



## Positive Psychology: *Zeigeist* (or spirit of the times) or ignorance (or disinformation) of history?<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper provides a critical review of Positive Psychology as a paradigm. From its origins in the late 1990s, Positive Psychology has acquired great popularity without any critical thinking. The dissemination of its un-innovative discourse in the mass media and specialized journals is an example of the popularity it has gained. This unquestioned acceptance of the discourse of Positive Psychology has taken place all over the world, including Spain and Latin America. After reviewing the general characteristics of Positive Psychology, the article discusses the shortcomings that this paradigm should overcome to be considered reliable and valid. Succinctly, the review concludes that the theoretical approach of Positive Psychology is not novel. The discourse that supports positive psychology as a new and original approach is in fact an exhibition of disinformation and ignorance of Philosophy, cultural Anthropology and the history of Psychology. In conclusion, the future of Positive Psychology requires overcoming the serious theoretical and practical problems that prevent it from being considered a new paradigm.

**KEYWORDS.** Positive Psychology. Individualism. Tyranny of the positive attitude. Theoretical study.

**RESUMEN.** El objetivo del presente trabajo es realizar una exposición crítica de la situación actual de la Psicología Positiva. Desde su nacimiento formal a finales de los años noventa, la Psicología Positiva ha ido adquiriendo, sin demasiada reflexión crítica,

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cada vez más popularidad. La diseminación de su discurso, por otro lado nada novedoso, en los medios de comunicación y publicaciones especializadas constituye un ejemplo de la popularidad adquirida. Esta aceptación irreflexiva ha tenido lugar en todo el mundo occidental, incluyendo España y Latinoamérica, admitiendo también los países de habla portuguesa. Después de numerar algunas características generales de la Psicología Positiva, se expone una serie de críticas que tiene que superar, si quiere conseguir llegar a ser un paradigma respetable, válido y fiable. Se concluye que la teoría de la Psicología Positiva no tiene nada de novedoso. Lo que en ella parece original es una manifestación del desconocimiento o desinformación de algunas ideas acerca de la historia de la Psicología, la Filosofía y la Antropología cultural. El futuro de la Psicología Positiva debería pasar por superar los graves problemas teóricos y prácticos que sirven como argumento para no considerarla como un nuevo paradigma.

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** Psicología Positiva. Individualismo. Tiranía de la actitud positiva. Estudio teórico.

Positive Psychology is part of the spirit of the times of psychological knowledge. Currently, a wealth of articles and books are being published and many scientific meetings of all kinds are being held with the sole purpose of highlighting the benefits of the Psychology of the optimal development of human beings. As an example, a review (2012-02-08) of publications with the tag «positive psychology» in PsycINFO revealed 902 peer-reviewed articles, 614 books and 112 doctoral dissertations published since 2000, with just a few anecdotal exceptions ( $n = 4$ ). The ratio between verified empirical evidence (*i.e.*, articles in peer-reviewed journals) and theoretical dissertations or non-verified evidence (*i.e.*, non-peer-reviewed books) was 1.47; this ratio is considerably low (for comparison purposes, the ratio for behaviorism was twice as high, 2.93) considering that science is based on the empirical evidence supporting theoretical discourse. The academic and scientific usefulness of so many publications and meetings is very doubtful. In fact, their proliferation in such short time seems to reveal a temporary fashion or *Zeitgeist* rather than significant progress in knowledge. In other words, it appears to be the result of giving in to the empire of fashion and the dominant discourse without any critical thinking at a specific time in history.

The discourse of Positive Psychology has provided an integrating view of the world of human beings and their historical process of living. It has made positive contributions that were already known to many psychologists. Yet, it has helped systematize a philosophy of people's lives that was already known to classical philosophical anthropology but had been marginalized by psychoanalysis, behaviorism and cognitive psychology.

Professionals in the areas of psychology, politics, economics, social psychiatry, sociology and cultural anthropology are trying to produce a world map of happiness with a happiness index of the planet. The Kingdom of Bhutan, for example, considers that «gross national happiness» is more important than gross national product. The pillars for its development are sustainable socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, promotion of culture and good governance (Burns, 2011).

Positive Psychology is understood as a set of resources that contribute to the optimal development of individuals and groups. Its contents are endlessly repeated in relevant publications. No other discourse, with the possible exception of psychoanalytic discourse, has generated so much irrelevant literature. According to Seligman (1998a, 1998b), the goals of Positive Psychology are the following: identifying and assessing positive traits that transcend cultures and political systems; promote positive experiences and emotions; and, finally, plan intervention strategies aimed at individuals, institutions and communities promoting strengths and experiences that contribute to individual and collective well-being. Has Positive Psychology provided a new paradigm or model? The answer seems to be it has not. Instead, it seems to have recycled old ideologies and world views based on cultural anthropologies.

To answer this question, we developed a theoretical study (Montero and León, 2007) with four objectives: first, review the origin of Positive Psychology; second, systematize the theory, method, intervention and empirical evidence supporting Positive Psychology; third, analyze the status of Positive Psychology in Spain and Latin America; and fourth, list the critiques of the theory, practice and educational capacity of Positive Psychology and draw conclusions of the study.

### Historical aspects

The real history of positive psychology does not correspond to that included in most publications. Maslow (1954/1991), for example, already talked about Psychology of Positive thinking (p. 275). The statement made by Seligman (2008): «I propose a new field: positive health» (p. 3), is false, or at least, clearly inexact. Positive health is not an original or exclusive idea of positive psychology. In fact, its history lies outside the traditional history of psychology. Kuhn (1962/2006) was right when he acknowledged that textbooks start by «truncating the scientist's sense of his discipline's history» (p. 249). Seligman (2011) provided a clearly unsatisfactory view of the history of Positive Psychology. The discourse of Positive Psychology has not achieved significant theoretical progress and obviously has not developed various evidence-based techniques to increase happiness either. At least eight traditions contain the same or very similar content as Positive Psychology from a theoretical and practical point of view. The first is hedonism, which refers to the search for positive affects accompanying the achievement of pleasure. The second is eudaimonia, which focuses on the process of growth and development of individual potential. The third is Humanistic, Phenomenological and Existential Psychology. The fourth is the tradition of positive mental health and proactive primary prevention. The fifth is the approach based on the criticism of capitalist society, the rise of post-material values and the paradox of happy peasants and miserable millionaires. The sixth is the approach based on the study of psychological well-being, the art of living well and quality of life. The seventh is based on rational approaches aimed at overcoming the adversities of life. Finally, the eighth area to consider includes studies on invulnerability, post-traumatic growth and resilience based on the competence model.

We must agree with Peterson and Park (2003) that Positive Psychology is only a «footnote» (*sic*, p. 145) to the history of psychology that includes ideas of the great thinkers and spiritual leaders of the history of Eastern and Western culture.

## **Positive Psychology: Theory, method, intervention and empirical evidence**

### *Theory, evaluation and methodology*

The theoretical bases of Positive Psychology were already known before the late twentieth century. Many manuals and monographic issues of journals endlessly repeat a discourse that is wrongly presented as being original and new. It is easy to understand why so many authors endorse a language focused on the positive side of the process of living. However, it is difficult to justify the lack of critical thinking of so many researchers and professionals. Positive Psychology uses what we might call «common virtues» with certain differences due to the peculiarities of each cultural system.

Three aspects should be considered regarding evaluation in Positive Psychology. The first is the instrument that establishes the twenty-four character strengths included in the Values in Action (VIA) classification (Lopez and Snyder, 2003). The second aspect refers to the instruments that combine the contents of individual and organizational invulnerability and resilience. The third and last aspect is that of the indicators of personal growth related to good governance and the efforts for human development.

Nothing is innovative regarding the methodology used. Positive Psychology uses the same methodological resources employed in Psychology to conduct quantitative scientific research and the characteristic qualitative methodologies of social sciences such as narrative, ethnography or the study of everyday life.

### *Intervention procedures in Positive Psychology*

Intervention procedures in Positive Psychology can be clustered into two groups. One is based on the invulnerability, resilience or competence model, whose aim is to develop resources to resist and overcome adversity. The other one is called «positive psychotherapy» (Seligman, Rashid, and Parks, 2006) and focuses on building positive emotions and character strengths and having life projects with an existential meaning. We accept that practical actions promoted by Positive Psychology could be classified with third-generation behavioral therapies. In the present study, Positive Psychology interventions are clustered into three levels: microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem.

- Microsystem. Available empirical evidence leads to the conclusion that optimistic individuals with better life satisfaction and positive emotions enjoy better health for longer (Diener and Chan, 2011). Therefore, if happy people live longer and have a better quality of life, promoting happy life is theoretically and practically justified (Cohn and Fredrickson, 2010; Duckworth, Steen, and Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson, 2005). Interventions aimed at promoting well-being fall within the approach of quality of life therapy or positive psychotherapy, positive education, behavioral activation and the construction of healthy rationality.
- Exosystem. This includes interventions conducted in workplace environments. The following aspects are dealt with: positive identity, authentic leadership, positive development and organizational change, organizational virtuousness, psychological capital, positive motivations and emotions, being proactive in the workplace and psychological strengths and virtues (e.g., forgiveness, humility,

compassion, hope, courage, justice, trust, humor, innovation, curiosity, spirituality, etc.).

- **Macrosystem.** Positive Psychology also seeks social changes to build individual and collective social capital resources. Improving society requires improving living standards, striving for social equality, promoting the freedom of individuals and having good quality institutions. An example of positive change implies the improvement of democracy and recognition of the value of interpersonal trust and social ethics. Therefore, the theoretical and practical principles of Positive Psychology should be included in national and international indices of well-being. There is a positive relationship between happiness and indicators of the quality of good governance, that is, a government that really seeks to reach high levels of happiness. This shows the usefulness of measuring well-being for designing and evaluating public policies.

### **Positive Psychology in context**

#### *Positive Psychology in Spain*

In Spain, the theoretical and practical principles of positive psychology have been very well received by certain psychologists. First of all, the theoretical and practical assumptions of Positive Psychology have been accepted without question (Avia, 2006; Bakker, Rodríguez-Muñoz, and Derks, 2012; Salanova and López-Zafra, 2011; Vázquez, 2006). Second, the results of the interventions conducted on the basis of such assumptions are consistent with the empirical evidence available in the literature reviewed (Vázquez and Hervás, 2008, 2009), which is the product of the work that good professionals were already conducting. This work could include third-generation behavioral therapies, whose knowledge and dissemination in Spain was studied by Zych, Buena-Casal, Sierra, and Gómez-Rodríguez (2012), without including Positive Psychology. Third, a number of publications are related to happiness and theoretical frameworks of knowledge in Epicurean philosophy (Pelechano, 2006). The fourth aspect to consider is the use of terminology related to psychological well-being, subjective well-being and emotional intelligence, all used as well by Positive Psychology. Finally, the fifth issue to consider is the historical and critical approach to Positive Psychology (Fernández-Ríos, 2008; Fernández-Ríos and Cornes, 2009), a subject that very few professionals are interested in. On many occasions, it seems as if Spanish Psychology had stopped thinking.

#### *Positive Psychology in Latin America*

In Latin America, positive psychology has had the same theoretical-practical history as in Spain and the United States. Regarding publications in Spanish, it is worth mentioning studies on the concept of positive psychology (Contreras and Esguerra, 2006; Neri, 2002) and studies based on the concepts of psychological capital, resilience and positive mental health (Casullo, 2008). As happens in Spanish Psychology, terminology related to Positive Psychology focuses on concepts such as psychological well-being, quality of life, psychological skills and subjective well-being.

In Portuguese language, it is worth mentioning publications referring to the concept of Positive Psychology, invulnerability and psychological resilience (Dell’Aglío, Koller, and Yunes, 2006) but also studies focused on Organizational Psychology and Psychology of Health. This does not differ from publications in Spanish. Therefore, there is nothing original or worthy of being considered new in positive psychology in Latin America either.

### **Positive Psychology: Critiques of theory and practice, training and future directions**

#### *Critiques of the theory and practice of Positive Psychology*

Many critiques can be made of the theory and practice of Positive Psychology. The most relevant critiques found in the literature are listed below:

- False claim of historical novelty. It is inexact to consider Positive Psychology as a new «emerging field». It is also wrong to argue that Positive Psychology is innovative and represents a new theoretical and practical paradigm. Several studies (Fernández-Ríos, 2008; Fernández-Ríos and Cornes, 2009) have already provided historical information justifying the argument that there is nothing new in Positive Psychology. If, by any chance, anything seems original and innovative, it is the product of a serious and unjustifiable distortion, manipulation or ignorance of history in general and psychology in particular.
- Dramatizing all sociocultural life. Everything seems to be pathological in current society. It is as if being miserable and generating negative emotions was the price individuals have to pay for living in the current civilization (Sachs, 2011). This implies wrongly replacing the market economy by the economy of happiness and assuming that there are problems everywhere and that Positive Psychology is needed to solve them and make the process of living less dramatic. However, the paradox is that the supposed benefits of Positive Psychology, if any, would be undermined by the market of the surplus value of the economics of happiness.
- Vague discourse and theoretical confusion in the use of professional language by an ideology. Many concepts are used vaguely. A few examples are happiness, well-being, good life, satisfaction with life, knowledge of life, authenticity, mature personality, healthy personality, etc. Other terms used (*e.g.*, curiosity, courage, justice, spirituality, etc.) generate more theoretical confusion than practical solutions. For example, there is overlapping between the meaning of happiness and personal growth on one side and hope and optimism on the other. All this confusion in the discourse is accepted because, unfortunately, Positive Psychology is in fashion.
- The «Barnum effect» (Meehl, 1956) in Positive Psychology. This refers to a rapid acceptance of the characteristics of «positive» individuals and organizations based on very general and vague descriptions. Assuming that positive characteristics are universal increases their chances of becoming valid for a large number of people. Therefore, many psychologists accept the discourse of Positive

Psychology, regardless of whether it is useful and contributes something new to the theory and practice of Psychology.

- A «political slogan» (Lazarus, 2003a, 2003b) that is part of the conceptual consumption of many societies, that is, cultural contexts in which individualism and the «every man for himself» principle prevail. The masses, including many psychologists, consume concepts dictated by the dominant discourse and organize meetings that are supposedly scientific but are in fact communities of belief. The concept of Positive Psychology as a «political slogan» includes, for example, the controversial interventions in military psychology to create stress-resistant soldiers for «preventive war» (Seligman and Fowler, 2011). Psychologists also have ideologies, even if they are based on errors or pseudoscience.
- It is based on false dichotomies: hedonism-eudaimonia, positive-negative affect. Positive Psychology should not be based on the false dichotomies hedonism-eudaimonia or positive-negative affect. What is relevant for human beings is not for psychologists to artificially create dichotomies but for them to bring together, understand and explain people's whole process of living. This process is a continuum that is materialized into a sociocultural context.
- Pathologization of normality and psychology? There may be a nonrealistic optimism on the continuous search for «ultra-happiness». Loevinger (1976) talked about the «psychopathology of normality» (p. 140) and Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) talked about a «massive pathologization of normal sadness» (p. 103). The psychologization of the social process of living leads to the construction of normal individuals as subjects of intervention. It seems, mistakenly, that people will never be able to enjoy a minimum of happiness if they do not have the help of a positive psychology practitioner and a personal coach. It is a very serious error to conduct therapies for normal people for the sake of increasing a false longing for illusory happiness.
- Medicalization of happiness or the obsession for «permayouth culture». Pathologizing normality can lead to the use of drugs and an unlimited search for new stimuli that will supposedly create positive affects. The age of normal anxiety has been replaced by a supposed epidemic of depression and medicalization of shyness. Examples of this struggle for «super-health» are the use of «smart pills» to boost cognitive processes in healthy individuals and «permayouth culture», the obsessive attitude of continuously undergoing all kinds of interventions for fictitious rejuvenation. The market of happiness is thus transformed into the market of impossible dreams.
- The dangers of unlimited positiveness. Focusing on the positive aspects of the living process of human beings implies a long list of dangers and counterpoints. First, there is an excessive emphasis on the «optimism of everyday life» included in the philosophy of life of a culture of optimism. In this culture, all human beings can and must function above their possibilities. In addition, the theory and practice of Positive Psychology originated in a cultural context of «perpetual euphoria» (Bruckner, 2000/2010) to achieve a happiness that human beings will never be sure to reach. This seems to be part of the empire of the illusion of irrational happiness.

- Usefulness of negative thinking. Not everything is positive in the process of living. Seligman (1990) used the concept of «flexible optimism» and admitted that «optimism is no panacea...It has its limits» (p. 361). Yet, many positive psychologists do not seem to consider such limits. Given that situations of adversity are inevitable, a certain defensive pessimism seems to be very useful from a psychological point of view. Some authors talk about a positive philosophy of negative thinking (Norem, 2001), which seems to be a very realistic approach to the everyday task of existing.
- The negative side of promoting positive thinking, for example, high self-esteem. The struggle for self-esteem has been a central concern in American culture. Yet, promoting self-esteem with an empirical basis can have negative effects. It is not always clear how costly it is to chronically strive for self-esteem. This can negatively interfere with social relations, learning, the feeling of independence, self-regulation and health. In fact, the positive effects of promoting high self-esteem are not always clear.
- The dangers of individualism. The individual emphasis on chronic personal happiness, self-realization and updating one's potential does not take place in a social void. This may imply exonerating social responsibility. This conclusion is consistent with the «dream» of individualist ideology in the capitalist and neoliberal society. Neoliberal ideology becomes a vital policy to psychologize the whole existential process of living. The individual approach of Positive Psychology aims to control, strengthen, manage and modulate the major life skills, happiness and life abilities of individuals.
- Neglecting the context of behavior. Positive Psychology exaggeratedly stresses theoretical and methodological individualism. Yet, personality traits and personal efforts to build positive lifestyles depend on the context of behavior. Acknowledging the relevance of sociocultural circumstances and reciprocal determinism leads to going beyond the current status of Positive Psychology (McNulty and Fincham, 2012).
- Defense of the status quo. The search for happiness is a «cultural obsession» of American lifestyle focused on the «tyranny of the positive attitude» (Held, 2002, 2004) or the «tyranny of well-being» (Warren, 2010). The aim is not to change the sociocultural circumstances of existence but rather for each individual to make an effort to achieve his/her happiness and personal realization. However, it must be considered that the individual and collective struggle for a positive lifestyle is built within the framework of the dominant ideology of each historical period.
- The happiness market. The obsessive emphasis on positive thinking leads mainly to the control of thoughts and emotions. People must be positive, otherwise misfortune will fall on them (Ehrenreich, 2009/2011). The market of emotional life is created for citizens to fight for positive emotions. The objective is to develop in people the socially constructed illusion that they need to be happier than the rest. It is the new age of feeling healthy and buying emotions to live with the new experience of positive thinking. It may be time to forget the irrational

struggle for false happiness and accept a certain defense of melancholy. The market of happiness is and can only be alienating and oppressive.

- Emotional capitalism or the market of technologies of therapy for normal people. The happiness market creates the need to treat normality and exploit expectations of self-improvement and perfection. It starts by building a culture of personal dissatisfaction and establishing a therapeutic technology not only to be healthy but also to feel healthier (Illouz, 2008/2010). All this generates a market of publications, books, lectures, self-help manuals, conferences, social networks, specialization courses and even miraculous potions to satisfy the social mandate of the tyranny of the positive attitude. This happens even at a time of economic uncertainty with emotional ups and downs, which is included in the concept of new normality or new normal.
- The fruitless search for positive psychological universals. Positive Psychology is based, at least theoretically, on universal psychological «forces». It aims to justify a universal science of human growth that is valid for all cultures. Yet, there are clear indications that it is an ethnocentric philosophy of life based on values of Western culture. Many studies in Positive Psychology have been conducted with WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) subjects (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010), who are not representative of most human beings. Everything seems to indicate that, fortunately, it is an illusion to search for universal laws that are valid for all individuals, regardless of time and place. If Positive Psychology searched for such laws, their inexistence would make it a useless passion.
- Circular reasoning. Positive lifestyle indices are correlated with positive affect, sociability, well-being, active coping with problems, etc. Available empirical evidence leads to the conclusion that psychological mechanisms studied by Positive Psychology must necessarily be positively correlated with the evaluation instruments used in this theoretical-practical frameworks. In fact, practically everything correlates with everything in psychology. Masking common sense with a complex statistical apparatus can only lead to explaining obscure facts with confusing reasoning. The process of living is much simpler and easier than the explanations of psychologists. This leads to the recommendation of writing academic papers and publications in general that are easier to read for non-specialized readers (Hartley, 2012).
- Critique of the neurosciences of Positive Psychology. This refers to the search for neural correlates of positive emotions through functional magnetic resonance imaging. However, the current findings of neuroscience do not seem very promising (Legrenzi and Umiltà, 2011). A neuroscience of Positive Psychology is very attractive but little else. It does not bode well when psychology has to find shelter in neuroscience and statistics to reach psychological assurance and social relevance.

### *Positive Psychology in education*

Fernández-Ríos and Buéla-Casal (2009) recognized that certain published studies should be useful to improve the curriculum of future psychologists. Students are

sometimes offered a version of Positive Psychology as some sort of new age practice that will solve all the problems of human beings. This is, as mentioned above, an example of the Barnum effect in Positive Psychology. Psychology students are given too much inexact information about the history and scope of Positive Psychology. This is not a criticism of presentism in history, which is almost always inexact. Presentism can have two meanings: describing, interpreting and understanding the past from the perspective of the present or considering the most recent events as the best.

What is the value of this study for psychology students? Several conclusions can be drawn from it. First, the history of a subject is not as trivial and simple as is often assumed. Second, critical thinking should be promoted among students, to the extent of making them question what they are taught in class. Third, the historic bases of Positive Psychology cannot be found in available texts. Fourth, there may be too much confirmation bias in Positive Psychology; this means searching for evidence that supports researchers' beliefs and ignoring or distorting evidence that contradicts them. Fifth, pseudoscience, so abundant in Positive Psychology, attracts many professionals.

For all these reasons, students should know that Positive Psychology contains a great deal of common sense, many vague concepts, a lot of untrue and redundant information and an endless amount of ill-founded theoretical and practical assumptions and truisms. This contributes to generating skepticism about Psychology in general (Lilienfeld, 2012) and Positive Psychology in particular in the public.

#### *Conclusions and future directions*

Positive Psychology has attempted to become a new paradigm in the theory and practice of Psychology but is not. A thorough analysis of the history of knowledge on the struggle to live leads to the conclusion that Positive Psychology is neither original nor as promising as many researchers believe. It has not contributed anything new from a theoretical point of view. It would be very interesting to replicate the research by Zych *et al.* (2012) on fourth-generation behavioral therapies, including Positive Psychology this time.

Certain professional psychologists seem tempted to believe that the major authors in the history of psychology, philosophy, cultural anthropology, literature and religions were not only chronic pessimists but also incapable of creating hope for human beings. This is a serious shortcoming in the educational curriculum of future practitioners of psychology. What is missing in their training are contents and skills based on interdisciplinarity, critical thinking and the sociocultural context of human beings.

A few critiques to Positive Psychology have been presented. Being positive is very well but it is naive to believe that optimism can solve all problems. In Spanish Psychology, new trends tend to be assimilated with no critical thinking. This is a serious problem in the training of future practitioners of Psychology and should be corrected.

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