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Positive Psychology and the legitimization of individualism

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Abstract

Positive Psychology (PP) has been firmly institutionalized as a worldwide phenomenon, especially in the last decade. Its promise of well-being has captured many people's longings for solutions in times of significant social uncertainty, instability, and insecurity. The field, nevertheless, has been severely criticized on multiple fronts. This article argues that positive psychology is characterized by a narrow sense of the social as well as by a strong individualistic bias that reflects the core beliefs of neoliberal ideology. In this regard, the present paper aims to illustrate the extent to which individualism is essential to understanding the theoretical and empirical foundations of PP's conceptualization of happiness. Additionally, the paper questions whether positive psychology and its individualist conception of human well-being are not themselves contributing to sustain and create some of the dissatisfaction to which they promise a solution.

Keywords

critical psychology, happiness, individualism, positive psychology, subjectivity

In the book *The Minimal Self*, Christopher Lasch (1984) argued that in times of trouble everyday life tends to become an exercise of “psychic survival”—one in which people, confronted with an unstable, risky, and unpredictable environment, take recourse to a sort of emotional retreat from any commitment other than their psychic self-improvement and personal well-being. Similarly, Isaiah Berlin noted that “the retreat to the inner citadel”—an individualistic doctrine that prompts us to escape into the fortress of our true self—“seems to arise when the external world has proved to be exceptionally arid, cruel, or unjust” (1968, p. 139). Jack Barbalet made similar observations, pointing out that in times “when opportunities meaningfully to influence economic, political, and other processes are low, then persons are likely to experience themselves as centers of

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emotion” (2004, p. 174). In this regard, Michèle Lamont has recently argued that individuals in post-crash neoliberal societies are increasingly turning to the belief “that they have to look inward for the willpower needed to pull themselves up by their britches and to resist the tide of economic decline” (2016, para. 7). Thus, whereas this belief is not new, it seems to have intensified in the last few years.

The fact that happiness therapies, services, and products have recently become extremely popular is a significant symptom of the rising trend amongst individuals to withdraw into themselves as a way to cope with uncertainty, deal with feelings of powerlessness, and seek solutions for their insecure situations. Mindfulness is a good case in point (Cabanas & Illouz, 2017). Mindfulness conveys the message that turning our priorities inwards in order to unlock, control, and improve our inner selves does not entail any kind of defeat, self-deceit, or hopelessness, but rather, the best way to navigate and thrive in a frantic, competitive, and tumultuous reality by demanding ruthless self-affirmation, constant self-improvement, and purpose through the pursuit of personal happiness. Mindfulness training instructs clients on how to focus on their inner and authentic landscape; embrace the present moment and have authentic feelings; savor the small things of life; and build positive, carefree, and resilient attitudes irrespective of their surroundings. For instance, a special edition of *Time* magazine published in 2016 entitled *The Science of Happiness: New Discoveries for a more Joyful Life*—extensively devoted to issues related to mindfulness, spirituality, and neuroscience—recommends in several of its articles to “remain present” as the path toward being “more productive and happier” (Seppälä, 2016, p. 13), to “protect that sacred time from people who need your time, like family” (Seidman, 2016, p. 37), and to “find pleasure” even in the most mundane activities, like “cutting the vegetables evenly, for example” (Seppälä, 2016, p. 16).

In the past few years, mindfulness publications have mushroomed in academia, becoming established as a recurrent topic. To give but one example, whereas a search in PubMed from 2000 to 2008 yields around 300 publications bearing “mindfulness” in the title or abstract, from 2008 to 2016 this same search yields more than 3000 publications. Mindfulness has also become a very lucrative global industry, especially after the world economic crisis of 2008—raking in more than \$1 billion in 2015 alone. Uncountable products labeled with the term “mindfulness,” such as courses, sessions, retreats, and even smartphone apps have exponentially grown in popularity, and progressively more multinational corporations such as General Mills, Intel, Ford, American Express, and Google are implementing mindfulness techniques to teach workers how to handle stress, cope with insecurity, and convert emotional management into more productive and flexible behavior (Cabanas & Illouz, 2017; Cabanas & Sánchez-González, 2016).

The large majority of widespread happiness-related therapies, services, and products, including mindfulness, have been sponsored and promoted by the influential field of Positive Psychology—henceforth PP. Founded in 2000 as an alternative field to traditional psychotherapy (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the academic and popular reach and influence of PP has expanded at unprecedented levels, faster than any other psychological field. In a matter of a few short years, PP has been strongly inscribed and entangled within transnational structures of accountability, consumption, management, surveillance, government, and measurement. The academic world also provides a good example of this expansion, where research on happiness and related topics—for

example, subjective well-being, positive emotions, flourishing, optimism, resilience—has mushroomed since 2008, engaging not only the field of psychology, but also the fields of economics, education, therapeutics, politics, neuroscience, management, and business (Rusk & Waters, 2013).

Several critical accounts on the influence of PP can be found in the specialized literature, including cultural (Christopher, Richardson, & Slife, 2008; Frawley, 2015), historical (Becker & Marecek, 2008a, 2008b; Ehrenreich, 2009), philosophical (Lipovetsky, 2007), psychological (Cabanas & Sánchez-González, 2012; Pérez-Álvarez, 2016), economic (Davies, 2015), and political (Binkley, 2014) explanations. This article, though, is mostly concerned with the ideological perspective. Specifically, the paper addresses the strong relation between neoliberal individualism and the conceptualization of happiness provided by PP.

In this regard, it has been shown elsewhere that PP renders individuals in neoliberal societies as *psytizens*, which is defined as a highly individualistic and consumerist kind of subjectivity that turns citizens of neoliberal societies into clients whose full functionality as individuals is tied to the pursuit, achievement, and development of happiness through acts of choice and consumption (Cabanas, 2016; Cabanas & Huertas, 2014; Cabanas & Illouz, 2017). The point was made that PP delivers a conceptualization of human happiness which fits squarely into the individualistic worldview of neoliberal ideology. Therefore, by drawing upon those previous works, the present article aims at illustrating the extent to which individualism is essential to understanding the theoretical and empirical foundations of PP's conceptualization of happiness. Additionally, the paper questions whether PP and its individualist conception of human happiness are not themselves contributing to sustaining and creating some of the dissatisfaction to which they promise a solution.

Positive psychology and its critics

The increasing popularity of PP in the past decade has been accompanied by a large body of criticism. Important critics have questioned the presumed novelty of the field (Kristjánsson, 2012), criticized its North American roots (Becker & Marecek, 2008b; Ehrenreich, 2009), its resemblance to self-help literature (Cabanas & Huertas, 2014; García, Cabanas, & Loredó, 2015), and its strong ethnocentrism (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Others have pointed out several conceptual flaws, including decontextualized and exaggerated claims (Coyne & Tennen, 2010; McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Miller, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008). For instance, Brown, Sokal, and Friedman (2013) thoroughly examined the influential concept in PP of “positivity ratios,” concluding that its theoretical basis, together with its methodological claims and universalist aspirations, were entirely unfounded. The practical usefulness and effectiveness of PP therapeutic interventions have also been cast into doubt (Eidelson & Soldz, 2012), including criticism concerning non-replication problems in the field (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). In respect thereof, some critics have even questioned the scientific status of PP (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012), arguing that “happiness does not lend itself to being an object of positive science, supposedly objective, descriptive and value-free” (Pérez-Álvarez, 2016, pp. 6–7).

Positive psychology and neoliberalism

One of the most prominent critiques, though, stems from PP's alignment with the neoliberal agenda. In this regard, it has been argued that PP sits well with the worldview of neoliberal ideology, with the former being especially useful for harnessing and legitimizing many of the central tenets of this ideology (Sugarman, 2015). I shall briefly mention three main reasons for this in the current section and the following two sections. First, PP conveys the message that we are all responsible for our successes and failures, that if we work on ourselves hard enough we can achieve anything we aim for, that we can manage our psyches and our emotions at will, that we will improve society and palliate the deficiencies and insufficiencies of our institutions by cultivating our well-being, instead of the other way around. In this regard, PP has popularized the idea that virtually every social and individual achievement or problem can be traced back to a surplus or a lack of happiness, respectively, so what we really need is to pour more positivity into our lives and erase any trace of negativity. According to this view, happiness should no longer be regarded as the consequence but as the *cause* underlying most of the desirable outcomes in life (e.g., Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Diener, 2012; Judge & Hurst, 2008).

Such an idea is reminiscent of the Self-Esteem Movement in the 1980s and 1990s, which argued that “many, if not most, of the major problems plaguing society have roots in the low self-esteem of many of the people who make up society” (Smelser, 1989, p. 1). Whereas the movement proved disappointing regarding effectiveness (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003), it successfully conveyed its individualistic and reductionist message. Decades later, PP interventions have not proven more effective. For instance, a report on one of the key intervention programs of PP concluded that

our analysis of pupil-level outcome data indicated that SEAL [Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning] (as implemented by schools in our sample) failed to impact significantly upon pupils' social and emotional skills, general mental health difficulties, pro-social behaviour or behaviour problems. (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2010, p. 2)

Relatedly, Katherine Ecclestone (2012) concluded that the evidence and conceptual base of many positive psychological programs was not only inconclusive and fragmented, but also “prey to ‘advocacy science’ or, in its worst manifestations, to simple entrepreneurship that competes for publicly funded interventions” (p. 476).

Additionally, PP fits well with other central assumptions of neoliberal ideology, such as scientism (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008)—a defense of the sharp separation between facts and values that works as an ideological means “to conceal pre-existing, unreflected social interests and prescientific decisions” (Habermas, 1970, p. 59)—and universalism, as some critics maintain (Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Sundararajan, 2005; Taylor, 2001). In this regard, PP's founding fathers claimed the field to be a scientific and culturally unbiased endeavor whose results could be expanded “to other times and places, and perhaps to all times and places” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001, p. 90). Although such a universalistic aspiration has been severely questioned (Becker & Marecek, 2008b; Pérez-Álvarez, 2016), PP has successfully popularized the idea that happiness is not an ill-defined or speculative construct with more than 50 shades of historical, cultural, and philosophical grey, but a well-defined natural and

psychological state that applies to all human beings equally. PP claims to have found the universal keys to human happiness, succeeding where centuries of philosophers have failed, so we would be negligent not to put them into practice in our daily lives, to implement them in our most important institutions, or to gear our economic and political endeavors accordingly.

Positive psychology and the measurement of happiness

The second reason is that PP's reliance on the so-called accurate and unbiased measurement of happiness sits well with the technocratic and utilitarian soul of neoliberal politics, as authors such as Sam Binkley (2014) or William Davies (2015) have argued. In this regard, PP has popularized the idea that, notwithstanding serious concerns raised regarding the quantification and commensurability of feelings, happiness can be expressed in a single and objective variable for comparing individuals according to their levels of satisfaction with their lives and to adopt it as a sort of "affective thermometer" for objectively measuring economic utility, assessing social progress, and guiding public policies. This idea is also shared by the related field of happiness economics. As these scholars point out, "researchers have succeeded in doing what Bentham could not accomplish: to devise a way of measuring how happy people are and how much pleasure or pain they derive from the ordinary events and conditions of their lives" (Bok, 2010, p. 204, see also Layard, 2005).

Nevertheless, prominent critics from multiple disciplines have pointed out several methodological shortcomings in the field as well as problems of measurement. Whereas positive psychologists—henceforth PPs—commonly state that these methodologies are precise and objective, the field seems to actually lack validated and consensual methods to measure happiness (Angner, 2013). In this regard, even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013) claimed that the field needed greater methodological reliability since many happiness measures "lack the consistency needed for them to be used as the basis for international comparisons" (p. 23). Another concern associated with happiness measures is that they are frequently based on quantitative questionnaires (e.g., "Values in Action Inventory," Park & Peterson, 2006 and "Satisfaction With Life Scale," Pavot & Diener, 2008) that are excessively individual-oriented. As some authors have pointed out, this methodology severely limits the range of informative responses that people provide regarding their happiness—which might also favor a confirmation bias on the part of the researchers (Schwarz, Knäuper, Oyserman, & Stich, 2008). For instance, a recent study conducted in Australia shows that when compared to life narratives obtained via interviews, quantitative self-assessments not only exaggerate how happy people really are, but also exaggerate the role that positive emotional factors play in comparison with social issues, in the way people assess their lives—including particular and specific circumstances, negative evaluations, and mixed feelings (Ponocny, Weismayer, Stross, & Dressler, 2015). In this regard, the study concludes by pointing out that "a major disaster in SWB [Subjective Well-Being] research would be that people do not do well, but researchers fail to recognize. Our results strongly suggest that relying exclusively on standard self-rating questions will not protect against this danger" (p. 2651).

Positive psychology and individualism

Finally, PP sits well with the worldview of neoliberalism because it shares the individualistic anthropology and the narrow sense of the social that characterize this ideology. PP supplies a model of selfhood that not only renders subjectivity as a natural, autonomous, and self-contained emotional and cognitive universe amenable to mathematical scrutiny but also as devoid of political and cultural content. By stating that obtaining happiness is the most important goal in life for all human beings (e.g., Diener, 2000; Seligman, 2011), PP also surrenders the worthiest purposes in life to a strong individualistic way of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world that turns personal flourishing into the most fundamental need and goal of all human beings. In this regard, and most importantly for this paper, several critical accounts have maintained that PP is based largely on the dominant Western ideology of individualism (Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Sundararajan, 2005). Specifically, it has been argued that PP uncritically assumes a strong individualistic bias that mirrors the anthropological and neo-utilitarian assumptions of neoliberalism (Christopher et al., 2008)—for instance, as Becker and Marecek (2008a) point out, “individualism is a core but unacknowledged ideology that pervades positive psychology’s ideas about persons, experience, and human action” (pp. 1768–1769). Thus, whereas it might be said that the individualistic bias characterizes mainstream psychology as well (Rose, 1998), the rest of this paper will try to illustrate that this bias becomes even more acute, essential, and explicit in PP.

Happiness and individualism

In PP, individualism and happiness depend on each other. Whereas the former is assumed as a cultural and ethical precondition for achieving happiness, the latter is put forward as the scientific justification for individualism as a morally legitimate value. PPs claim that just as happiness is a natural goal that all human beings inherently pursue, individualism and the pursuit of goals autonomously and independently is the most natural way of living a happy life (e.g., Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2009). There are several examples in PP literature that explicitly show and argue in favor of the strong interdependence between happiness and individualism.

For instance, Ed Diener and colleagues conclude that individualism is what most strongly relates to happiness, thus explaining why individualistic cultures tend to produce citizens with higher levels of autonomy, self-efficacy, and satisfaction with life than non-individualistic or collective cultures (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 2009). The main reason put forward is that a citizen in an individualistic culture has “more freedom to choose his or her own life course,” is “more likely to attribute success to themselves,” and enjoys more chances “to pursue their individual goals” (p. 67). Similarly, Oishi (2000) states that individualism defined as a cultural emphasis on independence and individual self-worth is the strongest feature associated with well-being and life satisfaction, thus explaining why citizens of Australia and Denmark were happier than those of Korea and Bahrain. According to Steele and Lynch (2013), individualism also accounts for the rise of happiness in countries such as China, whose higher levels of happiness would be related to the increasing acceptance of the ethic of personal responsibility, even

amongst those in socially disadvantaged positions. In this regard, the majority of PP studies claim to have soundly proven that the more individualized the nation, the happier its citizens: “the overall pattern strongly suggests that greater individualism is consistently associated with more well-being” (Fischer & Boer, 2011, p. 164).

One of the strongest assumptions in PP is that happiness is not a circumstantial, social, cultural, or political issue, but a psychological and individual one. This idea is well-reflected in the so-called “happiness formula” (Seligman, 2002), according to which genetics accounts for about 50% of individuals’ happiness; volitional, cognitive, and emotional factors account for 40%; and life circumstances and other factors, such as income, education, social status, and so on account for the remaining 10%. Although this formula has been discredited by the scientific community as well as by many PPs, the assumption that happiness is mainly an individual and psychological issue remains rather strong in PP. As PP Vázquez (2009) claims

in spite of what might be expected, other economic factors (such as access to drinking water or malnutrition levels), factors related to freedom (e.g., the possibility of divorce, right to abortion or suicide rates), to equality and social climate (illiteracy rates, trust in family and other institutions or social inequality rates, etc.) or to population pressure (birth rate, population density, etc.) do not seem to have a significant relationship to people’s happiness. (p. 131)

Following this reasoning, the role that social structures, power relations, economic inequality, authority, migration, justice, purchasing power, or coercion might be playing in the happiness of individuals is generally overlooked by PP (Becker & Marecek, 2008a). If anything, the relation of any of these factors to happiness would be subsidiary to individualism. Income is a good example. According to PP, and following the famous “Easterlin Paradox,” there is no significant relationship between income and happiness beyond a certain income threshold—which ranges from \$20,000 to \$75,000 per year depending on the study. Authors such as Stevenson and Wolfers (2013), though, put this widespread claim into question, showing that “there is no major well-being dataset that supports this commonly-made claim” (p. 603). Given this new evidence, whereas some PPs acknowledged the criticism, a majority agreed with the reply of authors such as Fischer and Boer (2011). According to the latter, whereas money might indeed provide citizens with better conditions for achieving happiness, this fact would still be subsidiary to individualism, since they argue that “increasing wealth in a society may influence well-being but primarily through allowing citizens to experience greater autonomy and freedom in their daily life” (p. 177).

Further, PPs state that the more internalized individualism is, the happier the individuals will be, regardless of their normative or cultural contexts. To this regard, PPs Sheldon and colleagues (2004) stated that even in non-individualistic cultures such as South Korea, Taiwan, or China, the happiest people are those who have internalized individualistic values and live according to them, normative or cultural forces notwithstanding: “self-concordant individuals are people who pursue life goals with a sense that they express their authentic choices rather than with a sense that they are controlled by external forces over which they have little to say” (p. 209). According to PP, those perceiving that they are autonomous and free enough to choose their own paths should show higher

levels of happiness regardless of any other structural, normative, or cultural condition: “Individuals may be dependent on others and still experience autonomy if they find value in that dependence and engage in it of their own volition. What is of importance is the internalization of the values that one is exercising” (Tov & Diener, 2009, p. 27). Thus, for PP whereas autonomy as *de facto* independence may not be required as a universal prerequisite for happiness, autonomy as a subjective feeling is. Indeed, this subjectivist way of understanding autonomy and freedom is individualism at its purest.

Happy nations

Countries with the strongest individualist values, such as Australia, Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United States, the United Kingdom, or Norway—as measured by Hofstede’s (2001) “Individualism-Collectivism dimension”—usually rank at the top of the most prominent global happiness reports as well, including the “World Happiness Report” issued by the United Nations, the “OECD Better Life Index,” or the “Happy Planet Index” issued by the British think-tank New Economics Foundation. According to PPs such as Schimmack, Oishi, and Diener (2005), this data proves that “higher well being in individualistic cultures is consistent with the definition of individualism as encouraging independence and freedom of choice” (p. 25). Further, a seemingly high correlation between happiness and individualism also seems to prove that the former can be used as a reliable variable when it comes to validating individualism itself as a core cross-cultural dimension—as these same authors point out, an “example of the validity of individualism is the repeatedly found relation between individualism and subjective well-being” (p. 25).

Scandinavian countries, characterized by their individualistic values, such as Denmark or Sweden, are recurrent cases to support the strong interdependence of happiness and individualism that is alleged by PPs. Danish people, for instance, praise individual merit, competition in education and business, and social mobility. Sweden is a similar case, where independence is one of the most fundamental values. The Swedish conceive authentic human relationships as fundamentally based on independence from each other, so true friendship and love is perceived as being built solely on free choice and personal will. Further, Scandinavian countries have coined the word “arbejdsglæde,” a single term that expresses the idea that happiness is a necessary precondition of success in life.

Nevertheless, this happiness–individualism association has been put into question by extended analyses that prove a null relationship between both variables (Bhullar, Schutte, & Malouff, 2012; Jun, 2015), especially when other social, economic, and political variables are taken into account. In fact, Scandinavian countries are as characterized by their individualism as they are by their strong welfare state, which, contrary to what PPs usually claim, might be a better explanation for their higher aggregate levels of happiness. In this regard, a thorough report on Denmark in 2014 concluded that the three main variables explaining the remarkable levels of happiness in the country were trust, security, and wealth (The Happiness Research Institute, 2014), further adding that, if anything, stress on personal responsibility “can have a negative effect on happiness” (p. 34). Thus, whereas the relationship between individualism and happiness is still up for debate, the

majority of PPs claim that a robust happiness–individualism association better explains the happiness of nations (Suh, Diener, & Updegraff, 2009).

Indeed, drawing upon their own research as well as the data provided by global happiness reports, PPs such as Bergsma and colleagues claim that “we now live longer and happier than ever before in human history” (Bergsma & Veenhoven, 2011, p. 2), on the alleged assumption that individualist and modern societies provide “a challenging environment that fits an innate human need for self-actualization” (Veenhoven, 2010, p. 120). Increased self-understanding, more opportunity to choose, and greater freedom are also notable features of these societies, which might contribute strongly to the higher happiness of their citizens (Diener et al., 2009; Seligman, 2011).

Happiness and suffering

Such claims contrast with the millions of people in these societies that each year resort to happiness therapies, services, and products such as coaching services, mindfulness courses, positive psychological advice, mood-boosting medication, self-improvement smartphone applications, or self-help books, apparently because they do not feel happy, or at least happy enough, with their lives (Lipovetsky, 2007). These claims also contrast with important works and studies that link the striking rates of depression, anxiety, mental illness, mood disorders, medication use, and detachment to the “me culture” that predominates in capitalist and modern societies (Eckersley, 2005; Hidaka, 2012; Horwitz & Wakefield, 2005; Lasch, 1984; Watters, 2010; Whitaker, 2010).

Further, such claims also contrast with sociological studies that relate increasing individualism to higher rates of depression and even suicide in developing countries. In this regard, social theorists such as Ashis Nandy (2013) analyze the shortcomings related to the rapid turn to happiness that India has undergone in the past decade. According to Nandy, a “clenched-teeth pursuit of happiness” and a powerful belief in “human self-engineering” (p. 176) have quickly become major cultural features in India, prompting many to firmly believe “that it is up to them, individually, to do something about their own happiness, that happiness cannot happen or occur, nor can it be given: It has to be earned or acquired” (p. 176). Nandy sees the Indian turn to happiness as a “byproduct of individualism,” a cultural “disease,” and a “regime of narcissism” coming from the West and spread through globalization. One of the main associated problems pointed out by the author is that happiness and its underlying individualism has brought about a profound sense of loneliness and despair amongst Indian citizens, which was previously absent and which would partly explain the rising suicide epidemics in India.

This analysis matches other important studies that understand PP as a bearer of the individualist mantra of personal responsabilization (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Frawley, 2015; Held, 2005; Zupančič, 2008). These studies suggest that happiness should not be viewed as the opposite of suffering. On the contrary, it is pointed out that happiness not only reproduces many of the hazards commonly associated with individualism—for example, detachment, selfishness, narcissism, egocentrism—but also creates its own forms of suffering, especially related to individual responsabilization (Illouz, 2008).

Regarding the former, i.e., happiness, authors such as Mauss and colleagues have pointed out that since it is defined in terms of positive feelings and personal gains, striving

for happiness might damage people's connectedness and increase both their sense of loneliness and detachment from others (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011). For their part, Tan and Forgas (2010) argue that whereas happy states might raise subjective empathy, they are often associated with decreased empathic objective performance, as well as with the increased pursuit of self-interest, selfishness, and egocentric behavior (see also Forgas, 2013). Similarly, Rose and Campbell (2004) reported that happiness positively correlates with narcissism, which lies at the core of self-aggrandizement and hubristic pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007). It has also been noted that happiness techniques, including those focused on attributional styles, self-affirmations, emotional regulation, or self-awareness are markedly self-centered (Cabanas & Illouz, 2017; Cabanas & Sánchez-González, 2012), thus favoring the sort of "hyper-reflexivity" that is the root cause of a vast array of mental disorders (Pérez-Álvarez, 2015).

Regarding suffering, the insistence on striving for higher and higher levels of flourishing, which is characteristic of PP, breeds the paradoxical effect in many individuals of feeling overburdened by the imperative of self-improvement, which is often accompanied by high levels of stress, emptiness, maladjustment, and depression (Cabanas, 2016). Further, happiness is also associated with self-blame as personal responsabilization has diffuse sources. As Ashley Frawley (2015) points out, "happiness claims evoke a rhetoric of vulnerability in which the vulnerable suffer from a harm for which the responsibility is unclear, and thus there can be condemnation without offence" (p. 115). Happiness emphasizes that only individuals are accountable for their choices in life, for the way they feel, act, and think, for their sense of purpose and well-being, and for their health. In this regard, since happiness is a mainly a matter of individual responsibility, suffering tends to be seen as a sign of personal failure and lack of effort (Cabanas & Sánchez-González, 2016). This would partly explain why people living in individualist societies tend to rank themselves as over 7 out of 10 on happiness questionnaires. According to authors such as Cummins and Nistico (2002; see also Tomyn & Cummins, 2011), a cognitive bias would account for the tendency amongst individuals in these societies to protect their self-esteem by inhibiting negative evaluations of their lives.

Happiness and Panglossianism

Against the background of these studies and the argument laid down in this paper, we might ask ourselves whether PP and its individualist conception of human happiness are contributing to sustaining and creating some of the dissatisfaction which they promise a way out of. On the one hand, looking inwards for remedies to pressing challenges such as high levels of instability, insecurity, uncertainty, or economic misfortune might be more of an ideological assumption than a proper solution. Happiness-based interventions and techniques might provide consolation to many, but they do not seem to be as effective as they claim. They do not, for instance, have a medium- and long-term impact, or come without associated problems. Some PPs acknowledge that individualist societies (also referred to as market economies) might be partly responsible for the rise of stress, anxiety, depression, emptiness, narcissism, hopelessness, and a large set of mental and physical disorders (Bergsma & Veenhoven, 2011; Veenhoven, 2010). Nevertheless, the majority of these scholars claim that personal features better explain all these ailments,

thus ruling out the idea that cultural, social, or structural conditions have a significant effect on them (Seligman, 2002, 2011; Vázquez, 2009).

Relatedly, PP has popularized the claim that despite living in troubled times, life is generally and globally getting better, as shown by global happiness reports. Demands for political and social transformation, therefore, would seem to be exaggerations. This idea is well-represented by Ruut Veenhoven (2010; see also Seligman, 2011), who argues that the need for social reform is overstated. According to him, such claims are fueled both by social theorists and journalists who, following the works of Marx, Freud, Durkheim, Riesman, Ritzer, or Putnam, “earn their living dealing with social problems and for that reason tend to emphasize evil (EVIL?)” (Veenhoven, 2010, p. 120). Veenhoven argues that the spread of this “negative view” of modern societies veils our awareness of actual improvement, thus working as a “self-denying prophecy” (p. 120). It has also been pointed out that “even if modern society causes part of the burden of mental disorders, its victims may also still enjoy some of the concurrent benefits” (Bergsma & Veenhoven, 2011, p. 4), since happiness may be equally available for everybody regardless of their situation. Some authors, though, have criticized this position:

The good life is not readily or equally available to all. Disparities in status and power resulting from social class, gender, skin color, race, nationality, and caste, markedly influence wellbeing. These structural differences dramatically affect one’s access to healthcare, educational and economic opportunity, fair treatment in the criminal justice system, safe and secure living conditions, a promising future for one’s children, and even mortality. What kind of fulfillment is possible in the absence of these basic conditions? To suggest that self-help exercises can suffice in the absence of social transformation is not only short sighted but morally repugnant. (Becker & Marecek, 2008a, p. 1771)

Irrespective of Veenhoven’s questionable claims, the fact is that PP seems to rekindle the overly optimistic and centuries-old tradition in Western thought of Panglossianism. This overly optimistic view, albeit consistent with a positivist and reductionist approach to history and society, runs the danger of exacerbating conformism, prompting gullibility, and reducing critical thinking. Calling into question the existing state of affairs, defamiliarizing the familiar, and inquiring into the processes, meanings, and practices that shape our identities, selves, and everyday behavior are fundamental endeavors of analytic and constructive judgment. Believing that all is for the best in this best of possible worlds, though, could block or diminish the need for critical thinking.

Conclusion

PP has been established as a worldwide phenomenon in the last two decades, especially since the years after the global financial crisis of 2008. The firm institutionalization of this phenomenon is not limited to academia, but it has haunted morality, politics, economics, and therapeutics to a great extent. It also reflects the fact that people are longing for solutions in times of great social uncertainty, instability, and insecurity. However widespread the demand for them, happiness therapies, services, and products promoted by PP raise serious doubts on many fronts. The increasing popularity of the field has been accompanied by a broad range of criticism regarding its theoretical basis, methodological

limitations, exaggerated claims, presumed novelty, therapeutic efficacy, and even its status as a science. Furthermore, the field has been criticized for its narrow sense of the social as well as for its uncritical assumption of a strong individualistic bias that itself reflects the core beliefs of neoliberal ideology.

PP fits in well with the worldview of neoliberal ideology, including its scientism, neo-utilitarianism, universalist aspirations, and emphasis on personal responsibility. On a political level, with PP, Bentham's utilitarianism seems to reach a higher level, ceasing to be an abstract utopia of social engineering and instead becoming a scientific reality in which the good life is amenable to calculation and measurement. On a theoretical level, PP provides a renewed and allegedly objective basis on which to ground its individualist assumptions about the self and society. The neoliberal postulate of autonomous and self-determined citizens who might achieve happiness in a free-market society through self-control, self-motivation, and the internalization of individualistic values seems to be justified now on the grounds of positivist science and sound empirical research. In this regard, the primary aim of this paper has been to illustrate the strong resonance of PP's individualistic conceptualization of happiness with that ideological postulate.

Further, it has been discussed that PP's individualistic conceptualization of happiness is problematic. Several historical, sociological, and cultural studies have related individualism to high rates of depression, anxiety, egocentrism, detachment, mood disorders, and mental illness. Happiness has also been associated with these same hazards, including narcissism, loneliness, hubristic pride, selfishness, and the increased pursuit of self-interest. It has also been documented that happiness is associated with forms of suffering on its own, including emptiness, anxiety, vulnerability, and guilt. In this regard, it has been pointed out that the alleged benefits of happiness and individualization might not outweigh their costs. Although more studies are needed, there is already a large amount of evidence that points in this direction. Therefore, and in light of the many criticisms directed at PP, it seems reasonable to think, like William Davies, that "maybe what we need right now is not more or better science of happiness or behavior, but less, or at least different" (2015, p. 8).

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