterson et al. (2007) note that social character traits such as gratitude are more strongly correlated with life satisfaction than the three pathways to happiness (Seligman & Royzman, 2003, pp 153). Gratitude As with a well-lived life, gratitude is not easily defined (Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010).

Although gratitude is variously described as an emotion, a trait and an action, nevertheless the literature indicates that a grateful disposition tends to be positively associated with happiness and a well-lived life (McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002; McCullough et al. , 2008; Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2008). Typically, gratitude is described as a response that occurs after the receipt of something perceived as positive due to the prosocial actions of another (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Aware of the limitations of previous field research, Emmons and McCullough (2003) attempted to apply a study design that randomly assigned participants to different treatment conditions. They found a difference in mean well-being scores across gratitude treatment groups from the comparison group, although less than expected, concluding that gratitude tended to increase psychological, social and spiritual well-being. One of the limitations noted in the study design (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), however, was that the study period was only three weeks long which may not have been long enough to identify changes in responses. This limitation has been commented upon by others (Lazarus, 2003). Indeed, Lazarus (2003) notes in particular that the lack of longitudinal studies in Positive Psychology studies concerning life satisfaction makes it difficult to identify causation and track precisely how different circumstances affect individuals, whatever the factors that contribute to a well-lived life. Kristjansson (2010) notes that this is not a problem unique to studies of well-lived lives.

Wood et al. (2010) noted that the definition of gratitude used in the Emmons and McCullough (2003) study did not include all of the things participants reported gratitude for that did not include a benefactor. He proposed that

gratitude includes an eight-level hierarchical life orientation including in ascending order; noticing and appreciating life could be worse, life is short, the present moment, engaging in ritual acts of thankfulness, admiring beauty, focusing on what one has, appreciating other people and reflecting upon what one has to be thankful for (Wood, et al. 2010). Using this expanded definition, Wood, linked gratitude to the Big Five traits, used to broadly describe human personality (Watson, Clark, & Harkness, 1994) and that people who are grateful tend to be more agreeable, sociable, less neurotic, conscientious and extroverted. Commenting upon the benefits of gratitude, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) note that an attitude of gratitude appears to be incompatible with negative life feelings such as greed and envy.

They note that appears to encourage individuals to reflect on experiences and social relationships in a positive way. It has also been suggested that gratitude appears to protect individuals from depression (Wood et al. , 2010) and support recovery from injury (Dunn & Brody, 2008).

Possible Future Research Directions

The literature indicates several interesting areas for future research. The first, based on observations by Wood et al. (2010) is that there have been only a few studies studying the direct relationship between gratitude and happiness.

Given the lack of longitudinal research to date, as noted by Lazarus (2003) and alluded to by Emmons and McCullough (2003), it may well be promising to conduct intra-individual longitudinal research of the impact of gratitude on an individual's perception of happiness when experiencing the normal

stressors of daily living (Lazarus, 2003). It may also be useful to apply a longitudinal study to examine if the things that make one grateful change across cultures, ages and genders (Diener, 2000; Linley et al. , 2006; Peterson et al. 2007) although it would be highly recommended to avoid using self-selected participants in the study.

Conclusion

Defining a life well-lived and the factors associated with it is a problem that has defied easy explanation for philosophers and other academics across the ages. Much of the previous research has involved recording self-reporting by participants. Given this and the fact that the very nature of happiness and a life well lived is a subjective experience, it has been argued that a propensity for gratitude impacts on an individual's ability to view their lives in a positive way, despite individual circumstances.

It has also been argued that an attitude of gratefulness has several physical and mental benefits for the individual, although these studies have not yet examined precisely if the factors that make an individual grateful change across cultures and genders. Further research is indicated in this fascinating area, possibly using longitudinal studies to explore how gratitude enables individuals to view adverse circumstances differently over time.

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