

LOGOTHERAPY AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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This lecture will present my take on the fields of logotherapy and positive psychology. My aim is to provide a comparison between logotherapy and positive psychology, highlighting what I see as key areas of similarity and difference.

DEFINITIONS:

The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania defines positive psychology as “the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive.” It has been more informally defined as “what’s right with people” rather than “what’s wrong with people.” Martin Seligman explains that whereas prior efforts in psychology have focused on how to move people from -10 to 0, positive psychology focuses on how to move people from 0 to +10.

Logotherapy and Existential Analysis is defined by the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna as an empirically based meaning-centered approach to psychotherapy wherein the search for a meaning in life is identified as the primary motivational force in human beings. Logotherapy has been more informally defined as “health through meaning.”

BASIC CONCEPTS:

Seligman’s positive psychology defines happiness as the Well-Lived Life. The Well-Lived Life is based on The Three Pillars of Positive Psychology, known as The Pleasant Life, The Engaged Life, and the Meaningful Life.

The Pleasant Life is a life of pleasure, especially simple pleasures in living, joy, love. The Engaged Life is a life wherein one uses one’s strengths in a way that is productive. The Meaningful Life is one in which one lives for a higher purpose.

Positive psychology works to enrich each of these areas.

Logotherapy teaches that happiness cannot be directly pursued, but is a by-product of reasons to be happy. Reasons to be happy can be found in Frankl’s Three Categorical Values: the Experiential Value, the Creative Value and the Attitudinal Value.

The experiential value includes all experiences of truth and beauty discovered in the world as well as all loving encounters with other human beings. The experiential value may be actualized through nature, art, dance, music, and literature and through relationships of love and acceptance. The creative value encompasses all acts that give something to life that would not otherwise exist. The creative value may be actualized through work, through hobbies, or through doing good deeds. The attitudinal value is actualized through the stance taken toward unavoidable suffering. If one chooses bravery

over cowardice, mercy over revenge, or justice over appeasement, then the attitudinal value has been actualized. A meaningful life is, therefore, a life in which these values are actualized to the greatest possible degree.

In my mind, there is high degree of correspondence between these basic concepts and Frankl's categorical values. Frankl's experiential value describes the pleasant life while his creative value describes the engaged life. Although the meaningful life comes closer to Frankl's concept of self-transcendence, the path to achieve this is based upon the attitudinal value.

More recently, Seligman has talked about five rather than three pillars. These five are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Good Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments, referred to by the acronym PERMA. Frankl also would break out encounters with others as a special case of the experiential value, sometimes referred to as experiences *and* encounters.

TECHNIQUES:

The techniques of Seligman's positive psychology are conceptualized on the premise of increasing the strengths of an individual rather than reducing or removing weaknesses. In this, much like logotherapy, it is seen as an adjunct to be used with other forms of therapy that address specific disorders.

Some examples of positive psychology techniques include the following:

The Three Blessings Technique:

At the end of each day, write down three good things that happened during the day that were not expected. Mood is raised in 20 to 26 days and people want to continue using this technique after that period of time.

Positive psychology has empirically identified 6 basic human strengths, each of which is also broken down into smaller strengths inside these categories. The six main strengths identified by positive psychology are: Wisdom, Courage, Love, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence.

The Positive Psychology Center has a number of free, online tests to measure constructs used in positive psychology. The test to identify these strengths is called the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) VIA, interesting enough, stands for Values in Action.

After the specific strengths of a person are identified, positive psychology then challenges a person to find new and larger ways to use their strengths. Logotherapy would say to actualize or realize their values. Positive psychology then challenges a person to reflect on deeper purpose in life and how to create this purpose in life.

CURRENT RESEARCH:

It is in the area of current research that positive psychology may be about to make significant strides. Through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the positive psychology has found a home in the United States Army.

Specifically, there is another test, called the Global Assessment Tool, or GAT, that measures emotional fitness, family fitness, social fitness and spiritual fitness, the latter relating to meaning and purpose in life. It has now been administered to 1.3 million people, every man and woman in the US Army. This is a huge research sample, and it is also being correlated with medical databases and the 29 other databases kept on every US soldier.

Here are some of the early, preliminary results of that research:

The year 2010 saw 84 completed suicides in the US Army. All 84 had taken the GAT. It has now been found that of those who scored within the bottom 1% of a measure of meaning and purpose in life, one-half have committed suicide. This measure includes true-false statements including “life has meaning” and “my work in the Army has purpose.” Because of the research efforts of positive psychology, there will soon be valid ways to predict suicidality, as well as drug abuse, court martial, and even early promotion within the United States Army.

Currently, positive psychology army research has developed 28 Internet based modules for areas on the GAT that suggest potential problem areas, including modules to improve spiritual fitness and resilience.

In one study performed in Korea, it was found that 80% of suicidal incidents, which include completed suicides as well as attempts and episodes of suicidal ideation, occurred among troops not trained in resilience while only 20% occurred among troops who had been trained in resiliencies.

Studies such as these also contribute to the current, rapid evolution of health care delivery systems in the United States. It may soon be commonplace that measures on social fitness, such as having a good marriage, will be a factor in the selection of dosage of antibiotics in a person with infectious disease.

The current Cameron administration in the United Kingdom is also working with Seligman to measure the positive well being of the entire nation. Changes in public policy are being compared against large samples of well being. Positive psychology research is looking toward a future where such things as a tax increase or decrease may even be weighed against its predicted health effects on a population.

What logotherapy lacks at present is a driving force, such as the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. It lacks the funding of such a center, and it certainly lacks the large-scale research opportunities that have been afforded to positive psychology by the US Army and the UK Cameron administration. These are some of the issues that logotherapy must face as it prepares itself to advance into the 21st Century.

DIFFERENCES:

Logotherapy insists upon the irreducible nature of the human person. Frankl argues that we are not only pushed by drives, but that we are pulled by meaning. In this sense, logotherapy has been called a “height psychology” rather than a “depth psychology.” In a similar vein, in his keynote address to the Second World Congress on Positive Psychology, Seligman argues that psychology has made a profound error about human nature – namely that we are pushed by drives rather than drawn into the future, drawn, he argues, by goals.

But how? For Frankl, we are drawn by values. For Seligman, we are drawn into the future by running “if-then” equations in the frontal lobes of our brains. In fact, he states, “there is nothing mystical about it.” Rather, what makes us human is reduced to the ability of our brains to do a type of calculation that the brains of animals cannot do, or, at least, not do nearly as well. Owing to phenomenology, while a modern day Frankl might acknowledge the ability of neuroscience to demonstrate if-then equations operating in the frontal lobes, he could never agree that our future-orientation is “nothing but” an operation of this glorious calculator. If meaning, goals, and values can be reduced to nothing but a brain operation, then they lack meaning – they lack a genuine human dimension – at least, for the logotherapist.

Nevertheless, there are obvious compatibilities and obvious areas of overlap. Positive psychology has done a good job of finding operational definitions for key areas of interest to logotherapy, and designing quality research to explore them. Frankl never had disputes with empirical findings in psychoanalysis or behaviorism. He saw logotherapy as moving beyond them. Recall Frankl’s famous analogy of the airplane. The fact that an airplane can fly does not mean that it cannot also taxi on the ground like a car. It only fulfills its purpose, though, when it takes to the air. Likewise, there is no reason for logotherapy to not fully embrace the research findings of positive psychology, just as it may use discoveries from psychoanalysis, behaviorism, or cognitive psychology today.

In like manner though, we in logotherapy should remember that logotherapy only fulfills its purpose when it takes to the air, when it discovers uniquely human meaning and purpose. And in that Unique Human Meaning, it stands alone.