

A Psychological Approach to a Thriving Resilient Community

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Psychological approaches that are positive and incorporate an introspective process for moral ends offer the hope necessary for the development of a thriving and resilient community. I will argue that the human or social aspect needs to be the focal point in developing a thriving resilient community. In making my case, I will draw from positive psychology, which has gained an important contemporary role because it looks beyond unhealthy individuals and pathology to determine what makes for a thriving individual and society. Positive psychology can help ensure a thriving human population, and consequently a thriving world. It provides the measurements necessary to evaluate the well-being of people. A better understanding of a thriving resilient community can lead to reinventing policies, and rules that govern our society and workplace.

For the purpose of this paper, sustainability is defined as “the capacity to endure”, which can also be referred to as “resilience”. “Resilience” is possibly more accurate (Heinburg & Lerch, 2010) since ‘sustainability’ exaggerates the notion of no ending point. Sustainable Development will be used to refer to the needs of the present that we must meet while contributing to the future generations’ needs. Sustainable Community will refer to a community with resilience—socially, ecologically, and economically. Spreckley calls these three, the “Triple bottom Line” (TBL) and refers to the importance of incorporating each one as a dimension of a sustainable community. Well-being will be used to refer to genuine happiness that can be measured as life satisfaction. Sometimes joyfulness can be used as an indicator because wellness evokes the feeling of genuine joy.

Depression, land degradation, and failing economies are outgrowths of the current approach to the development of communities. The current approach is an un-collaborated hierarchical system that makes top-down and majority vote decisions. The dominant view of development contends that technology and economics alone are necessary to solve human problems, with no provision for increasing people’s sense of meaning in the world. Without the human emphasis and understanding it not only fails to address the real problem but it is also destructive to our environment. Pope Benedict (2009) suggests stopping the destruction by changing our mentality and adopting a new lifestyle. He acknowledges the importance of understanding the essence of human meaning in whole before we will be able develop a society appropriately (Pope Benedict, 2009). Many holistic approaches to development have proven successful in developing happiness in communities by understanding human purpose and understanding. Tomorrow’s thriving resilient human future depends on development strategies that ensure society’s wellness, and realign technology and economics as tools to that end.

While I believe building community is a moral obligation, I also believe that with or without a sense of moral obligation, community leaders ought to focus their efforts on human well-being so as to improve open-mindedness, because that engages people to participate in society. Political campaign strategists reveal that campaigns are designed to improve open-mindedness since these methods encourage people to be more willing to compare candidates (Kam, 2006). Officials spend time and effort to figure-out how people will be involved, since people have a role in the political system to make informed decisions for the community. What they have discovered is that intense campaigns do promote open-mindedness among the people (Kam, 2006). So it is clear that open-mindedness serves an important role in society. It is also important to note that improving well-being also promotes open-mindedness.

Mentioned earlier, a sustainable community is a community that endures, or that is resilient. Developing a resilient (sustainable) community entails providing for the present community while simultaneously building a more resilient Earth for the next generation. A resilient community is sometimes described as a stable community, but this label does not describe the most developed community. A stable community is not necessarily a flourishing one.

A community needs to be psychologically evaluated to ensure the development of a thriving human existence. Positive psychology offers the tools necessary to measure this human existence by measuring subjective well-being and life satisfaction. When we begin to use positive psychology, we will immediately question our development strategies. Simply adding a qualitative value, like ‘thriving’, to the statement “resilient community” offers a meaningful goal. From this point we can begin to evaluate what is needed to achieve this type of community.

Community that provides fair treatment among members seems like it would suffice as a thriving community, but perhaps a community that provides equal opportunity, resources, and tools are needed. Some research does confirm higher well-being among material resource rich communities compared to material resource poor (Diener & Ng et al, 2010). However, measuring different countries reveals different results. For example research suggests that people in Great Britain are happier than Americans even though the income per head is higher in America (Easterlin, 1974). Tov, and Arora (2009) state that income does have a stronger link with well-being when looking at life evaluation, but a weak link to positive feelings (cited in Diener & Ng et al, 2010). It is possible that Great Britain has a social environment that boasts positive feelings. Positive feelings have shown to be strongly linked with social psychological prosperity (Diener & Ng et al, 2010).

A contribution of Positive Psychology stems from its incorporation of subjective well-being as a more reliable indicator of life satisfaction. Peterson, (2006) organized subjective well-being research demonstrating that income is a minimal factor in determining life satisfaction. He makes clear that the percentage of time experiencing positive affect has a greater correlation to well-being. It’s important to note then that a study among poor communities reveals that communities with thriving social and family life have higher subjective life satisfaction (Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2006). In an earlier study, Diener & Seligman, (2002) found that social relations were crucial to well-being. The authors of TBL suggest that a thriving community is a social environment in which the well-being of community members’ is mutually interdependent. Surprisingly, despite this growing body of research evidence pointing to the essential role of social relationships to well-being, Biswas-Diener and Diener (2006) found this to be absent among some programs to improve the well-being of poor communities. These programs tend to have an a focus on group outcome and not social relationships.

We need to start developing communities with high levels of life satisfaction. Peterson (2006) and other researchers suggest that people are generally “north of neutral”, or in other words, generally happy. In order to achieve a thriving community we need to increase life satisfaction beyond neutral. Linley & Joseph (2004) suggest a society with high subjective well-being. Current development strategies boast the removal of material limitations as the successful approach because it produces better livability, opportunity, and freedom, which is essential to a healthy community. However, material limitation is not the only factor in life satisfaction (Easterlin, 1974). Social relations are very important to higher levels of life satisfaction. Improvement of social relations is a missing area in many community development strategies and policies.

Development of reciprocity is essential to social relation. If people invest time and skill, they need to receive an equal return. If people receive inequity, they become drained, less interested, and just generally become stressed, where as people who receive fairness in social exchange are more likely to be fulfilled, and satisfied (Van Horn et al, 2001). This involves an emotional and psychological experience since the social exchange of equity involves trust, whereas a purely economic exchange requires enforcement (Nakonezny and Denton, 2009). Therefore a social norm of reciprocity is fundamental to building a [thriving] community (Van Horn et al, 2001). Befu (1977) emphasized that social “exchange penetrates through the social fabric and may be thought of as a network holding society together...[S]ocial and market exchange are both species of exchange, perhaps of coequal level though belonging to different spheres”.

While economists endorse economic exchange to improve our society, its contribution is surely questionable. Economic progress has led to consumerism, which has become a social norm in America (Peterson, 2006). That norm is widely clearly encouraged by political leaders and economists. By contrast, a thriving economic exchange is needed to help build a thriving resilient community, but is only a single dimension in the TBL. Nevertheless, the consumerism that currently drives America promotes competition and greed (Peterson, 2006). Positive psychology might suggest a more holistic approach that goes beyond the economic exchange. A holistic approach builds social exchange by defining goals and dealing with common problems in ways that build quality of life for people (Savory, 1999).

Additionally, it is important that Positive Psychology be able to measure the progress of the increase in life satisfaction to track progress.

(Sagiv et al, 2004) suggest that social environments that are congruent with individuals' goals and values afford them with opportunities for attainment, thereby increasing the possibility of life satisfaction. When a community together defines a statement that reflects their vision of a thriving sustainable life, they have a basis to develop. They will develop guidelines for a community environment that they desire. The TBL provides three-dimensions for this humanistic concept of sustainable development. TBL includes: 1) a thriving "society", 2) a thriving "environment", and 3) a thriving "economy". All three TBL dimensions need to improve simultaneously, without sacrificing one to meet another. In the following hypothetical example I propose a community vision statement that lays the foundation for measuring a thriving resilient community using Positive Psychology.

Quality of life for people are met, the natural world is resilient and provides food, water, and other resources to all people including future generations, and an economy that ensures the quality of life that people desire.

This statement reflects an integrated perspective for the attainment of a thriving sustainable way of life. The methods to improve the economy and environment will not be discussed in this report, but rather the focus is on the importance of human well-being. Human well-being is the societal aspect of the TBL. Making decisions in line with the TBL is important to achieve the thriving sustainable community, and each dimension can be measured. TBL dimensions: Economics and Environment have many related tools for measurement that are not discussed here. However Society is the important dimension in this report that can be measured by Positive Psychology.

Quality of life is a common phrase that is used synonymously with subjective life satisfaction. Quality of life refers to what is needed for fulfillment as personally described by each individual. It encompasses accomplishments, appraisals, emotions, experiences, and expectations (Peterson, 2006). A community together can describe a statement that reflects the quality of life the member's desire. The statement can accommodate individuals, without having to compromise their values. Thus the more relationships where people are accommodated to their unique quality life, therefore greater life satisfaction. Sagiv et al (2004) concludes that self-direction and achievement are positively correlated to positive affect. Community members collaborating to develop a quality of life statement can become the state of affairs in any society. This would result in a society with policies and guidelines that are more holistic.

Savory (1999) provides three areas of focus to help define a quality of life statement that must be incorporated in a managed *holistic goal*. According to Savory, the holistic goal is needed in order to have direction and a framework from which to achieve a quality of life. Savory's holistic goal addresses the TBL dimensions, as well as three additional foci for describing a "quality of life": 1) relationships, 2) challenge and growth, 3) purpose and contribution. These same areas of focus are prominent within Positive Psychology. The importance of relationships has already been mentioned earlier in this paper. So, challenge and growth are also known as *flow*, which is important for life satisfaction (Csikszentmihályi, 1999). Savory's additional focus on "purpose and contribution" describes the efforts that result in the quality of life desired. It could also be seen as the altruistic effort, which Peterson (2006) and Pope Benedict (2009) both describe as necessary for human well-being.

Positive psychology can measure life satisfaction to discover a thriving community that has a humanistic goal and desires to thrive. Leaders need to understand what makes people thrive in order to successfully implement strategies of sustainable development that ensure the quality of life people desire. The example above depicts components of a quality life, but it does not explain how to improve life satisfaction. Measurement is important because it provides a way to examine how well we are developing society with our current strategies. Changing community behavior in favor of environmental benefits is a typical approach to achieve sustainability. Examples of common environmental benefits are: pollution and waste elimination, and reduction of electricity consumption. The list is not exhaustive, but reflects some of the more popular strategies. Leaders utilize campaigns in the effort to change community behavior in favor of these environmental benefits.

Typical campaign strategies come in the form of billboards, banners, flyers, presentations, etc, that encourage motivational changes (e.g., 'using less electricity will save you money'). However, these typical strategies often end in unchanged behaviors, and a loss of invested time and money (McKenzie-Mohr, 2010).

Social marketing strategies, however, have been very successful. A revised collection of social marketing strategies to be used in sustainable behavior change is known as Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM).

According to Dr. McKenzie-Mohr (2010), Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM) is a very effective psychological approach to achieve sustainable behavior change. CBSM breaks down barriers in common thinking. However, as a sole approach it is designed to target improved human well-being based on technology and/or economics. Mentioned earlier in this report, technology and economics are not appropriate methods to improve life satisfaction without an initial goal for a quality life. Leaders who drive change for sustainability need to be aware of the inter-relatedness of individual and community wellness, and the best means to improve life satisfaction. The most promising approach is to combine positive psychology with social marketing.

CBSM leads to community change that improves an environment and/or economic goal, but does not have an internal mechanism to ensure a thriving society. It is a tool used to break barriers and promote behavior change through social norms. CBSM lacks an internal component that measures progress in accordance with the TBL. Positive psychology offers a remedy, because it has the ability to measure the humanistic portion of what makes a society thrive. Leadership is key to ensuring the development of thriving resilient communities. They have useful tools available to begin focusing on the well-being of people. They can spearhead social marketing campaigns designed to move the community away from consumerism towards meaning and purpose. Leaders can additionally facilitate situations in which people thrive.

Other research shows that communication, validation, and success are also a very important part of human well-being. For example: research on the self-concordance model shows that success is correlated to well-being (Sagiv, 2004). These factors can be developed into situations that build community and quality of life for people. Positive psychology is too young to know the percentage of success and which approaches work best, however, extrapolating the data from the literature review above could be useful in the development of a thriving resilient community framework for further research. Approaches to developing community resilience tend to over-emphasize technological and economical strategies. These current strategies have not improved human satisfaction, neither the environment. Thus, strategies need to focus on the three dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line. The TBL needs to be incorporated into efforts to develop the quality life that people desire, thereby improving life satisfaction. The TBL alone is not enough. We must manage and measure our progress continuously.

For people to achieve the quality of life they desire, and hence achieve a thriving society, a focus on management (Savory, 1999) and measurement (Peterson, 2006) will be essential. Management presumes knowledgeable leadership, while measurement is a tool for ensuring proper management. Earlier we discussed how the TBL describes a thriving resilient community, and how it incorporates a thriving “society” as an important dimension. Leaders facilitating the development of a thriving resilient community need to measure the effects of all three dimensions of the TBL, but the “society” dimension should be the primary focus.

Positive Psychology will play an invaluable role in achieving sustainable communities that thrive by measuring the societal aspect of the Triple Bottom Line. We must first realign the focus of sustainable community development to ensure community wellness. Development strategies all too often assume that the removal of material limitations (e.g., technological or economical) is the key to development, presupposing that material limitation prevents wellness and life satisfaction. However, the development strategy must target human wellness. This strategy cannot just be tagged onto a material emphasis. Projects that seek to contribute to the development of human communities must have human well-being as the primary goal, completely understanding what will in fact provide meaning, and dignity in a individual’s life. (Pope Benedict, 2009) This is a challenge that can be addressed. People have the ability to discover their meaning and purpose, as well as their values. Based upon research, it is reasonable to assume that basing a sustainable behavior change campaign on meaning and purpose, rather than environment or economics, will result in people doing what they value most, and consequently experiencing higher life satisfaction.

In conclusion, the research shows evidence that we can improve human well-being and achieve the quality of life we desire. Additionally, that by doing this we will obtain a thriving resilient community. The first task to sustainable development is to move beyond the materialistic lifestyle and discover human meaning and purpose. This will be the basis for the new quality of life we will seek.

Next, we need a new social environment. One not based on a consumerism that promotes competition and greed, but one that promotes personal and social well-being. Social exchange, reciprocity, and commonality are essential pieces to a new lifestyle.

This new social environment, a “thriving resilient community”, boils down to a place of social and economic exchange with altruistic effort. This is a thriving community where people have purpose in contribution and meaningful work. Where all human well-being are valued (present and unborn). When we value all humanity, we will find a quality of life that preserves resources. Finally, technology in this thriving community supports the resilience of this new ‘quality of life’. Positive Psychology is a science that provides the proof for developers and society that we need to realign our approach to development.

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