

Review

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Out of Flatland: The Role of the Notion of a Worldview in the Science of Well-being

Danilo Garcia* and Patricia Rosenberg**

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the suggestion of the notion of a worldview as part of the Science of Well-Being. We present, at first, an allegoric comparison as to why the view of a ternary unity of being (i.e. a coherence of the three parts of the being, body, mind, and psyche to maximize well-being) is difficult to grasp. We also discuss that humans do have unique experiences and memories, but that we are also connected to both all living things and to our environment. Finally, we point to a ternary model of personality to increase our understanding of a person's well-being: Temperament, character, and identity.

Key Words: *Character; Interpreter module; Narrative self; Science of well-being; Temperament; Unity of being; Worldviews*

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*PhD, Director, Blekinge Center of Competence, Research, Development, and Innovation for Better Health in Blekinge, Blekinge County Council, Karlskrona, Sweden, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden. Researcher, Institute of Neuroscience and Physiology, Sahlgrenska Academy, Gothenburg, Sweden. Head Researcher and Founder, Network for Empowerment and Well-Being, Sweden. Researcher, Department of Psychology, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
 **MSc, Researcher, Network for Empowerment and Well-Being, Sweden. Project Coordinator and Well-Being Coach, Blekinge Center of Competence, Research, Development, and Innovation for Better Health in Blekinge, Blekinge County Council, Karlskrona, Sweden

Address for correspondence to: Dr. D. Garcia, Network for Empowerment and Well-Being, Axel W. Anderssons Väg 8A, SE 371 62 Lyckeby, Sweden. E-mail: danilo.garcia@icloud.com

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Introduction

"I am not a plane Figure, but a Solid. You can call me a Circle; but in reality I am not a Circle, but an infinite number of Circles, of size varying from a Point to a Circle of 13 inches in diameter, one placed on the top of the other. When I cut through your plane as I am now doing, I make in your plane a section which you, very rightly, call a Circle."

– A Sphere talking to A Square in Flatland by E. A. Abbott (1884^[1]).

In a recent article, Nilsson (2014^[23]) suggests that the notion of a worldview needs to be included in Cloninger's Science of Well-Being (e.g., Cloninger 2004^[3], Cloninger 2006^[4], Cloninger 2007^[5], and Cloninger 2013^[7]). According to Nilsson (2014, pp. 1^[23]), the worldview is "the person's most basic beliefs, values, constructs, and scripts for understanding, evaluating, and acting upon reality, which ground the network within which more specific beliefs, goals, intentions, etc., are embedded." (Koltko-Rivera, 2004^[20]). Cloninger's Science of Well-Being focuses on self-awareness of the unity of being through sustainable personality development in three dimensions (i.e. the self, others, and the universe or the world as a whole, for example, nature). In Cloninger's paradigm, unity of being represents a complete, coherent, and harmonious sense of the self in these three dimensions, in turn, giving raise to feelings of hope in one self's ability to cope and make decisions (i.e. self-directedness), feelings of love toward others (i.e. cooperativeness), and feelings of faith in that we are a part of something beyond the self and others (i.e. self-transcendence). Nilsson first argues that the notion of unity of being is a presupposition rather than an empirical fact because Cloninger sees it as intuitive (Cloninger, 2004^[3]) and that others suggest that its critics lack self-awareness (for a review see Cloninger, 2004^[3]). Although Cloninger further develops the notion of unity of being and his view on scientific paradigms in several of his works (e.g., Cloninger 2004^[3], Cloninger 2013^[8], and Cloninger 2013^[9]), we wanted to put this discussion in the context of the analogy that follows.

Consider the quote from the book *Flatland* by E. A. Abbott (1884^[1]) at the beginning of this article. The sphere called "A Sphere" who is from Spaceland, a three-dimensional world, visits the square called "A Square" who lives in Flatland, a two-dimensional world. "A Sphere's" appearance in Flatland is that of a circle that can change its diameter at will. "A Sphere" visits Flatland to introduce a new geometrical two-dimensional figure to the idea of a third dimension in the hopes of eventually educating the population of Flatland. To convince "A Square" of a third dimension, "A Sphere" needs to pull "A Square" out of Flatland into the experience of Spaceland. We suggest this analogy embodies what Cloninger is explaining (2004^[3]) – to grasp the notion of unity of being, we need to actually simultaneously experience the three dimensions

by ourselves (cf. Haidt, 2006^[16]). One of the things that might prevent us humans from accepting or achieving unity of being might be the mere notion Nilsson refers to as our worldviews. The subjective reality imbedded in our worldview is a distorted reality experienced through our senses and the context we live in. This is also similar to the reality of the prisoners in Plato's Cave who since childhood gaze at shadows in the wall in front of them. In the case of "A Square," its worldview is based on a two-dimensional plane and therefore he is unable to understand and experience the dimension of elevation (Haidt, 2006^[16]). Again, the Flatland analogy only puts the axiom of the unity of being in perspective and we only give a brief simplified account of it; readers should seek more information in the works cited here. Nevertheless, related to our reasoning here, research suggests that witnessing acts of self-transcendence, that is, what Cloninger proposes as the third dimension of human personality, actually causes calmness and the desire to become a better person (i.e. moral elevation; Haidt, 2006^[16]). Hence, experience might facilitate the understanding of a ternary structure of personality.

Moreover, as noted by Nilsson, there has been an increase in studies on meaning-making in the form of life narratives (McAdams, 2008^[21]), an interpreter module (Gazzaniga, 2008^[14]; Haidt, 2006^[16]; and Kahneman, 2011^[19]), and worldviews (Koltko-Rivera, 2004^[20]). We agree in that these studies are not commonly unified in personality psychology and to an even lesser degree in well-being research (for some exceptions see McAdams, 2008^[21]; Pennebaker, 2011^[24]; and Garcia *et al.*, 2015^[13]). This is highly important because the words we use are not only a mirror of our thoughts and feelings but also the tools that can be used to guide behaviour (Pennebaker, 2011^[24]). However, Nilsson's observation is only partially complete. We suggest that a unified theory of personality operationalized as temperament-character-narrative presents a more complete approach. Cloninger (2007^[5]) has for instance pointed out that the temperament-character-narrative dimensions have evolved through three major systems of learning and memory in a long series of steps through evolution. The first system is the procedural, which regulates different emotional responses such as fear, disgust, ambition, and anger (i.e. Cloninger's temperament dimensions). According to Cloninger, the evolution of the second and third system allowed humans to develop character or "the reflection of personal goals and values" (2004, p. 45^[3]). Specifically, the second system, the propositional system, is present in primates and helps the individual to be self-directed and cooperative in a social environment. The third system, the episodic system, exists only among humans and stands for humans' capacity for self-awareness, which allows introspection and recollection of autobiographical memories (Cloninger, 2007^[5]).

Nilsson further proposes that a person might experience ill- or well-being depending on her/his worldview. The question is, we argue, whether subjective worldviews actually guide us toward lasting well-being, and if they promote

adaptation and survival in harmony with the world around us (cf. Cloninger, 2013^[7]). For instance, it is true that intelligence and money are important for our subjective well-being only if excelling in academic achievement and status, respectively, are the part of our worldview (Myers and Diener, 1995^[22]). Nilsson, however, forgets that worldviews might be shared as well and that certain behaviours bring well-being to most human beings. For example, prosocial attitudes (i.e. cooperation) increase individuals' well-being across different cultures (e.g., Aknin *et al.*, 2013^[2]). In other words, promoting helpful behaviour seems to lead to well-being independent of subjective worldviews. In contrast, certain things are important for our well-being only depending of our own unique worldview. Although Nilsson's proposition might be a step forward for personality research, it actually diminishes the Science of Well-Being to the individuals' subjective experience of reality, probably leading to a "separation of being" (cf. Cohen *et al.*, 2000^[11]). For instance, as suggested by Hart *et al.* (2005^[17]), people have a desire to uphold a meaningful picture of reality, which is probably motivated by existential insecurity. When threatened, individuals' try to protect their cherished worldviews by, for example, enhancing the value of in-group members and devaluating the value of out-group members (Greenberg *et al.*, 1990^[15]). That is, separation rather than unity with others who do not resemble ourselves or are not regarded as equal to us.

Furthermore, Nilsson also suggests "neither worldview nor the development of character and well-being is a one-size-fits-all" (Nilsson, 2014, p. 3^[23]). Although it is very appealing to see ourselves as unique, which we are in the sense Nilsson proposes through our own and unique experiences and memories, we are also connected to all living things and our environment (Dawkins, 1982^[12]). Moreover, Cloninger's tri-dimensional model of character (i.e. the self, others, and the universe) resonates with the findings by cultural psychologists (e.g., Shweder *et al.*, 1997^[25]) who suggest that moral judgments across cultures can be organized in three main areas of ethics: autonomy (cf. self-directedness), community (cf. cooperativeness), and divinity (cf. self-transcendence). Some cultures are more or less inclined to one or the other. Also of importance, in the field of personality psychology, it is common to define personality as stable through the life span. In contrast, Cloninger has actually revised the definition of personality (Cloninger 2004^[3]) to emphasize the interaction between temperament and character and each of the traits within the model across the life span (e.g., Cloninger and Zohar, 2011^[10]; Josefsson *et al.*, 2013^[18]):

Personality is a dynamic organisation within the individual of the psychobiological systems by which the person both shapes and adapts uniquely to an ever-changing internal and external environment (Cloninger, 2012^[6]).

In other words, it is a nonlinear dynamic model of personality that covers drives, goals and values, and influences and is co-influenced by the life narrative.

Concluding Remarks [Figure 1]

Nilsson’s proposition, if we understood it correctly, is indeed important to the Science of Well-Being and personality theory in general. However, we argue that it is important because worldviews are analogical to Flatland, the individual needs to be aware of her/his worldview to experience well-being and exercise her/his free will. One’s worldview could be meaningfully organized around agency (self-directedness), communion (cooperativeness), and spirituality (self-transcendence) to recognize what truly helps the individual to achieve well-being. In this context, a definition of well-being is lacking in Nilsson’s article; thus, our conclusion here might depend on which definition he is using. Well-being might, for example, refer to feeling good (i.e. happiness), doing good (i.e. mature and actively virtuous living), physical health (i.e. absence of disease or infirmity), and prosperity (i.e. success, good fortune, and flourishing) (Cloninger, 2004^[3]). Finally, one of the main concerns is the fact that the notion of worldviews presented by Nilsson is too broad and comprises both implicit and explicit constructs of a person’s self-awareness. In the quest of a nonreductive theory of personality, Nilsson puts together all parts of human self-aware experience in one notion, which misses out relevant constructs such as temperament and character (Cloninger, 2004^[3]), the life narrative (McAdams, 2008^[21]), and the interpreter module (Gazzaniga, 2008^[14]; Haidt, 2006^[16]; Kahneman, 2011^[19]). All of which might interact in the development of well-being [Figure 1].

Take Home Message

A ternary awareness of our being is necessary if the worldview is going to be

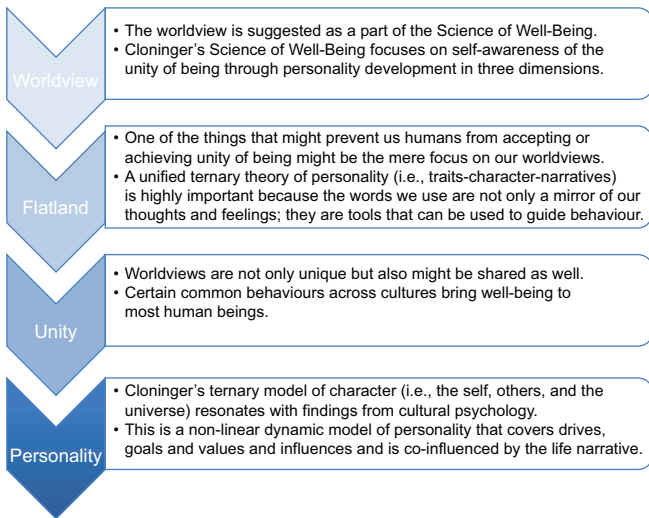


Figure 1: Flowchart of the paper

integrated as a part of the Science of Well-Being. Without this ternary structure, it is probable that the focus on one's worldview leads to separation of being. We rather propose a ternary structure of personality: temperament, character, and identity [Figure 2].

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Conflict of interest

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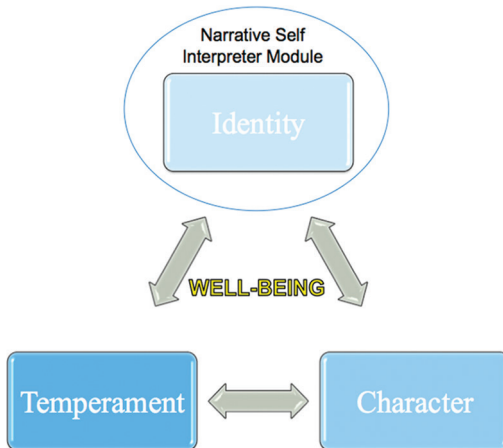


Figure 2: A unified view of personality including temperament (Novelty Seeking, Harm Avoidance, Reward Dependence, and Persistence), character (Self-directedness, Cooperativeness, and Self-transcendence), and identity (a construction of the interpreter module and the narrative self). All of which interact in the development of well-being (Adapted with permission from C. R. Cloninger, personal communication December 2, 2014).

research, person-centered methods, community projects, and the dissemination of knowledge to increase the quality of life of the habitants of the county of Blekinge, Sweden.

Declaration

This article is an original unpublished work and has not been submitted for publication elsewhere.

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Questions that this Paper Raises

1. Is the notion of the worldview needed in the Science of Well-Being?
2. Does a person's worldview prevent her/him from experiencing the unity of being?
3. Are we humans unique or are there universal ethics that unify us as species?
4. Is Cloninger's biopsychosociospiritual model of personality a unified model of human personality?

About the Author



Danilo Garcia Ph.D. is a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology and Associate Professor at the University of Gothenburg. He is also a well-being coach and the Director of The Blekinge Center of Competence, which focusses on innovation, research, and development of health and healthcare through person-centered methods. He is interested in personality, character, free will, responsibility, life narratives, empowerment, happiness, well-being, exercise, and human performance.

About the Author



Patricia Rosenberg M.Sc. has been a high school teacher for more than 10 years. She is also a researcher, project coordinator, and well-being coach. Her main interests lie at the interface of religion and psychology. Her other interests are the role of education in well-being among youth.