The Interface of Positive Psychology with a Psychology of Loss: A Brave New World?

ERIC D. MILLER, Ph.D.*
JOHN H. HARVEY, Ph.D.**

In this paper, it is argued that a psychology of loss can help to illuminate one of the central themes of positive psychology: That is, showcasing those human skills that emphasize human strengths and optimal functioning. However, the interface of positive psychology and a psychology of loss also contains a definite paradox. Loss is not an intrinsically positive event that will necessarily build human strength. Yet, the experience of loss can become a profound means for showcasing human strengths and potential. We also caution that a positive psychology, in its quest to focus on the more uplifting qualities of the human experience, must also realize that suffering and loss is inherent to the human condition.

Seligman (1) has written compelling articles in the APA Monitor and other publications encouraging the development of a "positive psychology." He argues that psychology has lost what ought to be its fundamental mission:

Before World War II, psychology had three missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent. After the war...the two [latter] fundamental missions of psychology—making the lives of all people better and nurturing "genius"—were all but forgotten.

We became a victimology. Human beings were seen as passive foci: Stimuli came on and elicited "responses," or external "reinforcements" weakened or strengthened "responses," or conflicts from childhood pushed the human being around. Viewing the human being as essentially passive, psychologists treated mental illness within a theoretical framework of repairing damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhoods and damaged brains.

Fifty years later, I want to remind our field that it has been side-tracked. Psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage, it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken, it is nurturing what is best within ourselves.

* Assistant Professor of Psychology, Kent State University, East Liverpool Campus. Mailing address: Kent State University, 400 East Fourth Street, East Liverpool, OH 43920.
** Professor of Psychology, University of Iowa. Mailing address: University of Iowa, Department of Psychology, 11 E Seashore Hall, Iowa City, IA 52242.

In short, a “positive psychology” seeks to emphasize the study of human strengths and optimal functioning.

In this paper, we assume that the general rationale regarding adopting a positive psychology is sound. However, we argue that a very important means to understanding positive psychology is to how it may interface with another field that addresses individuals’ experiences of loss.

We have theorized in different papers (2–5) that there should be a field concerning the psychology of loss that is broad and interdisciplinary in nature and focused on people’s pervading common-sense experience and their recognition of loss in their own and others’ lives. Such a field needs to investigate the similarities and dissimilarities in the causes, mediators, and consequences of many disparate loss experiences, such as: death, divorce and dissolution of close relationships, loss of employment, victimization through violence and genocide, loss of physical and psychological functioning due to illness and accidents, and the psychological consequences of stigmatization. These loss events represent only a small sampling of possible loss experiences. We further suggest that while researchers have primarily focused on the impact of negative life events on a variety of psychiatric conditions, such as depression, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders (6, 7)—very little work in this area has directly considered an individual’s personal sense of loss associated with these events and conditions. One notable exception is Hobfoll’s (8) conservation-of-resources model that provides new conceptual understandings of how we react to and process stressful life events.

A PARADOX?

At the time of this writing, the tragic crash of EgyptAir Flight 990 had recently occurred, killing all 217 passengers and crew members as the plane plunged into the waters near Nantucket. In recent months and years, many other public loss events have occurred, such as the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Jr., and Princess Diana, high-profile plane crashes, including TWA 800 and the crash of the LearJet carrying professional golfer Payne Stewart, and the Oklahoma City bombing. Each spotlighted the personal and profound grief that not only the affected individuals experience, but also the collective sense of grief that pervades our country and world as a result of these public tragedies.

We argue that a psychology of loss can serve as a very powerful means to explore a “positive psychology.” Such an argument may seem paradoxical: Indeed, the notion that loss actually can be associated with positive outcomes is paradoxical. Miller and Omarzu (3) found that college
students tend to associate the word loss with “very few terms [that] tend to overtly convey a sense that loss is or can be a positive event (i.e., associated with psychological growth)” (p. 4). Other scholars who have looked at our psychological reactions to thoughts about mortality and death suggest that such thoughts are the source of much potential negative arousal. For example, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski’s (9) terror-management theory posits that our ability to think causally, anticipate events, and to view ourselves as entities in the universe makes awareness of the potential for our deaths possible—and such awareness creates the potential for sheer terror. Taken to an extreme, excessive rumination about death could be seen as symptomatic of major depression and perhaps suicidal thinking (10). Thus, one side of the paradox is that loss is not an intrinsically positive event that inherently builds human strength.

The other side of the paradox is that the experience of loss can become a profound means for showcasing human strengths and potential. Loss is a part of every human life. Psychological growth very often is associated with adaptation to major loss. We know that such adaptation is facilitated by individuals’ acts of creating positive meaning when coping with major loss (11, 12).

Viktor Frankl’s (13) poignant work Man’s Search For Meaning presents an account of his experiences as a Jewish prisoner in a Nazi death camp (where he lost his wife and parents). Frankl maintains that our primary motivation in life is the search for meaning. He also discusses the role of meaning in terms of coping with loss or suffering: “In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning” (p. 135). He elaborates on this point by reflecting upon his own experience: “The question which beset me was, ‘Has all this suffering, the dying around us, a meaning?’ For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance—as whether one escapes or not—ultimately would not be worth living at all” (p. 138).

While some scholars have questioned whether finding meaning is inherently helpful or essential to all loss victims, it has not been found or suggested that finding positive meaning is associated with negative outcomes (14, 15). However, Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (16) have argued that the construct of “finding meaning” should be clearly delineated into two distinct processes: one, making sense of the loss (e.g., why did the loss occur?) and two, finding something positive in the experience (e.g., growth in character). Davis et al. (16) also note that these two processes differ in terms of when they are associated with less distress: Making sense of the loss tends to be particularly helpful in the short term.
(in the first year postloss), whereas finding something positive in the experience has more long-term benefits (at 13 and 18 months postloss).

Clearly, there is much controversy over how to operationalize the "search for meaning" construct and whether such a search is always beneficial to those who have experienced a major loss. However, there is considerable evidence that loss can cause some to reevaluate their life goals and priorities and to better understand the ways by which we build human strength. For instance, Thompson (17) found that half of the stroke patients whom she surveyed were able to find meaning (e.g., appreciate life more, appreciate family and friends, become more compassionate) in their experience, especially those with higher levels of physical functioning. In another study, Dollinger (18), found that virtually all of 35 adult family members mentioned that a lightening-strike disaster caused them to reevaluate what is important in their lives (especially their families and children).

Janoff-Bulman (19) maintains that experiencing a major loss or trauma causes individuals to realize that their general, absolute assumptions about the benevolence of the world, meaningfulness, and self-worth are not accurate. Yet, she further argues that these individuals will ultimately view loss as an episode that has allowed for a renewed sense of meaning by understanding the limitations of their previously held assumptions.

Additionally, an overwhelming amount of evidence still points to the process of finding meaning (including reevaluation of life priorities and the importance of one’s close relationships) as being strongly associated with adaptation. For instance, Thompson and Pitts (20) found that greater perceptions of meaningfulness of life were predictive of both optimism and low endorsement of irrational beliefs (perfectionistic, cynical, or catastrophic assumptions about the world) for cancer patients. Strong feelings of purpose and meaning in life are also associated with greater life satisfaction, stronger reasons for living, more social support, and less anger among recently bereaved individuals who have lost a close relative or friend (21, 22).

We contend that a psychology of loss can serve as a lens to better understand positive psychology by studying the accounts of those who have experienced major loss (2, 23). At the same time, we recognize that many who have experienced a major loss will find it difficult (or even impossible) to comprehend how they can even begin to turn their loss into a source of strength. Parents who have lost children frequently report such feelings (24). We also recognize that still others rely on rationalization and self-blame. In dealing with major loss, Kushner (25) discusses how, as a
young rabbi, he wanted to console the parents of a nineteen-year-old daughter who died from an aneurysm; the first words that these parents told the rabbi were: “You know, Rabbi, we didn’t fast last Yom Kippur” (p. 8).

While the temptation to blame oneself or others and to focus on the loss is always possible, many courageous individuals have chosen to view their loss as an opportunity to foster and develop human strength in themselves and others. Just before the former *Saturday Night Live* comedienne Gilda Radner died of ovarian cancer, she published a book about her experience of coping with cancer—in large part to showcase that it is important to share humor and to enjoy life no matter what difficult circumstances we face. Radner (26) wrote: “I decided, Well, if I’m gonna have it, I’ve gotta find out what could be funny about it. I’m a comedienne. Cancer, I decided, needed a comedienne to come in there and lighten it up.” A lasting legacy of Radner has been the development of Gilda’s Club, which is a network of support groups designed for cancer patients and their families and friends to join with others to build social and emotional support as a supplement to medical care.

One does not need to be a professional actor or comic in order to exhibit strength when faced with life crises. The terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, where 259 passengers and 11 people on the ground were killed, also provides examples of how individuals were able to transform profound grief into a source of renewed strength. Stigers (27), a professional writer who lost a close friend in the bombing, discusses and notes that “[My] writings are a lasting tribute to Miriam’s [his deceased friend] indelible presence, the subtle movements of the earth her life and death created, and the ripples that continue to bounce back and forth between her life and the lives she touched. . . . I’m proud to carry on the enduring legacy of Miriam’s unique way of seeing, living, and loving” (p. 133). Another lasting tribute to the victims of the Pan Am 103 bombing—especially to the 35 Syracuse University students who perished in the bombing—is the moving display “Dark Elegy.” Dark Elegy is a series of sculptures created by mothers who lost their children as a result of the bombing; these sculptures are meant to capture the unspeakable sense and amount of grief that these mothers experienced once they first learned of the death of their child.

These examples of individuals who report that their greatest contributions were born out of pain and loss offer an abundance of hope to others who will walk in their paths. In sum, this body of evidence and personal
reports represent what may be an invaluable part of the case for a positive psychology.

RESILIENCY

Seligman (1) also explicitly discusses the importance of studying and building resilience and health in young people as a means to further positive psychology. Researchers have provided a myriad of definitions for the term resiliency. Consider the following: “resourceful adaptation to changing circumstances and environmental contingencies” (28, p. 48); “the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behavior that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event” (29, p. 459); “the positive pole of individual differences in people’s response to stress and adversity” (30, p. 316). To date, resiliency has largely been conceptualized in terms of its implications for “at risk” children and adolescents (31–33). While there is still some controversy about the operationalization of resiliency, it clearly has great relevance and importance for a psychology of loss.

Unfortunately, many of the studies that have considered resiliency in certain populations, such as Vietnam War veterans or adult female survivors of childhood sexual abuse, have operationalized it as the presence or absence of certain psychiatric disorders (34–37). Yet, there have also been other studies that have focused on resiliency by examining how individuals can thrive and lead exceedingly productive lives in spite of their loss. For instance, Whiteman (38) notes that resilient Holocaust survivors have high feelings of self-worth, try to find meaning from their experience, assimilate the knowledge that they have survived into their daily lives, and value current and pre-Holocaust era relationships. Nelson et al. (39) discuss how a “fighting spirit” may be indicative of resiliency in cancer patients: They found that cancer patients who believe that they can fight back, conquer, and recover from cancer reported lower levels of negative affect and increased optimism.

The resiliency literature further reveals the paradoxical relationship between positive psychology and a psychology of loss. On the one hand, it is almost impossible to ignore the issue of whether individuals may develop certain forms of psychopathology as a consequence of their loss. Yet the issue of how individuals can “bounce back” from their loss to lead rewarding and productive lives has relevance not only for the study of resiliency, but also for positive psychology and a psychology of loss. In many respects, the net gain from the absence of psychopathology and the
presence of resiliency forms the core of our argument about the human potential to construct acts of great value and meaning from events which represented a great loss to the individual.

A BRAVE NEW WORLD?

The invocation of Aldous Huxley’s (40) classic dystopian novel _Brave New World_ is not unintentional. In his classic work, he describes a society where everyone consumes a drug called _soma_ that is supposed to ward off depression and invoke a state of happiness and general content in all of its citizens. A “happy” populace is so important that it is also reflected in the state’s motto: “Community, Identity, Stability.” The basic aspect of this fictional society that is so troubling and unnerving is that the citizens have been constructed to function as the state wants them to—in other words, these citizens lack a conscience: They are not allowed to experience the wide range of emotional states to which we, as humans, are accustomed.

If a so-called positive psychology is to develop, then it must recognize its fundamental limitation: We will never have a society where individuals are immune from loss and trauma or the psychological and emotional consequences of these events. These events are inherent in the human condition and human mortality. Psychology—including the areas of positive psychology and the psychology of loss—must always be concerned with recognizing and addressing human problems and frailty. Sadly, many loss events that in a “perfect” society should never happen, such as war and genocide, rape and incest, stigmatization and discrimination, will likely be a permanent reality in our lives. Thus, the interface of positive psychology and a psychology of loss can be a literal brave new world of understanding; otherwise, it risks becoming synonymous with the unattainable themes in the dystopian _Brave New World_.

While we suggest that loss experiences can build human strength, and in doing so lend more credence to the goals of positive psychology, we will always be faced with those who desperately struggle with tragedy. Consider the case of Carla June Hochhalter, whose daughter was partially paralyzed as a consequence of the Columbine High School shooting massacre. Almost six months to the day after these shootings, Carla June Hochhalter walked into a local pawn shop where she asked to see a handgun and then proceeded to load it and killed herself with a shot to the head.

This tragic death reveals much more than the possibility that those who experience loss will _not_ experience any sort of psychological growth—
indeed, it shows that loss can be too devastating a burden for many individuals. However, this case also suggests that the discipline of psychology—including positive psychology—must embrace a careful scrutiny of people's powerful sense of loss and how to help them adapt to the circumstances of even the most devastating loss. We cannot have a positive psychology if we do not have an appreciation for a psychology that realizes and accepts that many human motivations, cognitions, and behavioral consequences often are rooted in suffering, despair, and pain: And, as psychologists, we are in a unique—and obligatory—position to examine and treat suffering, despair, and pain.

Most major psychological research areas consider the consequences of the presence and absence of a certain stimuli or condition: Indeed, this fundamental notion forms the bedrock of what experimental science is all about. For instance, when we study happiness, we must necessarily have an understanding of which factors contribute to our happiness and which do not (41, 42). If we realize that increased wealth does not increase happiness (41), this, of course, gives us a better understanding of what happiness may be. A psychology of loss allows for an appreciation of the balance between understanding what a positive psychology is or should be and what it is not.

In short, there is the Huxleyan danger that a positive psychology, in its quest to focus on the more uplifting qualities of the human experience, will ignore those events that cause us to be “broken” and in need of a “mental cure.” However, the interface of positive psychology and a psychology of loss can lead to a “brave new world” of discovery and understanding for both of these areas.

CODA

As Seligman (1) contends, psychology has emphasized the importance of treating and curing mental illness at the expense of examining those characteristics and qualities that spotlight human skills signifying strength and resilience. We maintain that a psychology of loss also furthers this mission of positive psychology. Many prominent writers and philosophers have long argued that suffering and loss can make for a stronger person. Hemingway asserted that we are strongest at the broken places. Marcel Proust argued that we are healed of a suffering only when we experience it in full. We argue that it is now time for the field of psychology to consider the uniqueness and overlap between positive psychology and a psychology of loss as a means to examining how we can become stronger.
REFERENCES


321