

A POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FIELD OF DREAMS: "IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME..."

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The virtues are imbedded in a new field: positive psychology. With a definition and brief discussion of the parameters of positive psychology, various factors related to virtues are explored, including their public versus private aspects, domain-specific versus global characteristics, the necessity for careful claims regarding what we do and do not know in this area, progress in measurement, the need for interventions, the attention to communal matters, their natural bridges with health, and the overlap among them. In addition to exploring issues related to the present virtues of love, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, wisdom, control, and hope, additional virtues are noted. It is suggested that the interface of clinical, counseling, social, personality, and health psychology could profitably turn its attention to the study of virtues within the positive psychology paradigm.

Over the last several decades, psychology has been enamored with the "dark side" of human existence. During this time, students of psychology have been given the basics about human foibles, and the pathology model has captivated the attentions of young, formative minds that were to shape the academic and applied branches of psychology. In turn, those students' careers developed and they imparted the same psychology of the negative to their intellectual offspring. Amidst this dark side, it has been rare for a more positive view to emerge. What has psychology contributed in the last half of the 20th century, for example, to our understanding of human virtues? The answer, regrettably, is "Not very much."

In the previous decade, however, forces have been growing in psychology to abandon the sole focus on the negative. In part, this may reflect the fact that the pathology model has run much of its useful course. Likewise,

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with the rapid growth of the subfield of health psychology, drawing from the subareas of social, clinical, and personality, psychologists increasingly have begun to ask variants of the same question, "What strengths do people bring to deal effectively with their lives?" This guiding question is quite different than the pathology-focused question of, "What deficiencies drive persons' problems?" Furthermore, with leading scholars turning their attentions to specific topics involving human strengths, others in the field of psychology may begin to take notice.

Surely psychology can be called upon to build a foundation for understanding the very best in human beings. Isn't it time to more formally provide an overview of some of the advances regarding this positive view of people? By publishing these articles on human virtues in one issue, we have given more cumulative attention to these topics than in all previous volumes of this journal. But our goal is more than just to dust off some cherished mementos from the archives of psychology. Instead, we truly believe that the virtues-related concepts discussed in these pages deserve to be placed at the top of our agenda for the interface of clinical, counseling, social, personality, and health psychology as we close the 20th century and prepare to open the door to the 21st century.

For most students who now enter the field of psychology, as well as for several present scholars, there is a hunger to understand the strengths of the human spirit as it faces the multitude of challenges presented in life. Although there is some truth to the old maxim that "Bad news sells newspapers," one gets the sense from the new persons entering our field that they have genuine interests in the virtues that form the table of contents for the new positive psychology movement.

What would this new positive psychology look like? We believe that positive psychology reflects the viewpoint that the most favorable of human functioning capabilities—what previously have been called the virtues—can be studied scientifically, and that the principles and findings learned from this approach can and should be disseminated widely to people. To study such optimal human functioning, the scientific foci would include individual phenomenology, behavioral manifestations, interpersonal activities, group interactions, and societal repercussions. We should not be minuscule in our focus, but rather positive psychology should embrace many foci—a wide lens that is suitable for a big topic. In turn, the applications of positive psychology can be delivered to individuals, groups, and societies more generally. The fruits of positive psychology should not be just for the few, but the many. As such, we propose that the spreading of positive psychology tenets must be widespread—fostered through the forces of parenting and family life, education, therapies, various media sources (e.g., journals, books, television, and the Internet), community planning, political policies, and so forth.

REVISITING AN OLD HOME AND BUILDING A NEW ONE

As we discussed earlier in our introductory article in this special issue, questions of virtue and vice have been of interest to intellectuals for thousands of years. Although we now are witnessing a rebirth of a new wave of psychology, the virtues are the very stuff that form much of this “new” approach. Even within the previous history of scientific psychology, issues of virtue and character have, from time to time, received serious attention from some serious scientists. It would be naive of us to assume that we are thinking thoughts that no one has thought before. We need to drink deeply from the wisdom of researchers who have gone before, and from perspectives on other phenomena that scientific psychology puts at our disposal.

For most of its fairly short history, psychology as a discipline, along with its individual participants, have sought to establish their uniqueness relative to philosophy, and certainly in relation to religion (for a summary of uniqueness seeking in individuals and groups, see Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Although one can understand the need of the relatively young field of psychology to want to separate from its ancestral roots in philosophy, as well as to distance itself from older antecedents that are inherent in religious tenets, such continued separation at this point in time seems more like adolescent rebellion than a mature science stance that embraces cross-fertilization and varying realities. Thus, it probably would be extremely useful, whenever possible, for psychologists to find time for meaningful engagement with philosophers and theologians who might help to shape and refine scientific understandings of the virtues. Such dialogue can be helpful to psychologists who might be seeking to enrich their own conceptual understandings of particular virtues as well as philosophers and theologians who know how to make use of social science research in shaping their own philosophical and theological understandings of human nature.

STRAND OF SURPRISE

In reading the articles in this issue, one gets a sense of the fabric that will serve to cloth the new exploration of virtues in particular, and positive psychology more generally. A first observation is that, at this stage in time, the authors in this issue seem to share a certain implicit sense of surprise at the positive sequelae of the various virtues. These authors, who are pioneers or “rediscoverers” of early psychological interests in virtues, have labored for many years under the forces of negative psychology. Perhaps they were taught in their own graduate educations to focus upon the weaknesses and problems of people and, as such, they may have been influenced subtly by this prevailing paradigm to not ex-

pect much in the way of positive from people. To their credit, however, these authors are willing to take the risk to advocate a virtue that may be met with extreme skepticism and scrutiny in the normal publication process. Perhaps it is not by chance that these authors generally are established professionals in their fields, and their job status is more secure than is the case for new persons entering the field. As with any paradigm change (Kuhn, 1970), however, advocates need to articulate the new perspective and topical foci. In time, there will be less surprise at the positive sequelae of virtue-like behaviors, and even the newcomers to the field will feel secure in studying the various positive psychology virtues and related topics.

CAREFUL CLAIMS AS THE PARADIGM CHANGES

As the study of virtues becomes revitalized within the burgeoning positive psychology movement, the journal editors who are important gatekeepers for the profession will become more accepting of studies that explore the strengths of people. Also, with the growth of positive psychology, authors will less frequently be asked to "check" their results against the traditional pathology explanations. For example, in the 1980s, as the concept and associated measures of negative affectivity flourished, authors who submitted manuscripts for review at psychology journals often were forced to prove that their results were not explicable in terms of the negative affectivity counter explanation. There is nothing wrong with a cautious science in which alternative explanations need to be ruled out, but it is the case that psychological science, like other aspects of society, operates under prevailing social constructions of reality. And, for a recent period in psychology, that prevailing lens through which reality was seen was strongly ruled by the negative affectivity construct to the exclusion of other tenable *and more positive constructions*.

If the positive psychology movement grows, it will not necessarily be under the social construction that always asks, "Can you prove that your finding is not explicable in terms of human weaknesses?" As such, one of the major impacts of a successful paradigm change in science is that the new paradigm no longer always must be tested against the old one (Kuhn, 1970).

For the science of positive psychology, however, *it will be important that a sense of critical scrutiny is maintained so as to truly put any new theories and findings to the very best tests that can be made*. Sometimes this will mean that various differing strength-based theories will be tested against each other. Furthermore, this movement may establish an environment wherein even more powerful and heuristic positive psychological theories are produced. Throughout this process, however, the proponents of

the study of virtues and human strength must remain close to their data, and not make claims that go beyond those data. The authors in this issue either implicitly or explicitly make the point that the positive psychology movement would be done a tremendous disservice by unwarranted claims, which would only set back any potential gains that are made.

FROM MEASUREMENT TO INTERVENTION

In varying degrees, the researchers exploring the virtues described in this issue have established reliable and valid self-report indices. Such instrumentation will help each virtue to be examined by a wide range of researchers, and it generally will help to legitimize the study of the particular virtues. Indeed, one characteristic of a well-developed concept is that it has lucid, valid measures. A good measure typically reflects sophisticated, well-articulated theory development, and the virtues appear to have a fairly solid start in this regard.

Virtue researchers must be careful not to be satisfied merely with the establishment of measures, however. To a certain degree, instrument driven research may occur because of the ease of administering a questionnaire (Snyder, 1997a, 1997b). A drawback of such measures is that they may foster correlational research in which the relationships of given virtues to many other variables are studied, but the important manipulation-based or intervention investigations are not undertaken. Such interventions by necessity involve the related difficult and time-consuming work to truly understand the operations of the given virtues being measured. Perhaps, therefore, we should remember to invoke *both* parts of Lewin's maxim that $B = (f) P \times S$. More specifically, we must turn our attentions from the person in this equation (P) to the power of the situation (S) to influence the development and maintenance of virtues. To truly understand a concept such as human virtues, one needs to be able to foster them via intervention-like processes. This intervention research is much more difficult, however, than simple correlation research. With the advent of such interventions for promoting virtues, the measures can be used as helpful markers of such changes.

Our sense is that, for the most part, the study of the virtues presently is at the measurement stage, and the research has not developed to that point where actual interventions or programs have been implemented to test whether a virtue can be imparted effectively. This next step in the study of virtues will be important because, as we noted in the earlier definitional section of positive psychology, one of the premises of this movement is that it will be imparted to a wide range of people. Indeed, at the risk of sounding too much as if we are taking on the mantle of social architects, one of the ultimate goals of the positive psychology movement should be to see that the virtues are conveyed to the people of our society. An important part of such

research, in our estimation, will involve the exploration of the developmental roles of the family, schools, and other societal institutions in teaching the virtues to children. Likewise, how can we construe our societal institutions so as to maximize the viability of the virtues throughout the adult life span? These questions obviously are extremely large and important ones for the study of given virtues in particular, and the positive psychology approach more generally.

INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL PROCESSES

Virtues are practiced by individuals. This simple verity belies an even more powerful fact: Virtues are inherently social transactions in that what is good for the person also is good for others near that virtuous individual. Whether it is forgiveness, gratitude, love, control, wisdom, humility, hope, or any of the many other virtues, the positive act produced by one person serves to benefit many other people—the one for the many. Thus, we agree with Roberts' (1995) proposition that *virtues operate to help a person to live well among people*. Although it is obvious that most of the virtues discussed in the articles of this issue are interpersonally oriented, even the ones that are less obviously interpersonal are similarly influenced by communal forces. For example, hopeful people are interested in the successful pursuit of their goals, as well as helping others to reach their goals (Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997). As such, hope is simultaneously a virtuous motive that attends to goals related to “me” and “we.”

If our conjecture about virtues being conducive to successful social commerce is accurate, it will be important that researchers do not become seduced by the self movement both inside and outside of psychology. Likewise, in our estimation, education about interpersonal matters should be imparted to any new student coming into the field. If we might be allowed to suggest two required readings for new participants in the positive psychology movement, we would start with Harry Stack Sullivan's (1953) *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* and Fritz Heider's (1958) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PROCESSES

The virtues covered in this special issue—hope, self-control, forgiveness, humility, spirituality, gratitude, forgiveness, and love—involve both intrapsychic and interpersonal manifestations. One can both feel grateful and express gratitude publicly. One can forgive and express forgiveness publicly. One can be hopeful, and that hope can energize visible activity. Self-control serves as a governor over the full spectrum—what we say, what we eat and, probably, what we think.

Their dual natures—possessing both private and public manifesta-

tions—are crucial to their status as virtues. To invoke again Roberts' (1995) definition of virtues as traits suiting a person well to living among others, one would assume that they must have public manifestations conducive to social harmony, even as they promote personal health or well-being.

DOMAIN-SPECIFIC OR GLOBAL?

Many of the virtues appear to have both global and domain-specific components. Similar to the early work on locus of control (e.g., Rotter, 1966), many of the writers who have contributed to this special issue have examined virtues at a global level. At this global level, people might be assumed to possess stable individual differences in traits such as forgiveness, humility, gratitude, hope, and self-control. However, it also is possible to imagine that people might demonstrate differential amounts of these virtues in particular contexts. Such situation-specific virtues also are important. Just as understanding someone's "health locus of control" (e.g., Wallston & Wallston, 1981) might contribute unique information that is helpful for understanding his or her perceived locus of control in the health arena, it might be useful to inquire into someone's forgiveness, humility, gratitude, hope, and self-control in particular domains (e.g., marital forgiveness, workplace humility, health-related hope, self-control over food intake, etc.).

THE HEALTH CONNECTION

For some of the virtues, links to health and well-being are clear; for others, this research is just beginning. Research on the links of spirituality and hope to measures of mental health, physical health, and well-being is accruing rapidly. For other virtues such as forgiveness, wisdom, and love, research on links to well-being is beginning to accrue. Exploring the health-relevant aspects of these virtues is one of the exciting ways in which the virtues can be productively explored.

The relatively new and rapidly growing subfield known as health psychology is staffed by interface scholars, researchers, and practitioners. That is to say, there are professionals who describe themselves as clinical, social, counseling, and personality psychologists, usually on the basis of their education and training; yet, these "interfacers" naturally join together to study health. And there are increasing numbers of young psychologists whose first identities are that of "health psychologists." Many of these very same people also are finding the virtues and positive psychology to be the logical foci of their scholarly and applied endeavors. Sometimes a "change" in a field reflects, in part, the fact that several people have come to realize that they already share a common viewpoint in their work (Snyder, 1988). In this instance, therefore, many peo-

ple already may have moved to the “new” positive psychology, and we and they just now are beginning to realize this. Publications such as this one can help to facilitate such insights.

OPTIMAL LEVELS?

It is conceivable that at least some of the virtues catalogued in the present issue could have the capacity to work to human detriment when taken to the extreme. On this point, is it possible that some people are so forgiving that their forgiveness actually works to their detriment? Can one have too much self-control? It is harder to imagine that virtues such as hope and gratitude could have a similar down-side, but we should remain open to this question. Certainly, however, a person who is capable of making others feel grateful to him or her has tremendous power to influence the beneficiary. Future research should investigate the possibility that each of these virtues might, if manifested in excessive amounts or manipulated selfishly, be detrimental to individual or collective health and well-being. There is precedent here in that previous work on positive illusions, for example, where it has been posited that intermediate—and not extreme levels—are the most adaptive illusions (Baumeister, 1989; Snyder, 1989).

OVERLAP

As one looks at the titles of the articles in this special issue, many of the virtues (e.g., hope, self-control, forgiveness, gratitude, wisdom, humility, spirituality, love) would appear to be accounted for in conventional taxonomies of human personality. To invoke the Big Five taxonomy (Costa & McCrae, 1988), self-control would seem similar to the conscientiousness construct. Forgiveness, gratitude, humility, and love would seem to emerge, at least in part, from the agreeableness construct. Hope would seem to have a good dose of positive affectivity in it. The place of meta-constructs such as spirituality and love are probably less clear. However, it is evident from examining any empirically informed personality taxonomy that virtues do share some overlap with the personality traits that are the bread and butter of mainstream personality psychology. Lest the scientific study of virtue unwittingly recreate the standard personality taxonomies, it is probably worthwhile for researchers to step back and take a long look at whether (more likely, to what extent) individual virtues emerge from such personality traits.

Moreover, if Roberts (1995) is correct in the appraisal that virtues are traits that suit a person well to living among people, then it would not be surprising to find that the virtues share common motivational cores. People who tend to be grateful, humble, forgiving, hopeful,

self-controlled, and loving, for example, are likely to have a great deal of “emotional intelligence” (Salovey & Mayer, 1999). They probably have the capacity to experience empathy for others and to take the perspectives of others. Because many of the virtues might all be motivated by a common set of psychological capacities, we might not be surprised to find that virtues cluster within persons (just as problem behaviors, such as substance use, delinquency, and school dropout also tend to cluster within individuals). If virtues do cluster within individuals, then studying such moral exemplars is likely to be an extremely fruitful approach for investigating how the virtues operate.

WHAT’S MISSING?

Obviously, this special issue has only scratched the surface of the virtues. Additional important topics would include happiness, resiliency, flow, positive affectivity, self-esteem, emotion-focused coping, emotional intelligence, ambition, optimism, mastery, work ethic, imagining, mindfulness, problem-solving, goal-setting, passion, competence, uniqueness, attachment, caring, compassion, mentoring, benefit finding, humor, exercising, relaxing, and meaning. Many other virtues, such as generosity, kindness, altruism, honesty, commitment, trust, duty, and effort could have been considered here as well. Many of these concepts are supported by fairly large literatures. No one probably would dispute the contention that scientific psychology has much to say about the nature of such virtues. Moreover, research would support the contention that many of the virtues that were not covered in the present collection probably have important implications for individual and collective health and well-being. At the risk of stating the obvious, these “other virtues” need to be explored and integrated.

On a related note, another element that currently is missing is an integrative framework that would elevate the virtues from simply a grab-bag of interesting positive psychological concepts into a coherent, unified whole. Theoretically grounded frameworks that are sensitive to the inputs of empirical research need to be developed subsequently so as to provide more unity to the scientific study of the virtues.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Rather than being seduced by the traditional and somewhat easier “psychology of the negative,” we would suggest that our theory and research should embrace a view that there is a better human awaiting to be discovered. The fields of social, clinical, counseling, personality, and health psychology offer a futile soil for the growth of positive psychology topics pertaining to the virtues and human strengths. Based on the promise

that we see in the articles in this volume, we would close with a simple message: *It not only is possible, but it is imperative to develop a science that focuses upon the strengths of people.*

If the interface offers such a positive psychology, there will be a ready and receptive audience for it. We are reminded here of a scene from the motion picture "Field of Dreams," in which the principal character repeatedly hears the message, "If you build it, they will come...." This message suggested that if only he were to build a baseball diamond in the fields of his Iowa farm, then both the players and the fans would be drawn to it. The same may well be true of the psychological study of virtues and positive human strengths. We are not advocating a baseball field, of course, but rather a psychological field where the human virtues and strengths can be played for all that they are worth. The ultimate winners on this turf would be a positive psychology filled with potential benefits for humankind. That, in our estimation, truly would be a psychological "field of dreams."

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