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There are More Important Things:

Questioning American Psychology's Commitment to Personal Happiness and Self-esteem

Dr. Matthew Whoolery

Fulbright Scholar and Visiting Professor, Lady Shri Ram College for Women

Manuscript received on March 22, 2013. Correspondence may be sent to the author at matthew@whoolery.com.

There are More Important Things: Questioning American Psychology's Commitment to Personal Happiness and Self-esteem

While I hope I am still too young to write a retrospective of my career, I find myself reflecting on recurring themes in both my professional career as a practicing and teaching psychologist and my personal life. I hope that the reader will indulge a certain personal focus and use of the personal "I" pronoun even though this is a voice not used much in academic psychology. My focus in this article is on the commitment in American psychology to the ideal of personal happiness and Self-esteem. While for most Americans these aims seem self-evident, I have grown increasingly uncomfortable with and skeptical of these mostly unquestioned assumptions in my field. I hope that what I have to say can influence the reader both professionally and personally in their pursuit of academic goals and the right kind of life. I will focus on three primary assumptions made by modern American psychology: first, that human beings should or ought to be happy; second, that we should seek to be free of suffering; and third, that human beings should (and deserve to) feel good about themselves.

Unhappiness is not a Disease

Whether we focus on research or psychotherapy, American psychology's commitment to the ideal of personal happiness is overwhelming. This focus is not new and is based on a long history of European and British

philosophies claiming this as the primary aim of human existence. Since this focus on happiness is evident to any casual observer or experienced psychologist, I will not spend a great deal of time hammering out the history or details of this commitment (that is for another venue and paper) to personal happiness, but instead put my efforts into questioning the familiar assumptions. This goes for the other assumptions as well: it is well established that American psychology seeks to end human suffering and to help others feel good about themselves. Indeed, these assumptions for most people are unquestionable and form the basis for an ethical and effective psychotherapeutic intervention. My argument is that these assumptions are not as self-evident or universally true as we usually accept them to be. And I genuinely believe that they lead us away from, rather than toward, the right kind of life.

As a freshman at university, I grew to enjoy the experience of watching international films in my university's International Cinema program. It was refreshing and fascinating to see the stories and landscapes of other people and cultures. One particular Russian film had a profound impact on me. The film was directed by the critically acclaimed but largely obscure Andrei Tarkovsky. In his film *Nostalgia*, one character says to the other "You want to be happy. There are more important things." I actually returned the next day to see the film again (this was before Google and YouTube) just to see if I had gotten this idea and quote right. It at once struck me as true and I found myself morally disturbed by its simplicity. Disturbed primarily because it seemed to be so true but in

all my years as a student and an American I had never heard this truth before. When I have shared this quote over the years with my students, many of them have been similarly disturbed by it. Not all have agreed with it, but all have found it to provoke some questioning about what they have been striving for in their personal lives. I have even heard from students, years later, still mulling over this question: “Is personal happiness the right end goal to strive for in life?” Psychology, I believe, answers the question affirmatively. While there are notable exceptions (Frankl, 1992 for example), most psychologists and psychotherapists focus on the increasing of personal happiness as a primary goal. But is Tarkovsky right? Are there more important things?

I firmly believe that there are more important things, both personally and professionally. One of these is the search for meaning and purpose in life. By this I do not mean the search for personal meaning independent of others around us, but to find our purpose in what we can and should do in benefitting those around us. In a great story by Tolstoy, he tells of a king who is seeking to know the answer to three questions: Who is the most important person to know and consult? What is the most important thing to do? When is the most important time to act? In his parable, Tolstoy answers that the most important time is now. The most important person is the one in front of us. And the most important thing to do is to do good to that person. In working with clients and students struggling with depression, one of the questions I always ask them is what they are doing to benefit those around them. Some describe their feelings that they don’t feel like there is any reason for them to wake up in the morning. And the reality may be that in the way they are living their lives, there is not much reason for them to wake up and get out of bed. I encourage them to seek out ways to use their particular abilities or talents to benefit others. Even if it is just that they have an hour a day to spare to sit with elderly patients in an assisted living facility.

Part of this push comes from my own experience. In my late adolescence I found myself in this ‘dark’ time and couldn’t seem to find a way out. I had read the books on self-love and self-esteem and had found them ultimately lacking. No matter how much I examined myself or tried to convince myself that I was a good person I still was left with feelings of gloom. Maybe it was Tarkovsky’s film- I don’t remember- but one day I decided to seek out ways to serve in my community. I didn’t have any specialized skill to offer, but I ended up spending some hours each week working with children with physical and mental challenges. It’s not that in doing this community service I thought “I am a good person because I am helping others.” The change that took place in me was that I started to lose the self-consciousness and concern for my own well-being. Being with these children who approached me with simple love and affection just left me to not be worried about whether I was happy, good, or experiencing meaning in my life. The self-forgetfulness that came from working with these children was exhilarating. I finally didn’t care anymore about my problems and as a result “found” others around me. The relief from myself was wonderful.

This is the meaning I am referring to: the meaning found in the engagement in doing good in the moment we are in and for the person we are with. This is more important than being happy. Happiness may come (sometimes but not always) from living this way, but need not be pursued as a goal. Indeed, happiness as a goal is unattainable—for as long as we seek personal happiness we find ourselves always falling short because suffering and sorrow are inevitable parts of the human condition.

Healthy People Suffer

Much of modern psychotherapy sets the goal for a healthy individual to be free of suffering. Measures of mental health are almost always organized as “symptom checklists” which add up negative symptoms (like feelings of unhappiness or anxiety) to give you a score reflecting the “amount” of suffering you are

experiencing. In other words, each symptom of suffering is counted against your mental health. This is universal enough that it must seem to most psychologists to be self-evident that suffering is bad and a sign of poor mental health. I myself helped create one of these measures and also worked in a clinic that used such a checklist to track the progress of psychotherapy. I was certainly committed to ending the suffering of my clients and believed that problems needed to be fixed so that a person would be free of suffering and problems.

As an example of this in modern psychology and psychiatry, take the controversy over the so-called bereavement exclusion in the diagnosis of major depression. Until recently, the DSM-IV-TR (the diagnostic manual used by American psychiatrists and psychologists) gave an exclusion from the diagnosis of depression to those who were in bereavement for the death of a loved one. It was thought that it was normal to have sorrow, difficulties in eating and sleeping, and other symptoms when a loved one passed away (by the way, the exclusion was for only two months). Recently the controversy became more important as American psychiatrists and psychologists began the revision of the DSM for the fifth version. Members of the committee were psychiatrists and psychologists in good standing in the field, even if also in close relationships with pharmaceutical companies. The final decision was to remove the exclusion altogether! Now a person who is only two weeks away from the death of a loved one (since the diagnosis of depression requires 2 weeks of symptoms regardless of cause) can be diagnosed with a so-called mental disorder. The reasoning was that since people in bereavement are “suffering,” to not diagnose them with depression would unnecessarily leave them to suffer.

In the years since I began practicing and teaching psychology, I have continued in greater earnest to question the assumption that suffering is bad or avoidable. In other words, I have come to believe that suffering is an important part of being a human being. While most or all human beings prefer times of ease and happiness over times of stress and suffering, these latter states

still play an important part in a normal human life. Existential philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard (1969) argue that anxiety is essential to the meaningful human life. A human being free of anxiety would have no motivation to do anything, be happy to sit still. Anxiety and suffering move us in ways that moments of satisfaction and happiness cannot. Suffering in the case of bereavement, rather than being seen as a symptom of disorder to be fixed, may be seen as a healthy and normal way to deal with significant loss. These are not symptoms to fix, but meanings waiting to be fulfilled. More and more frequently I find myself advising others to refrain from trying to “fix their problems” and instead find ways to have a meaningful life accepting these parts of themselves.

One example is of a friend who talked with me a few years ago about the sorrow he and his wife were experiencing as they struggled to have children without success. The reality that they would not be able to have children of their own was a great source of suffering to them and their families. Interestingly, they went to seek help from a psychologist and were told that they were both “suffering from depression” which led to a prescription for an anti-depressant. There seemed to be no room for the idea that this suffering was genuine and an outgrowth of their love for one another that they had hoped would be expressed in having children together. Instead, their genuine suffering was interpreted as a disease that needed to be cured. While I certainly did not hope for their continued suffering and sorrow, I believe that it was a necessary and healthy mourning of loss rather than a problem to be fixed. The fact of the matter is this: life has times of unavoidable suffering. It seems to me that learning to find meaning in these times of sorrow is far superior to a frantic avoidance of pain. Psychology has done great harm in presenting human suffering as simply a disease to cure.

Feeling Good about Oneself is to Encourage Illusory Thinking

Perhaps the most provocative of my professional disagreements has to do with the

way that we should think of ourselves. American psychology has long had an obsession with positive Self-esteem and working to help psychotherapy patients “feel good about themselves.” This kind of positive self-image is encouraged regardless of the kind of lifestyle or decisions the person is making in their lives. People are encouraged to think positively of themselves even if they are failing miserably in their relationships, career, and personal lives. One of my colleagues worked at a mental hospital where they treated youth who were convicted of violent sexual assault. Even these youth were taught to love themselves more, disregarding or separating themselves from their horrific behavior. I believe that this focus in psychology is counter-productive and I have a feeling that most of us know that it is ultimately wrong. I will explain.

While I have known a few truly exceptional individuals in my life who I might think should esteem themselves quite highly (though I find they rarely do), most of us are quite aware that we are fundamentally flawed in one way or the other. And not just in ways that we can blame on our parents or society, but in ways that we know very well are due to our own poor choices. We are taught to repeat self-affirmative mantras when deep down we know that we really aren’t that wonderful. The problem isn’t that we find ourselves lacking in important ways, but that we are told by psychologists (and sometimes our mothers) that we should think that we are wonderful. Self-criticism is seen as a problematic behavior and something that should be avoided. We are taught by psychologists like Carl Rogers that our problems are fundamentally due to the inputs of others who teach us that we are only conditionally worthy. The goal of these kinds of therapies is to have us have unconditional positive regard for ourselves (Rogers, 1947). It was no surprise that a blockbuster hit in the 1980’s (and the song that became the theme song for the Atlanta Olympics) claimed that loving yourself was the “greatest love of all.”

When I say that I think most of us see through the illusion I mean that most of us feel

the conflict in this. We are told by psychologists that we should feel good about ourselves in every way but we recognize, quite acutely at times, that we really aren’t that great. We see in ourselves character flaws and behaviors for which we feel embarrassment, shame, and guilt no matter how much our society says that these things are okay. We tend toward self-criticism not because we are experiencing emotional problems, but because we are being honest with ourselves. While most all of us have some traits that are admirable, we are all aware of the many ways in which we fail to meet up to standards of the right kind of life—even if we define that personally. When we find ourselves honestly evaluating our lives, we are frequently faced with ways in which we know we are failing. What are we to do with these feelings? Are we to avoid them and drown them out in self-affirmations or should we face up to them and accept ourselves fully as flawed people?

In my own life I have found great peace in accepting that I am simply not a great human being. I don’t feel self-pity about this, but feel that an honest look at myself leaves me with the truth that I am lacking in significant ways. This self-criticism does not have to lead to a kind of wallowing in our faults, but can be an important way to move ourselves closer to the life that we want to live. Self-criticism is an essential part of being an excellent scholar and scientist. A willingness to admit one’s own scientific and moral fallibility helps us to be more careful in what we believe and more able to see our own mistakes. The famous psychologist Alfred Binet spent a significant portion of his career staking his reputation on the idea that the volume of a person’s cranium is the determiner of his/her intelligence. He even said that this “truth” was scientifically proven and irrefutable. In an act of scientific and personal humility, he later admitted that he was wrong. Binet went on to make significant and long-lasting contributions to the field of psychology while many of his compatriots never recanted and have faded into history as examples of pseudo-scientists.

I believe honest self-criticism is also important for experiencing personal growth. If we are really so wonderful and amazing as the Self-

esteem psychologists attempt to convince us, there is not much more for us to do. But if we are what we often fear, flawed and bruised human beings, there is a work to be done. Realistic expectations are fostered when we recognize as well that being less than stellar is to be human. Following from the example I gave earlier, when I realized that my personal feelings of doom and gloom were largely of my own self-ish creation, I was able to find a way out. As long as I kept trying to tell myself that in reality I was a great person I could not find the solution. The fact of the matter is that many of my own problems come from short-sightedness, selfishness, and willful disregard of the things I know and believe to be true and right. This is not self-pity, this is simply the truth.

Permit me one last example. One of my daughters was talking with me on the sidelines of her football (soccer) game about how she felt like she wasn't a good player. I simply agreed with her, not to be unkind but to be honest with her and encourage her ability to be self-critical. The fact is that she wasn't really very good at that sport even though she excelled in other parts of her life. I told her that the teammates and opponents that were better at football than she was had worked very hard to get that way. They had spent hours every day playing and practicing in order to feel confident and succeed on the playing field. I asked her "Do you want to be good if it requires that kind of work? If so, I will help you to achieve it." Her answer somewhat surprised me. She said "No." I asked her how good she *wanted* to be and she replied "Good enough to have fun." From that we decided to practice some more in order to help her feel more confident and to enjoy her games more. As you might imagine, when I recounted this conversation with some of my American friends, they were horrified that I would tell my daughter (or at least agree with her own conclusion) that she wasn't good at playing football. They felt

that I should have told her that she was "good" or "improving" even though neither of those were necessarily true at that time. This is the problem, we teach our children the same self-affirming and self-deceptive practices that lead us to the paradox of trying to feel all good about ourselves with the recognition that we realize it just is not true. Honest recognition of our faults is an important aspect of a healthy and mature human being.

While I believe that American psychology has good intentions and that most practitioners are acting in good faith to help others, I believe that our enterprise is fundamentally flawed. Indeed, I believe that psychology may be doing more to further unrealistic expectations of happiness that leads to feelings of shame about unavoidable unhappiness that is natural to the human condition. By perpetuating the idea that we can be free of suffering, people flock to their doctors and psychotherapists to help them fix what in reality are normal parts of the human condition. And by pushing the notion that we should feel good about ourselves we are leaving people unable to be self-critical in ways that will help them toward genuine self-improvement. Maybe accepting life as something more than self, sprinkled (sometimes heavily) with suffering, and ourselves as the incomplete creatures we are will lead to something like an improvement of individuals and society. Consider it, maybe there really are more important things.

References

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