

Don't worry, be happy: Erasing racism, sexism, and poverty in positive psychology

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Abstract

Positive psychology, referred to by some as a “fifth force” in psychology, has claimed that its offerings can contribute to the building of a “good life” and a “moral society.” Its methods in achieving this goal appear to include not only active denial of systemic and institutionalized forms of oppression or rationalizing oppression as a positive force, but also judgment of feelings, experiences, and actions that are central to addressing prejudice and social violence. Suffering is presented as a failure of self-control. Moreover, positive psychology, like other dominant forms of Western psychology throughout its history, legitimize themselves through scientism, which embraces supposedly “value-neutral” empiricism including exclusively natural science/quantitative designs, evolutionary psychology, a biological focus, and experimentation on animals. Special attention is given to how positive psychology is communicated to the public through popular publications, and how a mono-emotional approach to human experience is produced by and supports mono-cultural social structures.

KEYWORDS

critical psychology, positive psychology, poverty, racism, sexism, social oppression

1 | INTRODUCTION

The last several decades have witnessed the rise of a movement within and outside of the field of mental health in the United States of America, which has promoted itself as a “fifth force” within psychology, following psychoanalysis, behaviorism, humanistic psychology, and multiculturalism (Diener, Kesebir, & Lucas, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In their efforts to make a “case for positive psychology,” Lopez and Gallagher (2009) proposed that this movement in psychology was meant to “round out” psychology from its supposedly excessively negative focus, to unify psychology by minimizing the arguments rampant in the field, to “give psychology away” by providing “new” information to “normal people,” and to attract “more talent to psychology” because of positive psychology’s commitment to “observation and experiment” (pp. 3–5). These goals are

reflected in the so-called “Akumal Manifesto” of positive psychologists, created by Sheldon, Frederickson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, and Haidt (2000) to define the aims, applications, and implementation strategies of this field. In their voluminous publications exclusively focused on positive psychology, which include journals, books, handbooks, and special issues, words such as “culture,” “spirituality,” “society,” and “groups” are commonly used in an aspirational manner (Seligman & Fowler, 2011; Sheldon et al., 2000; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011).

One of the arguments repeatedly used to defend positive psychology against its critics is that it is not about promoting individualism and selfish self-preoccupation. For example, Ed Diener (2009a), one of the most recognized scholars of “happiness,” in his review of the history and future of positive psychology stated, “Positive psychology emphasizes not only the actualization of the individual, but development within the framework of his or her contributions to other people and the world. Thus, our discipline is poised to answer questions that are pivotal to building healthier societies” (p. 8). According to Biswas-Diener, Linley, Govindji, and Woolston (2011, p. 410), positive psychology is a “force for social change” because it focuses “beyond money” (p. 412), includes “environmental awareness” (p. 413), as shown in its use of the Happy Planet Index (Marks, Abdallah, Simms, & Thompson, 2006), identifies “strength based organizations” through research on managers, highlights “high producers,” recognizes “achieving” schools, and by addresses “poverty through enabling human talent and potential” (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011, p. 413).

Scholarly positive psychology literature typically places an overall emphasis on offering a universal “culture-free perspective” that is supposed to cross national, group and individual boundaries (Pedrotti, Edwards, & Lopez, 2009, p. 50). The use of major world religions to create indexes of strengths and values is also claimed to supersede social differences (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Shapiro, 2009). On the other hand, these culture-blind foundations of positive psychology shift when research results show contrasting levels of happiness and optimism among the peoples of the world. The examples of supposedly culturally embedded perspectives on happiness, cited in their literature, include numerous cross-national quantitative studies on optimism (Fischer & Chalmers, 2008) or on happiness (Diener, 2009b). Thus, the multinational findings are said to add multicultural and cross-cultural sensitivity to positive psychology by comparing Western samples with international ones on scales developed in the United States or promoting efforts to privilege positivity as a cultural requirement (e.g., the frequently praised Domestic Happiness Product of the Kingdom of Bhutan; Seligman, 2006). Positivity in its varied forms is then popularized to the public with references to world locations that supposedly possess the most happiness without significant attention to social or historical context or to within-culture differences (e.g., the Kingdom of Bhutan's extensive human rights violations; Saul, 2000).

The history of positivity stripped of social and individual context extends to the beginnings of psychology in America. The discipline's “fathers” such as G. Stanley Hall and John B. Watson were dedicated to promoting universal utopian visions involving testing and scientific conditioning of individuals to be happy, moral, and productive (Morawski, 1982). These utopian aspirations were often openly associated with social values of eugenics, defined as the science of racial betterment (Davenport, 1911; Galton, 1904). Eugenic views were widespread among intellectuals, politicians, and the public in many Western countries around the turn of the twentieth century, especially among American psychologists (Gould, 1996; Tucker, 1995; Yerkes, 1923). Racial inferiority was specifically tied to problematic emotional and moral forms of behavior: Galton (1883) and others described eugenically unfit groups (e.g., Black and Indigenous cultures, people living in poverty) as possessing hereditary emotional and behavioral characteristics that could damage current and future societies. The characteristics of the eugenically unfit individuals typically included melancholy, anger, impulsivity, lack of self-control, laziness, fearfulness as well as other forms of emotional and behavioral “racial” weakness, termed feeble-mindedness and parasitic hereditary liability (Goddard, 1914; Popenoe & Johnson, 1918; Smith, 1985). Moreover, eugenicists and eugenics-influenced psychologists were especially interested in how to protect so-called racially fit individuals from developing racially “poisonous” emotional states and behaviors, which could harm the hereditary stock of future happy and healthy societies (Galton, 1883, 1904; McDougall, 1921; Popenoe & Johnson, 1918).

Thus, in his key textbook, *Psychology: From the Standard of a Behaviorist*, Watson (1919), stated that psychology's primary concern must be with “engineering” “healthy” individuals who were not “feeble-minded” but “lack anger, fear, and attachments,” while possessing “low emotional levels” and showing “freedom from behaviors that show emotional

tension" (pp. 217–218). Watson, like other famous American psychologists, including Hall, Goddard, Yerkes, Thorndike, Cattell, and Angell was a founding member and leader of eugenics societies, specifically the Eugenics Research Association (News, 1916–1920). Like his other close American psychologist colleagues, Watson focused on adopting animal models of behavior to humans based on social Darwinist theories in regard to natural and sexual selection of the fittest, who were represented by White happy, healthy, and wealthy Anglo-Saxon males (Tucker, 1995). Behaviorists like B. F. Skinner (1953, 1971) continued to stress animal experimentation that de-emphasized social context of inequality. Although Skinner (1971) proclaimed that behaviorism could shape anyone to do what the scientists commanded (e.g., through scientifically trained behavioral teachers), thus creating the “master culture,” he also claimed that some individuals were simply beyond the reaches of such control: “If some races are not as intelligent as others, the teacher cannot be blamed if he does not teach them as well” (p. 77).

Later twentieth-century popularizers of self-control and positivity included Albert Ellis, whose book, co-authored with Harper (Ellis & Harper, 1975), entitled *A New Guide to Rational Living* became a sensational best-seller. Ellis's (1962) suggestions to millions of readers included culture- and environment-free advice such as “feeling well by thinking straight,” “thinking yourself out of emotional disturbances,” “overcoming influences of the past,” “refusing to feel desperately unhappy,” “talking the dire need for approval,” “eradicating the dire fears of failure,” “controlling your destiny,” and “accepting reality” (p. xvi). In summary, American psychology has been dominated by efforts to control negativity and ensure productivity with a focus on changing human beings into individuals who can contribute to a utopian racially uniform and productive society. The same focus on emotions and efficiency within the context of context-blind appear to be central to the new positive psychology movement.

Widely popular books by positive psychologists offer many promises of personal improvement and lasting change. These writings for broader audiences emphasize numerous scientific contributions that support positive psychology views claiming that optimism, flow, and positivity are caused exclusively by internal factors such as self-control (Seligman, 2002, 2006, 2011). In addition, these publications deny the significance of social oppression or represent such oppression as growthful for individuals who are targeted by it, shaming individuals for “negative” emotional reactions to their environment and their lives, and using scientific rhetoric that emphasizes the use of supposedly unbiased empirical methods to support their assertions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Seligman, 2006, 2011; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2016).

2 | SUFFERING AS A FAILURE OF INDIVIDUAL SELF-CONTROL

The foundation of positive psychology appears to rest on resentment that psychology as a discipline devotes itself to the study of external challenges faced by humans in their individual and social lives as well as emphasizes that many psychological difficulties were caused by external traumas, which are presented as outside of individual control. Positive psychology's emphasis is that psychology has given too much credence to so-called “victims” living in the “negative” aspects of life, rather than to individuals who seek “to go from plus two to plus seven” (Seligman, 2006, p. xi) in their lives. This focus presented people who experience various forms of suffering as the problem itself: this attention to the “negative” in and of itself was to blame for adding to rather than abating human struggle. Seligman (2006) summarizes the vision for how he arrived at the profession-wide strategy to make positive psychology a “force” in contrast to what he viewed as prevailing psychological perspectives:

Psychology now seemed half-baked to me. The half that was fully baked was devoted to suffering, victims, mental illness, and trauma. Psychology has worked steadily and with considerable success for fifty years on the pathologies that disable the good life, which make life not worth living. (p. iii)

The entirely internal acquisition of these positive states of mind and life is the cornerstone of writings by positive psychologists. These concepts are based on Seligman and his colleagues' torture of dogs and other animals to arrive at

such theories as internal attributions and learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Csikszentmihalyi (1997) declared that happiness “does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them” (p. 2). A focus on the environment that influences human experiences and behavior is, in Seligman's (2006) view, to blame for the turn of scholars in many fields, including psychology, to supposed negativity. Among problems produced by focusing on the external environment's role in human struggles, according to Seligman (2011), is that free will and personal responsibility, the cornerstones of positive psychology, are damaged: “If circumstances are to be blamed, the individual's responsibility and will are minimized, if not eliminated” (p. 105). In support of these claims, positive psychology writings continually emphasize that empirical evidence shows that none of the external differences matter other than the individual's commitment to self-control and finding his or her “authentic” happiness.

Providing specific examples of individuals who supposedly rose above their difficult circumstances through personal self-control and determination is common in positive psychology literature. For example, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) briefly conceded that “it is easier to doubt that life makes sense if one is born deformed, poor, and oppressed” (p. 234) but immediately followed up with advice and mind-boggling examples of how a few famous individuals achieved astonishing personal goals in spite of their external life circumstances by using their self-control to find “flow.” In turn, lack of control over one's life circumstances and oneself is presented as the true cause of struggles. For example, Seligman (2011) explained that it was supposedly young girls' individual “self-discipline” that led to “their superior classroom grades” (p. 118) during primary school years, which he stated diminished when vague and undefined “cultural factors . . . dampen the female self-discipline edge” (p. 118). This individual lack of self-control, Seligman proposed, results in women's lack of professional or life success.

Similarly, racism or other forms of oppression are reduced to individual choices. Fredrickson (2009) used experimental research studies to conclude that “even things that tend to divide people—like racial differences—seem to melt away when our hearts are warmed by positivity” (p. 68). These assertions lead people to believe that racism—an institutional and social form of prejudice—can be changed by individual efforts at “tapping into positivity” and “increasing positivity ratio,” following steps specified by Fredrickson (p. 179).

Moreover, notwithstanding public discourse on the racialized and class-based asymmetries that result in profoundly challenging circumstances for many individuals and communities, positive psychologists continually emphasize the primacy of internal individual, specifically “positive,” processes in addressing these concerns. For example, in the wake of hurricane Katrina, which occurred in the summer of 2005 and exposed horrific racial asymmetries in the United States, Seligman (2006) shared an idea for the following study:

The ideal experiment would have been something like this: to test everyone in a small town on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi for depression and explanatory style and then wait for a hurricane to hit. After the hurricane passed, we'd go see who lay there passively in the mud and who got up and rebuilt the town.
(pp. 77–78)

Seligman's (2006) other strategy in *Authentic Happiness* for those facing issues related to poverty is stated thus: “an inner-city young man, at risk for substance abuse because of all the drug traffic in his neighborhood, is much less vulnerable if he is future-minded, gets flow out of sports, and has a powerful work ethic” (p. 27). Thus, oppression in its varied forms is presented as a state of the individual mind, controlled by individual choices, and reflective of individual capacity for self-control.

3 | PROBLEMATIC RESPONSES TO OPPRESSION AND OPPRESSION AS AN “OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH”

In positive psychology, oppression and theories that emphasize external sources of suffering are presented as not only problematic, but as being used to manipulate individuals to view themselves as struggling with rather than

growing from their circumstances. Seligman (2006) decried any efforts, whether Marxism, psychoanalysis, or other “social movements in our century,” that, in his view, “tried to change the unchangeable,” thus supposedly contributing to “needless frustration” (p. 14). Seligman’s (2002) ire was directed at those who evoked social issues related to oppression: “Contemporary American demagogues who play the race card, invoking reminders of slavery . . . at every opportunity, create the same vengeful mindset in their followers” (p. 76). For him, reminders of these social issues only produce negativity because, “Race, at least in the United States, is not related to happiness in any consistent way” (p. 59). In fact, Seligman’s (2002) contention was that “past history in general is overrated” (p. 67). In *Finding Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) chastised those individuals who seek out-moded affiliations or belief systems that do not provide “goals and rules for intense flow experiences” but “become fundamentalist Christians, or Muslims, or communists” (p. 238). In their most recent contribution, *Homo Prospectus*, Seligman and his colleagues (Seligman et al., 2016) decried not only any theory or movement that questioned the past but also any that presented various forms of suffering or oppression, stating that humans are programmed by evolution to focus on a positive future rather than to scour their past or present for sources of their problems. In Seligman’s promotion of this new collaborative work on positive psychology, which included allusions to the brain, religion, and scientific psychology, external difficulties were presented as good for the person: “While traumas do have a lasting impact, most people actually emerge stronger afterward” (Seligman & Tierney, 2017, para. 12). The capacity to grow from such traumas, according to the authors of *Homo Prospectus*, is entirely based in the individuals who are improved as the result of life challenges they face, including social oppression (Seligman et al., 2016).

Emphases on improving people’s lives by addressing inequality and oppression are made problematic. Seligman’s (1975) popular book based on his work with laboratory dogs relating to learned helplessness and attributions, entitled *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death*, proposed that a social reform such as the “welfare system” only “adds to the uncontrollability” since the offer of external institutional help “undermines the dignity of its recipients because their actions do not produce their own source of livelihood” (p. 161). He cited other scholars who seemingly found in their research that “poor blacks may be unable to benefit from increased economic opportunities because of their widespread belief that outcomes are not under their control” (p. 164). His writings continued to emphasize that poverty and race must not be used as an “excuse” for individuals to display “learned helplessness” but as a means to grow from their circumstances by acquiring control and internal cognitive attributions through exclusively individual efforts to rise out of poverty.

Similarly, in his critique of a focus on the external environment as a potential cause of human psychological difficulties, Seligman (2011) decried “progressive science’s” seeking to “isolate situations that shape crime, ignorance, prejudice, failure and all the other ills that befall human beings, so that these situations can be corrected” (pp. 104–105). Disciplines such as the sociology, anthropology, political sciences, theology and philosophy of the past, he states, were too enamored of the “big idea” that it was a “malignant environment” rather than “bad character” that produced social problems (p. 104). In Seligman’s estimation, truly experimental sciences rather than these “social sciences” offered empirical proof that it was not the environment but “character and heredity” that explained “what people do” (p. 104). A continued problem promoted by “progressive sciences,” Seligman stated, “is their tendency toward ‘using money to correct social problems’ rather than placing responsibility on individuals themselves” (p. 105).

It is not surprising that positive psychology writing, including most of their questionnaires, normalizes upper social class economic or educational achievements and the experiences of individuals unaffected by social ills like poverty or institutional forms of prejudice. For example, Seligman’s (2006) tests of “your own optimism” included phrases such as, “Your stocks make you a lot of money” and “You fall down a great deal while skiing” (p. 33–39). Even the foundations of positive psychology speak to the influence of wealth and lack of connection to oppression: their initial visionary meeting, which produced the Akuna (Positive Psychology) Manifesto, was created at an exclusive resort on the coast of Mexico (Sheldon et al., 2000).

4 | SHAMING NEGATIVITY EXPERIENCED BY THOSE WHO FACE INSTITUTIONAL INEQUALITY

Shaming negative reactions to circumstances, including oppression, appears to be another key to positive psychology theorizing. The language used by positive psychology actively borrows from cultural and religious traditions that many individuals would associate with important life values. Terms such as “well-being,” “meaning-seeking,” “authenticity,” “transcendence,” “forgiveness,” “flow,” “optimism,” “spirituality,” and “future-mindedness” are repeatedly used to legitimize messages of positive psychology. Positivity and perpetual happiness are presented as the only healthy psychological states (Fredrickson, 2009; Lopez & Gallagher, 2009; Seligman, 2006).

Optimism is also claimed to be the only rational choice for physical health. Books on positive psychology share examples of immune disorders, cancer, heart diseases, and other life-threatening conditions that apparently result from a personal choice to view life as “negative” rather than “positive.” Furthermore, positivity is represented as the sole choice for higher personal productivity and professional success. Seligman (2006) summarized multiple scientific studies that apparently show that:

When optimists run for office, they are more apt to be elected than pessimists are. Their health is unusually good. They age well and are much freer than most of us from the usual physical ills of middle age. Evidence suggests they may even live longer. (p. 5)

Conversely, these writings emphasize that those who do not pursue optimism are actively choosing to doom themselves and those around them.

Shaming individuals about their reactions to external conditions includes admonitions that they should stop “focusing on trauma” and instead accept that varied external forms of social violence can make people “resilient” and “grow.” Both Seligman’s (2011) *Flourish* and the special issue of the *American Psychologist*, the Comprehensive Soldier Program (Seligman & Fowler, 2011), suggested that even engagement in war can be psychologically “growthful.” The Comprehensive Soldier Program, apparently funded by the Department of Defense following Seligman’s involvement in the development of “enhanced interrogation” techniques and in guiding “sciences of deception” conferences (American Psychological Association, 2015), aimed to use positive psychology “to increase the number of soldiers who derive meaning and personal growth from their combat experiences” (Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011, p. 6). In short, those who are engaged in varied forms of violence are shamed into believing that their suffering as a result of such engagement should not be psychologically and physically problematic, and that it should instead cause people to grow.

Moreover, shaming is directed at providers of care or others who question these assumptions, including the ethics of promoting the oppression-free and oppression-as-growth paradigms. In response to those who questioned the ethics and problematic psychological outcomes of the Comprehensive Soldier Program, Seligman and Fowler (2011) stated that “the balance of good done by building the physical and mental fitness of our soldiers far outweighs any harm that might be done” (p. 86). Psychoanalysts, Marxists, and others who emphasize the interpersonal and social context of human struggles are routinely vilified as not only promoting the view that past and present suffering matters, but actually generating suffering itself through insistence on making it visible (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Seligman, 2002, 2006, 2011). In *Homo Prospectus* Seligman et al. (2016) proclaimed that it is individuals who focus on past and present challenges and struggle rather than planning their bright positive future who are to blame for their own difficulties. In promoting the book, Seligman and Tierney (2017) claimed that these individuals “continue struggling because they over-predict failure and rejection” (para. 12). At no time do these positive psychology scholars acknowledge systems of oppression that define and often determine past, present, and future for groups of individuals.

5 | THE SCIENTISM OF POSITIVITY IN AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology assertions are continually legitimized through references to “literally hundreds of studies” and “in tests of hundreds of thousands of people” which were “discovered in the laboratories and clinics” and “rigorously

validated" (Seligman, 2006, p. 5). Seligman and colleagues' (Seligman & Tierney, 2017) newest contribution, *Homo Prospectus*, claims that positive psychology, supported by the latest "brain" sciences, neuropsychology and evolutionary psychology, has proven that neither a focus on the past nor present matter to human well-being but rather only a focus on an optimistic future. In a promotion for this new book, Seligman and Tierney (2017) recited brain studies and alluded to evolutionary theories, claiming that "Homo prospectus . . . doesn't dwell on the past: there's nothing he can do about it. He became *Homo sapiens* by learning to see and shape his future, and he is wise enough to keep looking straight ahead" (para. 27). This research, like other research in psychology, is presented as neutral, empirical, evolution-based, experimental, and, therefore, unquestionable.

Positive psychology's use of natural sciences is unequivocally consistent with definitions of scientism. Sorell (1991) defined scientism as "a matter of putting too high a value on natural science in comparison with other branches of learning or culture," especially in the study of human beings (p. x). Philosophers of science such as Hutchinson (2011) summarized this perspective as science which is exclusively "modeled on the natural sciences," with assumptions of "empiricism, positivism, materialism, and reductionism," which is then proclaimed to be "the only source of real knowledge" (p. vii). In psychology, scientism has been connected to promoting racist ideologies through supposedly inarguable empirical findings (Guthrie, 2004).

Experimentation on animals and its supposed contributions to understanding human behavior is frequently evoked. Indeed, Seligman's (1975) torture of laboratory dogs until they seemingly chose to die rather than be abused is acknowledged throughout positive psychology writings as a central idea that led to the development of the science of optimism. Evolutionary psychology is also invoked numerous times across most of the popular positive psychology books. Evolution, the public is advised, rewards the optimist who achieves productive flow, while punishing the pessimist (Seligman, 2002; Seligman et al., 2016). Even animals, we are told, do not consider their past or present but apparently focus on planning their individual future by hoarding food (Seligman et al., 2016).

Related to positive psychology's embrace of animal and evolutionary psychology is the legitimizing of positive psychology through biology, especially genetics (see, for example, Pluess, 2015). In these studies of the biology of happiness, race and ethnicity are never discussed, and poverty or socio-economic status are similarly absent. For example, Weiss et al. (2002) in their studies with zoo chimpanzees that combined evolutionary and biological frameworks found that "subjective well-being" was genetically predetermined and correlated with such "personality" characteristics as "dominance" over others (p. 1141). Thus, "heredity," remains the cornerstone of understanding how human beings respond to their environment (Seligman, 2011, p. 104).

The biologically reductionist, experimental and animal-based psychologies, which underlie the "sciences of happiness," reflect the scientism-driven commitment to exclusively natural science models of human behaviors. The positive psychology manifesto actually committed its scholars to quantitative experimental approaches to studying positivity (Sheldon et al., 2000). In a book on the methodological foundations of positive psychology, Simonton (2011) proposed that the use of quantitative measures and quantitative data are what differentiates this psychology from other forms that attend to human context, phenomenology, or humanistic values:

Although the humanistic psychologists tended to emphasize human virtues and strengths, their research was most prone to be qualitative and even holistic—more akin to human sciences than to the natural sciences. In contrast, positive psychologists have investigated many of the same topics using psychometric, experimental and survey methodologies. (p. 451)

In summary, scientism of positive psychology based on animal research, biology, and quantitative methods are celebrated in positive psychology literature. In contrast, human science approaches that are far more likely to attend to context as well as social justice in relation to human beings, especially individuals from marginalized backgrounds (Teo, 2008, 2010; Yakushko, Hoffman, Morgan Consoli, & Lee, 2016; Yakushko & Hook, 2017, are not only disregarded but openly dismissed as nonscientific. The exclusion of these methods speaks as another affirmation of the positive psychological disregard for acknowledging and addressing issues of social context and social justice through use of scientism as its main standpoint.

6 | PROBLEMATIZING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN RELATION TO SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION

Scholarship that questions the assumptions and influence of positive psychology in relation to marginalized communities is growing (Ahmed, 2010a, 2013; Binkley, 2011). Contextual qualitative human science research, practiced in social science disciplines outside of psychology, has shown that an emphasis on optimism and future goal-setting for marginalized groups can result in a loss of focus on justice and rights, in development of deference to the dominant majority's authority, and in splitting off "negative" feelings, such as anger, into others (Froyum, 2010; Wilkins, 2012). Privileging happiness has been directly connected to Western neoliberalism that suppresses attention to oppression or social violence as well as the realities of suffering associated with these (Ahmed, 2010b; Layton, 2009; Yen, 2010).

Even more problematic are positive psychology's assertions in relation to multicultural scholarship in psychology. Every minority identity model emphasizes the role of sadness, confusion, and anger in the development of individual and social consciousness in those from marginalized backgrounds (see, for example, Cross, 1978; Helms, 1990; Sue & Sue, 2012). Rage, anger, confusion, and resistance, which are undoubtedly "negative" inner states, are viewed as necessary for these identity development processes. It is not surprising that the only comprehensive review of positive psychology studies in relation to multiculturalism conducted by graduate students Kubokawa and Ottaway (2009) showed that positive psychology supports multiculturalism only in appearance but not in substance. In contrast, advocates of social justice inside and outside psychology recognize the vital importance of the struggle and suffering inherent in dealing with oppressive social structures (Martín-Baró, 1996; Montero & Sonn, 2009; Schulman & Watkins, 2008).

Lastly, social critics who attend to the problematic influence of positivity on broader culture share similar emphases to those engaged in a struggle for justice as well as concerns about the values communicated by Western positive psychology. Ehrenreich (2009), whose book *Bright-Sided* (also published as *Smile or Die*) showed the tremendous negative social costs of positivity to individuals and U.S. society, included a separate chapter on positive psychology, especially Seligman's efforts to profit from the public's appetite for positivity-focused self-help. Ehrenreich was roundly condemned in Seligman's (2011) *Flourish* for her "rants" (p. 202). In fact, Seligman accused this multiple award-winning journalist of "intellectual dishonesty" and "dangerous journalistic malpractice" (p. 203). Hedges (2009), in his book *Empire of Illusion*, also directly addressed positive psychology as a field in the United States: "Here, in the land of happy thoughts, there are no gross injustices, no abuses of authority, no economic and political systems to challenge, and no reason to complain. Here, we are all happy" (p. 139).

7 | PSYCHOLOGY'S ROLE IN SOCIAL OPPRESSION: THE CASE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology is a profession that has had an uneasy relationship with social issues and its own power. Hegarty (2007) detailed this history, emphasizing that U.S. psychology has been particularly dismissive of approaches that attend to social construction and context. The racist history of intelligence testing and IQ measurement is an example of how an anxious nation and its new discipline of psychology drew boundaries between those perceived as fit (that is, upper-class, educated, White, and male) and unfit, undesirable, and feeble-minded (that is, all others) (Danziger, 1997; Gould, 1996; Smith, 1985; Tucker, 1995). Scientific justifications were repeatedly given to legitimize such acts (Guthrie, 2004; Teo, 2008, 2010). Western psychology, like the rest of the culture in which it is grounded, continues to emphasize the notion of value-neutral and apolitical sciences, which in turn maintain the cultural status quo and order and designate social categorizations that support privilege and oppression (Bunn, 2007; Guthrie, 2004).

Instead, those engaged in critical approaches to psychology, whether as research or applied work, suggest that individual and collective well-being must rest on the premise of liberation and social justice (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Teo, 2010). Attention to dynamics of power and oppression are central to these methods, ensuring

expansion of consciousness or awareness of social forms of violence, fighting inequality, questioning the continuation of social status quo, and transforming social policies through activism (Prilleltensky, 2013). Positivity and productivity are accentuated repeatedly by all social structures that emphasize an importance of holding control not only over oneself but also over others (Ahmed, 2010a, 2013; Binkley, 2011; Gana, 2011). Individual suffering, Halpern (2002) suggested, is also social and political. Similarly, Ahmed (2010b) proposed that feminist consciousness, especially the feminist consciousness of women of color, must be “the consciousness of unhappiness,” encouraging women to “claim their right to be unhappy” in the face of continued sexism and racism (p. 571).

Social scholars show that emphasis on happiness as goodness is especially central to constructing identities of individuals from marginalized communities in order to perpetuate their oppression: from manuals that require that slaves continually act happy, to images of smiling Aunt Jemima, “tranquil Indians,” “care-free Mexicans,” and “cheerful” Asian individuals (Cassuto, 1997; Iwamura, 2011; Keller, 1983; Lönnberg, 1981; Merskin, 2001). In the context of African experiences of colonization and resistance, Fanon (2008) discussed that while White European colonizers tended unconsciously to split off the unacceptable and vile parts of themselves into Black African people, they also demanded that the colonized publically behave as contented and happy. In psychology, immigrants to the West are perceived primarily through the lens of acculturation, which similarly emphasizes positive adjustment and productivity (Yakushko & Morgan Consoli, 2014). Anger among minority individuals is interpreted as criminality and pathology (Wingfield, 2007) or viewed as a racialized state (Hutchings & Haddock, 2008). Similarly, popular Western culture both in the past and the present maintains the narrative images of women as “happy” housewives (Humphreys, 2015) rather than “angry feminists” (Roy, Weibust, & Miller, 2007) or “angry Black women” (Childs, 2005). These patterns reflect lasting historical attitudes, such as those held by eugenicists over a century ago (Davenport, 1911; Galton, 1883, 1904; Goddard, 1914).

While positive psychologists, especially in their popular writings, evoke the U.S. Declaration of Independence as a cornerstone of the American right to this “pursuit of happiness,” Zinn (2010) reminded us that the declaration was written by and for wealthy, White, slave-owning, Protestant Christian men who viewed women as possessions. In response to those who claim that history excuses these men’s narrow focus because they were merely products of their own time, Zinn countered that the social imbalance that shaped the proclamation and the United States as a nation must be acknowledged in order:

to understand the way in which the Declaration functioned to mobilize certain groups of Americans, ignoring others. Surely, inspirational language to create a secure consensus is still used, in our time, to cover up serious conflicts of interest in that consensus, and to cover up, also, the omission of large parts of the human race. (p. 68)

Therefore, psychology, like the rest of Western society, may be implicated in seeking social control by erecting and emphasizing individual goals of positivity and self-control while at the same time erasing and discrediting institutionalized sociopolitical and cultural forms of oppression that shape people’s inner and outer lives.

8 | CONCLUSION

In my view, as counselors, psychologists, psychology scholars, and social advocates we can be seduced by the scientism of using supposed empirical evidence, animal and genetic authentications, and evolutionary support. These views have historical antecedents in social and professional values and practices in Western psychology. I believe that we at times feel unconscious guilt as we experience shaming from others for focusing on “negativity” in our work or our personal lives. We also may become weary and overwhelmed facing tremendous social ills, whether in our therapy rooms, classrooms, communities, or our own lives. It is tempting to turn toward using defenses (e.g., projections, denial) in seeking perpetual happiness through self-control, self-improvement, and positive thinking rather than face sorrow, anger, and failure when facing staggering cultural problems.

I recall hearing the title song by Bobby McFerrin (1988), an African American entertainer advising us to “just be happy,” which was permitted to enter my Soviet world in the late 1980s, when the crumbling of communist states resulted in the collapse of society around me. I could not speak English then, but did feel how the tune appeared so out of place with the world as I understood it. Today, living in the English-speaking world, I am aware of the dissonance between the song's happy tune and the words of this song:

Ain't got no place to lay your head
Somebody came and took your bed
Don't worry, be happy
The landlord say your rent is late
He may have to litigate
Don't worry, be happy
(Look at me, I'm happy). (1988)

I imagine that the song was meant to be performed in jest, highlighting the absurdity of facing poverty with a happy face. However, in facing the rise of positive psychology I am aware of a more potent message, both historic and current, of cultural control by giving a mono-emotional directive toward a monocultural social order.

Today's world, in my experience, continues to be marked by racialized and gendered violence, increasing poverty around the globe, environmental degradation that affects primarily marginalized communities, and institutionalized forms of oppression. I believe that awareness of this oppression and the suffering it causes must call us to action as therapists and scholars. Recognition of inequalities and oppression should raise our anger and foster greater empathic connection to others' suffering through sadness and anger, supposedly negative states. Our profession, like our communities, should not be filled with *Homo Prospectus(es)*, as proposed by Seligman et al. (2016), only interested in bright visions of their individual futures and trickle-down happiness. We need *Homo sapiens* whose capacity to experience a full spectrum of emotions makes them also *Homo Justus*, those willing to remember history and question the present.

A call from John Hope, a young African American, living in the U.S. South in the late 1800s is still relevant: “Rise! . . . Be discontented. Be dissatisfied . . . Be as restless as the tempestuous billows on the boundless sea. Let your discontent break mountain-high against the wall of prejudice, and swamp it to the very foundation” (quoted in Zinn, 2010, p. 193).

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