Although the concept of positive psychology may be traced back to the late nineteenth century, today the phrase is most often used in two ways. The first is associated with humanistic psychology and arose as a reaction against the reductionistic determinism of traditional psychoanalytic and behavioral psychology. From its beginning, humanistic psychology was concerned with exploring, understanding, and facilitating the development of positive human experience and behavior in an attempt to focus on the whole person.

For example, Abraham Maslow, one of the founding fathers of humanistic psychology, dedicated an entire chapter to outlining the major themes of a “positive approach to psychology” (1970). They include such things as researching wisdom, aesthetic perception, positive emotions, well-being, higher states of motivation, love, positive personal characteristics, self-actualization, healthy educational and organizational practices, and democracy. Another distinguishing feature of this approach to positive psychology, and to psychology in general, is that it advocates a diversity of research methods, especially qualitative techniques.

The second and more recent use of the phrase positive psychology describes an emerging school of thought in modern psychology that bears this name. Positive psychology, as it is called, also began as a reaction against certain aspects of traditional psychology, namely, its focus on negative and problematic human behavior, such as psychopathology and what is wrong or deficient in people. One of the first authoritative expressions of the basic goals, character, and methods of this field also included a most succinct definition of positive psychology: It is “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). The distinguishing feature of this approach to positive psychology that separates it from the humanistic effort is the use of traditional psychological research methods, particularly a strong emphasis on the use of quantitative techniques.

**The Field of Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology's first focal area, positive subjective experience, is characterized by the study of such topics as well-being, personal happiness, life satisfaction, optimal human experience, exceptional performance, states of flow (total involvement), the importance of meaningful activity, and the good life. The second focus concerns the study of positive individual traits, and the field has already identified 24 “character strengths and virtues” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These positive individual qualities are generally divided into six major groups: wisdom (curiosity, learning, open-mindedness, originality, social intelligence, perspective), courage (valor, perseverance, integrity), humanity (kindness, love), justice (citizenship, fairness, leadership), temperance (self-control, prudence, humility), and transcendence (beauty, gratitude, hope, spirituality, forgiveness, playfulness, zest). This work includes the development of a set of criteria by which it may be determined whether a particular human quality or behavior is indeed such a positive strength or virtue.

A third concern of positive psychology aims at developing positive social processes and institutions, including healthy relationships, nurturing families, positive educational practices, healthy workplaces,
good citizenship, and even positive political practices around the world. The University of Pennsylvania's Center for Positive Psychology is often identified as the epicenter of this approach.

A general goal of psychology and behavioral science is to help reduce suffering by developing methods to solve personal, organizational, and social problems. Thus, positive psychology aims at establishing a body of empirically supported positive practices in all three areas. One large-scale positive project, for instance, involves identifying and supporting the development of what are known as “signature strengths” (Peterson, 2006) or basic personality characteristics that are associated with mental health, personal well-being, and prosocial behavior.

Positive psychology also advocates the creation of positive therapeutic techniques and programs. In general, positive therapy involves emphasizing three aspects of the therapeutic process. One is the use of deep strategies, which includes employing the factors that are common to all good therapies, such as accurate empathy, genuineness in the relationship, mutual respect, and trust. However, a more distinguishing feature of positive therapy is its strengths perspective, which emphasizes identifying and developing an individual's abilities and character strengths as an important part of the process. Finally, positive therapy often involves focusing on periods of well-being that people spontaneously experience and connecting these moments to the therapeutic process through such activities as journal writing. Many of these techniques are found in Fava's well-being therapy, which is often cited as an example of positive therapy (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Other forms of applied positive psychology are tailored to meet the characteristics and needs of educational, social, organizational, and institutional settings.

Both forms of positive psychology focus on similar goals and hopes for the future, especially understanding optimal functioning, fostering the good life, and creating healthy social institutions that facilitate well-being. However, it is very important to keep in mind that humanistic positive psychology and positive psychology differ greatly in regard to the scientific methods that each one employs to reach these ends. Although the humanistic approach is still very much concerned with its vision of positive psychology, this view reached a peak in the 1970s. In contrast, the newer positive psychology is undergoing a period of rapid growth and development.

For example, this approach has already produced a significant body of empirically based work on positive human phenomena (Snyder & Lopez, 2002), with much more on the horizon. Of course, neither school of positive psychology is without its critics, especially in regard to difficulties associated with researching many positive topics and the risk of becoming overly idealistic. Such criticisms notwithstanding, it is crucial to note that both forms of positive psychology are reminders that psychology must focus on human potential much more than has occurred in the past if it is to understand the human experience more completely.

References

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