

Veronika Huta

Veronika Huta is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Ottawa, Canada. She has a PhD in clinical psychology from McGill University. She conducts research on eudaimonia, hedonia, elevation, and meaning, and works on developing an integrated theoretical model of the eudaimonia-hedonia distinction in the domains of wellbeing orientations, behaviors, experiences, and functioning. She teaches courses in advanced statistics and positive psychology, and is one of the top rated instructors in her faculty. She is a founder of the Canadian Positive Psychology Association, and she co-organised the first cross-disciplinary conference on eudaimonia.

In general terms, and in your view, what would you say are the defining features of positive psychology?

I really like the field because it broadens the slice of human psychology that gets studied. So you've got not just mental illness and dysfunction, but flourishing, and virtue, and peak experiences, and positive institutions. You've also got not just everyday concerns but more existential concerns – so it's stretching the comfort zone of the field of psychology, in a healthy way. Also positive psychology is really trying to make inroads towards a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. For example, there's a new issue coming out in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* that's going to focus entirely on qualitative methods. So I really like that because I see human psychology as a very, very broad topic. We are very complex creatures and I like how positive psychology is filling in some of those gaps.

So I guess the multiple methods used in positive psychology is a strength of the field?

I think so. I think that positive psychology is very well poised to illustrate for the rest of psychology how valuable these approaches are. They're more exploratory and there's definitely a place for exploratory research in my opinion. They give richer descriptions, they give a more subjective inside view of various phenomena. So it's a little bit less cut and dry, a little bit more detailed, and I think that it fits very well with the field of positive psychology, it can be a pioneer in this area.

And how was it that you came to be interested in the field?

It was during graduate school. I was doing my PhD on depression. It's obviously an important topic, but it wasn't my cup of tea. I was looking for something else and I kind of had a feel for who I was and where I wanted to go, but it really didn't crystalize for me until I saw the presidential address that Seligman had given to the APA and it was like... I literally finished reading that and I felt like someone had handed me a mirror and I saw myself for the first time. Well maybe not for the first time, but it really gelled for me. And it was really nice to think that there were other people out there with similar interests to mine and there was this whole movement afoot, and that I could be a part of it.

It's surprising how many people had very similar experiences to that – initially studying parts of clinical psychology and eventually wanting to learn more about the other side – I think it perhaps shows how timely Seligman's speech was and speaks to how successful the movement has been.

It was fantastic. It was transformational. And I find that Seligman really has a feel for where this field needs to go next. For example, these days he's really emphasising the idea of prospection. So the idea that we need to study and support the human capacity not only to be pushed by the past, but also to be pulled by the future – to be drawn by vision, and values, and so on. So yeah, I just think it's heading in a very good direction.

Excellent. And what about your current work in positive psychology? Can you tell us a bit about your current work, what your focuses are, or some of the research that's exciting you at the moment?

Sure. I guess I could start by saying that what I focused on previously was looking at eudaimonia and hedonia, that's really my main area of research, and it continues to be my main area of research. So looking at eudaimonia and hedonia and how they relate to various wellbeing outcomes. I define eudaimonia and hedonia as orientations, as ways of living. So, if you define them that way then you can study them as predictors of a variety of outcomes. But what I'm focusing more on lately, and I'm really excited about this research because it's taught me so much more about the eudaimonic/hedonic distinction, is how eudaimonic and hedonic pursuits impact not just the individual but also the people around them. So in other words, looking at wellbeing in a broader way, not just personal wellbeing but the wellbeing of the people close to you, the wellbeing of the broader community, and also the wellbeing of the environment. So looking at wellbeing in that broader sense, that's one thing. One of my graduate students is specialising in that.

Another student is working with me to develop a questionnaire on worldviews, to see how they relate to eudaimonic and hedonic orientations. I think that's a fantastic approach because eudaimonia and hedonia really represent two of the main ways in which we approach life, two of the main *things* we are after, so to speak. And so it makes a lot of sense when you want to study predictors, to ask "Okay, if these are the things that people are after in life, how do the rules of the game of life operate in the first place? How is life structured? How does life function?" And that's where worldviews come in. So I'm really excited about that.

We're also doing a bunch of other stuff. We're doing research on cognitive functioning – differences in eudaimonic and hedonic mindsets and how they relate to cognitive functioning – things like time perspective, abstract thinking, perspective taking. We're also looking at automatic functioning. So things like skin conductance and heart rate responses.

So that's on the empirical end. Then on the theoretical end, what I've been really interested in over the last few years is developing a deeper understanding of the eudaimonic-hedonic distinction, because I really don't think it's just a tradition that's carried over from ancient Greece. It's a perennial phenomenon in human nature, but I think we need to do a better job of characterising it. So I co-authored a paper with Alan Waterman recently, and we looked at all of the different research definitions people are using of eudaimonia and hedonia, and we realised that really there are four rather different ways in which people are conceptualizing these things. One way is as orientations – so what you are after in life. Another way is behaviours – what you actually do in life. A third way is experiences – so what do you feel? Do you feel pleasure? Do you feel meaning? And the fourth way is more of a functioning approach – abilities and achievements that you've acquired after extended periods of time. And so what I've been really focusing on over the last couple of years, both theoretically and empirically, is trying to characterise what eudaimonia and hedonia look like, within each of those four categories. What variables would be subsumed under those umbrellas in each of the categories? One thing that became very clear to me during that process is that the category of hedonic functioning really hadn't been addressed. The category of experience has been addressed in both a eudaimonic and hedonic sense – you've got measures of pleasure, you've got measures of meaning, elevation and self-connectedness. But when it comes to functioning, you've got Carol Ryff's eudaimonic functioning variables – which include autonomy, personal growth and so on – but you don't have much of an understanding of what hedonia would look like as a way of healthy functioning. And so I've written a chapter recently where I've talked about this, where I've proposed a model of healthy hedonic functioning. And that would include things like being able to be selfish when it's appropriate, being able to use the sensual part of yourself appropriately, knowing how to savour,

knowing how to live in the here and now, being spontaneous, letting go under certain circumstances, and so on. I'm collecting data on that and we'll see how that goes.

Sounds exciting. Do you think that when we talk about the different types of wellbeing – so hedonic wellbeing, eudaimonic wellbeing – within the positive psychology community, do you feel that one type of wellbeing is valued more than the other?

Well, I guess I will have to answer this question in two different ways. On the one hand, yes, clearly in practice hedonic concepts get assessed more often. The question is why and I actually think it's not necessarily because people disagree with the existence and validity of eudaimonia. I think by and large the wellbeing research community is on board (though there are definitely exceptions, and we can talk about that too). But I think it's more a matter of inertia. So the dominant conception of wellbeing until very recently – and it remains a dominant conception – is subjective wellbeing. That's more on the hedonic end and includes positive emotions, being low on negative emotions, and being high on life satisfaction.

I'll make an additional comment. There also seems to be a knee-jerk reaction when people want to assess eudaimonia. A lot of researchers have an inkling that both hedonia and eudaimonia are important and ought to be measured, but then they throw in subjective wellbeing and Carol Ryff's measure of psychological wellbeing. I'd like to contribute to making various fields more aware that you can measure both eudaimonic and hedonic experiences and both eudaimonic and hedonic functioning. So in other words, if you're going to measure feelings of positive affect and satisfaction, it's important to also measure feelings like meaning. If you're going to measure Ryff's eudaimonic functioning, you also need to measure hedonic functioning because there are definitely positive things that a hedonic mind set and regular hedonic practice bring into your life. So I think it's really more a matter of time, than anything else.

Going back to your earlier point. There were some articles that came out recently about the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, and that possibly they might not be as separate as previously thought. I just wondered if you had any thoughts about that?

(Laughs). I'm glad you asked. Well this is my take on it. I actually agree with the critics to a large degree. I think there's a lot of confusion in the literature and there are major data gaps. When I read these criticisms I find myself nodding my head a lot of the time. What I have trouble with is when I

read their conclusions and they try to throw out the baby with the bathwater. When they say “there’s some flaws with the literature, there’s some major gaps, so let’s get rid of the idea of eudaimonia altogether.” When you look at how long this distinction has existed in the philosophical literature and the humanistic literature, and when you look at how compelling the theoretical foundation is, to my mind the most logical approach is to treat it as an empirical question, rather than to dismiss it out of hand.

So I’ve had a lot of the same concerns, but I’ve tried to address them through an empirical route. And one thing that frankly hasn’t been done is to differentiate between different types of wellbeing. So let me talk about that a little more because you might feel that that’s not true, but let me explain.

Eudaimonia and hedonia are often discussed as wellbeing (so as experiences or functioning). I actually disagree with that (I see them as ways of living). But if you do focus on them as wellbeing then what you need to do is use factor analysis, which is basically a way of summarising the inter-correlations between different variables, to give you a sense of which feelings or forms of functioning tend to go hand-in-hand, which variables tend to go hand-in-hand, and which ones tend not to go hand-in-hand. So what we need is basically a factor analysis of the different experiences that people can have or the functioning people can have. That hasn’t been done. What has been done is factor analyses where they used feelings to reflect hedonic concepts, and they used functioning to reflect eudaimonic concepts. They found that the concepts separate into two piles, but the question remains, do those two piles arise because of the difference between eudaimonia and hedonia, or because of the difference between experiences and functioning? So what I’ve been doing over the last few years is collecting a huge dataset about experiences. And really I’ve included about 30 experiences from the eudaimonic literature and from the hedonic literature, trying to include most of the stuff that’s been operationalized to date. I’m also going to collect data on different kinds of functioning.

Sorry, when you refer to experiences, can I just ask what types of experiences you’re referring to here?

Sure, so when I talk about experiences what I’m talking about are subjective feelings and cognitive-affective appraisals. So on the hedonic end it would include things like: positive emotions, joy, pleasure, comfort, relaxation, carefreeness. On the eudaimonic side, theoretically at least, it would include things like: a sense of meaning, a sense of value, a feeling of purpose, or a feeling of accomplishment. Various feelings of elevation, inspiration, peak experiences, and self-connectedness are also concepts that are on the eudaimonic side.

So yeah, what really hasn't been done is to look at whether there are two flavours of wellbeing experience, so to speak – or whether it all just comes out in one big lump. To be honest I expected it to come out in one big lump, which is why I operationalise eudaimonia and hedonia not as wellbeing *outcomes*, but as *ways* of living. In other words, as the choices that people make. But I was amazed... I mean I've done a preliminary analysis of the first 677 participants – I'm not done with data collection – but certainly a large enough sample size to get robust results, and what you get is a clear distinction between these two groups of outcomes, between these two sets of feelings.

When you look at positive psychology as a whole, what would you say are the most valid criticisms of the field?

You know I've been reading the earlier editions of this book, and I find that I'll just be repeating a lot of the same comments that have been made on that particular point. But I guess one 'beef' I have is that the application sometimes gets ahead of the science. And obviously this isn't true of all of the practitioners, but there are some practitioners who haven't taken the time to really learn about the research in a rigorous way, and most importantly to develop a feel for the nuances, for how to interpret the findings. So they end up with these very oversimplified statements like "You're guaranteed to improve your wellbeing if you just practice optimism on a daily basis." Well, the research is a lot more nuanced than that. In fact there's quite a bit of research coming out now showing that optimism, yes it is good in the majority of circumstances, but there are situations – especially situations that you can't control and can't change – where optimism can actually be detrimental. So that kind of nuanced perspective I think needs to be felt and processed more strongly in the practitioner's sphere.

Another thing is that I worry that the field is still quite Western centric. So there's this real emphasis on positive emotions and even things like accomplishment, and I wonder to what degree that's cross-culturally universal as a desired state, as a necessary state for wellbeing. It sounds to me very self-focused, to focus that much on personal pleasure, on personal enjoyment, and perhaps even on accomplishment. Lately I've been thinking about trying to formulate for myself, and trying to learn about a broader perspective – and I'm going to need data to really get a handle on it – but I suspect that happiness is a little bit of a different animal in the sense that it's not just this jubilant state, necessarily. It's more of a state that Barbara Fredrickson described, more of a state of access to all of what you are, things flowing well, a sense of integration and harmony. Antonella Della Fave has done some fantastic research looking at different cultures, and actually she's found that the most common

layman's definition of wellbeing is one of harmony and integration. And I think there is something very wise there. I would describe it as the right kind of freedom, so to speak. It's a state of psychological freedom but not necessarily of overly positive exuberance.

So the next step for positive psychology is to potentially extend beyond the West and to go more into Eastern and other cultures?

Absolutely. You know I think we all feel that way and there's been a large push in that direction. You look at the positive psychology 2.0 as Paul Wong has called it, and that's one of the major mandates of what he hopes is going to be the next wave of positive psychology. A much more integrated, and much more cross-cultural understanding.

So if you could rewind the clock and start learning about positive psychology from the very beginning again, would you do anything differently?

(Laughs). Ah, not much! I tend to follow my gut. I tend to trust my instincts and I think it might have been a bit of a crooked path, but I trust that path. Perhaps one thing I might do differently now and certainly it's easier to do it now is to take a course on the topic. To get more of a broad base. I didn't really get a broader perspective on the field until I had to teach a course on it. Teaching a course is the best way to learn about anything and that's when I really took the time to develop a good reading list and to read up on different areas.

Do you think people who study positive psychology, or those who work in the field, are more or less happy than the general population?

Well I don't know if anybody's done the research to answer that question, but I'd be surprised if it wasn't true. I mean, how could somebody not benefit from learning about this material day in and day out? Not just learning about it from the data but having to process it, having to think about it on a conceptual level. I know generally speaking people who work in the field of psychology find that they benefit because you've got all of these pointers that come your way – through your own research, through attending other people's talks, through reading publications. And all of these things help with the challenges and the experiences that we all have. So yeah, I would say that I would be surprised if it wasn't true. You know I'd have to say that I've noticed that the community of positive psychologists is wonderful. I attended the second positive psychology conference, and I've attended every one since.

And I remember thinking right from the start: this is my community, these are the people I want to spend time with. It was like an electric environment, it was very stimulating. So definitely a happy field to be a part of.

In your own wellbeing, has there been any concept or intervention that's been particularly helpful for you over your journey?

Hedonism I'd have to say. I know that sounds strange, perhaps I should use the word "hedonia" rather than hedonism because hedonism comes with so much negative baggage and negative connotations. I was a pretty hard core eudaimonist before I went into this research area. It was all about investing and working hard, and not having any fun. And by working with this data and having to think about it, having to really internalise it, I've learned much more about the value of balancing both. And I would also say that I've learned about what it means to have healthy hedonism, because there are different types of hedonism. I would say tentatively – I haven't worked this out fully in detail – but I would say tentatively that hedonia is healthy when eudaimonia plays a little bit of a supporting role in the background, when it kind of 'reins it in.' In other words, when you put in the effort to make the healthier choices, like not watching a movie tonight but rather spending some time with your family, and to pay attention to the things that *actually* enrich your life. So having a little bit of self-regulation to make the healthier choices, the ones that do make you happier. Healthy hedonia is also about not going to excess – so again there's that role of eudaimonia kind of reining you in. And even the effort of really being present and really trying to savour a hedonic experience while it's happening has a little bit of that supporting role.

So I think it's an interplay between the two and actually I think the interplay goes the other way as well. I think if you are just a pure eudaimonist (and I know this from first-hand experience) and you don't have hedonic awareness to rein you in and keep you from exhausting yourself, you can really go and tire yourself out.

Do you think that would characterize a lot of other people in academia?

Yes. I do. We could all use a bit of healthy hedonism every once in a while. And you know, I don't think you need it to be 50/50. I love working hard; my colleagues love working hard. I mean, this is what I chose to do. And I'm happy as a clam. But you do need a certain amount of hedonic activity. I

imagine the amount that you need varies from person to person, but I do think that you need at least that 5-10% to function well.

This edition of the book is about recognising exceptional women in the field. Do you have any thoughts about the contribution that women have had in advancing the field? Or do you see gender balance as an issue in positive psychology as a whole?

I don't think that gender really is a problem in the field. I really haven't seen any obstacles, I haven't run into obstacles, I don't have any female friends in the field who have run into major obstacles. I don't think it's like some fields where you know you're not even part of the conversation if you're female. Or, where you get a kind of patronizing pat on the back if you're female but also managed to have a good mind. From what I've seen in the field of positive psychology, what makes you respected is simply your work. The quality of your ideas and the rigor of your work and that's it.

Would you like to make a comment about anything that I haven't asked about today?

I'm good! I'd just like to thank you for taking the time to speak with me.