Footsteps on the road to a positive psychology

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1. Introduction

In the 2nd edition of his book, \textit{Fear and Courage}, Jack Rachman remarked on the scarcity of research on human strengths. While journal articles on anxiety and fear were numerous, only a handful of references on courage existed prior to 1990. Nine years later, thanks in large part to Rachman’s groundbreaking research, our knowledge of this human strength is growing. However, the discrepancy in research on positive versus negative human qualities remains huge. A search of psychological abstracts from 1967 through 1998 yields approximately 60,000 articles, book chapters and books on fear or anxiety and fewer than 500 on courage. Similarly, Myers reports that for every article on positive emotions (joy, happiness or life satisfaction) there are 21 articles on negative emotions (anger, anxiety and depression) (Myers, 1999).

Psychology’s focus on the negative may make evolutionary and historical sense. It has led to powerful techniques for reducing human suffering and has increased our awareness of environmental stressors that may stunt human development. However, psychology’s preoccupation with identifying, undoing and preventing damage has blinded us to human strength. Our theories are powerful in predicting failure, hopelessness and despair, but are impotent when it comes to explaining hope, persistence, creativity, compassion, love and the many other qualities that make life worthwhile. Worse, psychology’s focus on protection from damage is harmful. It has contributed to a culture of victimology and may be responsible for the widespread epidemic of depression in our young people.

Over the last half-century, several psychologists have called for an increasing focus on the positive. Humanistic psychologists including Maslow (1962) and Rogers (1954, 1963) argued that psychology ignored what was most important about being human, creativity, love, joy and our capacity for growth. However, these calls went largely unheeded and no systematic

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research study of human strengths emerged. Over the last 10 years, the construction of a positive social science has begun. We will highlight some of its findings and discuss some of the many questions that still remain to be explored. But first we explore the origins and costs of our negative psychology.

2. Negative psychology

2.1. Origins of a negative psychology

Why has psychology been so focused on the negative? There are several possible explanations. Negative emotions and experiences may be more urgent and salient than positive ones. This would make evolutionary sense. Since negative emotions often reflect immediate problems or objective dangers, they should be powerful enough to force us to stop, increase vigilance, reflect on our behavior and change our actions if necessary. (Of course, in some dangerous situations, it will be most adaptive to respond without taking a great deal of time to reflect.) In contrast, when we are adapting well to the world, no such alarm is needed. Experiences that promote happiness often seem to pass effortlessly (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). So, on one level psychology's focus on the negative may reflect differences in the urgency of negative versus positive emotions.

There are also historical reasons for psychology's negative focus. When cultures face military threat, shortages of goods, poverty or instability, they may most naturally be concerned with defense and damage. Cultures may turn their attention to creativity, virtue and the highest qualities in life when they are stable, prosperous and at peace. Athens during the 5th century B.C., Florence of the 15th century and Victorian England are examples of cultures that focused on positive qualities. Athenian philosophy focused intently on questions concerning human virtues: What is good action and good character? What makes life most worthwhile? Democracy was born during this era. Florence focused on the creation of beauty and bequeathed to us some of the most important artistic creations in history. Victorian England affirmed honor, discipline and duty as important human virtues.

Beginning with World War II and continuing through the cold war, American society became increasingly concerned with defense and damage. This is reflected in our media, children's books and in the topics studied by our social sciences. Local evening news shows exemplify this negative focus. Lead programs typically concern violence, arson, robberies, accidents and other atrocities. Stories of human kindness, courage and virtue are typically relegated to the end of the newscast, buried among dull items labeled 'human interest stories'.

During the early part of this century, psychology had three missions: treating mental illness, making life more fulfilling for all people and identifying and nurturing high talent. The early focus on positive psychology is exemplified by such work as Terman's studies of giftedness (Terman, 1922, 1939) and marital happiness (Terman, Butenwieser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson, 1938), Watson's writings on effective parenting (Watson, 1928) and Jung's work concerning the search and discovery of meaning in life (Jung, 1933). Since the onset of World War II psychology's focus has shifted to assessing, curing and preventing individual suffering.
There has been an explosion in research on psychological disorders and the negative effects of environmental stressors such as parental divorce, death and physical and sexual abuse.

2.2. Benefits of a negative psychology

The focus on pathology clearly has benefits. First, we have witnessed four revisions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. This diagnostic system has facilitated communication between clinicians and research investigators. Second, we now have strong evidence that several disorders, including schizophrenia, manic-depression, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder are caused in large part by genetic and/or neuroanatomical defects. Although cures for these disorders are still a long way off, great strides have been made in reducing the suffering associated with many of them. We cannot underestimate the benefit to family members of shifting the blame for these disorders from inadequate parenting to biological factors. Third, effective treatments for several disorders including depression, panic disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, enuresis and sexual dysfunctions have been developed (Seligman, 1993). Millions of people have benefitted from psychological and pharmacological therapies. Fourth, our awareness about environmental stressors that are harmful to individuals, particularly children, has increased. We know that marital conflict, violence, neglect, abuse and institutionalization can stunt growth and increase risk for psychological disorders. While far from perfect, our methods for protecting children have improved. Finally, we have developed powerful research strategies and statistical procedures for isolating causes for psychological disorders and effective treatment ingredients. These techniques have recently been applied to investigations of resilience and the building of positive qualities.

2.3. Costs of a negative psychology

Although differential attention to negative emotions may be adaptive for individuals and may make historical and cultural sense, it is dangerous for a science. The focus on damage has limited and biased our theories. We have an abundance of psychological theories about the development of pathology and very few about the building of strengths. Researchers guided by these theories have learned very little about the positive side of life.

2.3.1. Underestimating resilience

Until recently, psychological theories have assumed that people are highly vulnerable to stress and underestimated their resilience. Rachman's study of Londoners during World War II illustrates this point powerfully. Leading psychiatrists and psychologists at the time anticipated the air raids would cause severe psychological reactions. Widespread chronic panic was expected. However, Londoners adapted more easily than psychological theories predicted. Serious psychological disturbance was rare (Rachman, 1990). Reports of individuals' responses to the death of loved ones (Janoff-Bulman & Berg, 1998; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999), the bombing of Hiroshima (Rachman, 1990) and placement in concentration camps (Frankl, 1963) indicate that human beings have a remarkable capacity to adapt, find meaning and grow even when facing the worst traumas imaginable. Sadly, this capacity has largely been ignored and unexplained.
Similarly, perhaps because of our psychology's negative focus, we often underestimate people’s well-being (Myers, 1992, 1999). We may overestimate negative qualities in others and the problems they face. For example, only 25% of Americans believe that most married people are faithful to each other (Myers, 1992). A 1988 Gallup survey indicated, however, that approximately 90% of married Americans say they are faithful (Myers, 1992). Has psychology’s focus on the negative contributed to this discrepancy? At the very least, it has failed to teach us what makes life most fulfilling, most enjoyable and most productive. It has failed to document life’s positive qualities.

2.3.2. Preoccupation with protection

As a society, our concern with damage has turned into a preoccupation with protecting our children. We cringe when we imagine our children failing and becoming immersed in self-doubt and hopelessness.

The desire to protect is, in part, the basis for the self-esteem movement that emerged in California in the 1960s. This movement’s primary goal is to bolster children’s feelings of self-worth and insulate them from experiences that might shatter their self-confidence. Proponents of this movement have rallied against tracking based on achievement or ability, intelligence testing and competition in schools because these may be stigmatizing to those children who perform poorly. In many cases proponents have argued vehemently for the inclusion in regular education classrooms of children with profound cognitive impairments lest they feel stigmatized by the special education services they receive. At many schools, colleges and universities grade inflation has resulted. Some proponents of the self-esteem movement advocate teaching children the skills of ‘positive thinking’. In classrooms across the country, walls are lined with posters containing slogans like “I am special”. Children are taught to rehearse these mantras. We may laugh at Stuart Smalley’s parody of this approach on Saturday Night Live, when he admires himself in the mirror and recites “I’m good enough. I’m smart enough. And, daggone it, people like me”. However, the self-esteem movement is not simply vapid.

The movement has a harmful edge. First, it ignores the value of negative emotions. Emotions like anger, sadness, fear and shame help us make sense of our experiences in the world. Low self-esteem also can work in this way. When we feel badly, it is a sign that we are doing badly in the world. We are not accomplishing what we would like to at work, at school, with friends or in romantic relationships. This is a signal that change is in order. Genuine self-esteem is gained through success in the world. Happiness or self-confidence that is achieved simply through dulling or avoiding painful emotions is not grounded in reality.

Is it important that self-esteem be grounded in reality? Participate, if you will, in a thought experiment described by Nozick (1989). Imagine a machine has been invented that enables people to experience the greatest pleasures; success at work, creating a literary or artistic masterpiece, loving and being loved in return. You are invited to connect yourself to the machine for as long as you wish; an entire lifetime if desired. Would you connect to the machine? If so, for how long? Many of us would consider connecting to the machine for a short time, but few of us would want to spend our entire life in this way. Why? Connecting to the machine seems much like engaging in a prolonged dream or hallucination. Happiness
involves more than subjective pleasure (or avoiding displeasure). We also care about the
meaning, reality, or relevance of our lives. So it is with self-esteem.

The second problem is that the self-esteem movement produces a self-confidence that is
fragile. It has no substantive foundation. Does this matter? There is some evidence that when
self-confidence is unrealistically high, individuals are particularly vulnerable when challenged.
Rachman's study of soldiers in training to become paratroopers provides us with one example.
At the beginning of their training, soldiers were asked to predict their level of fear during the
training course. Over the course of the actual training, trainees who were overly confident
showed greater fear and were more likely to experience increases (rather than decreases) in fear
than trainees whose predictions were more realistic (Rachman, 1990). Unwarranted self-
confidence may inhibit academic achievement as well. Satterfield and colleagues found that law
students who were extremely optimistic had lower achievement than their peers (Satterfield,
Monahan, & Seligman, 1997).

High self-esteem may contribute to other problems. An
unwarranted sense of self-worth, combined with a tendency to avoid responsibility and blame
others for problems, may lead to violence. Hit men, genocidal maniacs, gang leaders and
violent youth often have high self-esteem (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

Third, a focus on buffering self-esteem may prevent individuals from engaging in experiences
that can lead to true happiness or joy. The most satisfying moments in our lives are often
times when we achieved something (success, affection) after struggling and working for it for
some time. By avoiding experiences that might threaten self-esteem, people avoid such
challenges. Research by Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues suggests that the most fulfilling
moments in our lives (flow experiences) occur when there is a delicate balance between our
skills and the challenges we face. Inevitably, this balance cannot be achieved at all times. As we
gain experience with an activity, our skills improve and we must confront greater and greater
challenges to remain in flow. An important implication of Csikszentmihalyi's model is that
happiness requires a willingness to face challenges and experience anxiety. The Rachman (1990)
distinction between fearlessness and courage is relevant here. Our society may be instilling in
our young people the goal of fearlessness. However, true courage often involves persistence in
the face of fear. In fact, the large literature on treatment of phobias and anxiety disorders
indicates that an effective way to reduce fear is through exposure to anxiety provoking
experiences. A psychology that emphasizes protection from damage may preserve self-esteem in
the short-run, but it will prevent genuine self-esteem, self-confidence that is based on acquiring
skills and doing well in the world, from developing. This emphasis will block flow, an
important route to happiness and life satisfaction.

2.3.3. Victimology

Psychology's negative focus has also contributed to a culture of blame and victimology.
Traditional behavioral and psychoanalytic theories view individuals as products of their
experience. Behavior, emotion and personality characteristics develop as a result of
conditioning experiences or the way our parents treated us during early childhood. There are
some advantages to attributing problems to external causes. Most importantly, people are
victims sometimes. Other people, institutions or policies may be unfair and may injure us. By
recognizing this, people can work for important social changes. Attributing problems to
external causes may also preserve self-esteem (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978;
Brickman et al., 1982). We may even get sympathy (though likely short-lived) when we complain about the misfortunes others inflict on us. However, there are costs associated with blaming others for problems. Our sense of power and control may be reduced. By ignoring our own contributions to problems, we fail to change our own behavior and increase the likelihood that similar problems will occur again in the future. Ultimately, we decrease our own well-being.

Two dangerous assumptions underlie our culture of victimology: (1) trauma always leads to serious damage and (2) damage always reflects the presence of trauma. These assumptions lead us to excuse heinous crimes as natural responses to misfortune. They led many well-meaning therapists in the late '80s and early '90s to attribute client's problems to early abuse and to search for repressed memories of that abuse when none were spontaneously reported. They lead many of us to blame our parents for the qualities we despise most in ourselves and to blame our spouses for the qualities we dislike in our children. Our culture of blame may breed anger and violence in our young people.

Sadly, our focus on victimology may generate distrust in the positive qualities in others. We often explain away creativity, generosity and other accomplishments as defensive attempts to compensate for early negative experiences. For example, a recent biography of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt explains Eleanor's pursuit of justice for minorities and poor people as an attempt to compensate for her father's alcoholism and mother's narcissism (Goodwin, 1994). Such explanations minimize the accomplishments and virtues of individuals. Our negative psychology has contributed to a pessimistic view of human nature.

2.3.4. Epidemic of depression

There is evidence that our society's concern with protection from damage has backfired. We now have an epidemic of depression in our young people, young people living in the most privileged time and place in human history. The incidence of depression has risen dramatically over this century. The estimate for the lifetime prevalence of depression in people born around World War II, for example, is about 2-4%. Recent estimates are that one in five adolescents will suffer a major depressive episode by the time they graduate high school (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, & Seeley, 1993). As many as one in eleven children may experience depression before the age of 14 (Garrison, Schluchter, Schoenbach, & Kaplan, 1989). Approximately 8% of high school students in this country attempt suicide each year (Center for Disease Control, 1991) and approximately 13 in every 100,000 15 to 19 year olds take their own lives (Lewinsohn, Rohde, & Seeley, 1996). These statistics mark a dramatic rise in despair and hopelessness. Paradoxically, the epidemics of depression and hopelessness occur against a backdrop of unprecedented opportunity for social and economic advancement.

3. Building a science of positive psychology

America is now at a moment of peace and prosperity. The threat of serious military attack is lower than it has been at any point in 100 years. Relative to most of the rest of the world, our social turmoil is low. It is time to turn our attention towards understanding and building the best things in life. It is time for psychology to remember its two lost missions: fostering high
talent and making life more fulfilling for all people. We desperately need a positive psychology that provides us with information about how to build virtues like creativity, hope, future-mindedness, interpersonal skill, moral judgment, forgiveness, humor and courage and how to enhance happiness and life satisfaction.

Fortunately, the construction of such a science is underway. Many of our important psychological theories are being revised to address the positive side of life and researchers have begun to investigate psychological strengths. Thanks in large part to Jack Rachman’s work, we have begun to identify some of the variables that promote courage, optimism and other human strengths. We have even begun to develop techniques for improving psychological well-being. However, fundamental questions remain.

3.1. What phenomena need to be explained?

Perhaps the most fundamental question is: What topics should be studied by such a science? In other words, what individual and interpersonal strengths do we value? What outcomes are most important to us? What do we mean by ‘happiness’ or ‘fulfillment’ or ‘satisfaction’ in life? A taxonomy of positive psychology is needed to guide theories and research.

Several approaches can be used to construct this taxonomy. For example, we might consider the skills and strengths that protect people from mental illness. We might ask what the opposite of the DSMs would look like. We might consider the qualities we would most like to instill in our children, or the qualities that lead to great scientific, artistic and cultural advances. We might look for common characteristics among people who exemplify the good in life (e.g. Thomas Jefferson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, Martin Luther King) or we might ask people to reflect on the experiences that make their lives most worthwhile. We could investigate the qualities emphasized in religious and philosophical writings. It will be fascinating to see how these various approaches converge or diverge.

Once we have identified these individual and interpersonal strengths, we can begin to investigate their origins and effects by studying individual differences in these characteristics. Eventually, we can develop techniques for nurturing strength and building virtue.

3.2. What we can learn from therapy

Rachman has suggested that we can learn a great deal about human strength (and not just weakness) by examining what happens in therapy. Clients with anxiety disorders, for example, often display remarkable courage in confronting the objects and situations they fear.

One of the most puzzling but consistent results in the psychotherapy outcome literature is the lack of treatment specificity. We have evidence that many forms of therapy are effective. However, with few exceptions, when one treatment is compared to another, differences between treatments, when found, are relatively small. NIMH’s National Collaborative Study of Depression, for example, has found few differences in the effectiveness of interpersonal therapy and cognitive therapy (e.g. Agosti & Ocepek-Welikson, 1997).

A variety of common therapeutic ingredients have been proposed including social support, empathy and talking about one’s problems. However, the most powerful ingredient common to effective therapies may be the building of human strengths. Many psychotherapists foster the
development of a variety of skills in their clients, skills that often are not specific to healing a particular psychological disorder. These strengths include optimism, hope, courage, honesty, realism, putting troubles into perspective, a sense of meaning or purpose, perseverance, future-mindedness, interpersonal skill, empathy, humor and the capacity for pleasure. Studies are needed that assess psychological strengths and their relationships to therapeutic outcome. In day to day practice, where clients rarely present with a single psychological disorder and often present with difficulties related to life transitions (leaving home, unemployment, marriage, divorce, death of a family member), the building of strengths may be especially important.

3.3. Downward and upward spirals

Psychologists interested in clinical disorders have often described downward spirals (or feedback loops) leading to increased psychological distress. Beck’s negative self-fulfilling prophecy and Clark’s cognitive model of panic are two examples (Beck, 1976; Clark, 1986). These models have been used to increase client’s understanding of their psychological symptoms and to create effective treatments. Cycles usually involve 3 components: events or situations, beliefs and the emotions and behaviors that follow. For example, in cognitive therapy, a client may learn that in social gatherings, his negative belief that “people dislike me”, leads to anxiety, inhibition and withdrawal. This makes positive social interactions less likely and prevents the man from developing friendships with others. The man will likely interpret these consequences as evidence for his initial belief that people dislike like him. The belief will be strengthened leading to increased anxiety, despair and further withdrawal from others. Thus, the cycle will continue.

Therapy focuses on breaking this spiral. The clinician can target the situations, the beliefs and/or the emotions and behaviors. In targeting the situation, she can work with the client to arrange different types of social gatherings in a hierarchy from those that are least anxiety provoking to those that are most threatening. She can then encourage the man to begin by engaging in those that are less threatening and to move up the hierarchy as he gains success. The clinician can target the man’s beliefs or interpretations by teaching him to look for evidence for and against his belief and by encouraging him to generate alternative beliefs that are more realistic (e.g. “people aren’t friendly because they don’t get to know me”). Finally, she can target emotions and behaviors by teaching the man specific techniques (e.g. distraction or thought stopping) for reducing social anxiety and interacting more effectively with others. Clinicians entrenched in a negative psychology may treat anxiety, depression and other psychological ailments as diseases. In this case, the goal of therapy is to reduce or eliminate symptoms, to prevent the disease from worsening or spreading.

However, most therapists do much more than this. By teaching their clients a realistic optimism and concrete problem-solving skills, clinicians may establish positive spirals. As clients have increasing success in the world, feelings of control and optimism increase. Skills improve and situations are managed more effectively. Clients become willing to take on greater and greater challenges, further increasing their self-confidence and skills. Thus, positive beliefs, emotions and behaviors are strengthened. Flow becomes more likely.

In our own research, we have found that teaching children and young adults cognitive restructuring and problem-solving skills buffers them against subsequent depressive symptoms.
For example, in one study, we investigated a school-based intervention program for 5th and 6th graders. Children participated in after school groups one day each week for 10 weeks. In the intervention groups, children learned cognitive restructuring techniques (how to examine evidence for beliefs and think more realistically about problems) as well as specific techniques for assertiveness, negotiation, managing large projects and interacting with peers. An approach to problem solving was taught that emphasized listing a variety of possible courses of action and then evaluating the pros and cons of each option. Homework assignments required practicing the skills between sessions. Children who participated in the intervention were compared to a matched control group. Results indicated that the intervention program improved children's explanatory style. Intervention participants were more likely than controls to attribute problems to temporary and specific factors. The program also reduced and prevented depressive symptoms (Jaycox, Reivich, Gillham, & Seligman, 1994). These effects endured and grew over a two-year follow-up period, suggesting that, perhaps, a positive spiral had begun (Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox, & Seligman, 1995). Recently, a similar program improved explanatory style and prevented depressive symptoms in college students (Seligman, Schulman, DeRubeis, & Hollon, 1998). It will be important for future studies to explore the effects of such program’s effects on positive emotions (e.g. happiness and joy), academic and interpersonal success and the experience of flow.

3.4. Situations that promote strength

Aristotle argued that although intellectual virtue was largely due to nature and teaching, other virtues, including moral virtue, arise from habit. We obtain virtues by exercising or practicing them. Thus, “men become builders by building and lyreplayers by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts”. Similarly, Myers (1992) suggests that we can improve ourselves by acting in ways that are consistent with the qualities we would like to possess and Rachman (1990) suggests that courage (as a personality trait) can develop through courageous action.

If this is true, then human strengths may be built through exposure to situations that call for them. Rachman suggests that courage, optimism and self-confidence may increase when we are thrust into situations that require them (Rachman, 1979, 1990). Clients often acquire courage through exposure therapy, for example. When individuals are required to demonstrate successful coping to others, their own coping skills improve (e.g. Rakos & Shroeder, 1976; Rachman, 1990). Responsibility for the safety or well being of others may also promote courage and resilience. Thus, firefighters and other individuals engaged in essential emergency services displayed remarkable resiliency during the London air raids (Rachman, 1990). Parents may experience similar courage when engaged in protecting their children from dangers. We have all heard stories of courageous acts by ordinary individuals, family members, friends, neighbors or even strangers, who rescued others from fires, near drowning or other catastrophes. When interviewed, these individuals often attribute their heroism to the demands of the situation. We need a psychology of ‘rising to the occasion’.
3.5. Connections to others

Finally, our connections to other people may also promote human strength. Nearly 100 years ago, the sociologist Durkheim argued that one of the consequences of individualistic societies is that ties to community and social institutions like religion are weakened (Durkheim, 1951). As a result, people feel less connected to others and less a part of something larger than themselves. It is harder to find meaning or purpose in life because the self is too small an entity to derive much meaning or purpose from. American society has witnessed dramatic changes in the importance of God, country and family to peoples' lives. When our grandparents encountered problems at the beginning of this century, they had their family members and their faith to lean on. Now, family members are often far away and the connection to religion has dissolved for many of us. The increasing emphasis on the individual may in part be responsible for the rise in depression over the century.

Numerous studies document that social support protects people from psychological disorders and distress. Studies suggest that a strong connection to others can foster human strengths as well. For example, World War II fighter pilots often stated that their bond with other pilots promoted courageous behavior (Rachman, 1990). Married people report greater psychological well-being than do single people (Myers, 1992). Religious involvement is linked to optimism and happiness (Myers, 1992; Sethi & Seligman, 1993). Although love and spirituality likely top many lists of important life qualities, they have received relatively little attention from psychology thus far.

4. Summary

We have argued that psychology as a field has been preoccupied with the negative side of life and has left us with a view of human qualities that is warped and one-sided. Psychology is literally ‘half-baked’. We need to bake the other half now. It is time for us to become equally concerned with the qualities and experiences that make life most worthwhile. A balance is needed between work that strives to relieve damage and work that endeavors to build strength. This balance is beautifully exemplified by Jack Rachman's work over the past 40 years. As an astute and compassionate clinician and researcher, Jack developed and evaluated effective treatments for some of the most debilitating anxiety disorders. At the same time, he was impressed by the resiliency of his clients and the courage they exhibited daily. His observations and studies of courage have helped to launch a systematic science of human strengths. They are giant footsteps on the road to a positive psychology.

References


