



LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD: AN EXAMINATION OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract:

Looking back is essential if positive psychology (PP) is to have a prosperous future. First, I will go through some of the criticisms that have already been levelled against PP, pointing out how some of the original issues are still relevant today. Then, I focus on a subset of the most recent studies to highlight specific developments and ongoing issues. Some of the most important of these is the widespread use of unreliable indicators of happiness and the over-reliance on skewed study populations. The commercialisation of PP raises additional issues, including the need for stricter regulation and quality monitoring of for-profit activities. I think it is essential for future research to be directly related to pressing issues of our day, such as the expanding income gap and the spread of disease. These are overlapping disasters that need scientific investigation. Such issues highlight "neglected negatives" that may be causing existing concerns, such as greed, apathy, and ignorance. Anger, which cannot be reduced to a simple good or negative evaluation, should also get more attention from the scientific community. Going ahead, I call for further research into areas already being investigated yet likely to foster healthy lives and equitable communities, such as exposure to the arts and natural experiences. More generally, I would want to see PP address long-standing issues from its history and work toward a societally relevant and admirable future.

Key Words: Positive, Psychology, Scientific, Community

1. Introduction:

For over thirty years, I have investigated the link between happiness and health by attempting to identify its core components, ascertain the roles that various elements play in fostering or hindering happiness, and inquire into the relationship between them. Although I have never considered myself a positive psychologist, I bring my prior knowledge and experience to bear on the field of PP. This is because I find it counterintuitive to categorise scientific endeavours according to their valence. As Rilke described them, the beauty and fear of existence are at the heart of everything that captivates me. Keeping these thoughts in mind, I evaluate PP's potential going forward by analysing its two-decade-long track record of successes and failures. My opinions are my thoughts as an outsider who was sceptical of the PP movement from the beginning.

I start by reviewing some of the first criticism, including some of my own, that consolidated several early worries about PP's introduction. Some of those issues persist even now, such as a refusal to acknowledge the long history of disciplines like psychology and allied ones that have long explored how best humans can operate [1]. This distortion hinders the development of integrated expertise and fosters isolation within PP. Additional prior criticisms, including those from within PP, underlined the need to combine negative and pleasing experiences, similar to dialectical methods. I mentioned analogous points as I went. In this piece, I rely heavily on my experience leading the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) national longitudinal study¹ over the last decade to discuss work done outside of PP that does just that.

2. Traditional Negatives to Positive Psychology:

The canonical explanation of what PP was for and why it was essential. In the first paragraph, the article's writers explained why they thought psychology was too focused on "disease, weakness, and injury" [2]. These claims ran counter to decades of research on optimism in clinical, developmental, existential, and humanistic psychology, from which I drew inspiration to construct an integrated model of mental health. In contrast, the bulk of the introductory exegesis was dedicated to setting the stage for the following 15 pieces. These studies were part of decades-long investigations into evolution, happiness, optimism, agency, health, wisdom, creativity, and talent. The founders of PP seemed to have overlooked the apparent contradiction between these fields and the claim that psychology is obsessed with the negative.

After three years, in Psychological Inquiry, a provocative piece titled "Does the Positive Psychology Movement Have Legs?" was published, which sparked a lively discussion amongst scholars. Most of the issues I addressed in my response to the Lazarus criticism were not unique to PP and included subjectivism, dimensional vs discrete models of emotion, and cross-sectional research. However, I argued for an equal emphasis on both positive and negative emotions when discussing the nature of human experience, explaining that "bad things happen to people, and the healthy response is to feel the sadness, pain, frustration, fear, disappointment, anger, or shame that results from the adverse experience." On the other hand, positive encounters might leave

individuals feeling elated, proud, loving, affectionate, pleased, or contented. Therefore, it is crucial to proper functioning to experience and express both types of emotion.

2.1 Integrative Efforts beyond the Field of Positive Psychology:

Extensive study outside of PP has unified the unpleasant and good sides of the human experience. "The MIDUS (Midlife in the United States) nationwide longitudinal research is based on different probability samples that allow for assessments of how well-being and health vary by age, race/ethnicity/gender, and socioeconomic level". Health and happiness are seen differently in many cultures, as shown by the MIDJA research. "Hedonic well-being (life satisfaction, positive and negative affect), eudaimonic well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance), optimism, sense of control, personality traits, generativity, social responsibility, and social ties with spouse/significant other and parents during childhood are all represented in MIDUS to an unprecedented depth [3]. MIDUS's broad breadth has allowed for the factors above to be linked to the fields of epidemiology, biology, neurology, and genetics" [4]. Most importantly, scientists worldwide can freely access and utilise MIDUS data.

Many discoveries have a mix of favourable and unfavourable aspects. For example, interleukin-6 (IL-6) is an inflammatory marker linked to many diseases, and those with lower educational attainment had higher levels of IL-6, but those with higher psychological well-being were protected from this link. Maternal nurturing mitigated the increased risk of metabolic syndrome in children from low-income families. Evidence of resilience demonstrates the protective effects of positive psychosocial factors against health problems and physiological dysregulation in the face of adversity (ageing, inequality, early life adversity, cancer, and loss of spouse). Research has shown that having a meaningful life purpose predicts more extended longevity and improved health practices [5]. In terms of the underlying processes, it was shown that increased eudaimonic well-being and improved diurnal control of cortisol were predicted by the brain's continuous activation of reward circuitry. Researchers in the field of personality have examined the concept of "healthy neuroticism," Their findings corroborate those of multiple international studies showing that high levels of conscientiousness moderate the relationship between neuroticism and risky health behaviours like smoking and inactivity.

Regarding race, MIDUS has expanded understanding of the Black-White paradox in health, namely that Blacks exhibit more significant levels of thriving and lower rates of mental illnesses than Whites do, despite inequality and prejudice. have brought to light understudied aspects of mental health in the general population by combining the analysis of mental distress (depression and anxiety) and mental well-being (emotion, psychological, and social). People who are languishing, in contrast to those who are thriving, have neither great well-being nor no mental discomfort. Deteriorating well-being over time was also associated with a higher chance of mental discomfort in the future, whereas improving mental health was associated with a greater likelihood of recovery. We cannot go into depth here, but several studies from MIDUS and MIDJA have shown significant cultural disparities in the significance of emotional and psychological well-being for health and biological risk.

3. Current Research in Positive Psychology:

In the first part of this post, we will look at some of the studies that have contributed to PP's development in the last two decades. Then, I discuss the most up-to-date field-wide assessments of PP [6]. The following two parts concentrate on two of their main complaints: the widespread dissemination of subpar tools for gauging happiness and the over-reliance on privileged, homogenous samples in PP studies.

3.1 Advances in Empirical Evidence:

There are several approaches to assess whether or not the field of PP is making positive strides ahead. Instead of doing a comprehensive literature review, I have opted to concentrate on creating individual chapters, drawing primarily on the third edition of the Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology. In contrast to journal papers, chapters might provide a narrative summary of many discoveries by combining several developments on specific themes throughout time. Eighty-seven writers, or 86% of the total, are from the United States; they contributed 68 chapters to this book.

Emotion research has numerous clear paths forward. First, evidence continues to bolster the expansion and build the idea that there are both immediate and long-term advantages to cultivating pleasant emotions. Second, linkages to other constructs (extraversion, happiness, and well-being), as well as to psychological disorders, health, marital and job satisfaction, and cultural concerns, have aided in the advancement of studies of positive affectivity, a trait composed of different components (jollity, self-assurance, and attentiveness). Third, studies have shown that happier people live longer, are less likely to become sick, are more likely to recover from illness fully, and are healthier in general, prompting researchers to dig further into the biological, social, and technological underpinnings of this phenomenon [7]. Finally, despite the need for further research into therapies, the emotional approach to coping (EAC) provides evidence of the deliberate use of emotional processing and expression to handle adversity, such as infertility, sexual assault, diabetes, and cancer.

The mental wellness was discussed in depth from several angles of analysis, including the life cycle and cultural considerations, as well as a review of the existing conceptualisations and metrics. The innovative research methodology was shown by analysing the effects of writing about one's own experiences and

expressing oneself creatively on one's mental and physical health (immune function and cardiovascular health), especially in the aftermath of trauma. Focusing on the necessity for professional regulation and monitoring, this article compares and contrasts the three most popular forms of mental health intervention (psychotherapy, counselling, and coaching) by analysing their time frames, therapeutic techniques, and target populations.

Conversational topics were explored in many chapters. The concept of attachment theory was introduced to examine the importance of attachment security in various contexts (health, social adjustment or interpersonal conflict, and personal growth). The complexity of relationships was analysed, highlighting the significant benefits and serious dangers of having many close friends. They highlighted positive processes, such as joy, closeness, developing one's sense of self, and the advantages of relating happy experiences with others. New studies on the neural basis of empathy were explained, and the results of previous studies were summarised. Future directions included exploring the connections between empathy and issues of racial and ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice. Some of the antecedents of forgiveness are internal (empathy, personality, attributions, and religion), while others are external (relationship dynamics) (closeness and conciliatory behaviour). Finally, it was pondered if forgiveness is always a good thing.

3.1 Flawed Conceptualisation and Measurement of Happiness in Positive Psychology Science:

My background in psychology allows me to contribute to the PP discussions on the topic from a unique perspective. As I have already said, I predicted that PP would have measurement noise issues from the start. However, given the increasing focus on establishing a universally accepted method of gauging happiness, my foresight was insightful and called for an investigation. As a result, the recently edited book contained a lively discussion of the pros and cons of different evaluation procedures and an analysis of diverse measuring methodologies. In addition, I was worried about the rise of weak, poorly verified measures that corrupt quality science in the field of well-being research came into sharp focus.

Seligman and his co-authors have added to this issue, which is not addressed in the abovementioned book. I provide two instances where claims that PP is based on solid research have been put forth but have been undermined by the dissemination of poorly built and poorly tested measures of well-being [8]. First, there was an attempt to verify the efficacy of five distinct therapies (gratitude visit, three good things, you at your best, using signature strengths in a new way, and identifying signature strengths). Samples were collected via the internet from people who had visited the simple happiness website; most were Caucasian and well-educated. Participants performed pre-intervention tests and five post-intervention tests throughout six months. It seems that the results were exaggerated in general; there was little consistency when the effects were seen and few instances when the control and intervention groups differed considerably over time. The importance of before-and-after comparisons in showing the impact of the intervention was also overlooked. I am especially interested in how happiness is quantified due to the assessment.

Because happiness is "scientifically unmanageable", it was broken down into its constituent parts: "(a) positive feeling and pleasure (the pleasant life)," "(b) involvement (the engaged life)," and "(c) meaning (the meaningful life)." I have taken note of the overlapping definitions of the various parts. The Steen Happiness Index (SHI), an unpublished 20-item inventory, was used to operationalise the trade book *Authentic Happiness*, which provided the basis for this tripartite formulation. No data were supplied, and it seems unlikely that such data could be gathered, suggesting that the inventory assesses three independent components of well-being. Furthermore, many items referenced concepts other than optimism, self-respect, dissatisfaction, energy, social connection, or decision-making, which undermines their face validity. The comment, "We continue to use the term happiness, but only in the a theoretical sense of naming the general purpose of the positive psychology effort and referring jointly to pleasant feeling, engagement, and meaning, " added to the confusion All the studies looked at happiness without breaking it down into its constituent pieces.

4. PERMA Framework:

Then came the PERMA framework, first described in the bestselling book *Flourish*. Two new factors-relationships and success-were included in addition to the previously established three-positive emotion, engagement, and significance. However, none were specified, and the claim about what constitutes happiness was not related to the vast preceding empirical literature on subjective and psychological well-being or study on pleasant emotions (exemplified by the various MIDUS measures). Because of this willful ignorance of decades of prior research, efforts to develop new evaluation methods are doomed to duplicate those of established ones [9]. Given that PERMA was implemented by borrowing components from existing instruments, it was inevitable that certain elements would be duplicated. The PERMA-Profiler was developed from these via a series of experiments (none of which were well-defined) using large samples obtained chiefly through online platforms; the vast majority of participants had advanced degrees.

The analysis did not include critical preliminary steps needed to produce quality ratings. Important considerations were the empirical dissimilarity of the item pools for the five components (i.e., did each item correlate more significantly with its scale than another scale) and the reliability and validity of the scales themselves. Since all PERMA items originated from earlier instruments, an additional issue not addressed in convergent validity testing with other measures was the degree of item overlap (redundancy). The PERMA

scales were linked with 20+ other variables in an independent set of tests. It was not obvious how these analyses applied to many other phenomena (such as organisational practises, political orientation, job performance, social capital, burnout, values, self-efficacy, perceived stress, and thankfulness).

Subsequent research has shown no difference between PERMA and subjective well-being and retorted with a plea to "transcend psychometrics," coupled with an analysis of the psychology of baseball pitchers [10]. To further divert attention away from the apparent empirical redundancy of PERMA with subjective well-being, the statement that "SWB probably is the beneficial ultimate common route of the constituents of well-being" was also presented. I found this to be the most jumbled statement: "All this is to say that a good theory of the elements of well-being helps to build well-being and that the psychometric findings that the elements correlate perfectly with overall well-being and that the elements correlate very well with each other is not very instructive when it comes to building well-being."

5. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the proposed five-factor structure of PERMA has received mixed support from other studies. The five-factor model, as well as bifactor versions, were supported for data from German-speaking nations. In my opinion, the recent methodological studies that have been looking at different multivariate structures are essentially unrelated to the core problems of improving people's lives and moving the profession forward. They have nothing to do with the dimensional structures of recycled objects but rather with the causes and effects of happiness, the resilience of happiness in the face of hardship, and the ability of treatments to increase happiness. All these problems have been left unanswered by the two attempts mentioned above to formulate a novel, conceptually based theory of happiness that is both empirically successful (i.e., the data support the alleged multifactorial structure) and unique from what was previously present in the field.

Not much of my writing has focused on issues like these. Instead, I have tried to emphasise the near-universal agreement within PP, and beyond that, moving ahead, careful formulations are required that combine benefits and negatives; that is, research and practise that take into account the strengths and weaknesses of individuals. Relatedly, the decline in the frequency with which the word "positive" appears in the names of scholarly works may be a result of this transition. Various have pointed out that there needs to be more focus on diversity or how the many areas of study vary along many different dimensions (such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic position, handicap status, sexual orientation, and cultural setting). The future of research and practice depends on making social relevance a top priority, which is why the next few years will be crucial-doing so necessitates paying attention to current issues and how they are navigated in many spheres of existence. Furthermore, the problems plaguing our society need research into aspects of the dark side that have been overlooked in the past (greed, indifference, stupidity, and anger). Despite the chaos of today's world, art and nature hold the potential to make us better people by opening our eyes to the plight of others and motivating us to live each day to the fullest with a passion that extends beyond our immediate spheres of influence and into the lives of our loved ones, our coworkers, and the wider community and the planet.

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