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Author(s): Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park

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Positive Psychology as the Evenhanded Positive Psychologist Views It

Christopher Peterson

*Department of Psychology
University of Michigan*

Nansook Park

*Department of Psychology
University of Rhode Island*

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the target article by Richard Lazarus (this issue). We offer here what we hope is a substantive and evenhanded contribution, characterizing positive psychology as we see it, agreeing with Lazarus in places and disagreeing in others. We also try to answer the question that Lazarus poses—“Does the positive psychology movement have legs?”—by suggesting what the field has, what it does not have, and what it should not have.

What Is Positive Psychology?

The field of positive psychology was christened in 1998 as one of the initiatives of Martin Seligman in his role as President of the American Psychological Association (Seligman, 1998, 1999). The trigger for positive psychology was the premise that psychology since World War II has joined forces with psychiatry and focused much of its efforts on human problems and how to remedy them. The yield of this focus on pathology has been considerable.

Unprecedented strides have been made in understanding, treating, and preventing psychological disorders. Widely accepted classification manuals—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.), sponsored by the American Psychiatric As-

sociation (1994), and the *International Classification of Diseases*, sponsored by the World Health Organization (1990)—allow disorders to be described and have given rise to a family of reliable assessment strategies. There now exist effective treatments, psychological and pharmacological, for more than a dozen disorders that in the recent past were frighteningly intractable (Nathan & Gorman, 1998; Seligman, 1994). Lagging behind but still impressive in their early success are ongoing efforts to devise interventions that prevent disorders from occurring in the first place (e.g., Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999).

However, there has been a cost to this emphasis. Scientific psychology has neglected the study of what can go right with people and often has little more to say about the good life than do pop psychologists, inspirational speakers, and armchair gurus. More subtly, the underlying assumptions of psychology have shifted to embrace a disease model of human nature. Human beings are seen as flawed and fragile, victims of cruel environments or casualties of bad genetics, and if not in denial, then at best in recovery. This worldview has even crept into the common culture, and many of us have become self-identified victims, trying to survive but not to flourish.

Positive psychology proposes that it is time to correct this imbalance and to challenge the assumptions of the disease model. Positive psychology calls for as much fo-

cus on strength as on weakness, as much interest in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst, and as much attention to fulfilling the lives of healthy people as to healing the wounds of the distressed (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The concern of psychology with human problems is, of course, understandable. It will not and should not be abandoned; people experience difficulties that demand and deserve scientifically informed solutions.

Proponents of positive psychology are “merely” saying that the psychology of the past 60 years is incomplete. However, as simple as this proposal sounds, it demands a sea change in perspective. Psychologists interested in promoting human potential need to start with different assumptions and to pose different questions from those of their peers who assume a disease model.

The most basic assumption that positive psychology urges is that human goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder, and distress. We can parse the concerns of positive psychology into three related topics: the study of positive subjective experiences (happiness, pleasure, gratification, fulfillment, well-being), the study of positive individual traits (character, talents, interests, values) that enable positive experiences, and the study of positive institutions (families, schools, businesses, communities, societies) that enable positive traits and thereby positive experiences (Seligman, 2002).

The good news for positive psychology is that our generalizations about business-as-usual psychology over the past 60 years are simply that—generalizations. There are many good examples of psychological research, past and present, that can be claimed as positive psychology. For example, we can point to the trend-bucking work by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) on flow, by Diener (1984) on happiness, by Snyder (1994) on hope, by Scheier and Carver (1985) on dispositional optimism, by Seligman (1991) on optimistic explanatory style, by developmentalists on resilience (e.g., Masten, 2001), by Vaillant (2002) on successful aging, by Ryff (1989) on psychological well-being, by Gardner (1983) on multiple intelligences, by Baltes and Staudinger (1993) and Sternberg (1998) on wisdom, and by Rokeach (1973) and Schwartz (1994) on values. We can point to the insights offered a generation ago by humanistic psychologists (Taylor, 2001) and by Jahoda (1958) in her prescient treatise on positive mental health. And we can certainly point to the important work by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) on how people successfully cope with stressful circumstances.

Positive psychologists do not claim to have invented the good life or even to have ushered in its scientific study. As we see it, the contribution of positive psychology has been to provide an umbrella term for what have been isolated lines of theory and research and to

make the self-conscious argument that the good life deserves its own field of inquiry within psychology, at least until that day when all of psychology embraces the study of what is good along with the study of what is bad.

Our experience with positive psychology is that everyday people find it exciting and the sort of thing psychology should be doing (cf. Easterbrook, 2001). Everyday people seem to know that the elimination or reduction of problems is not all that is involved in improving the human condition. In contrast, the academic community is more skeptical of positive social science. Contributing to skepticism are the aforementioned assumptions about human nature as flawed and fragile, notions more widespread and explicit among social scientists than the general public. From this starting point, positive psychology can only be seen as the study of fluff—perhaps even as dangerous fiddling while the world goes to pieces.

Social scientists who study human problems have the best of intentions: They want to eliminate suffering. However, the unstated corollary of this good intention is that well-being can be taken for granted. Indeed, the study of people who are happy, healthy, and talented may be seen as a guilty luxury that diverts resources from the goals of problem-focused psychology. From the perspective of positive psychology, we suggest a different possibility, namely, that a better understanding of well-being will allow psychologists to help all people, troubled or not.

Another stumbling block is the umbrella term itself—*positive psychology*—because many psychologists hear what they have been doing throughout their careers dismissed as negative psychology. This automatic juxtaposition is unfortunate, and positive psychologists intend no disrespect. We prefer the term business-as-usual psychology to describe work that focuses on human problems. As we have emphasized, business-as-usual psychology is important and necessary and, in any event, what we have spent most of our own careers pursuing.

To call someone a *positive psychologist* is but a shorthand way of saying that he or she studies the topics of concern to the field of positive psychology. It does not mean that the positive psychologist is a “positive” (happy, talented, virtuous) person, and it certainly does not imply that other psychologists are “negative” people. After all, social psychologists may or may not be social, and personality psychologists may or may not display a scintillating personality.

An evenhanded positive psychology does not deny disorder and distress or the circumstances that produce them. A reciprocal or dialectical view of good and bad, like the one implied by Lazarus (this issue), may well be a sophisticated one that positive psychologists should consider. However, turnabout is fair play, and so too should business-as-usual psychologists consider it.

The argument of positive psychology is that this has not occurred frequently enough in psychology's recent history.

Perhaps it is useful to remind our skeptical colleagues that positive psychology is still science and cannot have a quarrel with the scientific method. We believe that the use of tried-and-true scientific techniques to investigate the good life is what will make positive psychology viable.

There are individuals attracted to some of the premises of positive social science but who are not enamored of the scientific method; they like the "positive" but overlook the "science." It is therefore important to emphasize that positive psychology is not an ideological movement or a secular religion. Our world has enough of these. To be sure, many will provide some insights into the good life that positive psychologists should explore, but the emphasis has to be on the exploration of these insights with the tools of science to see which square with the facts of the matter and which do not. Positive psychology is not Esalen for the 21st century, the power of positive thinking rendered by 7-point scales, or a smiley face with summer salary support.

The goals of positive psychology are description and explanation as opposed to prescription. The underlying premise of positive psychology is of course prescriptive in that it says that certain topics should be studied: positive experiences, positive traits, and positive institutions. However, once the study begins, it has to be hardheaded and dispassionate. The routes to the good life are an empirical matter. Indeed, whether what seems positive is always desirable is also an empirical question.

Investigations of optimism have documented many benefits of positive thinking (happiness, health, and success in various achievement domains) but at least one notable downside: Optimistic thinking is associated with an underestimation of risks (Peterson & Vaidya, 2003). Should someone always be optimistic? The empirically based answer is certainly not if one is a pilot or air-traffic controller trying to decide if a plane should take off during an ice storm (Seligman, 1991; Seligman & Pawelski, this issue). Here, the data advise caution and sobriety—pessimism, as it were.

The task for positive psychology is to provide the most objective facts possible about the phenomena it studies so that everyday people and society as a whole can make an informed decision about what goals to pursue in what circumstances. Not all of the news will be upbeat, but it will be of value precisely because it provides an appropriately nuanced view of the good life.

For example, in interviews of individuals with notable strengths of character, we have discovered that almost all of those to whom we have talked report occasional problems when they act in accordance with their

most signature strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2002). Kindness may invite exploitation; honesty can produce resentment; playfulness sometimes ruffles feathers. However, without exception, our research participants accept these consequences as the price to pay for being true to their nature. The fulfillment that characterizes strength-congruent conduct is not always fun, but perhaps only a prescriptive approach to the good life would expect it to be.

Some of us within positive psychology have raised eyebrows within the academic community by failing to acknowledge fully the contributions of our intellectual predecessors (Cowen & Kilmer, 2002; Lazarus, this issue; Taylor, 2001). Such acknowledgment must of course occur; nothing begins in a vacuum. Not only is it good scholarship to keep the intellectual record straight, it is also an excellent way to make a new field less exotic and thereby less threatening. At the same time, we see no benefit in strenuously documenting the unlikely thesis that positive psychology is but a footnote to Lao-tzu, Confucius, Aristotle, Aquinas, William James, John Dewey, Carl Rogers, or Abraham Maslow. Positive psychology has a unique identity and makes novel contributions that go beyond its ancestry, distant and immediate.

Does Positive Psychology Have Legs?

Lazarus (this issue) wants to know if positive psychology has the requisite apparatus to go anywhere. We think that it does. Positive psychology has a destination (the study of the good life). Positive psychology has a strategy for getting there (the scientific method). And positive psychology has established an impressive infrastructure to support scholars along the way (Peterson & Seligman, in press).

Perhaps the infrastructure—a steering committee, conferences, training institutes, special issues of journals, edited volumes, handbooks, a teaching task force, awards, seed grants, electronic mailing lists, and Web pages—strikes some as too elaborate and deliberate at this early stage in the field's development. Regardless, positive psychology should not be confused with its infrastructure. We look at the creation of an infrastructure as akin to gassing up one's car and checking its oil before embarking on a cross-country trip. However, the trip itself entails nitty-gritty science. What is there to be learned about the good life that Sunday school teachers and grandparents do not already know? What are the causes, correlates, and consequences of the phenomena of concern to positive psychology? What are the disabling factors and downsides? How can the good life be encouraged, for individuals and societies?

We believe the journey has begun, and positive psychology has already identified a number of studies with findings both important and nonobvious (cf. Seligman & Pawelski, this issue). When we think of

good examples of positive psychology research, we find that they often share three features: (a) They are longitudinal; (b) they take seriously what research participants have to say by studying narratives, stories, accounts, or archived material that is inherently meaningful; and (c) at the same time, they look at external variables—hard measures, so to speak, that are not redundant with self-report. What is it that makes these features so compelling?

We believe an answer is provided by considering a typical definition of virtue:

Virtue is...a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing. Moreover, virtuous activity involves choosing virtue for itself and in light of some justifiable life plan. (Yearley, 1990, p. 13)

Flourishing is a process that takes place over time—hence the need for longitudinal research. Human excellence is part of a justifiable life plan—hence the need for studying what people have to say about the good life. And human excellence shows itself in behavior broadly construed—hence the need to go beyond the justifiable life plan to include measures, for example, of physical health, of sustained relationships, or of achievement. We assume that Lazarus (2000, this issue) is in accord with these features of good research.

It is worth emphasizing that if our interest is in the good life, we must look explicitly at indices of human thriving. We have studied depression by using a standard depression inventory in which the best one can do is to score zero, indicating the absence of depressive symptoms. However, not all zero scores are equal. There is a world of difference between people who are not suicidal, not lethargic, and not self-deprecating versus those who bound out of bed in the morning with shiny faces and twinkling eyes. These latter individuals cannot be fully understood unless we explicitly measure their happiness and zest (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

Positive affect and negative affect are largely independent of one another, which means that exclusive focus on negative emotions cannot allow—even by inference—conclusions about positive emotions (Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988). Along these lines, optimism and pessimism are semantic opposites but not always psychological opposites (Chang, D’Zurilla, & Maydeu-Olivares, 1994). Measures must allow researchers to break through the zero points of the indicators favored in business-as-usual science (Peterson, 2000). Positive social psychologists must go beyond surveys of prejudice and discrimination and experiments demonstrating the irrationality of social cognition (Krueger & Funder, 2002); positive educational psychologists must go beyond the documentation of school violence,

failure, and dropout (Moore, 1997, 2002); and positive organizational psychologists must go beyond the tracking of workplace theft, absenteeism, and turnover (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, in press).

Does the positive psychology movement have legs? We think so. We believe that it also has a heart, a brain, and considerable courage in challenging the status quo. However, the positive psychology movement is not a trip over the rainbow to Oz. As we have said, *positive psychology* is simply an umbrella term. What positive psychology does not have at present is a common vocabulary for speaking about the good life or deep theories that explain it. An avenue we think worth exploring is an account of when human excellence entails phasic activity (rising to the occasion or “coping” as studied by Lazarus and his colleagues) and when it entails tonic activity (steady-state behavior as studied by trait psychologists). Positive psychology does not yet have enough compelling empirical findings to convince skeptics that the positive is more than the absence of the negative (cf. Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997). And positive psychology does not yet have articulated applications or interventions like the treatment and prevention strategies devised and tested over the years by business-as-usual psychologists (Seligman & Peterson, 2003). We hope that these will all emerge as the field develops. What positive psychology should not have is an imperialist attitude that prescribes one way to the good life or that dismisses the grim realities experienced by all members of our society some of the time and some members all of the time. And despite our attempt to speak about positive psychology per se, the field even in its eventual maturity should not have a fixed or monolithic identity (cf. Diener, this issue). If the target article by Lazarus (this issue) does nothing more than caution positive psychologists against consensus by decree, we are thankful for it.

Note

Christopher Peterson, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 525 East University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1109. E-mail: chrispet@umich.edu

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