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Positive Psychology: Fundamentals, History, Elements, Future

1. Fundamentals: What is Positive Psychology?

Positive Psychology is the science of what enables individuals, organizations and societies to evolve in the best possible way and how to flourish.

Positive Psychology is therefore the science of the flourishing life. In its focus stands the empirical exploration of human resources, strengths, potentials and wellbeing. Fields of research are far reaching: They range from the psychological and physiological effects of positive emotions, the experience of flow and supporting social relationships to inquiries of motivation, mindfulness, passion and meaning. With its resource-oriented approach Positive Psychology clearly stands in the tradition of 20th century humanistic psychology and philosophy. Hence Abraham Maslow is considered to be a pioneer of this emergent scientific discipline:

„Humanistic philosophy [offers] a new conception of learning, of teaching, and of education. Stated simply, such a concept holds that the function of education, the goal of education – the human goal, the humanistic goal, the goal so far as human beings are concerned – is ultimately the ‘self-actualization’ of a person, the becoming fully human, the development of the fullest height that the human species can stand up to or that the particular individual can come to. In a less technical way, it is helping the person to become the best that he is able to become” (Maslow, S. 168f).

Self-actualization and personality development – both topics can be found in Positive Psychology again, though not describing it exhaustively, because findings clearly show the relevance of social relations and self-transcendent areas of life for human wellbeing (Seligman, 2011; Vaillant, 2012). Also methodically Positive Psychology distinguishes itself from Humanistic Psychology: While the latter – as Maslow's quote shows – due to its theoretical focus rather has to be considered as a philosophical discipline, Positive Psychology is an empirical science based on quantitative and qualitative methods of social research (survey, observation, experiment, content analysis, group discussion et al.).

2. History of Positive Psychology

At the same time, the occurrence of Positive Psychology depicts a break with the “mainstream” of 20th century psychology. Previous research had mainly been concerned with the aim of understanding and healing mental diseases like depression, schizophrenia or phobias. The content analysis undertaken by Myers (2000) of psychological abstracts since 1874 is exemplary for this classic deficit-oriented approach in psychology. The analysis showed a 14:1-ratio of assessed negative to positive. The new perspective in psychology was particularly shaped by the American psychologist Martin Seligman. He started his APA-presidency in 1998 with a keynote speech emphasizing the focus of psychological

research on aspects of the flourishing life and thereby coined the term “Positive Psychology”. Since then, relating research “explodes” on an international level. The foundation of a European research network (ENPP) followed in 2000, and the German Society for Positive Psychological Research (DGPPF) was founded 2015 at the University of Trier.

3. Elements of the flourishing life

Seligman (2011) has summarized the empirical factors which contribute to subjective wellbeing in the so called PERMA-model. Each of the five elements in this model fulfills by definition the following three criteria:

1. The element contributes to human wellbeing.
2. Many people pursue the element for its own sake (intrinsically).
3. The element is defined and measured independently of the other elements (Seligman, 2011, p. 16).

The acronym PERMA stands for *Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment*.

Positive Emotions

Abundant evidence on the resource-building effects of positive emotions underlies the Broaden-and-Build-theory by Barbara Fredrickson. Accordingly, positive emotions – like hope, gratitude, enthusiasm, love or curiosity – lead to open mindedness (*broaden-effect*) and support long-term resource-building (*build-effect*) (Fredrickson, 2013). Hope for example correlates with thought-action-tendencies of planning and supports the building of resilience. Interest, as a second example, correlates with the behavior of learning and exploring. Thus, it contributes to building knowledge in the long term (*ibid.*, p. 4f.).

Engagement

The element “Engagement” particularly refers to the experience of Flow. Research in this field was founded by the American-Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who describes Flow as an “optimal experience” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 195). While in a state of flow, a person is fully absorbed by her current activity and her attention is completely focused on the present moment. Further on, *intrinsic motivation*, a *lack of interest in extrinsic rewards* and *autotelic actions* are crucial characteristics of flow (*ibid.*). The subjective quality of a challenge and the perception of according potential actions are additional criteria: To achieve flow, individual skills must be challenged just right - neither too much nor too little. The Goal of action is clear and there is an instant feedback on progress.

Social Relationships

In the *self-determination-theory* of motivation, social affiliation / relatedness along with striving for competence and autonomy are considered to be human psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1993). According to Deci and Ryan, those basic needs are inherent, universal and existential (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74). Hence, human beings pursue goals that are based on the need for social affiliation or

social recognition (e.g. building and fostering friendships). Most prominently the relevance of positive social relationships for a flourishing life was shown in the so called Grant-longitudinal study (Vaillant, 2012). Baumeister and Leary (1995) come to similar results in an overview-study: According to their research, a lack of social ties strongly correlates with unhappiness, depression and other forms of suffering. A high level of subjective wellbeing or feeling happy seem to be incompatible to social isolation. Baumeister and Leary strongly emphasize, that social relationships and positive emotions correlate with each other: “In general, the formation of social bonds is associated with positive emotions” (ibid., p. 505).

Meaning

Following the Austrian psychologist Viktor E. Frankl, Positive Psychology defines Meaning as a self-transcendent domain. Frankl, who founded the meaning-centered logotherapy, defined meaning as follows: “*The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself*” (Frankl, 1984, p. 133). Seligman (2011) adapts this definition when describing meaning as “[...] *belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self [...]*” (ibid., p. 17). Also, Csikszentmihaly’s understanding of meaning implies a moment of self-transcendence: Basic values, on which meaningful goal-orientations and actions are grounded, cannot be regarded as merely individual phenomena, because they are shaped by cultural symbolic orders: “*Every human culture, by definition, contains meaning systems that can serve as the encompassing purpose by which individuals can order their goals*” (ibid, p. 218).

Accomplishment

Accomplishment is an element of wellbeing insofar as it is concerned with “[...] *what human beings, when free of coercion, choose to do for its own sake*” (Seligman, 2011, p. 20). This concept is strongly related to *self-efficacy-beliefs* – the belief in one’s capacity to succeed (Bandura, 1997). Accomplishment should not be misunderstood as mere efficiency in the sense of maximum work in minimum time. Rather, it implies self-reflection (reflecting on oneself, other people, contents etc.) and individual quality-standards (Brohm-Badry, 2016). Therefore, Brohm-Badry makes a case for a new definition of accomplishment, particularly concerning the school systems in German-speaking countries. According to her, a merely efficiency-oriented paradigm of accomplishment leads to an increasing compression of learning- and working time, as well as to achievement-structures mainly favoring competition. There would be too little space for a deep, serene, humanistic education. Given the corresponding implications for individuals and organizations (e.g., loss of the capacity to reflect, burnout, depression, demotivation, rise of employee turnover). Therefore, she advocates a humanistic paradigm of accomplishment with the following formula: Accomplishment = Work * Wellbeing / Time.

4. The future of Positive Psychology

Positive-psychological research concerns individuals, institutions and societies equally (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). On the individual level, the most relevant question is: how do mental resources contribute to a flourishing life? In this respect, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have examined the importance of universal virtues and character strengths. In this field, Positive Psychology appears to be exceptionally related to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy (particularly virtue-ethical approaches). Due to these obvious practical implications, Positive Psychology apparently fosters a new

culture of self-care, which the philosopher Michel Foucault imagined for (post-) modern individuals (Foucault, 2005).

In organizational contexts, there seems to be a demand for positive-psychological approaches as well. This applies to schools, universities and companies for example. While in schools, achievement pressure and mental disorders of teachers and students are increasing (Brohm, 2015), the Gallup Engagement-Index for Germany shows that 71 percent of German employees have a low and 14 percent have a non-existent bond to their workplace (Gallup, 2018). Therefore, research concerning organizational and personnel development presumably has a strong relevance for the near future.

Eventually, the topic of wellbeing and a flourishing life is relevant in many different topics concerning society as a whole. Various policy fields such as health, environment, labor market, economy or education affect the wellbeing of a population directly and indirectly. Thereby, quality of life and wellbeing increasingly gain importance as social indicators for affluence. For instance, the German parliament (Bundestag) in 2010 deployed a commission for "Growth, Wealth, Quality of life", which in 2013 presented its final report. Already in 2008, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy delegated the so called "Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission" to investigate alternative prosperity indicators. Also Nobel-prize-winner and psychologist Daniel Kahnemann contributed to the latter commission. The wide range of relevant societal fields affords a corresponding expertise. Therefore, it already becomes apparent, that the future of Positive Psychology in many cases will be an interdisciplinary one.

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