

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: STRENGTH & IRONIES

***Sonali Aggarwal**

Abstract

The supporters of the field of "positive psychology" argue that psychology has traditionally focused on the negative or unpleasant aspects of life. It can be seen that most of the topics in psychology, which have generated an enormous amount of researches, such as stress, coping, loss etc. have somewhere overemphasized the tragic and unpleasant components of life. The present paper will focus on some of the conceptual and methodological issues that are plague not only in positive psychology but also in general to psychology. It will also try to explain positive psychology view by giving special emphasis to coping, subjectivism, methodological and conceptual problems, as it is important to health and well being and also for providing criticisms of the positive psychology movement's ideology. The paper will try to focus on some of the ironies and strength of positive psychology.

Keywords: *positive psychology, coping process, subjectivism, methodological problems, conceptual problems, emotional valence*

Introduction

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), positive psychology is "the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life." The field of positive psychology has a long history. We can trace it back from William James's writings on what he termed "healthy mindedness", to Maslow's study of healthy people in lieu of sick people, to the work done by Allport's on positive human characteristics, and to the research done by Cowan's on resilience in children and adolescents.

The field of positive psychology grew out with a desire to encourage the neglected areas, such as hope, gratitude, forgiveness, etc. The field of positive psychology grew from the field of clinical psychology, where the large focus was on the mental illness. According to the positive psychologist, the main aim of positive psychology is not to see everything from the rose colored glasses not to deny the distressing part of life, but to study the ways through which people feel joy, create healthy families and better human experiences.

The Study of Myers (2000), have shown that Americans have reported being “very happy” or “pretty happy”. Also Diener & Diener, (1996) have consistently revealed from their work that most people across the globe score well above the neutral point on measures of life satisfaction. This was true for people who we might assume would be very unsatisfied with their lives, such as slum dwellers in Calcutta. The study by Biswas-Diener & Diener, (2001) showed that these people are actually quite satisfied with their lives. Thus, even when the life of these people is seen as negative most people are doing well. Therefore, it is us who tend to overlook the greater part of human experience.

The premise of positive psychology is that if the individuals engage in positive thinking and feelings and will abandon their preoccupation with the tragic and the stressful side of life, they will have good health and well-being. It is very important for anyone to accept that we cannot have positive without the negative. The movement of positive psychology has somewhere neglected the constructive developments that might accrue from the loss and pain. The movement has put more emphasis on the negative side of life. Although there’s is no harm in doing that, but it should not be at the expense of the negative, and above all, they should not be regarded as separable.

Psychology has continued to be a thriving field and has always made its mark as a helping profession to address many problems. Taking here, for example, the horrors of September 11, 2001. The incident has shaken many of us, and has entered and re entered again and again in the form of stories. It is not that these processes were so tragic that it will lead us to conclude that, psychology has become a negative field. Lazarus in his work has argued that such major loss events provide us a context in which the most positive aspects of human life emerge. It is also important here that Seligman’s notion of "nurturing what is best" should be more

focused upon. It has been found that psychologists have done little to examine how "normal" or satisfactory relationships can be made much more enjoyable (Harvey & Pauwels, 1999). However, more studies are needed on how some people are able to cultivate their relationships so that they can attain great health and happiness.

Lazarus has tried to explain the positive psychology view by giving special emphasis here to the coping process, subjectivism, methodological and conceptual problems, as it is important to health and well-being and for providing criticisms of the positive psychology movement's ideology. We know that individuals try to manage their emotions and the conditions of life by means of the coping process. Therefore like stress, coping is an integral feature of the emotion process.

Coping

Coping begins when an appraisal has revealed a problem that must be dealt with. There are two main ways of coping for stress. The first is emotion focused, and the second one is problem focused coping. It is the emotion focused coping, which is one of the two main forms of coping. It is the emotion focused coping in which no attempt is made to change the actual situation. The Individuals who cope up by thinking positively believe that everything will work out. On the other hand, problem focused coping is an action centered effort to actually change the troubling situation.

Subjectivism

When we talk about subjectivism the only way we can judge an appraisal is itself subjective, as subjectivism depends on a consensus of subjective judgments that are made by others. A consensus can be defined as an average of many different individual appraisals made by a collective group of persons which is selected by a researcher. It is, however, seen that the more

complex the judgment is, the greater are the individual variations. There is no right way to tell when an instance is right or wrong.

Methodological and Conceptual Problems of the Positive Psychology Movement

In psychological research there are many major problems which are frequently found. The first problem is with the cross sectional research. There are two serious limitations of cross sectional research, which dominate studies of correlation. First is that cross sectional research cannot demonstrate a causal relationship taking here, for example, if we want to see the relationship between emotions, health, and well-being then a causal relationship cannot be found. The Second problem is that, the research designs that are used they cannot distinguish what is stable or in action among the emotion states and traits. This leads to holding a very simplistic kind of approach where the emotions tend to get divided into two kinds of categories, where one of the valence is positive and the other is negative. The positive emotions are then grouped together and compared with the negative ones. Thirdly, there are individual differences problem, such as, Cohort differences, failure to give adequate importance to the individual differences and also an overstatement of the importance of the sample. Also, there is use of overly casual procedures for measuring emotion, such as, checklists and questionnaires that are administered only once per participant. These tests are inadequate for providing accurate and full descriptions of the flow of emotions that have been experienced by the person.

Emotion Valence

Another problem is about emotion valence. Whenever a valence is attributed to an emotion, there are three subproblems which arise. The first problem is a failure to question the basis for attributing a positive or negative valence to an emotion. When we talk of a positive emotion there are three different rationales for it. A positive emotion could be when people feel good subjectively, second, when they have been brought about by life conditions which are favorable

and thirdly, when the outcome is desirable. Also, there is always a social context where the emotion will be generated. It might happen that the situation in which one person feels happy could be sad for another person. Similarly, when we talk about negative valence, it could also have three different rationales for it first, the person might here feel bad than good, second, the emotion which is generated is unfavorable rather than favorable causal conditions and thirdly, the consequences of the emotion will be negative. Each of the emotion has a very distinctive relational meaning. Therefore, when we try to divide them into categories by using the two broad categories of positive and negative, and try to hold a dimensional approach, then it is very regressive and a distortion of reality. The dimensional approach undervalues the importance of each discrete emotion. Another problem with this dimensional approach is that the emotions, positive and negative are not fixed or we can say they are not consistent opposites of each other. All the emotions have the potential of being either both or one or the other and even same on the same occasion when an emotion is experienced by different persons. This can be explained by taking different emotions as an example here.

Hope

Hope is a word which is a combination of a wish and a belief that the desired outcome could occur. If someone really wants a job, then that individual thinks positive about it and believe in his or her chances of getting it are favorable, but at the same time will also feel uneasy because he or she is not sure that whether he will get a job. Therefore, hope is both positive and negative, and it is, not sensible to classify it as positive or negative.

Pride

When we talk of pride many societies, including our own, hold ambivalent notions about it. In western countries, it is treated as having a positive valence, whereas in India it is not taken very

positively. Schimmel (1997), says that in Judeo-Christian religious thought pride is considered to be one of the seven deadly sins.

Love

When we talk of love, we talk about it in positive terms, but the same word also carries a great misery with it. It is seen with the loss as well. Love can be as a source of threat through death, separation or dementia, etc. therefore, Threat is an indispensable aspect of love, which works in the background of our mind. Therefore, the feelings of love are always in a flux. Love can occur in combination with various other feelings. For example, a loving relationship in general share sentiment of mutual love, but at varying times there may be many negatively toned emotions in it, such as anxiety, envy, anger, guilt, disappointment and jealousy.

Anger

Anger is often taken as having a negative valence when, actually, the experience of it is positive. Anger can be seen in positive terms when someone takes a stand for himself or herself rather than shrinking away fearfully and helplessly. We see it negatively because its consequences are destructive in a relationship. Therefore, much more on emotions can be learned by studying each of these discrete emotions in organizational life or any other social context rather by grouping them into categories of positive or negative.

Individual Differences

Another problem is of individual differences. The researchers tend to overstate the cohort (or group) differences , but did not give adequate attention to the individual variation. This is seen not only in most of the studies on emotion, but also applies to many psychological and, to more broadly, social science research. Therefore, we miss the important aspects by taking things just

on a superficial level. Another issue is that in what way the minority participants for whom there is no overlap between the cohorts might differ descriptively from the majority who lie within the overlap. This is something which has not been of our attention, probably because individual differences are viewed as an embarrassment in the search for generalizations.

Emotion measurement

Another problem is about Emotion Measurement. How can we measure emotions? The problem of cohort, problem of valence and individual differences come together squarely on the urgent need to measure emotions fully and accurately. The measurement of emotions in research is often seen in the bottom line of research on emotions. The research designs that are used to study this kind of issue does not allow it to be effectively tested empirically. As Peterson (2000), argued that, concepts such as happiness, sadness or optimism, etc, are far more complex and difficult to assess than has previously been presumed. Wright and Mischel (1987) adopted a conditional trait approach, which affirms the necessity of taking into account the meaning of the person environment relationship, which is more suitable and apt in measuring these traits. This will help in reflecting more accurately what the participant is actually feeling under each condition and during each time period.

The ideas of Norman Vincent Peale are relevant here, for the positive psychology movement. Peale in his book wrote that being able to put our troubles in a positive light, might help us feel better and even flourish in our lives. The reason for this could be that being able to put a positive spin in the negative part of our life can motivate problem solving efforts and feeling of self actualization. Lazarus speaks of positive thinking as an ability which everyone cannot gain for themselves.

The progenitor of the positive psychology movement, Martin Seligman, is also frequently criticized psychology for emphasizing more on the stress and adversity rather than the positive side of life. Seligman in his work has emphasized on the personality traits that could facilitate the good life. But the message that comes from the positive psychology movement is that the

researchers should try to exclude the negative and focus on positive human qualities. Like I mentioned earlier that positive and negative are two sides of the same coin. Also not to forget that stress and loss are inevitable part of life. It is important to acknowledge that both stress and adversity often play a valuable role in the development of the person's personal strengths, but if we see most of the time it is seen as negative psychology. Therefore, the critics of psychology are highly selective in what they have read and too much positivism is not good for our us.

Conclusion

Positive psychology as a field seems too glib about the fact of life, that loss is also pervasive in life. It is sometimes that the field of positive psychology stresses the positive emotions to such a degree that it tends to dismiss the facts of regular loss and grieving. Victor Frankl from his own personal experience in Nazi death camps articulated a unique vision of how people can transform their losses into personal growth, which can also be seen in his work on logo therapy. It is also seen sometimes that due to the sudden demise of someone in the family, people sometimes choose to continue to remember the person he/she loved so much and dedicate a significant portion of his life for the person . The idea is similar to the Erikson's idea of generativity, which means making contributions to others based on their experiences. For them it is a way of remembering from the great loss. Therefore, these ways of coping are not new in psychology, which positive psychology movement has made it for people. Its strands can be found in the literature of psychology from the beginning of the field. The field of positive psychology has somewhere also neglected the positive elements of human life. Instead of considering the political and the social measures that might lead to improvement in people's circumstances and might foster true learning in them, the field of positive psychology has acted as a substitute for success, achievement and happiness.

But then there are things which are new about this trend and are worthy of our attention. The literature on positive psychology primarily focuses on getting people back to "normal." For example, what are the factors that will determine whether a parent who has lost his child at a

young age will eventually return to some degree of emotional "normalcy" or, will transform his or her life in the aftermath? Therefore, it is important to look into other aspects, such as, why such growth does or does not occur, if it is determined by specific coping strategies or more general personality dispositions, or whether such growth could be encouraged in people who have experienced extreme loss; these are certain important questions that have traditionally gained little attention. Therefore, the field of positive psychology offers avenues for research and theory that have largely been left untended.

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