

## POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN PERSPECTIVE

Carmelo Vázquez<sup>1</sup>

Madrid Complutense University

**T**he subject matter of this issue of *Papeles del Psicólogo* is indicative of the interest being taken among academics and professionals in Positive Psychology. In recent years, prestigious journals (American Psychologist, Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, Psychological Inquiry, American Behavioral Scientist, School Psychology Quarterly, *Ricerche di Psicologia*, Review of General Psychology, among others) have also devoted special issues to the subject. Without going into debates about the aptness of the term or the need for a more original label, the proponents of this approach highlight something as apparently simple as taking into account the positive and negative aspects of human functioning. We must acknowledge, with no little pride, that psychology has developed effective and efficient methods of intervention for many psychological problems. However, we have not made so much progress in conceiving methods for (re)establishing happiness in the unfortunate or, in a more general way, for providing a solidly knowledge-based formula for improving well-being. This situation is due in part to the fact that –for reasons too complex to go into in this brief presentation– the study of the negative has, by and large, occupied more of our attention than its opposite. An analysis of psychology publications since 1872, carried out by PsycINFO, shows that the ratio of negative to positive aspects dealt with is 2 to 1 (Rand & Snyder, 2003).

But pondering the question of human well-being is no mere passing fashion. In a sense, it has always been a core concern of Western philosophy, either from the direct analysis of the fundamental conditions of well-being (Aristotle's *eudemonia*) or, in more modern times, from the analysis of the existential conditions that limit the scope of this ideal. Thus, Aristotle, but also Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Bertrand Russell, Heidegger and Cioran have rendered reflection on happiness one of the central shafts of thinking about "the human condition". Howev-

er, science has found itself obliged to respond to other, more pressing demands, related to the struggle against illness, suffering or poverty, and only recently has it been in a condition to use its tools for exploring these terrains more traditionally falling within the province of philosophy.

Indeed, it is no historical accident that the Welfare State was a central European and Scandinavian invention of the 1960s, a concept that could only emerge when the principal epidemic illnesses had ceased to be the prime causes of mortality, and when economic prosperity in the West was greater than it had ever been before. Nor is it coincidental that it was in the 1970s that there appeared the first large-scale sociological studies on the state of the happiness of nations, which have continued uninterrupted to the present day, or that it was the mid-1980s that witnessed the explosion of research on quality of life in the field of medicine, an aspect which continues to be studied with enviable vigour in that field.

Psychology has also begun quite recently to accept subjective well-being as a relevant object of study and to take on directly, as a systematic academic duty, the exploration of human strengths and of the factors that contribute to the happiness of human beings. The inception of this commitment is so close, indeed, that the formal foundation of so-called Positive Psychology is accepted as being marked by Martin Seligman's inaugural lecture of his term as President of the American Psychological Association (Seligman, 1999), even though the seed of Positive Psychology can be traced to a much earlier period, in psychological approaches now consigned to history that showed the utmost good intentions but a severe lack of empirical support.

This new sensitivity toward the scientific study of well-being is, in a general sense, not exclusive to psychology. The analysis of well-being and the search for objective indicators is the concern of the social sciences as a whole. Among those involved in this undertaking are, for example, groups of sociologists and economists (including, in an active role, the psychologist and Nobel laureate for Economics Daniel Kahneman), addressing their efforts to the analysis of the factors which, beyond the official rhetoric, are related to citizens' well-being (Kahneman & Krueger, in press). How can we speak of the Welfare State if public policy does not concern itself with

Correspondence: Carmelo Vázquez. Catedrático de Psicología Clínica. Facultad de Psicología. Universidad Complutense. 28224 Madrid. España. E-mail: [cvazquez@psi.ucm.es](mailto:cvazquez@psi.ucm.es)

<sup>1</sup> Member of the International Web Steering Committee on Positive Psychology (University of Pennsylvania) and National Representative of the European Network of Positive Psychology (<http://www.enpp.org>).

the well-being of the population? We know that while the wealth of many industrialized nations has grown almost exponentially in recent decades, the happiness of their inhabitants has not substantially increased, which constitutes an alarming political paradox in relation to the meaning and scope of the Welfare State (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

It is somewhat venturesome to speculate on the future of what we currently refer to as Positive Psychology. Quite probably, what is for the time being a "movement" or, as some might say, a fashion, will dissolve without further ado into the everyday business of psychology. Indeed, in our view, and to paraphrase André Malraux, it might be said that the Positive Psychology of the future will be psychology or simply will not be. That is, the most likely scenario is that what we now call Positive Psychology will be perfectly integrated into the everyday work of future generations of psychologists, and the analysis and measurement of well-being, of positive emotions or of the effective improvement in the lives of people we treat will be the unquestioned manner of doing things. It is noticeable, in this regard, that the excellent contributions in this issue of *Papeles del Psicólogo* come from young professionals and researchers who do not appear unduly troubled by any such false conceptual or epistemological dilemma. From a theoretical or meta-theoretical point of view, then (as Linley et al., 2006, point out), it is of no great interest to discuss whether or not Positive Psychology pretends to constitute a new perspective within the discipline. In our view, it is all much more simple, but equally challenging: it is not a question of creating a new, isolated variant of psychology, but rather of taking into account, promoting and studying those aspects related to human well-being and happiness, even with a view to throwing light on the nature of psychological suffering (Vázquez et al., 2005). When all is said and done, such objectives are in accordance with that which concerns people, and which we should aspire to study and promote with enthusiasm. From this pragmatic point of view, there is little doubt that Positive Psychology has a brilliant future, and the proliferation of articles, new journals and rigorous research serves only to support such a prediction.

An interesting initiative in this regard is the ongoing project involving psychologists from several countries, myself among them, at the University of Pennsylvania. The year 2006 saw the launch of a website, initially based on the [www.authentic-happiness.com](http://www.authentic-happiness.com) model, in English, Spanish and Chinese. All the Scandinavian languages are also scheduled to be included, with the aim that it will serve as a centre for national and cross-cultur-

al psychological resources and research on human well-being.

Psychology's concern with human happiness (or subjective well-being, to use a more scientifically well-defined term) is certainly no turn-of-the-century whim or fancy, and still less an opportunist attempt to seek advantageous positions, especially if we consider that some of its most prominent proponents (Ed Diener, Martin Seligman, Daniel Kahneman, Chris Peterson, Csikszentmihalyi, to name but a few) have for many years figured among the most widely-cited authors in the psychological scientific literature for their achievements in their respective fields. It will be a formidable undertaking for psychology to contribute to the systematic theoretical consolidation of the most relevant concepts and the relationships between them (positive emotions, well-being, biases, positive health, etc.), the development of valid instruments for assessing such concepts (how do we measure, for example, an individual's level of well-being?) and, finally, the exploration and analysis of means of intervention (Seligman et al., 2005) that promote or help to maintain citizens' level of well-being. There is probably no greater challenge for social scientists and healthcare professionals than to promote people's true health and well-being, and our efforts would certainly not be wasted in the pursuit of such a noble goal.

## REFERENCES

- Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Beyond money: Toward an economy of well being. *Psychological Science*, 15, 1-31.
- Kahneman, D., & Krueger, A. B. (in press). Developments in the measurement of subjective well-being. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.
- Linley, P.A., Joseph, S., & Word, A.M. (2006). Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1, 3-16.
- Rand, K.L. & Snyder, C.R. (2003). A reply to Dr. Lazarus, the evocator emeritus. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14, 148-153.
- Seligman, M.E.P., Steen, T.A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive Psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60, 410-421.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1999). The President's address. APA 1998 Annual Report. *American Psychologist*, 54, 559-562.
- Vázquez, C., Cervellón, P., Pérez Sales, P., Vidales, D. & Gaborit, M. (2005). Positive emotions in earthquake survivors in El Salvador (2001). *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 19, 313-328.