POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: 
A PARADIGM SHIFT

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Current psychological practice focuses almost exclusively on pathology. Practitioners are concerned about treating a patient's mental illness within a disease framework. Concentrating on what is wrong has left little room for examining what is right. Any approach that emphasizes just one end of the spectrum (in this case negative) will be incomplete. Treatment should not only be about fixing what is broken; it must nurture what is best. Psychology needs to take building the best things in life as seriously as it has taken healing the worst. It is imperative that we reconnect to the positive aspects of life, such as what makes life worth living, most fulfilling, most enjoyable and most productive. Hopefully, by studying the building blocks of things like courage, love, forgiveness, wisdom, and spirituality we may discover the best ways to facilitate growth. A fresh shift in priorities could engender monumental breakthroughs for the individual, the field of psychology, and society as a whole.

Background

Psychology should be about the study of both weakness and strength. Examining the history of psychology reveals that it has always been interested in the total human experience, encompassing both the positive and negative. “Before World War II, psychology had three missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent” (Seligman, 2000, p. 6). After the war, two economic events changed the face of psychology. In 1946, the Veterans Administration made it possible for psychologists to make a living treating mental illness. A year later, in 1947, the National Institute of Mental Health was
created, and psychologists discovered they could get grants for research on mental illness. As a result, the field of psychology shifted towards studying pathology. This arrangement brought many accomplishments and benefits. Psychology has made amazing strides in the understanding and therapy of mental illness. “At least fourteen disorders, previously intractable, have yielded their secrets to science and can now be either cured or considerably relieved” (Seligman, 1994, p. 6). In the process, psychology has developed methodological rigors, which have made it a more exact science. Lastly, pharmaceutical advances have ushered in a new era of victories against the diseases of the mind.

However, there has been a considerable downside to this new direction. The two other fundamental missions of psychology, making the lives of all people better and nurturing genius, were all but forgotten. To make matters worse, not only did the subject matter change but so did the theories of how we viewed ourselves. “We became a victimology. Human beings were seen as passive foci: stimuli came on and elicited ‘responses’, or external ‘reinforcements’ weakened or strengthened ‘responses’, or drives, tissue needs, instincts, and conflicts from childhood pushed the human being around. Practioners went about treating the mental illness of patients by repairing damage: damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhoods, and damaged brains” (Seligman, 2000, p. 6). Inevitably, this focus on mental illness resulted in a distorted view of what is normal and exceptional. This negative bias has gotten so pronounced that we “view human strengths and virtues-altruism, courage, honesty, joy, health, and responsibility as derivative, defensive or downright illusions, while weakness and negative motivations-anxiety, lust, selfishness, paranoia, disorder and sadness, are viewed as authentic” (Seligman, 2000, p.6). We believe clients are honest when they describe their problems and deficiencies. We accept these negative evaluations as truth. Yet, we are suspicious when we hear things are going well and wonder if the person is narcissistic. Concentrating on the many negative mental effects of isolation, trauma, abuse, physical illness, war,
poverty, discrimination, divorce and death has created blinders to the many instances of growth and mastery.

To help bring this negative bias into better focus, Kennon Sheldon provides specific examples. Sheldon asserts that when a person looks back on his life and concludes he is a better man now, psychologists are quick to label it a self-serving delusion, or a temporal bias, a mere emotion-regulation strategy. When a participant sees his partner, as being better than the partner perceives herself, this is viewed as a backhanded way for the participant to inflate his own self-esteem. When a stranger helps another person, psychologists are quick to find the selfish benefit in the act, unwilling to acknowledge the existence of altruism. Indeed, the negative bias, once identified can be found lurking almost everywhere (Sheldon, 2001). Much attention is devoted to the biases, delusions, illusions, irrational thoughts, foibles, and errors of the human being. It seems that psychology has adopted the premise, without any evidence, that the negative motivations are authentic and positive emotions are just a by-products. Further evidence of this divide is the clearly demonstrated by a “search of Psychological Abstracts, which shows that while 70,856 articles have been written on depression, only 851 have addressed joy. Also, it is estimated that no more than two percent of the National Institute of Mental Health’s annual budget is spent studying human strengths” (Myers, p.56). So many resources are spent figuring out what is wrong there is precious little left over to explore the more positive flip side.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is simply the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues. Positive psychology revisits the average person, with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving. It attempts to resume psychology’s forgotten missions of improving the lives of “normal” and “gifted” people. Positive psychology contends that if we wish to improve the human condition, it is not enough to help those who suffer. The majority of “normal” people also
need assistance in reaching a richer and more fulfilling existence. Positive psychology is not a far-fetched fantasy that denies reality and believes “everything is good.” It respects the complexity of mental illness and acknowledges the need to alleviate pathology. However, positive psychology endeavors to look beyond the victim, the underdog, and the remedial. Positive psychology is an attempt to adopt a more欣赏 perspective regarding human potentials, motives, and capacities. This is surprisingly difficult given the current reductionist tradition. In order to restore a balanced view of humankind it is necessary to remove the negative blinders and replace them with realistic, yet optimistic lenses. Instead of searching for fixes to problems, psychologists need to pay attention to psychological health. We can no longer afford to ignore such qualities as love, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, creativity, originality, spirituality, and wisdom. There is so much we can learn, and then teach to others, about what really makes life worth living.

Positive psychology is not a new idea. The pioneers of humanistic psychology, particularly A.H. Maslow, Carl Rogers, Rollo May and Victor Frankl, have all stressed the importance of focusing theory, research, and practice on normal and fully functioning persons. Their vision had a strong effect on the culture at large and held enormous promise. The effects of this early human potential movement can still be found today in the general public's great attraction to self-help books. Ultimately, however, this movement failed to change the direction of psychology because it failed to attract a cumulative, empirical body of research to ground its ideas. For whatever reasons, psychologists were more comfortable and confident examining what went wrong. Concentrating on meeting the urgent needs of disorders and negative emotions forced researchers to leave the positive realm.

The Need for Positive Psychology

In past decades, American society was not ready for the humanistic pioneers. Today's prosperous culture affords the
perfect opportunity to revisit these revolutionary ideas. Martin Seligman is the foremost leader in the field of positive psychology. He believes we need to figure out why we have more money, education, and leisure time than any other people in history and yet almost all of our mental health statistics are going down. “We are twice as rich as we were forty years ago, but we are ten times more likely to be depressed. Add to this a divorce rate that has doubled, juvenile crime which has quadrupled, and teen suicide which has tripled” (Seligman, 1998, p.1). Seligman expects that the resolution to these frightening statistics will be the best argument for positive psychology.

We live surrounded by many more people than our ancestors did; yet we are intimate with fewer individuals, and thus experience greater loneliness and alienation. Long-standing supports such as family, religious organizations, and community groups are eroding. In their place individuals are looking to themselves for answers. Our individualistic culture puts the “I” on a pedestal and relegates the “We” to the floor. This sheds light on why we idolize money. Everybody is looking out for his interests and her share. All our energy is directed towards materialism and the benefits it affords. Unfortunately, our financial advances have not made life any better (some would argue it is actually worse). For most of us, the promise of money being the secret to life is a lie. Money cannot provide meaning to existence. Seligman contends that a loss of meaning feeds many psychological problems and that finding meaning requires an attachment to something larger than the lonely self. “To the extent that people now find it hard to take seriously their relationship with God, to care about their relationship with the country or to be part of a large and abiding family, they will find it very difficult to find meaning in life. To put it another way, ‘the self is a very poor site for finding meanings’” (Seligman, 1988, p. 55).

Positive psychology will be indiscriminate in imposing its values. It will tell people that a good, meaningful, productive human life includes commitment to education, commitment to family and to other social groups, commitment to excellence
in one's activities, commitment to virtues such as honesty, loyalty, courage, and justice in one's dealings with others. This contrasts the individualistic ideology of America. Positive psychology insists that an individual's pursuit of self-actualization must take into account the social context. Like Adler, positive psychology is upfront with what it believes will work. It trusts that accentuating what is best in human nature will give us the best chance at optimizing our potential. The balm for our society is to restore and nurture some of the strengths we lost (i.e. attachment, community, meaning, spirituality).

Prevention of Mental Illness

The direct goal of positive psychology is a scientific understanding of the practice of civic virtue and of the pursuit of the best things in life. A useful side effect of positive psychology may be the prevention of serious mental illnesses. Working exclusively on personal weakness and on damaged brains, has rendered science poorly equipped to practice effective prevention. "The major strides in prevention have largely come from building a science focused on systematically promoting the competence of individuals. We have discovered that there is a set of human strengths that are the most likely buffers against mental illness: courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, work ethic, hope, honesty and perseverance. Much of the task of prevention will be to create a science of human strength whose mission will be to foster these virtues in people" (Seligman, 1998 p. 2). A shift towards positive psychology will be proactive and, hopefully, it will preclude the development of mental illness in the first place. We can ill-afford to take for granted and ignore these amazing positive characteristics.

Research Results

While research on positive emotions like happiness is really just beginning, it has already yielded some tangible results. "Subjective well-being refers to what we think and how we feel
about our lives; to the cognitive and affective conclusions we reach when we evaluate our existence” (Deiner, p. 34). Subjective well-being is a more scientific sounding term for what we usually mean by happiness. One of the major findings in study after study has been that external factors have relatively little effect on happiness levels. It seems that age, gender, and income give little clue to a person’s happiness. Auke Tellegen's classic study found that heredity accounted for about a 50% variation in current happiness. This suggests that, like cholesterol levels, happiness is genetically influenced but not genetically fixed. We definitely can fluctuate our happiness within a range, but probably not radically (Myers, 2000).

Seligman acknowledges the genetic component, but he believes that learning has a much larger influence. “Traits are caused by particular kinds of experience, rather than controlled directly by genes” (Seligman, 1995, p. 98). In other words, even though there is a certain gene, it is the specific environment that activates the gene. Seligman asserts that it is not what we have or what happens to us that determines how happy we are, but how we interpret what happens. Ultimately, we are the authors of our own story. Seligman believes each of us has patterns of thinking about causes (explanatory style) that develop in childhood and last a lifetime. Pessimistic people believe that the causes of bad events that happen to them are permanent, global, and their fault (internal). They believe that the causes of good events are temporary, specific, and lucky (external). Optimists on the other hand, attribute bad events to temporary, specific, and external causes. They believe the causes of good events are permanent, global, and internal. Learning how to internally dispute negative reactions and internalize positive experiences is the basis for greatly affecting one's degree of happiness (Seligman, 1995).

David Myers has tried to find answers to the questions: how happy are people and who is happy? He has aggregated data from 916 surveys of 1.2 million people in 45 nations representing most of humanity. He recalibrated subjective well-being onto a 0-to-10 scale (where 0 is low, such as very unhappy,
5 is neutral, and 10 is the high extreme). Despite popular opinion that most people are unhappy, research shows surprisingly high levels of reported happiness. The average response is 6.75. Either people are happier than others believe or maybe the high self-scores are a result of the ego maintaining itself in the most flattering way. Regardless, happiness seems to be an important need for most people. Myers also found that compared with those who are depressed, happy people are less self-centered, less hostile and abusive, and less vulnerable to disease. They are also more loving, forgiving, trusting, energetic, decisive, creative, sociable, and helpful (Myers, 1993). The correlation between happiness and positive mental health is convincing.

The results of who is happy are also quite intriguing. “People who go to work in their overalls and on the bus are just as happy, on the average, as those in suits who drive to work in their own Mercedes. Money does not seem to effect happiness. Thanks to our capacity to adapt to ever greater fame and fortune, yesterday’s luxuries can soon become today’s necessities and tomorrow’s relics” (Myers, p.60). It is ironic to realize that our becoming more financially stable over the last four decades has not been accompanied by any increase in subjective well-being. Too often wealth disconnects people because it gets in their way and keeps them from living a good life. Actually, it seems the more people strive for extrinsic goals such as money, the more numerous their problems and the less robust their well-being (Kasser, 1996).

Myers also found that compared with those having few social ties, people supported by close relationships with friends and families are less vulnerable to ill health and premature death. Research supports Francis Bacon’s statement that friends “redoubleth joys, and cutteth griefs in half” (Myers, p. 62). Also consistent are the higher rates of happiness reported by married people. It seems that marital intimacy, commitment, and support do, for most people, pay emotional dividends. Lastly, Myers found that religiously active people report higher levels of happiness. This faith and well-being correlation may be a result of the sense of meaning and purpose that people derive
from their faith. Nonetheless, spirituality is an excellent resource that demands further investigation.

Christopher Peterson’s meta-analysis found that optimism, however it is measured, is linked to desirable characteristics: happiness, perseverance, achievement, and health (Peterson, 2001). Barbara Fredrickson did another fascinating study which found that positive emotions a) broaden people’s thought repertoires, b) undo lingering negative emotions, c) fuel psychological resilience, and d) build psychological resilience and trigger upward spirals toward enhanced emotional well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). It seems positive experiences are the best building blocks for growth. Trying to remove negative blocks is not as effective. Therefore, it is about time that researchers systematically examine positive attributes. We know so much about depression, anxiety, anger and countless disorders and yet the opposite states go unobserved. We need to gain a much greater understanding of happiness, optimism, cheer, humor, courage and resilience. There is a glaring imbalance when we know how negative emotions promote illness, but do not know how positive emotions promote health.

Ellen Winner has taken up the cause of studying giftedness. She has found that gifted people have a deep intrinsic motivation to master the domain in which they have high ability and are almost manic in their energy level (Winner, 2000). Hopefully, by understanding how the potential of highly talented people is either frustrated or brought to fruition, we can apply these findings to the general public. It is plausible that this ability of gifted people to get lost in their work may be a key component to happiness.

Flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s lifelong work is to discover what people can do to live happy lives and “how to live life as a work of art, rather than as a chaotic response to external events” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p.1). His theory is that a person’s happiness largely depends on whether he or she can
make “flow” a constant part of his/her life. “Flow is a state of deep focus that occurs when people engage in challenging tasks that demand intense concentration and commitment” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p.3). Csikszentmihalyi has based most of his research on empirical data gathered by surveying people spontaneously about which activities they were undertaking and the way they were feeling at the time. He used a watch, which beeped at random times during each day and required his subjects to immediately complete a standard survey. For many subjects he followed them every week for several years. The research has been undertaken and confirmed in several countries, and now reaches 250,000 surveys.

People in flow described being in an “ecstatic state” or a feeling of being outside what they were doing. They are completely involved, focused, and have inner clarity, knowing what needs to be done and how well it is going. They are neither anxious nor bored. They have no worries about the self; they are above the boundaries of the ego. In the process of being thoroughly focused on the present, time seems to stand still. They also report being intrinsically motivated, not pursuing external rewards. The enjoyment seems to be provided by the situation or the activity itself. We have all experienced these feelings of being in the “zone.” These flow experiences are associated with all activities, including work, sports, arts, hobbies, or social interactions. According to Csikszentmihalyi, a person’s happiness is positively correlated with the degree of flow in his or her life. Having both a high degree of intrinsic motivation and high levels of concentration is vital for people to be active agents in their own happiness (Csiksentmihalyi, 1995).

Csiksentmihalyi has also found it useful to distinguish positive experiences that are “pleasurable” from those that are “enjoyable.” Pleasure is the good feeling that comes from satisfying homeostatic needs such as hunger, sex, and bodily comfort. Enjoyment, on the other hand, refers to the fond feeling we experience when we break through the limits of homeostasis. It results when we do something (an artistic performance, sporting event, or stimulating conversation) that stretches us
beyond what we were. Enjoyment, rather than pleasure, is what leads to personal growth and long-term happiness. Unfortunately, too many people settle for pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi 1995).

According to Csikszentmihalyi, high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection from meaningful challenge are not signs of psychopathology, but rather signs of a deficiency in positive development. The same might be said for many cases of problem behavior such as drug use, premature sex, and delinquency. Often these problems are not caused by responses to family stress, emotional disturbance, or maladaptive cognitions, but rather to the absence of engagement in a positive life trajectory. Too many people get by without being invested in paths that excite them or feel like they originate from within (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995). We need to encourage people to invest their limited psychic resources in opportunities for action that represent real sources of development for the individual and society.

Future Directions

Until recently there has been no science of human strengths to compliment the science of healing. We know very little about human strengths. We do not have a good way of measuring them or maximizing their effects. To begin with we need to know what individual strengths and virtues are, and do these positive traits transcend cultures and approach universality. In 1999, the Positive Psychology Network (PPN) was founded. Its most pressing need is to create a working taxonomy. In pursuit of this goal, the PPN developed the VIA (Values-in-Action) Classification. This classification is comprised of roughly twenty strengths and virtues that fall into the broad categories of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. PPN posits that these broad categories emerge, almost universally, from the major classifications of strengths and virtues throughout history and across cultures. The long-range goal of the VIA Project is to categorize, understand, and
nurture these strengths. The PPN has also created the Positive Experience, Positive Character, and Positive Institution Centers for meetings and research; a task force on Teaching Positive Psychology in schools; annual national and international summits; grants and research awards; and a large web site with a living annotated bibliography. It seems the PPN is flourishing and the new field of positive psychology is burgeoning. (Seligman, 2001).

Personal Considerations

I believe positive psychology will come to understand and build those factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish. Such a science is possible. The major psychological theories have already adapted to include the investigation of strengths and virtues. No longer do all the dominant theories view the individual as passive. Rather, the individual is seen as a decision-maker, with choices, and preferences. Our experiences are not motivated solely by the pressures of adaptation and survival, but also by the need to reproduce flow and optimal experiences. It seems we are hard-wired to choose behaviors that make us feel fully alive, competent, and creative. Positive psychology does not need to start from scratch. Psychology has already developed a highly transferable science of mental illness. It has developed a usable taxonomy as well as reliable and valid ways of measuring such nebulous concepts as schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression. It has developed sophisticated methods for understanding the causal pathways that lead to such undesirable outcomes. Most importantly, it has developed pharmacological and psychological interventions which help to treat mental disorders. These same methods, with a slight shift of emphasis, can be used to measure, understand, and build those characteristics that make life most worth living. After all, psychology is much bigger than just medicine and fixing unhealthy things. It is about everything, especially work, family, play, sports, and love.

In the final analysis, positive psychology is a philosophy
that has as much to do with a return to simplicity as it does cutting-edge science. It is a common sense approach that concentrates on helping people live around their strengths instead of forbidding them to do bad things. Positive psychology is not wishful thinking; it realistically tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems of human behavior. It does not claim to be a value-free approach because it is certain that some ways of living are better than others. This includes having a meaningful, engaged, attached life that does not put the needs of the individual above society.

Lastly, I believe we need a paradigm shift towards positive psychology because, in my limited experience, it works the best. I have found that progress in the counseling relationship is often the result of amplifying strengths rather than repairing weaknesses. Building strengths and instilling hope seem to be the common components of all good counselors, regardless of theoretical orientation. Positive psychology is also an attractive theoretical framework because it can encompass my search for meaning and spirituality. Therefore, I believe that by creating a science of strengths, we will be able to improve the efficacy and effectiveness of therapy. In the process, I believe the science of psychology will get closer to its practice.

WORK CITED


