

Laudatio for Carol D. Ryff

29 January, 2014, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht

prof. dr. Peter Derkx

Dear Dr Carol Ryff,

It is a great honor for me to explain to you and everybody present at this solemn occasion why the University of Humanistic Studies has decided to bestow an honorary doctorate upon you.

Let me start by saying that I take it for granted that everybody accepts that your scientific and scholarly work is of the highest quality. Your own review article “Psychological Well-Being Revisited” (just published online) supplies sufficient evidence for this and for the wide impact of your work since 1989. Scientific quality is a *conditio sine qua non* for an honorary degree. The University of Humanistic Studies, however, has more specific reasons for conferring it on you.

First, your research deals with **themes that are key to the teaching and research at the University of Humanistic Studies**. You developed a concept of **psychological well-being** that is theoretically rich and starts from the conviction that research on well-being should not only deal with feeling good, happy, positive or satisfied with life, but needs to encompass the meaning-making, self-realizing, striving aspects of being human. Your theoretical model and measure of well-being incorporates six components: purpose in

life, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships and self-acceptance. This theoretical model has proven very fruitful. To date over 350 publications using your so-called 'eudaimonic' scales of well-being have appeared in more than 150 scientific journals. For the University of Humanistic Studies it is important that your concept of psychological well-being provides a bridge between our research on **meaning in life** and an enormous reservoir of empirical research results.

Another prominent theme which connects your research with ours is **resilience**. You define it as the maintenance or recovery of health and well-being in the face of cumulative adversity. You conceive the study of resilience as dealing with the question how people sustain positive outlooks and functional capacities as life challenges multiply. The link between mental resilience and experiencing life as meaningful is what especially interests us. Perhaps this link can be found in the ability to reframe troubling situations and to reconfigure one's view of life and the world. Your investigations of resilience are a source of inspiration for us.

Your work not only helps us to tackle the themes of mental resilience and a meaningful life. You are not only a professor of psychology. One of the main research themes of the University of Humanistic Studies is **aging well** and since 1995 you are also the director of the Institute on Aging at your university, the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Prominent in your aging research is the MIDUS (Midlife in the U.S.) longitudinal study. More than 400 publications have been generated by the data. A major MIDUS publication is *How Healthy Are We?*, the 2004 book you edited together with Gilbert Brim and Ronald Kessler. The study of aging and the life course through the lenses of resilience and psychological well-being brings you close to the heart of our own research.

The major objective of MIDUS is to understand the interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors as people age from early adulthood through later life. This refers to a second reason to give you an honorary doctorate. Your research is **multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary** in an exemplary way, integrating psychology, sociology, neurology, biology and medicine. The University of Humanistic Studies has been focusing its teaching and research for 25 years now on meaning in life in a just society and in doing this it has combined and will continue to combine approaches from the humanities and the social sciences (psychology included). Your conception of well-being builds on ideas of Aristotle, the philosopher, and you have already told me to be very interested in contributions from the humanities to your research. We would be delighted to play a meaningful role in this.

A third reason for your honorable distinction today is that your work clearly is not only motivated by intellectual curiosity and a desire to increase knowledge. It is also **motivated by a concern for social justice and by a humane engagement** with the well-being of individual human beings and with the development and destiny of the American and other societies. This could already be guessed on the basis of several of your publications, for instance the article on “Social Inequalities in Health” and the important book *The Self and Society in Aging Processes*. Your continuing research interest in Milwaukee’s African-American population (with its high unemployment among adult males and its high infant mortality rates) is also telling in this respect. However, the phone call I had with you in June last year in which we talked about the work of the Italian economist Luigino Bruni on capabilities and happiness definitely confirmed this impression. Your moral motivation also shows in your work on aging. An example can be found in your article “Psychological Well-Being in Adult Life” from which, to conclude, I quote the following:

“Older adults’ recurring lower self-ratings on purpose in life and personal growth warrant attention. These patterns point to possibly important psychological challenges of later life, and may support related arguments that contemporary social structures lag behind the added years of life many people now enjoy. That is, opportunities for continued growth and development and for meaningful experience may be limited for older persons today. An alternative hypothesis is that older persons place less value on personal growth and purpose in life than do younger age groups. However, we have had respondents rate their ideals of well-being, and these data challenge the notion that the aged no longer idealize continued self-development or purposeful living.” [END QUOTE]

The University of Humanistic Studies practices higher education and scientific research from humanist norms and values, so it is fitting for us to also point out your moral motivation and honor it.

For all these reasons it is a great pleasure for me to have the privilege of conferring this honorary doctorate in humanistic studies on you.