Human Behavior, Development and Society
ISSN 2651-1762, Vol 23 No 1, April 2022

Reflecting on Criticisms of Positive Psychology: A Rebalancing Act

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Date Received: 24 January 2022 Revised: 1 March 2022 Accepted: 3 March 2022

Abstract

The field of positive psychology has grown and spread quickly. Unsurprisingly, such rapid growth has led to some confusion about what, exactly, positive psychology is. Positive psychology has also attracted a number of critics who have questioned its necessity, validity, and relevance to non-Western cultures. This article presents these criticisms and responds to each of them. Instead of being seen as a separate field, the authors argue that positive psychology is best viewed as a rebalancing of psychology's focus as a whole. The article examines the immediate and powerful impact that ideas and practices from positive psychology have had on individuals, schools, organizations, and nations. The authors suggest that such quick and ready acceptance of positive psychology's core ideas and practices reflects the presence of a pre-existing imbalance within the field of psychology and calls for a more correct understanding of what is meant by a positive psychology. The article concludes by arguing that the study of flourishing should not be viewed as a new field of psychology. Instead, it should be seen as a complement to existing psychological theory and practice, with the result being a more holistic understanding of what it means to be human.

Keywords: *Positive psychology, well-being, criticism, application, flourishing*

Introduction

Positive psychology has been defined as "the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). The field of positive psychology continues to expand at unprecedented speed and, in a short period of time, has gone global. Positive psychology emphasizes the importance of cultivating mental health in addition to helping those with mental illness, the latter of which has been the primary focus of psychology to date (Seligman et al., 2006). Early signs of the development of positive psychology can first be seen in 1902 with William James' concept of "healthy mindedness," and later in ideas from humanistic psychologists, including Rogers' concept of the fully functioning person, Maslow's call to study healthy people to understand self-actualization, and others (for an historical overview see Froh, 2004). However, officially the field of positive psychology began in 1998, when Dr. Martin Seligman, as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), formally called for psychologists to emphasize research on human excellence and goodness, character strengths, and building the best in life. Seligman did not suggest replacing the study of mental illness, but claimed that illness or morbidity had been the almost exclusive focus of psychology for too long, and suggested that a focus on understanding and treating psychological problems did not contribute sufficiently to the development of thriving individuals or communities (Seligman, 1998; Seligman & Czikszentmihalyi, 2000). It has been over 20 years since Martin Seligman famously called for such change and the debate on the verisimilitude of positive psychology continues, with various academics leveling criticisms against the field as a whole. This article first explores the various powerful and pervasive impacts of positive psychology theories, researches, and practices on individuals, groups, and nations. Next, it highlights some of the most significant criticisms of positive psychology. The article concludes by arguing that, rather than viewing positive psychology as a specific branch or perspective, a more accurate understanding will allow positive psychology to be seen as a rebalancing of psychology as a whole.

Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology and the Individual

Seligman and Czikszentmihalyi's (2000) original call was for a psychology concerned with helping "healthy" individuals live more fulfilling lives, not only reducing the suffering of the mentally ill. The field of positive psychology has clearly had an impact on people's lives. However, evaluating that impact on the non-clinical population poses challenges because "normal" or healthy people typically do not seek help from psychologists or counselors. The widespread and sustained popularity of books on topics related to "happiness," however, indicates the existence of a great number of normal happiness seekers (Parks et al., 2012). In recent years, *Time Magazine*, *National Geographic Magazine*, and *The Economist*, have devoted covers, and even entire issues, to the topic. Likewise, the proliferation of websites dedicated to improving well-being through the application of science-based positive psychology methods, such as greater.good.edu, verywellmind.com, and positivepsychology.com, suggests a wide audience among the non-clinical population. Additionally, the burgeoning popularity of a variety of smartphone applications, including Headspace, Happify, Live Happy, and more, which use science-based positive psychology principles to improve individual well-being, indicates the presence of a high number of normal people who are seeking, and perhaps finding to varying degrees, higher levels of happiness.

One way researchers are gauging the actual impact of positive psychology on the well-being of the non-clinical population is via research into people enrolled in massive open online courses (MOOCs), which are open to the public. For example, researchers looked at the effects of The Science of Well-Being, a Yale University course offered on the Coursera.org platform, and found evidence for significant improvements in well-being when compared with a control group (Yaden et al., 2021). Importantly, with over 3.3 million registered learners to date for this one course, there is clearly significant interest by non-clinical populations. Likewise, there exists a tremendous potential impact on any adult who registers and practice positive psychology interventions or PPIs (Yaden et al., 2021). It is worth noting that these authors found over 20 additional courses related to happiness, positive psychology, and well-being on Coursera and edX, the two most popular MOOCs, from universities such as Harvard University, the University of California, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina, the University of Pennsylvania, and more. It is apparent that learning about, and practicing, well-being skills developed by positive psychologists, whether by book, website, course, or smartphone app, is impacting the lives of a great many healthy people.

Within the field of clinical psychology, the influence of positive psychology is much more apparent. The publication of the first *Handbook of Positive Clinical Psychology* (Wood & Johnson, 2016) serves as a tangible example reflecting the need for a more balanced approach to treating mental illness than the existing models offer; one that emphasizes the importance of building up the best things in life as well as fixing the worst (Seligman, 2011). Positive psychology's focus has spurred alternative conceptions to the dominant clinical paradigm, the disease model of mental illness, and questioned many of its underlying assumptions (Wood et al., 2020). A number of therapeutic approaches using positive psychology have been developed, including well-being therapy, quality-of-life therapy, mindfulness-based therapies, and positive psychotherapy (Wood et al., 2020). Positive psychotherapy (hereafter PPT), for example, emphasizes the importance of identifying and using one's character strengths, as well as remediating symptoms of mental illness. The importance of cultivating positive emotions is recognized in PPT as well as assisting in remediating distress (Rashid, 2015). While these developments are quite new, and more research is needed, preliminary studies show promise for their application to a range of psychopathologies (Wood et al., 2020). These examples highlight the value of incorporating the theoretical and practical tools of positive psychology to complement and enrich the treatment of clinical populations.

Positive Psychology and Education

Beyond the benefit to the individual, positive psychology's mission also includes the scientific examination of factors helping organizations and communities, such as schools, thrive by building on

their strengths and virtues (Gable & Haidt, 2005). In response to high rates of depression among youth worldwide, Seligman and colleagues concluded that schools were ideal providers of initiatives aimed at developing resilience, preventing depression, and increasing life satisfaction on a wide scale (Seligman et al., 2009). Positive education, which aims to "teach both the skills of wellbeing and the skills of achievement" (Waters, 2011, p. 77), is well-aligned with calls for a new educational paradigm focused on developing the "whole student." Accordingly, schools around the world have since been integrating elements of positive psychology into their classrooms, and mounting evidence suggests that the skills of well-being championed by proponents of psychology can, in fact, be taught and assessed in schools (Waters, 2011; Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Adler, 2018). Some of the classroom intervention programs that have been studied to date include:

- the Penn Resiliency Program, used globally
- the Positive Psychology Program, first developed in Strath Haven High School in Pennsylvania
- awesome Us, a New Zealand program for fifth and sixth graders
- the Geelong Grammar School Project, a school wide program in Australia
- the Happy Classrooms Program, developed in Spain
- the training programs from the Positive Psychology Research Center of Tsinghua University, China, and further disseminated to schools around China
- the Youth First and Girls First training programs, from the nonprofit organization CorStone, in India and Kenya
- the Strengths Gym in British schools.

The inclusion of positive psychology within curricula provides clear indications of improvements on a host of measures, including resilience, psychological and emotional well-being, improved social skills, higher academic performance, prevention of depressive symptoms, improved conduct, and better physical health (Seligman & Adler, 2019; Seligman, 2011; Harzer et al., 2020). At the university level, institutions of higher education are increasingly seen as places that should prepare students for not just their careers, but also to be well-rounded and responsible global citizens (Oades et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2018). The concept of a "positive university" has gained momentum, with universities in the United States, Mexico, Portugal, China, and others embracing the application of positive psychology principles to enhancing the wellbeing of their students, faculty, staff, and organization as a whole (Seligman & Adler, 2018; Harzer et al., 2020; Oades et al., 2014). Mounting evidence at all levels of education suggests that applying positive psychology principles in schools and universities fosters well-being in students (Lambert et al., 2019). In fact, the theories and practices of positive psychology are demonstrating powerful, measurable, beneficial effects that, while still in need of further study and refinement, clearly contribute to gaps in existing psychological knowledge.

Positive Psychology and Organizations

The fields of organizational psychology and organizational behavior have long been interested in the factors that contribute to improved productivity and performance. Traditionally, however, organizations have focused on preventing harm and fixing problems. Management research has long indicated that simply removing the negative factors from the workplace does not necessarily lead to positive changes in productivity, job satisfaction, or motivation (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2020). Again, responding to calls by the founders of positive psychology for a more balanced approach, positive organizational psychology, an approach was created that focused on studying "life-giving, positive characteristics in organizations" and "positive subjective experiences, positive traits, and positive institutions" (Donaldson et al., 2019, p. 114). Concepts and evidence-based practices from positive psychology have since readily been adopted by organizations around the world seeking to actualize employee potential in pursuit of organizational success. Success in today's competitive workplaces requires organizations and their employees to show creativity, to continuously grow, and to consistently excel in what they do (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2020). With higher well-being being associated with a number of desirable outcomes, such as higher retention, higher levels of

engagement, better work attendance, better customer satisfaction, and improved work performance, organizations have a vested interest in their members' well-being (Donaldson et al., 2019; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2020). A review of research evaluating the effectiveness of PPIs at work found that they improved desired work outcomes, and decreased undesirable work outcomes overall (Donaldson et al., 2019). The recently founded forum, International Positive Psychology Association Positive Work and Organization Division (2019), reflects the integration of positive psychology's broader focus. Seligman's call for a focus on all that is good in life has stimulated various lines of research and practice in yet another area, that of management and organizational behavior, which is flourishing.

Positive Psychology and National and International Policy

Beyond organizations, the importance of well-being has also increasingly been a matter of concern for policy makers and economists at all levels. Since Bhutan first began including "gross national happiness" in its development planning in 1972, countries around the world have increasingly begun considering the happiness of their citizens using measures that go beyond the traditional monetary metrics (Michaelson et al., 2009). Cities, states, and countries around the world have officially begun prioritizing the well-being of its citizens in a variety of capacities. Some have even included wellbeing in their countries' constitutions, including South Korea, Ecuador, and Japan (Snyder et al., 2020). At the global level, the United Nations has been reporting on the well-being of countries since its World Happiness Report began in 2011. By seeking more balance in an imbalanced field, the ideas and practices originating from positive psychology already have informed and influenced policy at local, national, and international levels (Snyder et al., 2020). In spite of the aforementioned impacts of positive psychology's theories, researches, and applications, it has attracted a number of detractors.

Criticisms of Positive Psychology

The Happiness and Suffering Dialectic

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism of positive psychology can be found in the argument that the exploration of human excellence is not some modern phenomena. Concepts embedded in the infrastructure of positive psychology have been explored long before Seligman. This is evidenced among psychologists such as, Victor Frankl's (1985) *Man's Search for Meaning* (originally published in 1946), May's (1958) discussion on the role of existential anxiety the development of terror management theory (Solomon et al., 1991), and the development of humanistic psychology. Ancient philosophers such as Plato engaged in existentialist debates on the role of happiness and suffering yet these debates continued in the 19th and 20th century and are commonly attributed to notable thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Camus. Similar concepts such as emotional regulation, finding meaning in life, discovering core strengths and development of personhood have all been explored in early philosophies in the East, as seen in Taoism, Buddhism and Zen practices. The elucidation of the happiness and suffering dialectic is not limited to intellectual giants or Asian philosophies, it is at the very core of the human motivation to attain knowledge of self and to achieve growth from that knowledge. The self-evident truth of humanity's desire to develop is inherent in many of the principles of positive psychology (kindness, flow, empathy, or optimism) should not be attributed to Martin Seligman or the APA, yet the intellectual merit of positive psychology is evidenced by the cascade of research that followed Seligman's 1998 call for intervention. Seligman and company deserve credit for this. Further to this discussion, there are additional concerns regarding the nature of wellbeing as a byproduct of internal (innate) or external (behavioral) mechanisms. Physical health is an important component of mental health (Koenig et al., 2012; Brief et al., 1993) and physical health has a clear genetic foundation (Røysamb et al., 2002). Thus, the state-trait debate on the nature of well-being is a contested aspect of the positive psychology movement. Psychology's role in self-help or the achievement of a better self are rooted in humanism yet positive psychology should not be labeled from a neo-humanistic perspective. An alternative interpretation is that positive psychology brings a scientifically rigorous exploration to the age-old questions of what it means to flourish, where before there was none to be found.

Humanism and Positive Psychology

While there are many criticisms of positive psychology, such as its' apparent similarity to self-help literature (Cabanas, 2016), its' American roots (Ehrenreich, 2009), or the perceived inherent ethnocentrism (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008), one of the most common critiques is that this perspective is simply an offshoot of humanism (Robbins, 2008). Many see positive psychology as being implicitly grounded in humanistic ideologies, such as positive mental health as discussed by Jahoda (1958), developed well before the establishment of PPIs. Indeed, Abraham Maslow, an influential driver of the humanistic movement, used the term positive psychology in publications (Maslow, 1954). However, Waterman (2013) clearly articulated three key features that distinguish the humanistic and positive paradigms. The first involves ontological differences whereby the humanists embrace social constructivism, phenomenology, and existentialism. On the other hand, the positive practitioners embrace both the individual nature and the generic nature of humanity as evident in the abundance of articles based on the development of character strengths.

The second distinction of these two psychological perspectives is the epistemological divide as Waterman (2013) recognized through the reliance on qualitative (humanistic) or quantitative (positive) research paradigms (Friedman, 2008). It is important to remain mindful of the fact that positivist psychology researchers' reliance on quantitative methodologies (Park & Peterson, 2007) is an epistemological strategy that aims to result in more rigorous (i.e., positivist based statistical) data that supports or refutes the research aims and that will be accepted by the psychological and psychiatric community. Such an approach avoids the criticisms so often cast upon phenomenological findings that result from interpretivist qualitative methodologies. The abundance of evidence on the positive impact of PPIs has led some observers to claim that positive psychology has caused the rebirth of a Panglossian era in psychological research (Cabanas, 2018). This is further complicated by one of the most common criticisms levied at the positive psychology research community, the problematic nature of operationalizing concepts such as mindfulness (Quaglia et al., 2015), subjective well-being (Busseri & Sadava, 2011), and life satisfaction (Pavot & Diener, 2008). Based on these criticisms, some argue that research in the field lacks credibility (Frawley, 2015).

Additionally, critics argue that the reliance on quantitative questionnaires implementing Likert scales leads to confirmation bias and social desirability response bias (Schwarz et al., 2008). However, one need only to imagine the potentially lethargic development of this new psychological paradigm as well as the wave of criticism that would have washed over Seligman and company had the majority of research methodologies implemented at the onset been based on epistemological, ontological, hermeneutic, or axial notions of the subjective human experience. Indeed, the abundance of quantitative instruments that have been developed, as well as the empirical data that support the PPIs, have contributed greatly to advancing the goals as stated by Seligman at the onset.

The third distinguishing feature of positive psychology that clearly separates this ideology from humanism relates to the applicability of the philosophy to counselors, therapists, and the like (Waterman, 2013). While humanistic and other psychosocial paradigms often endeavor to gain greater understanding of the phenomenological experience of the client, positive psychology has developed a series of PPIs (see Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2011; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013) that are not as client-counselor focused and furthermore are pragmatic in the sense that they do not require years of self-exploration and existential quandary (Waterman, 2013). In sum, the ontological, epistemological, and therapeutic differences clearly distinguish humanism and positive psychology.

Positive Psychology is WEIRD

Psychology as a whole has been rather Western centered since inception (Berry, 2013), as has psychology as a social science (Hendriks et al., 2019). It has been argued, based on evidence outlining the predominant role of American psychologists in both counseling and research output by Arnett (2008) and Allik (2013), that the majority of research is WEIRD—based on data collected from participants which are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). Yet global demographic trends are not WEIRD. An analysis of positive psychology research concluded

that only 5.5% of research output was conducted in non-Western nations (Schui & Krampen, 2010). This argument, the Western and thus individualistic nature of psychology, has led to additional criticism (Cabanas, 2018) wherein positive psychology is characterized as a byproduct of ideologies emphasizing Western individualistic paths toward flourishing (Richardson & Guignon, 2008).

Implicit within many PPIs is the value of instrumentalism and individualism (Wong, 2019). Yet the claim is exacerbated given the American origins of most PPIs (Park & Peterson, 2007). This American individualistic argument lends to the claim that these PPIs cannot be reliably implemented abroad and further arguments that these "happiness therapies" (Cabanas, 2018. p. 4) are far too individualistic, have led some to misinterpret the calls for greater socialization and development of empathy and instead choose to focus on the politics of wellbeing within an individualistic lens. A further semantic undercurrent is prevalent in much of the academic literature on PPIs where critics commonly substitute terms such as wellbeing with "happiness" and individualistic for "narcissistic." While, from the global cultural perspective, individualism is on the rise (Santos et al., 2017); from the macrosocial perspective, given access to technology, the ability of the individual to seek knowledge related to mental health questions and potential solutions has never been greater. This is particularly relevant in cultures that stigmatize mental health, a global problem (Thornicroft et al., 2009), yet particularly relevant given the increasing global acceptance of psychological treatments in traditionally collectivist nations in Asia (Kudva et al., 2020), which accounts for 60% of the global population. In India, for example, Nandy (2013) argued the transition to individualism is a "cultural disease" (p. 176) manifest in the desperately narcissistic pursuit of happiness that originated in the West. In fact, cross-cultural research in positive psychology is still in its infancy, but the trend is clear: research from non-Western countries is increasing rapidly (Hendriks et al., 2019). However, simply having American origins is not a credible reason to discount attempts to rigorously examine the processes and elements making up well-being. On the contrary, the need for high-quality research that is relevant to non-Western cultures is a powerful justification for renewed efforts to develop methodology that explores the cultural variations in understanding the factors make life most worth living.

Discussion

Positive psychology has spent over 20 years using the tools of science to investigate the various elements, causes, and consequences of well-being. If at first there was some question whether the science of positive psychology would contribute anything of value to science and society, that question has been answered. Interest has grown enormously and has had a significant impact on a wide range of disciplines, including mental health, education, organizations, economics, national, and international policy (Maddux, 2020). For example, a Google search for "positive psychology" by the authors in 2021 resulted in over 8,740,000 results, and the same search in Google Scholar resulted in over 3,450,000 results. Additionally, the phenomenon has gone global, with positive psychology journals, conferences, and associations across Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. However, as a relatively new area of focus, and one that receives a tremendous amount of popular media attention, many still question the value of the contributions made by positive psychology. Such skepticism, explored in the criticisms described above, may be warranted, as popularity and growth does not speak to the validity of the science. The authors of this article argue, then, that positive psychology represents a rebalancing of psychology as a whole; a holistic refocusing of what it means to be human. When seen in this light, the above criticisms, specifically that positive psychology is nothing new, that it is just an extension of humanism, and that it is only relevant to Western cultures, are not valid. Rather than being seen as a separate field within psychology, positive psychology should be acknowledged globally as an important complement to existing psychosocial theories, techniques, and interventions across various branches of psychology as a whole. An examination of positive psychology's many impacts makes a strong case for expanding psychology's current purview to include a greater focus on studying the positive (Gallagher & Lopez, 2021).

Conclusion

In this article, the authors argue that the positive psychology can best be seen as a rebalancing, rather than an entirely new perspective, branch, or a sub-field of psychology. The initial call for a more positive psychology was a direct result of psychology's almost exclusive focus on the negative since its inception, and the subsequent rapid and ubiquitous growth of interest in studying the positive reflects the need to address the historical imbalance. The inclusion of a scientifically rigorous examination of the positives across all branches of psychology has been welcomed by psychologists, but not all agree on its value. Upon reflection, treating positive psychology as a new perspective or a separate field is a mistake. The study of flourishing, of thriving, cannot be separated and criticized, because the good, together with the bad, form the whole. When seen in this light, the most significant criticisms of positive psychology lose their relevance altogether. Perhaps eliminating the moniker "positive psychology" altogether is the next step in the rebalancing process.

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