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Kennon M. Sheldon: A Pioneer in Social Indicators

Kennon M. Sheldon

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After graduating from Duke University in 1981 with a degree in psychology, I moved to Seattle, where I continued to be interested in creativity, genius, and intelligence (and where I also started a rock band). I read everything I could on various religious, meditative, and transpersonal theories and practices for transforming consciousness and achieving personal fulfillment. I wanted to know exactly what the state of “enlightenment” (i.e., satori, nirvana, moksha) felt like. Along the way I spent a year in a Master’s program in “existential-phenomenological psychotherapy,” at Seattle University. This part of my life culminated in my taking Werner Erhard’s “est” training, which provided a rather remarkable set of tools and concepts for enacting “Programming and meta-programming within the human bio-computer,” to borrow one of John Lilly’s book titles. But I dropped out of that program and soon I was nowhere, professionally – working in group homes for little pay.

Finally I came to two conclusions: 1) the state of enlightenment I was interested in probably didn’t exist, and 2) the 60s-style rock music I was writing and recording probably wasn’t going to make it. So I shifted gears, to a research-oriented Ph.D. program in Social/Personality Psychology at the University of California. At UC Davis

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I took classes with Charles Tart, the pioneer editor of *Altered States of Consciousness*, with Tom Natsoulas, a pioneer in the psycho-philosophy of consciousness, and with Dean Simonton, a pioneer in the field of psycho-historiometry, which uses archival data to understand genius-level creativity. The arrival of Robert Emmons in Davis before my 4th year gave me a sudden new focus: Personal strivings and action systems! Bob, and other goal researchers such as Brian Little, Hazel Markus, and Eric Klinger, saw idiographic (self-listed) goals as an under-studied aspect of personality that could provide exciting new information on how people get from point A to point B (i.e., from shy kindergarteners to famous dramatic actors; from a single insight to a worldwide corporation). At a time when the Big Five traits dominated personality psychology and most trait theorists were only trying to demonstrate that traits are stable, personal strivings were liberating because you could use them to predict longitudinal change in personality. Goals naturally occupy peoples' minds, directing their behavior more or less coherently and effectively.

Because Bob Emmons had been a student of Ed Diener's, he was interested in the relationship between personal strivings and subjective well-being. It was logical that I attacked this question as well. Although Bob moved on to other concerns, this question remains a major focus of my research activities. What goals, pursued in what way, are best suited for helping people to become happier people – that is, for enabling them to succeed in the prominent birth-right that is granted to all Americans, according to Jefferson's Declaration of Independence? In grappling with this question, I was forced to deal with an even more vexing question: whether happiness can actually go up and stay up, or whether we are always doomed to fall back to where we started. My research with Sonja Lyubomirsky has shown that new happiness can be sustained, but it is not easy. It requires making life changes that provide a new and steady inflow of interesting, novel experiences, thus continually overcoming hedonic adaptation to maintain oneself in the upper end of one's set range of potential happiness. On that note, I believe that there is a happiness set-point, but it is not destiny, only a most-likely default point. See Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) for a full exposition of our "Hedonic Adaptation Prevention" (HAP) model.

My post-doc and subsequent time at the University of Rochester as Visiting Assistant Professor (1992 to 1996) was perhaps the most formative of my career. There I learned Deci and Ryan's Self-determination theory, which addresses most of the humanistic issues and questions I was initially interested in. Here was a way to take "spacy" questions and issues, such as the question of free will, the nature of the self, and the role of consciousness, and make them respectable, for example, by using experimental manipulations and multi-level path analysis. I instantly resonated with the theory and have continued to try and make theoretical contributions, sometimes by pushing it in directions it didn't want to go! One of my contributions to the theory concerns the construct of "self-concordance," which indexes the alignment of peoples' self-reported personal goals with their implicit growth trends and motive dispositions.

During my early time at the University of Missouri as Assistant Professor (late 1990's), I further developed this line of thinking, and my 2014 *Personality and Social Psychology Review* article ("Becoming oneself: The important role of self-concordant goal selection") summarizes my current thinking on this critical question, of how people select goals and may often select the "wrong" goals for themselves. During this time at Missouri I was also fortunate to be present at the birth of Positive

Psychology in January 2000 (the founding conference in Akumal, Mexico), and I received a Templeton prize in 2002 for my contributions to the field. Although I still have some doubts and reservations about Positive Psychology (does it introduce values into what should be a value-free inquiry? Is it just a marketing tool?), I continue to contribute to the field to this day. For example, in my 2011 book with Kashdan and Steger and my 2014 book with Lucas.

As of the time I wrote this article, I have a Harzing's H of 64 and have been cited more than 20,000 times. In 2010, I was named one of 20 most cited social psychologists (controlling for career stage) (Nosek et al. 2010). In February 2015, I will be receiving the Society for Personality and Social Psychology Carol and Ed Diener Award in Personality Psychology. This award recognises a mid-career scholar whose work has added substantially to the body of knowledge to the personality field and / or brings together personality psychology and social psychology.

So there it is - an overview of my intellectual odyssey, an odyssey which continues to twist and turn. In fact, this twisting and turning is how I keep MYSELF in the upper end of my own happiness set-point range. Unfortunately, that range is located rather low in the overall population distribution, but for me it is better to be mildly contented than bored and frustrated! Being a researcher of goals, motivation, and well-being has been a very self-concordant activity for me, which has brought me the next best thing to spiritual enlightenment: Something interesting and meaningful to do, something that I am good at.

Selected Publications

- Nosek, B. A., Graham, J., Lindner, N. M., Kesebir, S., Hawkins, C. B., Hahn, C., & Tenney, E. R. (2010). Cumulative and career-stage citation impact of social-personality psychology programs and their members. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36(10), 1283–1300.
- Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). The challenge of staying happier: testing the hedonic adaptation prevention model. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(5), 670–680.
- Sheldon, K. M., Kashdan, T. B., & Steger, M. F. (Eds.). (2011). *Designing positive psychology: Taking stock and moving forward*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sheldon, K. M., & Lucas, R. L. (Eds.). (2014). *Stability of Happiness: Theories and evidence on whether happiness can change*. The Netherlands: Elsevier.