

Positive psychology and the humanistic approach of psychology



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Positive psychology is an expression that was utilized within the humanistic approach of psychology by Maslow in 1968 (Boeree, 2006). Unfortunately, humanistic psychology was not accompanied by a solid empirical base and has given rise to an immense amount of doubtful and unworthy movements in self-reliability (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, since the 1990's positive psychology has gained new momentum. Although ignored for such a long time, one of its greater researchers has been Martin Seligman, Ph. D. Positive psychology is a branch that seeks to understand, through scientific research, the processes that underlie the strengths and positive emotions of humans.

Positive psychology was defined by Seligman (2002) as the scientific study of positive experiences, positive individual characteristics, the institutions that facilitate its development and the programs that help to improve the quality of life of individuals. It's been also defined as the scientific study of human virtues and strengths, which allows for the adoption of a more open perspective regarding the human potential, his motivations and capabilities. " Positive psychology is neither a philosophical nor a spiritual movement, is not an exercise of self-help or a magical method to reach happiness" (Vera, 2006, p. 3).

Vera (2006) stated that the theoretical and research development that has dominated psychology throughout the years has been centered in the negative emotions and human weakness in general. Thus, giving rise to a framework of discipline slanted towards pathology, which has impacted the field to such degree as to be identified as psychopathology or psychotherapy. As a product of this almost pathologically exclusive

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approach, psychology has developed some effective and efficient intervention models for many psychological problems, in detriment of the advance in methods and strategies to reach and to optimize the resources and strengths of individuals. Consequently there is no current solid knowledge available in this later area. (Vázquez, 2006).

For Seligman (2002), the concept of positive psychology is not new in psychology. Since before World War II the main objectives of psychology were three, to cure mental disorders, to help people live fuller and more productive lives, and to identify and develop people's talent and intelligence. Nevertheless, after the war, different events and circumstances lead psychology to forget two of these objectives centering exclusively on mental disorders and human suffering. After the war and by different circumstances, these last objectives were left behind and psychology was dedicated exclusively to the treatment of mental disorders and to alleviate human suffering (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In recent years, there has been a shift in research within the field of psychology that evidences a tendency to undertake preventive and positive variables instead of the pathological and negative aspects that are traditionally studied (Vera, 2006).

Some authors maintain that one of the challenges for psychology over the next upcoming years will be to dedicate more intellectual work to the study of the positive aspects of the human experience. In addition to understanding and fortifying those factors that allow individuals, communities, and companies to prosper, to improve their quality of life as well as to prevent the pathologies that arise from adverse living conditions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The objective of what has been called <https://assignbuster.com/positive-psychology-and-the-humanistic-approach-of-psychology/>

positive psychology is exactly to catalyze this change within the field, shifting it towards the development of people's strengths (Vera, 2006).

Accordingly, the main task of prevention in this decade will be to study and to understand how these strengths and virtues are adopted in children and young adults. This is a fundamental element for the prevention of the so called mental disorders (Seligman & Christopher, 2000).

The term positive psychology was proposed by Martin Seligman, who after dedicating a great part of his career to the study of learned helplessness and psychopathology, made a radical turn towards the study of what he called human virtues and strengths (Seligman, 2002). Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) explained that, nevertheless, the first approaches toward positive psychology dated back to the late 1920's with the writings of Watson regarding the psychological care of infants, and towards the late 1930's with the work of Terman and collaborators on students' talent, their academic environment and the psychological factors related to marital happiness.

Seligman (2002) proposed that positive psychology is defined as the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual characteristics. This includes the institutions that facilitate the development of these positive experiences as well as the programs that help to improve the quality of life of individuals, while preventing or reducing the incidence of psychopathology. It is also defined as the scientific study of human virtues and strengths, which allow for the adoption of a more open perspective with respect to human potential, his motivations and his capacities (Sheldon & King, 2001). It includes civic and institutional virtues that guide individuals to

take on responsibilities in their community and promotes characteristics to become a better citizen (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

One of the main contributions of positive psychology has been to establish that the feeling of happiness or everlasting well-being is quite stable in people, and that it is composed by a probably hereditary, fixed condition that is relatively independent of the environment in which they live. This positive feeling can also be modified as a result of specific circumstances, however after a few months it returns to its previous base-line level. Thus, temperament is one of the most important predictors of the levels of positive experiences that a person will feel (Seligman, 2002).

On the other hand, there are character strengths or strengths personal to each individual that can be put into practice as well. According to Seligman (2002) every individual has particular personal strengths. For Peterson and Seligman (2004) the concept of virtue or strengths refers to those capacities that can be acquired through the person's will, representing positive personality traits. Peterson and Seligman (2004) designed a measuring instrument of human strengths, on the basis of a classification of individual positive resources. The VIA Survey of Character Strengths is a questionnaire of 240 items with 5 possible answers each, that measures the degree in which an individual has each of the 24 strengths and virtues.

These strengths are traits or psychological characteristics that are present in different situations throughout time and their consequences are usually positive. Seligman (2002) suggested that putting any fortitude or strength into practice causes authentic positive emotions which act as barriers

against illnesses. Among these barriers are found optimism, interpersonal abilities, faith, ethical work, hope, honesty, perseverance and the capacity for flow or optimum experience (Seligman & Christopher, 2000).

Vázquez (2006) suggested that individuals can intentionally strengthen their capacity to experience and maximize positive emotions. This has been shown, to improve their social, emotional, and physical health. It should also be noted that, certain variables exist such as the perception of a successful marriage as well spirituality that have been related, although, in a modest way, with a positive experience and overall good health.

For Seligman (2002), positive emotions can be centered in the past, present or future. The emotions related to the past include satisfaction, complacency, personal realization, pride and serenity. Those related to the present are happiness, tranquility, enthusiasm, euphoria, pleasure and the most important one the so called flow. This flow includes happiness, perceived competence and intrinsic interest in the activity carried out. Lastly, emotions related to the future are optimism, hope, faith, and confidence. These three emotional aspects are different and are not found to be necessarily related (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993).

Vázquez (2006) suggested that it fits to highlight the importance of subjective interpretation of objective factors in the maintenance and creation of happiness. Thus, advocating the idea that happy people have a greater probability to see the events and circumstances of life in a way that it reinforces and promotes their well-being. These people expect their future to

hold positive results. They also have a sense of control of the results of their actions and they have more trust in their abilities or dexterities.

Positive emotions include happiness and other feelings of welfare; they are described as brief reactions that are typically experienced when something happens that is significant to the person. Currently there is sufficient data to support that positive emotions promote health and welfare. Thus, favoring personal growth and allowing people to have feelings of satisfaction with their own life, to have hoped, to be an optimist and to be perceived as happier. There are even studies that show that laughter, happiness and a good sense of humor help not only to maintain but also to recover health (Vera, 2006). Vázquez (2006) mentioned that:

“ Sufficient evidence exists to affirm that positive emotions relate to longevity, the perception of good health in older adults, the development of happiness, the immune system’s capacity, cardiovascular recovery, and the adequate confrontation to stress and adversity” (p. 1).

For Fredrickson (2001), positive emotions have a fundamental objective in evolution, while they expand the social, physical, and intellectual resources of individuals, making them last longer. Thus increasing the reserves that can be resorted to when challenges or opportunities are presented. When people experience positive feelings their way of thinking and behavior are modified. Also their behavior patterns increase in order to perform in certain situations by means of the optimization of their own personal resources in the social, psychological, and physical level (Seligman, 2005).

Vera (2006) indicated that optimism is a psychological characteristic of a disposition that remits to positive expectations and future objectives. This relationship with variables such as perseverance, achievement, and physical health made this subject one of the central points of positive psychology. Optimism is one of the strenghts that provide greater welfare, which relates to the expectations that people have about the future.

It is a disposition or steady and generalized believe that positive things will occur (Chico, 2002). Optimism implies a sense of personal control as well as the ability to make sense of life experiences which is associated with better mental health (Seligman, 1998). It has been found that this variable has favorable effects on the course of illnesses, increases the possibilities of life in terminally ill patients and impacts the perception of general health and welfare (Seligman & Christopher, 2000). Accordingly, optimistic subjects usually demonstrate better abilities of rational problem resolution (Seligman, 2002). Chico (2002) explained that:

“ According to studies carried out, optimism is related, in a positive way, with strategies of favorable confrontation (planning, positive reinterpretation and personal growth, problem focused confrontation and adaptive confrontation) and, in a negative way, with styles of non-adaptable confrontation (emotionally centered, denial, distancing behavior, substance abuse and confrontation)” (p. 547).

Similarly it has been observed that people with serious health problems that present with an optimistic perception of their illness have a more prolonged life, and they report having a better quality of life than those that assume

their condition in a pessimistic way (Vera, 2006). In accordance with this, people with an optimistic orientation present with resistance to illness and report more favorable results in their health evaluation (Seligman, 1998). On the other hand, pessimistic people present greater deterioration in their overall health and welfare.

Happy people are more sociable, and reason exists to think that their happiness is due to a high level of satisfactory socialization (Seligman, 2002). Research has shown that teaching optimism to children can be effective in preventing symptoms of depression utilizing cognitive training and social troubleshooting therapy (Danner, Snowdon & Friesen, 2001). Conversely, pessimistic people have eight times more possibilities of becoming depressed when they are presented with misfortunes. They also yield less in their studies, sports and the majority of their work. In addition, they also have less overall health, a shortened lifespan and they maintain more unstable interpersonal relations (Seligman, 2002).

According to a study carried out by Diener & Seligman (2002), people that have a high score in a scale of happiness were more sociable and maintained more stable social and emotional relationships, than people that have a low score in the same scale. At the same time, people that obtained greater scores in the scale of extraversion and less in the neurotic scale, also, have a lower score in some scales of psychopathology according to the MMPI. The results of this study suggest that the happier people have a functional emotional system that allows them to react appropriately as they face life's events.

Vera (2006) proposed that the purpose of positive psychology has been to contribute to the study of the conditions and processes related to the optimum development of individuals, groups and institutions. These contributions have had an impact on different intervention fields of psychology, mainly in the clinical areas of health and education, in which a greater emphasis is observed.

In the clinical level, one of the objectives of positive psychology is to change the intervention framework towards the development of therapeutic strategies that favor the positive emotional experience. This emotional experience is oriented towards the prevention and treatment of the problems derived or exacerbated by the presence of negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, aggression and stress, among others. Said emotions also have the property to extend the individuals' behavior repertoire while influencing their thought and action processes (Fredrickson, 2001).

One of the challenges of positive psychology it's that it presumes the development of reliable and valid measurement instruments that are capable of measuring and differentiate variables in this area. The traditional evaluation and the models that stem from it have made people's illnesses and weaknesses much more apparent. The creation of instruments that allow for the evaluation of resources and positive emotions is necessary in order to be able to develop more healthy, dynamic, and functional models. To this end, Seligman & Christopher (2000) have designed a measurement instrument based on a classification of the individual positive resources, the inventory of strengths or strengths.

Due to the traditional orientation of psychology, today we can count on solid knowledge of the effects of negative emotions, like fear, sadness, anger, aversion, indignation and repulsion, among others, on the so called physical and mental health disorders (Seligman, 2005). Nevertheless, the concrete objective of positive psychology within the clinical and the health environment is to study the strengths and human virtues, as well as the effects that these have on individuals and society in general (Cuadra & Florenzano, 2003). Seligman (2005) considered that this type of approach also constitutes a valuable strategy for prevention, as these virtues act as barriers against psychological disorders and can contribute in an important way towards recovery.

Jaycox, et al. (1994) explained that within the educational level, studies exist on extrinsic, academic motivation development, learning environments and family oriented services. These studies emphasized the generation and optimization of strengths from a positive and proactive approach.

Educational psychology from a positive perspective centers its attention on the strengths or specific positive attributes of people and groups in pedagogical environments. According to studies performed in this environment, teaching staffs that emphasize positive experiences on the development of children's abilities make it possible for these children to have a greater probability of experiencing higher levels of auto-efficiency and other characteristics of positive psychological development, when they occur jointly with the development of complex abilities. With regards to this statement, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) maintained that promoting competencies in children is more than fixing what is wrong with them, but to

identify and to fortify their predominant positive qualities, and to help find the areas in which they can express them. Promoting children and young adult's strengths and strengths will increase the changes that favor the successful management of current and future difficulties.

In this sense, Jaycox, et al. (1994), maintained that preventive interventions should be directed towards the modification of the environment to reduce stress, modification of the individual to develop competencies, and to modify both in a simultaneous way. The educational environments in which rewards are offered in a contingent way with the successful achievement of realistic goals have more probabilities of increasing motivation and diminishing the problematic behaviors of children and young adults.

Given that this is a new perspective for the approach of psychology, its basic proposals are applicable in all the areas in which the discipline has been present. This shows not only an ample and active field but much research and intervention alternatives. In this sense, one of the main challenges of positive psychology supposes, for instance, a conceptual delimitation and the development of valid and reliable instruments that are certified to estimate and delimit the studied variables (Vera, 2006).

On the other hand, it is recommended to seek the accumulated discipline knowledge in different areas of the field and to utilize it from the perspective of positive psychology. Likewise, it is expected that strategies utilized in the clinical, educational, health and other fields of development, be submitted to empirical validity, and its instruments approved psychometrically.

Fortunately, in recent years, many researchers like Seligman (2005) and

Fredrickson (2001), have begun to study and theorize in this field, opening a new way of understanding the human psychology. According to their theory and developed models, positive emotions can be channeled towards prevention and treatment intervention so that they can be transformed into true weapons in order to encourage people to face emotional problems.