

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGY

Beatriz Vera Poseck

Mention of the concept of positive psychology often leads to its interpretation as some new trend of spiritual philosophy, or the latest miraculous self-help method to add to the many that have already flooded the market. However, it only requires the slightest interest in the concept to understand how far removed these assumptions are from reality. Positive psychology is nothing less than a branch of psychology which, with the same scientific rigour as the rest of the discipline, focuses on fields of research and interest quite different from those traditionally studied: positive human qualities and characteristics.

Key words: Positive emotions, optimism, humour, resilience.

A menudo, cuando se hace referencia al término de psicología positiva se tiende a interpretar como alguna nueva corriente de filosofía espiritual o un nuevo método milagroso de autoayuda de los tantos que saturan el mercado. Sin embargo, poco hace falta interesarse en el concepto para comprender cuán lejanas se encuentran estas suposiciones de la realidad. La psicología positiva, no es sino una rama de la psicología, que, con la misma rigurosidad científica que ésta, focaliza su atención en un campo de investigación e interés distinto al adoptado tradicionalmente: las cualidades y características positivas humanas.

Palabras clave: Emociones positivas, optimismo, humor, adaptabilidad.

If we ask a range of different people of all types and from all walks of life about the objective of psychology and the work of those involved in it, we will surely find a predominant response: to treat and cure mental disorders.

Undoubtedly, psychology has for many years focused exclusively on the pathology and weakness of human beings, indeed becoming identified and even almost confused with psychopathology and psychotherapy. This phenomenon has given rise to a theoretical framework of a pathogenic nature, which has seriously biased the study of the human mind. The exclusive focus on the negative that has dominated psychology for so long has led to the assumption of a model of human existence that overlooks or even denies the positive characteristics of the human being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and which has contributed to the adoption of a pessimistic view of human nature (Gilham & Seligman, 1999). Thus, characteristics such as joy, optimism, creativity, humour, excited anticipation, and so on have been ignored or only superficially dealt with.

The limitations of this focus on the negative have begun to attract attention in recent years and in relation to different disorders. Thus, for example, depressive disorders appear to be insufficiently explained from a model based exclusively on negative emotions. Depression is not only

the presence of negative emotions, but also the absence of positive emotions, and it is essential to take this into account, for example, in the development of treatments. In this context, techniques and therapies conceived for fighting depression have traditionally focused on the elimination of negative emotions such as apathy, sadness or helplessness. However, recent research has begun to develop intervention strategies based on the stimulation in the depressed person of positive emotions such as joy, excited anticipation, hope, and so on.

A large part of research and theoretical work in psychology in recent years has focused on seeking how to prevent the development of disorders in risk subjects. However, it cannot be denied that, still today, psychology has shown itself unable to provide a solution to this question. The pathogenic model adopted over many years has proved incapable of even approaching the prevention of mental disorders. The key to this failure might perhaps be found in the fact that prevention has always been understood in terms of negative aspects, and that the focus has been placed on avoiding or eliminating negative emotions.

Indeed, the greatest advances in prevention have derived from perspectives based on the systematic construction of competencies (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In this regard, research has shown the existence of human strengths that act as cushions against mental disorders, and there seems to be sufficient empirical evidence to state that certain positive characteristics and hu-

man strengths, such as optimism, hope, perseverance or courage, among others, act as barriers against such disorders.

The reductionist perspective has converted psychology into a “science of victimology” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Historically, psychology has conceived the human being as a passive subject, who reacts to environmental stimuli. The focus of applied psychology has been the cure of suffering, and there has been an explosion in research on mental disorders and the negative effects of stressors. Professionals have the task of treating patients’ mental disorders within a pathogenic framework in which the repair of damage is crucial. However, psychology is not only a branch of medicine dealing with mental illness-health; it is much more than that. In recent years, voices have been raised which, taking up once more the ideas of humanist psychology about the need to study the “positive side” of human existence, have offered solid empirical and scientific support to this neglected part of psychology.

The term “positive psychology” was developed by Martin Seligman, a researcher who, having devoted a large part of his career to mental disorders and the development of concepts such as learned helplessness, made a U-turn in his work, developing and promoting a more positive conception of the human species.

The object of positive psychology is to improve quality of life and prevent the appearance of mental disorders and pathologies. The current conception of psychology, centred around the pathological, focuses on correcting defects and repairing what was broken. In contrast, positive psychology insists on the construction of competencies and on prevention.

For Seligman, the concept of positive psychology is not new to the discipline, for prior to the Second World War the main objectives of psychology were three: curing mental disorders, making people’s lives more productive and fuller, and identifying and developing talent and intelligence. However, after the war, different events and circumstances led psychology to forget two of these objectives and focus exclusively on mental disorders and human suffering (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Likewise, we can find clear positive tendencies in the humanist current of psychology, which flourished in the 1960s and was represented by such recognized authors as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow or Erich Fromm. Unfortunately, humanist psychology has not enjoyed a solid empirical basis, and has indeed given rise to an im-

mense quantity of doubtful and quite unreliable self-help movements (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In this quest for the best in the human being, for the good things that allow our potential to flourish, positive psychology does not trust in pipedreams, utopias, delusions, faith or self-deception, but rather adopts the method of scientific psychology, broadening the traditional field of activity and distancing itself from the questionable methods of self-help and spiritual philosophies so widespread today.

According to Martin Seligman, positive psychology emerged as an attempt to overcome the resistant barrier of a 65% success rate that none of the psychotherapies have been capable of surpassing to date. The techniques developed in research in positive psychology support and complement those already in existence. Thanks to theoretical research in this area, the spectrum of intervention is considerably broadened and enriched. In this context, the involvement of variables such as optimism, humour or positive emotions in physical states of health emerges as one of the key points of research in positive psychology. The hope for the coming years is a large quantity of empirical results that will allow a new theory of psychology to take shape.

Positive psychology is not... a philosophical or spiritual movement, nor does it set out to promote spiritual or human growth through methods of questionable foundation. It is not a form of self-help, nor a magic method for achieving happiness. Nor does it pretend to be a cloak for wrapping beliefs and dogmas of faith, or indeed a path for anyone to follow. Positive psychology should in no case be confused with dogmatic movements whose aim is to attract devotees or followers, nor must it ever be considered outside of a rigorous professional context.

Positive psychology is... a branch of psychology that seeks to understand, through scientific research, the processes underlying the positive qualities and emotions of the human being, for so long ignored by psychology.

The object of this interest is none other than to contribute new knowledge about the human psyche, not only to help solve the mental health problems that affect individuals, but also with a view to improving quality of life and well-being, always in accordance with the rigorous scientific methodology that must characterize all health sciences.

Positive psychology represents a new perspective from which to understand psychology and mental health that serves as a complement and support for that which al-

ready exists.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Psychology must overcome concepts focused on pathology and create a positive terminology to complement the negative expressions so abundant today in traditional psychology.

It must also create new assessment instruments, aimed at identifying the strengths of the individual, so as to guide prevention and treatment and promote personal development.

Furthermore, it must design intervention programmes and techniques aimed at developing the precious resources that people, groups and communities undoubtedly possess. The positive effects of these developments will be evident not only at the individual level, but also at a social level in a complex world that is constantly erecting new challenges for its inhabitants.

The intention throughout this special issue is to offer an overview of some of the areas of interest of positive psychology, and to outline a first approach to the development of valid and reliable instruments with which to work.

POSITIVE EMOTIONS

The majority of research on emotions has focused exclusively on the negative emotions, and this is to some extent logical if we consider that emotions such as fear, sadness or anger are alarm signals which, if systematically ignored, may generate considerable problems. The natural tendency to study that which threatens the well-being of humans has led to a concentration on those emotions that help them to deal with imminent danger or problems.

Moreover, there are other reasons that explain why positive emotions have had a lower scientific profile. For example, they are more difficult to study, given that they are relatively fewer in number and more difficult to distinguish. Thus, if we consider the scientific taxonomies of the basic emotions we can identify 3 or 4 negative emotions for each positive one. This negative ratio is indeed faithfully reflected in everyday language, so that people in general have more difficulty naming positive emotions.

There are also differences with regard to the expression of each type of emotion. Thus, negative emotions have been assigned specific facial configurations that make possible their universal recognition (Ekman, 1989). In contrast, positive emotions have not been assigned such

unique and characteristic facial expressions. Moreover, at a neurological level, negative emotions trigger different responses in the autonomic nervous system, while positive emotions do not provoke such differentiated responses.

Another explanation for the imbalance in scientific interest between negative and positive emotions resides in the way their study is approached. Thus, on considering positive emotions, researchers have always done so from the theoretical framework used for the study of negative emotions. From this perspective, the emotions are, by definition, associated with action impulses. Negative emotions have obvious adaptive value, representing efficient solutions to the problems mankind has faced since its origins. However, the adaptive value of positive emotions is more difficult to explain, and has been ignored for many years. But if it were truly the case that they lacked value, we would have to ask ourselves why they have remained with us throughout thousands of years of evolution.

What, then, is the adaptive value of positive emotions? We can answer this question if we abandon the theoretical framework from which we understand negative emotions. Positive emotions resolve problems related to personal growth and development. Experiencing positive emotions leads to mental states and forms of behaviour that indirectly prepare the individual to cope successfully with future adversity (Fredrickson, 2001).

Fortunately, in recent years, many experts have begun to carry out research and theorize in this field, opening up new ways of understanding human psychology. One of the theories most solidly representative of this trend is that developed by Barbara Fredrickson. She highlights the importance of positive emotions as a means of resolving many of the problems generated by negative emotions, stressing how, through them, human beings can succeed in getting through difficult times and come out stronger. According to this model, positive emotions can be channelled towards prevention, treatment and coping to become authentic arms for dealing with problems (Fredrickson, 2000).

OPTIMISM

Optimism is a dispositional psychological characteristic that refers to positive expectations and future objectives, and whose relationship with variables such as perseverance, achievement, physical health and well-being (Peterson & Bossio, 1991; Scheier & Carver, 1993) have turned it into one of the central aspects in positive psy-

chology.

The modern interest in optimism emerges from findings on the role of pessimism in depression (Beck, 1967). Since then, many studies have shown optimism to have predictive value in relation to health and well-being, as well as acting as a modulator of stressful events, palliating the problems of those who are suffering or stressed, or have serious illnesses (Peterson, Seligman & Vaillant, 1988). Optimism can also act as a strengthener of well-being and health in those who, though free from disorders, wish to improve their quality of life (Seligman, 2002). From an evolutionary point of view, moreover, optimism is considered as a characteristic of the human species selected through evolution for its survival-related advantages (Taylor, 1989).

Common sense tells us that it is positive to look to the future with optimism, and numerous empirical works support this idea. Thus, for example, studies with the general population show a clear tendency to overestimate one's degree of control over situations (Langer, 1975), while depressed people would estimate highly accurately their true degree of control (Alloy & Abramson, 1979). This illusion of control, together with other mechanisms, contributes to explaining why some people do not become depressed and others do.

What distinguishes an optimistic person from a pessimistic one? Is it good to see life as a little better than it really is? Are pessimists realists while optimists live on illusions? It is these and other questions that scientific study in this field aims to resolve. Thus, optimism promises to be one of the most important topics in research on positive psychology.

HUMOUR

The book "Anatomy of an Illness", published in 1979 by the late magazine editor Norman Cousins, was the first work that dealt openly with the correlation between humour and health. Cousins describes how he recovered from a disease (ankylosing spondylitis) that is usually irreversible through a treatment that included, among other therapies, watching comedy films by the Marx brothers.

Humour and its commonest external manifestation, laughter, constitute an important pillar of research in positive psychology. Although the idea that laughter and humour are good for the health is not a new one, it is only the last few decades that have seen the gradual proliferation of therapies and clinical interventions based on

this conception. Scientific research has shown that laughter is capable of reducing stress and anxiety and thus improving the individual's quality of life and health.

Humour "serves as an internal safety valve that permits us to release tensions, dispel worries, relax and forget everything", asserts Dr. Lee Berk, Associate Professor of Pathology at Loma Linda University in California, and one of the principal researchers in the world of health and good humour. In a series of studies he examined participants' blood samples before and after they watched comedy videos and compared them with those of a group who did not watch the videos. Berk discovered considerable reductions in the concentrations of tension-related hormones and an increase in the immune response of those who watched the videos.

RESILIENCE AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

Experiencing a traumatic event is perhaps one of the situations most likely to transform a person's life. Without in any way belittling the seriousness and horror of such experiences, it should be underlined that it is in extreme situations that human beings have the opportunity to reconstruct their way of understanding the world and their system of values, to reconsider their conception of the world and to modify their beliefs, so that in this reconstruction there can (and often does) occur a process of learning and personal growth (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). However, traditional psychology has tended to assume that all traumatic events leave people with psychological wounds, and to ignore the study of phenomena such as resilience and post-traumatic growth, based on the capacity of human beings to resist and recover from life's onslaughts and build on their effects.

Resilience and post-traumatic growth emerge as research concepts in positive psychology, through which it is aimed to determine why some people succeed in learning from their experiences and even extract benefits from them. Resilience is situated within a positive and dynamic current of psychology that promotes mental health, and would seem to be a reality confirmed by the testimonies of many people who, despite having gone through a traumatic situation, have managed to get over it and get on with life –even on an improved level, as though having experienced the trauma and come to terms with it had enabled them to develop latent and unexpected resources. Although for a long time responses of resilience have been considered as unusual (and even

pathological) by experts, the current scientific literature shows clearly that resilience is a common response, and that its appearance, far from indicating pathology, suggests a healthy adjustment to adversity.

Events such as the recent terrorist attacks in New York and in Madrid can provide a good scientific basis for the analysis of these phenomena, and although there is an enormous preponderance of studies devoted to post-traumatic stress disorder, there is also a small body of work on positive emotions, coping and resilience.

CREATIVITY

Creativity is the capacity to create, to produce new things. It is the ability of the human brain to reach conclusions, to conceive ideas and to solve problems in an original way. The form it adopts can be artistic, literary, scientific, and so on, and it can also be employed in everyday life, improving its quality. This last-mentioned expression of creativity probably does not leave its mark on the history of mankind, but it is in essence what makes life worth living (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Creativity is considered, therefore, as a key process in personal development and social progress, and hence falls squarely within the field of interest of positive psychology. Nevertheless, the potential this suggests is weakened by the widespread assumption that creativity is a dichotomic differential characteristic possessed by some and not by others. Research on creativity has contributed to the promotion of this belief, focusing as it has done for many years on traits, that is, on the identification of the personality characteristics (stable and scarcely modifiable) of "creative people". As a result, some other important research areas have been neglected, such as the physical and social contexts in which creative people have developed their creations, or the specific skills they have learned. Furthermore, it has been assumed that creativity cannot be altered, and that creative persons can produce creative work at any time and in any field.

In the light of current research, neither of these assumptions appears to be completely true. Today we understand that creativity does not depend exclusively on stable personality traits, but is rather the result of a specific constellation of personal characteristics, cognitive abilities, technical knowledge, social and cultural circumstances, material resources, and even luck (Amabile, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). Creativity can be developed and encouraged in all areas of life, and can also be considered as another

resource available for coping with adverse circumstances. Anybody, moreover, can develop their creative potential and improve the quality of their everyday life, even if the final result is not earth-shattering discoveries for humanity or universally valued creations.

MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS

One of the challenges for positive psychology is the development of valid and reliable measurement instruments capable of measuring and delimiting the variables involved in the field.

Traditional assessment and the models deriving from it have clarified aspects of human illness and weakness. What is necessary now is the creation of instruments that permit the assessment of positive resources and emotions, with a view to developing more functional, more dynamic and healthier models.

Pioneering in this regard are the efforts of Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, who have designed a measurement instrument based on a classification of the individual's positive resources.

The VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) is a 240-item questionnaire that uses 5-point Likert-style items to measure the degree to which respondents possess each of the 24 strengths and virtues in the classification developed at the Values in Action Institute under the direction of Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson.

The 24 strengths measured by the VIA-IS, and which form the basis of the Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook classification, are grouped in 6 sections: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence.

The VIA study with more than 4000 participants reveals that, of the 24 qualities or strengths assessed through the VIA-IS, five are consistently related to life satisfaction to a far greater extent than the remaining 19. These are: gratitude, optimism, enthusiasm, curiosity and the capacity to love and be loved.

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