

REVIEWS MORE

THE ‘HAPPINESS ISSUE’: A BRIEF ELABORATION ON A COMMON OBSTACLE TO SOCIAL ROLE VALORIZATION. By JOE OSBURN. *The SRV Journal*, 4(2), 33-41. REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ www.srvip.org

Reviewed by Ray Lemay

JOE OSBURN, A WELL-KNOWN very senior SRV and PASSING trainer, in his 2009 article “The Happiness Issue,” takes up some of the oft-repeated objections to SRV implementation: that a particular SRV measure might possibly make a person unhappy; or that SRV as a whole won’t make an individual happy. Not a few have observed that some people living in what would be generally viewed as miserable circumstances or even in a state of great devaluation seem nonetheless content and even possibly happy. For some it might be natural disposition, low expectancies tied to previous disappointments, or possibly a saintly ascetic renunciation.

Osburn shows that SRV is not inimical to happiness, and that many SRV-influenced measures may contribute to an individual’s happiness. Valued roles and the good things in life (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996) are not the same as happiness, though we could easily imagine a strong correlation between the two. However, though friends and family (‘good things’ numbers four and one) are often a source of well-being and happiness, there are moments and events with such persons that may lead to suffering and unhappiness. Unfortunately, much research (Lemay, 2009) suggests that people who are devalued often have very few social relationships that might bring about such happiness or unhappiness.

AS OSBURN POINTS OUT, the invocation of the “happiness” argument is often a cop out: SRV is demanding and people will sometimes equate

effort with unhappiness. Some SRV initiatives do come with risk and here again some people suggest that this will put happiness at risk. The happiness argument may be used to detoxify an otherwise noxious practice or life-circumstance and thus be an argument for the status quo: “Our client is happy as he is, why change anything?” In such circumstances the happiness argument is certainly illustrative of the low expectations of employees or family members who are content to leave things as they are. In such circumstances, “who is happy?” and “who benefits?” could be viewed as important questions.

Osburn could have pointed out that happiness is an issue of contention in many therapeutic enterprises: Freud is reputed to have written something to the effect that the goal of therapy was to free an individual from his neurotic misery so that he could face the misery of the world (Onfray, 2009); so much for happiness. Richard Friedman, a psychiatrist, wrote in the *New York Times* on 17 January 2011 that: “I am pretty good at treating clinical misery with drugs and therapy, but that bringing about happiness is a stretch. Perhaps happiness is a bit like self-esteem: You have to work for both. So far as I know, you can’t get an infusion of either one from a therapist.”

According to Friedman, therapy is supposed to help provide people with a narrative that explains why things are as they are. But, having a narrative that makes sense of the past does not make it accurate or even an effective narrative. For instance, understanding why you are doing poorly today is not as likely to be as effective as having a narrative that tells you where you are going tomorrow, how things (including yourself) might or should change.

MIHÁLY CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI (1996), one of the positive psychology gurus, has made it his career to study happiness, or something close to it, that

he has named “flow”—when we are involved in a pleasurable activity and our consciousness of time momentarily stops. The exalted state of flow is focused motivation when we are immersed in an enjoyable activity of learning, doing or striving. In such a view, happiness is doing, or getting there. Once there it is over. One could thus imagine that the effort required by an SRV measure might just provide the moments of flow that might also be counted as one of the good things in life. Indeed, the eighth “good thing in life” listed by Wolfensberger et al (1996) could be viewed as a necessary precursor that might enable experiences of flow: “Opportunities and expectancies that enable one to discover and develop one’s abilities, skills, gifts, and talents. In most societies today, this would also include schooling. Probably no one ever develops all their abilities to the fullest, and we are not talking about getting to ‘actualize’ oneself in every way and in every aspect of life. But most people do want to be able to contribute at least something, to be good at one or more things” (13).

It also seems that working (‘good thing’ number six) is a potential source of happiness. “Work, and especially work that can be invested with meaning other than, and usually in addition to, merely a way to gain money or comparable material gain. For many people, this is likely to be work that is of the nature of primary or secondary production, or that is life-enhancing to others or the environment, that hopefully has readily visible results, and that is recognized as valuable by others” (13). Csíkszentmihályi writes that “what often passes unnoticed is that work is much more like a game than most other things we do during the day. It usually has clear goals and rules of performance. It provides feedback either in the form of knowing that one has finished a job well done, in terms of measurable sales, or though an evaluation by one’s supervisor. A job usually encourages concentration and prevents distractions; it also allows a variable amount of control and—at least ideally—its difficulties match the worker’s skills” (59). Martin Seligman, the former President of the American

Psychological Association and founder of the Positive Psychology movement, in his book *Authentic Happiness* (2002) also suggests that work is essential for happiness. According to Seligman, a job will engender satisfaction as long as it puts to use what he has termed our “signature strengths.” Indeed, when a job allows us to marshal our signature strengths, it becomes less a career and more a calling. “A calling is the most satisfying form of work because, as a gratification, it is done for its own sake rather than for the material benefits it brings” (166).

Seligman goes on to tell us that “A calling (or vocation) is a passionate commitment to work for its own sake ... any job can become a calling, and any calling can become a job” (168). Thus even people who hold what we might consider lowly employment such as an orderly in a hospital or cleaning lady in a hotel, can view their work as a calling, allowing them to deploy their signature strengths and provide them with great satisfaction. Seligman describes such circumstances for hair cutters, nurses, kitchen workers and so on. All of the above is consistent with good thing in life number 16, “Being able to contribute, and have one’s contributions recognized as valuable” (14).

Seligman also writes of the concept of flow and tells us that work is an activity that is well-suited for engendering flow. “Flow cannot be sustained through an entire eight-hour workday; rather, under the best of circumstances, flow visits you for a few minutes on several occasions. Flow occurs when the challenges you face perfectly mesh with your abilities to meet them. When you recognize that these abilities include not merely your talents but your strengths and virtues, the implications for what work to choose or how to recraft it become clear” (173).

“Work can be prime time for flow because, unlike leisure, it builds many of the conditions of flow into itself. There are usually clear goals and rules of performance. There is frequent feedback about how well or poorly we are doing. Work

usually encourages concentration and minimizes distractions, and in many cases it matches the difficulties to your talents and even your strengths. As a result, people often feel more engaged at work than they do at home” (175). Thus leisure, idleness or waiting for your professional worker to enact your individual service plan do not seem to be conducive to happiness, which is maybe why these could be listed under the heading “life wasting,” one of the common “wounding” experiences that are often the consequence of devaluation. It is quite true that some might choose idleness over work, but research suggests that this is not likely to lead to happiness. Csíkszentmihályi reports that the evidence suggests that free time is more difficult to enjoy than work. “Free time with nothing specific to engage one’s attention provides the opposite of flow: psychic entropy, where one feels listless and apathetic” (66). Many devalued people have a lot of time on their hands.

For Seligman and Csíkszentmihályi, happiness is hard work and it is the product of being actively engaged in day to day life, which is quite foreign to the experiences of many devalued people. Also, and not surprisingly, a number of people I know have noted that being involved as a team member of a PASSING team doing a PASSING assessment (an otherwise grueling experience) was a happy experience, something akin to flow.

Osburn does suggest that there are things we can do to increase the likelihood of happiness, and that there are service measures, directly assessed through PASSING, that may be conducive to happiness: “One such sub-score is ‘Felicity,’ comprised of ratings which measure conditions that taken together would likely contribute to a recipient’s overall sense of ‘well-being’ or, yes, feelings of ‘happiness’ ” (39). Indeed, such a statement falls well within mainstream psychological research and theorizing. For instance, George Vaillant, the Harvard Psychiatrist who has led a number of longitudinal studies on outcomes, famously found that only one childhood experience predicted adult mental health or well being. He

found that parents who have their kids do chores and keep them active provide experiences that are highly correlated with adult mental health later on. Intelligence, family, socio-economic status, composition and background were not critical mediating factors. Vaillant broadly conceptualized childhood work to include a regular part-time job, regular household chores, participation in extracurricular clubs and sports, and regular school participation in activities. Thus, being active and engaged as a child and youth seems to have a long-term impact on mental health and thus by extension employment and well being as an adult.

For some, maybe a few, all of the above might be surprising, but SRV’s position on happiness is no different than one might find in a number of other theoretical approaches, and is certainly not inconsistent with most research. Nobody’s against happiness, but as Osburn concludes, “making ‘happiness’ the decisive factor in one’s service philosophy is not the same as the idea of supporting a felicitous set of service conditions which potentially might facilitate such a state” (39).

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SOCIAL INCLUSION AT WORK. By JANIS CHADSEY. Annapolis, MD: AAIDD, 49 pages, 2008.

INCLUSIVE LIVABLE COMMUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES. Washington, DC: NATIONAL COUNCIL ON DISABILITY, 84 pages, 2008.

BODY & SOUL: DIANA & KATHY. By ALICE ELLIOTT (Director). 40 minutes, 2006.

HALLMARKS AND FEATURES OF HIGH-QUALITY COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES. BY KENDRICK, BEZANSON, PETTY & JONES, Houston, TX: ILRU COMMUNITY LIVING PARTNERSHIP, 13 pages, 2006.

ACHIEVING COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP THROUGH COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDER SERVICES: ARE WE THERE YET? *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 45(3), 149–160 (2007).

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