

DISCUSS AND EVALUATE SOME FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

In previous years psychology has tended to focus much of its attention on the understanding and repairing of negative aspects of human nature, for instance depression and prejudice. In doing this it has neglected the finer qualities of life. Positive psychology is concerned with emphasising factors that contribute to happiness and well being, rather than trying to treat deficit and pathology. This assignment aims to highlight some of the fundamental assumptions of positive psychology, whilst at the same time addressing any major criticisms.

A key figure in the positive psychology movement is Martin Seligman. Seligman believes that modern psychology has been so preoccupied with relieving any factors that may make life miserable, that it has forgotten about those that produce a more enjoyable existence. According to him, social sciences in particular, view human strengths and virtues as mere fantasy, whilst negative motivation and human flaws are viewed as authentic. As a result of this, human beings have often been disregarded as passive victims of society. Seligman aims to correct this unbalance by promoting the investigation into positive areas of psychology.

Seligman proposes three 'desirable lives,' the first one being 'The pleasant life.' This refers to any positive emotions that arise from happiness and well-being. He divides these emotions into three main categories, past, present and future. He believes that in order to feel happier about our past, we must abandon any fears that previous bad experiences will determine our present and future. In order to feel content in the present, we must distinguish between 'pleasures' and 'gratifications.' Pleasure can present itself in two forms. Those that occur 'through the senses,' and are transitory, for instance a beautiful smell, and those that are taught through experience and are explained through the feelings they produce. He also states that if we wish to improve the way we feel about our future we must change our outlook on life to enable us to become more optimistic and hopeful. Seligman believes that in order to achieve a 'pleasant life' you must combine the positive emotions of our past, present and future

The second is 'The good life,' and this involves what Seligman refers to as 'gratifications. Gratifications are activities we deeply enjoy, but unlike 'pleasures,' they are not necessarily accompanied by any raw feelings. Gratification can be achieved through identifying and developing our most fundamental strengths and virtues, for instance creativity and compassion. He believes that by "*Using your strengths and virtues to obtain abundant gratification in the main realms of life,*" you will achieve what he refers to as 'The good life.'

The final life is the 'meaningful life.' Seligman defines a 'meaningful life' as, "*the use of our strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are.*" In Seligman's view, these strengths and virtues are intrinsic to human nature. This notion is referred to as 'The dual aspect theory.'

However, Freud maintains a more deterministic view. In his opinion all good actions stem from negative motivation. This notion was originally based on the 'Doctrine of Original sin,' whereby all individuals are viewed as inherently sinful. Although this view is widely accepted among the religious and secular world, there is no evidence to support its claims.

Christopher Peterson is a firm supporter of positive psychology. In his opinion the main aim of psychology should be the prevention of human suffering, rather than the treatment. He argues that society, by large, would benefit more from the prohibition of harmful disorders, than through their healing. In this case, why is this method of prevention rarely demonstrated in psychological practise? Peterson believes the main reason for this is, that prevention strategies are not as as psychotherapeutic ones, and therefore psychologists are not educated in this field. However its counterpart is a required element of their training.

Despite the fact that many sensitive issues could benefit from psychological expertise, psychologists, in the past have tended to steer clear of applying their work to any politically sensitive areas. However according to Ed Cairns, more recently it is becoming common place for it to be used in such fields. For instance, Christopher Al Lewis believes that positive psychology is now contributing to the promotion of peace. This can be illustrated in Allport's example of 'the contact hypothesis,' which states that contact between two people will ultimately lead to reduced conflict. This hypothesis has played a major role in the Northern Ireland peace process, whereby policy makers aimed to build the rapport of the community and prevent conflict before it actually occurs. The role of positive psychology in the promotion of peace can be illustrated in the following three areas. The first being 'conflict resolution.'

Positive psychology is not only relevant to the individual, it can also be applied to groups and organizations.

In the last decade, prevention has moved to the forefront of psychology and has become a priority in terms of policy making, psychological practice. Due to the rise of this positive perspective, Seligman believes that principle theories in psychology no longer view the individual as a passive 'victim' of society, but rather as an active part in the decision making of their own life. In his opinion individuals now have the opportunity to make preferences, for instance, becoming happy and successful, or in some cases settling for misery and failure. According to Seligman, those approaches that rely largely on positive psychology are likely to have the direct effect of preventing many serious emotional conditions. At the same time it may result in an increase of physically healthier individuals, given all it teaches about the influence of mental well- being on the body. But finally, by concentrating on a perspective that focuses on building the abilities of individuals, rather than correcting their weaknesses, Seligman hopes to fully restore psychology back to its neglected task of making people stronger, happier and more productive.