The Promise of Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Positive Psychology has demonstrated its usefulness in studying and contributing to individual well-being. The next big challenge for this new field is to help improving the social and cultural conditions in which people live. Three specific goals are discussed: A more complete understanding of human nature; forging a more sustainable and more fair social contract; and a rediscovery of the joys of existence. If Positive Psychology will be able to support these goals, it will become an important contributor to the evolution of human consciousness and the evolution of culture.

Keywords: Alternatives to materialism, cultural evolution, education, evolution of consciousness, goals of positive psychology, psychology, joy, new social contract

It is wonderful to see what has happened in such a short period of time in this emerging field of Positive Psychology. Some ten years ago, when we started talking about it with Marty Seligman in Mexico, on a beach like this one in Opatija, I could never have thought that in ten years so many enthusiastic, well-trained, and enterprising psychologists would be gathering here in this beautiful environment. I think that in every aspect, what we started there has exceeded any expectation we had at the time. When we first wrote our paper in the January 2000 issue of the American Psychologist, I thought that perhaps ten years later some psychologist would say:"…hey, that's not a bad idea, this positive psychology…", but I thought it would be a minor theme in the evolution of Psychology.

Instead, there have been fantastic developments and new ideas in places such as South Korea, Singapore as well as in Europe and the Americas. Of course, I am not trying to take credit for these developments because Seligman and I were just the catalysts for a wide-spread desire among psychologists for a broader, more realistic perspective on human behaviour. The pressure from psychologists from all

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over the world needed a little push, a little conceptual framing for the changes to occur. It is because there has been this pent-up interest for a long time that such tremendous advances were made in such a short time. Most of what we consider Positive Psychology now has always existed in the background of the dominant perspective in the discipline.

So, the reason Positive Psychology developed so quickly and ready to go, just like Minerva springing fully armed from the brow of Jupiter, is that it brought together so much existing knowledge from Aristotle's concepts (Aristotle 350 BC: 1998) to the work of earlier humanistic psychologists like Maslow (1968, 1970). We had the shoulders of giants to stand on, and that's why we could see a little bit further than perhaps they did. And in the last few years, of course, many young psychologists have added very important new empirical findings and ideas.

The success of Positive Psychology has been dazzling and almost meteoric, but if we don't want this perspective to be extinguished as quickly as meteors are extinguished, we need to make sure that it is based on sound principles and good research. My intention today is to clarify at least one basic issue that may determine the future of Positive Psychology and suggest some ways to proceed according to these principles.

Direct and Indirect Approach

The main issue I want to address at this point is weather Positive Psychology should be mainly concerned about how to make people *feel* better about their lives, or weather it should be equally concerned about helping people *have* better lives. Some times the dialogue and discourse o Positive Psychology seems excessively concerned about feelings; about how people can feel better at the moment. But that concern is a dangerous one, I think; if that's all we mean by Positive Psychology. Of course, because we are psychologists and because much of our profession has been shaped by clinical paradigms, we tend to think that Positive Psychology is about helping people to be more optimistic, happy, satisfied with their lives. We may call this the *Direct* or Therapeutic approach to improving the quality of life and this is and will be an important component of Positive Psychology.

But it is not the only one, and perhaps not the most important one. The other approach to making life better we may call the *Indirect* or Enabling one. It consists of finding out what conditions make people more optimistic, happy and satisfied, and then helping these conditions to come about. And these conditions may be political conditions or social conditions; the way we build our homes, the way we build our cities, our neighbourhoods … So, the question is how our understanding of psychology can improve the quality of life, not directly by making people feel happier or more optimistic, but by making jobs, political system, and social system, urban environments such that people say:"…Hey! Life is good! I feel better about life already…".

For example, if a business is badly run and the workers are frustrated the *Direct* approach would recommend training the workers to feel better about their jobs, while the *Indirect* approach would focus on removing the structural causes of frustration. So far Positive Psychology has paid comparatively less attention to the conditions that provide positive experiences. It is time to begin thinking seriously about how Positive Psychology may change not only how we feel about life, but also what we can do to change the way we live.

Three Essential Goals of Positive Psychology

Leading a more pleasant, or even a more meaningful life, is not the most important goal that Positive Psychology can have. We are becoming increasingly aware that we have responsibility for a much larger project, which is that of contributing to the well-being, or indeed that survival, of our species. We all realize that humanity is unlikely to survive if we do not take on the burden of helping to avoid mistakes that we have committed in the past, and we are not likely to continue in the future unless we work to prevent those mistakes.

One of the basic intuitions of all religions has been that we have a responsibility larger than just for ourselves, beyond our individual lives. All religions try to make us aware of the responsibility for our own actions, but also for the consequences for the larger and larger scope of effects that our actions have.

Now science is also becoming increasingly aware of the same responsibility, and is beginning to take it seriously. We have become a force in evolution for good or ill; we must take responsibility for our own destiny. This is the goal we must think about when we think about what we must accomplish in the coming decades. So I will focus in my talk on three kinds of topics that I have been involved with in my own research, which is part of the very humble contribution that the young science of psychology can make to our understanding of what we need to do in the near future.

There are three main points I wish to touch upon in this presentation – three goals for Positive Psychology that go beyond helping to improve individual well-being. The first one is simply that we need a new image of what it means to be human. We have been quite schizophrenic as a species about our own identity. On the one hand, we have thought of ourselves as the supreme goal of creation, as masters of the universe. And on the other, we tend to describe ourselves as organisms run by greed and lust, and governed by genes that have no interest in our destiny or in the destiny of the world except for their own replication. Neither the notion of ourselves as angels or as selfish genetic robots is very constructive or realistic. I'd like to think of ourselves as the cutting edge in the evolution of complexity, for good or for ill. It is an incredibly powerful and more interesting way of conceptualizing what human beings can be.

Complexity, as most biologists who are interested in the philosophy of evolution would say, is made up by a tendency towards differentiation, towards individuality, towards refinement of specialized functions and also by integration, by belonging to expanding circles of relationships. In the case of human beings, integration means belonging not only to a community of other people, but also to systems of value, to ideas, to the ecosystem, and so forth.

After a century of debunking old certainties, the social sciences are beginning to take a more benign view of human beings. The debunking started - arguably - with the biological writings of Darwin (1872) that inspired Spencer (1855: 2009) and other social scientists, continued with the work of Karl Marx (1844: 1988) who reduced human beings to the puppets of property relations, and Freud (1920) who saw human beings as slaves to libidinal tendencies necessary for survival and reproduction.

Recently, however, social scientists have become more and more aware of other forces which are just as evolutionarily sound. Just to mention two recent books by people I happen to know: Robert Wright's *Non-Zero* (2001) which is a popular view of the evolution of non-zero sum relationships in the world, especially in human history. Or David Sloan Wilson's *Darwin's Cathedral* (2002), a good example of that tendency of drawing together evolutionary biology with the insights of religions. There are many other recent works expressing the awareness that it's not only greed and sex that are necessary for survival, but also cooperation, altruism, and even a spiritual empathy with the universe at large.

One project I have been working on for nine years with colleagues at Harvard and Stanford universities is a series of studies under the conceptual umbrella of "Good Work" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, Damon, & Gardner, 2001). We have looked at people in various professions, ranging from journalism to genetic research to several art forms to higher education and asked such questions as: How can you do good work in these professions? What prevents people from doing good work? But more importantly, how people overcome the pressures to cut corners or just try to feather one's own nest, and keep in sight the larger good that the profession is supposed to serve. There are signs in other social sciences too that the dialectic has swung away to a certain extent from a radical critique of humanity to something a little more optimistic.

Evolution of Consciousness

In my work, I am interested in the evolution of consciousness, which means essentially to know ourselves, and here again, psychology obviously is one of the sciences for which that question is paramount. And I think of this as having two general goals – one is how to free ourselves from the control of genetic instructions and the second, how to free ourselves from the control of social conditioning without denying or trying to repress or avoid the reality of these instructions, which

we have in our chromosomes and in our early experiences in the context of society and culture.

The point is that if we just blindly follow those instructions we are probably adapting ourselves to conditions that existed hundreds of thousands of years ago in terms of genetic evolution and thousands of years ago if we consider cultural evolution. I follow the old Latin saying "*natura non fecit saltum*"– nature does not advance by jumping - despite what Stephen Jay Gould (1977, 2002) and other catastrophe theorists of evolution may say. Radical changes are slow and take time, and so we cannot free ourselves easily from these long-standing conditioning forces in our history. But we need to understand them and we need to know how, under what conditions, we can do better than what the past programmed us to do.

So that's the first of the three topics I hope Positive psychology will take on as part of its agenda. It is to know better what our nature is like, and understand how to control our psychic energy so that we are not simply responding to selective forces that existed in the past but are not relevant any longer.

Rules for a New Social Contract

The second goal to accomplish in the next decades is to develop rules for a new social contract. For a few decades now we have lived under the impression that Karl Marx's (1844: 1988) notion of material inequality had been surpassed by the triumph of capitalism, especially with the implosion of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the changes in China. But perhaps we were too optimistic. We believed that there was no longer need to worry about the increasing gap between those who own the means of production and those who have to work for it. If you look really at what is happening, however, it seems that Marx has been vindicated if not on the local, then at least on a global level. We have exported the proletariat, we have globalized poverty, and because they live far away from the reach of our attention, we think we can forget the material conditions under which the majority on this earth must live.

Yet unless some new rules are developed to decrease – not eliminating completely, but at least decreasing - material inequality, there are going to be a severe problem. Another problem will be the inequality of power. It has been said over and over since Lord Acton's (1887: 1997) time that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". We have seen many examples of this in the United States these past years, with our leaders entering dubious wars around the world, and our powerful corporations achieving power and wealth by ignoring the laws and ignoring the expectations of their shareholders. We have to worry because power does corrupt; it makes us think we don't need to play by the rules that the rest of the world lives by and we can impose our will on other nations, other groups. We have a long way to go to redress these problems reappearing in new guises every few generations. If we become too complacent, these are problems

that will eventually destroy the system in which we live. How can Positive Psychology help in this regard?

To get to less global problems, one of the issues that I became more and more aware of as I have been working in this area is the impoverishment of our reward system in this culture and many modern cultures, in Europe and elsewhere. All of the human rewards which before used to include such things as respect, honor, deference that were given to people who had different skills or contributed differently to the body politic – all of those rewards have been collapsed. Essentially we have focused on a single monetary reward, so that people are responding to an incredibly restricted set of compensations for their work.

One of the ways Positive Psychology can help to make this new social contract real is by revitalizing symbolic rewards, rewards that express human appreciation in a variety of ways, not just material ways. In this respect preliterate societies, most nomadic or hunting gathering societies, are much better able to do so, and making life richer by having different forms of recognitions and rewards for performance, that don't have to be reduced to a single and contested metric.

In my latest book called *Good Business* (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) I have a chapter called the "the soul of business." This book is about case studies of 40 CEOs who had been nominated by other business people and by people who knew what happens in business. They were nominated for being very successful and also socially responsible. These are people who, as the saying goes, "walk the talk". Like Aaron Feuerstein whose factory burned down, yet he kept paying his workers for a year afterwards, while the factory was being rebuilt, even though he no longer had an income and had no contractual obligation to do so. He wanted his community to survive. There is an amazing number of people - even in business - who spend energy investing it in goals that are larger than their self interest.

There is a beautiful word that has completely disappeared from our vocabulary. It is the term "magnanimous," which means having a large soul. It is a term that occurs in many languages. For instance in Hindi it is *mahatma*, as in the Mahatma Ghandi, which means the "Great-souled Ghandi." It is comforting to know that even within such a compromised profession as business there are people who are magnanimous, who invest their life energy into goals that transcend themselves. But we have to do a better job of recognizing and reproducing this behavior. In business schools one learns about ethics in business and in medical schools about medical ethics, but most of it is simply about not stealing too much and not hurting people. But little is learned about having great souls.

Power of Joy

The third topic where I think Positive Psychology has a great role to play is the one that I have done most work in and I feel the most confident to talk about - what I would call the power of joy. We must realize that unless we have passion and joy

in life, we are not going to survive long as a species. It is what helps us survive the dark night of the soul. It is what we need to feel that life is exciting, expanding and that we grow in the process of living.

So many children in our society are growing in environments where they almost never experience this joy. They have to sit in school, doing abstract tasks they don't care about, without moving their bodies - which were selected by evolution for movement and action. They live in environments that are boring and essentially meaningless, especially in the suburbs.

In our studies we followed a thousand teenagers for nine years across the whole of the United States, in twelve communities which were chosen to be representative; they were of different types of economic and social make up (Cikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993).

One of the things that was very surprising is how the amount of joy, happiness, involvement of teenagers goes down as social class goes up, except for the very end where it goes up a little bit in the really affluent suburbs. But in the typical communities where both parents are professional knowledge workers, work most of the day, the teenage kids live are essentially left to themselves. They are much worse off in terms of personal commitment. This is one of those ironic paradoxes of our evolution: we create environments which we think are going to improve our lives because they are more comfortable, secure and luxurious, but which in the long run are actually undermining the very essence of what makes life worth living.

There are two elements which predict a healthy, happy, involved young adulthood nine years later, when these adolescents are at the end of high school. These are two almost opposite traits: one is the amount of challenge that a 12 to 14 years old reports. And the second is the amount of skills he or she reports moment by moment in life. These were the best predictors of successful adaptation to college and work nine years later, better than almost anything else. Only one other thing predicts success as well, and that is "cooperation".

In other words, if a teenager is asked, when the watch signals: "at the moment when the watch beeped, did you feel *cooperative* or *competitive"* (on a ten point scale)? The more toward the *cooperative* end of the scale the child reports being, and the more *challenged* he says he is, the more likely it is that the child will be successful in commitment to life. Unless we are able to provide that kind of joy and challenging, productive activities to children, I am afraid that materialism and selfishness will consume more and more of our lives.

Plato, 25 centuries ago in "The Republic," (360 BC: 2000) wrote that the most important task for educators is to teach young people to find pleasure in the right things. He knew already that children will find things to do that promise to be enjoyable - but they may not be the right things in the sense of either the child's own personal development as adults, or in terms of the social order in which they live.

So one of our major task as Positive Psychologists is to help young people to get joy from helping evolution. We have to find ways to make the job of helping planetary health and diversity as enjoyable as a game, as a great adventure, something that can stir the imagination and provide a noble purpose. Instead of promising greed and selfishness, we have to find ways to make social justice and cooperation like a game that is enjoyable and challenging. And finally we have to increase the complexity of consciousness. We have to find ways to make it enjoyable to develop one's consciousness, instead of filling the mind with passive and vicarious activities which do not build skills, character or cooperation.

How to make the pursuit of these three goals enjoyable – helping the planet, helping social justice and helping complexity of consciousness? This is the great challenge that awaits Positive Psychology. It is an exciting opportunity that those of us assembled here in Croatia are fortunate to have a chance to contributing to.

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