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Wellness as healthy functioning or wellness as happiness: the importance of eudaimonic thinking (response to the Kashdan et al. and Waterman discussion)

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Kashdan, Biswas-Diener and King (2008) debated with Waterman (2008) the value of eudaimonic perspectives in well-being research. In this invited response we discuss problems associated with reducing the conceptualization of well-being to subjective well-being (SWB). Although we like and use SWB ourselves as an indicator of well-being, the value of eudaimonic thinking, both in the generation of hypotheses concerning how goals and lifestyles link with wellness, and in broadening and differentiating the outcomes considered to be reflective of wellness. We agree that eudaimonic research in psychology is young and varied, but suggest that preemptively constraining the field to a "big one" (SWB) conceptualization of wellness would be less generative.

Keywords: eudaimonia; well-being; self-determination theory; happiness

Kashdan, Biswas-Diener and King's critique of eudaimonia promotes their view that wellness equals happiness, and that SWB is an appropriate assessment of both. This is an important discussion, and we laud these respected colleagues for initiating it. Yet, even for those of us who appreciate and regularly use SWB as one indicator of well-being, aspects of their critique are troubling, for they seek to clear the field of eudaimonic perspectives not only prematurely, as Waterman argues, but on several questionable grounds.

Both eudaimonic/functionalist perspectives and happiness/subjectivist views are active in contemporary economics and philosophy (Sen, 1999), but Kashdan et al. depict them as 'costly,' suggesting that psychologists today don't need philosophy or complex theoretical notions. In contrast, we think it is more costly for psychology to equate rigor with an absence of theory, complexities or abstractions. Just like psychopathology, well-being is complex and multifaceted, and defined not only by mental states, but also by what gives rise to them. It is in this regard that Kashdan et al. seem to miss the essence of eudaimonic thinking, which is not focused on identifying a different type of 'mental state' as they claim throughout. Aristotle's goal in discussing eudaimonia was to determine what functions, ways of living and values best represent and promote human wellness and flourishing. Although contemporary eudaimonic thinking in both economics and psychology does not embrace all his specific ideas, it retains this central focus. Research on SWB informs that agenda, but does not encompass it.

Kashdan et al.'s 'Big One' conception of wellness

Kashdan et al. argue for a 'Big One' approach. For them, wellness equals happiness, and both can be best assessed by subjective appraisals. Attempts to impose a functional or 'objective' view of well-being, as eudaimonic perspectives do, are deemed 'elitist.'

To set this up, they segment philosophies of wellness into objectivists versus mentalists (subjectivists). This formulation has a purpose, as it leads to contrasting eudaimonia not with hedonia (its traditional opponent) but with SWB. Hedonia and eudaimonia traditionally refer to ways of living. SWB is thus opposed to eudaimonia only if SWB is considered exclusively a product of hedonia, which we would dispute. Nonetheless, virtually all scholars agree that eudaimonic attributes should be strongly associated with subjective happiness, and in this sense SWB can be an indicator of wellness. Eudaimonists simply do not agree that subjective happiness by itself supplies a full definition of well-being, or even a differentiated taxonomy of wellness-related experiences.

Whether we talk of meaning, awe, inspiration, sexual pleasure, egoistic-gratifications or self-transcendent ecstasy, in a 'Big One' view these are just inputs to SWB. More happiness equals more wellness, irrespective of its source or function.

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However, within this formulation there is no view of a healthy personality *organization*, or of self-regulated functioning as an aspect of what defines well-being. Thus, an oblivious person with electrodes continuously stimulating reward centers of the brain would be, by this definition, not only happy but also well. Kashdan et al. seem to be aware of this problem in defining well-being as only a mental state, noting that no one wants to be 'on the machine,' but the question is why? It is eudaimonic thinking that addresses this.

Kashdan et al. also argue that studying eudaimonic variables as antecedents of well-being 'provides illusory progress' in our understanding of wellness. We disagree. Lacking space, we cite just one of many examples. Whereas hedonic theories would have had no reason to even raise such hypotheses, eudaimonic theorists have long questioned wealth and materialism as life goals (Fromm, 1976). Drawing from eudaimonic views, Kasser and Ryan (1993) predicted and found that people who place a strong value on wealth relative to close relationships, personal growth and community would show lower wellness on multiple indicators, including SWB. This hypothesis has since been supported by numerous studies, and researchers have both extended and applied these findings. Many studies derived from eudaimonic conceptions have similarly advanced our understanding of both physical and psychological wellness.

In a further ad hominum argument, Kashdan et al. state that using non-subjective markers of wellness constitutes 'elitism.' We agree that *happiness* is subjective, and that self-report is the most direct way to assess *that* construct. But neither well-being nor psychopathology can be fully assessed by happiness. Imagine applying this definition of wellness in clinical contexts. We regularly see patients who feel happy or satisfied (such as the person with bipolar illness early in a manic phase, the narcissist during prideful times, or a well-supplied drug addict) but who do not exemplify well-being. We also see people appropriately low in SWB following a loss, and consider their capacity to grieve an expression of wellness. As such examples illustrate, critical to defining well-being is *considering the functions and processes through which subjective states accrue*. This is not elitist; it is simply good clinical practice. Since Aristotle, eudaimonic thinking has defined well-being by the processes, functions and values being engaged, rather than simply the happiness associated with them. SWB, especially given its homeostatic properties, may be a more solid indicator of wellness when considered in the context of the functions, values and behaviors that engender it. As for Kashdan et al.'s concern that this more complex view of wellness casts people's experience as 'uniformly suspect,' we can't think of any eudaimonic theorists who have argued that. We like SWB ourselves as an indicator.

Finally, testing hypotheses concerning elements of eudaimonia open to all people to develop is not elitism. Indeed, it is potentially liberating, particularly within cultures abundant with daily hedonic seductions and sensibility deadening pleasures. It is, however, hardly surprising that an ideology equating wellness with subjective happiness would be popular in our consumerist society. Hedonic psychology reflects our times.

Self-determination theory and eudaimonia

In their review, Kashdan et al. acknowledge many empirical contributions from self-determination theory (SDT) to well-being research, yet are concerned that eudaimonic sensibilities add an unnecessary layer of obscurity to the theory. As a functional theory of behavior, SDT is focused on *how* people live, that is, how their motives, goals and values, in interaction with interpersonal and cultural supports, function to fulfill needs intrinsic to their nature (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT further focuses on the consequences of these processes across multiple outcomes, including objective ones like persistence and productivity, and subjective ones, like SWB and meaning. Where SDT is aligned with eudaimonic thinking is in emphasizing that the processes, functions and values through which outcomes are generated is critical to our definition and understanding of wellness.

Within SDT, wellness is specifically characterized by integrated functioning, which represents self-endorsed actions, congruent with abiding values and basic needs. Researchers within SDT are thus interested in how varied ways and conditions of living promote or thwart integrated functioning. Because the outcomes of autonomous, integrated functioning are inherently pluralistic, we focus on both functional processes and multiple outcomes in evaluating healthy functioning. We often include SWB as one symptom or indicator of wellness, and also find others' research on it informative.

Ryan, Huta and Deci (2008) recently reviewed the eudaimonic literature using SDT. Like Kashdan et al., who cite this article, they expressed concern about labeling subjective outcomes as exclusively eudaimonic or hedonic (which should also apply to life satisfaction). Focusing instead on eudaimonia as a way of living and functioning, Ryan et al. specified a model of some of the core attributes of Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia using operationally defined SDT variables including mindfulness, autonomy, intrinsic life goals and psychological need satisfactions. Yet, although SDT can test varied eudaimonic hypotheses within its nomological net, SDT is not exclusively about eudaimonia. SDT research also examines how motives, both intrinsic and extrinsic, relate to happiness,

enjoyment and fun: outcomes of interest in their own right. SDT also focuses on achievement, creativity, connectedness, resilience, health and numerous other phenomena indicative of fully functioning persons.

SDT's interest in eudaimonia does, however, reflect an understanding that hedonic views ignore much of what is central to an organismic view of well-being. In line with eudaimonic traditions, we think a meaningful account of healthy psychological development and wellness must include functional capacities for awareness, autonomy, competence and social relatedness, which, although associated with happiness, are not reducible to it.

Only room for the 'Big One?'

Today several theories in psychology draw upon eudaimonic perspectives. Like all big topics in psychology, approaches to eudaimonia differ, as Kashdan et al. critically highlight, but they fit together in attempting to understand optimal well-being in terms of the human potentials, functions and values it entails. Kashdan et al. describe eudaimonia as a 'presumptive' theory, but it seems more presumptive to prematurely foreclose on how the field conceptualizes wellness.

That said, Kashdan et al. correctly point to some of the differences between and challenges for eudaimonic perspectives. They, like us, have called for more careful delineations, and more studies of component processes. Yet we should not rush into a singular definition of well-being as subjective happiness, or abandon theory and complexity. Research derived from studies of SWB and from the more theoretical eudaimonic perspectives have both richly informed the field, and the presence of both affords a generative creative tension. We suggest that there is room for both happiness-as-wellness advocates, and those who remain interested in testing perennial, yet complex, ideas about the attributes, values and functionalities involved in human flourishing.

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