

**LIFE LONG WELL-BEING: A HUMANIST AND HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT****Doug Gutknecht, Chapman College, California****INTRODUCTION**

The study of lifelong development on an interdisciplinary, holistic, and humanist basis is gaining ascendancy in the social and human sciences (Brim, Baltes 1980; Baltes, Schaic 1973). Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and historians have treated portions of this holistic puzzle, and this treatment will promote better understanding of the lifelong process of optimum development and well-being. Various authorities in psychology and sociology have done creative work on the issues of optimum well-being (Bronfenbrenner 1970; Elder 1974; Riley 1972; Brim 1966; Riegel 1975; Neugarten 1969; Foner 1975). The human life offers many paths and dimensions which provide opportunity, influence, and obstacles in the endless search for human and social meaning.

**WELL-BEING DEFINED**

Well-being is the opportunity to maximize one's potential and to enlarge possibilities for meaningful transactions with self and society. It requires self-knowledge and the desire and opportunity for lifelong learning and social involvement. It is rooted in a basic biological level of fitness and wellness, not just absence of disease. Well-being assumes the flexibility of self, the ability to deal with ambiguous situations. It requires plasticity in daily encounters which often create stress and frustration. Individuals derive well-being from the ability to define, interpret, and construct meaningful bridges to environments they wish to engage. It is active engagement in challenging activities. It is rooted in awareness that chronological aging does not produce inevitable passivity, or decline and loss of capacity. Such awareness of aging is not inherently good or bad, but provides both opportunity and obstacles for being that is well, optimal, actualized, and world-affirming, not merely marginal and tolerable.

**WELL-BEING OVER THE LIFE COURSE**

There are four basic assumptions for life course well-being:

1) Individual change, growth, and self development goes beyond chronological aging.

Inevitable change requires one to look at self development experientially and experimentally, rejecting a rigid view of externally imposed ages, stages, crises, and tasks. Well-being is diminished by viewing age as a set of imposed expectations and requirements.

2) Structured processes systematically set the stage for humanist self-actualization and well-being. The intrinsic factors in life course transactions include timing, extent and number of role relations, and possible discontinuities. Extrinsic factors include war, political struggles, and economic and social crises. Excessive emphasis on any one factor, divorced from analysis of the individual's interpretation of multiple contexts and social support networks gives a false picture of lifelong well-being. The life course consists of numerous life event paths which may intersect or run parallel, and do not necessarily run in orderly stages.

3) Demographic processes influence timing of individual transitions. Individuals are part of population cohorts. A cohort consists of people born into a social system in approximately the same social era. The life pattern of those born into a cohort is affected by the same social, historical, and environmental events.

4) Life choices by individuals as autonomous agents and as members of a cohort, can influence the direction of change in society. Many reforms in educational, financial, military, and social institutions resulted from those born in the postwar cohort in the United States from 1946 to 1964. Individuals can receive arbitrary and patterned views of social role expectations and societal standards.

**GENERATIONAL COHORTS**

The generational cohort is defined by the average time it takes a female to replace herself giving birth to a daughter, who will later repeat the process, approximately in 30-year cycles. A generation becomes a point of reference for regarding common social and historical events which bind and separate members of society. The generation of the postwar period entered society in a time of rapid economic growth, suburbanization, coming of the media age, increased use of

automobiles, and expansion of public education. Specific demographics are of less interest than the consequences.

The baby boom generation affected decisions on resource allocation, consumer markets, war and peace, education, housing, media and employment. This generation helped spawn entire industries and markets, creating both winners and losers. Although not evident in the economic boom of the 1950's and early 1960's, the cycle of economic boom and bust became more evident in the latter part of the Viet Nam War, when America's unlimited appetite for growth could not at once be satisfied with both guns and butter. Later, stagflation became a permanent fixture as so many groups petitioned the government to benefit each at the expense of others (Thurow 1981). Different cohorts encounter different social patterns, trends, and expectations, depending on the current of domestic and world events. The fact of large numbers influences these larger trends. Young bodies are needed to fuel the engines of war. Sophisticated consumers look for high returns on investments. An educated labor force demands more challenging jobs.

Social problems do not impact all generations or all members of society equally. Different segments flow through society with different consequences, and at different transitional points. The well-being of individuals of the postwar population boom, black women, the very poor, and single parent families are diminished by blocked opportunities and a reduced chance for education, and consequent rejection for employment in primary labor markets.

#### **HOLISTIC THOUGHT ABOUT WELL-BEING**

Everyone needs to feel a part of society, through the community, neighborhood, school, church, family, or work associations. Under the pressures of the modern world, people look for roots, purpose, and meaning. The idea of age provides one such sense of structure which can simultaneously allow one to feel part of something while limiting one to standardized behavior and expectations. Age norms are established by society as patterns of expectation which persuade one to act one's age and regulate behavior to the demands of society. Sometimes this pressure

can seem unfair and constraining.

Age norms create predictability in our lives (Neugarten, Hagstead 1976 45). We need predictability in the early years when basic personality dimensions form, but many contemporary researchers believe that we shape, alter, and reshape our personality configuration throughout life, and that one person's predictability may be another's burden. Everyone needs some guidelines and a safe haven for retreat. But predictability can become an excuse for failure, retreat from involvement, and a self-fulfilling prophecy. "You said I cannot succeed, so why should I try?"

Work norms provide general guidelines for the individual and society. We are constrained to play in our early years, work in middle years, and retire in our later years. It is comforting to depend on established life patterns. But rigid expectations often become the base for discriminating against adaptive patterns, and wasting potentially productive human and social resources. The rigid expectation that one cannot begin work until age 18, or that one must retire at age 65 may seem unnecessarily restricting to those wanting to contribute. Forced retirement may seem a punishment after a long career of service and public involvement. Those who challenge age norms and expectations often provide a good model for others.

Holistic living requires us to recognize that people make contributions at any stage in their lives regardless of age. Social norms may turn our episodic, fluctuating, and perplexing seasons of life into seasons of discontent. Age can become a label of experience and ability which in practice, spells presumed disability (Sennet 1974). Holistic life course analysis affirms the humanist search for multiple life paths and directions which are influenced by historical and social events, but not reduced to them. Holistic analysis provides insights into the existential and experiential meanings of role transitions and age norms. We engage and disengage social roles which may diminish us because of the social demands and lack of social supports. Our public and private selves feel separated and unsynchronized (Bensman, Lillienfeld 1979; Lasch 1979). Limits, boundaries and social patterns must also provide opportunities for self

actualization, growth, and public involvement (Lifton 1976; Birnbaum 1977).

Holistic analysis affirms our existentially and emotionally felt *brute being* in life experiences (Douglas, Johnson 1977 3). Feelings and behavior must become integrated in a way which supports pattern and ambiguity, choice and necessity, retreat and involvement, recharging and giving. Meaning is derived from our engagements and involvements with the world, sometimes with focus, and sometimes without a clear purpose. The pictures which we create talk back to us, and reflect our value choices. We reap what we sow. If we sow paranoia, we create paranoid people who attack us first before we can attack them. Because we create meaning and value in the world through our daily actions, we generate added energy for benefit or harm. Commitment and enthusiasm for our selves, families, community and world grows by involvement and concern for the things we care about. Our moral choices regarding what we allow in our world and time creates a habit of indifference or commitment.

We cannot abdicate responsibility for the world by passing the responsibility elsewhere. The morality of muddle and postponement, of constantly putting off decisions and responsibility for the world which we create catches up with us. We are never finalized as dead or devitalized as long as we are connected with things which make a difference to us, and as long as we live up to our principles and moral commitments. Holistic analysis also fits well with the idea of well-being over our entire life. But it must, as a matter of consistency, affirm the importance of unique experiences and their interpretation in a meaning-centered existence.

Both short term, intensely-felt encounters and long term struggles become important. Well-being must include ways of recognizing the gaps between the various dimensions of our personal life space and the social institutions which allow us freedom to explore, think creatively, experiment, risk and grow, over both the short and the long haul.

There is no *necessary* rhythm or certainty in the sequence of segments of the life space that the individual will occupy. ...thus there is great variety possible in society, given the increasing numbers of segments of living in which behavior can be carried out. (Dubin 1979)

## PERSONAL WELL-BEING

Well-being is rooted in our view of ourselves both as situated and as emergent. We construct ourselves as feeling beings in a social world. A belief in the indestructibility of our deepest being and the importance of our feelings and emotions allows us to challenge, confront, rebel, and emerge as selves in process. This view of self resides in a nonpositivist, anti-Cartesian epistemology which rejects rigid reductionism, the separation of subject-object dualism, and the belief that personality must be reduced to fixed types. Such labels channel our attention away from our humanist potential for personal change and social well-being.

Well-being is situated both in our body and in our mind. Physical health is tied with psychological health. This holistic mind-body integration requires us to see lifelong physical health as fundamentally related to psychological health. These are based on holistic consciousness which leads to the search for understanding of being and becoming, being and doing, and being and praxis. The key point is that consciousness of our deep indestructible self depends on our attitudes toward the world which suggest engagement, existential possibility, and human affirmation.

Consciousness connects us to other social beings and the social world through our attitudes of optimistic concern and caring. Consciousness becomes a vital life line to authentic existence. It is a world truly beyond ourselves, yet rooted in our deepest core of self, neither over nor underinflated; neither narcissistic nor guilt-ridden and oversocialized.

The consequence of blocking our sense of purpose, our vital system, is the loss of objective meaning. When we block out the larger purposes of life, meanings outside our private sense of self, we elevate our own petty problems to unreal and fantastic proportions, and become neurotic, anxious and preoccupied. We lose well-being as we lose consciousness of our social and human connections, a sense of the larger purposes and values in life. When this happens, we turn in on ourselves in a self-destructive funk of guilt, inactivity and passivity. In this view, consciousness loses its greatest power, to focus, to engage, to take the role of the other, to confront, to connect,

to analyze with compassion, to join forces. We let the robot take over, and become passive, bored, frustrated, spiteful, and amplify the bad messages while ignoring the good (Wilson 1972 222).

The mind needs to amplify, to contact the deep levels of vital reserves and energy. Otherwise the trivial events of the day lead us into a fearful withdrawal or excessive activity and burnout. Existential and humanist attitudes toward a sense of possibility and a meaningful future provide a vision, a prospect of things worth doing. Affirmation of possibilities, goals, and visions of the future provide a link for consciousness and connection to the world. It offers the best chance for lifelong well-being.

### THE CONNECTION

Marks discounts the scarcity approach to concepts which assume that we use up and drain away the time and energy by making social commitments. He offers instead, an expansionary view of self and consciousness. We expand our energy and time by enlarging our social commitment, public projects, and role involvements. Because we choose to do something meaningful with our time, we actually enlarge it. The *drain* metaphor assumes that the source of energy is based on sexual or libidinal forces, and that one sublimates or exhausts one's potency in bursts of creativity and engagement. Such scarcity or drain theories use reductionist metaphors because they view mind and body as separate. Energy is finite, and easily used up. By the holistic view, energy is abundant, and rooted in the physiology of living cells. The most significant contribution of this view is the emphasis on meaningful projects, goals, values, attitudes which call forth vital reserves, and ultimately stimulate activity which produces more energy. Time itself is not scarce, but varies with our meaningful commitments, valued activities, attitudes toward tasks, cultural scripts, and institutionalized roles. Such a view is compatible with notions of not wasting time, in order to foster innovative life patterns. We must make tradeoffs among a variety of probable activities.

Finally, commitment, or lack of it, often functions as an excuse for noninvolvement, lack of energy and effort, misplaced priorities, and

failure to communicate the need to disengage close creatively, and assimilate (Klapp 1979 12). The main point is the need to reconceptualize the hydraulic drain and scarcity metaphors which are applied to energy, time, commitment, and consciousness. Energy well invested in meaningful life events, social connections, and valued relations, produces more energy. Well-being over the life course increases as we choose and prioritize those meaningful private activities and social commitments.

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE & SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Well-being over a lifetime involves innumerable transitions and decisions on paths and schedules for education, family, career, leisure, consumption, and life style. Personal stress is created by transitions that go against normative standards, age norms and chronology patterns. Sheer numbers of persons in large cohorts, or autonomous and creative persons may break out of rigid patterns and point the way to alternate life paths, schedules, and transitions. Such unprecedented responses open the way for necessary larger social and structural changes at other times.

Individual well-being is intimately tied to the available structural and social support systems which may limit or enhance human options and potential. Old, predetermined institutionalized patterns that once served a purpose are difficult to change because traditions die slowly, long after their original reason to exist is gone. The lockstep is built on rigid mechanical metaphors, such as the hydraulic metaphors of energy scarcity and fixed resources. Ignored are the options and joys of planning alternative life paths, schedules, and events in the life spiral. Flexible life scheduling as a significant prescription for lifelong well-being remains an undernourished alternative (Best 1980 3).

Changing requirements for knowledge and technical skill, and increasingly sophisticated work environments require new thinking about how education prepares one for work, leisure, and growth. Meaningful work is one of the most important components of lifelong well-being. It can be facilitated by lifelong study, retraining sabbaticals, better career planning,

educational credits for what has been learned through work experience, and work credit for time spent in schools. Cramming all of one's education into narrow and arbitrary life stages of childhood and young adulthood prolongs boredom, irrelevance, inactivity and poverty, and curtails practical and necessary learning opportunities. Well-being is promoted by allowing students to combine school and work, to join cooperative education programs, and to alternate periods of work and education throughout life.

Flexible life scheduling should be joined with public recognition of the way social support systems encourage or discourage personal and social well-being over the life career. We must learn to diversify experimental social and policy support programs, and to diversify options and promote assessment of individual goals and plans. The issue of learning to cope with lifelong stress, strain, and burnout also indicates the importance of social support systems to maintain life-course well-being. Though scarcity theories may not govern the use of human energy, and spontaneous activity may actually expand human energy, the facts of work stress, overload, and role strain remain. Excessive amounts of work distract from a human the feeling of competence and mastery which degrades one's sense of quality involvement (French, Rosenthal, Cobb 1974). Options open the individual as part of flexible life scheduling allows a better fit between changing personal needs and environmental support, particularly when the fit creates strain.

Well-being is ultimately tied to one's source of belonging, connection and involvement with significant others. Humans are social animals, and only become fully human through interaction, communication and learning. For society to maximize well-being we must maximize significant, meaningful relations, connections and support systems. Loss is important because it reveals elements of the social bond, including seven dimensions: 1) intimacy and role relations; 2) mundane assistance; 3) linkage to others; 4) creation and maintenance of self; 5) support for nonconformity myths; 6) reality maintenance; and 7) maintenance of possible futures (Lofland 1981 10).

Lifelong learning about optimal physical

health is essential for well-being. Physical involvement with self realization includes reducing emphasis on winning, highlighting fun, creativity, spontaneity, excellence, and challenge in sports activities. Learners are the best judges of their own physical needs and capabilities. Social support systems should expand participant sports facilities, and encourage activities which can be continued over a lifetime (Spreitzer, Snyder 1978). This idea of leisure, as one dimension of lifelong learning sits well with the *autodidact* or self programmed learner who continuously learns to add vitality and zest to life (Highest 1976). Self education for lifelong leisure works on the principle of informal learning, personal involvement, and choice. When people discount professional, over-organized, and formal activities, they have more active control of all aspects of their own life.

## CONCLUSION

Well-being is best facilitated by a holistic perspective on lifelong education, and involvement with significant activities, people, and institutions. The key is *participation*, and learning to forge new relations, open avenues of growth, and challenge old institutions to offer needed support structures and support systems. We need a holistic understanding of the forces that narrow our lives and restrict us to rigid chronological stages, timetables, and roles. We can break out of the lockstep mentality concerning education, careers, health, retirement, and institutional change. Such restrictive mentality limits our ability to learn and change.

Developing skills, resources, and support systems require lifelong commitment and participation in these personally significant projects. The challenge of a changing cultural and social environment requires the individual to recognize the complexity of events and the necessity to develop and maintain skills in assessment, decision making, organizing activities, and political participation.

## REFERENCES

- Baltes P, K Schaie 1973 eds *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Personality & Socialization*. New York Academic Press  
 Bensman J, R Lilienfeld 1979 *Between Public & Private: Lost Boundaries of Self*. New York Free Press

Best F 1980 Flexible Life scheduling: Breaking the Education-Work-Retirement Lockstep. New York Praeger

Birnbaum N 1977 ed *Beyond the Crisis*. New York Oxford

Brimm O 1966 Socialization through the life cycle. O Brim, S Wheeler eds *Socialization After Childhood*. New York Wiley

Brim O, D Baltes 1980 eds *Life-Span Development & Behavior*. Vol 3 New York Academic Press

Bronfenbrenner U 1975 Reality & research in ecology of human development. Proceedings, Amer Philosoph Society. 119 439-469

Douglas T, J Johnson 1977 eds *Existential Sociology* New York Oxford

Dubin R 1979 Central life interests: Self integrity in a complex world. *Pacific Sociol Rev* 22 405-426

Elder Glen 1974 *Children & the Great Depression*. Chicago U Press

Foner A 1975 Age in society: Structure & change. *Amer Behavioral Scientist* Nov 144-168

French J, W Rosenthal, S Cobb 1974 Adjustment as person-environment fit. Coello, Hamburg, Adams eds *Coping & Adaptation*. New York Wiley

Girdano D, G Everly 1980 *Controlling Stress & Tension*. Englewood Cliffs Prentice Hall

Gordon J 1980 Paradigm of holistic medicine. *Holistic Health Rev* 3 234-259

Hight G 1976 *The Immortal Profession*. New York Weybright Talley

Klapp O 1979 *Opening & Closing: Strategies of Information Adaptation in Society*. New York Cambridge U Press

Lasch C 1979 *Culture of Narcissism*. New York Norton

Lifton R 1976 *Life of the self: Toward a New Psychology*. New York Simon Schuster

Lofland L 1982 Loss & human connection: Exploration in nature of the social bond. W Ickes, E Knowles eds *Personality Roles and Social Behavior*. New York Springer Verlag

Marks S 1977 Multiple roles & role strain: Notes on human energy, time, and commitment. *Amer Sociol Rev* 42 921-936

Neugarten B 1969 Continuities & discontinuities of psychological issues into adult life. *Human Development* 12 121-130

Neugarten B, G Hagestad 1976 Age and the life course. R Binstock, E Shanas eds *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences*. New York Van Nostrand Reinhold

Riegel K 1975 Toward a dialectical theory of development. *Human Development* 18 50-64

Sennet R 1980 *Authority*. New York Vintage Books

Spreitzer E, E Snyder, D Larson 1979 Multiple roles & psychological well-being. *Sociological Focus* 12 141-148

----- 1978 *Social Aspects of Sport*. Englewood Cliffs Prentice Hall

Thurrow L 1981 *The Zero-Sum Society*. New York Penguin

Wilson C 1972 *New Pathways in Psychology: Maslow & the Post-Freudian Revolution*. New York Taplinger

## PETERS

Continued from Page 206

Giddens A 1977 Review essay: Habermas's social and political theory. *Amer J of Sociol* 83 189-212

Habermas J 1971 *Knowledge & Human Interests*. Boston Beacon

Hollingdale R 1965 *Nietzsche* Louisiana State U Press

Horkheimer M 1972 *Critical Theory*. New York Seabury

Horkheimer M, T Adorno 1972 *The Dialectic Enlightenment*. New York Seabury

Jaspers K 1965 (1935) *Nietzsche* Chicago Regnery

Jay M 1973 *The Dialectical Imagination*. Boston Little Brown

Kaufmann W 1968 *Nietzsche* New York Random House

Ligtheim G 1971 *From Marx to Hegel*. New York Seabury

Marcuse H 1964 *One Dimensional Man*. Boston Beacon

----- 1968 *Negations* Boston Beacon

Nietzsche Friedrich  
1964 (1874) *Untimely Meditations; Schopenhauer as Educator*. New York Russell & Russell

1968a (1895) *The Antichrist*. New York Viking

1968b (1895) *Beyond Good & Evil*. New York Modern Library

1968c (1872) *The Birth of Tragedy*. New York Modern Library

1968d (1908) *Ecco Homo*. New York Modern Library

1968e (1887) *On the Genealogy of Morals*. New York Modern Library

1968f (1892) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. New York Viking

1968g (1889) *Twilight of the Idols*. New York Viking