

Toward a Humanistic Positive Psychology

Why Can't We Just Get Along?

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Abstract

I propose that despite the nay-saying 1) positive psychology is justifiably a branch of humanistic psychology, and 2) a humanistic positive psychology would be salutary to the profession of psychology. From the standpoint of theory, I show how positive psychology shares humanistic psychology's concern with what it means to be fully, experientially human, and how that understanding illuminates the vital or fulfilled life. However, I also show how the findings of positive psychology, particularly in the area "happiness" research - or what has recently been termed "human flourishing," stop short of the fuller aforementioned aims. Specifically, I show how positive psychology appears to oversimplify both the experience of human flourishing and its social-adaptive value. While the positive psychology findings on flourishing are useful in limited contexts, e.g., in terms of their implications for the attainment of pleasure, physical health, and cultural competency, they are inadequate with respect to the more complicated contexts of creativity, emotional depth, and social consciousness. I will detail the nature of these discrepancies, such as their implications for perception of reality, psychological growth, and capacity for self-reflection, and consider their role in an expanded vision of human resiliency.

Overview

Positive psychology is justifiably a branch of humanistic psychology. Let me clarify: To the extent that humanistic psychology¹ stands for "What it means to be fully and experientially human, and how that understanding illuminates the vital and fulfilled life" - and it does, according to our texts (Schneider, Bugental, & Pierson, 2001) - I hereby advocate for a branch of humanistic psychology called positive psychology.

I am happy (and I use that word advisedly!) to endorse humanistic psychology as a positive psychology, and positive psychology as a humanism - yet with one major caveat: Positive psychology as it is presently constituted reflects what I call a "narrow band," cognitive-behaviourally informed theoretical perspective. What I mean by this is that prevailing studies of happiness (or even that which has been termed human flourishing) represent but a circumscribed range of how such phenomena are actually experienced "on the ground," so to speak, in people's everyday

worlds. If this were not the case, I don't think we'd see so many contradictory cases in positive psychology research, but I will elaborate on this momentarily.

Broad Band vs. Narrow Band

To the extent that positive psychology is viewed for what it is, therefore--a narrow band formulation of a broad band experience² - I welcome it into the humanistic mosaic. On the other hand, to the extent that positive psychology, that is, narrow band investigation, is mistaken for broad band comprehension, I have grave concerns, not just for the alliance of positive psychology and humanism, but for the alliance of our field with life.

To restate my case, I have nothing against narrow bands; within their proper contexts, they can have great value - such as their contribution to clarity, contentment, and order. The problem is that those things represent only *slices* of life, not life itself. Or to quote another wary observer of the human scene: "Twice two makes four is... not life, gentlemen, [but] the beginning of death" (Dostoyevsky, 1864/1975). Hence, while narrow bands can have great value, they can also pose great hazards, and these hazards are necessary to point out - especially today - when twice two makes four is increasingly trumpeted as constituting life.

Problems with Narrow Band Positive Psychology

As I view it, there are three main problems with a humanistically deprived (cognitive-behaviourally informed) positive psychology:

1) methodological narrowness; 2) neglect of the tragic dimension; and 3) susceptibility to the expedient; and all three bode dubiously for our society.

The positive notions of happiness and flourishing, therefore, are not just remote academic inquiries; they are innermost challenges to our nature and world today - and that is why this symposium is so imperative.

Without further ado then, let me illustrate how I believe a humanistically deprived positive psychology is impacting us today, and what, if any, steps we can take to remedy this situation - that is, to reconnect humanism and positive psychology for the enhancement of psychology as a whole.

In their 2005 article in the *American Psychologist*, Fredrickson and Losada conclude that human flourishing, which they define as an "optimal range of... functioning...that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience," is predictable based on one key factor - a "positivity ratio" (p. 678). What is a positivity ratio? It is a quantitative proportion of positive - (that is pleasant, grateful, upbeat, appreciative, and enjoyable) feelings - over negative (that is unpleasant contemptuous, irritable, disdainful, and aversive) feelings (p. 678). Further they identify a positivity ratio of 2.9 as the threshold for flourishing based on their review of the relevant research. In other words, one must attain a ratio of about three "good thoughts" to

every single bad thought, in order to achieve what the authors call human flourishing. Or to put it another way, the “flourishing factors of goodness (“indexed by happiness, satisfaction, and superior functioning”); generativity (“indexed by broadened thought-action repertoires and behavioural flexibility”); growth (“indexed by gains in enduring personal and social resources”); and resilience (“indexed by survival and growth in the aftermath of adversity”) are significantly “linked to a positivity ratio at or above 2.9” (p. 685).

Now these findings are notable, and help us to understand something about “optimal” human functioning within a context of narrowly operationalized definitions, strictly codified measures, and carefully controlled observations. [Granted, the researchers did use what they term “nonlinear, dynamic” equations (p. 680) to account for the relative variability of emotional processing, but nevertheless, their findings strike me as neither fluid nor dynamic - sorry!]

Contradictions in the Positive Findings

Furthermore, what the researchers don’t help us to understand - and what will be essential to understand if we are ever to substantively broach human vitality - is how positivity ratios *also* appear to correlate with destructive human tendencies. For example, a growing body of research appears to suggest that what the researchers call high positivity - a disposition to pleasant, grateful, and upbeat feelings - is also correlative with a dimension called “positive illusion” (relative inaccuracy regarding reality); and that negativity (or what is generally characterized as mild to moderate depression) is correlated with relatively greater accuracy concerning reality (Alloy and Abramson, 1988; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). These findings, moreover, also appear to square with recent correlations between highly positive people and suppressed psychological growth, inability to self-reflect, and racial intolerance (Bodenhausen, Kramer and Susser, 1994; Stambor, 2005, p. 13).

Furthermore, if we couple the above findings on positivity with the consistent findings that approximately 80% of the American (U.S.) population calls itself happy (Time Magazine, 2005, January), then we have some very puzzling (some would say, troubling) juxtapositions to account for. For example a quarter of the U.S. population (presumably a healthy percentage of the happy 80%) believes that “using violence to get what they want is acceptable” (Rifkin, 2005, p. 32). Nearly half “are more likely to believe that human nature is basically evil, and that ‘one must belong to the one, true religion to lead the best, most meaningful life’” (Spirituality & Health, May/June, 2005, 27). *59% believe that the prophecies in the book of Revelations (such as the Rapture and a war with Islam in the final reckoning) are going to come true, and nearly a quarter

believe that the Bible predicted the 9/11 attacks. (Moyers, 2005); and, 67% of US men and 57% of US women are overweight or obese (Payne, 2005).

Finally, the researchers fail to explain how high positivity seems to be correlated with some of the most egregious forms of behaviour in the history of our world. To wit, the eye-witness reports of Nazi party rallies, Stalinist marches, Klan gatherings etc., and the mass enthrallment with authoritarian leaders (Shirer, 1960; Goldhagen, 1996). William Shirer, for example, noted that by the time of his Nuremberg address in the early 1930's, Hitler had received "the most frenzied adulation for a public figure that [he had] ever seen" (p. 230).

On a much tamer level, although still to the point, Richard Handler (2006), a reporter for the Psychotherapy Networker wrote at the conclusion of a positive psychology course taught by no less than its acclaimed founder that: "Seligman has undoubtedly done the field of psychology an enormous service by demonstrating that ...the study of what makes people happy, optimistic, and wise is just as important as the study of what makes them anxious, depressed, and crazy... And yet I am still left wondering if...the will to try for the optimistic life must come from something deeper, more mysterious, [and] less definable"(p.12).

"Oddly enough," Handler concluded, "while we were never supposed to give in to negativity and depression, they both shadowed the whole course; they were the unacknowledged elephants lurking in the corner" (p. 11).

Perhaps genuine happiness is not something you aim at, but is, as Frankl once noted, a byproduct of a life well lived - and a life well lived does not settle on the programmed or neatly calibrated.

Consider Rollo May's (1981, pp. 241, 242) distinction between happiness and the more fecund (in his view) "joy:"
"Happiness depends generally on one's outer state; joy is an overflowing of inner energies and leads to awe and wonderment... Happiness is the absence of discord; joy is the welcoming of discord as the basis of higher harmonies. Happiness is finding a system of rules which solve our problems; joy is taking the risk that is necessary to break new frontiers."

Summary and Conclusion

In short, positive psychology and its cognitive-behaviourally informed theoretical base have a lot of explaining to do. If scoring high on positive psychology scales - which often means enjoying lots of friends and family, and frequently going to church - encompasses the oblivious couch potato as well as the fanatical ideologue, something is amiss.

Furthermore, the ratio of positive to negative feelings would seem to be a very crude indicator indeed of the highly nuanced and multimodal experiences of flourishing and happiness. On the other hand, a humanistically informed positive psychology, in my view, could help

redress that explanatory chasm. By marshalling perceptive, subtly nuanced, quantitative *and* qualitative data, we may discover a very different portrait of the “flourishing” person. This portrait would likely unveil a many-textured personality - closer to Zorba the Greek, than to Dick or Jane who may well keep a clean and orderly life, but who, at the same time, may also quietly endorse a materialist, militarist, and imperialist lifestyle. How else will we find out about such discrepancies unless we employ methodologies that cut beneath the deceptive surfaces of human performance (Shedler, Mayman, Manis, 1993).

Hence in answer to the question that I posed at the beginning of this paper: What it means to be fully, experientially human, and how that illuminates the vital life - I advocate for a humanistically informed positive psychology, one that would supplement positive psychology scales with intimate, in-depth portraits, and that would augment positive psychology theorizing with theorizing that accounts for the ranges of human fulfillment. In his study of self-actualizers, Abe Maslow (1968) made a similar point. One observation that had long stumped him, he said, began to fall into place, and that is that “these most mature of all people were also strongly childlike. These same people [with] the strongest egos ever described and the most definitely individual, were also precisely the ones who could be most egoless, self-transcending, and problem-centered” (p. 140).

“Now it is very curious,” wrote Rollo May (1995, p. 99) along a parallel line of investigation, “that each of [the creative therapists he – May - admired was] great in exactly his weakest point.” For example, “Harry Stack Sullivan, the person who could never relate to others, founded...interpersonal [psychiatry];” Abe Maslow, “who had so many hellish experiences [as a child growing up in the streets of New York] founded... the school of peak experience and the human potential movement.” May goes on: “the experience of degeneration...is I hope, temporary, but [it] can often be used as a way of reforming and reorganizing ourselves on a higher level. As C.G. Jung puts it, ‘the gods return in our diseases’ (p.100).

And it is precisely for reasons like these, that we need a humanistically informed positive psychology today. For, far from being diversionary - or God forbid, fuzzy-minded(!) - a humanistically informed positive psychology would aim straight at the paradoxes of human well-being studies—resolutely excavating their depths, their complexities, and their ambiguities (Schneider, 2004, 2009). A humanistically informed positive psychology would acknowledge the capacities of depression or anger or fear to distort, but it would also, and at the same time, recognize their capacities to clarify, liberate, and sensitize. In short, a humanistically informed positive psychology would foster a brute inquiry of being. Such an inquiry would be forged in “the lived truth of the terror of creation,” as

the noted anthropologist, Ernest Becker (1973, p. 283) once phrased it, “with full exercise of passion, of vision, of pain, of fear, and of sorrow” (p. 284). Anything less, as he also noted, would be a dereliction of both our science and our practice.

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Notes

¹Contemporary humanistic psychology embraces three basic subdisciplines: the existential, the transpersonal, and the constructivist; but it also can be viewed as a context for the psychological field as a whole (Schneider, Bugental and Pierson, 2001).

²That said, I am also aware that an emerging generation of positive psychology researchers, such as Laura King, Chris Peterson, Jonathan Haidt, and Shane Lopez, are moving the field in a broadened and more nuanced direction; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and even Martin Seligman assent to these developments. However, to my mind, these trends are in varying degrees still delimited by the three problems I refer to momentarily - methodological narrowness, neglect of the tragic dimension, and susceptibility to the expedient. In this light, therefore, even “reformative” positive psychology stops short of, and could importantly benefit from, the recommendations of this article.

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