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Personal Growth

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Synonyms

Eudaimonia; Flourishing; Fulfillment; Fully functioning; Individuation; Personal development; Self-actualization; Self-determination; Self-development; The good life; Virtues; Wisdom

Definition

The concept of personal growth has never been clearly defined but can roughly be related to the idea of a life span developmental process directed toward the goal of becoming a better person. Theories of personal growth are nonrelativistic in the sense that they see some developmental trajectories in life as better than others. The specification of what these changes consist of, or what makes them good, is, however, often ambiguous or controversial. One approach evaluates personal improvement against standards of well-being and quality of life, and this strategy has clear normative elements. Another approach follows a more descriptive path and considers growth as a sign of

increased structural complexity and improved functionality.

Conceptualizations

To live means to move toward goals (Pross 2016). Humans have many and often complex goals, and some of them, perhaps those most important to us, are about changing ourselves in the hope of becoming better human beings. The inclination toward individual improvement – a striving to “be a better version of yourself” – is ubiquitous in human lives. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks about “the rights for a free development of one’s personality” (UN 1948, Article 22). Although many theories about human development exist, all developments are not about personal growth. What seems unique to theories of personal growth is partly a concern for functional improvement, often in the sense of changes toward good or preferable states of being. Developing from personal growth should express some kind of transformation toward the fulfillment of one’s human nature, talents, or functions.

Historical Origins

The roots of what we today call personal growth can be traced back to the axial age (800–200 BCE). In the *Odyssey*, for example, something called a “growth cycle” was intended to be completed after adventurous voyages had been

embarked on and modified the travelers' ideas about themselves (Jourard and Landsman 1980). In old Chinese ethics, the strive toward personal betterment was elaborated by Confucius and others (Wong 2013; Yu 1998), and the ancient Pan-African belief system, Ubuntu, articulated an ethic about how individuals only can develop as humans through other persons (Ramosé 2002).

The classical Greek era also concerned itself with striving toward personal growth. The Socratic "Know Thyself" and Aristotle's theory on virtues can be seen as advices about where a sound development should lead. For the ancient Greeks, personal growth was a moral concern, based on the conviction that an individual (given that he was a male and part of the Athenian elite) should develop into the "man-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature" (MacIntyre 2007).

The idea of personal growth was abandoned in Benthamian hedonism and mainstream economics. Improvement and individual betterment is not needed in a world populated by rational agents incapable of making systematic errors and whose lives are reduced to the maximization of pleasant experiences. Similarly, strict behaviorism leaves no room for individual development, as they considered character traits and personal identity as illusory (see Coan 1977). Persons could not be good or bad – only environments could be that. Skinner held a hedonistic view of the good life, which in combination with his environmental determinism led him to conclude that happiness could only be achieved by means of a properly organized society (Skinner 1945).

Early Psychological Theories

The earliest appearance of the term personal growth seems to be in a book from 1898, entitled "Social and ethical interpretations in mental development" (Baldwin 1897). As suggested by the title, and in a review of the book (Dewey 1898), personal growth was considered an ethical concept made possible only through certain social experiences. The normative element of personal growth was also noticeable in the work of Allport (1961), who depicted the goal of personal growth to be about "propriate striving." Other scholars of this epoch articulated ideas about growth in a less

value-laden prose. One approach is focusing on growth as a developmental mechanism operating reciprocally with stability over the life course (Buhler 1928, cited in Berlyne 1960). Another is focusing on the holistic, organizing principle for complex organisms as a unity (Goldstein 1939).

With the formation of a humanistic psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, the study of personal growth was intensified. Scholars such as Maslow and Rogers insisted on bringing the essence of human beings back into science and to move "toward a centering upon human needs and fulfillment and aspirations" (Maslow 1966, cited in Grogan 2013). Maslow considered personal growth to be a contrast to activities devoted to maintain states of equilibrium. Inspired by Goldstein, he typically referred to growth as self-actualization (using the term in a way that never quite satisfied Goldstein, though). Rogers was also inspired by another of Goldstein's concepts, that of organismic growth. He considered organismic growth as the reason why humans would be inclined to actualize his or her potentials. For Rogers, personal growth was not about "moving from fixity through change to a new fixity but rather moving from fixity to changingness" (Loevinger 1976, p. 151). The characteristic personality trait of a growing person was openness to experience.

In order to define optimal living and the fulfillment of human potential, the pioneers of humanistic psychology assembled lists of characteristics they, for various reasons, considered appropriate for personal growth. In a review of this literature, Coan (1977) identified what he refers to as "five basic modes of human fulfillment": efficiency, creativity, inner harmony, relatedness, and transcendence.

Another cluster of personal growth theories from about the same time period is identity theories or developmental stage theories. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is an example in case, although the theory might be more relevant for issues related to psychological adaptation than to personal growth. Loevinger's (1976) theory on ego development considers development as something that unfolds as a person moves from one stage to another, and the

transition often involves the issue of solving conflicts. Although her theory is not about personal growth per se, Loevinger's work has contributed to a better understanding of the concept of growth. For example, she contrasted optimal states ("polar values") against other developmental aspect, discussed developmental elements of "moral progress," and considered the highest stage of ego development as somewhat similar to Maslow's concept of self-actualization.

Current Perspectives on Personal Growth

Some of the present-day theories on personal growth have hardly moved beyond the terminology and models of the humanistic and identity theories of the mid-twentieth century. One example is Robitschek's concept of personal growth initiative (e.g., Robitschek and Spering 2009), which is clearly influenced by Rogerian person-centered theory, including the principle of organismic growth. The main idea of growth in this conceptualization has to do with a directional tendency in every living organism of maintaining, enhancing, and reproducing itself (Rogers 1963).

Waterman's eudaimonic identity theory (e.g., Waterman and Schwartz 2013) speaks of personal growth as the fulfillment of one's personal potential. It is inspired by neo-psychoanalytic identity theorists, such as Horney, Erikson, and Marcia, combined with an old and, according to Keyes and Annas (2009), extremely eccentric reading of Aristotelian eudaimonism. The basic idea of Waterman's theory is that we know that a development toward a person's "true self" is taking place when a person has a genuine feeling that "this is who I really am." Waterman refers to such feelings, and the growth processes that generate them, as eudaimonia.

Ryff is another personal growth researcher who remains faithful to the overall structure of humanistic psychology (e.g., Ryff 1989, 2016). Embedded in a list theory of well-being, her view is that personal growth is one among six components of a good life. Growth is defined, subjectively, as an individual's feelings, perceptions, and self-proclaimed openness toward continued development.

The growth element in self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 2000) is organismic, rooted in the work of Goldstein and Rogers. The principal idea is that humans have a proactive and self-organizational nature that tend to develop what Deci and Ryan refer to as positive human potentials. Positive potentials are intrinsically motivated, a concept that in turn is described as the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, to learn, and to be agentic. SDT builds on need theory and is dynamic in the sense that the growth tendencies can be stimulated or thwarted by the environment. Hence, personal growth is contingent on the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs, i.e., competence, autonomy, and relationship.

Departing from a functionalist approach to life span development, Staudinger and her colleagues make a distinction between two forms of positive development: adjustment and personal growth (Law and Staudinger 2016). They argue that several theories of psychosocial maturation, like the one proposed by Erikson, are not really about personal growth. It is a about adjustment, which is a kind of integrated maturity that enables acceptance with one's life as it happened to turn out (and not as it possibly could have turned out). Adjustment is associated with hedonic well-being and personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability. In Piagetian terms, adjustment is about successful assimilation. Personal growth, on the other hand, refers to a continuous striving toward new experiences, i.e., toward learning. It concerns successful accommodation in Piagetian terms and correlates with openness to experience and eudaimonic well-being. Staudinger considers wisdom to be the prototype of human growth. The concept is separated into two subdimensions: personal wisdom (referring to judgments and insight about a person's own life) and general wisdom (focusing on the life of others and on life in general).

Also considering growth as distinct from, but interacting with, adjustment, Vittersø (2016) has proposed that personal growth is an independent and unique component of well-being. In contrast

to mainstream theories on subjective well-being, Vittersø's functional well-being approach (FWA) proposes that subjective well-being comprises two separate kinds of goodness, one related to concepts such as simplicity, adjustment, assimilation, and biopsychosocial stabilization. The other is related to concepts such as complexity, expansions, accommodation, and changes in biopsychosocial structures. Rather than considering personal growth as something that merely leads to more hedonic well-being, the FWA assumes that personal growth reflects a kind of goodness in and by itself. Such a goodness is not easily captured by self-report measures of life satisfaction or pleasant feelings, though. The separation between simple and complex goodness makes the FWA able to explain why some intense positive states, such as flow, are unrelated to feelings of pleasure and happiness while still being considered as positive. Similarly, the FWA accounts for the low correlation observed between openness to experience and hedonic well-being.

Personal Growth in Organizations

Thinkers as different as Aristotle, Marx, and Arendt share the idea that the fulfillment of our human nature is only possible during activity, sometimes defined as being active through work (e.g., Dean 2016). Although not specifically referred to as personal growth, important ideas within organizational psychology regard how challenges and novelty in the work-life may lead to growth and individual development. Examples of such concepts are grit, calling, meaning, and practical wisdom.

Duckworth et al. (2007) refer to grit as the most essential trait and personal quality for achievement and success. Grit is defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals and is characterized by a persistent effort and interest toward challenges despite failure, adversity, and setbacks in progress. These non-cognitive qualities of perseverance and sustained interest seem to be more predictive of achievement and success (i.e., educational attainment, retention) than IQ, Big Five traits, and self-control.

Wrzesniewski and her colleagues (1997) have shown how some people relate to their work as a

“calling” and not just merely a job that offers material benefits. Being in a calling means to frame work as a deeper personal investment inseparable from their life and is related to higher life and work satisfaction, better health, and fewer days away from work.

Straume and Vittersø (2015) also view personal growth as a stable trait. They measured personal growth as a eudaimonic dimension of well-being consisting of the four subscales curiosity, absorption, complexity, and competence. Their study revealed that personal growth at work was differently related to subjective health and sick leave compared to life satisfaction, indicating that personal growth is a distinct dimension of individual difference in well-being.

Some researchers have chosen to focus on the role of goals, values, strengths, and expectancies rather than on personality and individual difference. For instance, Ariely et al. (2008) have investigated the impact of minimal meaning and argue that many people are willing to work long hours for low or no external reinforcement (labor supply) as long as they perceive the task as meaningful. In this context, a task is meaningful if it is recognized by others and has a purpose in the sense that their work is linked to a general objective or a bigger picture.

Schwartz (2011) emphasizes practical wisdom as the most important character humans must develop to exercise moral will and moral skill and to flourish as human beings. Being practical wise means knowing how to read the social context, to properly interpret guiding principles in different contexts, to take the perspective of another, to improvise and balance conflicting aims, and to have well-educated emotions and intuition. It takes exercise to develop wisdom, with trial, error, and feedback as important ingredients in the process. Schwartz argues that managers, who replace opportunities for such practices with rules and incentives, create a downward spiral in organizations that constrain employee's potential of knowing and doing the right thing in any particular situation.

Progress and Future Perspectives

The concept of personal growth is still fuzzy, but some signs of conceptual improvements exist. Within developmental psychology, the knowledge on growth in the sense of increased structural complexity and improved functionality has become substantial, showing, for instance, how such growth typically decreases with age. Moreover, the contents of the lists that have been presented as growth characteristics have changed over the years and are currently better grounded in empirical data and updated psychological theories. For example, based on a comprehensive study of the literature on well-being and emotions, Davidson (e.g., Begley and Davidson 2012) has proposed that the most salient signs of good functioning follow from an emotional style characterized by the following six elements: resilience (how slowly or quickly you recover from adversity), outlook (how long you are able to sustain positive emotion), social intuition (how adept you are at picking up social signals from the people around you), self-awareness (how well you perceive bodily feelings that reflect emotions), sensitivity to context (how good you are at regulating your emotional responses to take into account the context you find yourself in); and attention (how sharp and clear your focus is).

Staudinger has pointed out that psychosocial maturation, which earlier tended to dominated theories of personal growth, is better conceived an adaptation rather than as growth. She proposes that wisdom, including moral consideration, is the prototype of personal growth. The moral nature of human beings has recently reemerged as a major topic in theories of development. In particular, the work of Tomasello (2016) is groundbreaking in its understanding of humans as a fundamentally social, collaborating, and a moral species. The future of personal growth research will likely appear as a body of new knowledge in which moral maturity is an integrated part of what it means to become a better person and in which the concept of functioning more often will refer to functioning in a group.

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