What is the ‘good life’?

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As psychology at the millennium begins to take the building of the best things in life as seriously as it has taken the healing of the worst, we need more of a science than presently exists. A focus of the convention in San Francisco and a central mission of my presidency is to nurture a science and a practice of positive psychology. Here is a progress report on the three first steps.

A taxonomy for the good life

The main purpose of a positive psychology is to measure, understand and then build the human strengths and the civic virtues. But to begin we need to know what the individual strengths and the civic virtues are—the positive traits that transcend particular cultures and politics and approach universality. Positive psychology needs a taxonomy. Taxonomies do not float in a vacuum. Rather, they serve a purpose. Food, for example, can be categorized by calories for dietitians, by cost for shoppers or by weight for shippers. The main purpose of a taxonomy for positive psychology is to guide the formulation and building of the 'good life.' (By the 'good life,' of course, I do not mean a Porsche, champagne and a suntan.)

Here are several ways of casting the questions about the good life. Which will be most fruitful for a taxonomy?

1. Sanity. The DSMs categorize the mental disorders for the purpose of measurement and treatment. Is there an array of human strengths—the 'sanities'—that are the opposite of the disorders?

2. Parental. Beyond those qualities provided by genetic inheritance, what would responsible parents most want to bestow on their children?

3. Political. To assess across time, culture and political systems how closely a people came to the good life, what set of questions would we ask?

4. Self-actualization. If we wanted to know, as we aged and accomplished or failed, how close we were to the good life, what would we ask ourselves?

5. Best exemplars. Rather than trying to agree on the elusive dimensions of the good life, can we think instead of an array of paradigmatic 'good lives,' e.g., Jefferson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Churchill, and
measure proximity to such sterling examples?

6. Traditional. Do our cultural and religious writings about self-actualization, about wisdom and about creating an art of life yield a taxonomy?

Three beginnings

To begin the taxonomy and the consequent measurement, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is organizing three meetings, and the Gallup Corp., under the leadership of Don Clifton, PhD, has agreed to sponsor all the meetings. This is most welcome since I am committed to the ideal of carrying out presidential initiatives without adding more new APA committees to our overly burdened governance and without draining APA’s treasury.

The first meeting will be a small, cross-disciplinary group of eminent senior scholars who will ponder the questions above and suggest a framework for categorizing and measurement. The second meeting will be a gathering of about 20 specialists representing the measurement of each of the categories deemed most promising. Gallup has agreed to take any relevant polls to gather any preliminary data requested. The third meeting will be to refine the taxonomy and then to develop a battery of measures. We don’t expect closure, of course, but only a fruitful start.

The second development is a meeting to debate the most burning questions in positive psychology. In Akumal, Mexico, in January, Csikszentmihalyi, APA CEO Ray Fowler and I will host a weeklong conversation among a group of 18 young psychology professors from around the world. This group, which is of course paying its own way, was selected from 45 nominees of the most talented and productive young researchers working in or near to the domain of positive psychology. The group will ponder some of the liveliest questions, such as:

'Is happiness a means or an end?'

'Do positive motivations derive from negative ones?'

'What is the relationship of the individual to the interpersonal strengths?'

'Can an economically viable profession of positive psychology emerge outside the health-care system?'

'What is the evolutionary function of positive feeling?'

Finally, if psychology still exists in the year 3000 (the age of 'knowing' by then could have given way to the age of 'the known' or the species could be extinct), historians may look back to the January 2000 issue of the American Psychologist to assess progress. This millennial issue will be devoted to what we know about positive psychology. David Myers and Edward Diener will write about 'Happiness.' Ellen Winner and Camilla Benbow about 'High Talent.' Howard Gardner about 'Responsibility.' Michael Frese about 'Initiative.' Paul Baltes and Ursala Staudinger about 'Wisdom.' Barry Schwartz about 'Self-determination.' Dean Simonton about 'Creativity.' Susan Taylor and Peter Salovey about 'Health and Mood.' George Vaillant about 'Positive Psychodynamics.' Chris Peterson about 'Optimism.' And lots more. We won't be around to either blush or be proud of this issue when and if historians look backward, but it is our beginning.