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The long road to strength

Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward

Edited by Kennon M. Sheldon, Todd B. Kashdan, and Michael F. Steger

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Now, you could say that our ordinary thought in society is incoherent – it is going in all sorts of directions, with thoughts conflicting and cancelling each other out. But if people were to think together in a coherent way, it would have tremendous power.

David Bohm

Last week, I hosted a European Science Foundation meeting on ‘combining brain imaging techniques’. In addition to booking hotels, bands, bars, coffees, lunches, dinners, equipment, rooms, etc., I asked each of our 20 speakers to write a short paper, which I edited and arranged alongside other papers in a proceedings document. The full set of ideas and research findings -- represented linguistically, mathematically, and graphically – was very impressive. When the speakers presented they each shared a simpler, more straightforward set of ideas to the group. Then, over coffee, when engaged in dialogue with one another, the speakers exchanged an even simpler set of ideas, as they sought to coordinate with one another and achieve some coherence. Interestingly, it was during dialogue that new ideas and new collaborations often arose -- ideas and collaborations that will, no doubt, need to be expanded into a more complex and coherent action dynamic, such that new basic and applied research can emerge. For anyone working in this area of basic and applied science it is clear that it takes a long time to develop collective strength: humility, creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, social intelligence, citizenship, fairness, leadership, self-regulation, hope, humor, and perspective are all needed to sustain the collective along the long road to strength. But strength is a definite possibility, and by

strength I refer here to the power of purposeful, intelligent collective action informed by scientific knowledge and applied to adaptive problems.

Adaptive problems come in many forms, and aside from those problems that are solved by individuals in isolation from others and in isolation from scientific knowledge, the bulk of modern human problems are solved in a relational social context and informed in some respects by available scientific knowledge. The challenge for individuals and groups is to obtain increasingly valid scientific knowledge and use this knowledge to solve their collective and individual adaptive problems. The field of positive psychology has focused for the past 10 years on the scientific problem of how to accentuate and enhance the positive – positive emotions, positive experiences, positive strengths of character, and positive (enabling) institutions. The emergent dialogue -- in books, research articles, conferences, and over coffee -- is truly awe inspiring and it is clear that positive psychology has come a long way in the past decade. *Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward* is a superbly rich book that presents a vast set of ideas and research findings. Following on from my recent ESF meeting, I would certainly love to invite all of the contributors to Ireland to present their ideas and research findings and thus further facilitate the coordination of ideas presented in this book. The authors write about positive emotions, positive experiences, positive strengths of character, and positive (enabling) institutions from a range of different perspectives, with eight sections devoted to biological, emotional, social-cognitive, personality, relationship, clinical, organizational, and societal perspectives, respectively. The book also includes a section devoted to summary perspectives, where, as expected, the authors

call for more integrative models of optimal human functioning (Chapter 28), more balanced socio-cultural perspectives on the meaning of human strength and positive developmental outcomes (Chapter 29), a more balanced view on both the ordinary and extraordinary human strengths (Chapter 30), and a recognition of the historical position of positive psychology in the ongoing cycle of scientific thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Chapter 31).

However, if I were to invite all of the speakers to Ireland, I would seek to design a very specific working environment with a very specific focus on collaborative design, because what is surprisingly lacking in this book (and this includes the introductory and summary section chapters), is a dedicated focus on the science of design and the science of collaboration (Warfield, 2003, 2006; Warfield & Cárdenas, 1994). Positive psychology is striding very well along the long path to strength: however, if the goal is more integration, more balance and focus, and more coherent, purposeful, intelligent application of our collective knowledge to solving adaptive problems, then we may need to think beyond the science of description that currently dominates positive psychology, and think also about how best to design a new form of systems science that facilitates successful collective design and successful collective action.

Taking stock and moving forward

Consistent with Kashdan and Steger's introductory aims for the book (Chapter 2), I believe this book does present a useful overview of "what we know and ... where positive

psychology needs to go in the future in order to realize its huge potential” (p. 19). The book also succeeds in enhancing the “conceptual complexity” of positive psychology and its “underlying connectivity to the broader research base of psychology” (p. 19).

However, the book does not provide “...a radical integrative advance for the positive psychology movement” (p. 19). I think this radical integrative advance lies dormant in the collective mind of the contributors, but I also think that the contributors may need a systems science facilitator (Broome, 2006), particularly if they wish to arrive at a new form of radical collaborative integration. The need for collaborative systems integration is readily demonstrated by reference to the non-overlapping content of the book. Most notably, the “conceptual complexity” across eight levels of analysis, although marvellous to see, must be integrated by the reader, because the authors did not work together in advance of publication to design a radical integrative advance.

A collaborative design workshop in advance of putting pen to paper may well have resulted in the publication of a book with a very different integrative structure. For example, while all of the contributors writing chapters for the emotional, social-cognitive, personality, relationship, clinical, organizational, and societal perspective sections make very worthwhile contributions, none of them open their chapters with a biological account of the “primordial endophenotypes” (Chapter 5, p. 58) -- interdependent, evolved systems of emotion and motivation -- that structure our ongoing experience in different contexts. Jaak Panksepp’s account of seven biological systems – the SEEKING/desire, RAGE/anger, FEAR/anxiety, LUST/sexual, CARE/maternal nurturance, PANIC/grief/separation distress, and PLAY/joyful systems – is compelling and perhaps

worthy of integration with Masicampo and Baumeister's somewhat fuzzy and less biologically grounded social-cognitive view on the value of conscious thought "as a tool for adapting the human animal to cultural life" (Chapter 12, p. 185). At the same time, Panksepp's often intuitive 'implications for a life well lived' in relation to each of his biological systems, for example, the CARE and PANIC systems, would certainly be better had he coordinated in advance in the context of a collaborative design workshop with Gable and Gosnell, who write very well on different types of constructive and destructive responses to capitalization attempts (i.e., how a relationship partner responds when a positive event has been shared). However, the integration between Panksepp and others is not achieved in this book. Similarly, while the relationship between low blood glucose and cognitive-emotional regulation problems outlined by Segerstrom and colleagues (Chapter 3) may well be relevant for workplace and organizational interventions that seek to avoid negative work overload while enhancing productivity and well being (cf. Chapters 23 and 24), the integration across authors is not achieved in this book. What hope is there for a radical integrative advance if our positive psychology thinkers and actors fail to coordinate with one another? What should we do?

Robinson and Tamir (Chapter 11) review a large body of literature and arrive at the reasonable conclusion that a task-focused processing mode is likely to facilitate greater positive affect, mental health, and task success than a self-focused processing mode. So if our task is to achieve a radical integrative advance for the positive psychology movement, it seems we should shift the focus away from ourselves and focus directly on the task at hand. In other words, we should use the science of design to design a radical

integrative advance for positive psychology and not berate ourselves for our limited integrative success to date (cf. Chapter 30). Part of this integrative design work will inevitably involve continuing the expansion of conceptual complexity of positive psychology and its underlying connectivity to the broader research base of psychology. Notably, there are many excellent examples of this in the book under review. For example, consider the work summarized by Nofle, Schnitker, and Robins on the problematic structural validity of the VIA character strengths inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the close correspondence between some of the VIA strengths and underlying personality traits as measured using the NEO-PI-R (McCrae & Costa, 2003). Notably, they report that the strength of courage as measured by the VIA character strengths inventory covaries with conscientiousness and extraversion, two of the ‘big-five’ personality traits measured using the NEO-PI-R. Furthermore, while Peterson and Seligman had originally proposed that the primary criterion to be used in *defining* a psychological strength is that the “strength contributes to various fulfilments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 17), Nofle, Schnitker, and Robins note that, although character strengths are predictive of emotional and physical well-being, their predictive power is sometimes entirely redundant with the Big Five personality traits.

Thus, by expanding the conceptual complexity and underlying connectivity of positive and mainstream psychology, we should be able to advance our knowledge, avoid redundancy, and generate more coherent, intelligent applications of our collective knowledge for solving adaptive problems. However, it is likely that positive

psychologists will need to make greater use of collaborative systems science tools (Hogan and Stein, 2010) if they are to avoid fragmentary expansion of conceptual and empirical complexity. Furthermore, it is my belief that achieving a radical integrative advance for the positive psychology movement will also involve (a) establishing a *social network* of highly knowledgeable positive psychologists who, collectively, have a deep and growing understanding of biological, emotional, social-cognitive, personality, relationship, clinical, organizational, and societal perspectives and who are (b) *willing to come together as a team* in the context of (c) a *local problem situation* and (d) work with local stakeholders to *structure the local problem situation* and (e) import their expert knowledge alongside the expert local knowledge of stakeholders in the *design of resolution structures* that inform the adaptive action of individuals and groups. In order to achieve this goal, positive psychology will need to embrace applied systems science.

Designing positive psychology

Specifically, to bring about coherent, integrated change, we need an applied system science that incorporates at least five elements. According to John Warfield, systems science is best seen as a science that consists of nested sub-sciences. It is presented most compactly using the notation of set theory. Let **A** represent a science of description. Let **B** represent a science of design. Let **C** represent a science of complexity. Let **D** represent a science of action (praxiology). Let **E** represent systems science. Then

$$\mathbf{A \subset B \subset C \subset D \subset E} \quad (1)$$

We can learn something of systems science by first learning a science of description. Then we can learn a science of design which includes a science of description. The science of design is fundamental if our goal is to redesign systems. Next we can learn a science of complexity which includes a science of description and a science of design. The science of complexity is fundamental if our goal is to integrate the knowledge and perspective that different people have in relation to key problematic design issues. Next we can learn a science of action which includes a science of description, a science of design, and a science of complexity. The science of action is fundamental if our goal is to catalyze collective action for the purpose of bringing about system changes that are grounded in the science of description, design, and complexity. Effective applied systems science needs to embed these elements, one within the other.

As it stands, while the research in the area of positive psychology is seeking to guide the way we design our personal, relational, and organizational life, the integration that is being constructed draws largely upon the science of description. By adding a science of design, complexity, and action we not only achieve a higher-level integration, we also shift the centre of power and influence and persuasion beyond the academic domain and into a domain of enquiry that includes all those who seek a better future.

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