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The imperative of happiness in positive psychology: Towards a psychopolitics of wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Positive Psychology has reconstructed how we understand happiness. The practices and discourses it presents to perform that reconceptualization appear as if free from political interest or intentionality. However, this article will show that its proposals define a subtle new form of government which we will call Psychopolitics. Instead of placing the population or the body of the citizen at the centre of political struggles, it focuses on the psyche. Through an extreme defence of positive emotions and happiness as the key to a good life, Positive Psychology promotes a type of friendly power relations, which instead of punishing motivates and empowers the individual's creativity. To illustrate all of this, we conducted a case study with a Positive Psychology training course taught in a Spanish state university. Content analysis was used to explain the recurring themes and practices of this new discipline of positivity, showing how health is redefined around the happiness axis, and how happiness becomes an individual responsibility. We conclude that all these dimensions are simply a categorical definition of a new type of power relations which may characterise the 21st century.

1. Introduction: Happiness and positive psychology

As several authors (Arguís et al., 2010; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Fordyce, 1977) have remarked, happiness is one of the major goals regarded as exceptionally valuable in the sociocultural imaginary of our contemporary societies. It is a commonplace in academic literature to state that this is a construct which varies both diachronically - that is, over history, and synchronically - through culture and political axes. If we go back to Classical Greece, we quickly find that it was considered a greater good (Aristotle, 2009). On the other hand, in the Middle Ages, happiness appears as something we obtain in the next life (Aquinas, 2010; Augustine of Hippo, 2019). If we look at its definition in other cultures, past and present, but characterised by their distance from our own cultural coordinates, we find that happiness is included with values centred in the body or in collective well-being. All these examples show that its definition varies and multiplies depending on temporal, local,

social, religious, and political coordinates (see Tables 3–7).

More recently, and in our immediate context, in the Modern Age, with the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), happiness was proclaimed to be a right. Along these lines, a plethora of movements have emerged in the Contemporary Age which approach this right and feeling from a more practical perspective, based on scientific principles (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The most recent conception, considered to belong to the 21st century, suggests that happiness may not be governed only by rulings which control people's lives through their bodies or their religious values, but also through the immediate and productive management of the *psyche* (Han, 2014; Stiegler, 2013). This notion should not be understood as a genetic, idiosyncratic and deep-rooted dimension of the individual which could be externalised through words or observation as it was in the 19th century, with the clearest examples being psychoanalysis or classic

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cognitive psychology, but more from an existential perspective of meaning in life, initially explored in the 20th century by the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1959), whose experience of being a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp can be used to address today's global psychological problem of suicidal behaviours (Costanza, Amerio, et al., 2020) after the financial crisis (Economou et al., 2013) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Costanza et al., 2021). Nowadays, the psychic realm has received a new, much broader and more operational definition, which makes it a set of relationships between internal aspects of the human being (which pass through the body and cognition) and other external aspects which pass directly through knowledge and the technologies which have recently begun to dominate our everyday lives (apps focusing on health, mindfulness, balanced diets, etc.). This is the result, among other things, of the fact that although in recent years we have put much more emphasis on looking for the so-called society of wellbeing (Rose et al., 2006), which emphasises care for the somatic, at present being physically well is no longer enough, and we are required to go a step further. Thus, the transformation of different world organisations in relation to the concept of health is clear. While in 1948 the World Health Organization defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not the mere absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1946), by the end of the 20th century it was considered "a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities" (PAHO, 1986). In this new accepted sense, "personal" covers everything which was formerly called mental, but many more axes too, such as our relationship with the information generated by certain healthcare apps, the results we get from psychological or intelligence tests, or our interpersonal skills. In this pivot by the WHO we see health become an assumption, and the new goal of every citizen becomes achieving absolute and overall or comprehensive positive well-being. At this crossover of dimensions is when the so-called "psyche" acquires a new definition and value.

Positive Psychology is one of the movements which has taken advantage of this paradigm change and has aligned itself with this new attitude towards the psyche, which must be optimised to reach this well-being. In January 1998 it began using the concepts of "happiness" and "well-being" interchangeably as generic constructs to describe the proposals of its practical and intellectual initiative. The creators of this new discipline decided that "the content of the scientific enterprise should rest on three pillars" (Seligman, 2002, p. 384): a) the study of positive emotion; b) the study of the positive personality, the strengths and virtues whose regular exercise generates positive feelings; and 3) the establishment of a classifying and categorising system. In this way, the new discipline was affirming that a happy person would be one who enjoyed many positive experiences, had few negative ones, and saw himself as satisfied with his life (Diener et al., 1999). This meant a change of direction from what had originally underpinned Positive Psychology. In the beginning it had focused on studying only the positive aspects of human functioning in its most everyday and immediate activities. This First Wave, which emerged as a kind of counterweight to traditional psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005), received a series of popular criticisms for its negative side effects, its simplistic application and the universality of its theories with a "Pollyanna-ish"¹ view of the world (Sample, 2003). This internal questioning gave way to a Second Wave which advocated giving up the negative-positive dichotomy and broadening the field of study, coming to understand well-being in a more dialectic and eudaimonic way (Salanova & Llorens, 2016). This more interactive perspective, which includes the change of direction mentioned above, has been called "Positive Psychology 2.0" (Wong, 2011).

However, what could be called the Third Wave of Positive Psychology is already becoming apparent. Here the excessive focus on the individual will be expanded to include cultural, ethical, and contextual aspects. According to Lomas et al. (2020), this will introduce a deeper and more complex approach which will take into account the groups and systems which individuals inhabit. The Positive Psychology of the future

will be interdisciplinary and work with a wide range of methodologies, leading to a necessary epistemological expansion. It seems obvious that this wave is the response to the many criticisms of Positive Psychology in recent years, which are structured around three axes. First, critics point to the excessive individualism of this approach. Its concept of happiness and well-being gravitate exclusively around an individual who makes decisions in a very narrow and limited social dimension (Cabanas, 2018). Second, some authors (De La Fabian & Stecher, 2017; Teo, 2018) affirm that this individualism is a resource to legitimise a new concept of Homo Neoliberalus, based on subjectivity centred on utilitarianism and the lack of socio-political criticism. Finally, it has been suggested that there is no analysis of how certain commonplace technologies in our everyday lives generate a series of affective modulations with our bodies that align them with neoliberal attitudes to productivity, emotions, and action (Martínez-Guzmán & Lara, 2019).

To avoid validating the analysed premises, thus perpetuating the mechanisms of subjectivation, we must make clear that of course there are other philosophical approaches to happiness that Positive Psychology is not considering at all; for example the philosophical theory of Absurdism, where the universe is irrational and meaningless. Research based on this would definitely contradict the claims of Positive Psychology, as it states that trying to find meaning would lead humanity into a conflict with the world.

Despite all these criticisms, it seems obvious that the number of studies on Positive Psychology has increased exponentially in recent years, and several meta-analyses have been published in very important journals, showing its effectiveness in increasing psychological wellbeing and reducing depression and stress (Hendriks et al., 2020). Some authors (Fagundes et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2007) consider that all of this shows the existence of a new imperative at the service of an old objective: increasing worker productivity. Other works (Brito et al., 2020) return to the standardisation effect which this imperative, expressed through "self-help", could have on the subjective perceptions of neoliberal citizens.

At any event, there are two important gaps in all the literature mentioned above. First, there is no analysis of the discourses and practices promoting Positive Psychology, which could be shaping the previously mentioned third wave. Second, it has not been suggested that the imperative of happiness or success of Positive Psychology is simply a sign that a new type of power relations is emerging, which does not fall under the heading of "neoliberalism" nor under the Foucauldian label of biopolitics or optimisation of the life of the neoliberal citizen (Foucault, 1979).

To fill these gaps, our research proposed to analyse the contents of the discourses and the practices promoted by Positive Psychology through a case study of a Master's degree taught in a Spanish state university, to explain if happiness can be related to politics. Although it seems paradoxical, we suggest that this hidden political value would not be linked to the liberal or neoliberal economic and social imaginary which defines our societies. On the contrary, we argue that the discourses and practices of Positive Psychology relate to the emergence of a new format of power relations, which Han (2014) calls the psychopolitical regime. Positive Psychology is an instrument promoting a happiness imperative which forms one of the key dimensions of what we have called the psychopolitics of well-being. This new power regime could be the essential characteristic of our present, and would indicate that the arena of power struggles and the urge to control are now not exclusively in the biological realm (Bios), as post-structuralist thinking has stated (Agamben, 2020; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Foucault, 1979; Hardt & Negri, 2000) since the late 20th century, but now also include a special interest in the psyche.

To illustrate all of this, first we present and discuss the notions of the entrepreneur and emotional capitalism. Next, we assess the notion of psychopolitics in its conceptual and heuristic aspects. Third, we describe our methodology and data analysis with ATLAS.ti, and finally, we conclude that Positive Psychology is one of the exponents of a new

power regime. This discipline promotes a happiness imperative which is the central axis of what we have called the Psychopolitics of Well-being.

2. Entrepreneur of the self and emotional capitalism

The new era of permanent communication and public exposure (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) has a flipside, which is simply the need for us to constantly know ourselves (self-knowledge) and take care of ourselves (self-care). The movement known as *Quantified Self*, the goal of which is to increase physical, mental, and spiritual performance through self-measurement, is a good example of this (Lupton, 2016; Nafus & Sherman, 2014). From the point of view of many authors (Illouz, 2019; Lazzarato, 2012), this need is simply the implementation of a new mechanism of self-exploitation, which finds its main vehicle in generating information, and where the beginning and end of the process depends on our own subjectivity.

As we know, Foucault (1979) gave the name “entrepreneurs of the self” to individuals who reproduce this self-management logic. The subject is now an entrepreneur (understanding enterprise to be a task or action which involves work or effort), not only in the professional sphere but also in the personal and above all in the emotional realms. This entrepreneur is configured as a performativity of actions, appearing as a reflective project which is subjected, alone or with the support of consultants, therapists, coaches or other authorities, to a continuous self-monitoring, to adjust, again and again, the trajectory of *sui vida* (Brockling, 2015).

In the context discussed above there has been a proliferation of practices and discourses on coaching, self-help, emotional intelligence, and Positive Psychology. Using them, we dose ourselves with well-being, try to temporarily calm an unease which we find ourselves unable to identify clearly, and construct a *modus vivendi* which little by little makes the search for happiness its central axis. In this way, we have gradually entered a new form of “intangible production” which now not only values technical expertise (hard skills) or information, but also values emotional competencies (soft skills). As well as human capital and social capital (people with good social networks, to attract new customers, new ideas, new projects, etc.) at present what is most valued - for their capacity for development, their inimitability and their “competitive advantage” (Luthans et al., 2007) - are the psychological (or personal) resources of individuals, such as Attitude, Emotional Intelligence, personal Strengths or Psychological Capital. For some authors, all this shows that we have entered a new type of capitalism which, going beyond information (Zuboff, 2015), fuses onto and operates in the emotions (Illouz, 2019). The emotional realm is the new field of action of capitalisation and wealth generation: we invest in emotions, we look for their profitability, we accumulate them, we sell them ... Large corporations and institutions mobilise emotions to generate extra value which is added to the value generated by information and the circulation of goods.

3. What is psychopolitics?

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han, adapting Stiegler’s (2011) notion of psychopower, recently put forward the thesis that we are witnessing the birth of a new form of government of the population characterised by prioritising the psyche as the object of its actions. He called this Psychopolitics (2014). Unlike biopolitics, whose object is life, whether in the form of *bios* (the moral) or *zoé* (the body), psychopolitics acts on individuals’ pre-reflective mind, exercising a type of power which does not coerce and oppress, but motivates them and lets them act freely. Han (2013) refers to a power which acts based on freedom and positivity, which does not subjugate violently to bend citizens to its will but seduces the citizen into freely choosing to submit. This power does not standardise, as discipline does with the body, but moulds to the psyche of each individual, explores its nature, and based on that, directs behaviour.

Psychopolitics makes the individual into a project constantly being proposed and reinvented on the emotional plane. In psychopolitical devices, individuals constantly manage their psyche, looking for well-being and positive emotions. The wide range of life choices provided by neoliberalism and the consumer society are accompanied by a sensation of individual freedom together with a disconnection from all external, social coercion. Han (2012) suggests that, far from being free, contemporary individuals have interiorised disciplinary coercion and are constantly exploiting themselves to maximise their life projects.

Positive Psychology as an academic discipline plays a key role in all the above. Its redefinition of happiness, its quantification, and the definition of the healthy individual based on that quantification are its defining elements. The following sections show how its discourses and practices follow what we have described, and perfectly reproduce a citizen-project which perfectly fits into this new form of government, Psychopolitics.

4. Methodology

4.1. A case study

This article is based on qualitative research. Specifically, we chose the case study method because it would open up the possibility of using a wide range of techniques, allowing data to be gathered from multiple information sources (Yin, 2009). As the main purpose was to describe in order to find variables and identify relationships, we proposed a holistic single-case design which would let us explore the context in which the phenomenon was inserted and explain causal links of the processes involved in the phenomenon in real-life application (Rashid et al., 2019). As some researchers explain about this methodology, the main purpose is not to generalize but to particularize a given case based on its situational reality (White & Cooper, 2022).

The Master’s in Applied Positive Psychology was the case chosen to gather data for the following reasons: First, it is illustrative of the research topic, since the Happiness proposal of Positive Psychology is explicitly promoted. Second, its relevance in all Spanish-speaking countries since it is the first Master’s Degree in Positive Psychology to be taught fully online by a university in Spain, in Spanish, and with the support of the Spanish Society of Positive Psychology (SEPP). Third, it is generally representative of the field because it includes the discourses and applies the practices of the most current Positive Psychology endorsed by the methodology of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania. Fourth, it was easy to access the materials of this one-year training course because the main researcher was a student of the Master (in its 5th edition) during the investigation.

Based on the meta-analysis by Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam (2018), we followed the case study protocols of Merriam (1998) and Yin (2009) and overlapped them to obtain a step-by-step protocol to fit our research needs which resulted in the levels that we finally carried out: 1) literature review, 2) construction of a theoretical framework, 3) identification of the research problem, 4) definition of research questions, 5) sample selection, 6) data collection, 7) data analysis and 8) conclusions.

4.2. Data collection

Specifically, the empirical data raised as the main sources for content analysis were the following: 1) Course texts containing the theory taught in the class in text format, 2) images and graphics in the form of lecture slides, 3) audiovisual files, 4) the program’s official webpage and its virtual intranet context, and 5) discourses and 6) practices delivered by the lecturers.

The research question of whether positive psychology’s discourses and practices can be related to politics guided the data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and led to a document² constructed over a six-month period, for 8 h per week, where notes by the main researcher

were systematically taken on all this content taught in the course. We decided to analyse only the second semester as the first half was treated as period of adaptation to the field and used to design the research taking into account the characteristics of the case studied. Although the students were not part of the observation process, Participant Observation was used to understand the everyday ways of acting, thinking and feeling of a group in a specific space and time under the daily discourses and practices of Positive Psychology delivered by the lecturers.

4.3. Analysis of the information

To analyse the information we followed abductive reasoning (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010), which is a knowledge production strategy associated with constructionism that occupies the middle ground between induction and deduction. Although Plutynski (2011) identifies many problems (Boundary, Formalization, Description and Justification), in our reasoning we used empirical data to illustrate the hypothesis while we were accepting the theory to explain the empirical data. So, although we accepted the existing theory of psychopolitics we were also data-driven to (re)generate that theory. And as a good abduction process should have a hypothesis that explains the facts while the facts sustain the hypothesis (Peirce, 1998), that is exactly what we found in our case of study.

A Content Analysis was performed to explore how, and how much, the happiness discourse and practices proposed in the Positive Psychology course serve the current device of neoliberal governmentality defined as Psychopolitics. To categorize and link the information divided into empirical material (data collected) and theoretical material (characteristics of Psychopolitics), we introduced the empirical corpus in the qualitative data analysis programme ATLAS.ti (version 8) and this gave us a list of items exemplifying the general concept of Happiness proposed by Positive Psychology.

The process to qualitatively categorize this information was to extract the following attributes from each item: 1) its main characteristics, 2) what these characteristics imply, and 3) Keyword(s) that can summarize it. There were 74 different units of data involved in the coding. To take an example, from an item of empirical data extracted from the course texts and theory such as “Positive Psychology concludes that happiness is distributed in three large dimensions: Genetics (50%), Circumstances (10%) and Intentional Activity (40%) (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).” it could be qualitatively concluded that 1) Happiness, according to Positive Psychology, depends a little on circumstances, a bit more on intentional activity and a great deal on genetics. 2) That implies that circumstances are almost irrelevant to happiness, since it depends on the genetics with which you were born and what you do intentionally. 3) Keyword(s): individualisation, innate happiness, intentional control, not dependent on context, etc.

Therefore, with just one item of empirical material it could already be explained that the main premise of the science of happiness is that it is worth striving to be happy (since it is stated that 40% percent is subject to a certain control by the individual), a fact that could be related to the Psychopolitical theoretical perspective through the coding “Individualisation”.

From there, redundant items were eliminated and the most relevant ones were selected to reach saturation. Next, the remaining items were grouped in codes that represented the main topics of Positive Psychology. Finally, each thematic code (for example, “Practices”) was related to the characteristics of Psychopolitics through their respective associated items.

It is noteworthy that this analytical procedure was put to the test by other researchers from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, reaching similar conclusions.

Table 1 summarizes the different types of empirical data gathered (first column) and how the characteristics of Psychopolitics (second column) emerged from each specific category. We also show all the repetitive characteristics that overlapped during the analysis (third

Table 1
Categories of empirical data and psychopolitics.

Empirical Data (and number of units)	Characteristics of Psychopolitics	Overlapped Characteristics
1) Course texts & theory (28)	Individualisation: Structures are disregarded. Responsibility falls on individuals. If they fail, they blame themselves. Psychologisation: The power which used to be exercised against the body is now applied to the mind. The mental is more important than the physical.	● Improvement ● Attraction ● Emotional Capitalism ● Transparency ● Prescription ● Positivity ● Measurement
2) Images and graphics (19)	Improvement: Promotes refining, a perpetual improvement of the Self.	● Attraction ● Transparency ● Ubiquity ● Gamification
3) Audiovisual files (3)	Attraction: It does not force anything, it invites. Smart power, seductive rather than oppressive, and giving us the freedom to reproduce and even improve the neoliberal <i>modus vivendi</i> . From “must be” to “can do”. Emotional Capitalism: Emotion is the raw material; neoliberalism converts the power of the psyche into productive power. It exploits everything to do with the emotions.	● Transparency ● Ubiquity ● Immediacy ● Gamification
4) Virtual context (2)	Transparency: We strip naked voluntarily. The digital panopticon (Big Data) enables us to surveil each other, creating a standardisation of the masses. Psychographics with a double function: gathering and distributing information about the desires of society/societies. Ubiquity: through total communication, it reaches the whole world horizontally and penetrates all the fabric of society vertically. It attempts to be present in every sphere of our everyday lives.	● Individualisation ● Psychologisation ● Improvement ● Attraction ● Immediacy ● Gamification
5) Discourses (13)	Prescription: This shows us what it is good to feel, think and do. It constructs reality and (fore)tells what is desirable. Positivity: “The good” is rewarded and made visible, and “the bad” is criminalised and made invisible. Creation and establishment of ideal thoughts and behaviours.	● Psychologisation ● Improvement ● Emotional Capitalism
6) Practices (9)	Measurement: Everything must be measurable, and everything must be measured. Everything must become data. The Quantified Self as a data source for Big Data. Immediacy: Promotes and exploits immediacy, leaving no space for reflection. Stigmatises slowness and encourages accelerationism: now or never. Operates at the emotional, pre-reflective level. Gamification: It can make our jobs more flexible and fun, but our working hours follow us home. There are no longer boundaries between leisure and business. Life is capital.	● Individualisation ● Psychologisation ● Improvement ● Attraction ● Emotional Capitalism ● Transparency ● Ubiquity ● Prescription ● Positivity

column), with the main characteristics being the most representative and the overlapped being just secondary (see Table 2).

As shown in the table, some elements have overlapped and we take this overlapping into account in the analysis. The categories obtained

Table 2
Positive mental health for positive performance.

Empirical Data	Primary Characteristics
Positive Mental Health (Díaz et al., 2007)	Prescription Psychologisation Positivity Emotional Capitalism
Theory of the “Happy-Productive Worker” (Lucas & Diener, 2003)	Gamification Individualisation Improvement Ubiquity Emotional Capitalism
€2.97 Operating Return on Investment (World Economic Forum)	Prescription Measurement Emotional Capitalism Measurement Gamification

Table 3
(Re)defining happiness.

Empirical Data	Primary Characteristics
Diener’s (1999) requirements of happiness: - Presence of positive emotions (joy) - Absence of negative emotions (sadness) - Positive evaluation of life (satisfaction) The experience of joy, satisfaction or positive well-being, combined with the feeling that life is good, meaningful and worthwhile. (Lyubomirsky, 2008)	Prescription Psychologisation Positivity Emotional Capitalism Emotional Capitalism Prescription
True happiness derives from identifying and cultivating people’s major strengths and from its everyday use in work, love, leisure, and raising children. (Seligman, 2011)	Ubiquity Measurement Prescription Transparency Individualisation Improvement

Table 4
(Re)modelling happiness.

Empirical Data	Primary Characteristics
Model of the three paths of Seligman (2002): 1. The Pleasant Life (emotions) 2. The Good Life (engagement) 3. The Meaningful Life (purpose)	Prescription Psychologisation Positivity Emotional Capitalism Individualisation Improvement
The PERMA model of happiness (Seligman, 2012): - Positive Emotions - Engagement - Relations - Meaning - Accomplishment	Positivity Individualisation Attraction Psychologisation Emotional Capitalism Prescription
The Model of Eudaimonic Well-being of Ryff (1989): - Autonomy - Self-acceptance - Positive Relationships - Purpose in Life - Personal Growth - Environmental Mastery	Emotional Capitalism Psychologisation Improvement Positivity Prescription Individualisation Attraction

from the ATLAS.ti analysis of the items were grouped under the following epigraphs to illustrate their relation with Psychopolitics: 1) Positive Mental Health for Positive Performance, 2) (Re)defining happiness, 3) (Re)modelling happiness, 4) Practising happiness, 5) A measurement of happiness, 6) A new individual: positive and happy, 7) Positive Education, 8) Positive Psychology Models and 9) Positive Psychology New Perspectives. These nine themed categorical structures were derived from linking each specific unit of empirical data [for example, Positive Psychology’s (re)definition of Mental Health (Díaz

Table 5
Practising happiness.

Empirical Data	Primary Characteristics
Mindfulness	Prescription Psychologisation Individualisation Ubiquity
Best Possible Self	Psychologisation Individualisation Improvement Ubiquity Immediacy
Three Good Things	Positivity Prescription Ubiquity
Savouring	Individualisation Ubiquity Attraction Immediacy
Positive Language	Positivity Measurement Immediacy Psychologisation Individualisation Prescription

Table 6
A measurement of happiness.

Empirical Data	Primary Characteristics
Happiness can be measured using questionnaires, tests and apps	Measurement Emotional Capitalism Immediacy Individualisation Ubiquity Attraction Psychologisation Transparency

Table 7
A new individual: positive and happy.

Empirical Data	Primary Characteristics
What are Positive People like? - Social affiliation and free time - Sense of humour - Extroverts and emotionally stable - Sense of spirituality - Behaviour tends towards the positive (optimism) - They try to be happy - They smile more - They live longer and better! - Prosocial behaviour (helping others)	Prescription Psychologisation Positivity Individualisation
Personal Resources of Positive People: • Self-efficacy • Resilience • Optimism • Positive emotions • Responsibility • Trust	Prescription Psychologisation Positivity Individualisation Emotional Capitalism

et al., 2007)] with their primary characteristics, and then expanding these characteristics to other items of empirical data to create networks of qualitative relations. (To justify the first axis for example, it is a fact that the new “Positive Mental Health” was taught on the exact same page as “Benefits for Performance” and “Return On Investment”, thus corroborating the results of the qualitative analysis of the Master’s).

Although these are the main nine axes of the Psychopolitics of Positive Psychology, all themes were not equally prominent, and so we decided to eliminate the three last axes from the former analysis,

because they rarely appeared or appeared only in one source and not others, and thus were less relevant. The discarded axes were Positive Education, Positive Psychology Models, and Positive Psychology New Perspectives.

4.4. A note about reliability

Given the qualitative nature of this research, it is vital to address some issues of trustworthiness, taking into account that the claims we make about what to draw from our analysis are not definitive and can change depending on the context and over time. With our method we have analysed frames of meaning that do not allow generalisation, but do allow us to elaborate an ideal type, a model that fits the case studied very well and can be used to investigate other cases, while assuming that in other specific cases it may vary.

5. What is hidden behind the discourses and practices of positive psychology?

Positive Psychology is presented as a discipline without links to any global political framework. Its aspirations centre on eliminating individual suffering, and its intellectual and practical activity are linked to finding tools to enable this eradication. Our Content Analysis shows that first, it turns to the concept of health and happiness to achieve these goals, and second, doing this makes apparent the political dimension of this discipline, which it tries to sidestep. Its goals define a happiness imperative through practices which are constantly quantified and measured by the recipient individuals themselves. Next, we will present the six networks or themed categorical structures which we found in our research, and which allow us to make this statement. Each of them in turn describes an axis defining Positive Psychology as a new scientific discipline and life project. And all of them, as a whole, unanimously show the deployment of a new exercise in power relations we will call the Psychopolitics of Well-being. We will introduce these networks with a table at the start of each sub-section showing the relationships among categories obtained with the Atlas.ti software, clearly displaying the number and density of links established between them. These tables show the groupings of categories we obtained in our analysis. Column 1 shows the data used while column 2 shows the primary Psychopolitical characteristics of every specific item of the Empirical Data.

5.1. Positive Mental Health for Positive Performance

Our first axis' table presents the following groupings:

The above table shows a direct link between positive mental health and positive performance in any area or project a citizen is working on. The verbatim quote from [Díaz et al. \(2007\)](#) is central to this conceptual network: "mental health implies a positive emotional state, [...] having expectations of a positive future, and in general, an adaptative mode of interpreting reality. But it also means having resources to face adversity, and even more important, to develop as human beings."

Thus, Positive Psychology is presented as a discipline which goes beyond the deficit; in other words, it aspires to be something more than a palliative for a lack. It establishes a link between mental health and success ([Lyubomirsky et al., 2005](#)) through notions and theories of performance such as the "Happy-Productive Worker" ([Lucas & Diener, 2003](#)). In fact, the Positive Psychology course explains that health is closely linked to capital, justifying in literally economic terms what is called a Return on Investment: an amount of monetary resources saved on the use of health services or returned in other ways, such as increased productivity in companies. It mentions as a fun fact that according to the World Economic Forum, the value of this ROI is calculated at 2.97 euros for each euro invested in Happiness Programmes. The table clearly shows that Well-being is a keyword which spreads from the sphere of health to the business world. And most importantly, that this does not happen through discourse on public-private investment policies or

practices and improving human capital, but through a clear Psychologization. The mind and the psyche dominate the conceptual structure, replacing interest in physical health. This psychologization is dominated by the emotions which refer to happiness and its possible capitalisation. As we already mention in earlier sections, the conceptual structure of the graph perfectly fits the paradigm propounded by the World Health Organisation itself on the link between well-being and personal performance: "Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" ([WHO, 2018](#)).

Here we have the first axis defining Positive Psychology, which suggests that positive mental health is a necessary condition for positive performance.

5.2. (Re)defining happiness

The second table we obtained is:

The second obvious category structure which appeared in our study shows how the defining axes of Positive Psychology include the intention of reconceptualising the idea of happiness. It goes from a broad and varied conceptualisation to pivoting almost exclusively on the central axis of emotion. Thus, the literature used in the course analysed is dominated by classic authors such as [Diener et al. \(1999\)](#) who for years have been focusing on how we should feel our emotions, and strange as it may seem, how much. If these emotions are positive and plentiful in time and space, they will create a state of joy and satisfaction, which is the desired objective of Positive Psychology ([Lyubomirsky, 2008](#)). True happiness is built on this axis of emotionality ([Seligman, 2012](#)) and all citizens are invited to make their inner selves transparent so that the proposal of happiness can be applied and radiate into all spheres of everyday life through "its everyday use in work, love, leisure, and raising children."

Thus the second defining axis of Positive Psychology, as can be seen in this table, is the articulation of happiness over positive emotional experience and the need to quantify these experiences, given that the more often they occur in our lives, the more well-being we will experience.

5.3. (Re)modelling happiness

At a third moment, we were able to establish this table:

The above table shows a third categorical structure whose importance surprised us. It refers to the fact that happiness is not just redefined, but also remodelled. Positive Psychology is not averse to the scientific ambition of proposing models and causal explanations. Thus, in this case, it looks for models which support the factors influencing the creation of human happiness. In fact, the teachings of one of its founders, Martin Seligman, is prominent in the Positive Psychology course because it suggests that a "good life" ([Seligman, 2002](#)) can be achieved if we can break down the concept into three phases or hierarchical stages: first, the life of the emotions (the Pleasant Life); second, of commitment (the Good Life); and third, of purpose (the Meaningful Life). Alongside this structure of three phases, the PERMA model of happiness ([Seligman, 2012](#)) also appears often, adding a list of factors which must be fulfilled to have a happy life (Prescription). Other authors such as [Carol Ryff \(1989\)](#) also appear frequently, as they have formulated models which emphasise engagement, or commitment to a purpose and to personal growth, using attractive graphics (Attraction) to prescribe the idealistic idea that any autonomous individual (Individualisation) must develop himself or herself (Improvement) to fit into the Well-being Model prescribed by positive science.

From the above, we can conclude that the third axis defining Positive Psychology is modelling happiness according to the image or metaphor of a path with different stages which must be overcome to reach a final goal, which would be what is considered a "good life" or desirable state

of happiness.

5.4. Practising happiness

The fourth table of results of our research is complementary to the previous one and can be seen below:

Obviously, the existence of the network of categories described in the previous section is supported by another which describes suitable practices for following the path that leads to the “good place”. Thus, we see that one of the key points of Positive Psychology is its supply of a wide range of so-called “Positive Practices” intended to increase well-being in search of an “optimal human functioning” (Improvement). Some of these practices are thinking positive, thinking of your *Best Possible Self*, *Savouring* the here and now through *Mindfulness*, and practising gratitude by writing a letter or listing *Three Good Things* which have happened at the end of the day. As can be inferred from this list of practices, individuals on their journey to maximum happiness are constantly required to explain (Transparency) their emotions, thoughts and behaviours using Measuring and recording mechanisms which accompany them at all times. Thus, happiness is something which demands exercise, practice, and perseverance. But not just any type of action leads to “good living”. There is an extensive catalogue in which individuals must make their emotions, thoughts and behaviours transparent. This is the fourth major axis defining Positive Psychology.

5.5. A measurement of happiness

A fifth table offers these results:

One of the most characteristic elements of Positive Psychology, and which makes it radically different from other approaches which also deal with the question of human well-being (psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology in all its variants, emotional intelligence, etc.) is its emphasis on the ability to measure happiness. This theme is the heart of the fifth conceptual structure which appeared in our research.

“Happiness can be measured using questionnaires, tests and apps” is a phrase recorded from the training course which epitomises the *modus operandi* of Positive Psychology as a scientific discipline. This leverages the aspiration of the scientific method to measure everything (Measurement) so that its proposal for happiness seems to involve a goal which can be objective and operational, and presents a certain level of stability. The basic premise of the “science of happiness” is that everything must be measurable and everything must be measured: when someone asks how we feel, we immediately become transparent and the emotional data we provide (for example, reacting with emoticons [icons of the emotions] on social networks online) can be quantified based on various systems. Quantifying and measuring happiness is the fifth axis defining Positive Psychology.

5.6. A new individual: positive and happy

Finally, our data are grouped in this sixth table:

Finally, our exploration obtained a categorical structure which had to do with the definition of the citizen. Here, individual people are the main recipients and beneficiaries of the messages sent by Positive Psychology. This discipline explains what persons determined to be “positive” are like, and what resources they have. In this exercise we observed three elements. First, an exacerbated individualisation which appears as a result of the Psychologization mentioned above. Second, a projection of this individual into the future, given that they are considered a project which can be improved indefinitely. Finally, this individual is made responsible for making, or not making, the decision which can lead to a fuller, happier life. In other words, the resources, the practices, the knowledge, the scientific constancy exist, and therefore it is ultimately the individual who is responsible for having a good life or rejecting that path. Thus, the characterisation of a certain type of individual who faces a context which offers resources for improving their life, and is

responsible for accepting or rejecting them, is the sixth axis defining Positive Psychology.

6. Discussion: the happiness imperative of positive psychology

As we have mentioned above, one of the main criticisms of Positive Psychology accuses it of being an instrument of the neoliberal imaginary. This accusation is based on the excessive individualism exhibited in this discipline and the link it establishes between happiness and productive activity. However, our research shows that the reality is more complex. In the previous section we showed that Positive Psychology structures its discourses and practices based on six categorical axes: a) good mental health means better work and personal performance; b) happiness is articulated based on emotions; c) happiness is visualised as a path with several stages which must be overcome; d) there are specific practices which enable us to follow that path; e) happiness can be measured (and the new algorithmic technologies and apps have an important part to play in this); and f) it is not a fallacy to think that the ideal of a positive, happy individual exists - in other words, the final product of following the path. These axes make up the conceptual and practical framework of this discipline. They set the guidelines for teaching and researching it, and how it understands our everyday reality.

These axes quickly show that Positive Psychology goes beyond the liberal-neoliberal framework. Evidently, if we pay attention to the axes which emphasise individuality and the link between happiness and production, we can accuse it of being a tool at the service of reproducing this framework. However, in doing that we would be ignoring what all the other axes are showing us. Therefore, we propose a joint reading of the six axes which offers a framework for interpreting them, characterised by four dimensions. First, Positive Psychology offers an imperative. That is, the citizen is free to choose what it proposes, but not choosing it means renouncing good living and the prospect of all lives that want to be lived to the full. This imperative operates as a subtle obligation pointing to an individual ethic which shows everything that is good to feel, think and do. This obligation is established in every sphere of everyday life and operates through the most immediate emotions, applying a positivity to the mind which makes the individual responsible for continuing to submit to an endless project of optimisation. Second, the individual is considered a project continuously working towards future improvement. Happiness, as we have mentioned, is at the end of a journey which must be taken, deploying certain practices of self-observation, self-governance, self-generated information, and exhibition of the self to other people. Third, the information this individual produces about their internal states is quantified, measured, converted to data, and can be recorded for analysis. Finally, it is advisable to note that the main field of action for all the above is the psyche, rather than the somatic or social reality of the citizen. It will be through intervention in the psychic plane that they will reach, or not, that goal of happiness and well-being that every human longs for.

Positive Psychology, for all these reasons, is not exactly a tool of liberalism-neoliberalism. Rather, it forms part of the sphere of intelligibility of Psychopolitics. Thus, we see individuals who convert everything in their psyche into data, which are then evaluated and returned to them so that they can continuously optimise and improve their mental structures. The novelty or nuance which Positive Psychology adds to this psychopolitical exercise is to promote what we could call a Psychopolitics of Well-being. That is, this exercise of datification of the psyche which permits its infinite optimisation can be directed to a specific goal of well-being or good living.

The Psychopolitics of Well-being seems to be seeping into every aspect of our everyday life. It makes happiness the core of its action on the psyche, and while its goals may be noble and seek the constitution of a human being with less suffering, it still deploys subtle power relations and control mechanisms. These include the establishment of an imperative that motivates us intelligently instead of punishing us; it promises

tangible and scientifically proven realities, rather than political or religious utopias; it offers courses of action that are practically impossible to reject, rather than hard-to-achieve fantasies; and it makes our psyche a project open to its scrutiny and intervention, where individuals' ability to choose is diminishing, given that they delegate their decision-making criteria to computer applications and systems of knowledge like that offered by Positive Psychology.

7. Strengths of the study

This research could establish a base from which we can continue exploring the full implications of this framework, and precisely the general strength of this study is that it has paid attention to the historic, social, and symbolic nature of a particular analysed object. This involved a focus on examining the discourses and practices in which that object is inserted and defined (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This case study explored a contemporary system (Johansson, 2007) over a defined period (Creswell et al., 2007), without attempting to isolate that unit from its real context of production (Dul & Hak, 2007) thus allowing us to observe psychological power relations that happen in real life. Thanks to having placed us in a privileged study position from within the case itself [with one of us being a participant observer], this has allowed us to observe how a Master's in Positive Psychology empowers a new era of "positive graduates" who are continuing with the work of perpetuating the chain of positivity (and all that this implies), meaning that we now know first-hand how Positive Psychology is reproducing and how it uses its followers to ensure the continuity of its discourses and practices, so from this research they will be aware of the role they are playing in society. This study shows the power relations that are enabled by Positive Psychology, something that is currently not being done. The fact that in the end everyone is interested in happiness makes the results of this research relevant not just to experts but to all the people who in one way or another have been, are being, or definitely will be affected by "The happiness of Positive Psychology".

8. Limitations of the study

Today more than ever, we must be aware of the great limitation that is approaching happiness from a privileged, rather comfortable position, which makes us understand it -and promote it- in a certain way that may not be relevant for everyone. Therefore, a counterproductive part of this research that tried to make the mechanisms of Positive Psychology explicit is that, without intending it, it can inadvertently validate the very premises that have been analysed, thus perpetuating the mechanisms of subjectivation that they provoke. In addition, another limitation is that since the identities of the case studied have not been openly disclosed because that could be harmful to the people who make it up, it has not been possible to reach the most desirable option which is the complete dissemination of the information that would have facilitated replication and linking to other investigations. Finally, the question of whether it is possible that Positive Psychology is not alone in operating via Psychopolitical mechanisms is not answered yet and should be discussed in future investigations, constantly reviewing the findings of this case study. Evidently, this future research will have to face the challenge of showing how psychopolitical operations are nested within other types of practices and discourses which are presented as breaking with the established neoliberal order.

9. Conclusions

Positive Psychology has reconstructed how we must understand happiness. Its practices and discourses have spread to every action of our everyday life. Although it is presented as a discipline taking no part in the main mechanisms of power, we have found that it subtly reproduces a new modality of power and control, called Psychopolitics. Here, the arena of political struggle and conflict have moved from the notion of

the *bios* to that of the psyche. This is what enables us to define a productive, active individual aligned with the requirements of the status quo, the practical consequences of which are spreading into the spheres of our everyday reality through the creation of more happiness programs in the field of education, well-being workshops to manage one's emotional health at work, new positive applications to the "citizen science", and obviously training in the field of psychology as well, where life coaching has become so important that it is now the new definition of Popular Psychology.

However, Positive Psychology does something more than just reproduce a power mechanism; it creates it to maintain itself and it has established a variant or nuance of Psychopolitics which we have called the Psychopolitics of Well-being. Here and now, the good life, the life worth living, is the life that is constantly seeking the well-being generated by positive thoughts and emotions.

Author's statement

The authors declare that the text is completely original and that there are no conflicts of interest in it.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2023.101058>.

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