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Wiki

Re-marketing of Traditional Topics?

: Positive Psychology :

*** Please note you can click on the blue links to be re-directed to the journal articles or other further information***

Introduction

In 1998 due to the efforts of **Seligman**, Positive Psychology become an independently recognised branch of the APA. However, **Lazarus (2003)** has suggested that Positive Psychology is an 'ideological movement' (pg 93), and **Csikszentmihalyi (2003)** himself admits that PP is in danger of becoming so. So, is PP really a new area of scientific inquiry, or is it just 'old wine in new bottles'? (**Kennon M. Sheldon**)



The concept of human happiness - both personal and universal - has been the centre of thought for thousands of years. Religions each portray ways to live morally, suggesting happiness is living in line with certain religious doctrines. For the academics, philosophical thought has continuously questioned the nature of human happiness and morality. Even more recently, the **human potential movement**, and humanistic psychology more generally, again questioned the nature of human happiness.

Many resources already exist as to how to maximize happiness that do not include mention of the concept of Positive Psychology. If you receive the BPS Psychologist magazine, you will have received a pamphlet with the Feb. 2012 edition advertising the bestselling self-help books based on CBT, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Mindfulness and Compassion Focused Therapy (but note, not Positive Psychology as a whole, and only two mindfulness books are advertised compared to 14 books based on CBT).

This is not the only example of how to achieve happiness that forgoes Positive Psychology. For example, the multi-million dollar book and film "**The Secret**" suggests that life changing results, including increasing happiness, can be gained through the **Law of Attraction**, and does not mention Positive Psychology. Similarly, even within psychology, the **Solution Focussed Therapy** model suggests that by highlighting and building the strengths and skills we already possess, you can combat psychological issues such as depression. Again, such interventions also do without mentioning PP. So, is there any need for Positive Psychology? And is it anything new?

The Debate



As alluded to in the introduction, it has been suggested that PP may be a new label/fad which ultimately adds little new to what psychology was already doing before - a smorgasbord of traditional topics taken from throughout philosophy, psychology and religion, and physics and re-marketed as a new discipline for the 21st century - a construct of a few savy minds in the field to help psychology cash in and monopolize on the multi-million pound industry that is the self-help movement.

Lazarus (2003) proposes that PP is just another fad in the field of psychology which will disappear in time and return again in another form. Indeed, throughout the history of psychology, various branches (Psychoanalysis, Behaviourism) have been formed in reflection of the zeitgeist at the time (Look back at the CHIP lectures from Level 3), later to be replaced by more popular ideas as society has changed. The question is whether PP is itself another form of traditional ideas that have been re-marketed in reflection of the current zeitgeist. **Lazarus (2003)** suggests that PP is indeed nothing new, but has existed for thousands of years as one form or another. So is this really the case? And what does this mean for the future of Positive Psychology?

Positive Psychology...A Humanistic history?

So, if positive psychology isn't new, where did it come from? As we will see in the sub-topics below, there is evidence that some of the concepts embraced by positive psychology have existing for thousands of years within the realms of philosophy and religion. But is this its only origins?

William James, a philosopher and psychologist, is considered by some to be the real father of positive psychology.

James was intrigued by the idea of a 'healthy-minded' temperament (as compared to a morbid-minded one). Far pre-dating Seligman's presidential address, in James' own presidential address in 1906 James called for a new field of psychology. James' conception of healthy-mindedness has some similarities to positive psychology - James believed that healthy-mindedness could be voluntary and be deliberately chosen, just as Seligman suggests we can learn to be optimistic. For a full discussion of Positive Psychology and James' views, see [Pawelski \(2003\)](#).

More recently, and as has been alluded to above, positive psychology owes alot to Humanistic Psychology's ideas that people have an innate drive to strive for personal growth and development. [Maslow](#) used the term positive psychology himself, and was concerned with the study of health, self-actualized individuals, believing that psychology did not have an accurate understanding of human potential. Indeed, it is suggested that the areas of interest to humanistic psychologists - love, creativity, self-actualization, courage etc, are similar to the signature strengths suggested by Seligman. [Froth \(2004\)](#) argues that the main difference between humanistic and positive psychology are focused around methodological differences. ([Froth \(2004\)](#) provides an excellent article on the history of positive psychology in relation to humanistic psychology for those of you who are interested).

[A Place to Start...](#)

If you're looking for a general dip into some of the debate on whether PP is a re-marketing of traditional topics more generally (whether each individual topic is a re-marketing will be covered more later) read...

1. [Lazarus \(2003\)](#) Does the Positive Psychology Movements Have Legs?

- A good place to start for understanding some psychologists view on Positive Psychology as a re-marketing of traditional topics.

2. [Csikszentmihalyi \(2003\)](#) Legs or Wings? A Reply to R.S Lazarus

- Csikszentmihalyi has written a reply to the above article by Lazarus, and is a great place to start in understanding some of the defensive arguments against the view that Positive Psychology is just a re-marketing of traditional topics

3. [Froth \(2004\)](#) The History of Positive Psychology: Truth Be Told

- An exploration of the humanistic roots of positive psychology

[For the Keen...](#)

Interested in finding out more? We have provided separate pages for each of the subtopics so that when you are revising you can dip in and out of the relevant information on our wiki! Just click on the links to be re-directed for more information on the history of each subtopic and a discussion on whether Positive Psychology is simply re-marketing these traditional topics.

Short on time? Skip below to read our general conclusions!

1. Signature Strengths

Click link above for debate on Signature Strengths

2. Mindfulness

Click link above for debate on Mindfulness

3. Learned Optimism

Click link above for debate on Learned Optimism

4. Gratitude

Click link above for debate on Gratitude

[A Quick Exercise...](#)

Grab a scrap piece of paper and think back to the topic you read for you own wiki page, and any other papers you've read so far for the course.

Firstly, have a think back to the historical or traditional context your wiki came from. What are the origins of Positive Psychology's thought for your topic? Where did these ideas come from? Do you think these ideas are new, or have existed for a long time? Is there anything new positive psychology has added?

Secondly, think about whether the articles you read mentioned Positive Psychology or not. What did the papers gain from being referred back to Positive Psychology? Could the papers that didn't refer to Positive Psychology have gained anything from being so?

Ask yourself...Do you think Positive Psychology was a re-marketing of the traditional topic of your wiki?

[A Few Comments On...](#)

1. Wild & Uncritical Claims

It is hard to point to wild & uncritical claims that address whether Positive Psychology is simply re-marketing. Those that suggest that Positive Psychology is just re-marketing have an element of truth as we have see. The above subtopics all derive from traditional topics, and thus, it does not seem wild or uncritical to suggest that Positive Psychology is nothing new. However, neither can we point to those articles trying to defend Positive Psychology as being wild or uncritical - their

counter arguments are similarly just.

2. Implications for Clinical Practice / Research

Does whether PP is re-marketing or not really matter for clinical practice, or for research opportunities? If PP is coming up with new ideas which are able to be used in clinical practice to improve one's disposition, then this is obviously great, but even if PP derives from traditional topics, aren't any useful implications for practice still valuable? Whether PP is re-marketing or not, it doesn't really matter if it can increase self-perception of happiness and well-being. After all, if a placebo makes someone feel better, isn't that useful?



One area where it may be important to understand the history of PP is in the implications for research opportunities. Like in any subject, in psychology funding shifts depending on the research interests of the current zeitgeist. If positive psychology is seen as something new, then funding is more likely to be forthcoming. However, even if positive psychology is a re-marketing of traditional topics, the existence of an umbrella under which to carry out and publish research already justifies the existence of positive psychology.

3. Gap Between Theory and Research

We cannot talk about the 'theory and research' of whether positive psychology is new. However, what we can suggest is whether the theory that positive psychology is just re-marketing is reflected in the research thus far completed by positive psychology.

As a **quick exercise**, think back to your knowledge of the topics of signature strengths, mindfulness, learned optimism and gratitude before you started studying PP. Had you heard of these things before starting the lectures? Have you learnt something? Do you think that the research you have read for your own group/wiki topics is new and exciting? If positive psychology is just re-marketing, how come we didn't know these things before? Do you think the research you have read has added something to the literature? You make up your own mind - does the research thus far published in positive psychology suggest that there is nothing new to learn?

General Conclusions

The ideas underlying the vast majority of Positive Psychology theories are not new. PP encompasses a range of ideas from philosophy, religion, and other areas of more 'mainstream' psychology. For example, ideas of expressing gratitude are evident in all world religions, mindfulness has origins in the ideas of Buddhism, and using our strengths to achieve today is evident in self-help books that do not mention PP. However, the division of positive psychology is still in its infancy. It may be that, with time, PP is capable of building upon these traditional topics to provide ideas that are actually novel.

It is important though to assess Positive Psychology in the sense of an evolving discipline. Seligman has emphasized a need for a shift in thinking about Positive Psychology from that as being involved in happiness, to that which involves thinking about well being (Have a look if you've not already accessed [The Centre For Confidence](#) linked from Steve's site). Similarly, whether Positive Psychology is new or not, it has been argued that PP is necessary ([Sheldon & King, 2001](#)). Whether you agree with this or not is your own choice!



However, it may *not* be worth asking whether PP is a re-marketing of traditional topics - the answer seems to be undoubtedly that yes, it is. In his reply to Lazarus (see intro) [Csikszentmihalyi \(2003\)](#) writes under the title of the section "Is Positive Psychology 'New'? Of Course not" that "Who ever claimed it was?" (pg 115).

It is then worth asking rather than is PP new, whether the re-marketing of traditional topics under the umbrella of positive psychology has *utility*. In the topics discussed, a recurring sentiment is established that further scientific research into the key ideas expressed is warranted, despite these topics being centuries old in some cases.

The very fact that these topics span across culture, time and disciplines and that these ideals consistently re-occur in various forms is indicative of some universal utility in their messages for how to live 'the good life' as opposed to 'the pleasant life'. [Csikszentmihalyi \(2003\)](#) in reply to the criticisms of Lazarus (see intro) suggested that "neither Lazarus nor we can tell in advance what will turn out to be a fad, and what will genuinely advance science" (pg 114). However, whether Positive Psychology is yet able to actually provide adequate research is questionable (again, see the views of [The Centre For Confidence](#) on Seligman).

If this is true, and these theories do indeed warrant further investigation, is it useful to investigate these concepts under Positive Psychology, or should we continue to allow these concepts to span the psychological (and philosophical and religious) literature? Is there a harm to dealing with the topics of positive psychology within the existing divisions of Health Psychology, Clinical Psychology and Occupational Psychology etc? We would suggest that, despite its re-marketing of traditional topics, positive psychology does have something new to offer - a coherent and integrated forum for discussing what does lead to the 'good life' as opposed to the 'pleasant life'. While discussion of these topics does occasionally crop up in other areas of the psychological literature, PP has highlighted the importance of not just focussing on how to minimize distress, but how to maximize happiness, and enabled researchers a pathway to funding, publication and the communication of ideas.

Thus, while "positive psychologists do not claim to have invented the good life...the value of the overarching term *positive psychology* lies in the uniting of what had been scattered and disparate lines of theory and research about what makes life worth living" ([Seligman, et al., 2005; pg 410](#)).

References

Journals

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Referring links:

1. Signature Strengths 2. Mindfulness 3. Learned Optimism 4. Gratitude



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