

Negative Reflections About Positive Psychology: On Constraining the Field to a Focus on Happiness and Personal Achievement

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Abstract

“Positive” psychology has gained a dominant voice within and outside the field of psychology. Although critiques of this perspective have been rendered, including by humanistic psychologists, psychology scholars have offered minimum space for critical reflections of this movement in contrast to its critiques existing inside and outside the academia in other fields. Therefore, this contribution seeks to explicate emerging systematic critiques of positive psychology by scholars and practitioners from within mental health fields as well as from philosophy, medicine, education, business, and cultural studies and to highlight sociocultural discussions of positive movement by the culture critics. Last, we offer reflections on positive psychology as immigrant professionals from non-Western backgrounds with an emphasis on existential and humanities-based perspectives. We also highlight that the tenets and experiments based on “positive” psychological practices may have especially detrimental effect on marginalized individuals and communities. This contribution seeks to invite a critical dialogue in the field

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regarding positive psychology within and outside humanistic psychology and psychology in general.

Keywords

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Positive psychology was proclaimed as the “fifth force” in psychology, asserting the recognition given to psychological forces such as psychoanalysis, behaviorism, humanism, cognitive-behaviorism, and multiculturalism (Deiner, Kesebir, & Lucas, 2008; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Seligman, 2002, 2006, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 2014; Seligman & Fowler, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The visibility and exposure of positive psychology within and outside psychology are tremendous: Its research and researchers are often sensationally covered by the mainstream media, and they have significant presence on the Internet such as in Seligman’s (“Dr. Optimism”) World Well-Being Project (AuthenticHappiness.org, 2016) and Deiner’s (“Dr. Happiness”) Pursuit of Happiness website that offers credit for Psychology of Happiness Certificate Course (PursuitofHappiness.org, 2016). The overall number of publications for and by mental health scholars and psychologists with emphases on integration of positive psychology appear to have increased dramatically in the past few years in volumes such as *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, *Making Hope Happen*, *Positive Psychology in Practice*, *Positive Psychological Assessment*, *Handbook of Hope*, and *Handbook of Positive Behavior Support*. Many special scholarly journal issues and contributions appear to have an extensive coverage on “positive psychology,” seeking to “connect” the varied fields related to psychology with the “positive psychology” movement (e.g., Lopez et al., 2006; Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2008; Magyar-Moe, Owens, & Scheel, 2015; Seligman & Fowler, 2011; Wong, 2011). Most frequently, these contributions focus on showcasing the scholarship that emphasizes positive psychology constructs such as well-being, optimism, goal-setting, flow, positivity, posttraumatic growth, encouragement, and resilience.

Several scholars and special issue contributions undertook to address the integration of as well as theoretical schisms or differences between positive psychology and specific theoretical schools, including humanistic psychology (Friedman & Robbins, 2012; Robbins, 2008, 2015). Whereas some of these contributions sought to draw on similarities between positive psychology

movement and humanistic-existential perspectives valuable to integration (Joseph & Murphy, 2013; Robbins & Friedman, 2008; Schneider, 2011; Wong, 2011), other humanistic scholars provided critical and questioning perspectives with regard to such integration (Friedman, 2014; Held, 2002). Two special editions of *The Humanistic Psychologist* included discussions of differences and similarities with regard to the methodological and epistemological aspects of positive psychology in contrast to humanistic psychology (Franco, Friedman, & Arons, 2008; Friedman, 2008). These issues also provided critical assessment of implicit power dynamics in positive psychology (McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008) as well as convergence of the two fields with regard to humanistic values for a well-lived human life (Mruk, 2008). In addition, several scholars addressed the viability and scientific legitimacy of qualitative methods and their integration with quantitative methodologies with regard to studies on positivity (Davis, 2009; Glazer & Friedman, 2009; Ho & Wang, 2009).

The foci of many critiques of positivity psychology by humanistic scholars seem to be on addressing the distance that positive psychology has intentionally taken from humanistic psychology schools despite their shared values (Friedman & Robbins, 2012; Robbins, 2008). These contributions often make a call for integration through research methodologies used by positive and humanistic psychologists (i.e., typically greater use of quantitative studies by humanistic scholars) that would supposedly result in greater acceptance of this integration within the mainstream psychology (Wong, 2017) as well as the defense of the humanistic psychology field as scientific against the accusations by positive psychologists to the contrary (Friedman, 2011). These discussions, however, often disregard many other problematic aspects of positive psychology and exclusively focus on positivity, raised by scholars across many disciplines.

Thus, this contribution seeks to further escalate questioning of the problematic aspects of positive psychology as a movement in the field as well as query the integration between humanistic-existential and positive psychological perspectives. Such problematization, in our view, must occur through multitheoretical, transdisciplinary, and multicultural critiques, including by social cultural critics. We also believe that it is vital to emphasize critiques of positive psychology offered by humanistic scholars such as those by Held (2004) and Schneider (2011). Therefore, we offer a summary of growing and alarming concerns with regard to positive psychology movement, documented both within and outside psychology (Béné, Wood, Newsham, & Davies, 2012; Binkley, 2011; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Collinson, 2012; Kappes, Oettingen, & Mayer, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2010; Miller, 2008; Pinto, 2011; Prilleltensky, 2013; Sundararajan, 2005, 2008; Yen, 2014).

Journalists, activists, and notable intellectuals have sought to raise public's awareness of oppressive mainstream social values inherent in positive psychology suppositions (Binkley, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2009; Halpern, 2002; Hedges, 2009) yet appear to be unheard in the field. The goal of this brief contribution is to bring awareness of multiple critiques in order to foster a dialogue that is attuned to divergent perspectives on positive psychology including alternative perspectives with regard to positivity movement from psychology and outside the field.

Systematic Philosophical, Epistemological, and Empirical Critiques of Positive Psychology

Among the most systematic critiques of positive psychology are those that examine its underlying epistemological assumptions and how these assumptions are grounded exclusively in broader Western philosophical worldviews. Miller (2008) highlighted that positive psychology continually employed circular reasoning (e.g., a goal of well-functioning individual must be to become goal-setting and goal-motivated), tautological (e.g., optimistic people need subjective sense of well-being to achieve optimism), drawing correlation where none are justified (e.g., success is achieved by happy people), and offering unjustified generalizations (e.g., specific positive interventions can turn any person into an optimistic, fulfilled, and successful individual). Furthermore, the values of American philosophy of individualism, framed within the context of Western neoliberal (fundamentalist capitalist) values of individual success or conversely individual blame for failure, have been discussed as central to tenants of positive psychology (Binkley, 2011; Cushman, 1990, 1995; Frawley, 2015; Layton, 2009; Sugarman, 2015; Vintimilla, 2014).

Another critique of "positive psychology" focuses on its emphasis on a personal "self," which is believed to function outside cultural–social context by which it is constructed. Among examples of such emphasis are claims that positive affect correlates with positive life outcomes as well as personal success (Diener, Kesebir, & Lucas, 2008; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). This perspective has been critiqued as untenable both by philosophers of science (Cushman, 1990; Frawley, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2010, 2012; Miller, 2008) and by psychology scholars (Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008; Held, 2002, 2004). The critique is based on the recognition that notions of the "individual self" disregard the assumptions of the socio-cultural construction of the same self, without attending to the dynamics of power of who constructs these social values and why (Becker & Marecek, 2008; Layton, 2009; Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988; Sugarman, 2015). Drawing on Foucault's concepts

of the technologies of the self that describe how social institutions not only dictate the formation of an “individual self” but also order how individuals self-regulate themselves with regard to these institutions, Becker and Marecek (2008) question how pursuits of happiness, strengths, and resilience disregard these social dynamics in favor of the American philosophy of individualism of the “self.”

It is notable that in many of their publications positive psychology scholars actively deny and denounce their connection to an individualistic, Western American ideology (Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). They appear to distance themselves from connections with obviously “positive psychological” popular phenomena such as *The Secret* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002) or to legitimize themselves through insisting that focus on happiness serves as a foundation of world religions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Such protestations do not appear to carry any weight given that cultural critics and cultural philosophers unequivocally connect positive psychological emphases to exclusively Western and American individualist philosophy (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2009; Frawley, 2015; Hedges, 2009; Yen, 2010). Moreover, review of any texts on philosophy of religion highlight that it is the relationship to human suffering rather than personal optimism or achievement that is at the heart of most long-standing world religious teachings and practices (Davies, 2012; Gibson, 2015; Halpern, 2002).

Another way in which positive psychology legitimized itself was by claiming that it was based on significant and unquestioned empirical support (Lopez & Edwards, 2008; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Magyar-Moe et al., 2015; Seligman, 2002, 2006, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 2014; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). New positive psychological contribution, such as *Homo Prospectus* (Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2016), proclaim that in addition to large-scale experimental research, “brain sciences,” evolutionary and animal-based psychologies as well as “studies of the unconscious” resoundingly support assertions such as the insignificance of past and present circumstances to human functioning, focusing on only the positive visions of one’s future, or intentional refusal to consider mortality. Undoubtedly, this type of research is voluminous and has received increased visibility and funding. However, the common uniting thread of these assumptions is traditions of scientism in psychology, which uses exclusively natural sciences paradigms, which are intentionally stripped of social context (Guthrie, 2004). For example, any focus on social context, which Seligman (2011) identifies with problematic “progressive sciences,” is openly discouraged because positive psychology research insists that human functioning is entirely based on peoples’ “good

character and heredity” (p. 104). Moreover, multiple contributions on supposed genetic and evolutionary determinants of human happiness are supposed to lead to unquestioning acceptance of biological support for and superiority of positivity (Bartels & Boomsma, 2009; Weiss, Bates, & Luciano, 2008; Weiss, King, & Enns, 2002). For example, in Weiss et al. (2002), study genetic correlates of “subjective well-being” were traced to “dominant behavior” among chimpanzees, a species frequently used by evolutionary psychologists to justify sexist and violent behaviors that are supposedly universal among humans and animals (Ruti, 2015). Invisible in frequent scientific proclamations by positive psychology scholars with regard to genetic heredity of happiness is their direct use of contemporary eugenic research (e.g., twin and adoption studies, caged animal studies) such as that promoted in Seligman’s (2002, 2006, 2011) books. Moreover, history of how eugenicists have used “sciences of racial betterment” to promote racist, sexist, xenophobic and classist ideologies when proclaiming that health, intelligence, and optimism as hereditary is also absent (Guthrie, 2004; Tucker, 1996; Yakushko, 2018). Denial of social context or external forms of oppression together with an emphasis on good moral character as the evidence of evolutionary fitness remain the cornerstones of eugenic movement, which relies significantly on research by psychologists (Tucker, 1996).

Qualitative or mixed methods research is not only ignored in positive psychological sciences but also openly minimized as too “humanistic” (Simonton, 2011, p. 451). For example, the *Oxford Handbook of Methods in Positive Psychology* (Ong & van Dulmen, 2007) includes no mentioning of qualitative or mixed methods research. In their foreword, Ong and van Dulmen propose that the goal of positive psychology sciences is to “avoid the “soft” label” (p. vi). In turn, they state, “Quite simply, the only viable future for positive psychology is for it to become a ‘hard science’” through the use of “latest in technologies,” “fMRI scans,” “genetics,” and “multiple methodological techniques” that avoid even “self-report questionnaires” because these instruments’ “days... are over” (p. vi). In addition, moral and religious concepts and language are used to legitimize privileged position of positivity and happiness in human experience (Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2006, 2011; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011), despite significant evidence from many religious theological traditions to the contrary (Bell, 2006; Gibbs & Wolfson, 2002).

The “science of happiness” has been significantly and systematically questioned by scholars not only within the psychology field but also across disciplines such as medicine, business, and education, who have argued that substantial empirical evidence contradicts positive psychology claims. For example, multiple concerned scientists discussed the negative costs of

promoting “positive thinking” and “positive emotions” in medicine. Among the most vocal critics of positive psychology are those who addressed significant negative impact of so called “positive” interventions among individuals undergoing cancer treatment or dealing with other life-threatening illnesses (Coyne, Stefanek, & Palmer, 2007; Coyne & Tennen, 2010; Palmer, Stefanek, Thombs, & Coyne, 2010; Stefanek, Palmer, Thombs, & Coyne, 2009; Sumalla, Ochoa, & Blanco, 2009; Tomich & Helgeson, 2004). Their scholarship points to not only lack of evidence that happy people are healthier or fair better in medical treatments but also that insistence on optimistic thinking during treatments can result in significant challenges such as self-doubt, self-blame, and poor self-care. For example, based on the result of the study of patients diagnosed with lung cancer, Schofield et al. (2004) found that “encouraging patients to ‘be positive’ may only add to the burden of having cancer while providing little benefit” (p. 1281). Coyne and Tennen (2010), reviewing empirical evidence, characterized positive psychology in cancer care as “bad sciences,” “exaggerated claims,” and “unproven medicine” (p. 16). Beyond cancer, for individuals across cultures with symptoms of cardiovascular disease and inflammation, feelings of anger were related to better health outcomes rather than worse, especially highlighting the negative costs of suppressing anger (Kitayama et al., 2015).

Miller (2008), writing from context of education, suggested that purported research on positive psychology in educational settings can be summarized as an acceptance a priori of a particular type of student personality—“cheerful, outgoing, goal-driven, status-seeking extravert” (p. 591) rather than studying actual changes among students based on “positive” interventions. Contrary to suggestions that “happy” students learn best, Schwarz and Bless (1991) showed that systematic reviews of scholarship indicate that “happy” individuals tend to not learn well (e.g., tend to be inattentive, self-focused, and “mindless”), whereas individuals who display “negative moods” appear to be far more accurate and focused learners. Bless et al. (1996) confirmed that negative, rather than positive, affective states lead individuals toward greater cognitive capacity and processing motivation during learning situations.

Kristjánsson (2012) highlighted that although empirical evidence of positive interventions in schools is mixed and tentative at best, these findings are not questioned but continue to fuel long-standing rhetoric that historically marked controversies within the educational system (e.g., theories of education that place an exclusive emphasis on certain socially constructed student virtues or traits rather than variables that can be changed). Even more problematic are the findings by Kappes, Schwörer, and Oettingen (2012), who established that inducing positive fantasies about the outcomes among students from marginalized background resulted in lowering their academic

performance. "Happiness curricula" and "pedagogy of fun" were also critiqued by Vintimilla (2014) for their potential to socialize children, from their early childhood, to become "neoliberal subjects," who remain docile, consumerism-driven individuals seeking subjective well-being rather than collective justice (p. 85). Greenaway, Frye, and Cruwys (2015) also showed that students' greater positive feelings about their future were correlated with significant depression and that higher aspirations to achieve predicted higher depression both at the time of setting a goal (i.e., to attend college) as well as at 5-year follow up.

Industrial-organizational psychologists and business scholars have also begun to discuss the damage of what Collinson (2012) termed *Prozac leadership*, which requires "accentuation of the positive" in order to achieve business goals. Workers' supposed "optimistic" and "positive" behavior has been shown to translate into poor achievement (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011). In the group settings, such as the workplace, inducing positive goal-setting has been shown to result in lack of empathy and care for others (Kappes & Shrout, 2011).

Being "positive" also contributes to lesser civic engagement: Greater "positivity" was related to a reduced likelihood of giving to charitable organizations (Kappes, Schwörer, et al., 2012). Pérez-Álvarez (2013) summarized scholarship that demonstrated that individuals who self-identified as "happy" were also more likely to be "conceited, selfish," and even "sad," when valuing or seeking personal happiness as a goal (p. 213). Even economy suffers when politicians take on the positive tone: A study of economic development on a national scale by Sevincer, Wagner, Kalvelage, and Oettingen (2014) found that optimistic future-oriented presidential addresses and media reports appeared to predict economic downturns.

Conversely, scholarship provides support for the necessity of so called "negative" emotions and affective states and the problems created by an exclusive emphasis on the positive ones. Held (2004) noted that disregard for "negative" human states results in what has been termed in several fields the *tyranny of positivity*. Schneider (2011) suggested that positive psychological emphases, because of their significant emphases on biological, cognitive, and behavioral explanations of human behavior, essentially negate the focus on the human experience and the totality of what constitutes living rather than functioning. Pérez-Álvarez's (2013) summary of empirical research supporting "good things about negative affect" showed benefits of "negative emotions" such as better memory, more accurate judgment, less gullibility, reduction of stereotyping, as well as improved ability to motivate and relate to others (pp. 214-215). Similarly, Held (2004) emphasized that "negative" emotions are essential for human understanding of personal and

social reality. Scholars such as Davies (2012) and Gibson (2015) reviewed the concept of human suffering, highlighting that it may be essential to human transformation and meaning-making. In contrast to assertions of positive psychologists that religions teach positivity, most religious scholars highlight that individual and communal suffering is at the heart of spiritual experience (Gibbs & Wolfson, 2002). Moreover, religious traditions that focus on social justice and liberation actively question religious movements that emphasize positivity and happiness. Bell (2006) stated that liberation approaches in religion share a common dedication of refusal to ignore suffering in order to stand in solidarity with people who are marginalized and oppressed.

Last, comprehensive edited contributions on the importance of negative emotions further highlighted that so-called negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, shame, and jealousy have multiple adaptive functions and valuable social as well as relational consequences (Norem, 2008; Parrott, 2014; Woolfolk, 2002). Empirical studies regarding “negative” emotional states have also shown the importance of these affective states based not only on objective criteria but also on the subjective participant reactions. For example, an emotion of regret, often viewed as “negative,” has been found to have many positive effects (Roese & Summerville, 2005; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007), and individuals themselves rated regret as a valuable and needed human emotion (Saffrey, Summerville, & Roese, 2008).

In terms of the theoretical and therapeutic worldviews, positive psychology is reflective of an exclusively monocultural or monotheoretical cognitive-behavioral psychological approach to understanding human experience: It assumes that emotions, attitudes and behaviors are entirely conscious and under the individual’s control and that certain emotional states are invariably preferable to others (Beck, 1979, 2011; Dobson, 2009). In fact, Seligman (2006, 2011) emphasized that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and psychiatric medical interventions, which are empirically supported, “positive,” and successful, are the only acceptable psychological approaches to treatment of mental disorders or distress. Seligman (2006, 2011; Seligman et al., 2016) openly disparages all other traditions that emphasize importance of the past (especially psychoanalysis) or a focus on mortality (humanistic-existential traditions).

Consistent with CBT assumptions, positive psychology claims that internal human experience can be distinct (i.e., “optimism” as an entirely discrete inner state), noncontextual (i.e., wholly internal), and noncontradictory (i.e., inconsistent or conflicting inner states minimized) (Holmes, 2002; Kantrowitz & Ballou, 1992; Kubacki & Chase, 1998; Lyddon, 1995). Held (2004) further discussed the separation of positive psychology from other therapeutic orientations, such as humanistic, with what she terms *negativity*

about negativity, including focus of other orientations on suffering, transformation, and meaning. Thus, we argue that positive psychology is not an approach that is integrative or cross-theoretical, as is often presented, but mirrors the values and practices of a specific orientation in psychology, namely, CBT.

Therapeutic values of positive psychology have been questioned. Specifically, the intentional suppression of negative emotions has been linked to negative mental health consequences. Garside & Klimes-Dougan (2002) found that suppression of negative emotions, especially based on gender socialization ideals of how such emotions are expressed (e.g., anger expression by women and girls), was linked to greater psychological distress indicators. In the study of emotional regulation among African American adolescent girls, who were taught to “manage their negative” emotions in order to “deal with” racism in their lives, Froyum (2010) found that such efforts “largely promoted emotional deference, thereby reinforcing racialized, classed, and gendered ideologies” (p. 37). Wilkins (2012), in an ethnographic study of African American college men who sought to restrain their anger, specifically anger related to racist incidents, found that men tended to disavow racism and project their angry feelings into others, especially Black women.

Moreover, Lacanian and postcolonial Lacanian scholars, such as Hook (2001, 2007) and Wright (2014), challenged the field of psychology to examine its dominating discourses and activities in order to identify its role in existing systems of oppression as well as to reflect on the ways in which current practices such as therapy and research build on and uphold dominating ideologies. Hook (2001, 2007) suggested that assessment of what is positive and desirable is greatly influenced by individual subjectivities (specifically those of the therapists), which are in turn shaped by what he terms *existing psychological technologies* such as therapeutic interventions themselves. Thus, given the authority and power that counselors and psychologists hold (Hook, 2001), it is salient to remain reflective and critical of the ways in which therapeutic structures shape, influence, and control of what the field perceives as “positive” and “negative” human experiences.

In his incisive critique of happiness and well-being studies, Wright (2014) argued that positive psychology and happiness studies were ideologically driven and built on capitalism tenets of consumption and production, which can be measured, tracked, and modified. According to Wright (2014), current mental health and medical industries seem to assess psychological issues and complaints in terms of gains and losses of work time. Wright (2014) posits that happiness and well-being studies reinforce and contribute to “cost-benefit approach” to psychological health (p. 797). This function is demonstrated by the language of various positive psychology-based therapy approaches,

including those that claim to incorporate the elements of existential therapy (Mruk, 2008). For instance, in his description of Competence and Worthiness Therapy, Mruk (2008) utilizes the language such as increasing and solidifying the gains, generating measurable positive changes, and making an action plan to reach set goals (p. 152). Such language points to the significance of economic productivity and production of “economies of enjoyment” (Wright, 2014, p. 801).

Multicultural Critiques of Positive Psychology

Closely related to the above critiques is the multicultural analysis regarding the centrality of worldviews and politics of individualism to positive psychology. Not only do these assumptions fail to reflect the perspectives and needs of diverse communities, but they also may serve to shift the blame of responsibility for self-fulfillment and happiness to individuals rather than to institutions or cultures that systematically marginalize and oppress (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2011; Christopher & Howe, 2014; Froyum, 2010; Wilkins, 2012). Kubokawa and Ottaway (2009), writing from psychology graduate student perspective, reviewed scholarship regarding “positive psychology” and multiculturalism and concluded that positive psychology, despite its proclamations of universal cultural appeal and calls for greater “cultural sensitivity,” does not show evidence of an actual engagement with issues central to multiculturalism. Prilleltensky (2013), a critical community psychologist, further stated that psychology’s goal must be to emphasize fairness and social justice as foundational to well-being, which he viewed as contradictory to an emphasis on positivity that is individually determined and attained. To illustrate, proponents of positive psychology argue for the universality of psychological strengths (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) as well as qualities that result in adaptation to one’s environment and “pursuit of a better life” (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 96) without exploring the impact of oppression and marginalization or an assumption that all individuals have equal opportunities to make such pursuits. Although the role and impact of one’s culture on beliefs such as happiness or hope are acknowledged by practitioners of positive psychology, the emphasis remains on identifying specific “positive” interventions to help diverse individuals “improve” their lives (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 93) rather than focusing on addressing the systems of oppression that cause suffering (Ahmed, 2010; Froyum, 2010; Wilkins, 2012).

Moreover, systematic focus exclusively on resilience and positive changes for marginalized individuals or communities have been suggested to add to the discrimination and oppression of marginalized groups. Béné et al. (2012) offered a comprehensive review of how concepts such as “resilience” in

relation to efforts with communities were influenced by poverty and wars. They noted that “resilience,” which has become a focus in work with marginalized populations, often functions a new form of “tyranny” for these very communities, reflecting “utopian” desire of nonmarginalized scholars and activists to “fix problems,” rather than address complex underlying difficulties or power dynamics. Their review highlighted that in certain circumstances an emphasis on “resilience” can be problematic and serves to create greater problems than solve them.

Pinto (2011) discussed the cost of continually emphasizing self-achievement and self-fulfillment to girls via the newly developed cultural and educational rhetoric of “girl power,” which she viewed as contributing to rather than challenging patriarchal norms. Pinto highlighted that if a girl does not achieve “success” in her chosen field, she is taught to view this failure as related to her personal lack of an optimistic attitude, goal orientation, and persistence (i.e., her lack of “girl power”). In fact, Seligman (2011) claims that women do not succeed in life because of their supposed loss of self-control rather than acknowledging continued sexist patriarchal structures that deny women equality. In fact, in examples on gender, Seligman (2006) refers to “golden” girls who apparently develop depression without, in his view, any identifiable reason and are helped by focusing on their internal attributions and self-control through very brief coaching. Considering the reality of continued patriarchy, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression and dominance, affording privilege to certain groups over others, such emphasis on personal “positivity” as foundational to personal “success” is indeed problematic. Yakushko (2018) noted that positive psychology frequently denies or minimizes the role of social oppression or social violence while shaming individuals who are targeted by these forms of marginalization for not having internal attributions, self-control, and optimistic worldviews. As noted earlier, studies of African American women and men showed that intentional suppression or redirection of “negative” emotions, especially related racial and gender experiences, may result in greater challenges as well as projection of difficult feelings unto others (e.g., men’s projection of anger into women) (Froyum, 2010; Wilkins, 2012).

Other scholars, writing from non-Western perspectives, have highlighted that the assumptions of positive psychology are often presented as not only universal but also applicable to individuals of “all times, all spaces,” although they are not reflective of cultural values and beliefs of many cultural groups. Specifically, positive psychology continues Western emphasis on mind-body-spirit split, which is inconsistent with many indigenous perspectives: In many cultures, mental states and attitudes are not viewed as separate from physical or spiritual well-being (Ahmed, 2010; Christopher & Hickinbottom,

2008; Kingfisher, 2013). Personal challenges and tribulations are viewed as ancestral forms of communication, spiritual lessons, important initiations into particular social standing, or indications of imbalance (Duran & Duran, 1995; Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006; McCubbin & Marsella, 2009; Wendt & Gone, 2012). Seeking to control or change these states without attending to their meaning and significance in personal or communal life is often seen as problematic (Wendt & Gone, 2012).

Moreover, Joshanloo and Weijers (2014) documented that in many non-Western and non-Judeo-Christian world traditions “aversion to happiness” far more accurately described attitudes toward personal self-fulfillment. Specifically, these authors detail cultural-religious and social beliefs, primarily among Asian and middle Eastern cultures, that view states of personal “happiness” as well as intentions to pursue it as socially damaging, contradictory to spiritual values, and reflective of personality defects. For instance, in his critique of globalization of Western mental health interventions and psychopharmacology, Watters (2010) noted that states such as melancholy and suffering, imbued with meaning, were not only culturally acceptable but desirable in many non-Western cultures. Similarly, Sundararajan (2008) emphasized that the Chinese Buddhist notion of the “empty self” as well as a moral obligation to remain continually connected to one’s own and others’ suffering directly contradicted the central tenets of positive psychology.

Last, psychologists’ emphasis on resilience, strengths, and supposed “posttraumatic growth” occasionally draw parallels to certain forms of social justice and social action-oriented approaches, such as liberation psychology (e.g., Watkins & Shulman, 2008). In contrast to these perspectives that especially draw on critical theories, especially Marxism, positive psychology writings are filled with disparagement of such theories (Seligman, 2002, 2006, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) because of their emphasis on external oppression that is often internalized by those who are targets of social violence (Fanon, 1952/2008; Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Undoubtedly, liberation, critical, and postcolonial approaches highlight the importance of narratives and practices of culturally relevant notion of well-being (Duran & Duran, 1995; Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). However, it is notable that these states of well-being are always discussed within a framework of continued emphasis on the struggle toward self-determination in the face of injustice. Indeed, most social justice approaches emphasize the vital role of conflicts or radical questioning, which are marked by sorrow, rage, confusion, and other so-called “negative” states (Bell, 2006; Fanon, 1952/2008; Martín-Baró, 1996; Montero & Sonn, 2009; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). For example, Watkins and Shulman (2008) emphasized that psychologies of liberation can lead to

having our “hearts broken,” as a result of awareness, consciousness raising, and action. In addition, unquestioned acceptance of the values of the dominant culture, including states of “happiness” and “satisfaction,” are considered symptoms of unawareness of the oppressive status quo and colonization (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2011; Christopher & Howe, 2014). Similarly, identity development models for individuals from marginalized communities, offered by cultural scholars and psychologists, emphasize the move from the initial states of unawareness and unconscious acceptance of oppressive self-definitions (i.e., being content and happy with the way things are) toward confusion, anger, and resistance—notably “negative” states (Cross, 1978; Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1990). Scholars have remarked that because social oppression continues to flourish in Western societies, the need for development of varied forms of individual and community resistance, as well as movement through various identity development stages (i.e., “negative” states), will remain (Sue & Sue, 2012; Thompson & Carter, 2013). Yakushko (2018) argued that monoemotional emphases in psychology parallel monocultural attitudes that strip human experiences of their social and political context. In summary, positive psychology appears to minimize the vital importance of these “negative” stages of development and functioning in marginalized individuals and communities. In fact, implicit or explicit communication that personal strong will and optimistic thinking are the result of personal achievement that lead to happiness and success can be viewed as a form of oppression.

Social Cultural Critiques of Positive Psychology

Writers outside psychology have critiqued American obsession with individual self-achievement and self-betterment. Meyer (1998), a historian, reviewed the rise of popular trends since the early days of colonization of the Americas and the Declaration of Independence “pursuit of happiness” language that urged Americans (i.e., White affluent males) to use their positive thoughts and behaviors in order to build wealth, ensure health, and succeed across all areas of their personal or business endeavors. In fact, an emphasis on positive thinking as a guarantee of one’s prosperity has been present among the U.S.-based popular philosophers, businessmen, religious leaders, and healers for several centuries (McMahon, 2006, 2010; Meyer, 1998; Yen, 2014).

In the past several decades, burgeoning self-help literature capitalized, figuratively and literally, on the cultural obsession with continued self-development toward a state of happiness and self-satisfaction (Frawley, 2015; McGee, 2005; Rosenblatt, 2006). Bruckner (2011) proposed that contemporary Western culture viewed happiness as a personal and moral duty or

obligation. The award winning journalist and social scholar Barbara Ehrenreich in her books *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and *Bait and Switch* (2006) focused on the plight of poverty in the United States, providing one of the most systematic reviews and social critiques of positive thinking and positive psychology. In her nationally best-selling book *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*, Ehrenreich (2009) discussed the ways in which positive “sciences,” including positive psychology, have been implicated in damaging business practices, politics, cancer care, economy, and more. Her reviews of positive psychology, including interviews with positive psychology founder Martin Seligman, suggested that the push for positive psychological “sciences” was based on as much a search for profitable niche as a desire to improve people’s lives.

Another cultural critic, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and activist Chris Hedges (2009) in his book *the Empire of Illusions*, dedicated an entire chapter to showcasing the contribution of “positive thinking” movement, and specifically the positive psychology movement, to cultural malaise, unwillingness to see or address injustice, and maintenance of extreme forms of social control by small wealthy minority. Hedges unflinchingly wonders how mainstream mental health professions, influenced by focus on positivity and self-control, participate in creation of society, which is willing to embrace fundamentalism, social domination, seeming necessity of wars, projections into “bad others,” and extreme ethnocentrism.

Although as psychologists we may choose to ignore or dismiss such cultural critiques, recent revelations specifically regarding psychology as a field, including involvement in torturous behavioral interrogations (Risen, 2014) or unquestioned use of behavioral exposure techniques in treatment of returning veterans (Morris, 2015), have galvanized the public as well as many counselors and psychologists. We believe that it is vital that the field of psychology remains responsive and alert to such external analyses, continually engaging in self-reflection of how collectively (as professions) and individually (as scholars or practitioners) they may contribute to the social and political status quo rather than maintain it.

Personal Negative Reflections on Positive Psychology

As psychology scholars and clinicians as well as recent immigrants who are interested in existential, humanistic, postcolonial, Lacanian, and psychoanalytic and Jungian traditions, we are mindful of how mainstream United States approaches psychology. In our experience, the U.S. psychological zeitgeist primarily privileges cognitive-behavioral and behavioral perspectives, which

emphasize rationality, control, and self-improvement rather than the primacy of personal and collective liberation, meaning, or humanistic values. We resonate with the writings such as Zamyatin's (1920-1921) *We*, who was among early writers to creatively detail the totalitarian states' requirement for their citizens' "happiness," in contrast to their ability to have choice, to love, or to be free. However, in our training and our work (both clinical and academic), we experienced the emergence of the focus on the "positive" under a guise of "strength-based" approaches, especially through growing emphasis on rapid "resilience-based" interventions, manualized forms of care with focus on quick fixes, and encouragement to focus on "solutions" rather than "problems." Many of these approaches are reminiscent of ideologies we witnessed to be employed as tools designed to promote political compliance and to control dissidence in our countries of origin. Although we continue to work through and heal the colonizing oppressive history of having been raised with oppressive values (both of us had had ancestors who were exterminated for being dangerous to the state), we are sensitive to the ways in which similar messages of colonization (i.e., right and wrong thinking or behavior, insistence on optimism and positive thinking) affect us. We empathize with rage at the oppression (e.g., reactions to incidents of racial violence), sadness at the suffering (e.g., refugee crisis), anger at global warmongering (e.g., invasions of other countries), or fear regarding the future (e.g., global environmental crisis). We also find that fiction, poetry, or other forms of human creativity place tremendous significance on human suffering, beauty of human emotional complexity, and necessity of human imperfection. We firmly believe that these "negative" emotions fuel us as much as any other inner states toward understanding, action, and the sheer awareness of being alive. Along with the cultural critic and Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, we question the ethics of the ideology of happiness that may be largely built on a fantasy (Jones, 2014).

Positive Suggestions to Bringing Back Negativity to Psychology

This review was intended to bring a divergent perspective on contemporary positive psychology. Our view is undoubtedly critical and frequently grave. We do not discredit or deny the presence and value of what are considered "positive" emotions, attitudes, or behaviors as part of the entire spectrum of complex human experience. Like Held (2004) and Schneider (2011) we can see the value of dialogue and collaboration that acknowledges this spectrum of human experiences and values, including so called positive emotional states or self-directed actions. However, we want to affirm the vital need for

the inclusion of multiple theoretical views and practices rather than the exclusive monotheoretical emphases of Western positive psychology, so that hegemones, assumptions, and values within all traditions are critiqued and examined. We are certain that “positive psychology,” which already took deep roots within psychology as well as other mental health fields, including in humanistic psychology, will remain influential. It is encouraging to see scholars such as Lomas and Ivztan (2016) engage in the discussion on complexities of human emotions and emphasize the dialectics between the positive and the negative within the field of positive psychology. Our hope is that the so called second wave of positive psychology (Wong, 2011) seeks greater awareness of its own “negative” influences related to assumptions and cultural values as well as its potential for harmful impact, particularly by presenting its tenets as unquestionably grounded in scientific facts and evidence that are value-neutral and culturally grounded.

Alternatives to positive psychological practices in psychology can be numerous. For example, interventions toward what are called well-being, resilience, happiness, and strengths could be questioned in terms of social justice and fairness. Suffering, “problems,” and “negative” states can be acknowledged as meaningful and valuable (see Gibson, 2015, for discussion). For example, Dr. Kwame Scuggs, trained in both psychology and mythology, utilizes retelling of myths, often full of human struggles and challenges, to teach urban African American adolescent males to connect with their own suffering, anger, and, in turn, their full humanity. In 2012, Dr. Scuggs’s organization Alchemy, Inc. was awarded the Nation Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award. The documentary film by Karina Epperlein *Finding the Gold Within* was released portraying intervention programs of Alchemy, Inc. This moving film features African American adolescent men and ways in which they create a meaningful and transformative space for expression of rage, sadness, fear, and other emotions, often related to their experiences of racism and oppression (*Finding the Gold Within*, 2016).

Yalom (1980) in *Existential Psychotherapy* emphasized that meaning-based humanistic orientations in psychology do not seek to avoid or bypass important existential issues humanity faces, both as individuals and as a collective. In addition to aspects of human condition such as freedom or choice, the acknowledgment of isolation and morality is viewed as central. Awareness of death and mortality, openly derided in Seligman et al. (2016) *Homo Prospectus*, is recognized as one of the most important but difficult tasks of human life. Humans, Yalom (1980) writes, must continually and directly face this reality, “the reality of our helplessness and our mortality; a reality that, despite our reach for the stars, a creaturely fate awaits us” (p. 127). Writing about the inextricable connection between life and death in human experience,

Yalom highlights that most philosophers and literary giants emphasized that “lifelong consideration of death enriches rather impoverishes life” (p. 30).

As suggested by those engaged with liberation and postcolonial psychology, addressing the psychological impact of social injustice should involve making concerted efforts toward the process of conscientization by beginning to make space for anger, rage, distrust, and sadness (Fanon, 1952/2008; Martín-Baró, 1996; Montero & Sonn, 2009; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The expression of these so called negative feelings is essential not only to recognizing the issues related to class, race, and gender oppression but also to understanding how they influence individuals on a daily basis, rather than using counseling or psychology to instruct them on how to adapt to middle- or upper-class White capitalist social structures. People’s ability to feel, express, and use their rage at the oppression or conduct an analysis of structures of power may be far a more useful tool to them throughout their lifetime than the ability to choose “positive” thoughts or behaviors over “negative” ones. In fact, Fanon (1952/2008), the progenitor of postcolonial theories and practice, who worked as a psychoanalyst in Northern Africa during time of their liberation from colonial European oppression, viewed that healthy individuals expressed and experienced rage needed for them to remain involved in political fight with the colonial oppression rather than settling with being “content.”

One of the problems in mental health training and scholarship is the overall lack of attention to political history, philosophy, and theory (Fox et al., 2009; Yen, 2014), including in humanistic and existential traditions (Schneider, 2011). Training in psychology should actively incorporate an emphasis on philosophy of sciences, critical theory, and social analysis to teach students to critically consider the assumptions underlying research and clinical practice. The field could also reenter into the conversation of how monocultural theoretical frameworks in psychology (i.e., rational behavior-focused approaches that are shared by cognitive-behavioral, behavioral, and “positive” psychological perspectives) have had an impact on our profession in unquestioned language of “empirical evidence” (Shedler, 2015; Wampold, 2013) or lack of responsiveness to the needs of diverse communities (Hall, Yip, & Zárate, 2016; Sue & Zane, 2006). Thus, we hope that the “negativity,” both critically toward ourselves as a field as well as toward those social values that continue to maintain the status quo in the United States, takes a greater hold in psychology’s efforts to address suffering and bring healing as well as, in turn, contribute to psychology’s and humanistic psychology’s renewed status as justice-focused, dynamic, and growing fields.

We wish to end this contribution with the voice of the book’s protagonist John (the Savage) from Huxley’s (1946) *The Brave New World*, written in

response to the rise of behaviorism and other forms of theories of control in the United States, the book both authors read initially in our countries of origin via “underground market” copies because it, like many books that emphasize social discontent, was censored. Happiness and self-control were state matters, ensuring political and cultural compliance. In many ways, refusal to acknowledge the reality and significance of human suffering, pain, and negativity while optimism and success are presented as a preferred personal choice and a “virtue” are still the same tools toward the maintenance of the individual and collective status quo even in so-called democratic and open societies (Ahmed, 2010; Fox et al., 2009; Hedges, 2009).

In Huxley’s (1946) book, *John (the Savage)* debates one of the official state’s World Controller named Mustapha Mond who insists that their state’s stability requires individual and collective “happiness.”

“But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

“In fact,” said Mustapha Mond, “you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“All right then,” said the Savage defiantly, “I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen to-morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.”
There was a long silence.

“I claim them all,” said the Savage at last. (pp. 62-66)

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