

Positive Psychology: The Scientific Search for the Good Life

Living a Good Life Guest Lecture
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Psychology
emerges
from
Philosophy

Separation from philosophy in mid-to late 1800s.

Goal: pursuit of the empirical study of the questions raised by philosophy.

1879: Physiologist Wilhelm Wundt opens first psychology lab in Leipzig Germany. He attempts to utilize scientific methodology to study internal human experiences. The "official start" of psychology.

Late 1800s: William James becomes known as "the father of American psychology." He studies the relationship between human behavior and internal experiences.

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Psychology Takes Hold As a New Discipline

The field grows rapidly and many different schools of thought emerge over the next 100 years.

Each theoretical school of thought conceptualizes the human experience differently. Examples include:

Psychoanalytic theory (Freud and others)

Behaviorism (Watson and Skinner)

Cognitive theory (Piaget, Beck, Ellis)

Humanism (Maslow, Rogers)

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Emergence of Positive Psychology

- Modern psychology and psychiatry have strictly adhered to a deficit model of understanding the human experience.
- Traditionally, the goal of psychotherapy has been to help people become less miserable.
- Positive Psychology emerged around 2000 and distinguished itself by its rejection of a deficit model.
- Goals of Positive Psychology include:
 - Utilizing science and application to identify and optimize human strengths.
 - Describing what makes life meaningful, satisfying, and worthwhile.
 - Understanding the components of human happiness and how to increase it.

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An American Psychology

- Happiness is a nonspecific term experienced differently across individuals.
- Early positive psychologists sought to define happiness and use this definition in their research.
- The research definition of happiness used until about 2010 was a very American one:
 - Experiencing lots of positive emotions
 - Experiencing few or no negative emotions
 - Possessing a sense of personal satisfaction with one's life

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Early PP Research: Extrinsic and Intrinsic Factors

- Researchers studied the impact of external variables such as:
 - wealth
 - material possessions
 - high social status
 - conventional beauty
- Researchers also studied internal factors people use to optimize their personal potential:
 - Self-determination
 - Autonomy
 - Self-Esteem
 - Mastery of the environment
 - Achievement of personal goals

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Early Research Results

- Extrinsic Factors:
 - Hedonic Adaptation
 - Hedonic Treadmill
- Intrinsic Factors:
 - Found to be closely connected to people's experience of happiness
 - Problems with the conclusion these factors are fundamental components of happiness?

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America's rugged individualism

- A term used since the 1800s to describe the American ethos.
- The belief that anyone with a good idea and the willingness to work hard can achieve their personal goals.
- The concept of the self is centered and pay-off occurs at the level of the individual.
 - Clear boundaries between the self and others/the world.
 - Focus on personal goals and achievement.
 - Value placed on personal control, choice, autonomy.

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Early Research Flaws

Research using a limited definition of happiness and studying internal factors relevant to a similarly limited group of people produces data that is relevant only to that small group. The results are not generalizable.

Furthermore, using these Western tools to assess happiness in people who don't experience happiness that way leads to invalid results.

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Correcting the Flaws

- About 2010, the field widened its view of human strengths and happiness by looking at values and experiences associated more closely with Eastern traditions:
 - **Transcendence and the "small self."** A sense of connection between the self and the universe. De-emphasis on the personal self. A spiritual experience of the interconnectedness of the self with all living things.
 - **Compassion** which flows from one's experience of connection with other living things.
 - An understanding that the **absence of painful emotions is not the same as the presence of positive emotions.** They coexist, supporting and complementing each other.
 - **Harmony** in social relationships.
 - **Contentment** that accepts joy/pain, failure/success -- a spiritual sense of being at peace.

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What does this mean for us?

- Each of us is made up of multiple identities, all of which influence how we understand our lives and how we experience happiness – what a good life is to each of us.
- VIA Strengths Inventory – information about your top individual strengths which may be helpful when you reflect on your life and current happiness.
 - Does your life allow regular space for your strengths?
 - Can you think of possibilities for incorporating them more fully into your life?

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In-Class Survey

- Live Survey: What do you believe you must have in order to live a happy, meaningful life? What is less important?

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***Please rank the following in order of most important to you
to least important to you***

In order to have a happy and meaningful life, I need...

- opportunities for traveling, taking risks, having adventures
- a challenging career with opportunities for leadership and a good income
- close supportive friendships and intimate relationships
- regular opportunities to observe my faith tradition
- intellectual stimulation and new opportunities for learning
- opportunities to contribute/give back to people, animals, the environment, etc
- lots of exciting plans I am always working on
- opportunities for spending time in nature, feeling a connection to the natural world
- a family of my own
- regular opportunities to exercise my creativity


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In-Class Survey

- Live Survey: What do you believe you must have in order to live a happy, meaningful life? What is less important?
- Results: thoughts/reactions?

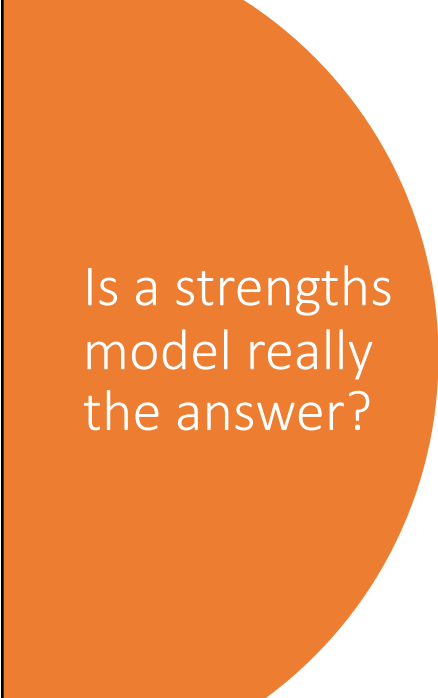
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Has the last 10 years of research found any constants across people regardless of their identities?

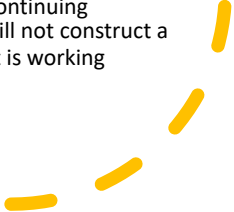
- **YES, generally speaking.**
- The research has found that a few broad areas are important fundamental components of a meaningful, satisfying life:
 - **Close supportive relationships**
 - **Play/fun/new experiences**
 - **Regular opportunities to engage in meaningful activities**
 - **A sense of connection to something greater than the self**
- What these components actually consist of vary vastly from person to person, as well as their degree of importance from person to person

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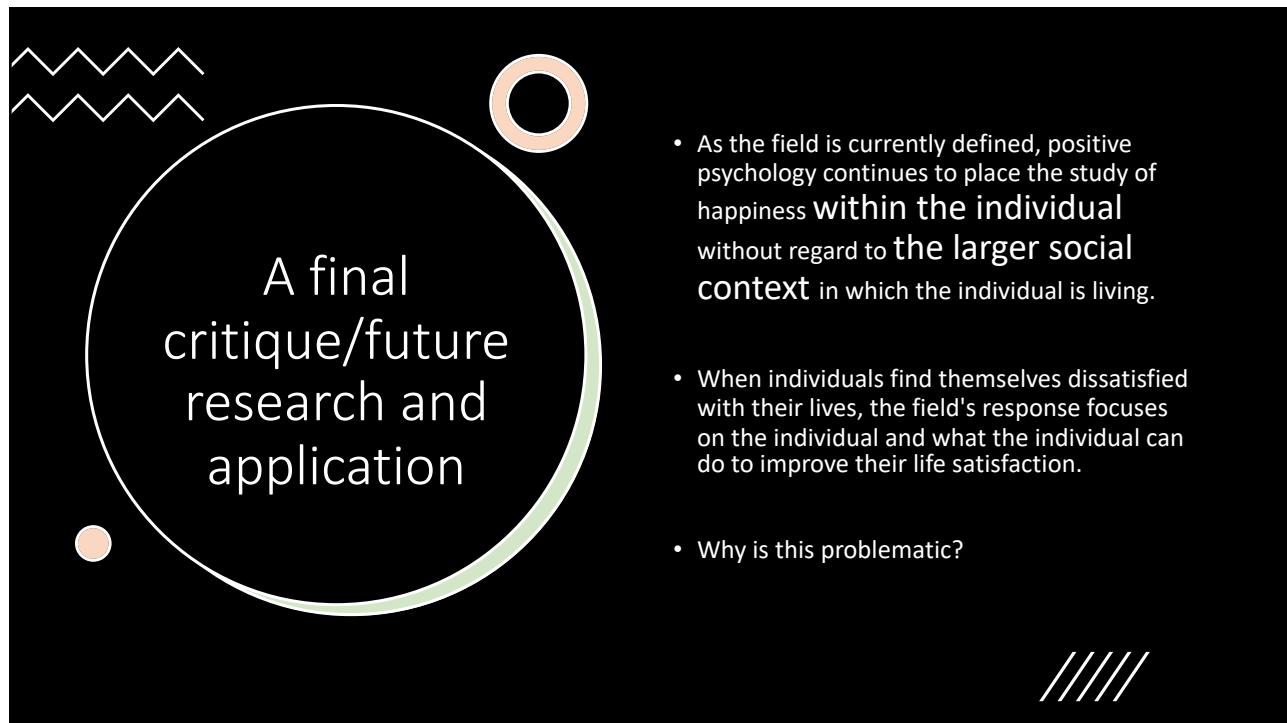


Is a strengths model really the answer?

- Positive Psychology emerged in opposition to the deficit model of clinical psychology and psychiatry, stressing the importance of enhancing what works well instead of fixing what is broken.
- But what if you look at that short list of fundamental components and you realize one of them is totally lacking in your life? Do you focus on building up the areas that are already well accounted for, or you do try to find a way to fill in what is missing?
 - And so we're back to using a deficit model after all.
 - What we're really seeking is a **balance** – the continuing awareness that simply fixing what is broken will not construct a satisfying life, nor will simply building up what is working well. We must attend to both.



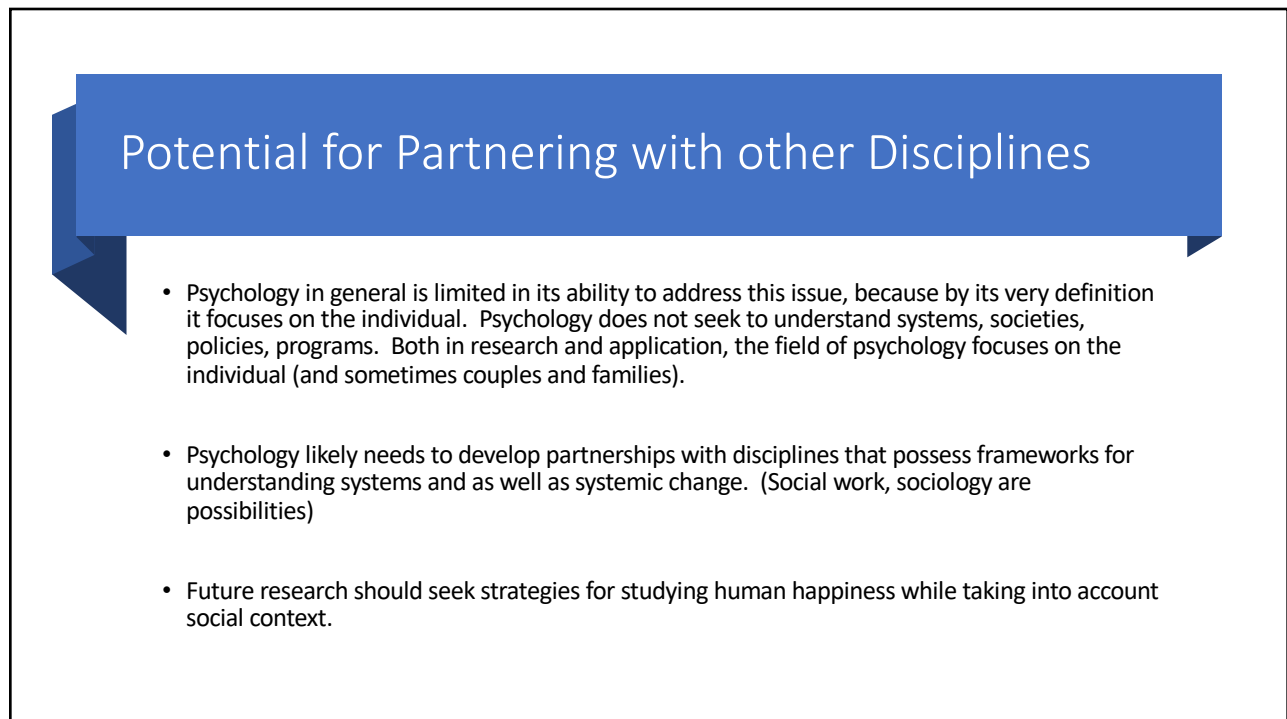
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A final critique/future research and application

- As the field is currently defined, positive psychology continues to place the study of happiness **within the individual** without regard to **the larger social context** in which the individual is living.
- When individuals find themselves dissatisfied with their lives, the field's response focuses on the individual and what the individual can do to improve their life satisfaction.
- Why is this problematic?

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Potential for Partnering with other Disciplines

- Psychology in general is limited in its ability to address this issue, because by its very definition it focuses on the individual. Psychology does not seek to understand systems, societies, policies, programs. Both in research and application, the field of psychology focuses on the individual (and sometimes couples and families).
- Psychology likely needs to develop partnerships with disciplines that possess frameworks for understanding systems and as well as systemic change. (Social work, sociology are possibilities)
- Future research should seek strategies for studying human happiness while taking into account social context.

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