Why Positive Psychology Is Necessary

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The authors provide a definition of positive psychology and suggest that psychologists should try to cultivate a more appreciative perspective on human nature. Examples are given of a negative bias that seems to pervade much of theoretical psychology, which may limit psychologists' understanding of typical and successful human functioning. Finally, a preview of the articles in the special section is given.

What is positive psychology? It is nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues. Positive psychology revisits "the average person," with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving. It asks, "What is the nature of the effectively functioning human being, who successfully applies evolved adaptations and learned skills? And how can psychologists explain the fact that, despite all the difficulties, the majority of people manage to live lives of dignity and purpose?"

As such, we argue that positive psychology is simply psychology. That is, just as other natural and social sciences try to describe the typical structure and natural functioning of their topics of interest, so should psychology. Also, just as other scientists express profound appreciation for their topic of study (i.e., the physicist who admires the elegance of Einstein's equations, or the archaeologist who marvels at the achievements of ancient peoples), so should psychologists.

Positive psychology is thus an attempt to urge psychologists to adopt a more open and appreciative perspective regarding human potentials, motives, and capacities. Such an endeavor is surprisingly difficult within psychology's reductionist epistemological traditions, which train one to view positivity with suspicion, as a product of wishful thinking, denial, or hucksterism. It is probably appropriate that psychologists receive such training because all people are prone to be taken in, at least at times, by their own delusions and wishes. However, we suggest that such skepticism, taken too far, may itself constitute a negativity bias that prevents a clear understanding of reality.

Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that the normal functioning of human beings cannot be accounted for within purely negative (or problem-focused) frames of reference. In fact, the majority of the human race achieves a state of thriving, rating themselves as happy and satisfied with their lives (Meyers, 2000). Unfortunately, psychologists still know relatively little about human thriving and how to encourage it not only because they have not given this question the resources it deserves but, more important, because they have worn blinders that have prevented them from even recognizing the value of the question.

To illustrate the predominant negative bias of traditional psychology, consider the following: Clinical psychologists have focused the majority of their attention on the diagnosis and treatment of pathologies, and in the quest for "fixes," scant attention has been paid to the nature of psychological health. Practitioners of social cognitive psychology have devoted vast attention to the biases, delusions, illusions, foibles, and errors of the human being. Those who study evolutionary and economic psychology have long assumed the sovereignty of selfishness. Freud gave dominance to the animalistic id, whereas contemporary terror management theorists give dominance to the fear of death. An OVID search on the terms *error* and *bias* yielded far more hits (18,913) than did a search on the terms *strength* and *virtue* (7,423).

More specific examples bring this negative bias into sharper focus. When a research participant looks back on his life and concludes that he is a better man now than he was earlier, psychologists are quick to label it a self-serving delusion, a temporal bias, a mere emotion-regulation strategy. When a participant sees her partner as being better than the partner perceives himself or herself, this is viewed as a backhanded way for the participant to inflate her own self-esteem. When a stranger helps another person, psychologists are quick to find the selfish benefit in the act, unwilling to acknowledge the existence of altruism. Indeed, the negative bias, once identified, can be found lurking almost everywhere in theoretical psychology. Again, we

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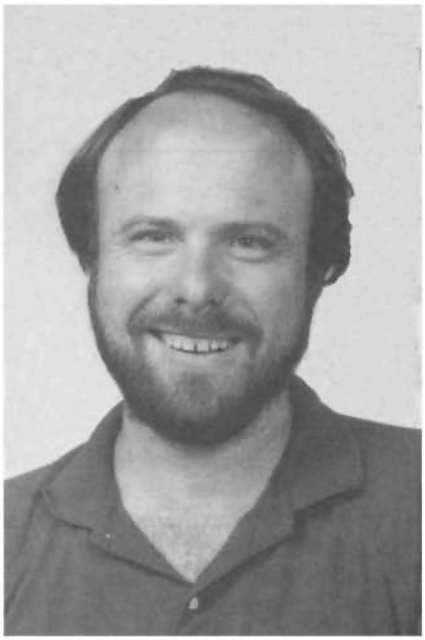

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believe this bias prevents psychologists from perceiving many important human processes, outcomes, and strengths.

In selecting the articles for this special section, we tried to illustrate some of the best of the new positive psychology, to show the exciting and potentially transforming new questions that can be asked once one adopts a more appreciative perspective. For example, why are positive emotions so important? (This is something everyone knows intuitively, but it has been the topic of relatively little study in psychology.) Barbara L. Frederickson's (2001, this issue) *broaden-and-build theory* of positive emotions offers a promising answer to this question, namely, that positive emotions facilitate the creation of important skills and resources. Why are the majority of humans around the world very satisfied with their lives despite their objective difficulties (Meyers, 2000)? Perhaps it is because of the ordinary but unappreciated magic of human resilience. In her article, Ann S. Masten (2001, this issue) discusses the remarkable adjustive capacities that resilience researchers now view as being part of every human's innate equipment. Nevertheless, some people are even happier than the rest of us—why is this? Sonja Lyubormirsky's (2001, this issue) article addresses this question, showing that happiness may really be "in our head"; as folk wisdom has long asserted, happy people appreciate what they have, without dwelling on what they do not have. Finally, is it possible for positive psychology to also be realistic psychology, or is this an oxymoron? Sandra L. Schneider's (2001, this issue) article tackles this question, showing that there is a fuzzy range of factual knowledge and possible interpretations that allows positive or optimistic construals to be just as potentially accurate as any other construal. At the same time, positive construals are also more adaptive, in that they help to actually bring about the optimist's vision.

As readers peruse this special section, we hope they will agree that psychologists should focus more attention on the positive aspects of human nature. If psychologists allow themselves to see the best as well as the worst in people, they may derive important new understanding of human nature and destiny.

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