Positive psychology is value-laden—It's time to embrace it

Michael M. Prinzing

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Abstract

Evaluative claims and assumptions are ubiquitous in positive psychology. Some will deny this. But such disavowals are belied by the literature. Some will consider the presence of evaluative claims a problem and hope to root them out. But this is a mistake. If positive psychology is to live up to its *raison d'être*—to be the scientific study of the psychological components of human flourishing or well-being—it *must* make evaluative claims. Well-being consists in those things that are good for us, that make life go well. Thus, one cannot investigate this topic without making claims about what is good for people and what they have reason to do. It's time, therefore, to embrace the fact that positive psychology is value-laden. Doing so would benefit the field by allowing for more rigorous theorizing, and—perhaps counterintuitively—increasing the field's objectivity.

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Positive psychology is value-laden—It's time to embrace it

Positive psychology is rife with evaluative claims and presuppositions. This is precisely how it should be. Evaluative claims include claims about what is good or bad, right or wrong, what we should or have reason to do, and so on. The aim of the paper is to call upon researchers to be more open and explicit with such claims, and to reassure them that doing so will not impugn their scientific credentials. If positive psychology is going to study the topic it aims to—the psychological components of human flourishing or well-being—then it cannot merely describe, it must also evaluate. To abstain from evaluation would mean failing to address that topic at all. Indeed, the real problem with the value claims in the field today is that they are so often made surreptitiously. In other words, the presence of value judgments is not a problem; but covering them up, or pretending they are something else, is. Pretending to be value-free is dishonest and shields these evaluative claims and assumptions from critical scrutiny. Far from undermining the field's scientific credentials, making these claims and assumptions explicit would actually make the field more credible, and advance its aim of understanding human flourishing.

In what follows I demonstrate that evaluative claims and assumptions are, and have always been, ubiquitous in the field. I then consider some unsuccessful strategies for rooting them out, before arguing that they are ineliminable. Finally, I address the worry that embracing the evaluative character of positive psychology's subject matter would compromise the field's credentials as a science. I argue that embracing value-ladenness would actually make the field *more* objective.

Values in positive psychology

The claim that values pervade scientific practice is widely accepted amongst philosophers of science (Alexandrova, 2017, Chapter 4; Reiss & Sprenger, 2014; Turner, 2013). Philosophers debate which *kinds* of values are allowable, and what *roles* they should play. But there is no dispute over the fact that values are involved. A common view in the philosophy of science is that evaluative claims and assumptions—while they are acceptable in the *process* of scientific research—should not be allowed into its *product*. That is, values can play important roles in determining what gets researched (e.g., we should dedicate research funds towards ethical objectives like curing diseases) and how (e.g., there should be constraints on how research subjects are treated). Moreover, so-called 'cognitive' or 'epistemic' values, like simplicity and parsimony, can help determine which theories we accept. But, according to this traditional view, the *results* of scientific research should not include, explicitly or implicitly, evaluative claims. Science is supposed to describe how things are—not tell us what is good or bad, or what to do. I reject this traditional ideal, as shall become clear. But I'll start by showing how positive psychology does not live up to it.[1]

Some researchers are well aware of this. For instance, Self-Determination Theory 'is unabashedly prescriptive and proscriptive' (Niemiec & Ryan, 2013, p. 218). And Alan Waterman notes that the questions investigated by positive psychologists are, '[a]t their core… questions about how a person ought to live' (2013, p. 3). Hence, there may be some readers for whom this paper's thesis goes without saying. Yet, in general, the field has been resistant to this idea. Martin Seligman, credited with founding the field, and Ed Diener, arguably the most impactful researcher in it, 'believe that social science should be descriptive and not prescriptive' (2004, p. 4). Seligman has repeatedly reaffirmed this stance: 'My view of positive psychology is that it

describes rather than prescribes… [positive psychologists are] just describing what lots of people do' (2011, p. 26). Similarly, in a book about virtues—after characterizing virtues as 'morally valued' traits that enable people to live 'the good life'—Christopher Peterson and Seligman wrote that, 'although our classification is decidedly about such values, it is descriptive of what is ubiquitous, rather than prescriptive' (2004, p. 51).

Explicitly evaluative claims

These claims are strikingly out of place in the positive psychology literature. The mission and *raison d'être* of the field, from its very inception, has been to study 'the best things in life' and 'what makes life most worth living' (Seligman, 1999, p. 560). Positive psychologists seek 'to understand and build the factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish' and to 'articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound… and attractive' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Motivated by the observation that psychology was 'ill equipped to help individuals to live healthier and more meaningful lives… [or to promote] the best in people', positive psychology was founded 'to help people live and flourish, rather than merely to exist' (Keyes & Haidt, 2003). It is 'the scientific study of strengths, well-being, and optimal functioning' (Duckworth et al., 2005, p. 631), and seeks 'an evidence-based psychological understanding of the Good Life' (Kashdan et al., 2008, p. 226). Indeed, positive psychologists claim to have identified 'many contributors to the best kind of life' (Fowers, 2008, p. 629), and even that 'well-being is not only valuable because it feels good, but also is valuable because it has beneficial consequences' (Diener & Seligman, 2004, p. 1). To say that someone is living well, has a good or meaningful life, is flourishing, or is realizing the best parts of themself, is plainly to make an evaluation.

Moreover, positive psychology is often claimed to be a recent addition to old philosophical traditions.

> The question of what is it that makes a life a good one is a central concern for humanity. Varied answers to this question are provided by philosophy, religion, political and cultural belief systems, and, of course, the science of psychology… (Kashdan et al., 2008, p. 228)

The editors of a recent survey volume write that:

> The topic of this book, *how to live well*, is one of the oldest and most universal questions that has preoccupied human beings since the dawn of history. Philosophers, writers and artists and, more recently, empirical social scientists struggle to understand how life should be lived… (Forgas & Baumeister, 2018, p. 1)

Some researchers see themselves as eudaimonists like Aristotle (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Waterman, 2008), or hedonists like Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill (Diener et al., 1998; Kahneman, 2003). The idea is that, with contemporary empirical tools, positive psychology can help answer the questions that interested these philosophers (Kesebir & Diener, 2008). But Aristotle, Bentham, and Mill were doing *normative ethics*—they were interested in what really matters in human life, and what goals we ought to pursue. Eudaimonism and hedonism are theories of value. If positive psychology is a part of such philosophical traditions, then it must be making evaluative claims.

These kinds of claims are simply too ubiquitous to be dismissed as occasional overreaching. It's implausible that all of these researchers have simply gotten carried away and forgotten the boundaries of their field. Rather, it seems clear that positive psychology is in the

business of making claims about what's good in human life, and how we ought to live. Besides, what's the *point* of this research otherwise?

Implicit evaluative commitments

In addition to explicitly evaluative claims, evaluative judgments frequently serve as unspoken assumptions, hidden in the research practices. As Laura King and colleagues write, the field's 'definition of "the good life" remains largely implicit in the outcomes we choose to study and promote' (2004, pp. 35–36). Positive psychology is a field of many constructs, and its journals are filled with debates over which should be used. These debates frequently turn on tacit assumptions about which constructs better capture the true nature of well-being (Gruber et al., 2011; Kashdan et al., 2008; Raibley, 2012, 2012; Ryff, 1989; Tiberius & Plakias, 2010; Waterman, 2008).

Perhaps the most well-known debate concerns the use of hedonic and eudaimonic constructs. As Todd Kashdan and colleagues write, '[e]udaimonic theorists generally maintain that hedonic theories are inadequate to describe the Good Life' (2008, p. 221; see, e.g., Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Tiberius & Hall, 2010; Waterman, 2008). Meanwhile, hedonic theorists maintain that eudaimonic constructs don't maintain a strong enough connection between a person's well-being and their own values (Diener et al., 1998; Kashdan et al., 2008). This debate, it should be observed, is a direct parallel of debates in the philosophical literature on well-being. 'Objectivist' theories claim that people can fail to want what is good for them, and 'subjectivist' theories claim that the constituents of a person's good must be capable of 'resonating' with them (Heathwood, 2014; Rosati, 1996; Sarch, 2011). The difference is that, in the philosophical literature, no one denies that this is a debate about value.

The assumed implications of positive psychology research, and the way in which they are promoted to the public, are quite revealing. A great many books have been published for popular audiences with the aim of helping people to live better (Fredrickson, 2009; Gilbert, 2009; Haidt, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Seligman himself opens his popular audience book with the claim that '[t]his book will help you flourish', and he insists that his 'writings are believable because of the underlying science' (2011, p. 1). It's unclear how he squares this with his insistence that positive psychology does not evaluate or prescribe.

Positive psychology research is also considered to have implications for public policy. Diener and Seligman (2004) themselves argue that policy makers should be using the well-being measures developed by positive psychologists rather than more traditional economic measures of social welfare. The argument, in essence, is this: *At one time, economic measures were a good assessment of how well people were doing. But, in countries with well-developed economies, where basic needs are now generally satisfied (with some egregious exceptions), these measures don't accurately assess well-being. They should therefore be replaced by measures that directly assess the topic of interest.* This argument is unquestionably value-laden. Diener and Seligman are saying that what matters—and what policy makers should be promoting—is individual well-being, and the tools of positive psychology should therefore be used because they can measure it directly. Political ambitions like these reveal quite clearly that positive psychology is taken to bear on what people and even governments ought to do.

Possible responses

I anticipate two candidate responses to the suggestion that evaluative claims are ubiquitous in positive psychology. One is that, despite appearances, positive psychologists are

not actually making evaluative claims. The other is that, even if they do make such claims, they need not do so.

A science of *people's values*, not a science of value

Positive psychology, one might argue, does not make evaluative claims. Rather, it reports on what ordinary people *think* is valuable. That is, positive psychologists shouldn't tell people what is good; they should let those people tell them. These reported views can then serve as our guide in helping those people achieve what they independently care about. Ed Diener and colleagues hold this view: 'With the increasing democratization and equality in the world, it is no longer defensible to rely only on kings and mandarins to prescribe the desirable life… [Our approach] allows people to define well-being for themselves… [W]e allow people to decide whether their lives are satisfying based on their individual values, goals, and life circumstances' (1998, p. 35). The idea is that 'experts' should not decide what is good for people. We should use constructs that are 'content free' (Sheldon, 2013), and give 'each individual the right to decide whether his or her life is worthwhile' (Diener, 2000, p. 34). By letting participants decide for themselves whether their lives are going well, researchers can profess not to have endorsed any value claims themselves.

However, defining 'well-being' as 'subjective well-being' (high positive affect and life or domain satisfaction, and low negative affect)—as Diener et al. were advocating—is not a value-free, default position (Tiberius, 2013a). First, including affective constructs assumes that certain hedonic and/or emotional states are good for people. But this is something those very individuals might deny. Not everyone wants pleasant experiences or thinks they would be good for them. Think of a workaholic who cares primarily about career advancement and would gladly sacrifice any pleasant experience for a promotion. Or a masochist who actually *wants* painful experiences.

Think of the millions of people who visit the former extermination camp at Auschwitz each year. The place, it goes without saying, produces quite a bit of negative affect, and little positive affect. Yet people go there because they think experiences like this are an important part of the human experience, components of a rich, meaningful life. To build affective constructs into one's approach thus presupposes contestable claims about what is good for people.

One could try to avoid this issue by claiming that we should rely exclusively on life or domain satisfaction measures. Or, better yet, measures that go for a direct ask: 'How well is your life going, according to your own standards?' But now we have a different problem. Some people think that the only things that are good/bad for them are pleasant/unpleasant experiences. And we know that affective recall is not very reliable (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). We also know about the peak-end rule, according to which what we remember most clearly, and what shapes our *post facto* evaluations of experiences, are moments of peak intensity and endings (Fredrickson & Kahneman, 1993; Kahneman et al., 1993; Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996). This means that constructs like life satisfaction will be very poor indexes of what such people care about. Someone who has had lots of pleasant experiences for a long time, but who has very recently had less pleasant experiences, is going to report that his/her life is not going particularly well. But this would be, by this person's own standards, a mistake. So, if we relied on *post facto*, cognitive assessments, we still would not be respecting each individual's conception of well-being.

Another problem with this approach is that relies on participant's snap judgments, rather than their considered views (Haybron, 2011, 2013; Tiberius & Plakias, 2010). Study participants complete surveys like the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener & Emmons, 1985) in a matter of seconds, which is obviously not long enough for a serious evaluation of one's life. People's reported evaluative beliefs, including their conceptions of well-being, change dramatically even

with just little time spent in careful reflection. (Ask someone who has taught introductory courses in ethics.) In other words, people are not typically in touch with their own deepest cares and concerns. Thus, taking their spontaneous, unconsidered judgments as authoritative is not as respectful as one might think. It means listening to their surface-level feelings, rather than their deeper cares and values.

There is simply no way around this problem. The nature of well-being is sufficiently contested that there is no way of measuring something and calling it 'well-being' without contradicting the views of some of those measured. In any case, to argue that each individual *ought* to be allowed the freedom and autonomy to decide what his or her well-being consists in is already to endorse an evaluative claim. The view Diener et al. suggest in the quote above is a popular one in Western liberal democracies, where it's common to think that society should be arranged so that each person is able to pursue his/her own conception of the good life. (In political philosophy, this view is known as "political liberalism". See Rawls, 1996). But let's be very clear about what this is: it's a claim about what a just society looks like, and what we ought to do.

A science of happiness

One might think that, though value judgments are currently ubiquitous in the field, this is an avoidable mistake. They could be removed by restricting the scope of investigation. Perhaps, if positive psychology were merely the science of *happiness*—and made no claims about flourishing, well-being, the good life, etc.—then it could be value-free. Happiness, one might think, is nothing more than a psychological state. Of course, most people do typically value happiness. But, that's up to them, and we can study happiness without assuming anything about its value.

A problem for this strategy is that research on the concept of happiness—as used by ordinary people, as well as happiness researchers—is sensitive to evaluative judgments (Phillips et al., 2011, 2014, 2017). If a person is living a morally good and/or meaningful life, people rate them as being happier than if they are living a psychologically equivalent but less virtuous or meaningful life. When people consider whether someone is happy, in other words, they are not just considering whether that person is in a particular kind of mental state; they are also evaluating the person and their life. So, restricting the field's focus to happiness wouldn't eliminate the evaluative character of the subject matter.

The researchers who showed this, however, provide the resources for a response. Phillips et al. write that psychologists could be permitted to adopt a purely descriptive definition of happiness because, 'technical definitions play an important theoretical role… and need not be aligned with the ordinary concepts' (2017, p. 179). Just like the physicist's definition of light is not beholden to ordinary ideas about light, the psychologist's definition of happiness need not be beholden to the folk concept. There is something right about this claim. A physicist can and should use terms in whichever way best suits theoretical purposes. But social scientists are under obligations that physicists are not. Social scientists investigate topics and phenomena that ordinary people are deeply invested in—e.g., well-being, happiness, and love, as opposed to atoms, light, and gravity. Consequently, we cannot define terms without regard for what they mean in ordinary life. When psychologists report their findings on 'happiness', people will take this to concern the topic they have in mind when *they* use the word. Moreover, they are *encouraged* to do so by the way in which the findings are presented. If the technical definitions are not sufficiently similar to the ordinary senses of the terms, then there is sure to be

miscommunication and confusion. (Especially since, as indicated, scientists use of the concept evaluatively just like lay people.)

Even worse, if the technical concept isn't close enough to the folk concept, researchers could not claim to be investigating the phenomenon that interested us in the first place. We might retain the word, but we would have changed the subject. It's a tricky question how much one can change a concept while preserving the topic (Prinzing, 2018). Technical concepts are sure to be more precise than their lay counterparts. But, in order to satisfactorily explicate a lay concept—rather than surreptitiously change the subject—I believe that social scientific concepts need to respect the *interests* and *purposes* behind thought and talk about the topic in the first place. The most important interest people have in happiness is clearly its relevance to well-being (Haybron, 2003). The reason we care about happiness is because we think it's *good*. Any definition of 'happiness' worth using—for empirical research, or for anything else—must respect this idea. Thus, even if positive psychology professed only to be the empirical study of happiness, it would still be that case that 'the central question for this field is, What are the psychological states that are important for well-being?' (Haybron, 2000, p. 217). This puts us right back where we started.

Embracing it

Investigating well-being *necessarily* involves making value judgments. The subject matter makes this a given. The concept of well-being is evaluative, and its functions are practical. The concept plays an important role in individual and collective deliberation. Decision-making and advice employ it. Lifestyles and public policies are shaped with an eye towards it. For positive psychology research to actually help people, it has to address them on their own terms. In order to be relevant to these practical questions—relevant, that is, to individuals' interest in well-being in the first place—the research had better respect the evaluative, action-

guiding character of the subject matter. While empirical methods can shed light on how to achieve certain goals, they cannot tell us which ends are ultimately worth pursuing. For that we need values. Thus, to abstain from evaluation would be to change the subject. If positive psychology were to be value-free, then it would have no relevance to such practical matters.

The upshot is that the field has two options. Either it can embrace the evaluative character of its subject matter, or it can abandon the goal investigating human well-being scientifically. The latter option, as I'm sure readers will agree, is a very bad one. Science is (one of) our best tool(s) for learning about the world. We should not abstain from using it to learn about a topic that we care so deeply about. It would be absurd to think that we should use scientific methods to learn about the mating behaviors of deep sea fish—which no one but a select group of biologists gives a whit about—but that we should *not* use them to learn about human flourishing and how we can promote it.

Embracing the evaluative character of the subject matter, however, would require changes to the ways in which research is conducted and, more importantly, presented. Obviously, any pretense of value-freedom or neutrality would have to be dropped. Evaluative claims and assumptions would need to be made fully explicit. Construct selection, definition, and operationalization reveal our evaluative assumptions. Constructs should therefore be validated both empirically and evaluatively (Alexandrova & Haybron, 2016). That is, in addition to the usual psychometric validation, constructs must be shown to capture phenomena that feature in plausible theories of well-being. Moreover, preferences for different constructs should be acknowledged as reflecting, not merely differences in the interpretation of empirical results or the convenience of using different measures (as in, e.g., Biswas-Diener et al., 2009), but substantive disagreements about what makes life go well. This might be done in the introduction

and/or methods sections of publications, and might look something like: 'We have chosen construct C, as assessed by measure M as our dependent variable. Our research team believes that C is an important constituent of human well-being because…' I have heard of researchers including 'value disclosures' (*à la* financial disclosures) in presentations of their work. This is a step in the right direction. But it's awfully cagey. One doesn't 'disclose' one's empirical or statistical methods. One states them straightforwardly, as essential components of the research. Evaluative assumptions, as I've argued, are no less crucial to the research, and should therefore be presented in the same way.

Making our values explicit will benefit the field in two ways. First, it will allow for more rigorous theorizing about well-being. Second, it will make the presence of values in our research more legitimate by exposing them to public scrutiny and consequent refinement.

Benefit 1: Better theorizing

Given that evaluative claims will inevitably be made, those claims should be thoughtful, well-considered ones. That is, they should be based in a plausible and appealing theory of well-being, a product of critical reflection on what makes a life good for the person living it. Positive psychology has been criticized, even by its own practitioners, for failing 'to develop any fully integrated, coherent theory or model of the good life' (Robbins & Friedman, 2017, p. 17; Dodge et al., 2012; Forgeard et al., 2011; Fowers, 2008; Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2015; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Philosophers have claimed that positive psychologists have proven 'incapable of providing a clear account of their discipline' and, as a result, the field 'appears to be a giant hodgepodge… [with] no agreed upon definition' of what it studies (Bishop, 2015, pp. 1, 4). We are now well-positioned to see why this is so. A clear account of what positive psychology

studies, an ‘integrated, coherent theory’ of well-being, would need to include explicit evaluative claims, and positive psychologists have been uncomfortable with such things.

But it is about time we got comfortable. In order to make progress on its founding aspirations, to realize its *raison d'être*, the field needs to reflect more seriously on what well-being really is. A science of well-being simply must have clearly articulated, well-considered, publicly discussed vision of the good life. This need not, and assuredly will not, mean reaching a field-wide consensus. Being explicit about our values will not ensure that we all agree about what the good life looks like. What it would do is enable a serious, forthright dialogue about the merits of various conceptions of well-being. In other words, it would incorporate philosophical methods alongside empirical ones. For those not aware, critical reflection is what philosophy is all about (Popova, 2012; Priest, 2006). And ‘a critical, self-reflective dialogue about value’ is a good way of describing the practice of philosophical ethics. When it comes to investigating human flourishing, then, a sharp disciplinary boundary cannot be maintained. There is no such thing as aphilosophical thinking about the good life. Empirical methods are suitable for description, and philosophical methods are suitable for evaluation. But this topic is both descriptive and evaluative. Thus, neither set of tools is sufficient on its own. Each shines a light from one direction, casting a long shadow in the other. Shining both lights together is the only way to see the object of shared interest in its entirety.

These days, philosophers making empirical claims or assumptions—which is at least most of them—are expected to be familiar with scientific research on the relevant topics. (This is not to say that all of them live up to this standard.) It’s only fair that empirical researchers making evaluative claims uphold the inverse standard. A great deal of philosophical work has been done on well-being (Crisp, 2017; Fletcher, 2016). Scientists interested in that topic might

make themselves more familiar with it. Some positive psychologists are already onboard with this. One does see, from time to time, a little philosophy in theory-heavy publications (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Typically, however, psychologists are not trained philosophers. They have little practice in rigorous philosophical reasoning and, in any event, aren't paid to do it. The result is that, even those who realize how important philosophy is to positive psychology tend to have somewhat sketchy, incomplete surveys of the philosophical literature, and a limited understanding of the issues and debates. We shouldn't expect psychologists to be good philosophers any more than we expect philosophers to be good psychologists. An intellectual division of labor, which allows for the advantages of specialization, would improve productivity. That is to say, both fields would be better off if they collaborated more closely. Philosophical theories are better for being more empirically-informed; and empirical research is better for being more philosophically-informed. Thankfully, the ranks of empirically-minded philosophers interested in well-being are swelling (e.g., Alexandrova, 2017; Haybron, 2016; Tiberius, 2013).

Benefit 2: Greater objectivity

I believe that positive psychologists have been resistant to the kind of explicitness I call for out of fear that open discussions about values will somehow impugn the field's scientific credentials. If we are making claims about value, then can we remain 'objective' scientists?

Heather Douglas, a philosopher of science, humorously notes that '[o]bjectivity is one of the most frequently invoked yet vaguely defined concepts' (2007, p. 131). If being objective just means making no evaluative claims, then the study of well-being can never be objective. But many sciences are in the same position as positive psychology. Consider medical science. The concepts of health and disease are partially evaluative (Hausman, 2015; Kingma, 2007, 2014;

Wakefield, 1992). What it means to be healthy is, roughly, for one's body to be *functioning well*, or as it *should*. Health is, of course, something we value. And it would seem that we value it precisely because it's a central component or precondition of well-being. Similarly, a disease is not merely a physiological abnormality. Abnormalities that are in no way bad for a person, that don't cause them harm, aren't considered diseases. Something is only considered a pathology when it is negatively evaluated. Yet no one thinks that, because medical science studies health and disease, it is therefore a less 'objective' or legitimate form of science. Clearly, we need a different, more realistic ideal of objectivity. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to articulate such an ideal, here is a proposal for the relationship between objectivity and evaluative claims in science: values threaten objectivity when they are left implicit and are therefore unscrutinized. Imagine, for comparison, if researchers were not expected to be entirely transparent about their measurement methods or data analysis techniques. This would undoubtedly compromise their scientific credentials and the quality of their work. Things are no different when it comes to evaluative judgments.

To illustrate, at one time masturbation and homosexuality were listed as pathologies in medical handbooks and the DSM respectively (Drescher, 2015; Engelhardt, 1974). We now think that was a mistake. These 'conditions' are not pathologies because they are not (or at least not necessarily) bad for people. They were pathologized because the researchers' values shaped their work. But what was *problematic* in these cases was not the fact that evaluative judgments were made (that's inevitable). What was problematic was the fact that those evaluative judgments were never seriously questioned. They were not subjected to sufficient criticism and debate. It was only when they finally were subjected to scrutiny that masturbation and homosexuality lost their 'pathological' status.

Thus, it seems to me that the ideal of scientific objectivity ought to be one of openness and intellectual humility. That is, *all* claims—be they empirical, mathematical, evaluative, etc.—should be made clearly and candidly so that they can be subjected to critical reflection and ongoing, public critique and debate. If the research misses something important, or focuses on something that no one has any reason to care about, then people should be able to speak up and say so. Even the most popular conceptions of well-being are open to challenge. And dissenting voices should be able to question prevailing assumptions. This is only possible, of course, if those assumptions are stated clearly.

If they anticipated such scrutiny, researchers would likely be more reflective and self-critical when they make evaluative judgments in the first place, thus preventing them from complacently maintaining unexamined values. But we needn't rely solely on individuals. As social psychologists are well aware, people are quite good at finding ways to bolster and defend their own views in the face of contrary evidence—especially when their values are involved (Nickerson, 1998). This is why academic institutions are (supposed to be) designed to pit competing views against each other. The rationale is that the truth will emerge victorious when ideas compete on a fair playing field—even if the advocates of those ideas are deeply biased. Being explicit with evaluative judgments would allow them to be treated like empirical findings in this regard. They could be presented publicly, with as much transparency as possible, and then defended, revised, or abandoned in the face of open debate. We should, after all, be open to changing our conceptions of well-being as we learn more. Our values and empirical beliefs are interdependent. Reflecting on what matters to us will change how we think and what we do. And learning more about how the world works will change what we value.

Conclusion

Positive psychology promises to help us gain an empirically informed understanding of the psychological components of human flourishing. This is one of the noblest of ambitions. But we cannot achieve this end without first coming to terms with the fact that doing so will involve making evaluative claims: claims about what is *good* in life, and what we should do. Attempting to avoid talking about value means either endorsing evaluative claims unwittingly and unreflectively, or changing the subject altogether. If we're going to pursue the psychology of human flourishing—and we certainly should—then we need to get comfortable with making explicit, well-considered, publicly scrutinized claims about value. This may take some getting used to. But it's what must be done if we are to fulfill the field's *raison d'être* with candor and integrity.

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Footnotes

[1] While I focus on positive psychology (as it is the field I'm familiar with) a lot of these points will apply equally to other social sciences (Douglas, 2007, 2013; Dupré, 2007). This is because social scientists typically study phenomena picked out by what philosophers call 'thick ethical concepts' (Kirchin, 2013; Williams, 1985). Thick concepts have both descriptive and evaluative content. To apply a thick concept is to judge that something has certain empirical properties as well as certain evaluative properties. For example, bravery isn't merely a willingness to face danger. Those willing to face the danger of walking off a cliff aren't brave; they're stupid. Bravery is being willing to face danger *for a good cause*, or when it's *right* to do so, or some such thing. It turns out that many folk psychological concepts—including emotion concepts like *love*—are thick (Phillips et al., 2011). Or consider aggression (Longino, 2013). Central to this concept are the notions of harm and offence (Ramírez & Andreu, 2006), which are evaluative. A harm just is something that is bad for a person. And we wouldn't think that a friendly hello was aggressive just because an irate person took *unjustified* offence. That someone took offense is only significant to the aggressiveness of the action if the action *merited* that offence. Whether this is so is an evaluative or normative question, not an empirical one. Other thick concepts include health and disease (Hausman, 2015; Kingma, 2014), economic efficiency and unemployment (Hausman & McPherson, 2006), and—of course—well-being.

If there is anything distinctive about positive psychology here, it's the fact that the research products—claims about the nature of human flourishing—are so obviously evaluative. In contrast, it's often less clear whether, for instance, an economist's claims about economic efficiency are value-laden.