

Positive Psychology: Old and New Theoretical Requirement for “Living this Moment”

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Abstract

Human history is a life coach but we usually listen very little or we do not keep it in mind. Hippocrates, the founding father of Medicine, wrote in his work “Epidemie” in 350 BC(!) some emblematic sentences, by remembering that ‘the biggest mistake we have made today is to separate psyche from soma’. The evolution of the concept of Positive Psychology, starting from the ancient philosophical and existential contributions as the fundamental basis for modern scientific approaches (Mindfulness and Achievement Commitment Therapy) pushing individuals towards self-acceptance and wellbeing is discussed. Finally, a multidimensional approach from the “Positive Psychology philosophy” for diagnosis and treatment is suggested as a useful tool and the value of psychophysiological techniques that can be applied to clinical and general population is highlighted in order to improve individual wellbeing and make people feel healthier and happier.

Keywords: Positive Psychology; Health Care; Assessment; Clinical Intervention; Psychophysiology

Introduction

One of the definitions of Positive Psychology (PP) is “the branch of psychology that uses scientific understanding and real action to aid in the achievement of a satisfactory life” rather than treating mental illness [1]. The focus of positive psychology is “on personal growth rather than on pathology, as is common among other structures within the field of psychology” [2,3].

Specifically to the field of General, Clinical, Abnormal and Health Psychology, PP adds an important emphasis on the use of the scientific method to study and determine positive human development. This also fits well with the investigation of how human development can falter. This concept brings attention to the possibility that focusing only on the disorder could result in a partial and limited understanding of a person’s condition [4].

One important question is, is it possible to understand the phenomenon of PP better today by matching old and new concepts or simply by making use of some anecdotes from human history? Furthermore, is it possible to apply some of the new methods introduced into clinical practice to everyday life? We do have the belief that any method can be very efficient, and a concept cannot be exhaustive by itself without a connection to others. Starting from this point of view, PP is a new and an old way that could be used as a guideline to understand human sufferings better. However, we continue to think it as an outlook and a philosophy of life more than the basis for new technique applied to people in general and to psychopathology. The risk is in promoting trends like that of Steven Woli, a clinical psychiatrist at the George Washington University, who said that the study of PP is just a reiteration of older ways of thinking, and there are not so many scientific studies to support the validity of this method [5]. Contrary to this assumption, remembering and underlining some old and new concepts and stories may be particularly useful.

Reality and Man: An Ancient Story

Reality is considered a fact by the majority of people but this positive or negative interpretation is intimately connected with physiological and psychological inner functioning involved in the interpretation of the world. Perception, in particular the visual one, is closely interested

in the “appraisal” and “reappraisal” of life phenomena. However, it works through mechanisms properly called “optical illusions”, which allow us, for instance, to see two parallel lines as rails, meeting at an imaginary point, and so forth...

The perceptual system provides data for a kind of “virtual reality” that strictly corresponds to the subjective idea that people have about reality. A mechanism that is heavily influenced by the so-called “cognitive schema”. This is a kind of filter through which each person sees and understands reality. These ideas and mental constructions change with life experiences from early childhood to adult life, and they are influenced by education, traditions and social environment. Therefore, physiological mechanisms at the base of reality perception are the main source of interpretative “mistakes” of reality itself.

In 1935 Koffka wrote, “We have to distinguish between the geographical environment and the behavioural one. Do we all live in the same city? Yes, if we mean the same city in a geographical sense; no, if we mean it in a behavioural sense”. The geographical versus behavioural antithesis is Koffka’s most important theoretical contribution. It is a key distinction to show that behavioural responses of many people lie in the environment, but not in the one perceived by everyone and in a merely physical environment, as people frequently presume. Let us take the example of three people looking at a wonderful sunset on the beach. The natural event will obviously be the same: while the sun is setting, one of the three people will be attracted by the beautiful sight, the second might smile, remembering a happy moment lived in a similar situation, the last person, instead, might cry as he relives a situation he once shared with a partner who is no longer there.

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People, therefore, in different ways and according to situations and their individual characteristics, frequently find themselves absorbed in a customized world, transformed by their own perceptive and cognitive activity, that is, by their thoughts and ideas. Perception of the world and reality is filtered through themselves, and one by one, personal frames and values condition them. They are influenced by judgments from other people, specifically those seen as a referential élite, as happens for some trends on how to live and dress, by expectations of success or by ambition towards social roles that are considered important [6].

Western society, in particular, exalts individual freedom of opinion and speech, yet, inconsistently pushes towards standardized and easily labelled behaviours and attitudes, thus discrediting and isolating people who do not comply with so-called "normality". Self and reality representation can be considered as a focus of human mental and behavioural activity, with every aspect linked to this, in particular to what can be defined as "reality personalization". We can also remember the story of a child, aged four, who went to visit his grandparents for a while. At night, when his grandmother put him to bed, he suddenly started yelling and crying, "I want to go home, I'm afraid of the dark", so his grandmother replied "when you're at home you sleep in the dark, I've never seen the light on in your room at night, so why are you scared here?" The child then replies: "That's my home darkness, but I don't know your darkness at all!"

The process connected to a healthy self-awareness necessarily goes through personal and subjective experience and through knowledge. Human history is full of more or less scientific attempts to produce or increase the level of wellbeing and inner peace. Surely one of the most significant though, even if it is not the most famous, is the one given in the text "The method of hesychastic prayer as taught by Father Seraphim", which is described by Leloup in the book: "The Hesychastic Philosophy". The main point is represented by the story of Father Seraphim who receives a young French philosopher in his hermitage of Saint Panteleimon (Mount Athos, Greece) who wanted to be initiated into the "hesychast method of meditation".

Father Seraphim first taught him to "meditate like a mountain", which is to sit motionless on the ground with crossed legs in search of greater stability, pervasiveness, and the greatest possible self-consciousness. According to Seraphim, in fact, the first advice to give to someone who wants to relax and feel good is not physical but spiritual. Thus, the first advice that sounds like an imperative is "sit down and find the most comfortable position for you". Therefore, "the young philosopher learns to feel like a mountain, knows how to take time, to adapt himself to the seasons, to keep quiet and peaceful". Gradually, the rhythm of thoughts slowly changes and flattens and accepting the thought and not running after it becomes a healthy habit, so you can grasp just "the flow of thought". "You must learn to see and understand without judging, being able to make sense of what was and what is, and what continues to exist, just as the mountain has the right to be what it is".

The second step was to teach the student "to meditate like a poppy", or to direct his attention and meditation towards the light, by straightening, also in a physically way, his spine. According to Seraphim's words: "If you look closely at a poppy, you'll see that the stem supports the corolla but also that it has some flexibility that will allow it to bend but not break under the influence of the wind". For humans, this can be translated as the need to have a certain amount of humility. "If the example of the mountain can give the idea of firmness and eternity, from the poppy you will learn fragility but also wisdom and humility: meditation (and even life in general) knows the Eternal in the transience of the moment, but only for an instant".

The next teaching of Father Seraphim was to learn "to meditate like the ocean". The rhythmic comings and goings of the waves help promote a rhythmic and adequate breathing pattern and thus the student learns the art of breathing like the large and variable movement of the waves. At the same time, it gives the student the chance to experience the feeling of rootedness, stability and adaptability. He can feel more easily like a drop of water in the immensity of the ocean/universe, a definite drop, which retains its identity and awareness, learning how to be a single, unique and unrepeatable reality. "He learned that to meditate well you need to learn to breathe deeply. Relaxation and wellbeing, in fact, mostly consists of being able to leave the course and natural flow of the breath. "He learned finally that, although there were also very high waves on the surface, the ocean underneath is always calm, soft-spoken, though never quite still. In any case, the student gradually learned that thoughts, along with feelings and emotions, come and go like the crests of the waves, but the bottom remain almost motionless, almost immutable and firm. And more, and more again".

At this point it is important to note that the instructions can be set up as a sort of "training" that could be easily defined as "therapeutic". The ancient monks, according to the testimony of Philo of Alexandria, were effectively psychotherapists at that time. Their role, before leading to the so-called "light", was in fact to try to heal the nature of the person, to put it in the best conditions in order to receive grace, because "grace does not contradict nature, but restores and complete it"¹.

This was what the old friar did with the young philosopher, that is, he taught a meditation procedure that can be rightly considered as "purely natural". The mountain, the poppy, the ocean, the bird, all the phenomena and natural elements that resemble the man who, before leaving, can capture the different levels of being, or rather, the different aspects of the natural and biological world he lives in every day, and then, the entire universe.

Today, man has lost this connection with the cosmos, with the rocks, with the plants and animals, and, in the end, even with his own self-psychobiological being. If this is true, many of the illnesses and diseases, but also feelings like insecurity, anxiety, tension and depression, so prevalent in contemporary reality, can be partially explained by the sense of loneliness and exclusion that makes the man of today a stranger in the world. Succeeding in this path and discovering the source of happiness/unhappiness is an individual task and there cannot be a universal model because each person is the architect of his own existence. Especially in the so-called "industrialized countries", serenity, personal balance, being happy is often identified only with the opportunity to "meet one's needs" and "avoid tension and stress". However, in the adult human being, the stratification of needs, once the primary ones have been satisfied, can be very different and therefore very difficult to perceive, analyse and finally meet. Consequently, what is perceived as a "need" could sometimes be fictitious, and therefore unable to give full satisfaction and gratification [7].

Wellbeing: Modern Contributions

There is indeed a significant difference between wealth and wellbeing. The latter concept implies the ability to possess sufficient knowledge and active control over oneself in order to avoid high levels of physical and psychological stress or chronic fatigue. The excessive consuming of time and attention on belongings is often a result of the increasing frustration in other important life areas, such as interpersonal relationships, even the most intimate and essential ones.

¹Modified from: J.Y. Leloup, Notes on Hesychasm - Introduction, pp.9-25.

Therefore, stress and anxiety as such do not cause problems for the individual, but their excess and overly prolonging over time as unjustified activation and tension create health problems and harm people's happiness. In relation to this, the words of Victor Frankl [8], a psychiatrist who was the founder of logo therapy, could be appropriate: "Mental Hygiene to date has generally been dominated by a biological principle that is psychologically wrong, homeostasis. This fundamental error derives from the belief that (in psychology, as well as in physiology) what man needs in the first place is calm and inner balance, relaxing at all costs ... but man rather than relaxation needs tension: a certain, healthy and well-dosed amount. The tension experienced through what he wants to win, to know, to get. This, when mixed with the optimal amount for the individual, gives a meaning to life, to the existence which is reserved and awarded only to that particular man. This tension is not detrimental to mental health, but favours it". In total agreement with Frankl, therefore, we can say that in the recipe for happiness there is, definitely, the ingredient of "healthy and appropriate tension".

Starting from these assumptions, an increasing amount of research has been devoted to the study of population, well-being and quality of life in recent years. However, quality of life and wellbeing are almost relative concepts: each person will develop a private interpretation of them, based on his/her physical condition, social role, psychological characteristics, lifestyle, level of interaction with the environment, etc. Thus, it becomes essential to identify the most precise indicators of subjective wellbeing in relation to how an individual evaluates as positive for his health, level of satisfaction in social, occupational, and personal achievements and future goals, based on parameters that can differ profoundly from the objective conditions in which he/she lives.

In the psychological field, the study of subjective wellbeing has been aptly described by Martin Seligman [9] who published the book "Learning optimism". Seligman's thought is very simple: psychology has offered substantial contributions for understanding psychological disease, thus it is possible to investigate the processes and the characteristics that make people happy and to study methodologies and behavioural patterns that make everyone happy, even those who do not show particular problems and, perhaps wrongly, are called "normal".

In 2002, Seligman published "Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment", which is the basis of the applicative corpus of PP, by focusing on the conditions and processes that contribute to the Flourishing or "optimal state" of people functioning [10]. This attempt is certainly not new in psychology; just to mention a few examples; Rogers emphasized education towards positivity and explained the critical role of clinical psychology in facilitating self-knowledge. Subsequently, Allport [11] studied the positive features in each person, by assuming that the wealth of everyone's characteristics is varied and multifaceted. Maslow looked into people's health in depth, and in the central chapter of his famous book "People who are self-realized", he tracked the need to know about everyone's characteristics and how to manage social demands and adherence to conventions. He describes these as a kind of cloak that in some circumstances it is good to put on, but in others it is necessary to take off. Cowan [12] studies the concept of "resilience", from the Latin "resilio", which means 'bounce', but in a figurative sense it corresponds to something that is not influenced greatly by negative factors. Here it comes to mean the ability to face events as much as possible, even the most traumatic ones, in a positive way, in order to successfully reorganize life-facing difficulties, and to be open to good opportunities that life may offer at any moment. By Seligman, the first consistent evidence and application of concepts from a hedonic

perspective has been highlighted in psychology, with a series of studies mainly aiming at analysing the dimensions of pleasure that is observed as purely personal and linked to positive feelings and emotions [12]. This perspective is different from the eudaimonic one that favours instead the analysis of the factors that promote the development and the implementation of individual potential and authentic human nature, according to the Aristotelian concept of eudemonia. It includes not only individual satisfaction, but also a development path towards integration with the surrounding environment and an interaction between individual and collective wellbeing [13]. In particular, for behavioural scientists the eudaimonic perspective focuses its attention on the close connection between individual wellbeing and interaction with others, as a contribution to the development of society [14].

From Positive Psychology to Current Clinical Approaches

PP has offered a highly innovative contribution both theoretical and applied as it has emphasized the role of individual resources, potential analysis and understanding. This is also partly due to cognitive-behavioural approaches, in particular second and third generation ones, that aim at identifying current or residual resources of individuals rather than focusing on the deficit itself [6,15,16]. We have already seen how the awareness and perception of reality are clearly influenced by thoughts, and thoughts dominate human existence: if it is true that "I think, therefore I am", it is not equally true that "I am what I think I am".

A Zen story tells of a businessperson who fell asleep at the wheel of his junk boatload, while sailing on a calm river; suddenly a shock wakes him up and he sees that his boat has been hit by another boat driven by another person who, in turn, had fallen asleep at the wheel. The dealer gets angry and yells at length against those who, in his opinion, caused the crash. However, both were asleep so who was actually to blame? What would have changed if on the boat that caused the crash there had been no one, or if the boat had hit a rock, a tree, or a bank? Perhaps the dealer would have blamed the empty boat, the shore, the wind, the fate... In addition, would it not have been simpler and wiser if he had not blamed anyone? If for a few minutes, he had not done anything? Thus, he could have tried to understand the reasons for what had happened: Fatigue? Lack of sleep? Distractions? It would have been the opportunity to learn from his experience for subsequent crossings. From this example, it is possible to understand that the attribution of causality, a search for a cause-effect relation is almost spontaneous in humans. At most, we tend to blame ourselves as if every act is wanted and conscious and as if every human reaction, even the most archaic like showing emotions, such as paleness and redness, were simply controlled and not physiologically controlled by that part of the nervous system that, not surprisingly, is called "autonomous".

In order to think in a different way, thus not attributing fictitious and completely useless blame or cause-effect relations, we need to learn how to grasp thoughts and listen to the words that go through our head in a somewhat "colder" manner. We need to know and keep in mind those thoughts and emotions are a complex product of different factors: genetic, temperamental, but also acquired by learning and sometimes involuntary and they affect everyone across life span. Therefore, they should be treated as a product, as a consequence of a number of influences.

Thoughts and feelings can be driven into different directions by human reflection without automatic, and often useless, cause-effect determination and self-identification by thought. It is not easy to do, but there are few easy things in real life, such as being helped and

trained psychologically to potentially direct our thinking and behaviour in a different way. Being focused on what you are doing is exactly what Seligman described as necessary for the experience of flow, for that kind of immersion in the current moment that can produce a state of wellbeing derived from living the present as much as possible. This makes obvious reference to PERMA that Seligman recently described in his book "Flourish" (2011). PERMA is an acronym that describes five essential elements that should also be coordinated between each other, to allow people to experience a state of perpetual wellbeing: 1) Feeling and expressing Positive Emotions (P): to experience wellbeing, there is a need for positive emotions. Any positive emotion, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant it is, such as a feeling of peace, or gratitude to another person, the satisfaction of having done a good job, the sudden pleasure of seeing one of Nature's amazing sights, inspiration, even for non-artists, hope, curiosity, love, and others matching this category. 2. Engagement (E): when people are really engaged in a given situation, tasks or projects they really care for, they come into a particular state in which the flow of time seems to stop, because in these situations we focus intensively on what we are doing. This produces a state of wellbeing as such, a kind of eustress or positive stress that can counteract inevitable distress or negative stress [15]. 3) Positive Relations (R): we know that human beings are "social animals", and good relations are essential for wellbeing and in fact, people who manage to have significant and mostly positive relationships of any kind are found to be happier than those who cannot for a variety of reasons. 4. Meaning (M): giving meaning to actions and having purposes in life; choosing and pursuing a cause, whether it is a religion or a cause that helps humanity in some way. Marginally, it means to give a meaning to life and if this is achieved, it produces satisfaction, gratification and a consequent sense of wellbeing in people; 5) Achievement (A): many people strive to improve themselves in some way, from work to school, interpersonal relationships, in situations that are competitive. In achieving their objectives, individuals have to commensurate themselves with realistic characteristics they really possess and potential levels they have reached to gain comfort and happiness.

PP has also identified 24 'character strengths' [17]. These characteristics are called universal "virtues" or "strength areas" that people generally have in a different degree and configuration. People often do not consider these features because they seem so "natural" or obvious.

Contrary to this expectation, knowing personal combination of these kinds of characteristics is relevant and in line with wellbeing itself. Many studies with different theoretical backgrounds from PP, underline how greater self-knowledge and increased awareness make people generally more effective and happier. This could explain the results of a recent study by Gross, Lerner and Sherman of Harvard and Stanford Universities [18], which has shown how the real leaders, who have responsibility for a large number of people, seem to be less stressed than middle managers and officers with less responsibility. The authors have suggested that the leaders reaching the height of their career have also a greater awareness of themselves and their abilities and defects. The actual capacity to manage themselves and the other workers is related to the recognition of strengths of everyone's natural areas. At the same time, it is also important to accept limitations, weaknesses, defects and not try to build a "perfect" self.

Among the methods that can be used effectively to achieve these objectives, Mindfulness is, as a two-dimensional construct well represented by terms such as awareness and acceptance [19]. The aim of Mindfulness is to live life-facing events, personal or environmental

concerns with further awareness and acceptance, by providing help for the so-called "reframing" of the person and the reality of his/her life [20]. Mindfulness promotes the reframing of a new and safer experiential context, in order to modify existing rigid mental (box) processes and patterns of response, by offering a greater psychological flexibility [21,22].

Moreover, Achievement Commitment Therapy (ACT) represents a clinical-psychotherapeutic intervention, whose main purpose is the acquisition of skills from the elaboration of experiences, emotions, thoughts as well as acceptance and implementation of actions consistent with one's own personal values. ACT uses three main techniques: Mindfulness, defusion and commitment. Mindfulness helps gain greater awareness of the current moment. People suffering from anxiety, for example, almost never live in the present but are constantly thinking ahead, anticipating problems, worrying too much and constantly. Depressed patients, instead, tend to relive unpleasant experiences of the past, both recent and remote ones, which of course cannot be changed. Defusion helps to analyze thoughts, emotions and sensations as mind products, by supporting people not to definitively identify themselves with these ones. Acceptance of the content of thought can thus be developed by trying to avoid a priori knowledge between acceptable and unacceptable thoughts. Finally, Commitment is essential to give a value to life, but first it is necessary to understand which things have a real value, both universal and personal. Only in this way, in fact, you can plan first, and then try to implement realistic goals in the short, medium and long term.

The great influence of PP on ACT is obvious and the identification with its theoretical background is almost total. Being healthy and happy means trying to live according to one's own values, and to the ones shared with at least a part of the society and people who live in it. This also means identifying emotions, feeling and thoughts and the various sensations you feel in life as a product of the living experience even if, in some cases, this is very heavy to bear.

Final Comments

Research groups should intensify their efforts to achieve a better and more accurate bringing into operation of some constructs proposed by PP in the next future, thus pursuing a growing verification and optimization of interventions, methods and techniques. In addition to the fundamental theoretical basis of PP, a means that can be used profitably is multidimensional assessment. This refers to an evaluation that includes a personal history such as "life events", "state" and "trait" characteristics, quality and type of interpersonal relationships, coping style, and psychophysiological patterns with the baseline autonomic reactivity and in response to stressful stimuli.

It is important to pay particular attention to Heart Rate Variability (HRV) that increasingly appears as an excellent indicator for the assessment of the ability of relaxation and positive thinking. It is also possible and useful, in some cases, to integrate these data with those from medical assessment (e.g. blood and hormonal assays). For example, in mental illnesses or mixed pathologies (i.e. psychophysiological and psychosomatic disorders) and to observe the effects of a psychological or integrated treatment (i.e. pharmacological and non-pharmacological) across follow-up evaluations (e.g. 6-12 months). This approach may be decisive in ensuring the stabilization of post-treatment acquisitions [15,23,24] and it could be extended to the general population with easily to use instruments for verification, such as biofeedback systems. This assessment may help people to explore and find their own capacity and to generalize results to everyday life. In

particular, the visual feedback given by this technology may be useful to reach the goals set by the therapeutic team.

Thinking positive is not simple but the approach towards a lived pleasant memory and a grateful feeling is the only way to reach behaviour-oriented gratification, to imprint the brain and condition it for the development of more and more circuits geared to goodness and positivity.

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