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On the Importance of Distinguishing Hedonia and Eudaimonia When Contemplating the Hedonic Treadmill

Alan S. Waterman
The College of New Jersey

Missing from the Diener, Lucas, and Scollon (May–June 2006) revision of the adaptation theory of well-being was any consideration of the emerging distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Contrasts between hedonia and eudaimonia, two conceptions of happiness, emerged out of competing philosophical perspectives regarding the nature of a “good life.” Within hedonism, happiness in the form of “hedonia” is the goal to be sought, and the greater the extent of pleasure experienced the better. Within this context, no consideration is given to the source of happiness. In contrast, according to Aristotle, the goal of a good life is excellence in the pursuit of fulfillment of personal potentials in ways that further an individual’s purposes in living. Happiness in the form of “eudaimonia” is a positive subjective state that is the product (or perhaps a by-product) of the pursuit of self-realization rather than the objective being sought.

Empirical research reveals that despite a high correlation between measures of hedonia and eudaimonia, differences between the two are highly replicable (Waterman, 1993; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, in press). For example, eudaimonia is significantly more strongly associated with the extent to which activities are associated with opportunities to develop one’s best potentials, with investing a great deal of effort, with having clear goals, and with feeling challenged. In contrast, significantly stronger correlations with hedonia are found for such subjective experiences as feeling relaxed, excited, and content, losing track of time, and forgetting personal problems.

A discussion of eudaimonic well-being is relevant to the analysis of the “hedonic treadmill” both because the reasons for the adaptation of eudaimonia are well understood and because the construct provides a perspective on what is necessary for sustaining happiness. Flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), which occur when there is a balance of the challenges posed by an activity and the skills a person brings to it, can be interpreted as one indicator of eudaimonia, particularly when the talents expressed are aspects of a person’s best potentials (Waterman, 2004). With repeated engagement in a challenging activity, a person’s skill levels are likely to improve, and there will be a concomitant reduction in the challenges involved. The result is that an activity that once gave rise to flow experiences becomes a source of boredom (a condition prevailing when skills are high and challenges are low). This circumstance could be described as a “eudaimonic treadmill” because, with time, activities that once gave rise to pleasure no longer do so. This could be interpreted as leading to the same pessimistic conclusion reached by Brickman and Campbell (1971), that there is little people can do to change their long-term levels of happiness. However, the opposite is actually the case. The analysis of flow experiences contains within it the solution regarding what is necessary for sustained experiences of eudaimonia. If flow experiences are to be restored, it is necessary for a person to increase the level of challenges undertaken, thereby striving to further enhance the realization of personal potentials. Since the opportunities for increasing levels of challenge in any endeavor are almost limitless, so too are opportunities for experiences of eudaimonia. Such circumstances can more aptly be described as a “eudaimonic staircase” than as a treadmill since the person is striving to attain a higher level of accomplishment.

The objection could be raised here that increasing levels of challenges over time will inevitably lead to frustration on the basis of some eudaimonic equivalent of the Peter principle: Over time, a person tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence (Peter, 1969). It is true that increasing challenge may result in a person reaching a point where the skills present, or that can be developed, are simply not sufficient for a successful outcome to a particular endeavor. However, eudaimonia is the product not of the successful outcome of some task or project but of striving for excellence in the development and use of talents. Challenges are functional in bringing out the best one is able to do, or to be, and thus are likely to be a source of well-being, irrespective of the extent of success achieved in any particular instance.

The existing research on the hedonic treadmill has generally failed to take into consideration the nature or source of the happiness being assessed. Global ratings for happiness do not distinguish between hedonia and eudaimonia. Diener et al. (2006) asked why happiness levels change more, and why those changes are longer sustained, for some people than for others. The answer may be that such differences depend on whether it is hedonia or eudaimonia that is being affected. A higher gross national product or longer life expectancy may both be nation-level variables predicting happiness, but it is what people do with the wealth available or with their life spans that determines their level of well-being and its sustainability. The winner of a lottery may use the proceeds to support a lavish, sybaritic lifestyle or may change careers with the goal of fulfilling personal potentials. The happiness to be derived from the latter is far more likely to be sustainable.

Starting with the premise that the nature and source of happiness do make a difference, one can advance the hypothesis that the adaptation theory of well-being is most relevant to experiences of hedonic enjoyment unrelated to self-realization through the fulfillment of personal potentials and purposes in life. In contrast, experiences of eudaimonia are likely to have greater sustainability, with the understanding that as gains in talents are realized, there is a concomitant need to increase the level of challenges taken on. With respect to interventions directed toward increasing levels of happiness, this analysis suggests that those interventions directed toward promoting self-realization (and therefore eudaimonia) will have more lasting consequences than those with a focus on hedonia.

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Correspondence concerning this comment should be addressed to Alan Waterman, Department of Psychology, The College of New Jersey, P.O. Box 7718, Ewing, NJ 08628-0718. E-mail: water@tcnj.edu

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Is Evidence-Based Practice Diverse Enough? Philosophy of Science Considerations

Dennis C. Wendt Jr. and Brent D. Slife
Brigham Young University

In its policy rationale for evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP), the APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice (May–June 2006) claims to have constituted itself with “scientists and practitioners from a wide range of perspectives and traditions, reflecting the diverse perspectives within the field” (p. 273). We applaud this attention to diversity but contend that an entire perspective of the debate was omitted in the Task Force’s newly approved policy and its underlying report. This perspective is a broad philosophy of science consideration for evidence-based practice that is held, in varying degrees, by

many members of several APA divisions, including Divisions 24 (Theory and Philosophy) and 32 (Humanism).

The failure to consider a philosophy of science perspective led the Task Force to make a number of epistemological assumptions that are not based on evidence or rationale and that thus violate the very spirit of evidence-based decision making. In this comment, we reveal a few of these assumptions and discuss their detrimental consequences.

The Task Force’s grand assumption, underlying all the claims of its report, is that “evidence” equals “empirical.” The report claims, for example, that “the purpose of EBPP is to promote effective psychological practice . . . by applying empirically supported principles of psychological assessment, case formulation, therapeutic relationship, and intervention” (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006, p. 273). Here, as in several other places, the Task Force asserted that it endorsed the application of empirically supported principles but failed to explain why.

There is, we suspect, an important reason for this lack of explanation: The Task Force assumed that an empiricist framework required no justification. The usual reasoning behind this assumption is a prevalent, yet mistaken, notion that “we can only know, or know best, those aspects of our experience that are sensory” (Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005, p. 84). This mistake is consistent with much of psychology’s recent history (Viney & King, 1998), in which empiricism has been misunderstood to mean objective or impartial, “in the sense of exposing what is actual or real” (Slife et al., 2005, p. 84). In other words, empiricism is not viewed as a *particular* epistemology or philosophy at all but as a transparent window to the way things are.

Ironically, this assumption of transparency violates the very spirit of the evidence-based practice movement: If the framework of a therapeutic method requires justification, then why not the framework of an investigative method on which the APA policy is based? The latter framework cannot be justified empirically because empiricism is the issue in dispute. However, an empiricist framework can be examined and potentially justified through a reasoned assessment of its assumptions and implications (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2004). Unfortunately, this type of examination is altogether missing from the Task Force’s report and policy statement.

Without such an examination, deeply problematic aspects of the Task Force’s

framework are neglected. For example, the Task Force does not adequately consider that researchers and clinicians are invested in nonobservable (nonsensory) meanings and relationships (Slife et al., 2005, p. 89). This investment is evident, for example, in the efforts of Division 29 (Psychotherapy) to identify and validate empirically supported therapy relationships, such as therapeutic alliance and group cohesion (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006, p. 272). Although this alliance and coherence are surely experienced by patients and therapists, they do not fall on their retinas (Slife et al., 2005, p. 91). The *people* of these relationships are observed and registered, in some sense, on their retinas, but the *betweenness* of these people is not experienced through sensory observation (Slife et al., 2005, pp. 88–89).

Both Division 29 and the Task Force assert the existence and importance of these relations (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006, pp. 272, 275), but in order to comply with the method requirements of empiricism, they must operationalize or make these relations observable (p. 274). The problem is that any specified operationalization (e.g., questionnaire ratings) can occur without the nonobservable experience (e.g., therapeutic alliance), and any such experience can occur without the specified operationalization. The upshot is that the construct operationalized may never be studied. Moreover, one can never empirically know the relation between the construct and its operationalization because pivotal aspects of this relation—the construct and relation itself—are never observable (Slife et al., 2005, pp. 89–92). By ignoring this crucial problem, APA’s policy runs the risk of making psychotherapy research a compendium of operationalizations without any knowledge of how they relate to the original object of study.

Problems such as these are the reason that alternative philosophies of science, such as qualitative methods, were formulated. Indeed, many qualitative methods were specifically formulated to investigate experienced, but not strictly observed, relational meanings of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). But this implies another problem with the unexamined framework of the Task Force’s report—it tends to assume that all alternative methods are variations on the same empiricist epistemology. For example, the Task Force includes qualitative research on its list of acceptable methods (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006, p. 274), but it fails to understand and value quali-