

Lecture 4 –Positive Psychology and the New Self

Dr. Mat Savelli

KTH 230, Mon 2:30-5:20pm

savellm@mcmaster.ca

1

Writing Session!

- Next Wednesday (Oct 4), in class.

2

Into the 21st Century

- If 20th c. was “the century of the psy-ences,” 21st c. marks culmination of the growth of psy.
- From relief of negative states and deficiencies to enhancement.
- Increasingly, daily discipline and governance over psychological life comes from the self, rather than experts.

3

Emergence of Positive Psychology

- 1990s, Seligman’s “epiphany in the garden.”
- As new head of APA, promised to revolutionize psychology by turning away from “the negative” to study the “universal science of happiness.”
- Csikszentmihayli’s own revelations and flow.
- PP emerges as the study of positive experience, human strengths, virtues.

4

Key Tenets

- Emotions like optimism can be learned, irrespective of life conditions. Happiness the result of cognitive outlook.
- Inverts Freudian theory that thoughts driven by underlying emotions (themselves products of life experiences).
- Once happiness inculcated in an individual, they'll perform better and then feel better (self-reinforcing circle).
- Seligman: rather than curing "negative states," psychology should augment ability to prevent psychopathology.
 - Courage, future-mindedness, optimism, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, capacity for flow and insight all buffers.

5

Explosion of Positive Psychology

- PP proliferates through media, academia, professional practice.
- Happiness and optimism good for health, longevity, business, grades, marriage, creativity, income, etc.
 - Fredrickson: positivity undoes damage that negativity causes to cardio system.
 - Segerstrom: positive thoughts boost the immune system.
- PP discourse infiltrates everyday practice: e.g. gratitude exercises, strength focused business meetings, etc.
- Life coaches, self-help books, happiness formulae, happiness economists, etc.

6

The Happiness Turn

- Ahmed: increasing belief that (a) happiness is a 'thing' – a condition that can be achieved, (b) that happiness is desirable, and (c) that happiness can be identified and measured.
- Happiness becomes ubiquitous as a discourse that defines the norm of what is good, desirable, healthy, and prosperous.
- Those who pursue "right happiness" rewarded w/ riches, health, social value. Those who fail to do so will be punished.
- Happiness as a *choice* that one makes.

7

Critiques of Happiness Turn

- Happiness transformed to service that can be bought and sold via 'happiness industry.'
- Part of broader ideological project for responsabilization of the individual.
- Depoliticizes and decontextualizes happiness.
- "Universal truths" of the "science of happiness" grounded in culture of individualism.
- What we assign as 'proper' sources of happiness may police certain activities and prioritize others.
- PP's tautologies: "those who are more satisfied in their life are happier."
- Scientific doubts and the 'benefits of the negative' (and existence of binary between positive/negative).

8

Conclusions

- Happiness itself redefined – from intangible and personal to definable, universal, and purchasable.
- Culmination of broader trend that sees human beings as measurable, w/ identifiable norms.
- Barker: do-it-yourself medicalization – personal tools like mindfulness reframe normal ups and downs as signs of disorder, reinforce need to be vigilant.