

A critical review of the history and current status of positive psychology

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ABSTRACT

Positive psychology is emerging as an alternative to negative psychology. The positive approach seeks to highlight intrapersonal and interpersonal resources in order to favour the optimum development of people, groups, organisations and societies. This tradition has a long history in Western and Eastern philosophical and anthropological thought. Therefore, it is not a novelty or original and so can and should be criticised. This study concludes that positive psychology is not necessary or essential for healthy or reasonable psychology, as its proposals have long been widely known.

Key words: Well-being, post-traumatic development, happiness, realistic optimism, positive psychology, resilience

Received: 14 October 2009

Accepted: 23 November 2009

INTRODUCTION

The concept of positive psychology includes all those aspects which are related to the art of positive living or to resources for the good life. The approach here accepted is *eudaimonic*, as opposed to the *hedonic*, which focuses on happiness from an utilitarianism and pragmatism orientation. The eudaimonic approach, by way of contrast, focuses on taking responsible charge of the historical and personal process of living. It seeks to build intrapersonal and interpersonal resources not only for invulnerability but also for personal development and in the search for happiness. Classic *eudaimonia* is better built with resources such as *areté* or *virtus*. This study chooses the alternative of identifying *eudaimonia* or happiness, with *areté*, which is in turn related to the concept of an ethical and virtuous person, *virtus*. Healthy values, which entail personal effort, contribute to creating positive personal and social resources which make up a framework by which a happy life can be built up.

As far as this study is concerned, good life is related to the healthy regulation of cognition, emotions and actions, which are useful to generate psychological invulnerability. Positive constructive emotions *extend* the positive existential perspective of human behavioural potential and favour coping strategies to extract benefit from adversity. They also

favour the struggle for social justice, positive social interaction and moral emotions.

This study aims to establish a critical perspective of the present-day state of positive psychology. To do that, it starts by differentiating between positive psychology and negative psychology. Then, it reflects on whether positive psychology makes a really original contribution to psychological knowledge. Furthermore, it considers that there are too many concepts referring to the objectives of positive mental health which, in the last resort is related to the classic terms of *eudaimonia*, *areté* and *virtus*. Finally, it deals with the applications of the theoretical and practical principles of positive psychology and with an account of criticisms likely to be formulated.

From negative psychology to positive psychology

Either due to historical ignorance or to a lack of education, psychology seems, not always but in fact traditionally, to have put emphasis on the problems of human beings. At the end of the 1990's this approach was named, we believe falsely and a mistakenly, *negative psychology* (Gillham & Seligman, 1999). It seems that traditional psychology undermines the resilience of people and victimizes them. Furthermore, it emphasizes unjustified epidemics such as depressive symptomatology and anxiety disorders. It is not true that the history of psychology, regarded in a broad sense, puts fundamental emphasis on predicting failure, hopelessness or despair and forgets about hope, persistence, creativity and the meaning of life. This approach is incorrect and is not justified historically.

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In this instance, Gillham and Seligman (2009) show their great lack of knowledge about the history of human thought. This negative approach can be related to the *deficit model*, of *risk* or *vulnerability*. It is, therefore, a psychology for the *society of risk*, which highlights rehabilitation and the overcoming of personal and social pathologies.

As a supposedly original alternative, *positive psychology* is framed within the traditional *competence model* or *prevention-oriented invulnerability model*. It adopts theoretical and practical perspectives founded on humanistic psychology and represents a hopeful approach to human nature and its existential course. Positive psychology is related to the human being's positive and constructive *explanatory drive* and to the need for a *feeling* of competence. Nevertheless, this perspective does not theoretically contribute anything original. In the general population, the norm is *resilience* to life's adversities and not a surrendering to them, which we have known for a very long time now. So, what's new about positive psychology?

Is there anything really new in positive psychology?

As argued by Lazarus (2003a) positive psychology ignores much of the work of the past (p. 175). The history of psychology has traditionally been considered as presentist. That is to say, it regrettably supposes that the present day psychological knowledge is superior to that of the past. However, this perspective is not only inaccurate but also wrong in relation to positive psychology. As a matter of fact, psychology often uses new labels to refer to what has been known for centuries. Before going on with the description of this study, we think it could be useful to bear in mind the following statement by Descartes (1637/006, 6), "When we get excessively interested in what was being done over the past centuries, we get generally ignorant of what is currently going on." This is an interesting idea, as scrutinising history too much may distort the present day and future perspectives of psychological knowledge.

Most of Western and Eastern anthropological philosophy, as well as the Egyptian and Arabic, have emphasis on: living with moderation, having a comprehensive world view, overcoming adversities, learning to suffer with strength, getting to know oneself, controlling anger, avoiding excesses, wisely guarding against danger, struggling for temperance and sound judgement, searching for spiritual harmony and peace, putting emphasis on personal effort, favouring internal potential, or establishing social resources for social support; etc. The aim is to achieve a good frame of mind and a balance in the cognitive and behavioural aspects of the existential passage. *Delight* and *relish* in the process of living represent an expansion of the existential potential, which coincides with the approach of positive mental health and holistic health. This is the approach of *expanding and building* positive emotions and the art of an ethical and virtuous life. If this is not positive psychology, it very much looks like it.

Anybody who lets themselves be guided by epistemic curiosity and a comprehensive view of history may come across the key ideas of positive psychology in many centuries-old studies. We here assert that the *eudaimonic perspective* of positive psychology does not represent a new point of view. Those who do think so, show their unjustifiable ignorance of the history of anthropological thinking and of Graeco-Roman and Oriental public health. The values advocated by the supposedly original positive psychology have no novelty or originality in them at all (Fernández-Ríos, 2008; Fernández-Ríos and Cornes, 2003). The historical development of positive psychology is *not* what appears in its manuals. These instead contribute to distort it. The possible real story is otherwise and usually outside the books on the history of psychology. All this manifests a deficient and inaccurate historical approach to psychological knowledge prior to the 19th century. Fernández-Ríos (2008) argues the following in another study, "I find it reasonable to conclude that positive psychology does not contribute solutions to any existential problem which have not already been addressed by classic Western and Eastern thinkers and by common sense"(p. 169). Common sense has been marginalized and unjustifiably ignored in the main, by present day psychology. For his part, Avia (2006) states that the approach of positive psychology "is not a new or homogeneous paradigm or model; not to speak of an alternative to 'non-positive' psychology" (p. 239). In this regard, we should wonder whether we have a clear idea of what positive psychology has historically represented. On behalf of a fake scientism, psychology has forgotten about people's everyday history of philosophy, about their existential day to day efforts. This makes these words by Seligman (2008) clearly inaccurate and, ultimately, as wrong, namely, "I propose a new field: positive health" (p. 3). The terminology used by positive psychology is not novel nor does it contribute anything original to what we already knew.

Concepts related to positive psychology

Western classical anthropological philosophy makes emphasis on *areté* and *virtue* to achieve happiness. People with courage to live should not let themselves be uselessly consumed by suffering. According to scholasticism, *traits of a healthy frame of mind* are prudence, justice, strength of spirit and temperance. Human beings seem to have a healing strength coming from nature for acquitting themselves well in adverse circumstances. This is the issue of strength of health and the constructive value of suffering, historically known as hygiene of the mind or hygiene of the soul.

Positive psychology speaks of the controversial concept of the *optimum human being*. It seeks *healthy psychological development*, the struggle for well-being and personal thriving. Positive psychology is the allegedly scientific study of the psychological mechanisms of strengths, resources or virtues that, within each corresponding social and material context, contribute to constructing an optimum performance of individuals, groups, organizations and societies. Historically speaking, there is nothing new in it. The aim of part of Western

and Eastern anthropological and philosophical history has always focused on the struggle to *extract benefit from adversity*.

The present day discourse of psychology has at its disposal the following series of concepts and psychological mechanisms which are relevant for positive psychology: invincibility, protecting factors, temperament, resistance, elasticity, growth, prosperity, reward delay, invulnerability, strength, vigour, need to thrive, proactive self-efficiency, self-esteem, self-determination, resistance to temptation, dispositional optimism, hardness, religious beliefs, social support, sense of coherence, psychofortology, fortigenesis, power, energy, vitality, comprehensive optimizing personality, learnt powers, the positive side of negative thinking, constructive or proactive social comparison, dedramatising sense of humour, ability to forgive, or leisure time activities and so on. In general, all of this terminology refers to strengths or cognitive and emotional fortitude in people's everyday lives.

So much redundant psychological discourse confuses rather than clarifies. When the concepts do not contribute anything new, we get into language games which are very often irrelevant to psychology. For this reason, we believe in using a terminology that highlights the common and finds a consensus, instead of focusing on what is wrongly different. The best thing for the human being seems to always be the middle way.

From the wisdom of the middle way to positive psychology

Sophía is defined as knowledge or awareness of divine and human issues. Philosophía, as far as we are concerned, represents the art necessary for a virtuous life. Wisdom makes reference to learning to live peacefully and virtuously from internal and external experience. Wisdom has to do with practical and moral existential integrity.

Classical Western thinkers spoke of *areté* and *virtus*. It is urgent to retake these concepts for the psychology of the morally mature person. Virtue works as a positive command for progress toward personal growth. Wisdom or maturity of self are useful to reach an authentic quality of life with courage, motivation and existential meaning. The classical formulation of virtue includes justice, bravery, moderation, magnanimity, sensibility, wisdom and calm.

The statement *in meso stat virtus*, meaning that virtue lies in the middle, is also relevant for the anthropology of the history of positive psychology. Aristotle (1985, 1106a-1106b), recognizes the relevance of the term *mesotes*, meaning the middle way. The search for moderation and balance is present in Western, Oriental and Arabic thinkers. This perspective of the middle way has been extrapolated to the current psychological thought under the vague, confusing and evasive concept of the optimum human being. The sense of the process of living has historically moved around understandability, which coincides with the perspective of humanistic or phenomenological and existentialist psychology. As well argued by Dilthey (1894-1945), "We 'explain' nature; we 'understand'

emotional life" (p. 197). Thus, what is nowadays included within the concept of positive psychology?

Assessment in positive psychology

Positive psychology assesses psychological processes or resources implied in the choice and achievement of aims which are beneficial in heightening well-being. Some of the competences, resources, strengths or power to bear in mind during the assessment process are the following: optimism, hope, self-efficiency, problem solving, feelings of control, courage, positive emotions, certainty in attachment, ability to forgive, gratitude, coping strategies, dimensions of life quality and art of living, well-being, happiness, solidarity, self-determination, empathy, emotional intelligence, human resource ecology, sense of justice, transcendence, religiosity, spirituality, curiosity, creativity, authenticity, care, humility, or self control, etc. (Lopez & Snyder, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This is fulfilled in practice by the creation of environmental contexts for building intrapersonal and interpersonal resources which may generate *richness* and *psychological resources*. As stated above, the discourse of positive psychology is very widespread in Western psychology. Now, what is its status in Spain?

Positive psychology in Spain

Spanish psychologists have also joined in the trendy discourse of positive psychology, within which we can distinguish four aspects. The first one refers to reflection on happiness and a happy life (Avia, 2008; Fierro, 2000). The second issue deals with the references and relevance of some aspects of epicurean philosophy for present day psychology, which can be included within positive psychology (Fierro, 2008; Pelachano, 2005, 2006). Thirdly, we can highlight monographic issues of journals (Carrillo & Prieto-Ursúa, 2006; Vázquez, 2006) and books (Vázquez & Hervás, 2008, 2009; Poseck, 2008). Finally, it is worth mentioning the reviews of some aspects of positive psychology (Avia, 2006; Prieto-Ursúa, 2006).

All of these studies are theoretically and practically well founded on the traditional discourse of positive psychology. However, we believe that they ignore many of the problems presented by positive psychology, which are dealt with below.

Applications of positive psychology

The theoretical and practical principles of positive psychology have been applied to all the aspects of human psychology and its existential contexts. This means referring to subjects who cope with adversity, families who cope with stress, positive organizations, or post-traumatic growth, etc. Positive psychology enjoys some empirical validation (Duckworth, Steen & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Revivich & Linkins, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). The findings are moderately satisfactory, as in any other approach of psychological science. The perspective of proactive intervention focusing on invulnerability seeks to enhance people's well-being.

Snyder and López (2007) introduce the terminology of prevention science within the field of positive psychology. They deal with *primary enhancement*, which includes the effort to establish an *eudemonic* state, optimal for a good life; and with a *secondary enhancement*, focusing on building the best life on already existing optimal performance and on seeking heightened experiences. In spite of some empirically founded findings, positive psychology displays serious drawbacks. These problems need to be overcome whenever possible.

Criticism of positive psychology

At a first look at positive psychology one could think that it is part of the spirit of the times (López & Rettew, 2009). However, this is an inaccurate conclusion, as it does not offer anything new from a philosophical or anthropological point of view. Thus, we find it relevant to consider the following criticisms of the theory and practice of positive psychology.

a) *Excessively quantitative methodology.* All that is quantitative in psychology is not always relevant for the existential meaning of life. We believe that putting excessive emphasis on the psychometric structure of psychological processes may make us forget about the human being as a whole. Excessive mathematization of psychological processes does not really help in understanding the human being.

This problem may be solved by applying any other useful and ethical resource to understand the process of living. In this regard, three important historical lines of thought can be pointed out in the effort to understand the human being. One of them is the narrative tradition of *consolation* in face of individual adverse events, such as the death of a loved one and the comprehensive description of emotional expression in face of collective catastrophes, such as earthquakes or epidemics. The second, which complements the first, is the use of *mixed methods*, which combine quantitative and qualitative traditions. The third line of thought deals with a contextual approach to research and with the methods emerging from research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008), e.g. vital projects, life stories, autoethnography, or ethnodrama, etc.

b) *Acontextual individualism.* This procedure primarily focuses on the individual without regarding the influence of the context on behaviour. When too much emphasis is put on individual personal self-realization, the context and the *alter ego* can be forgotten. Positive psychology seems to centre on the values of liberal individualism with a good dose of narcissism, which predominates in Western culture (Christopher & Heickinbottom, 2008). This is as if positive psychology were a perverse manifestation of the technical and instrumental rationality of this culture.

The alternative lies in bearing in mind the social and material context in which people are born, live and die. It doesn't matter if one speaks of behavioural contexts, ecological niches, circumstances or social and material conditions of existence. In all cases the situation constrains and conditions people's behaviour, as psychological

processes are developed by social interaction. Cultural psychology and indigenous psychology emphasize the process of cultural build up of psychological resources. This gives importance to the relevance of socio-political and socio-economic issues on people's well-being and happiness.

c) *Forgetting classical knowledge about emotional intelligence and positive emotions.* Emotional intelligence apparently represents something new, but it is not. The approach of emotional intelligence is a confused mixture of insubstantial opinions and exaggerated hopes. When something seems to be new and original we run the risk of ignoring history and supposing that the whole past was a mistake. Furthermore, psychology, maybe unable to understand the human being as a whole, formulates too many kinds of intelligence and so unjustifiedly divides the human being into parts.

The correct perspective may consist in analyzing history and reflectively and critically reading the classical authors related to our topic. The present day emphasis on emotional intelligence, regarded as something novel and original, could be corrected by reading the classics. Among many authors we can point to are Aristotle (1985), Cicero (2001), Menandro (1999), Publio Siro (1963) and Seneca (2000). Much of the effort made by Western and Eastern anthropological philosophy has searched for emotional balance and the medium between reason and passion or between affection and cognition.

d) *Neurologization and psychobiologization of positive psychology.* Present day psychological research is producing a neurobiologization of psychological processes. This is an easy thing to do, but it eliminates any possible chance of psychological hermeneutics. The neuroscientific approach is very promising, finding out where in the brain psychological processes take place, which makes it scientifically very relevant, but it contributes little more to psychology. This issue is well provided for by the good interdisciplinary departments of neurology. We do not think that neuroscience meets the practical expectations that psychology has of it. It is not going to solve any problem dealing with existential phenomenology. Examples of research on neuroscience within the approach of positive psychology are the neurobiology of positive affection and the study of empathy from the perspective of mirror neurons. One more example is the biologization of will power, which leads Gailliot and Baumeister (2007) to speak about the *physiology of will power*.

The alternative lies in not adopting a neuronal and reductionist perspective of the person, as in the case of great classical authors. Human beings need meaning in their life experience (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006). The research of the neurobiology of psychological processes does not reveal the meaning of cultural styles. For example, studies on mirror neurons do not lead to a better phenomenological understanding than interpreting existential work. Therefore, what is relevant for positive psychology is not so much neurobiology, but the existential meaning of the living process.

e) *The tyranny of a perfectionist positive attitude* in the living process and obsessive eagerness

in the search for self-realization (Held, 2002). One of the negative aspects of being forced to always make rational choices for self-realization is frustration and disenchantment. The obsessive struggle for an unrealistic perfectionism only brings about negative consequences and may lead to a *non realistic kind of optimism*, in other words to excessive and obsessive confidence in oneself.

It might be more appropriate to opt for the concepts of *critical optimism* (Seligman, 1990) and *flexible tenacity* (Gollwitzer, Parks-Stamm, Jaudas & Sheeran, 2008) in relation to the living process. The relevant thing for psychology is to highlight the *agency ability* (Bandura, 2006) and coping strategies. Agency is conceptualized as the conditioned political, cultural and economic ability to turn social and material living contexts into healthy places to live and struggle for personal development. In addition to this, the positive value of negative thinking and the functional usefulness of negative emotions need also to be borne in mind.

f) *Universal self-enhancement?* The controversy whether self-enhancement is a cultural universal or is culturally conditioned is still unresolved. Whereas some research approaches believe that self-enhancement is in fact universal, others assume transcultural variations and, hence, believe that it is not. Self-enhancement seems to be higher in individualistic cultures, whereas it is lower in collectivist ones. This supposes that the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is pertinent. It is also worth noting that it is risky to extrapolate Eastern cosmovision into Western cultures. We recognise that the trend of uncritically importing Eastern cosmovisions into our Western culture may be pernicious.

The alternative may be through the research on the psychological mechanisms implicated in the wish to be a good and competent person in each culture (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Smith, Smith & Christopher, 2007). This partially coincides with the lexical approach to personality features, which is a provisional alternative. It would also be desirable to assimilate an integration of cosmovisions which are different or even incompatible. It might be relevant for positive psychology to extract, whenever possible, the positive life styles of each culture in order to enhance psychological well-being.

g) *Inappropriateness of high self-esteem.* There is too much bibliography available in order to reach some conclusions on self-esteem that often do not go much further than common sense. On many occasions, the objective benefits of high self-esteem are few and limited. The benefits of adequate self-esteem are well known, but what are their costs? The overemphasis on finding constant high self-esteem may weaken or interfere in personal autonomy, in the learning process, in interpersonal relationships, in self-control and in health (Crocker, 2006; Crocker & Park, 2004). Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs (2003) state that self-esteem is not the cause of or the main predictor of almost anything.

The solution to this problem may lie on the concept of optimal self esteem (Kernis, 2003) in each socio-cultural context in order to reach authenticity in those social and cultural living conditions.

h) *Useless philosophical controversies.*

Accepting the principles of positive psychology uncritically implies a naive philosophy of the human being's psychological resources for coping with everyday living. Meddling in philosophical discussion without solution is a waste of time. The theoretical and practical integration proposed for positive psychology (Held, 2004, 2005) together with ontological controversies (Slife & Richardson, 2008) generate a discourse which may be philosophically appealing but is theoretically unsatisfactory and practically irrelevant to psychology.

The solutions to the possible philosophical controversies of positive psychology should come from the consensus emanating from a philosophy of science applied to psychology. We are aware that this is difficult due to great theoretical variation. The classical fragmentation into models or schools has two aspects. One of them is that the diversity of schools is not a problem in psychology, as it is positive to have various points of view for description and comprehension whenever they are carried out with faithful regard for the data and with existential coherence. The other aspect is that lack of unity in psychological theory creates an incompatible diversity of opinions which makes it impossible to reach a comprehensive solution. We are in favour of the latter idea, as we believe that unjustified or unjustifiable divergence of psychological theory is negative in itself. Unlimited theoretical controversies, not always reasonable or explicable, create a space for chronic divergence and unresolved polemic.

i) *Is the concept of positive psychology a necessary one?* Held (2002, 2004) argues that there is no theoretical or practical evidence to keep advocating positive psychology. As Lazarus (2003b) suspects, "Positive psychology does not mean the same thing for all psychologists" (p. 93). Held (2005) prefers to speak simply of psychology instead of positive or negative psychology. If the ultimate goal of positive psychology is to provide a meta-theoretical foundation for optimal human existence, it is something insubstantial and irrelevant.

The alternative to this might come from being critical with the concept of positive psychology itself. Its content could have been included within psychology of health just as well as within the general concept of psychology. We believe it is as simple as this. Furthermore, we consider that so much bibliography, supposedly and falsely considered original is not necessary to conclude what we already know.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of all the conceptual problems of positive psychology, there is much in its favour to make it, we believe unjustifiably, theoretically and philosophically very promising. From our point of view, it is a mistake to uncritically accept the discourse of positive psychology. This is a regrettable consequence of the lack of constructive critical reflection on the discourse of psychological knowledge.

The theme of positive mental health is nothing new nor does it contribute anything original. It is just trendy, but little more. It is as if all previous psychological work were useless, had been ill

directed and lead by professionals who did not know what they were doing. This is not right, as the psychologists who were really concerned about human suffering have always aimed at the same goal, namely helping people to live without problems and to learn from mistakes. As a consequence, from philosophical and anthropological points of view, positive psychology does not contribute anything new.

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