The Science of Life Stories, Eudaimonia, & Personal Growth

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Three Core Questions

1. How do we think about our lives?
   - Life stories

2. How do we conceptualize a good life?
   - Eudaimonia

3. How do we foster a good life?
   - Personal growth

- All three are begging for scientific study
Personal Growth

An American Ideal

A Major Industry

A Science?
Studying Personal Growth

- What is it?
  - Personally meaningful self-transformation

- Need to measure, at least:
  - What people want to become
  - What people actually become over time

- What do people want in life?
  - Answer: A good life

But lots in between! “Growth is no merry ride”
What Is a Good Life?

Happiness, Hedonia, Pleasure, Lots of Nice Stuff

Wisdom, Virtue, Meaning, Maturity
Eudaimonia as “Pleasure Plus”

- Pleasure matters
  - Life without pleasure? Good only as ethical or true

- Wisdom matters
  - Life without wisdom? Good only as pleasurable

Therefore measure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happiness</th>
<th>Wisdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(= \text{Feeling good about the self} )</td>
<td>(= \text{Thinking complexly &amp; integratively about the self and others} )</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Happiness is subjective: *subjective well-being*

- Measured via self-report: Satisfaction, pleasure, etc.
- Measures are stable, match others’ evals

**Positive and Negative Affect Scale**  
(Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1._____ interested</td>
<td>very slightly not at all</td>
<td>a little</td>
<td>moderately</td>
<td>quite a bit</td>
<td>extremely</td>
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<tr>
<td>2._____ distressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>3._____ excited</td>
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<td>4._____ up</td>
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<td>5._____ strong</td>
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<td>6._____ guilty</td>
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<tr>
<td>7._____ scared</td>
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<tr>
<td>8._____ hostile</td>
<td></td>
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<td>9._____ enthusiastic</td>
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<td>10._____ proud</td>
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<td>11._____ irritable</td>
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<td>12._____ alert</td>
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<tr>
<td>13._____ ashamed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14._____ inspired</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15._____ nervous</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16._____ determined</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17._____ attentive</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18._____ jittery</td>
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<tr>
<td>19._____ active</td>
<td></td>
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<td>20._____ afraid</td>
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**Satisfaction with Life Scale**  
(Diener et al., 1985)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  In most ways my life is close to my ideal.</td>
<td>Definitely Disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Definitely Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The conditions of my life are excellent.</td>
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<td>3. I am satisfied with my life.</td>
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<td>4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.</td>
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Measure Wisdom?

- Wisdom involves a matured subjectivity
- Measure as psychosocial maturity (Kegan, 1982; Labouvie-Vief, 2006; Loevinger, 1976; Staudinger, 2005)
- Open-ended Qs about difficult situations in life
- Assess responses for reasoning processes, such as:
  - Structural complexity, perspective-taking
  - Integration of thoughts, emotions, & behaviors
- Good inter-rater agreement & validity
Happiness & Wisdom: *No Double-Dipping*

- Happiness & wisdom don’t correlate
  - People who think complexly about their lives are just as likely to be happy as not

### Wisdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Higher</th>
<th>Lower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Happiness</td>
<td><strong>Star</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Happiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Two distinct paths of development

(Bauer et al., 2005; King et al., 2000; many others)
Eudaimonia across the Life Course

But variation!

- By demographics
- By personality
- But by efforts of personal growth?

(Cohn, 1998; Diener et al., 2006)
Is Personal Growth Possible?

- Nature + Nurture = Who We Are, right?
- Yet as for the determinants of happiness:
  - Suggests room for personal growth
  - So, study how people interpret & plan their lives

Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), Review of General Psychology
Life Stories

- The self in narrative form
- How we interpret & plan our lives
- How we know & construct meaning
- Subjective interpretation, always
- But systematic patterns emerge

Components of a life story (McAdams, 1993)

- Memories and goals
- **Structure**: Complexity, coherence, time framework
- **Content**: Tone, imagery, **theme**, ideology, character
Two Great Themes in Stories

- **Agency**
  - Getting ahead
  - Power, mastery, achievement, success, victory, making impact

- **Communion**
  - Getting along
  - Love, intimacy, relationships, dialogue, sharing
Growth Themes

- Narrative emphasis on personal growth
  - Learning, exploring, deepening self & relationships
- ...rather than safety \(^\text{growth v. safety; Maslow, 1968}\)
  - Securing, preserving, defending self-image or status
- The concept of growth gives the story meaning
Participants write narratives about their lives (McAdams, 1993, 2008)
- Key memories: High, low, turning points, etc.
- Major life goals, current personal projects, etc.

Multiple researchers code for themes etc.
- e.g., presence of a theme coded as 1, absence as 0
- Establish inter-rater reliability (agreement)
Growth v. Non-Growth Scripts

- **High points in life**
  - G: “I came to a greater understanding of my life”
  - N: “It was the best time ever / best I ever felt about myself”

- **Low points in life**
  - G: “I learned I had strengths I didn’t know I had”
  - N: “It has given me only misery”

- **Turning points in life**
  - G: “I developed as a person.”  N: “I’m different now”

- **Major life goals**
Two Kinds of Growth Goals

Intellectual Growth Goals
Wanting to learn, to develop deeper or expanded knowledge

• “I want to go to work and...to feel intellectually challenged every day.”

• “To be as integrated physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually as I can be, exploring my own process & to develop...”

Experiential Growth Goals
Wanting strengthened or deeper life experiences

• “Have a happy, healthy family... To achieve this I will continue to live, grow, be open to new people...”

• “To enjoy my work...and to continue building my relationships with the ones I love...”

Wisdom

Happiness

(Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b, 2010; Bauer et al., 2005, 2011)
Eudaimonic Growth

- EG = increase in happiness & wisdom over time
- Recall: Happiness & wisdom don’t increase much across adulthood on average. But...

- Intellectual growth goals predicted increased wisdom 3 yrs. later
- Experiential growth goals predicted increased happiness 3 yrs. later

Growth goals predict eudaimonic growth

(Bauer & McAdams, 2010)
Growth Isn’t Just for the Young

- Growth : young :: decline : old ???

- Gain goals decline, but still more focus on gain than on loss

Narratives: Growth is for the old!

- Older adults are more likely than younger adults to have growth narratives

- Growth narratives may be especially important for happiness & wisdom in older adulthood

(Bauer & Park, 2010)
Growth ≠ Recovery

- Recovery is about getting back to baseline
  - Recovery narratives predict happiness
  - But not wisdom

- Growth is about ongoing, progressive process
  - Growth narratives predict happiness better than recovery narratives
  - Plus wisdom

(Bauer & Graham, 2011)
Growth and Self-Transcendence

- Stages of self-development
  - Peron identifies with an increasingly wider scope of others
  - Yet own individuality becomes clearer

- The ego quiets as it grows
  - Stronger sense of self, less defensiveness
  - Greater openness, compassion, perspective-taking, humility, authenticity, gratitude, forgiveness, tolerance, social responsibility, universalist values, concern for future generations, and more

(Bauer, 2008)
Are Life Stories Unique?

Stories are nice. But aren’t they just byproducts?
  - Gender? Money? Social support? Genetic traits?

No. Growth narratives predict happiness and wisdom even when controlling for these things
  - Growth is not just about “being positive,” having resources, being smart, etc.
Concluding Thoughts

- We can study personal growth etc. scientifically.
- How we interpret and plan our lives has unique implications for how our lives turn out.
- Transdisciplinary, cross-cultural studies.
  - Social sciences, physical sciences, humanities, arts, education, business, law, medicine, engineering, etc.
  - Growth concepts by cultures, gender, age, etc.
Thank You

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