TOWARDS A POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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When asked "How are you?" we Maltese usually reply "not bad" rather than "good", "fine" or "OK". No problem there except that we mean to say something positive but express it in a rather negative way. In other words, we focus more in terms of the negative side of the picture.

Something similar has happened to psychology. It has focused mainly on pathology and less on the positive elements of normal human development, on how people can flourish and grow psychologically, on what contributes to one's well-being. In the words of Seligman (2008): "It has become a science largely about healing, concentrating on repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning".

Psychologists in their practice worked on a mental illness model just as medical doctors worked on physical ailments.

A paradigm shift is needed so that the science and practice of psychology may tap the human potential and develop the strengths of normal people. This would necessitate establishing a new approach in psychology by creating what has become known as Positive Psychology.

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology has been defined in a general way as "the scientific study of what makes life worth living". According to its proponents, its purpose is "to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities." (Seligman, 2008)

This shift in the field would include exploring topics like happiness (or "Subjective Well-Being", this sounds more scientific), optimism, hope, love, courage, spirituality, aesthetics, talent, altruism, satisfaction in life and work, creativity, play, and so on.

The task of psychology would not be just to study weaknesses and vices but also strengths and virtues, not just repairing what is broken but also nurturing what is good, not just concerned with illness and pathology but also with good health and normality. Basically, this involves a strategy of prevention more than a policy of symptom relief. Research in preventive measures has shown that developing human strengths and fostering virtues can protect us from mental illnesses.

What are the effects of a positive psychology? How does mental health look when seen from the perspective of positive psychology? First of all, there are changes in attitude toward health, both physical and mental. It has been shown that a positive attitude towards health may increase longevity and improve prognosis on certain diseases. More specifically, positive emotional styles may act as a prevention against the onset of the common cold. Researchers in positive psychology today rightly claim that mental health is something over and above the absence of mental illness, and it is quantifiable and predictive.

We tend to focus more on how negative emotions promote illness than on how positive emotions promote health. The role of practitioners should be to amplify strengths more than to repair the weaknesses of their clients.

Clinical Psychology

Historically, the practice of clinical psychology, as Maddux (2008) points out, has been characterised by four basic assumptions:

1. Clinical psychology was concerned with psychopathology, that is, with deviant, abnormal and maladaptive behavioural and emotional conditions. Thus the focus was not on facilitating mental health but on alleviating mental illness.
2. Understanding psychopathology required theories different from those which explain normal problems in daily living and in effective psychological functioning.
3. Psychological disorders were similar to biological or medical diseases -- they reflected distinct conditions inside the individual. Emotional and behavioural problems found their cause inside the person rather than in the person's interactions with his or her environment.
4. The clinical psychologist's task, similar to the medical clinician's, was to identify (diagnose) the disorder (disease) inside the person (patient) and to prescribe an intervention (treatment) to eliminate (cure) the internal disorder (disease)

Even the field of medicine has shifted its emphasis from the treatment to the prevention of illness and more recently to the enhancement of health. Moreover, a new field has been developed – health psychology – which acknowledges the need to emphasise prevention of illness and promotion of health. Clinical psychology has to make the same shift for it to achieve its own identity and purpose, by replacing the illness ideology with a positive psychology approach, that is, by refuting the assumption that normal problems in living are symptoms of psychopathologies.

Developing a positive clinical psychology implies that we must adopt a new

approach and set of values as well as a new language. In this new language, ineffective patterns of behaviours, cognitions, and emotions are construed as problems in living, not as disorders or diseases. Such a positive clinical psychology would have to reject the pathologising of human experience, and that it is more important to understand what is best than what is worst. As a result, "strengthening the strengths will weaken the weaknesses."

Illness ideology

Some authors point out that as a result of the growing dominance of the illness ideology among both professionals and the public, eventually whatever human beings think, feel, do and desire which is not perfectly logical, adaptive, or efficient will become a mental disorder. One of the most poignant paradoxes in psychology concerns the complex relationships between pathology and creativity. A related paradox is that some of the most creative adults were reared in unusually adverse childhood situations!

Having presented the need to shift to a more positive view of the human person and of psychology's way of helping the person to grow, it must be added that the concept of positive psychology is not totally new. Various schools of psychology, especially the humanistic approach, already offer a model, both conceptual and therapeutic, which promotes a positive perspective. In particular, Transpersonal Psychology, together with Psychosynthesis, refer to the spiritual dimension and to the higher levels of our personality such as creativity, harmony, peace, unity, love, happiness, beauty etc.

Another point is that positive psychology does not deny the value of dealing with negative aspects, of healing damaged personalities, admitting that illnesses and pathologies exist. However, it is a question of "not only but also" and of how much emphasis is placed on the negative dimension to the detriment of a holistic positive orientation.

Finally, one might ask why has psychology focused more on the negative? Perhaps because negative emotions and experiences are considered as more urgent and may therefore override the positive ones. So they require immediate attention and dealing with them becomes a question of survival. More important, though seemingly less urgent, would be to develop those characteristics which make life worth living, that is, those qualities which help people not just to survive but also to flourish.

References

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