



POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS ENEMIES: A REPLY BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

Carmelo Vázquez

Complutense University of Madrid

Positive psychology has been the subject of passionate attacks. Its novelty, its scientific scope, its intentions and even the honesty of its followers have been questioned. Furthermore, by extension, the concern of psychology on a whole with human well-being has been placed in doubt. In this review, we offer an answer to some disproportionate criticism and make an overview of the existing overwhelming evidence derived from the active, robust research agenda on positive emotions and cognitions (e.g., optimism) and their relationship to health and psychological wellness. Psychology cannot ignore a growing general movement in social sciences and in political and economic discussion that places psychological well-being in the legitimate focus of attention. In this regard, positive psychology is contributing, with the best standard tools psychological research, to articulate and support a good part of the research in and promotion of those crucial issues. Finally, it is argued that, based on a true and respectful academic dialogue, psychology must inevitably and fluently integrate the focus on positive functioning for a more inclusive explanation of human nature.

Key words: Positive psychology, Optimism, Health, Meta-Analysis, Psychotherapy, Myths.

La Psicología Positiva ha sido objeto de ataques apasionados. Se ha cuestionado su novedad, su alcance científico, sus intenciones e incluso la honestidad de sus seguidores. Además, por extensión, se ha puesto en duda que la Psicología en su conjunto se ocupe de temas como el bienestar humano. En esta revisión ofrecemos una respuesta a algunas críticas desproporcionadas y efectuamos un repaso de la abrumadora evidencia existente derivada de la activa y sólida agenda de investigación que existe sobre las emociones y cogniciones positivas (p.ej.: optimismo) y su relación con la salud y el bienestar psicológico. La Psicología no puede estar de espaldas a un movimiento general creciente, en las ciencias sociales y en el ámbito de la discusión política y económica, que sitúa el bienestar psicológico como un foco legítimo de atención. En esa dirección, la Psicología Positiva está contribuyendo, con los conceptos y herramientas propios de la Psicología, a articular y apoyar una buena parte de la investigación y promoción de esos temas cruciales. Finalmente se plantea que, en base a un diálogo académico veraz y respetuoso, la Psicología ineludiblemente deberá integrar fluidamente el enfoque sobre el funcionamiento positivo para poder explicar de un modo más integrador la naturaleza humana.

Palabras clave: Psicología positiva, Optimismo, Salud, meta-análisis, Psicoterapia, Mitos.

“Rejecting happiness, says Kant, ... would be to reject being human.” Comte-Sponville, Delumeau and Farge (*The Most Beautiful Story of Happiness*, 2005, p.9).

Passionate arguments should not have a prominent place in an academic discussion. But I think that something like this is happening in some critical observations made of positive psychology (PosPsy) in Volume 33 of *Papeles del Psicólogo* (2012, vol. 33, issue 3), a space for psychologists members of the COP (Spanish Psychological Association) which must be vigilant of the good name of psychology and its professionals. I do not wish to start answering arguments

made in those criticisms one by one, first because nobody has asked me to do so, and above all, because the reader should not be punished with parasitic discussions. But I do honestly believe that PosPsy merits taking a look at its principles, practices, and of course, its limitations, which are probably, to a certain extent, common to the tasks of general psychology.

It is not easy to begin a rational discussion in response to some of the criticisms, which behind an educated appearance, lead to disqualifications which are in no way academic. Following a shield of appropriate literary and philosophical quotations, it goes on to qualify optimism as “contemptible” and “unscrupulous”, denouncing PosPsy literature for its “bad faith”, branding the activity of colleagues as “magical”, or talking about “despotic” happiness (Pérez-Álvarez, 2012), hardly leaves a crack open for opponents. And the same thing

Correspondence: Carmelo Vázquez. Facultad de Psicología. Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Campus de Somosaguas. 28223 Madrid. España. E-mail: cvazquez@psi.ucm.es



happens when its promoters or followers are branded as ignorant or manipulating (Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012). These are value judgments that cloud the terrain of discussion, and by the way, could be unnecessarily offensive to many.

Since its origin, there has been criticism of positive psychology by psychologists, from the indefatigable debater James Coyne (Coyne and Tennen, 2010a), to Foucaultian philosophers (Binkley, 2011), experts in literature (Wilson, 2008), psychological therapy theoreticians (Held, 2004), essayists (Ehrenreich, 2009) and specialists in Aristotelian education (Kristjánsson, 2010). But it has also had sympathizers, or at least interested spectators, such as Albert Bandura (Bandura, 2011), Philip Zimbardo (Zimbardo, 2004), James Gross (Tamir and Gross, 2011), Ellen Langer (Langer, 2002), Peter Salovey (2002), Susan Nolen-Hoeksema (Nolen-Hoeksema and Davis, 2002), Shelley Taylor (Taylor and Sherman, 2004), John Cacioppo (Hawkley, Preacher and Cacioppo, 2007), David Barlow (Carl Soskin, Kerns, and Barlow, 2013), and Stephen Hayes (2013), to cite some researchers with an admirable career. It is not a matter of making a list of detractors and defenders because this does not necessarily add or detract weight from its arguments, but it can help understand that when PosPsy is pictured as a club of dreamers, when not of defenders of vile interests, which we will return to, the judgment made is as surprisingly blind as it is unfair.

Richard Lazarus (2003a) made one of the first criticisms of PosPsy in a special issue of *Psychological Inquiry* in which, as a matter of fact, there was space for the pros and cons of that incipient movement to be heard. Anticipating some probable reaction by those who were the target of those criticisms, Pérez-Alvarez (2012) reminded us of a later observation of Lazarus himself (2003b) that those criticized reacted like a stirred up hornets' nest. I admit that the tone of this article would be more one of "pessimistic hornet" than optimistic (according to the classification of these insects made in a fascinating study by biologists Bateson, Desire, Gartside and Wright, 2011). My pessimism derives from the conviction that it is a difficult, if not impossible task, to convince any critic when he leans too far over in an emotional language full of absolute judgments. So this article was born of the conviction that it is going to contribute very little to some passionate voices already positioned against PosPsy.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A MATTER OF ORIGINAL SINS

Devaluating the enemy is a practice well analyzed by social psychologists (Zimbardo, 2008). The method is recognizable when right from the start it makes unfavorable humiliating comparisons (Lindner, 2006). Thus, to begin with, nothing better than to make a parallelism between PosPsy and an apparently well-known bestseller (*The Secret*) or with the Oprah Winfrey talk shows in the USA (in case the reader does not know her, a popular US television talk-show hostess) (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012). These two examples would be the new popular representatives of a metaphysical New Thought, in the heart of a dehumanizing ideology of industrial capitalism of which PosPsy would be a natural continuation.

The interesting arguments on the social genesis of "positive thinking" (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012) are weakened, however, when they become exaggerated. Without denying that there is a convergence between this very American idea of individual betterment and success stories (Tennen and Affleck, 2009; Vázquez, Pérez-Sales and Ochoa, 2013) and positive psychology beginning and taking root in North America, that sociological analysis is incomplete. For example, there are psychological needs (Ryan and Deci, 2001), and basic emotions (Ekman and Freisen, 1971) which research has demonstrated are linked to life satisfaction (Tay and Diener, 2011). So that explaining the rise of PosPsy basically as an expression of a sociopolitical dominant model of thought (or of production) seems to be reductionist.

The positive and negative knot

If one of the original sins that PosPsy is accused of were that cloudy connection with the quasi-religious tradition of "positive thinking", there are still others that would have to be atoned for. Not the least of which is the use of the terms "positive" or "negative" themselves. It is fair to acknowledge that talking about "positive" psychology is a source of misunderstanding and the origin of much criticism, but it should also be recalled that they have been clarified on numerous occasions (e.g., Vecina, 2006; Hervás, 2009; Sheldon, 2011).

Even talking about positive and negative emotions is furiously criticized (Held, 2004; Lazarus, 2003a; Pérez-Alvarez, 2012; Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012). However,



all the experts in emotions know that *there are no good or bad emotions in a moral or absolute sense and that all of them, pleasant or unpleasant, fulfill a double function of individual control and communication* (see Avia and Vázquez, 2011). The extended and already inevitable use of terms such as affect or “positive” emotions basically denote the *hedonic component* (pleasant or unpleasant) which can lead to emotions and has been described for decades in research on emotional space (Russell, 1980); Watson and Tellegen, 1985). This distinction between positive and negative emotions is a well-established psychological concept validated on psychological (Avia, 1997), neurophysiological (Davidson, 1999; Kringelbach and Berridge, 2009) and phylogenetic (Nettle and Bateson, 2012) bases. So attributing PosPsy with qualification of some emotions as positive and others as negative as if it were a sudden notion is a triviality as repetitious as it is empty.

Similarly, solemnly suggest, after so many decades of research (e.g., Campos, 2003), that the adaptive value or not of emotions depends on *context* (McNulty and Fincham, 2012) is not news. But this obvious statement is valid, naturally, if it serves as a preformed and deformed image of

PosPsy: «It all depends on the context in which they [positive processes] occur and nothing seems to be inherent per se, contrary to *essentialism* and *ingenuity* which seem to preside in “happiology”» (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 189). That accusing finger misses the target. Among other things, from the studies done by those characterized “happiologists” come precisely some of the best studies on the fact that “positive” emotions can occasionally and contextually have negative effects and vice versa (Cohen, 2006; Fredrickson, 2004). Doubtless having this contextual element in consideration is important (Hayes, 2013), and naive readings of “positive” and “negative” as something of inherent value. But this warning is a guide for orientation in any venture in the field of integrating psychology.

With generous and appropriate literary quotations some critics warn that there can be happiness in unhappiness, and that we can enjoy melancholy (Wilson, 2008). I think the validity of these hypotheses cannot be solved from the philosopher’s desk. On the contrary, we need a precise scientific approach to tackle those issues. Under what circumstances is sadness a source of satisfaction? What are the limits? This is what a science-minded psychologist

should answer. From experimental studies we know that a certain amount of sadness, as long as it is not intense or continuous, can induce more analytical reasoning (Andrews and Thomson, 2009), a more impartial judgment of others (Tan and Forgas, 2010) or a less biased memory (Matt, Vázquez and Campbell, 1992). All of this could help under certain *circumstances* to make better decisions (e.g., when the result is uncertain or when making an erroneous decision could have a very high cost). But we also know that, *in general*, high levels of depression or depressive rumination are associated with poorer problem solving (Lyubomirsky Tucker, Caldwell, and Berg, 1999), less memory of specific *positive* autobiographic events (Romero, Vázquez and Sánchez, in press), or paying less attention to *positive* emotional stimuli (Sánchez, Vázquez, Marker, LeMoult, and Joormann., 2013). Furthermore, sadness, although at times we can “enjoy” it, is frequently linked to the coexistence of other negative emotions that add a corrosive element to that isolated emotion (Hervás and Vázquez, 2011). This has very little to do with that idealized and literary enjoyment of melancholy.

Positive psychology: Offering wholesale happiness?

Continuing with a variant of the argument above, although factors such as positive emotions (Xu and Roberts, 2010) and life satisfaction (Diener and Chan, 2011) are associated with greater longevity, both in retrospective and prospective studies, nobody states, at least in the academic arena, that those positive elements are *unlimitedly* beneficial under any circumstances. For example, it has been known for a long time, and already forms part of the knowledge capital of psychology, that very high levels of positive emotions can have adverse effects (Diener, Colvin, Pavot and Allman, 1991; Oishi, Diener and Lucas, 2007) facilitating, for example, a person’s becoming involved in higher-risk activities (Martin et al., 2002). Apart from this, more subjective happiness (Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, 1999), more optimism (Brown and Marshall, 2001), higher self-esteem (Baumeister Campbell, Krueger and Vohs, 2003; Dunning Heath and Suls, 2004), better sense of humor (Martin, 2007), more self-effacing beliefs (Salanova, Llorens and Rodríguez-Sánchez, in press), or receiving more compliments for one’s own behavior (Dweck, 2007) is not always associated with better results or more psychological well-being. It is well known that it depends



on context and other psychological variables present. Similarly, having more choices to choose from, which in principle may seem desirable, can lead to psychological blocking and an increase in discomfort, as convincingly shown by Barry Schwartz, another “naïve” psychologist close to PosPsy issues (Schwartz, 2004, 2009). And to return to the data, a diversity of correlational and experimental studies, precisely by researchers on psychological well-being, have demonstrated that awarding an extremely high value to having an emotional state of happiness has paradoxical effects on mood (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson and Savino, 2011), even feeding feelings of alienation and loneliness (Mauss Savino, Anderson, et al., 2012). So examples that the consequences of positive emotions and cognitions are not necessarily positive are plentiful and well-recognized in PosPsy.

Even positive intervention has to be guided by the idea that maximizing those positive components at all cost can lead happiness to therapeutic failure and to disoriented clinical intervention (Ruini and Fava, 2013). So the subject of the optimal positive dose and its connection with positive or negative results has never been far from scientific research on positive functioning. The idea that Aristotelian virtue, whether superficially or not (let us qualify to others), inspires some central motifs in PosPsy leads to the idea of middle of the road (Grant and Schwartz, 2011; Ruini and Fava, 2013) and probably this is a good starting point for directing research related to the optimal dose of emotions, experience, or positive psychological characteristics. For some, recurring to the idea of this inverted “U”, or “having to pinpoint it or contextualize it all” leaves us in “psychology as usual” and “it was unnecessary to invent PosPsy for that” (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 194). For others, on the contrary, it means situating psychological research at the usual boundaries of the science and assists in reasoned direction of their research program (Grant and Schwartz, 2011; Mauss et al., 2011). Can a mature science without nuances or contextualization be expected? Obviously not. That remains for discourse of another kind in which there is room for freewheeling arguments or when absolute ideas are defended.

Research on emotions and well-being is much more complicated than the frivolous image that sometimes emerges in the deforming mirrors of the critics. For example, contrary to the view of idiotic, allow me, reader,

to use the adjective, happiness, research has shown that people may prefer negative emotions to positive if the first are linked to long-term goals or agree with vital plans (Tamir, 2009). The same thing happens transculturally: while satisfaction with life is empirically linked to experiencing many positive emotions in individualistic cultures, especially the American (Schimmack, Oishi and Diener, 2002; Tamir, 2009), in Asian cultures, experiencing negative emotions does not conflict with feeling satisfied with life. All this underlines, in turn, the validity of distinguishing between different components of well-being (Fernández-Abascal, 2008; Fulmer Gelfand, Kruglanski et al., 2010; González, Coenders, Saez and Casas. 2009; Kahneman and Deaton, 2010; Oishi, Diener, Napa Scollon and Biswas-Diener, 2004; Vázquez, 2009), although those well-separated differences in the scientific scope are presented to the reader in a jumble or as if they were indecipherable tongue twisters (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 187).

The childlike view offered of research in positive emotions, like celebrants in a naive psychology, is surprising, when there are so many of these studies generating knowledge on the functional limits and contextual value of those emotions. And this is done in the demanding terrain of scientific research.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN?

In a frieze in the Caserón del Buen Retiro in Madrid, there is a quote written by Eugenio D’Ors, “Everything that is not tradition is plagiarism.” And it would seem, in view of some of the criticisms that have been poured on PosPsy, that it can contribute nothing new. It is undeniable that there is a long tradition already, not only in philosophy, but in psychology, that has coined, used and evaluated many of these concepts (McMahon, 2006). In few areas of psychology that I know of is the same tribute rendered to their intellectual ancestors (e.g., Ryff and Singer, 1998; Kesebir and Diener, 2008; Oishi and Kurtz, 2011) although for some even that is not enough.

How can any attempt be made at innovation in positive functioning? In the recent and remote past of psychology, the idea of a *healthy mentality* (William James), *full functioning* (Carl Rogers), *positive mental health* (Maria Jahoda), or *self-actualization* (Abraham Maslow) have always been in the discourse, dominant or not, of psychology (Avia, 2012; Joseph and Wood, 2010; Fernández-Ballesteros, 2002).



However, in view of PosPsy critics (e.g., Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012), it would seem as if a look at the past exhausted any possibility of psychology using these concepts. In my opinion, what is happening is rather the opposite. Because “passion”, just as an example, has been a substantial subject in Greco Latin philosophy (McMahon 2006), should in no way imply that it has drained the flow of what could be studied about it. For instance, Robert Vallerand’s research program distinguishing between harmonious and obsessive passions is a good example of this (Vallerand and Verner-Filion, 2013). The same could be said about “recovery” of other subjects that perhaps were never lost on the historic path of psychological research, such as forgiveness (McCullough, Kurzban and Tabak, 2013), gratitude (Wood, Froh and Geraghty, 2010; Emmons and McCullough, 2003), courage (Pury and Woodard, 2009), or generosity to others (Dunn, Gilbert and Wilson, 2011; Aknin et al, in press). Why characterize the study of these subjects as if they were only of interest to a few pious devotees? Or as if they were arcane and included in the book of philosophy already written? Forgiveness or gratitude, for example, are two powerful elements in human transactions and must not remain at the margin of scientific scrutiny, unless we think that given their nature, only philosophic or religious discourse on them is possible.

PosPsy is reprimanded, pointing out that “it would learn a lot” (sic) (Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012), from authors such as Saint Augustin, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Adler, Allport, Aristotle, Cicero, Dilthey, Frankl, Heidegger, Horney, Hume, Husserl, Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty, Murray, Seneca, Spinoza and Spranger. Well, so much the better then, to heed the lesson offered us. Thus with a lengthy stream of philosophers’ names, Fernández-Ríos (2008, p. 164) explains that almost everything already written and concepts like flow respond to Heraclitus’s idea that “nothing remains still, ... everything is in a *perpetual flow*” (sic), something which, he states a few lines fewer on, can be learned fruitfully from the philosophy of Husserl, Zubiri, William James or Bergson. I do not believe that this precisely helps to construct an intelligent dialogue between philosophy and psychology (at least PosPsy) because, just to mention an example, the Heraclitean concept has little to do with the idea of psychological flow (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1998; Delle Fave, Bassi and Massimini,

2009). Furthermore, to take advantage of the lesson it would be much more useful and enlightening to point out concrete examples of what study in particular could be benefitted from a better historical reading of a specific author and in what way that concrete case could contribute to a better science. Otherwise, this is a declaration as falsely seductive as ineffective. And to work in the terrain of science, that desideratum would have to be translated into operative variables, rigorous methods of measurement and adequate designs that could establish a dialogue with philosophy (Schoch, 2006), but each one with its experience and without employing trivial analogies. That is the terrain of psychology, and of course, also of PosPsy (Sheldon, Kashdan and Steger, 2011).

Anything PosPsy may have new is denied or minimized. Nothing better than snuggling up to subjectiveness itself then. It is entertaining to see that some critics of happiness, denying even that this has any value as a scientific object, feel impelled to offer their own perspective on what the essential ingredients of that dark object of desire are. Only the warm refugee from philosophy and the deficiencies themselves remain. In some cases leisure is recommended (Fernández-Ríos, 2008) or in others unconditional surrender to the principles of the Spanish philosopher Gustavo Bueno (Pérez-Álvarez, 2012). All of these paths, recurring to leisure or to the opinions of this philosopher, are feasibly on target for illuminating and widening knowledge on human well-being. But as a psychologist, I would expect that programmed studies grounded in data be derived from them (see Pressman and Cohen, 2005). If not, in effect, we will have more of the same and it is not surprising that this generates a cynical view in some critics, convinced beforehand that nothing can be contributed that goes beyond what we have already known since the Greek classics.

PosPsy is also accused of ethnocentrism (Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008) because it attempts to be a “universal science” (sic) (Fernández and Novo, 2012) based on findings of participants in wealthy industrialized western societies. I do not know how many studies on the psychology of jealousy, cognitive therapy of panic, or acceptance and commitment therapy, to provide a few examples, have been generated in non-Western settings. But PosPsy is one of the areas in which there is the most quality thought and research on cultural differences,



creating publisher series of books dedicated specifically to it (e.g., Cross-Cultural Advancements in *Positive Psychology*, directed by Prof. Antonella Delle Fave for Springer publishers), the continuous publication of studies which put universal normative ideas in question (see, almost at random, any issue of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, the *Social Indicators Research*) or publication of results of careful transcultural studies (e.g., Diener and Suh, 2000; Diener, Helliwell and Kahneman, 2010), which is not a common practice in almost any other area of psychological research. There is also much evidence that psychological factors, such as, let's say optimism (Solberg and Segerstrom, 2006) or the need for self-acceptance (Heine, Lehman, Markus and Kitayama, 1999), do not have the same weight on health or well-being in all cultures. None of this is concealed and there are no particularly naïve positions among researchers in concepts such as happiness or well-being, but, on the contrary, they promote the most rigorous analysis possible of any transcultural differences.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: SINISTER ALLY OF INDIVIDUALISM AND CAPITALISM?

One pompous accusation of positive psychology arduously defended by some postmodern philosophers (Binkley, 2010), to which some critics join in on without scrimping on praise (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012), is the idea that PosPsy is a bastard product of capitalism and the free market. There are no savings on long-winded criticisms to unmask the enemy. It is stated that under the well-intentioned puerile goal of studying psychological well-being, hides a moral agenda that contributes to human alienation (see Cabanas, 2011). With a neoliberal policy agenda, what would characterize PosPsy is "its link to the status quo, with all its inequalities and abuse of power" (Ehrenreich, 2009, p. 170). And just so the sentence of this judgment remains quite clear: "Its intended scientific character may be more than anything else a scientismist label. One way of covering up its ideological character within traditional positive thought and current consumerist capitalism" (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 183)¹ And in an almost identical manner, Cabanas and Sánchez (2012) suggest that PosPsy relies on "a model of positive individualism" and "is wrapped

in scientific discourse as a guarantee of objectiveness and truth" (p. 173). The origin of this authority for giving patents on moral behavior or scientific legitimacy is not well understood.

This view, which reminds us too much of all that about a Jewish-Masonic conspiracy to flatten the Franquist democratic opposition, is more an easily digested general cliché than what the majority of PosPsy research responds to. One of the reasons that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) provide for the historical failure of humanist psychology was having too individualist a view of the human being and scant connection to the common welfare. Now, paradoxically, just the same thing is attributed to PosPsy, accusing it of having an underlying individualist discourse which exempts it from any social transformation, because everything is "within the individual" (Binkley, 2010).

This reiterative idea of an underlying individualist model is probably shared with the assumptions of other approaches (from cognitive psychology to psychoanalysis, or evolutionist psychology), something that the critics cited acknowledge. But here also they dodge PosPsy theoretical thought and construction in which the intrinsically social nature of human well-being is repeatedly underlined (Seligman, 2012; Swxi and Ryan, 2001; Ryff and Singer, 1998; Fredrickson Cohn, Coffey, Pek and Finkel, 2008; Kesebir and Diener, 2008), incorporating even symbolic links with community or sense of belonging (Keyes, 2007; Blanco and Diaz, 2007). Few times, within academic psychology discourse have so many elements been introduced that have to do with human transactions (love, gratitude, forgiveness, or generosity) which are probably essential to understanding human well-being (Snyder and Lopez, 2002; Oppenheimer and Olivola, 2009). So in spite of many in the academic environment, faced with the view of its founding radical individualism, PosPsy is allowing subjects as ignored as they are essential to understanding human nature to find their place (Hayes, 2013).

Perhaps it would be advisable to stop and consider the facts a little more and sensationalist diatribes less. There are few areas in social science research in which, like positive psychology, internal contradictions in the current economic system and underlying discourse on materialism have been

¹ It is interesting that contrary to these accusations of PosPsy being outside of genuine science, other criticisms, which are applauded (e.g., Held, 2004), accuse it of just the opposite: of adopting a positivist perspective far from post-modern constructivist sensitivities. Anything goes for criticism.



manifested. Available measurements of well-being, of which there is a sufficiently solid body (Lopez and Snyder, 2003; Ong and Dulmen, 2007), have shown the relatively scant contribution of money to increasing citizens' emotional well-being (Diener and Seligman, 2004). The belief that money is a source of personal well-being has become, according to Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize in Economy and very near to PosPsy, a harmful collective illusion (*focusing illusion*) (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz and Stone, 2006). The crucial debate on the role of money and materialist values of well-being is not new (Kasser and Ryan, 1993), but much correlational research is being added, if not experimental, more related to PosPsy (Aknin, Barrington-Leigh, Dunn, Helliwell et al., in press; Dunn et al., 2008, 2011; Oppenheimer and Olivola, 2011). It would be an unnecessarily rhetorical question to ask whether this is relevant or not to psychology.

There are many studies that demonstrate that the measures of subjective well-being are indicators sensitive to social inequality (Alesina Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2004; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), poverty (Deaton, 2008), or liberty (Veenhoven, 2004). In fact, recent studies have empirically tested that there is a positive correlation between systems of progressive taxation and greater well-being of citizens (Oishi Schimmack and Diener, 2012). In any case, for some authors, PosPsy is in itself an important vector of social transformation (Biswas-Diener, Linley, Givindji and Woolston, 2011) and a mainstay of more effective intervention in community development (Murray and Zautra, 2012) or in extreme situations such as poverty or the effects of armed conflict (Veronese Natour and Said, 2012). As Albert Bandura recently showed in an observant perspective on positive psychology, "Millions of people are living under humiliating conditions in social systems that marginalize them and deny them any hope, freedom or dignity. Agentic psychology also works on improving people's well-being and enabling them to make social reforms to improve the quality of their lives" (Albert Bandura, 2011, p. 12).

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: BANNED FROM PARADISE

It is possible to be against the study of psychological well-being and consider it a waste of time or a trivial,

even frivolous exercise of psychology. But some go further, and awarding certificates of pure scientific and moral lineage, dictate their unappealable sentence: "PosPsy continues to be a science without heads or tails" and "if the cart is taken away, they are not even useful or beneficial" (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 189). It is definitely not that way and there are arguments in both basic and applied science that contradict that biased conclusion.

Abounding more in the argument: "There do not seem to be any historic or scientific, or epistemological criteria that back it" and "It is founded mainly on an insufficient correlational method" (Cabanas, 2011, p.280). Criticism even rises in tone still more, attributing PosPsy with "methodological insufficiencies (erroneous attributions of causality, lack of more longitudinal studies, excessive confidence in the correlational method and in self-reports, difficulty in measuring emotions, etc.)" (Cabanas and Sanchez (2012, p. 174-175)² Not only is it denied any possibility of innovation, but advises us that, "If by any chance something seems original and innovative, it is the *product of a severe and unjustifiable distortion, manipulation or ignorance of history in general and psychology in particular*" (Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012) [italics by author]. There is no escape then, and the moral quality of these positive psychologists well justifies their expulsion from that idyllic Valhalla of psychology that a bunch of distorters, manipulators or ignoramuses have now come to stir up. If nothing original is created, bad. But if it is, even worse. The panorama painted is really black and since the slur has been unveiled by zealous guardians of the truth, the Association of Psychologists and the scientific community would do well if they were demanding and employed strict ethical criteria, expelling those who sympathize with and even less, those who enlist in a movement of magicians.

I would suggest to some critics that to make their voices more effective and credible it would be advisable not to exaggerate the misdeeds of the opponent. And at the same time, I would ask them to be respectful, at least in public, of PosPsy actors. It seems to be a capricious creation of ignoramuses and distorting demiurges (read Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Martin Seligman, Ed Diener, Barbara Fredrickson, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Chris Peterson, Daniel Kahneman, Sheldon Cohen, etc.) who in a fit of

² And speaking of attributional errors, Cabanas and Sánchez (2012, p.178) attribute a quote intended to ridicule to Prof. Gonzalo Hervás and myself, but actually belongs to other respectable colleagues.



reason, or, what is worse, moved by concealed interests, decided to create a schismatic and “separatist” movement in Psychology (Held, 2004; Pérez-Alvarez, 2012). No more nor less³. The reader should know that in March 2013, Ed Diener, one of these “separatist” leaders and first President of the International Association of positive Psychology (IPPA, 2007-2009), received the William James Prize for his Contributions to Psychology, awarded by the prestigious American Psychological Society (APS), a society made up mainly of researchers and academics⁴, not to mention Martin Seligman, whose scientific quality is unquestioned and is one of the most influential psychologists in the recent history of psychology (Gilham, 2000).

The critical spiral ascends with a light load, happy with itself, to the point of stating that it has “been forming a network of academics who have been joining the powerful PosPsy industry [which] is not only a prolific source of high-impact scientific publications, projects with public and private funding, master’s degrees, etc., but also feeds on, and at the same time strengthens, the profitable industry of popular and self-help books, coaching and personal growth courses, talks at companies on developing human potential, etc.” (Cabanas, 2011, pp. 280) [italics by author]. Thus PosPsy would be in orbit around a gigantic academic and professional business that would in fact be accomplice in conning thirsty masses with evangelizing messages.

In the face of this fantasy scenario, what reality offers is the presence of honest scientists who are struggling with the best of their intelligence to publish in the best academic journals in the world, not in parish vehicles or in friendly magazines, and to finance their projects with the same arms and rigor as in the rest of science. To create an image of obscure privilege is as unfair as it is false. The work of many Spanish and international authors who measure the value of their work in the best

journals (*Science, Lancet, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Emotion, Psychological Bulletin, Nature, Psychological Science, PANAS, Journal of Applied Psychology, Clinical Psychology Review, etc.*) to spread their results on psychological well-being is worthy of my respect and intellectual admiration. That is the terrain in which quality research plays on. Nothing further from “a science without heads or tails” (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 189), although we acknowledge that some may not like it.

As if those disqualifications of the scientific status of the study of well-being and its researchers were not enough, it is advised with severity concerning the present and future work of psychological research on such abject matters. Thus it is suggested that, “it would a shame for such *findings* to be blessed by National Agencies and funded with public monies, and for new generations of psychology research to believe that it is of interest to study and find associations between satisfaction, well-being and feeling good” (Pérez-Alvarez 2012, p. 187)⁵. And if there was not already enough shooting, we are advised beforehand of the failures that such research is bound to have and the opinion which any project on these subjects (appropriately ridiculed) should merit. I hope that the projects which I personally as a researcher could present to public competitive programs would be evaluated by more impartial judges. And above all, I encourage those new generations of researchers to consider that there may be nothing more serious than to study the nature of human well-being, and not to let themselves be intimidated by threats about the integrity and feasibility of what they do, or the risk of being expelled from the temple of wisdom.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND HEALTH: A USELESS VENTURE?

Some critics concentrate decisively on the relationships between health and positive psychological variables

³ Karl Popper wrote his book, “The Open Society and its Enemies,” to whom the title of this article is in debt, as an allegation against the philosophic defenders of totalitarian ideas. Reading such integrational descriptors as “separatism”, “schism”, it would be better to recall that as Popper wrote, “The enemies of freedom have always charged its defenders with subversion” (1962, P.96).

⁴ In 2012, Ed Diener himself also received the American Psychological Association (APA) Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions, and was elected member the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

⁵ Incidentally, this author alludes to a study done by CocaCola, data from which have been analyzed by a team from the Complutense University. Some of its results are in fact not trivial, in spite of what the critic may think, since it is the first time that a representative national study establishes the differential weight of life satisfaction separately for psychological and physical problems (Vázquez et al., 2013).



(Pérez-Alvarez, 2012). And to do this they faithfully follow the outline and content of the criticism poured on them by Coyne and Tennen (2010). After demandable equanimity, we miss some echo of the answer to those criticisms given by Aspinwall and Tedeschi (2010) published in the same journal (*Annals of Behavioral Medicine*).

We are assured that “the information (propaganda) about PosPsy and cancer now work like legends in the movement” (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 190). But contrary to this supposed “propaganda”, as suggested by Aspinwall and Tedeschi (2010), there is nothing in the scientific literature related to positive Psychology about any statement on the “curative” power of optimism. In fact, optimism, as revealed in the meta-analysis by Rasmussen, Scheier and Greenhouse, (2009) (see Table 1) does not lower mortality related to cancer, but such other aspects as anxiety, sorrow, adherence to treatment, etc., which are very important in the management and evolution of many medical conditions (including cancer). Another thing may be popular reading or news, or the collective imagination (Ehrenreich, 2009). But what are we really talking about? When optimism, like well-being, or happiness, is said to “lack any scientific or philosophical basis to solidly sustain it,” (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 183), it is simply a hyperbolic opinion that does not hold to cumulative evidence by standard scientific activity (Diener et al., 1999; Carver and Scheier, 2010; Bok, 2010).

Repeating Coyne, Tennen and Ranchor’s argument (2010), Pérez-Alvarez (2012) states that, “Although studies show that pessimism predicts health as well as optimism, only optimism is exhibited... Although the mean effect size between optimism and health was 0.14 and between pessimism and health was 0.18, the title and emphasis of the article is ‘optimism and physical health’ (Rasmussen, Scheier and Greenhouse, 2009) (p.190). In reality, if the original meta-analysis of Rasmussen et al. (2009), recognized researchers in psychology of health, is read, they are found to be very cautious in their conclusions. Although the difference between optimism and pessimism is *not statistically significant*, which suggests the need, based on data, of breaking down the effects of the two variables (optimism and pessimism) in psychology, and measure those two aspects separately in studies that wish to evaluate their impact on health (see Joseph and Wood, 2010);

Winefield, Gill, Taylor and Pilkington, 2012). Something as reasonable as this, and as carefully argued, is ridiculed in the criticism by suggesting that, “the notion that being an optimist improves health is already a *mantra* in promoting research on PosPsy intervention and in *marketing* PosPsy as a business (Coyne et al., 2010)” (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 190) [italics by author]. The balanced, scientifically constructive tone of Rasmussen et al. make this criticism, without entering into other assessments, as imprecise as it is disproportionate. Why that biased interest in offending the role of variables like optimism in health with such absolute and self-complacent opinions?

But more than entering into particular studies on the relationships between health and positive psychological variables, it is better to look back at some of the major meta-analyses done with this type of “positive” variables and in which literally tens of thousands of participants took part. The results (see Table 1) offer a relatively consistent pattern of the beneficial role, which in general, is associated with variables like optimism, satisfactory social relationships, perception of benefits, etc.) and results related with health, such as mortality (Chida and Steptoe, 2008; Holt-Lunstand, Smith and Layton, 2010), physical health indicators (Howell et al., 2005), or extent of recovery from physical illness (Lamers, Bolier, Westerhof, Smit and Bohlmeijer, 2011).

These meta-analyses, and in general the examination of the abundant data existing (Vázquez Hervás, Rahona and Gómez, 2009), reveal that the relationships between positive variables and health cannot be dispatched with offhand disqualifying remarks or incendiary declarations. Helping to separate with cautious analyses and well-grounded results, as these studies do, is in fact our task as responsible scientists, committed to the mature development of scientific activity in psychology.

POSITIVE CHANGES AFTER ADVERSITY: A WELL-KNOWN FRAUD?

Another of the areas in which Coyne and Tennen (2010) make cruel criticism is research on the perception of benefits to adversity and post-traumatic growth. The criticism is again out of proportion. These authors show beyond doubt that “positive psychology has failed, we believe miserably, in its approach to the study of growth after adversity” (p.24). What happens, Spanish readers are taught, is that “PosPsy lacks a basis for understanding



TABLE 1
META-ANALYTICAL STUDIES OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND HEALTH

Authors (year) Journal	N ^o of studies (N ^o participants)	Aim of the study	Results
Chida and Steptoe (2008). <i>Psychosomatic Medicine</i>	70 studies (35 with healthy population, N=1,742; 35 with population with illnesses, N=826)	Impact of well-being with state measurements (i.e., positive emotions) and trait (e.g., optimism, sense of humor, life satisfaction) on mortality. Includes observational, prospective and cohort studies.	General mortality reduced associated with psychological well-being in the healthy population (RR=0.82) but not in the population with illnesses (RR=0.98). In the population with illnesses, psychological well-being was associated with lower mortality in patients with kidney failure and in patients with HIV+
Hegelson et al. (2006). <i>Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology</i>	87 cross-sectional studies (N=From 1,717 to 8,431 depending on the dependent variable analyzed)	Perception of benefits after suffering from some severe physical or psychological condition	Psychological benefits associated with less depression and independently more psychological well-being. Unrelated to anxiety or general discomfort.
Holt-Lunstand et al. (2010). <i>PLOS Medicine</i>	148 studies (N=308,849)	Impact of quantity and quality of social relationships on risk of mortality.	Those who have better interpersonal relationships have 50% more likelihood of survival (OR = 1.50; CI 95%: 1.42-1.59).
Howell, Kern and Lyubomirsky (2005) <i>Health Psychology Review</i>	150 studies (N=44,159)	Impact psychological well-being in health target indicators. (Includes longitudinal and experimental studies).	Psychological well-being has a significant impact (r=0.14) on target health variables in short (r=0.15) and long term (r=0.11). The positive impact is higher on the immunological response and tolerance to pain. There are no significant relationships with cardiovascular reactivity.
Lamers, Bolier, Westerhof, Smit, and Bohlmeijer (2011). <i>Journal of Behavioral Medicine</i>	17 studies (N=12,744)	Impact of emotional well-being (i.e., positive affect and life satisfaction) on recovery from physical illnesses and survival from physical illnesses. Only prospective studies (mean follow-up: 4 years).	Low predictive capacity, but significant between well-being and recovery (RR=1.14).
Luhman et al. (2012). <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>	188 studies (N=65,911)	Impact of life events important on emotional and cognitive psychological well-being (life satisfaction). Only longitudinal studies.	Impact of diverse types of life stressors on aspects related to work performance. Life events, especially when they are repeated (e.g.: unemployment) have a significant specific impact on the trajectory of well-being.
Lyubomirsky, King and Diener (2005). <i>Psychological Bulletin</i>	225 studies published and 11 Ph.D. theses (N>275,000)	Analysis of the bidirectional impact between psychological well-being (subjective happiness, life satisfaction, or eudaimonic well-being) and different domains functioning (e.g., work performance, social relationships, health, prosocial behavior, creativity, conflict resolution). Includes cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental studies.	Emotional well-being (subjective happiness, positive emotions and life satisfaction) predicts functioning in various domains. The effect sizes are varied depending on the results and type of study.
Moskowitz et al. (2009). <i>Annals of Behavioral Medicine</i>	84 studies (N=30,133)	Relationships between optimism, pessimism and physical health. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.	The mean effect size (ES) between optimism and physical health was 0.17 (95% CI: 0.15-0.20). The ES was higher for subjective measurements of state of health (ES=0.21) than for objective measurements (TE=0.11) and higher for cross-sectional studies (ES=0.22) than longitudinal (ES=0.12). Optimism was significantly associated with better results in: mortality and survival rates, physiological and immune markers, physical symptoms, pain and pregnancy. No significant differences between ES of the relationships between optimism and health (ES=0.14) or pessimism and health (ES=0.18).
Solberg and Segerstrom (2006). <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i>	48 studies (N=11,629)	Relationship between dispositional optimism, confrontation strategies and psychological adjustment.	Optimism is positively associated with direct stressor or derived emotional management strategies (r=.17) and negatively with avoidance strategies (r=-.21). Optimism is also associated with more flexible use of strategies. The relationships are stronger in studies in English-speaking countries.
Vatne and Bjorkly (2008). <i>Clinical Psychology Review</i>	42 studies (N=6,774)	General well-being in unhospitalized people with severe mental disorders	Significant association of well-being with different types of mental disorders. Well-being is strongly associated with Leisure and Social Relationships, but not with such aspects as Personal Safety or Employment. Clinical depression is the symptomology most associated with less well-being, but explains less than 29% of the variance.

Note: RR=Relative Risk; OR=Odds ratio



the phenomenon and prospective studies that demonstrate it, insisting on them with more faith than evidence" (Pérez-Alvarez, p. 190).

Phenomena such as positive change after adversity are not new observations in the history of humanity (Prieto-Ursúa, 2006). What is new, whoever may regret it, and this is what is relevant, is that there is empirical research on them (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004; Joseph and Butler, 2010). This area is, as a matter of fact, one of the terrains where research on coexistence of positive and negative aspects, or of psychopathological symptoms and strengths are naturally integrated, very far from that supposed, "positive extremism" (Larsen et al., 2003; Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2006; Páez Vázquez, Bosco et al., 2011; Vázquez et al., 2005, 2008; Vázquez and Hervás, 2010; Zoellner and Maercker, 2006).

Let us return, again, to the data. In their meta-analysis on the perception of benefits derived from adverse conditions (severe illness, loss of dear ones, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, etc.), Helgeson, Reynolds and Tomich (2006) found that from 50-60% of people perceive some type of benefit from it. Although further progress in understanding this type of phenomena is still required (Ochoa et al., 2013), limiting its transcultural validity (Vázquez and Páez, 2010; Vázquez, Pérez-Sales and Ochoa, 2013) and using means of measurement that go beyond self-recording (Cho and Park 2013), disqualifying the scope and importance of the phenomenon is a generalization which does not correspond with an analysis of existing evidence. Fortunately, it is an area full of complicated conceptual and methodological challenges for which researchers have been profiling rigorous knowledge, subjected to the best standards of scientific production in psychology (Joseph and Butler, 2010; Park, 2010; Sumalla, Ochoa and Blanco 2009). Therefore, it is not a matter of naïve scientists mesmerized by the positive.

POSITIVE INTERVENTION: THE APOTHEOSIS OF COMMON SENSE?

Consideration of emotions and positive cognitions by psychology, including clinical, is a growing need recognized by different approaches and relevant authors. There is overwhelming and still growing evidence that *positive* and negative affect are involved differently in different psychopathological problems (such as depression, social phobia and schizophrenia, among

others), in both adults (Watson and Naragon-Gainey, 2010; Kashdan, Weeks and Savostyanova, 2011) and adolescents (Gilbert, 2012). This includes an interesting proposal on clinical intervention based on positive emotions from a transdiagnostic perspective by David Barlow's group (Carl et al., 2013).

As already reviewed elsewhere (Vázquez, Hervás and Ho, 2006; Vázquez Sánchez and Hervás, 2008), interventions specifically directed at promoting improvement in emotional well-being in people without psychological problems can be traced to studies by Fordyce in the eighties. And naturally, there are many interventions and clinical techniques founded in psychology (e.g., therapies based on activation, on pleasant activities, etc.) which have common hubs with current PosPsy interests (e.g., Mazzucchelli and Kane, 2010; Layous Chancellor, Lyubomirsky et al., 2011).

But the untiring criticism of the whole already warns those who unwarily think that it is a fertile ground for solid development of psychology that "what is 'positive' in positive psychotherapy, as any clinician may observe, is generic, and has a common budget with psychotherapy" (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 192). An argument which is proudly repeated (Cabanas and Sánchez 2012 (p. 180): "that which seems clearly valid in positive psychology is rather a generic trait of any process of confronting problems, the importance of which is taken on by all psychotherapy – and common sense – that is: the advisability of keeping an open attitude that facilitates the individual's understanding his situation better and making effective use of the resources at hand to overcome problems of daily life." Why study something unspecific, and which in the best of cases, if it had any effect, would be trivial, because "common sense" can reveal it? It is impossible, with these axiomatic critical opinions, to go forward in any direction. And if we try to move, it is because we have succumbed to a vane illusion.

But let us return to research. It is insisted, with unyielding faith and optimism, that positive intervention is the result of common sense and not much more than innocent placebos. Contrary to this idea, meta-analytical results combining dozens of studies show that they are effective (Bolier Haverman, Westerhof et al., 2013; Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009) (see Table 2). The evidence of clinical studies done to date reveals that interventions are more effective when the samples are from hospital settings and if they are more individual than group or self-help (Bolier



et al., 2013). Doubtless, more clinical trials are necessary to approach diverse clinical problems, employ more and better control groups, and longer follow-up studies (Bolier et al., 2013; Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 2012). These are challenges that are not so different from those of any therapy. For example, although exercises in gratitude have shown to be effective in people with light or moderate symptoms of depression (Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009), they are not always beneficial. They can be ineffective, or even harmful, when the participants do not expect the exercise to be effective (Sin, Della Porta and Lyubomirsky, 2011) or when they have a strong interpersonal need (Sergeant and Mongrain, 2011). So again, it is only from research, and not from our desk, where we can really find the limits and benefits of intervention.

One of the first studies with clinical samples was the one by Seligman, Steer, Park and Peterson (2005). In it, the use of some positive exercises for one week (keeping a diary in which they wrote “three good things” that had happened during the day, and making daily use of their own “psychological strengths”) significantly improved their symptoms of depression and increased their well-being in one, two and three-month follow-ups. Recently, Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews (2012), two researchers in positive intervention⁶, found that those results could be unspecific, because the same exercises are as effective as those done by a “positive placebo group” whose task was to record and write for 10 minutes

every night of the week, some *positive autobiographical* memory. In the study, well-being *increased* in three groups compared to a second placebo group that was asked to write about any memory and not specifically positive memories. Faced with the evidence already accumulated and subjected to systematic revisions and meta-analyses, for Pérez-Alvarez (2012), this last study would unmask the artifice of PosPsy to demonstrate, without any gender of doubt, that positive exercises are pure placebo. Here is the sentence: “The greatest innovation in positive psychology exercises seems to be just the *scientismist wrapping* and the enthusiasm of the novelty of agreeing with the *scientific label* that Positive Psychology brings with it” (p. 191, italics by author). In the case of this concrete experiment, an alternative hypothesis to the “pure placebo” that this critic suggests, is that the placebo intervention is also an uncontrolled positive intervention: it is found that remembering positive autobiographical elements (Latorre Serrano, Ros et al., 2008) and writing about them (Burton and King, 2004) is effective in improving well-being and reducing depression. But in any case, more proof of the consistency of the findings and sustainability of the effects, refining existing evidence and finding better control groups is necessary, and that is one of the tasks that more recent studies than the original study by Seligman and his group face (see Peters Meevisen, and Hanssen, 2013; Layous, Nelson and Lyubomirsky, 2012).

The positive approach has not only incorporated

TABLE 2
META-ANALYTICAL STUDIES ON POSITIVE CLINICAL INTERVENTIONS

Authors (year) Journal	Nº of studies (Nº participants)	Aim of the study	Results
Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009). <i>Journal of Clinical Psychology</i>	51 studies (N=4,266)	Impact of positive intentional intervention on emotions, cognitions, or positive behavior in people with symptoms of depression	Significant effects on measures of well-being (r=.29) and in reducing symptoms of depression (r=.31). Larger effects in older, treated individually and more motivated participants.
Mazzucchelli et al. (2010). <i>Journal of Positive Psychology</i>	20 studies (N=1,353)	Behavioral activation and psychological well-being in samples of people with and without depression.	The aggregate effect size (Hedge = 0.52) shows a difference in measures of well-being in favor of behavioral activation compared to control conditions in both types of samples.
Bolier et al. (2013). <i>BMC Public Health</i>	39 studies (N=6,139)	Changes in psychological well-being and depression after positive intervention with different formats (individual, group and self-help therapies).	Small but significant effects on subjective well-being (standardized mean difference = 0.34), psychological or eudaimonic well-being (0.20), and symptoms of depression (0.23). Effects sustained at 3-6 months.

⁶ It is interesting to underline that some of their work on effective positive intervention (e.g., exercises in optimism and self-compassion) have been published in journals specializing in positive psychology (e.g., Shapira and Mongrain, 2010; Sergeant and Mongrain, 2011) so, as is normal in the dialectic process of construction of science, what is relevant are the data available and not so much the supposed convictions of the researchers.



techniques unheard of before in Psychology (exercises in gratitude, use of psychological strengths, savoring, etc.), but is opening interesting territories backed by basic and clinical research (Watson and Naragon-Gainey, 2010; Carl et al., 2013). Furthermore, paying more decided attention to positive emotions, resources and strengths, can help redefine what psychological recovery is (Vázquez and Nieto, 2010), or the concept of individual “mental health” (Maddux, 2008; Keyes, 2005; Vázquez, 2008) or “organizational health” (Salanova et al., 2012; Rodríguez Carvajal ., Moreno, de Rivas et al., 2010).

Another subject that merits some reflection is that many of the techniques that are being incorporated and subjected to validation in clinical trials to improve well-being of the participants come from basic research in psychology. This was not at all frequent in psychological therapies. Classic psychotherapeutic techniques take place mostly in the clinical setting itself. However, research on gratitude, forgiveness, or enjoyment, to give a few examples, are inspired by, or even directly transferred from basic experimental research (e.g., Quoidbach Berry, Hansenne, and Mikolajczak, 2010; Wood et al., 2010; Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Worthington Witvliet, Pietrini and Miller, 2007).

Its applicability to clinical samples and relative effectiveness should be checked, but that transfer of knowledge from basic to applied is a distinctive mark of many positive interventions. Furthermore, this type of transfer helps consolidate the idea that there are no unsurpassable distances between people who have clinical problems and those who do not, which is going in the direction of rejecting models of medical thought for explaining mental health (Maddux, 2002, 2008; López and Costa, 2012). What may be useful for normal people to feel psychologically better could be equally effective in improving clinical depression (Vázquez and Ring, 1996; Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009). As Wood and Tarrier (2010) argue, we have to take the ability we have in Psychology to increase and sustain well-being of citizens seriously, and not only those with pathologies, although, as Seligman, Parks and Steen (2005) acknowledge, we still need to delve much deeper into how to do it.

The findings of PosPsy research are not limited to “common sense”, as is admitted with certain condescendence (Fernández-Ríos and Comes, 2009, p. 8; Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012, p.180; Pérez-Alvarez 2012, p. 186), but comes from subjecting ideas to the

scrutiny and best practices of science (Ong and Dulmen, 2007; Sheldon, Kashdan and Steger, 2011). The opinion that “the process of living is much simpler and easier than the explanations of psychologists” (Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012, p. 341) does not seem very motivational. If this is so, we beg for the keys to that process be explained to us, because if that is the way it is, psychology is superfluous, not just silly PosPsy.

More than recreate in moral epistles or empty sarcasm, I think we should look for ways of connecting these new positions and more traditional clinical psychology (Wood and Tarrier, 2010; Bolier et al., 2013; Parks and Biswas-Diener, 2013; Sheldon, Boehm and Lyubomirsky, 2012). This requires research and also much caution so as not to make “superenthusiastic promotions” (Wood and Tarrier, 2010, p. 824) or feed false myths (Diener, 2008) with something which still has a long way to go. See what doses of intervention are the best, which combination of exercises is the most effective, how “positive” techniques can be integrated with existing intervention schemas, which culture groups they are most suitable for, or for what problems they are the most effective, are some of the points pending.

We also, in my opinion, have the obligation to search for places for convergence and not set up invisible walls. An example of this is the recent attempt to find common channels for the practices of PosPsy and *Mindfulness* (Langer, 2002; Baer and Lykins, 2010), acceptance and commitment therapies (Kashdan and Carriochi, 2013), cognitive-behavioral therapies (Wood and Tarrier, 2010; Parks and Schueller, 2013), constructivist approaches (Tarragona, 2013), or their link with new technologies (e.g., Baños, Espinoza, García-Palacios et al., 2013). This conciliating search for places in common and without any rejection of rigor must be the road psychology is found on. There is a long way to go, but closing the doors before getting there is suicide.

WHY BE HAPPY WHEN YOU CAN BE NORMAL?

One of the unpardonable sins of PosPsy, picked out from an interminable list (see, for example, Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012), is that now “people are determined to be happy, *instead of normal*” (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 197) [italics by author]. In her revealing autobiographical history, Jeanette Winterson (2012) tells the story that gives the book its title, about when she reveals to her puritanical mother that she is a lesbian, and that she dares to do this



to be happy, her mother reproaches her saying, "Why be happy when you can be normal?" I wish for myself and for those I love, to have full lives and with the most emotional well-being. Not normal lives, if there were any way to define precisely what "being normal" is and if "normality" were not in most cases a heavy imposed stone that means rejecting change and personal, social and political improvement.

Many academics and professionals, from territories adjacent to PosPsy, work for educational systems, from school (Layard and Dunn, 2012; Caruana, 2010) to Universities (Parks, 2011) to become institutions in which we can not only feel good, but grow intellectually and psychologically and be able to participate critically and constructively in them. As a matter of fact, it is not too much to recall the words of the Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater, "Anyone who feels that optimism is repugnant, should not be teaching and should not attempt to think about what education consists of. Because educating is believing in human perfectibility, in the innate ability to learn and the desire to know what encourages it, that there are things... that can be known and should be known, that men can improve each other by means of knowledge" (*El Valor de Educar*, 1997, P. 18).

There are many professionals who wish to have a clinical intervention model in which psychological well-being has a major role in the clinical environment (Linley and Joseph, 2004; Vázquez and Hervás, 2008; Parks and Schueller, 2013). And many others are studying how to create working conditions that favor a certain feeling of belonging (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2009; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2011), and to make them places where one is treated with dignity. I think that we need less normality and more passion, more enthusiasm in what we do, and more involvement in what surrounds us, which is not in conflict with critical judgment or with the impulse to change or with the desire to have better lives and societies (Huppert and So, 2013). And that idea, in which economists like Amartya Sen, Richard Layard or John Helliwell or philosophers like Marta Nussbaum, to name some outstanding examples, participate in, must not be relinquished by psychologists, because it is a domain which is of our special competence. What is health and how is it defined? What is the architecture of human well-being and how is it evaluated and validated? It should not suffice simply to reduce pain, deficiencies or symptoms,

but move toward models based on improving people's lives and developing their competence and strengths (Díaz, Blanco and Horcajo, 2007) as, in fact, the patients themselves seem to claim (Zimmerman et McGlinchey, Posternak et al., 2006). In this sense, PosPsy for some is one of the tools that we have to undermine a medical model of clinical psychology (Maddux, 2008). A look at the positive side can help make Psychology better (Bandura, 2011; Tarrier and Wood, 2010; Hayes, Villatte, Levin and Hildebrandt, 2011). Simply being interested in measuring positive psychological functioning (López and Snyder, 2003; Winefield, Gill, Taylor and Pilkington, 2012; Joseph and Wood, 2010) and widening what we consider "effective intervention" with more ambitious criteria than merely reducing problems could be significant progress in the psychology of the future.

Although even admitting the value of studying positive human functioning, is happiness the principle of life, the supreme value? Each of us has to answer that question. We have already given arguments, based on empirical studies, showing that giving this more priority than other values can be a source of misery and suffering. Nobody is obligated to be happy and it would be an error to feed this discourse, which, in fact, is in good part impregnated in societies like the American (Ehlerich, 2009; Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012). The right to be unhappy even has to be defended (Ahmed, 2010), or like the late admired philosopher Jean Améry decided to defend the right to vengeance and resentment of victims of torture and Nazi concentration camps as the best way of preserving their dignity without submitting to the social pressure for pardon (Améry, 2001). There is no objection to these inalienable personal options. But it is not a good idea to discard the idea that having better lives is a legitimate demand for many human beings (let us recall the words of Savater above) and the paths may be very varied.

Happiness or having a full and fortunate life is not a norm although textually it is affirmed, without any useless shadow of a doubt, that "in fact, the principle of happiness is not empirical, but *normative, imposed: a tyranny*" (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012, p. 198), [italics by author]. In spite of this repeated observation (Held, 2002; Prieto-Ursúa, 2006; Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012) the theories on psychological well-being have insisted on their descriptive, not normative character. Nothing better than turning to them and reading them without prejudice.



POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A VALUABLE PROPOSAL BY AND FOR PSYCHOLOGY

PosPsy concentrates on something very simple to understand: it favors *also* looking at the competences and abilities of the human being, on psychological strengths, or on positive emotions. If we do not pay attention to these elements, whether in PosPsy or not (e.g., Wood and Tarrrier, 2010; Hayes et al., 2011), because that is now irrelevant, psychology itself is always going to be cut short.

There is generalized interest in including well-being and positive mental health (Beddington, Cooper, Field et al., 2008) as a relevant element in political decisions and macroeconomics of countries. In the United Kingdom, the Ministry of Science published in 2008 a series of academic reports on many different areas to find out the state of “well-being and mental capital” in the country and thus be able to design policies enabling the lives of the British to be improved (Jenkins, Meltzer, Jones and Brugha, 2008; Kirkwood Bond, May et al., 2008). This seed has led to a national political debate on well-being (New Economic Foundation, 2011) and include, among other things, periodic measurement of the psychological well-being of the citizens in national statistics of that country. Incentivizing public policy to promote well-being is a domain in which economists and policymakers are also becoming interested (e.g., New Economics Foundation, 2011; Dolan, Layard and Metcalfe, 2011; Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern and Seligman, 2011; Diener et al., 2009; Frey and Stutzer, 2012; Graham, 2009; Helliwell, 2011; Veenhoven, 2004).

In the clinical environment, the Scottish government has designed a National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being (Myers, McCollam and Woodhouse, 2005) the backbone of which is the idea of individual and community resilience and psychological well-being of citizens as a goal of national health. There is a need to employ more robust models and indicators in the future scenario of mental health policies in order to advance in that direction (Parkinson, 2012; Lamers, Bolier, Westerhof et al., 2011). Something much more ambitious than the horizon of the Spanish Mental Health Strategy (2007), in which although there is a nod toward the idea of positive mental health (p. 333), it concentrates almost exclusively on reducing the epidemiological rates of mental disorders. This is indeed more of the same.

Along another line converging with this interest, the

European Science Foundation has initiated an ambitious study to evaluate European hedonic, eudaimonic and social well-being directed by a group of European researchers and psychologists (Huppert Marks, Vázquez and Vittersso, 2012) in 2013. And the United Nations, finally, decided in its General Assembly of June 2011, with the support of recognized researchers in psychological well-being, to introduce measurements of subjective well-being as additional indicators of human development (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs 2012). Attempting to improve people’s lives, transcending from economic parameters, is not a triviality but a need in many social, academic and political sectors (Helliwell and Barrington-Leigh, 2010; Bruni and Porta, 2007; Bok, 2010; Graham, 2009; Layard, 2006) to which psychology can contribute with the best of itself, and should be proud to do so (Diener Lucas, Schimmack and Helliwell, 2009; Sheldon et al., 2011; Ong and Dulmen, 2007; Lopez and Snyder, 2003).

We have a formidable opportunity to introduce elements in public policies to reduce destitution, poverty and inequality by *also* improving people’s lives within psychological parameters (Bok 2010; Diener et al. 2009). Psychology cannot turn its back on this, and we are rather an essential tool in this movement. And if we want psychology to participate with a role and a voice in that direction, we have to do it by employing the best of our resources, going deeper into research on the positive components of psychological functioning and well-being. And we already have traveled a long path, which can doubtless be improved upon, but is reasonably robust.

Without doubt, a perspective that impacts on psychological abilities, strengths, or positive emotions should not naively ignore that human nature is complex and contradictory. There is little to object to in that idea. As Amalio Blanco (2012) so rightly said, psychology cannot be understood without paying attention to positive functioning, but neither without recalling that human beings can inflict harm and humiliation on others, as the well-known experiments by Milgram or those by Zimbardo demonstrated several decades ago. The laudable desire for integral psychology (McNulty and Fincham, 2012) or a psychology that assumes diversity (Pérez-Alvarez, 2012) requires a deep understanding of grief, but also of pleasure. If we need a more complex and comprehensive psychology, nothing better than defining and measuring everything that concerns us as



human beings (e.g., Winefield, Gill, Taylor and Pilkington, 2012). Some of us think that a good fate for PosPsy would be its dissolution in main stream psychology (Vázquez, 2006; Linley, Joseph, Harrington and Wood, 2006), but not without having contributed to move its channel a bit and accelerate the correction of some insufficiencies of traditional psychology. That is how the ways to integration can be favored (Wood and Tarrier, 2010; Wong, 2012), and it must be done, not from fraternal hatred and sterile criticism, but from a “genuine conversation” which, as pointed out by Hayes (2013), impacts on “common interests, shared perspectives, and mutual respect” (p. 317).

But local winds do not blow in this direction of harmony and construction. Echoing what Pérez-Alvarez (2012) said, Cabanas and Sánchez (2012, p. 181) suggest, “the complaint and concern of some psychologists who see with some astonishment how what seems to be a new ‘fashion’ is offered without any greater academic debate or resistance by professional psychologists, the scant basis of which could very well collect a high price in the ‘respectability’ of the entire profession, as it has so often before.” We are even told in alarmist tones that it seems as if “Spanish psychology had often stopped thinking” (Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012, p. 337). I do not think these critics have any reason to worry, because they are not dealing with an enemy but colleagues honestly concerned with understanding human well-being better, and who firmly consider that it is a legitimate and desirable goal of psychology. There is still a long way to go and there is still a very wide margin before a sort of happiness spell undermines the critical capacity of psychology and Spanish psychologists. The risk is rather the contrary: that many are unable to understand that we have a professional and academic obligation, as legitimate as understanding pain or pathology, to meet the laudable goal of an integral psychology. And while we walk the road, at least allow me the innocent whim of remembering that the psychologists who reflected more words of positive content in their writing are those who have lived the longest (Pressman and Cohen, 2012).

It is my intention not to continue with this debate, which would also contribute to continuing to feed someone else’s résumé based on repeatedly judging the work of others. The arguments are clear and the readers have to form their opinion. I think we have a commitment as a discipline and as a profession that consists of generating

knowledge and contributing honestly, and to the extent possible, to improving the lives of others. That is the task which concerns many of us.

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