

Two traditions of happiness research, not two distinct types of happiness

Robert Biswas-Diener^{a*}, Todd B. Kashdan^{b*} and Laura A. King^c

^aCentre for Applied Positive Psychology, Milwaukie, OR, USA; ^bDepartment of Psychology, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA; ^cDepartment of Psychology, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

In an earlier paper (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008), we outlined a critique of the distinction being made between eudaimonic and hedonic forms of happiness. That paper seems to have had the desired effect in stimulating discourse on this important subject as evidenced by a number of responses from our colleagues. In this paper, we address these responses collectively. In particular, we outline common intellectual ground with the responding authors as well as points of difference.

Keywords: happiness; meaning in life; subjective well-being, eudaimonia; self-determination theory

Introduction

The surge of attention given to eudaimonia in the scientific literature (e.g., Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001), textbooks (Compton, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2007), and the mainstream media (e.g., *O: The Oprah Magazine*, March 2008), motivated us to carefully scrutinize what we know, what we don't know, and whether there are any costs to the wide adoption of the idea of two types of happiness. We believe that eudaimonia has entered the lexicon of psychology with minimal scientific scrutiny and felt it necessary to ask some basic questions about this topic. We believe that the science of happiness will benefit not only from our skepticism but also from the intelligent commentaries to our paper. Indeed, we would like to thank our colleagues who took the time to present many insightful comments related to our original article on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Kashdan et al., 2008). We appreciate the willingness of these authors to meet the bold spirit of our essay with similar courage. Although we did not intend to baffle or provoke, we believe that our article has been effective in our fundamental aim of increasing critical dialogue and introducing intellectual caution about the topic of eudaimonic happiness. We do not want to lose either this forward momentum or the clarity of this dialogue by fault-finding each response in this issue. Rather than responding to each individual point made by Delle Fave and Bassi (2009), Keyes and Annas (2009), Ryan and Huta (2009) and Waterman (2008), here we address broad points of agreement and departure.

Common ground

Well-being profiles

It might appear that we argue for a monolithic approach to happiness (what Ryan and Huta, this issue, refer to as the 'Big One'). If this is how our article, and our recent research on the topic (e.g., Kashdan & Steger, 2007; King & Hicks, 2007; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006), was interpreted then we did an inadequate job of describing our position. Our approach is exemplified best by the following passage from our original article:

Our reading of the research literature suggests that there is good evidence that eudaimonic and hedonic aspects of well-being can operate in tandem... Focusing research attention on specific dimensions of well-being allows for greater clarity in communication, facilitates comparison...and promotes flexibility in the mixture of well-being variables used in research (Kashdan et al., 2008, p. 228).

This position overlaps with the work by Richard Ryan and Ed Deci (2000) on self-determination theory (SDT) and those who continue to extend this model (e.g. Sheldon, 2004). Their research shows that the types of goals people pursue and the reasons they are pursued act as a synergistic aspect of a person's well-being. Other research from SDT underscores how autonomy supportive environments can facilitate well-being. These researchers use a continuum of motivation and various psychological needs that, when satisfied, provide the nutrients to feel good and function at more optimal levels. They describe how the degree to which these needs are satisfied is important,

*Corresponding author. Email: Robert@cappeu.org; tkashdan@gmu.edu

and the degree to which a person shows balance in satisfying autonomy, competence, and belonging needs are both important (two related but separable elements of well-being; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006). The SDT approach is sensible in that researchers clarify how some studies focus on subjective experiences (whether affect or cognitive appraisals of life satisfaction) and other studies focus on other levels of analysis including strivings, psychological needs, and the environments that best allow these needs to be met so that people can perform at their best.

We also want to emphasize the valuable distinction between symptoms and functioning made by Keyes and Annas (2009). Researchers often measure symptoms in clinical trials as a proxy for functioning when they are related but distinct (McKnight & Kashdan, in press). We often forget the importance of behavior and functioning and implicitly assume that by measuring positive experiences we are measuring positive functioning. Although they are positively correlated, as Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff (2002) demonstrate, they are related but independent. It would be unfortunate if our interventions to improve people's well-being only focused on symptoms or how they feel about their lives, and failed to address their functioning. To our knowledge, the research by Keyes and colleagues is the first time that measures of well-being were differentiated according to this framework (symptoms vs. functioning). This is exactly the type of conceptually meaningful, precise strategy for distinguishing well-being constructs that we feel has been lacking in discussions of eudaimonia.

We would like to emphasize that, concerning these and related approaches (Kashdan & Steger, 2007; King et al., 2006; Sheldon & Tan, 2007), there need be no intellectual exclusivity and there ought to be flexibility in studying the inter-relationships among these philosophical 'camps.' Compare this with the approach being offered by Waterman (2008) who asserts that there are *qualitatively* different types of happiness and that certain elements are categorized separately from others. This latter approach is guided by *a priori* beliefs as the data are not yet available to support this idea. Instead of referring to qualitatively different types of happiness (those that are phenomenologically felt as distinct from one another) we believe it is more precise and flexible to provide conceptual frameworks for addressing the question of why particular combinations of elements (at various levels of analysis) will lead to various outcomes. Taking context into consideration, as do Delle Fave and Bassi (2009), and considering the intricate interplay of well-being variables at various levels of analysis, as do Keyes and Annas (2009) and Ryan and Huta (2009) provides the foundation for examining how meaning making, affective experience, and overall functioning relate to one another.

Points of departure

What is eudaimonia?

In our original article, we suggest that the sheer number of constructs and variables related to eudaimonia serve to confuse, rather than clarify, this interesting concept. What becomes clear from reading the commentaries, particularly those by Waterman and Keyes and Annas, is how poorly unified is the study of eudaimonia. Although Keyes provides an explicit definition of eudaimonia, the vast majority of people studying this topic are not using his definition or operationalization. In fact, of the four responses to our article, no two presents the same definition of eudaimonia. Only two of the commentaries address the importance of context in studying happiness (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2009; Ryan & Huta, 2009), only two commentaries explicitly inform us that the work of recent philosophers must be read to understand the nature of eudaimonia (Keyes & Annas, 2009; Waterman, 2008), only one of the commentaries partitions certain positive affects as being part of hedonics and other positive affects as part of eudaimonics (Waterman, 2008), and of the three commentaries that address the operationalization of eudaimonia, none of them use the same conceptual framework or measurement strategy (Keyes & Annas, 2009; Ryan & Huta; Waterman, 2008).

It could be that the apparent disagreement about eudaimonia stems from the philosophical ambiguity of the concept. A variety of authors have interpreted Aristotle's original writings and, for scientific purposes, clearly, there is not sufficient consensus to treat this concept as a singular variable. Waterman (2008), himself, points to areas of personal disagreement with Aristotle and both Waterman and Keyes and Annas discuss modern day 'eudaemonist' theorists; but neither of them provides a guide to how we are to evaluate the quality of the various interpretations. Should we be faithful to Aristotle's original writings? What is it about the modern eudaemonist theories that might better lend themselves to empirical study? On what basis should we accept Waterman's (2008) revision to Aristotle?

Upon reading these commentaries, it becomes clear that, to date, there remain serious problems in the translation of eudaimonia from philosophy to psychology. Certainly, the criticisms raised by Keyes can be levied at almost every reference to Aristotle's work on eudaimonia in the psychology literature (e.g., Compton, 2004; Peterson, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; Snyder & Lopez, 2007; Waterman, 1993, 2007; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). Moreover, we are still unclear as to how and why flow, vitality, and interest are in the eudaimonia 'bin' and are divorced from other high energy, positive emotional experiences and motivational states that are

in the hedonics ‘bin.’ The same ambiguity applies to meaning in life, which is a cognitive appraisal that a person makes about his or her life. Each of us is a proponent of good theory and, despite four commentaries, none have provided a theoretical rationale for these distinctions.

Further, the question of ultimate value of embracing this all-encompassing ambiguous construct remains unanswered. We stand by our original argument perfectly described by Ryan and Huta, ‘eudaimonic sensibilities add an unnecessary layer of obscurity to the theory.’ Considering the difficulty of communicating science to non-scientists, we don’t understand the utility of adding additional terminology to ‘categorize’ self-determination theory as eudaimonia. Even Ryan and Huta agree that it is the processes, functions, values, and organization of elements within a person that is important. What is gained by reducing this complexity into a category that is distinct from useful elements that help flesh out the theoretical model such as emotions and cognitive appraisals about the self, other people, and the world?

It is the notion of observing various combinations of variables that we argue is needed. Subjective well-being components (positive affect, negative affect, judgments about life) are not separate from other well-being components, they are in the same nomological net and are even included in the same conceptual models. For instance, Waterman suggests that there are three categories of experience: occasions on which both are present, occasions on which hedonia is present but not eudaimonia, and occasions on which neither are present. This is our point. Guided by a meaningful conceptual framework, we should be examining pathways between matrices of variables, with an eye toward relevant moderator variables (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lent, 2004).

Hedonic pleasure remains hedonic pleasure

We remain steadfast in our original assertion that existing evidence does not support a conceptualization of two *qualitatively distinct* forms of happiness. Regardless of its source, it is still hedonic happiness. Considering the conceptualization proposed by Telfer, and described by Waterman (2008), we can see that hedonic pleasure may have been a dead end road for those interesting in eudaimonia to begin with. According to Telfer (1990), hedonic pleasure sometimes occurs in the absence of eudaimonia, but eudaimonia never occurs in the absence of hedonic pleasure. This conceptualization, of course, requires empirical support addressing the question of whether engaging in eudaimonic activities is always associated with feelings of pleasure. Should such a conceptualization prove to be supported by research, it certainly has important ramifications for research on eudaimonia, suggesting,

at its base, that hedonic happiness does not differentiate eudaimonia from non-eudaimonic activity. Hedonic happiness, instead, is beside the point. If hedonic pleasure does not distinguish eudaimonic activity from other activities (except quantitatively) then why focus on hedonic well-being in research on variables purporting to represent eudaimonic tendencies? If hedonic feelings of pleasure are simply a by-product of such activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000), why focus on these feelings in research on eudaimonia? And why label those feelings qualitatively different from hedonic feelings that emerge from other pleasurable activities? It is surely no small irony that research intending to demonstrate that happiness is not everything should focus, nevertheless, on hedonic well-being as an outcome. The quantitative characteristic of this hedonic pleasure (e.g., its level, frequency, or intensity) would seem to be the last place one might look to demonstrate a qualitative difference between two types of human experiences. Instead, researchers might examine variables that are, themselves, clearly empirically and conceptually distinct from hedonic well-being, to examine the non-affective consequences of the activities and motivations that are thought to represent eudaimonia.

Hedonic pleasure reinforces many human behaviors, some of which have been labeled eudaimonic. But these feelings would seem to be *the least important aspect* of the Good Life, from the eudaimonist perspective. We concur with Waterman in calling for a more expansive list of outcomes that ought to be considered as consequences that might be pursued as they relate to the ‘why’ of happiness (but not happiness, itself). Surely, these more distal variables would be the place to pursue the notion that some activities or motivations represent a nobler life than otherwise. To call the hedonic feeling of pleasure that accompany (and perhaps maintain) such behaviors qualitatively different from the pleasure that derives from other less noble activities is simply not tenable from the data to date.

As Waterman (2008) points out, ‘eudaimonic research’ is relatively young and we believe this scientific tradition should not be presented or accepted as more established than it is. We are concerned about the potential dangers of people misinterpreting a distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness as meaning that there are two unrelated experiences of happiness. In the end, we agree with Ryan and Deci (2001) that there are two intellectual traditions of happiness research, and that looking at happiness antecedents and outcomes through a variety of lenses is instructive and important.

Acknowledgements

The contributions of the first two authors to this manuscript were equal. This work was supported by National Institute of Mental Health grant MH-73937 to Todd B. Kashdan.

References

- Breines, J.G., Crocker, J., & Garcia, J.A. (2008). Self-objectification and well-being in women's daily lives. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *34*, 583–598.
- Compton, W.C. (2004). *An introduction to positive psychology*. New York: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*, 227–268.
- Delle Fave, A., & Bassi, M. (2009). The contribution of diversity to happiness research. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *4*, 205–207.
- Kashdan, T.B., Biswas-Diener, R., & King, L.A. (2008). Reconsidering happiness: The costs of distinguishing between hedonics and eudaimonia. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *3*, 219–233.
- Kashdan, T.B., & Steger, M.F. (2007). Curiosity and pathways to well-being and meaning in life: Traits, states, and everyday behaviors. *Motivation and Emotion*, *31*, 159–173.
- Keyes, C., & Annas, J. (2009). Feeling good and functioning well: distinctive concepts in ancient philosophy and contemporary science. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *4*, 197–201.
- Keyes, C.L.M., Shmotkin, D., & Ryff, C.D. (2002). Optimizing well-being: The empirical encounter of two traditions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 1007–1022.
- King, L.A., & Hicks, J.A. (2007). Whatever happened to 'what might have been'? Regret, happiness, and maturity. *American Psychologist*, *62*, 625–636.
- King, L.A., Hicks, J.A., Krull, J., & Del Gaiso, A.K. (2006). Positive affect and the experience of meaning in life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*, 179–196.
- Lent, R.W. (2004). Toward a unifying theoretical and practical perspective on well-being and psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *51*, 482–509.
- McKnight, P.E., & Kashdan, T.B. (in press). The importance of functional impairment to mental health outcomes: A case for reassessing our goals in depression treatment research. *Clinical Psychology Review*.
- Peterson, C. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 68–78.
- Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review Psychology*, *52*, 141–166.
- Ryan, R.M., & Huta, V. (2009). Wellness as healthy functioning or wellness as happiness: The importance of eudaimonic thinking. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *4*, 202–204.
- Ryan, R.M., Huta, V., & Deci, E.L. (2008). Living well: A self-determination theory perspective on eudaimonia. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*, 139–170.
- Sheldon, K.M. (2004). *Optimal human being: An integrated multi-level perspective*. New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Sheldon, K.M., & Niemiec, C. (2006). It's not just the amount that counts: Balanced need-satisfaction also affects well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *91*, 331–341.
- Sheldon, K.M., & Tan, H. (2007). The multiple determination of well-being: Independent effects of positive needs, traits, goals, selves, social supports, and cultural contexts. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *8*, 565–592.
- Snyder, C.R., & Lopez, S. (2007). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Telfer, E. (1990). *Happiness*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Waterman, A.S. (1993). Two conceptions of happiness: Contrasts of personal expressiveness (eudaimonia) and hedonic enjoyment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *64*, 678–691.
- Waterman, A.S. (2007). On the importance of distinguishing hedonia and eudaimonia when considering the hedonic treadmill. *American Psychologist*, *62*, 612–613.
- Waterman, A.S. (2008). Reconsidering happiness: A eudaimonist's perspective. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *3*, 234–252.
- Waterman, A.S., Schwartz, S.J., & Conti, R. (2008). The implications of two conceptions of happiness (hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonia) for the understanding of intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*, 41–79.

Copyright of Journal of Positive Psychology is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.