Book Reviews


According to Browne and Keely (1998) when people interact with a claim or theory, they do so with a history and their history affects their interpretations. I want readers to realize that as I review Seligman’s latest book I do so with a history. In my view, Seligman is a role model in academia because he has a thirty-year history of publishing high quality research on learned helplessness, optimism and depression. Simply stated, his academic contributions are exemplary. However, throughout my much shorter academic history I have struggled with the lack of cross-cultural scholarship Seligman utilizes in his research. Seligman’s outstanding research background and scarce attention to cross-cultural literature are apparent in Authentic Happiness. Hence, for the reader to gain an accurate understanding of my review and interpretation of Authentic Happiness—one which respects and admires Seligman’s research contributions in the social sciences but is troubled with his scant attention to cross-cultural literature—I believe our discussion should begin with a very short personal narrative of my prior interactions with Seligman’s work. This story will provide a historical context that underscores my subjective review, rather than a traditional objective book review that simply lists “the facts.”

I became familiar with the academic work of Seligman as an undergraduate student. However, it wasn’t until I was a graduate student at the University of Utah that I really began to apply Seligman’s academic work into a therapeutic recreation framework (see Dieser & Ruddell, 2002). Further, and most importantly, when I used attribution theory as a licensed therapeutic recreation specialist and addiction counselor with men who were homeless and

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1 According to Eisner (1998) most academic cultures align to objective evaluations, which assumes that researchers can be value free objects who simply explain “the facts” (p. 43). The book review that I present is based on subjective evaluation, which underscores (1) the human dimension of scholarly activities, (2) how and why different findings can have multiple interpretations, and (3) that all people, including “objective researchers,” have values that are usually hidden behind scientific language. Further, my storytelling also parallels Seligman’s storytelling, thus using the same genre of subjective experiences and writing style.
substance dependent (e.g., Dieser & Yoight, 1998) I realized that using a cognitive framework
did not work well with clients from ethnic minority backgrounds (see Dieser, 2002). It was at that
point that I began to truly question Seligman’s work and cognitive theory and realized that
although Seligman has published literally hundreds of research and scholarly articles on
attribution theory, he has directed scant attention on understanding attribution theory and
depression from a cross-cultural perspective. Simply stated, learned optimism as explained by
Seligman (1990) and Seligman and his colleagues (1995)—which is attributing success to
personal, permanent, and pervasive attributes—is based on White Euro-North American indi-
vidualistic values. For example, Choi Nishett and Norenzyan (1999) underscored the East-West
difference in attributions and highlighted the pervasiveness of the fundamental attribution error
in Euro-North American psychology.

Authentic Happiness has this same limitation—it mirrors in many ways the limitation of
Seligman’s research—there is scarce attention focused on cross-cultural issues in this book, even
though there is cross-cultural psychology literature that suggests that different cultures have
diverse attributions, explanatory styles, and concepts of happiness/quality of life (e.g., Choi et al.,
1999; Häse, Shybut, & Lossof, 1969; Kashima & Traindis, 1986; Matsumoto & Juang, 2004;
Moghaddam, Ditto, & Taylor, 1990). Suggesting that happiness has a universal feature in a
socially constructed world is troubling to me. Instead, I think Seligman needs to acknowledge
that the theoretical underpinnings of his scholarly work in Authentic Happiness are based largely
on individualistic values (e.g., finding one’s personal signature strength) and research that is
primarily based on White Euro-North American people. That is to say, his book has excellent
relevance for people who value individualism, but should be used cautiously when working with
people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Despite this concern, I found the following aspects salient in his newest book: (1) Seligman’s
strong focus on using psychology in a positive and preventative manner opposed to an
intervention focused on repairing emotional damage, (2) the important focus on leisure theory
(e.g., flow, social life), and (3) his openness and personal narrative approach in critiquing
psychology and his past endeavors as an academic and person.

In my view, the central thesis of Authentic Happiness is that happiness occurs when a person
identifies a signature strength and uses it toward something larger than the self. A signature
strength is a personal strength (e.g., playfulness, gratitude, kindness, honesty, love of learning,
critical thinking) and the role of positive psychology is to help a person identify and develop their
signature strength. In regard to leisure theory, Seligman suggests that flow can be increased by
(1) identifying signature strengths, (2) choosing work that lets people utilize their signature
strengths—which will cause an increase in flow experience during employment, and (3)
recrafting present work to use signature strengths.

Unknown to Seligman, Stebbins (2002) concept of serious leisure—which is the systematic
pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity interesting enough that a participant finds
a career acquiring and expressing a combination of special skills, knowledge and experience—
has already provided a framework for Seligman’s pragmatic extension of developing signature
strengths. According to Stebbins, because amateurs interact across the work-leisure divide and
find their work-leisure as personally enriching and self-gratifying, serious leisure can be the
recasting of employment and is based upon identifying a personal (signature) strength. Stebbins
also underscored that in both career and casual volunteering, a person uses their specialized skills
and knowledge (which Seligman calls a signature strength) as an uncoerced helping activity with
no direct material gain (what Seligman refers as something larger than the self).

Authentic Happiness is broken into three sections. Section one, positive emotion, consists of
seven chapters. Chapter one explains that happiness is important because it helps people live

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longer and brings meaning into one’s life. Further, in chapter one Seligman posits that hedonism is a delusion of happiness and outlines his central thesis. A claim that caused me to pause and think was “I do not believe that you should devote overly much effort to correcting your weakness. Rather, I believe that the highest success in living and the deepest emotional satisfaction comes from building and using your signature strength” (p. 13). This claim has been an excellent catalyst in developing student discussions in classes I teach in therapeutic recreation—using therapeutic recreation to identify and use signature strengths opposed to using therapeutic recreation to alleviate illness (existentialism approach to therapeutic recreation instead of a medical model or clinical approach).

The primary idea in chapter two is that positive psychology can be used in a preventative manner, instead of following the medical model approach of focusing on a person’s illness. In a personal narrative, Seligman highlights his journey regarding moving away from the medical model approach to the field of positive psychology.

In chapter three Seligman posits that positive emotions have many healthy consequences, such as friendship, love, creative thinking, and physical health. In regard to therapeutic recreation and leisure service, the most relevant aspect of chapter three is when Seligman references a study by Diener and Seligman (2002) which suggested that the most happy people “…differed markedly from average people and unhappy people in one principle way: a rich and fulfilling social life” (p. 42). That is, people who are happier spent more time with people in free time and leisure pursuits. In the latter part of chapter three Seligman suggests that acquiring a rich social life can help raise the amount of happiness a person experiences.

In chapter four Seligman underscores that although life circumstances can affect happiness, people can change internal circumstances to increase happiness. In this chapter he introduces a happiness formula. Accordingly, happiness is equated to positive psychology (e.g., optimistic thinking, attitude), life circumstances (e.g., social life, relationships) and set ranges (e.g., genetics). Seligman argues that the single most important issue in happiness is positive psychology (helping a person identify and develop their signature strength in past, present and future events).

Chapters five relates happiness to past events. Seligman suggests that dwelling on past negative events and the expression of anger produces cardiac disease and more anger. In its place, Seligman suggests people learn how to forgive and train their minds to remember pleasant events. Although I personally find forgiveness and gratitude paramount (and cannot justify revenge), as an academic involved in cross-cultural issues I find parts of chapter five troubling. Although I fundamentally believe that chronic dwelling on negative events are usually harmful (e.g., supports the development of depression), I also fundamentally believe that it is important to accurately understand and remember past negative events so that ugly and hatred-oriented behaviors and actions can be prevented. I believe Seligman needs to spend greater depth explaining the difference between dwelling and understanding past negative events.

The thesis of chapter six is that people can control their emotions (happiness) about future events by being optimist thinkers. As in his previous books and articles, Seligman introduces a cognitive therapy approach (the ABCDE model) and highlights that an optimistic person will provide temporary and specific explanations for negative events and persist and universal attributions for positive events. Unlike past books (e.g., Seligman, 1990; Seligman et al., 1995), the personalization dimension of attribution theory (internal and external locus of control) is not explained in this chapter. In the endnotes Seligman comments that he has purposely not used the personalization dimension because he is worried that people might take insufficient blame for mishaps and too much credit for success. I found this insight relevant—having taught university classes regarding learned helplessness/optimism and therapeutic recreation attribution based

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intervention, my observations have lead me to believe that numerous students have indeed interpreted the personalization dimension as a means to escape responsibility regarding misfortunes and to take too much credit for successes. Further, I find it problematic that in chapter six Seligman makes no reference to cross-cultural research and scholarship that people from different ethnic background have differing attribution styles (e.g., Choi et al., 1999).

In chapter seven Seligman posits that to increase happiness people need to follow Aristotle’s perspective in asking themselves “What is the good life?” and answer it by identifying and using a signature strength in pursuit of the good life. In the beginning part of this chapter Seligman separates the concepts of pleasures (momentary delights in sensory stimulation which require no or little thinking or interpretation) and gratifications (total absorption which results in psychological growth). It is gratifications that create flow experiences. By asking “what is the good life?” Seligman knowingly outlines the philosophy of Aristotle in which contemplation is needed to experience happiness (eudaimonia). Seligman unknowingly underscores aspects of the classic concept of leisure, which is schola (a life space of quiet and peace for contemplation or active reason) (Dare, Belton, & Coo, 1998; de Grazia, 1962). Seligman suggests that although flow and gratifications provide multiple physical and psychological health people often choose pleasure activities over gratifications because gratifications entail the possibility of failure and require great discipline and effort to develop skills. That is, whereas pleasures are easy to experience, gratifications and flow are difficult.

Although I think this chapter is important (e.g., distinction between pleasure and gratifications), my one concern is that Seligman is relying too heavily on a psychological perspective of eudaimonia by referencing the work of Ryan and Deci (2001) and Ryff (1995). Accordingly, Seligman aligns well-being with eudaimonia as a striving for perfection that represents the realization of one’s true potential or self-actualization (see endnote 112 on page 289-299). Kingwell (1998) has argued that too many psychologists (and by extension I will add therapeutic recreation specialists and human service workers) are drawing upon the concept of eudaimonia to develop self-help theories without an accurate understanding of its original classic philosophical background (and are using such theories for self-promotion and profit). To support his argument, Kingwell writes:

Despite his growing fame in the 1960s, Maslow became bitter and disillusioned as he got older and felt only scorn for those who thought that meta-motivation—the attempt to meet self-actualization needs—could be consciously pursued. “They’re doing it stupidly and inefficiently and incapable and they want it now,” he said in an interview recorded during the last year of his life. He also became increasingly dismissive of those who sold their psychotherapeutic wares by claiming that self-actualization was available to everyone (or at least everyone with the money to pony up) (p. 54).

In short, I am not arguing that Seligman has misinterpreted the concept of eudaimonia; rather I am suggesting caution in regard to how Seligman uses eudaimonia within a psychological framework and prudence to therapeutic recreation specialists who might want to develop psychologically oriented therapeutic recreation practice based on eudaimonia.

Section two, strength and virtue, is broken into two chapters. Chapter eight proposes that there are six universal character traits that capture good character: wisdom and knowledge, courage, love and humanity, justice, temperance, and spirituality and transcendence. Seligman suggests that although different cultures have different behaviors in expressing these traits (e.g., what courage means for a Samurai is different than for Plato), these are essentially universal character traits. Simply put, I find this difficult to believe and Seligman provides no research
evidence in the endnotes of his book. Although I agree with Seligman that character development is not entirely developed from the environment, I disagree with him that the environment (e.g., culture) may have little influence on character development. A vast amount of research in social learning theory, cross-cultural psychology, anthropology, and sociology suggests that people learn norms through culture and social interaction (e.g., Fish, 1996; Matsumoto & Juang, 2004; Salzmann, 1993). As much as I respect Seligman, in this chapter he follows a Euro-North American psychological perspective, which focuses solely on individual character that is blind to culture and other environmental influences.2

Chapter nine allows the reader to identify their signature strength. As I stated in the first section of this book review, finding one’s personal signature strength is based on individualistic values (for example, a collectivist culture may prohibit the finding of personal/individual signature strengths and instead may enhance the ability to identify group oriented signature strengths). Further, the bulk of the chapter is a questionnaire oriented toward identifying signature strengths. There is also an Internet option at www.authentichappiness.org. After taking both the book and Internet questionnaire, I found certain questions too vague to respond. For example, one question asked, “I cannot wait to get started on a project.” My honest answer is that it depends. Whereas I cannot wait to start a research project, I can wait (and would like to wait) marking 50 final exams (marking project) or raking my leaves in the fall (yard project)! I did not know how to answer this question and others, so I provided neutral answers. Further, unlike other chapters in Authentic Happiness that use various scales to measure psychometric constructs, I could not find any additional writing on the development of the signature strength questionnaire (e.g., reliability, validity, usability) used in chapter nine.3 Unless I missed it, the only explanation regarding the signature strength questionnaire is a footnote on page 140 explaining that the questionnaire is the work of the Values-In-Action (VIA) Institute under the direction of Dr. Peterson and Dr. Seligman. When I visited the VIA website (www.viastrength.org) on Sept. 3, 2003 the website message stated: “No one’s home yet. Check back soon, please.” My guess is that once the construction of this website is completed, that information on the signature strength questionnaire will be provided.

Section three consists of five chapters. Chapters ten, eleven, and twelve are oriented toward how to increase positive emotion at work, love, and parenting respectfully. Chapter thirteen is a summary of the central thesis of Authentic Happiness. Chapter fourteen is oriented toward the interface of positive psychology and the existence of God. Throughout this last chapter, Seligman raises many questions as he searches for an answer related to the existence of God. For example, Seligman discloses “I’ve never been able to choke down the idea of a supernatural God who stands outside of time, a God who designs and creates a universe . . . But now I’m starting to think I was wrong, or partly wrong” (p. 257).

To this end, I am impressed with Seligman’s personal disclosures and narrative writing style throughout Authentic Happiness. Dr. Seligman, an outstanding and internationally prominent psychologist, seemed very human as he explained (1) his anxiety when being notified that he won an election to be President of the American Psychological Association, (2) his excitement in meeting Csikszentmihalyi after saving him from drowning, and (3) how his children claim he could not be the author of The Optimistic Child (Seligman et al., 1995) because he is too grumpy. Seligman’s personal disclosures caused me to reflect on my profession of therapeutic recreation

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2 Fish (1996) has commented that “. . . for all the relative theoretical and methodological strength of psychology, most psychologists are blind to culture” (p. 59).

3 For example, there is a credible reference (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) regarding the Positive Affectivity and Negative Affectivity Scale located in chapter three.

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and my personal life. For example, having read *Authentic Happiness* has caused me to reflect on how dominant the medical model and clinical approach to therapeutic recreation is which focuses on alleviating illness. Perhaps more focus should be oriented toward using therapeutic recreation to identify and develop signature strengths (e.g., serious leisure within a therapeutic recreation framework). Likewise, in regard to my personal life, my wife and I have attempted to teach our three sons to be more optimistic and have greater positive emotion (we have used material from the *Optimistic Child*). In fact, I’ve told my three sons that the true meaning of a Ph.D. is Pretty Happy Dad. However, as they get older they call me Dr. Sourpuss more frequently! Perhaps I need to spend more time developing my own signature strengths individually and within a family and leisure context (e.g., love of history, enthusiasm for life).

Despite my concerns, *Authentic Happiness* is a solid addition to the literature in psychology, health and human services, and relevant to therapeutic recreation. It challenges traditional psychology and human service work (therapeutic recreation), which focuses on repairing emotional damage. It provides a positive and preventative framework for existential therapeutic recreation programming (Richter & Kaschalk, 1996; Sylvestre, Voelkl, & Ellis, 2001) which can develop signature strengths, virtue/eudaimonia (conformity to a standard based upon defining the good life), meaning, and happiness.

**References**


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