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Positive psychology

Intellectual, scientific, or ideological movement?

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**Ideologies, beliefs, and knowledge systems**

Scientific movements and ideologies have often been presented as opposing, and even antagonistic, concepts. However, the relation between them is not so simple. Scientific knowledge and ideology represent complex concepts, polysemic in their daily usage. Despite repeated announcements of the impending *end of ideology* (Bell, 1960), the concept of ideology allows for a comprehensive and critical analysis of conceptual formulations presented as global proposals (Eagleton, 1991). This concept also has some advantages over units of analysis that are more abstract, less operational, or more partial and limited, such as scientific paradigms (Kuhn, 1962), research programs (Lakatos, 1970), scientific or intellectual movements (Frickel & Gross, 2005), or the history of concepts (Koselleck, 2002). Above all, the concept of ideology helps to better situate the position of a certain system of knowledge in a given society, as well as its social function.

The term *ideology* seems to have been coined by Destutt de Tracy in 1796 to refer to his concept of a “science of ideas.” The term quickly took on connotations of a biased view of reality. To a large extent, the negative view of the concept of ideology comes from Marxism (Marx & Engels, 1932/1976), in which it is used to refer to a pattern of thinking supported by a social group aiming to maintain unjust social structures. In this sense, ideologies would be social products having the function of concealing reality, despite being presented as the most genuine expression of it. This markedly critical formulation of ideology has subsequently been adopted by numerous authors. The Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1973) proposed a conception of ideology as a communicative structure characterized by the willingness to transmit its own representations, values, and meanings, as well as by its inability to attend to other approaches.

This view of ideology involves the presentation of a biased conception of the world, of facts about humans and society, and a lack of capacity for self-reflection. In this sense, ideologies promote the maintenance of theoretical and pragmatic approaches for reasons that are not intellectual and epistemic. Ideologies do not have to be completely wrong; it is sufficient that they present a part of reality, positive or negative, as if it were the whole, in order to distract attention from issues that advocates of these ideologies might prefer to remain unconsidered. Some of the frequent aims of ideologies are to present the particular as universal, the relative as absolute, the
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historical as eternal, and the social representation of a group as the direct expression of reality. These functions have been repeatedly manifested throughout history, for example in fascism, nationalism, dogmatism, or different forms of totalitarianism.

In addition to being descriptive in nature, ideologies are also explanatory and therefore justificatory entities (Montenegro, 2002). Scarborough (1990) described them as a system of thought that gives human action a supporting context and, at the same time, imposes limits on free thought. According to this formulation, ideologies constitute matrices that generate a certain type of ideas, while blocking the ideas that oppose them. That is, ideologies are a “map of thoughts,” and this map contains and limits the possible conceptual developments of these thoughts. In addition to being a matrix of ideas, ideologies are also a matrix of behavior. Ideologies determine the types of behaviors and practices that are generated from their ideas, and most importantly, define the values, meanings, and virtues that are presupposed. Therefore, ideologies serve as a global system of justification (Mannheim, 1936).

Faced with this markedly negative interpretation, some theorists have offered a concept of ideologies as a belief system that supports “common sense” and provides unified and practical messages. Geertz (1973) has redirected the understanding of ideology to more neutral grounds, wherein ideologies are viewed as a map of social reality and a matrix of thought that is capable of creating a collective consciousness. In the same way, P. Brown (1973) proposed that ideologies are belief systems about social issues that exert a deep impact on the structure of thought, feeling, and behavior.

Naftad and Blakar (2012a), who have significantly developed the concept of ideology from the perspective of social psychology (Naftad & Blakar, 2012b; Naftad, Blakar, Botchway, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2009), proposed that ideologies represent a coherent system of ideas and beliefs about the world and social practices. In this model, ideologies are the associations of beliefs that a person develops as a consequence of living in a society, and with which he or she tries to describe and explain the nature of the human condition and the surrounding world. In other words, ideologies are systems of thought that people hold, and have the function of explaining human reality at the individual and collective level. In this sense, ideologies play a social function and serve to provide identity to a group or community.

Following Gramsci (1971), Eagleton (1991) proposed that ideologies are a system of representations of a very wide social group. In the same direction, Van Dijk (1999) conceptualized ideology as a form of social knowledge and the basis of the social representation of a group of people. It is in this sense that Châtelet and Mairet (1978) described ideologies as the prevailing mentality in different historical periods. They represent the “common sense” of a population or group that can be characterized as both a conceptual approach to reality and a certain type of economic, social, political, or religious interest. The role of ideology as the “common sense” of a group is to present an objective description of that group’s social and historical development (Eagleton, 1991). As a set of beliefs and convictions, it plays an important indirect role in the justification of values, practices, and theories, doing so not explicitly, but by imposing its convenience, utility, and practical necessity (R. W. Wilson, 1992).

Ideologies usually have a contestatory nature in relation to other approaches, against which they are presented as an alternative. They are belligerent. Ideologies carry a principle of antagonism and rupture, as well as hegemony and prevalence over the other systems of thought that they call into question, completely or partially. More than a set of proposals, they are a system of counterproposals. Ideologies are characterized by a formulation in contrast with other formulations. Also, ideology serves as an element of identity for a particular group; without an ideology, the group’s identity flounders.

In order to understand an ideology it is important to pay attention to its language. All ideologies contain their own voice and terminology (Kroskirty, 2000). Ideologies are identified by
the preference for a few specific words over others and the use of particular forms of speech. The terminology of an ideology is important, in that it provides connections to the central concepts of the theory and its social and group references. The repetition of terms and concepts is indicative of the central elements of the conceptual matrix around which the organization of the model is produced (Rommetveit, 1968). The theoretical counterproposal present in most ideologies is usually manifested by a change in the most frequently used terms and their replacement by others, as well as by a different organization of the conceptual discourse. Choosing to replace certain words with others represents the choice of new intellectual options opposed to existing ones, and shows a set of preferences at the cost of abandoning others (Blakar, 1979). Therefore, a way of knowing what is really supported by an ideology is to pay close attention to the most frequent words in its discourse. The words themselves are the message.

The tendency to turn belief systems into ideologies is widespread, and reflects the human need to avoid uncertainty and have a consistent picture of reality. The formation of beliefs and ideologies arises as a response to needs for action and global orientation, rather than for epistemic reasons (Kelly, 1955). The tendency towards ideology becomes stronger when less information is available and when the ability to critically process information is low. From these circumstances, the need for ideologies emerges as a political and social reaction to reality.

The sociology of scientific knowledge

Applying the model of ideology to a scientific project, research program, scientific movement, or paradigm study does not imply a global disqualification in itself. Many of its proposals can be acceptable, even most, but not all. Thus, it becomes necessary to also apply a critical analysis to the products of science in order to clarify the foundations, scope, and limitations of their conceptual frameworks. Science is only science when it is possible to question its foundations, and when it is formulated within a space with no place for authority, common sense, or group agreements, but only critical thinking, formal logic, objective observation of facts, and experimentation. These conditions, however, are rarely found entirely in any scientific program.

It is not possible to understand the basis of scientific knowledge as a whole outside its historical and sociological contexts. Historical, genealogical, and critical analyses unveil not only the contexts of scientific discovery, but also those of its justification, exposing the social functions that facilitate or block the development of scientific knowledge. The Annales school (Aries, 1973; Burguière, 2006) has highlighted the importance for historiography of exposing daily events to the context of discovery and justification. The history of science is full of corrections (Bachelard, 1934/1985), atrocious errors (Di Trocchio, 2003; Shermer, 2001), and not a few impostures (Bouveresse, 1999; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). Given these facts, it would appear necessary to conduct critical, social, historical, and ideological analyses of scientific movements, especially as the consequences of these movements and their impact on society increase in extent and prominence. Accordingly, it seems necessary to include the sociology of knowledge within the study of scientific movements (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Lamo de Espinosa, Gonzalez, & Torres, 1994) in order to highlight the context, functions, and conceptual content that are present within these movements, even though not necessarily directly expressed.

In addition to its immediate academic context, science is always necessarily situated in a historical and social context. A history of science, and particularly of scientific disciplines, cannot be written while addressing only conceptual and academic issues. Real history is always about people and groups in economic and social contexts. The history of science is not only a history of ideas, but also a history of the people and groups that practice science. As discussed by Fourez
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(1996), the history of science contains a non-rational and random component that makes its development and internal logic unpredictable. Newton’s apple is more than just a metaphor!

Science is rigorous, but not all scientists embark on rigorous scientific work. There are often generalizations and doctrinal reifications in scientific schools of thought that turn theoretical proposals into creeds without sufficient substantiation (Kuhn, 1963). The risk of creating scientific formulations of academic disciplines of knowledge is the abandonment of methodology and hypothesis testing in favor of the production of results. When theory tries to go beyond what the data will support, there is a strong risk of falling into ideology. An excessive enthusiasm for theoretical proposals is a step towards the inappropriate generalization of empirical results, and one of the ways that can lead to ideology is an insufficiently confirmed proposal.

The tendency to form ideologies is heuristic. The human mental system does not process information digitally, but engages in successive abstractive and symbolic processes (Bruner, 1973). One of these levels consists of generalization and the formation of ideologies. The tendency to turn information into beliefs and emotions stems from the very nature of the human mind and in its configurations as an interconnected system (Moreno-Jíménez, 2007; von Bertalanffy, 1968). Going beyond the scope of the field of knowledge being studied is a normal tendency in the process of knowledge acquisition. From here, the formation of ideologies responds to group and social processes, also within scientific groups.

Once formed, the system of ideological thinking is primarily self-reproducing. This allows for continuous expansion by association, while the same system also blocks the capacity for critical thinking. Ideology is, in effect, a conceptual system for the control of social awareness, but this requires the maintenance of a single, one-dimensional formulation that discourages criticality. Resistance to the natural process of change that characterizes science is a distinguishing feature of ideologies. When this happens, it is then necessary to speak of beliefs and ideologies rather than scientific propositions; we have entered a system of convictions detached from the evidence of reality.

Positive psychology and its ideological risks

The emergence of positive psychology at the end of the twentieth century has been followed by its spectacular growth; it has been by far the fastest-growing movement within psychology in recent years. Positive psychology has permeated virtually all of the areas open to an intellectual, academic, and psychological movement (Hart & Sasso, 2011; Yen, 2010). It has had a massive presence in the general and scientific press, in academic and non-academic manuals, in associations, in new lines of research, in general and specialized conferences, and in the support received from all kinds of organizations. This tumultuous development has been accompanied by several excesses and failures. The relevant issue is whether these errors stem only from the near-uncontrolled rate of growth of the field, or are internal and fundamentally intrinsic to the whole program. In such cases, the answer is usually not located at either endpoint.

The upsurge of positive psychology in such historic moments is no alien to its objectives and central theoretical proposals. The possible genealogical and archeological explanation (Nietzsche, 1887/1998; Foucault, 1969) likely makes explicit things that the chronological narrative of its main proponents ignores and silences. Although there have been historical narrative descriptions (Jørgensen & Nafstad, 2004; Seligman, 1999), a history of the conceptual ground and the social conditions that have led to the emergence and development of the idea remains to be done.

Cabanas and Sanchez (2012) claimed that the origin of positive psychology stems from traditional North American religious culture, which expects that people will improve themselves by their own efforts, within the framework of positive thinking and the popular culture of
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self-help. According to lexicographic studies carried by Cabanas and Huertas (2014), positive psychology and the culture of self-help share very similar topics and goals, even though their approach and the way in which they are presented differ. From this perspective, positive psychology would seem to lack the critical capacity to assess the conceptual ground from which it may have originated.

Other references to the contextual origins of positive psychology allude to the liberal economic context of the United States. From this perspective, American positive psychology has developed according to the standards of modern organizations, characterized by their market orientation, entrepreneurial initiatives, and multiple partnerships with major associations and corporations (Prieto-Ursúa, 2006, Binkley, 2011). All of this has favored its development, but it has still lacked the skill to listen and reflect on its conceptual foundations and its own logic of justification. American PP, and (thus) to a large extent all of PP, has been more attentive to the context of discovery, the eureka of its original intuition, than to the context of justification. Positive psychology failed to reflect on its own scientific basis (Lazarus, 2003a). Like large organizations, positive psychology has placed a strong emphasis on results. Its enthusiastic reception in wider society, rather than within academia, may have contributed to this. In any case, however, it would not be right to identify all of positive psychology with a single region of the world or a single thematic package. Positive psychology takes many forms and covers a multitude of topics; and those that are the most talked about and reproduced are not necessarily the most valid.

Positive psychology is clearly more than a collection of vague ideas about the positive aspects of the person. The aim of positive psychology is to present a seminal idea about individual and social relations from a positive outlook, or, taking matters a step further, to present a positive portrait of the person and his or her relationships, as well as a positive social worldview. That positive outlook is the key concept at the center of PP’s proposition. In this sense, it seems appropriate to note that the focus of positive psychology has not been on the whole of the person or of human relationships, but only on their positive aspects. Furthermore, this interest has centered on those positive aspects of people and relationships that depend on individual willpower and effort. This choice, however, is fraught with conceptual and practical consequences. An ideology of the person is not the same as an ideology of personal relationships, or the overdetermination of social relationships. The paths of the theory are different for each of these three options. Positive psychology is a proposal about the internal overdetermination of the person in the social context. From this perspective, the conceptual picture of PP can be described more clearly as a worldview of social reality as determined by personal attitude.

One of the founding objectives of PP has been to present itself as a scientific endeavor, as attested by quotes such as “Positive psychology is psychology – psychology is science – and science requires checking theories against evidence” (Peterson, 2009, p. XXIII) or “We are, unblushingly, scientists first” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001, p. 89). From the very beginning of positive psychology, its main authors have made a strenuous effort to differentiate it from what science is not, such as self-help (Seligman, 1999). This regular insistence on the status of positive psychology as a science, indeed as a rigorous science, might perhaps indicate that the authors of these statements have their doubts about it. Certain statements about science are more rhetorical than real.

Along with the vigorous defense of PP as a scientific proposal (Vázquez, 2013), there have been a number of strong critiques of it, especially of its scientific claims (Coyne, Tennen, & Ranchor, 2010; Fernández-Rios & Novo, 2012; Pérez-Álvarez, 2013). Frawley (2015) considered PP “bad science” and, indeed, “scientism,” an ideological formulation presented as science when it is really not. As usual, however, the situation is more complex than total rejection or enthusiastic approval. Currently, positive psychology is a broad field of study with many very different
The struggle for doing science using the most rigorous methods with a new theory or proposal, when they are in a development period, may lead to error, if not imposture. The formula for what constitutes happiness may be an example of this (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2002), while the positivity ratio that anticipates the likelihood of flourishing (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) may be another. The application of rigorous methods does not ensure scientific development, which mainly requires previous theoretical maturation; instead, it can lead to deception (N. J. L. Brown, Sokal, & Friedman, 2013). Excessive claims can slip into an ideological approach by claiming categorical truth for that which is, in fact, still controversial. In other words, there are enthusiasms that lead to ideology.

The term “positive psychology,” although initially contested by its proponents (Hervás, 2009), refers at its core to the study of positive emotions, positive personality traits, and positive institutions. The direct aim of positive psychology is to improve all three of these, especially the first two, leading to feeling happier and the development of our dispositions and skills. In doing so, positive psychology is heir to a long tradition that has proposed self-improvement as the goal and main objective of the person (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961). Behind these approaches, the basic and central assumption of the intrinsic goodness of the person and human nature seems to be present, at least in many theoretical developments. The use of the metaphor of flourishing of the person (Keyes & Haidt, 2002; Seligman, 2011) seems to indicate the natural development of the organism due to its fundamentally positive nature. As Lazarus expressed it, “in short, this movement presents an almost Pollyanna version of the Garden of Eden notion of the good life and good people while it masquerades as being tough-minded and scientific” (Lazarus, 2003b, p. 173).

The belief in “human goodness and excellence” (Peterson, 2006, p. 136) seems intrinsic to PP. According to Seligman (2003, p. 126), a fundamental assumption for PP is “the dual aspect theory that the strengths and the virtues are just as basic to human nature as the negative traits.” More positively and explicitly, Linley and Joseph (2004, p. 714) considered that “Implicit within positive psychology is the idea that human beings have the potential for ‘good,’ and that we are motivated to pursue a ‘good life’.” The problem, however, is that PP changes the meaning of what is possible by the affirmation of its generalization. Humanistic psychology recognized the fact that terms such as “goodness” are dependent on history, contexts, and persons. Positive psychology has extended the recognition of this possibility to the global population without exposing through which means this generalization occurs. The “potential for good,” as a real fact, is not a global reality.

This core assumption contradicts most of the beliefs and convictions of religions and philosophical views on human nature (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998; Trigg, 1999), as Seligman (2003, p. 126) recognized. The major religions of history have been based around the idea of salvation from human flaws; indeed, they have proposed human weakness and limitations as the starting point and reason for their existence. It is not the mythical story of fault in the beginning of history that is relevant here, but the human experience it embodies along with its focus on the negative.

Faced with this historical and geographical panorama, PP proposes a positive outlook on the human condition. The decision is brave and bold, but the scientific data to support it are nonexistent. It is a legitimate point of view to hold, of course, but not a scientific one. Positive psychology tends to present itself as a secular alternative to traditional religions. It is in this sense that Peterson and Park (2003) explicitly warned that PP should not be taken as an “ideological movement or secular religion” (p. 145). Similarly, Lazarus (2003b, p. 176) stated that in his
opinion, proponents of PP were “promoting a kind of religion, a vision from on high, which is falsely clothed in a claim to science that never materializes.” It is not acceptable in scientific discourse to confuse beliefs with data, although the confusion is more common than recognized. The speed with which an ordinary man can become a butcher is surprising (Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 2007). The memory of the Gulag, the Shoah, and the banality of evil (Arendt, 1963) are examples from yesterday that still resonate today. A minimal awareness of history indicates that it is too simplistic to place much faith in the kindness and natural excellence of the human condition. Thinking about the human condition without regard to the dark side of its collective and personal history reveals an unrealistic willingness or false consciousness. History does not reflect a friendly picture of humankind (White, 2011).

The idea of a positive human condition, characterized by its capacity for development and flourishing (Seligman, 2011), can be considered the academic product of a cultural context, without which it would not have made much sense. PP is the expression of a culture characterized by specific values of a developed, open, and democratic society, with widely recognized human and civil rights. Although this kind of thinking may be accepted and even introduced into practice anywhere in the world, its full emergence and expression do not seem possible outside the context of recognition of human, civil, and democratic rights. It is in such contexts and cultures where positive psychology has the best chance to develop and where it may best serve its function of fostering personal and professional development, especially by entering new areas such as personal and professional coaching. As Biswas-Diener (2011, p. v) has recognized, “positive psychology is deeply anchored in Western culture.” Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the development of positive psychology outside an “affluent society” (Galbraith, 1958), such as the United States or elsewhere, where happiness is just another consumer product.

The extension of positive psychology to other socioeconomic contexts may be more a product of colonial export than academic diffusion. An example of this is the fact that the definition of happiness may be radically different between one country and another (Frawley, 2015; Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). George Steiner, one of the world references in comparative literature, has suggested that no language is able to express the pursuit of happiness and optimism towards life as much as English does (Steiner & Adler, 2014). According to Steiner, (American) English conveys hope and disavows the experience of despair, the apocalypse, and the metaphysical view that condemns the human condition. Without explicitly naming it or alluding to it, Steiner invokes the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956) on relations between thought and language. Steiner seems to say that American English is optimized for describing PP. A fundamental characteristic of ideologies is the identification of elements of referential identity as universal. This seems to be the case in such a central aspect of PP as the pursuit of happiness.

Related to this possible ideological feature is the absence of any analysis of contextual factors in positive psychology. Positive psychology is approached primarily as an intra-individual process that is virtually autonomous. As such, PP neglects aspects of gender, social class, ethnicity, and social structures (Kristjánsson, 2010). It is true that references to these are occasionally made, but their direct relevance and importance is clearly secondary. Even genetic and neuropsychological aspects (Fredrickson et al., 2015; Fredrickson et al., 2013) have received more attention than social ones, in an apparent effort to present the proposals of positive psychology as being directly derived from human (biological) nature. The limited attention paid by PP to social questions arises from its own original individualistic conception and strong focus on internal and dispositional aspects of the person. Some more recent developments (Biswas-Diener, 2011) have expanded this perspective somewhat, although the main trend remains intra-individual. Shifts to social explanations would probably force a profound change in some of the central tenets of positive psychology. Although only a few movements of ideas have been as concerned with
multicultural studies as PP (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2009; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2014; Vázquez, 2013), comparative studies do not always elude ethnocentrism; indeed, sometimes they accentuate it.

One of the central themes of positive psychology is the construction of a set of human strengths. In his initial proposal for this, Seligman (2002, p. 125) explicitly stated that his intention was to return to the approaches of social sciences of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in regard to three points: a) there is a human nature; b) action stems from character; c) character can be good or bad. From these facts, his intention was to restore the scientific value of the concept of character (Seligman, 2002). This pursuit is legitimate, but the price to pay for it is very high, as it discards a considerable amount of knowledge accumulated by the social sciences throughout the twentieth century, especially in regards to the critical importance of context in the development and behavior of the person. Approaching the study of the person as a psychological system from the character model, and hence implicitly or explicitly abandoning the current model of personality, inevitably involves a disconnection with the current approach to the study of personhood (Boyle, Matthews, & Saklofske, 2008; John, Robins, & Pervin, 2008). Character and personality are not the same thing; this is why we have different words for them, and the consequences of substituting one for the other are likely to be broader than one might think at first. Replacing personality with character as the topic of our research is a throwback to the past with an unclear aim.

The VIA inventory of human strengths proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) consists of a set of six great virtues and twenty-four character strengths. Undoubtedly the set of strengths selected by Peterson and Seligman is impressive, but unfortunately there are many more that were not chosen. The problem is not that not all of these are alluded to (which would be impossible); rather, it is that the missing strengths are related to nonconformity, the desire for adventure, the disposition to party (cf. Sloan & Garcia, Chapter 25 in this volume), and so on. There are two basic conceptual frames in the list chosen: Apollonian and Calvinist. All of the included strengths are to be found somewhere along one or both of these dimensions. Neither Orpheus nor Dionysius are at all well represented, nor indeed Achilles. The selected strengths have a familial, religious, and moral air. Not only does this list lack many strengths, but the ones missing are related to qualities not associated with industriousness and productivity, perhaps more characteristic of people from southern latitudes. Among such people, many of the strengths are probably not even seen as qualities. We could say that even if this framework is not ideological, it is, at the very least, only partial.

It is perfectly legitimate to establish a psychology of virtues, in the same way that a philosophy of virtues exists (Comte-Sponville, 1995), or, on the same basis, a psychology of the capital sins or great vices of history (Blackburn, 2004, Dyson, 2006; Thurman, 2005; Tickle, 2004). The problem is extracting from one or the other the truth about human nature, of which both virtues and vices form a part. Human nature is not found in the biological, but in the historical and social. The set of human strengths presented by Peterson and Seligman (2004) can be read more as an ethical code of behavior than an objective description of character traits. They are a collection of virtuous character traits that fall within the happiness hypothesis: the practice of virtue leads to happiness (Haidt, 2006, p. 158). This hypothesis, however, is partial at best, because there are more than a few people who are happy and not virtuous, and inversely, as the libertine Marquis de Sade literarily exposed. The moral character of the proposal of PP is recognized by its authors, who wished to “reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed societal discourse” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 3). However, this statement is ambiguous; it is difficult to know what is meant by virtue. As Seligman (2002) recognized, the content of the six virtues is mostly formal and can differ widely in different latitudes. However, the big problem for the VIA classification is that exactly the same
is true with character strengths because, as Kristjánsson (2010, p. 305) observed, “the distinction between virtues and character strengths is not entirely clear.”

The strengths proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) are a set of good character qualities that lead to happiness in those who possess them. As Kristjánsson (2010) observed, positive psychology is a psychology based on virtue, with the central objective of maintaining positive emotions and happiness. Rather than a neutral description of the human condition and its possibilities, it looks more like a postmodern and secular moral code. Its most characteristic principles seem to reproduce the ideology of the Protestant work ethic, despite protests from Seligman (2002) that it is not so. There are no points of disagreement between the Protestant ethic and the moral proposals of PP. In fact, PP has attracted enormous interest from authors in the field of ethics and morality (Haidt, 2002; Kristjánsson, 2013; Nussbaunn, 2010). Positive psychology, ethics, and morality seem to be harmoniously conjoined and to complement each other. From the point of view of a scientific discipline, this is a risk, and not a small one; morality is always an optional extra for science. In this sense, it is not sufficiently clear whether the intention of PP is to develop a science of character or a scientific morality. It may be appropriate to recall that Peterson (2006, p. 137) himself described his unofficial title at the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center as that of “director of virtue,” with effective responsibility for boosting character strengths and virtues.

As a result of these approaches, PP proposes (Maddux, Snyder, & Lopez, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to transform the “illness ideology” of mainstream psychology into a more optimistic formula, focusing on the positive factors of the human condition. This proposed change, however, is highly subject to cultural factors, giving a typical upbeat vision in which the illness ideology is replaced by a healthy ideology (McDonald & O’Callaghan, 2008). What is proposed is not so much a model of mental health, but rather a model with the prototypical characteristics of the American citizen: cheerful, outgoing, goal driven, and extroverted (Miller, 2008), and whose dynamics are further characterized by adaptation, integration, and productivity. The proposed model does not seem to be particularly universal or scientific; instead, it is locally and morally oriented.

Here, then, is the basic problem: is positive psychology a form of disguised morality, or is there an initial confusion about what psychology can say as a science? Is the happiness hypothesis a necessary component of positive psychology, or is it merely a contingent outcome of its conceptual framework? Is the character described by the VIA strengths inventory the result of a temporary worldview that can be modified, or is it a consequence of an ideology that needs to causally relate virtue and happiness? Any proposal and defense of a form of moral behavior by an intellectual and academic movement inevitably leads to confusion. It seems necessary here to recall the criticism of Marx and Engels in regards to false consciousness, and to remember Nietzsche’s expositions in On the Genealogy of Morality (1887/1998). The recovery of values and virtues, of whatever kind, is a confusion of tasks between a scientific approach and a moral choice; the latter is, of course, a fully legitimate endeavor, but not a scientific one.

The universality of human strengths is controversial, as the authors themselves acknowledge (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 50). A common expression of the ideological character of intellectual proposals is to identify the local as a prototype of the universal. Ethnocentrism is one of the risks that threatens intellectual formulations, such as when variables derived from the meanings of concepts in the English language are proposed as the universal structure of personality (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005), or Western values are presented as world values (Schwartz, 1992). Confusing the particular and the universal is one of the characteristics of ideologies and a means for their implementation and justification. The existence of a universal human condition does not imply the existence of a universal unitary configuration. The final product of the
human condition is the result of the interaction between nature, history, and context. Proposals of universal contexts are mixed with ideological and parochial approaches. One cannot talk about some kind of universal human nature that is independent of history and culture. The latest intercultural and social developments of positive psychology (Biswas-Diener, 2011) seem to have started including broader and less ethnocentric perspectives.

Some proponents of positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 8) have used the term positive personality to refer to personality from the perspective of positive psychology. The use of this term has been extended to different contexts (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2012; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2015). We believe that the use of this term is wrong. There is no such thing as a positive personality, but only positive elements of a given personality and in a given context. In the system of psychological processes of personality, it makes no sense to talk about positive or negative traits in absolute terms. Personality traits acquire a positive or negative valence depending on the context of the whole process and the psychosocial situation (McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Mischel & Shoda, 2008). Personality, as a system of personal self-determining elements in a context (Mischel, 1977), cannot be identified only with one of these aspects. Choosing to focus only on part of the whole, namely the positive aspects, reveals an arbitrary and biased model. It is neither possible nor correct to speak of positive personality; personality is pathos and eudaimonia, hubris and arete, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consecutively. A modular model of personality (Moreno-Jiménez, 2007) requires taking into account the flaws and inconsistencies of the interaction of the system of processes of the person. Evolutionary psychology requires simultaneous consideration of the processes of individual and group evolution, involving both selfish and altruistic genes (E. O. Wilson, 2012, 2014). The internal contradiction and the presence of evolutionary antagonistic trends, individualistic and group processes, and selfish and collaborative qualities, seem to be characteristics of the human condition. Talking of positive personality is a lexically possible option, but one that does not correspond to the complexity of the facts and leads to misleading interpretations. More recently, this term has been abandoned in favor of “positive character,” which is apparently intended to convey the meaning of “good character” (Seligman, 2002).

A characteristic of intellectual movements is that they build their own language and conceptual syntax. As described by Adorno (1973) and Nafstad and Blakar (2012a), conceptual systems and ideologies are spread and maintained through the development and enforcement of a language, which is eventually adopted and repeated without critical reflection (Thompson, 1962). Terms, categories, and concepts form the elements of a way of thinking and its conceptual syntax. Positive psychology is not exempt from this phenomenon. Terms such as positive emotions, strengths, happiness, optimism, well-being, and others are commonplace in the texts of positive psychology. The repeated invocation of the concept of strengths emphasizes a way of thinking about the human condition. The insistence on positive emotions constitutes an indirect statement about their prevalence in human emotional life, and the dominant concern for happiness involves the implicit prescription of a universal goal.

Biswas-Diener (2011) discussed the predominance of some concepts within positive psychology compared to others that also appear to provide a clear representation of the positive approach to human existence. Happiness is mentioned profusely, but empathy not as much; positive emotions are present everywhere, but altruism less so. The most commonly discussed topics are not always the most important. There is a certain emotional tone in the choice of concepts and the profusion of issues that may be closer to the self-help movement than to the scientific use of psychology. Presumably, the conceptual maturation of positive psychology will produce a change in the prevalence of use of different terminologies and themes. Currently, the most prototypical ones are likely not the best or the most promising.
Looking forward . . . positively

Positive psychology is a recent intellectual, academic, and scientific movement. As such, it is to be expected that its internal developments and external antagonisms will lead to many changes from its current status, although it is difficult to say what form these changes will take. A fundamental property of the development of scientific discourse is that it takes time and patience, and requires the ability to avoid being carried away by the excitement of vision at the expense of the rigor and demands of ideas and methodology. A formal principle could be stated: loss of initial excitement is inevitable in scientific movements. In the current form of PP, there are many valid elements and a new perspective for studying human psychology, although there are also a few aspects that research will have to refine and clarify. It seems reasonable to us not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Many of the criticisms made against PP were previously aimed at psychology in general, as a scientific discipline. French philosophy of science, for example, has been harshly critical of psychology as a whole. The French epistemology of science has two basic starting points. On the one hand, it is based on Marx’s analysis of society and the economy, and on the other hand, it relies heavily on the phenomenological approaches of Husserl (1931/1999), which deny any possible objectification of the psychological subject. From both influences, French epistemology has refused, in some of its most representative authors, the possibility of psychology as a science. Authors such as Canguilhem (1943), Foucault (1954), and Althusser (1963) have joined in a common criticism of psychology, regarding it as a false science. This rejection has had a long influence and is still present in France.

The conceptual risks of positive psychology are not new or particular to PP; rather, they are present in the formulation of psychology as a theoretical and practical discipline (Kristjánsson, 2010). Criticisms of its ideological aspects have been leveled at psychology in general and at some schools and subdisciplines in particular. Chomsky (1972), in a well-known article with the provocative title “Psychology as ideology,” considered behaviorism to be a manifestation of capitalist ideology. Slightly more nuanced has been the criticism directed at some of the disciplines such as cognitive psychology (Sampson, 1981), social psychology (Jussim, Crawford, Anglin, & Stevens, 2015), or neurobiology (Rose & Rose, 1973). These criticisms emphasize the difference between what is said, what is done, and the implicit and real social functions of the respective conceptual frameworks. A strong criticism against psychology as a whole stems from critical psychology (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Holzkamp, 1993; Martín-Baró, 1998; Montero, 2004; Parker, 2007), based on the radical accusation that psychology is individualistic and does not sufficiently take into account the context and social processes that lead to situations such as violence, poverty, inequality, discomfort, and human helplessness, experiences in which social and psychological effects merge. Many of these criticisms can be readily extended to the positive psychology movement. Although critical psychology and positive psychology are both value-laden, the values at stake and the resulting moral stances differ profoundly between them.

It is impossible to completely avoid ideological frameworks as implicit theories of processes of development and change in people, but it is necessary to examine and criticize these frameworks in a continuous process of awareness and substitution with more rational formulations. The process is likely to be an endless story, but it is a necessary one. Discussion of intellectual or scientific movements is important in order to differentiate between specific criticisms, constraints, and outright rejections. Gaps and inconsistencies are always present in any intellectual or scientific movement, and the more recent the movement, the greater the number and extent of these lacunae. The formulations of explanatory models of behavior and society contain not only formal and hypothetico-deductive processes – that is, a rational system – but also an experiential
system (Epstein, 2012), fraught with socio-historical assumptions, as well as the automatic and self-perpetuating processes that form the core of the ideological elements of all explanatory systems. Making them evident is the task of historians and sociologists of knowledge (González García, 1979; Iranzo & Blanco, 1999).

Positive psychology is an approach from psychology that has had a huge academic production in the few years of its existence. As the new field matures, some issues and topics will consolidate, and others will disappear altogether. Some of the current areas of study and theoretical approaches will come to be seen as wastelands. This is the nature of the evolution of science.

A key element in PP’s development will be a recognition that it is, in fact, merely a branch of psychology; until now, this has not always been sufficiently taken into account. PP so far has been more concerned with the applications of psychological development than with basic psychological processes, and has not sufficiently addressed the question of possible contributions from other branches of psychology. For its successful future development, the suppression of non-scientific assumptions and the ability to take the results on their own terms, without falling into ideological worldviews, will be fundamental.

References


PP: scientific or ideological movement?


Bernardo Moreno-Jiménez et al.


