Positive Psychology, from the Caymans to Lincoln

**A Progress Report and Meeting Summary**

In February of 1999, a small group of scholars met in the Cayman Islands to discuss how to approach a taxonomy of human strengths and the positive life. After much discussion, the group selected 17 wellsprings that were seen as potential human strengths; they were also considered to be relevant as predictors of other indicators of a good life, such as subjective well-being or objective measures such as income. These 17 “wellsprings” were considered to be local to the present time and culture, and were seen as partially dependent on the presence of certain enabling factors.

Thus, the Cayman group effectively presented a working model of the “wellsprings” of a good life, and how they are founded on certain other factors, and may lead to various outcomes. This working model can be summarized as follows:

1. **Enabling Factors**

* Social Capital
* Genetic Capital
* Human Capital
* Personal Capital

### Characteristics

* Love and Intimacy
* Satisfying work/ Occupation
* Helping Others/Altruism
* Being a good citizen
* Spirituality
* Leadership
* Aesthetic appreciation/ Pleasures of the mind
* Knowledge and understanding of areas of life larger than one’s self/ Depth and Breadth
* Being a person with principles and integrity/ Ethics
* Creativity/Originality
* Play
* Feeling of subjective well-being
* Courage
* Purposive Future-mindedness
* Individuality
* Self-regulation
* Wisdom

### Outcome Measures – Fulfillment

* Subjective fulfillment
* Objective fulfillment
* Societal/Civic fulfillment and recognition

The purpose of the meeting in Lincoln was to gather experts on the above “wellsprings,” with the aim of further understanding them and how they might be measured empirically. Dr. William Damon was the first to present, on the wellspring of principled behavior. Dr. Damon emphasized the importance of studying moral identity, the extent to which being moral is important to how people define themselves. Qualitative methods have been used to trace the emergence of moral self-definitions in children and adolescents; in this research, finding humanity in others emerged as critical. Dr. Damon also emphasized the importance of understanding the complexities of habitual behavior.

Next, Dr. Dean Simonton discussed ways of conceptualizing and measuring creativity and genius. Dr. Simonton defined creativity as requiring both originality and adaptiveness, while genius involves distinctiveness, impact, and intellect. Dr. Simonton then described several approaches to measuring creativity, and the pros and cons of each: Productivity, Eminence, Intelligence, Cognitive Style, Personality, and Biography. Each appears to have some predictive validity, indicating the importance of using multiple measures.

Dr. Brian Sutton-Smith next discussed play, which he defined as an “invitation to excitement.” He then described the importance of play in the development of existential optimism, and described several questionnaire measures of playfulness and peer play interaction.

Dr. Robert Emmons then spoke on meaning and goals, under the category of purposive future-mindedness. He described a methodology for measuring personal strivings, starting with the completion of the sentence “I typically try to…” After goal elicitation, the strivings can be rated on appraisal dimensions, and then categorized for conflict/instrumentality. These strivings seem to have important relationships to well-being measures, especially those strivings that involve spirituality. According to Dr. Emmons, virtues involve having both the right goals and character, and gratitude may be an important moral affect.

Saturday morning’s session began with Dr. Ed Diener reporting on the definition and measurement of happiness and subjective well-being. Subjective well-being appears to consist of 4 main categories: pleasant affect, unpleasant affect, life satisfaction, and cognitive outlook. There are many ways to measure subjective well-being; the most popular methods are fairly reliable self-report scales. Other measurement approaches, such as experience sampling, memory for good and bad events, informant reports, expert ratings, physiological indicators, and responses to experimental manipulations such as reaction time and priming, all tend to converge with the self-report measures (correlations of .4-.6). Dr. Diener also argued for the importance of considering not only moment-to-moment hedonic subjective well-being, but also studying constructed subjective well-being such as general satisfaction and recalled affect.

Dr. Barb Fredrickson then discussed the benefits of positive emotions, arguing that the study of positive emotions necessitates revising the concept of emotions as associated with “specific action tendencies” to instead think of “thought-action tendencies.” After describing the positive emotions of joy, interest, contentment, pride, elevation, and love, Dr. Fredrickson asserted that the adaptive function of positive emotions is that they broaden an individual’s mindset, and then incidentally build personal resources. Positive emotions may also be helpful in regulating negative emotions and triggering upward spirals towards emotional well-being. Measurement has mostly focused so far on self-report measures, with single-item measures preferable when investigating a single positive emotion.

Next, Dr. Harry Reis discussed intimate relationships. After discussing the range of evidence for the apparent dominance of negative over positive events in affecting intimate relationships, Dr. Reis argued for the importance of the appetitive/aversive distinction in this domain. Feeling understood and appreciated appears to be a strong predictor of feeling close in relationships, and Dr. Reis closed by commenting on the importance of shared recreation for couples, including novel and exciting activities.

Dr. Paul Baltes then discussed wisdom, which he referred to as a meta-heuristic that activates bodies of knowledge together to focus on mind and character at the same time. He noted that developmental psychology has never ignored positive psychology, as it has always concerned growth. Wisdom may be a key to resilience in the upcoming century of the incomplete mind. The theoretical definition of wisdom is expertise in the domain of the fundamental pragmatics of life, and criteria for it include factual and strategic knowledge, as well as understanding of relativism, context, and uncertainties. Using think-aloud profiles and then coding responses, a positive correlation between wisdom and age was found only for adolescents. Older adults do however appear better at understanding relativism and contextualism. The biggest shortcut to a good life may be to activate bodies of knowledge such as wisdom. However, Dr. Baltes believes that modesty and tolerance are critical notions for the developing field of positive psychology. In his discussion, Dr. George Vaillant referred to a comment Dr. Baltes had made earlier stating that the wise person is one whom people from other villages would trust. He also discussed the similarity between his notion of mature defenses and the wellsprings from the Cayman list.

Dr. Corey Keyes then discussed languishing and flourishing. Languishing is the state of being devoid of vitality, being stagnant, miserable, and neglected. Flourishing, in contrast, involves being filled with vigor and vitality, and to be prospering and developing. Dr. Keyes described a measurement strategy using the MIDMAC data set in which flourishing was operationalized in a DSM-type approach involving high emotional well-being (using affect measures) and high psychological and social functioning, in the absence of major depression in the past year. Languishing, in contrast, was defined by the absence of depression but low emotional well-being and low functioning. Using these criteria, 10% of the sample qualified for a diagnosis of languishing, while 14% were flourishing. The sociodemographics of languishing appear to parallel those of depression. Dr. Keyes believes that languishing is a form of suffering that positive psychology must seriously consider.

On Saturday night, Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman recounted his personal discovery of the field of positive psychology, and described how the field had been developing thus far as well as the directions that he hoped it would take in the future. After witnessing a show of great potential to see into the soul by one of his daughters, Dr. Seligman began thinking about how psychology had come to concern itself almost exclusively with curing disease, at the cost

of ignoring the study of making people's lives better and nurturing genius and human potential. However, the methods that were developed to study and treat mental disorders can be applied to advance the field of positive psychology. Dr. Seligman feels that his mission as APA president was to get people interested in this work and to get it funded.

The final wellsprings presentation was made by Dr. Paul Rozin, who spoke about work and passion. According to Dr. Rozin, psychology has tended to have a process orientation rather than a domain orientation, and this has led the field to ignore many of the things people actually do, such as eat and deal with money. Dr. Rozin presented evidence that people who view their occupations as callings rather than merely as jobs or professions tend to have a higher quality of life. He also presented evidence concerning cultural differences between America and France concerning attitudes towards food, in which it seems as though Americans have taken much of the pleasure out of eating.

Dr. Don Clifton then presented some preliminary data from a survey in which over 1000 people were asked wellsprings-related questions. These comments were framed by Dr. Clifton’s belief that human beings can live together more harmoniously if human strengths are built; this is where positive social science can best play a role. Dr. Clifton provided examples of how measurement seems to improve people’s motivation and performance in some situations. He reported that, of the 17 dimensions, civic involvement and individuality ran together with leadership and focus, respectively, so these two were dropped for a final total of 15 wellsprings. He also noted the gender difference such that females scored higher on many of the wellsprings, and that some of the wellspring scales had lower reliabilities than was hoped. Derek Isaacowitz then reported on some age differences in the wellsprings data, and suggested that an important aspect of the endeavor would be to ask what profile of wellsprings was associated with what outcome measure at different ages. Finally, Dr. Diener reported on correlates of subjective well-being in the data, including a demonstration that income does not appear to be a necessary condition for subjective well-being, but that it may actually be close to sufficient for it.

The final part of the meeting was an open discussion led by Dr. Seligman, who started the discussion with the question of whether it will be possible to ask about the psychological health of the nation. Dr. Diener raised the following issues: are there optimum levels of these wellsprings? Is there a desirable pattern across the qualities? Is this model culture-bound? What are the criteria for proving that wellsprings are helpful or not? What is the role of values and empiricism in this endeavor? Dr. Rozin made connections between positive psychology and the study of ethnopolitical conflict, especially the SACSEC center at Penn. Dr. Nozick reminded the group that these wellsprings might be valuable in themselves, not just as means to ends. A discussion also ensued concerning the need to have both research on positive psychology in the “ivory tower” as well as applications that can be disseminated in the real world.

In sum, an enormous amount of research and methodology was discussed under the rubric of further understanding and developing ways to measure the wellsprings proposed by the Cayman group. While there may still be some intellectual issues to work out, this meeting clearly demonstrated that it is possible to measure these wellsprings, and that research traditions exist that can be built upon for this endeavor. The next step will be for participants to directly investigate these wellsprings empirically, with the hopes that some of this data will be presented at the 2nd Annual Positive Psychology Summit, to be held Labor Day weekend 2000 in Washington, D.C.