



**REAL LIFE IN TIMES OF HAPPINESS. A CRITICISM OF
POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY (AND IDEOLOGY)**

Pérez, M., Sánchez, J.C. and Cabanas, E.
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Three hundred and seventy-four pages without filler is what this book offers, of interest to psychologists of any specialty, journalists and the educated public in general. It is a complete analysis of positive psychology. It is complete because it approaches the subject from a theoretical-methodological and historical viewpoint, but without the two being separated: the historical viewpoint is part of the theoretical-methodological one and vice versa. For the rest, it is a critical analysis, based on judgments of epistemic, political, and moral value.

After an introduction in which it is argued that the theme of happiness goes beyond the categories of any presumed science of happiness, the content is divided into three parts. The first contains a theoretical and methodological analysis of positive psychology, whose precarious epistemological base is brought to light showing that it ultimately constitutes a mixture of common sense and placebo effect shrouded in scientific language. The second part could almost be read independently as a historical summary of the roots of positive psychology—which, typically North American, refer to the ethics of self-control, self-made man, transcendentalism and New Thought—and how these roots are ramified in the current contemporary world of work, structured according to the authors along the transition from classical liberalism to neoliberalism. The third part, dense and risky, proposes a way of understanding happiness that does not pass through positive psychology but rather other academic traditions, especially what is known as constructivism—the hero of the book is surely John Dewey—, whose difference from constructionism, labeled as relativist and postmodern, is underscored more than once. There is also talk of the synergies between positive psychology and liberal democracy (individualist in a pejorative, hedonistic sense) and between constructivist psychology and (community) social democracy. Finally, the conclusion recapitulates the main ideas of the work.

Now we have described the book, we can begin to evaluate its content, although to do so we would really need more space. So here are just a few jottings regarding some parts that, in my opinion, could be discussed with the authors.

A feeling that I have had throughout most of the reading is that many of the criteria with which positive psychology is analyzed could be applied to all psychology with similar results. I do not mean potential methodological sloppiness or undue conceptual extrapolations, but rather that probably from any psychology one could preach what is preached in the book of positive psychology, namely, that it is a set of practical rules closely linked to common sense, performative, but linked to the claim to be doing science and whose theoretical justification is debatable. The performative nature of positive psychology—in the sense that forcing us to be happy causes us unhappiness—can be extended to all psychology, since virtually all psychology makes us self-reflective and, therefore, makes

us aware of ourselves turning our problems into psychological ones. Likewise, both with respect to positive psychology and with regard to any other psychology, it can be said that the borders among science, values, and politics are porous.

The book transcends this feeling when, in its third part, it proposes a type of psychology that would save it from being burnt: the aforementioned constructivism—of Dewey, James Mark Baldwin, Jean Piaget, etc.—, which in other pages make up existential psychology or contextual psychology, in a more psychotherapeutic branch. In fact, constructivism is presented as a general psychology aware of its inevitable relationship with values and politics. We must recall that Dewey coordinated within the same framework a functionalist psychology and a whole general conception on the progress of humanity that included a philosophy of art, ethics, a philosophy of education, etc., as well as his concerns as an activist.

The problem, I think, is that a hundred years later it is not so clear how to elaborate a *master narrative* like that without justifying it through the use of a conception of reality or of human nature that, nevertheless, is only sustained based on the story itself. It is precisely a postmodern descendant of Dewey, Richard Rorty, who has shown the difficulty of grounding our knowledge or our interests in something external to them and universal. The only thing that is appropriate, says Rorty, is a common negotiating ground, a practical rationality consisting of making interests compatible without denouncing that the adversary is moving away from (what we define as) some kind of objective truth external to the negotiation process itself. There is no common theoretical perspective, universal or unifying.

Prolonging this argument, one might ask about the meaning of canceling the heterogeneity of psychology and reducing its plurality to a unifying point of view. Perhaps the theoretical and practical plurality of psychology is constitutive, irremediable, and responds to the fact (which the authors admit) that all psychology is linked to a certain conception of human nature and a sociopolitical agenda. Insofar as we live in societies that are not medieval or totalitarian, that include different ways of life, it seems difficult to imagine a single psychology that encompasses all of them *de facto* and not only by decree. Perhaps, in the same way that it is defended in the book that happiness is an elusive concept, impossible to define clearly and distinctly, we should do the same with psychology: consider it an elusive discipline that can only be understood from sideways on and not face to face.

Diving into psychology and social sciences, defining what things are and what they are not can lead to the creation of dichotomies instead of identifying gradual processes and mixtures. It has given me the impression that the authors of the book do this when they raise the distinction between a tradition of positive psychology linked to liberal democracy—the bad one, shall we say—and a tradition of constructivist psychology linked to social democracy—the good one. The table on page 312 is enormously illustrative in this regard. In it a column is dedicated to characterizing each of these two traditions in terms of their conception of the state, democracy, the individual, values, evolution, and the relationship between science and truth. I thought it was like applying a scalpel to a tissue, cutting it into two pieces, and pretending that each of the halves had a different composition. Crossroads and mixtures of traditions (classical liberalism and neoliberalism, positive



psychology and constructivist psychology, liberal democracy, and social democracy, etc.) are such that it is impossible to separate them cleanly. We can only cut.

Something similar happens, in my opinion, with the characterization of the social sciences that is done at the end of the work, among which of course psychology is included. They are characterized by traits such as epistemic values (they are not mere ideology or mere concealment of power relations, but rather they contain truths), care (commitment to the well-being of the other, respect) and the inescapable connection with a certain worldview or value system (ethical, political, relating to how we should live). Well, let's take the case of care. Its dark side is missing. To speak of care is to emphasize the good side of a relationship between subjects that also includes carelessness, exploitation, vigilance, control, repression, cruelty, etc. Think of the connection between social sciences and colonialism or sexism, in totalitarian forms of social engineering, in invasive clinical practices, in confinement based on scientific principles of a pedagogical or psychiatric nature, etc. These are phenomena as inherent to the care sciences—the social sciences—as any others. The dimensions that are negative (or rather are considered so by us) are inseparable from the ones that are (we consider) positive. The authors

themselves are aware of this when they recognize that sometimes values have a bad influence, inducing “cheating or causing harm (and degrading objectivity and care)” (p. 326), which they nevertheless consider a “borderline case to pursue and punish, as an exercise of illegitimate values” (*ibidem*).

The problem is that sciences are defined both by their controversies and by their consensuses, and what is sometimes considered legitimate is considered illegitimate and even aberrant at other times, without ceasing to invoke in any case epistemic values (“it is true”), values of care (“it's for your own good”) and values of progress (“it's for the good of all”). It is the experts who usually invoke these values according to a mechanism that in the book is not problematized. Who is authorized to speak on behalf of the others? And why? What is the authority of social scientists?

All in all, my scribbles denote a “criticism of criticism” and not a reprobation of the book—like the one that a steadfast positive psychologist would make, say. It is a high-level work, in which the collaboration between three psychology professors from different specialties—clinical and historical—has produced estimable fruits that should be reaped in the faculties of psychology and beyond.

SAVING CHILDREN FROM THE “FRIENDLY FIRE” THAT DIAGNOSES THEM WITH A MENTAL DISORDER THEY DO NOT HAVE

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Más Aristóteles y menos Concerta. Las cuatro causas del TDAH [More Aristotle and less Concerta. The four causes of ADHD] is Marino Pérez's new book, published in October 2018 by NED editions. This professor of psychopathology at the University of Oviedo, not satisfied with his well-known and recognized contributions to the phenomenon of ADHD—always from a critical perspective—has aimed to go beyond the somewhat mired controversy of “ADHD yes/ADHD-no”, attempting to solve definitively what seemed to be an impossible question: what are we talking about when we talk about ADHD?

As things stand today, on the one hand there are the supporters of ADHD, who talk about pathology, neurodevelopmental disease, genetics, etc., and on the other the denialists, who talk about invention, and there is even a third group, who speak of overdiagnosis—they believe in the diagnosis but criticize the excess of false positives. This group nevertheless still belongs to the supporters. There have been two conflicting positions for decades and the confrontation seems to have nowhere to go. With this new and outstanding work, Marino Perez has sought to overcome the usual confrontation, which is normally based on an empirical battle, of “facts”, and to raise the discussion to the field of philosophy. Nobody, he reminds us, can escape philosophy. And

ADHD is a real thing, he says, because otherwise we would not be talking about it. The question is to see *how* it has become real.

The book has three parts. In the **first part**, entitled *La insostenibilidad del TDAH como entidad clínica* [The unsustainability of ADHD as a clinical entity], the author carries out a review of the four pillars on which ADHD rests: diagnosis, genetics, neurobiology, and history. From the beginning, he avoids assuming an uncritical stance on the standard conception—which is uncommon in ADHD publications—pointing out, one by one, all the conceptual deficits of the diagnosis that are usually considered valid without being reviewed. The problem begins with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the DSM, of the American Psychiatric Society, and other related manuals such as the ICD (*International Classification of Diseases*, of the WHO), which establish diagnoses without clinical validity. ADHD is the result of a consensus of opinions, not evidence. There is no conclusive data but there is a very abundant bibliography on almost-findings that has become evidence by mere accumulation. The diagnosis ends up being the result of a cumulation of fallacious reasoning. A consequence of this is, for example, the extension of the diagnosis to adults and the flourishing of diagnoses among women. Next come the complementary tests on which the diagnosis is based, which the author ascribes to clinical paraphernalia, because if they measure something, they do not measure ADHD.

The section dedicated to genetics shows that there is a discourse already assumed as valid in which terms such as hereditary and genetic are confused, and where we talk about a complex and heterogeneous disorder as a resource that ends up evidencing failure in the search for genes. He explains why it should be unthinkable to talk about gene-environment interaction, starting with the fact that the ADHD phenotype is not even well defined. All this without forgetting to cover issues as current and necessary as epigenetics. Maybe in all this genetic ambiguity, laments the author, there is more politics than science.

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Affirming that ADHD is a disease or disorder of neurodevelopment means, again, avoiding the issues that Marino Pérez is not willing to avoid. In his opinion, the results that are usually published about the brain-ADHD tell us more about the preconceptions of their authors than about the data obtained. Although the conclusions found are sufficiently inconsistent that nothing practical can be derived from them, the “neuro” discourse on ADHD is so recurrent and so ambiguous that it ends up being admitted as evidence due to the mere fact that a lot is said about it. The author ends by offering us four reasons to stand up against the neuroevolutionary brain-centric perspective that may have led us here.

Finally, the first part of the book ends with what usually goes at the beginning of many ADHD publications: its history. Against the idea that ADHD is a permanent problem, Marino Pérez again avoids taking this as a matter of fact and reviews the issue. Diagnosing ADHD retrospectively to historical figures of all kinds—even biblical ones—, a widespread formula, accepted as most natural, reveals more than anything an attempt by the defenders of the diagnosis to show that ADHD has a pedigree, which would reinforce it as a natural entity to hold up to the denialists, who, we remember, speak of invention. Reviewing history carefully, we find a very different story from the one that is usually accepted.

In the **second part**, Marino Pérez wishes to answer a question that ends up being imposed at the end of the first part. If ADHD is not what it seems, then what is it? To answer this question, we must leave the empirical data behind and review the method itself, the language that is implicit in it, and precisely for delving into these issues there is philosophy. In very accessible language, the author introduces us to a **metascientific perspective** in a surprising way, with the intention for us to be able to distinguish the components of ADHD in order to understand its structure, which is far from being natural. Marino Pérez finds in the *four causes of Aristotle* a very useful tool for this purpose, which although it has already been used in relation to ADHD, its past use has not been correct and, more importantly, using the four causes respecting the Aristotelian essence may shed the light that is needed to access the deep roots of the phenomenon.

Asking about the four causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) allows us to obtain complete information about something. What it is made of, what form it has acquired to be what it is, who did it, and for what? Although the psychologist Peter Killen and collaborators had already used the four causes of Aristotle in ADHD, Marino Pérez criticizes this precedent for, among other things, not being faithful to the Aristotelian essence and for being limited to reordering the official neurobiological explanations, without questioning the scientific quality of the diagnosis. Our author proposes, in the first place, to follow the sequential order of the causes of Aristotle, which Killen et al. did not do.

The material cause informs about the origin of ADHD. Brain defects, chemical imbalances, injuries of some kind? These would be the material causes of a neurobiological disorder. But the material of the diagnosis of ADHD is not this, but certain annoying behaviors picked from a way of being. These behaviors are given a concrete form—already artificial—by means of arbitrary diagnostic criteria (DSM, ICD, etc.), which becomes the formal cause. The efficient cause is what informs us of how ADHD becomes real. The risk factors would not be in the diagnosable but in the diagnostician, who convert behaviors—which

could be understood within a context and a learned way of being—into symptoms. Marino Pérez explains that with a natural entity such as diabetes or Alzheimer’s it would not make sense for the efficient cause to ask about “doers”, which is what happens with ADHD. And finally, what is the use of ADHD, its final cause? Beyond the well-known interests of the pharmaceutical industry in the promotion of certain disorders, there would be a harmonization of the interests of different actors and institutions, which take advantage of the diagnosis. There are many who profit, and not exactly the children diagnosed, the professor affirms.

The metascientific perspective allows us to understand why ADHD, without being a natural entity, ends up being something very real.

The **third part** of the book is presented as a kind of instruction book on **how to return to normality**. The first thing would be to rethink the alleged scientific-clinical entity of ADHD, and place the problem in the social, family and school spheres, not in the sphere of disease. But the author is not optimistic given the many interests created around ADHD, which he summarizes in one of the many brilliant statements in this book: “researchers need the problem more than the problem needs the researchers.” Yet still he does not throw in the towel.

The problems that tend to be diagnosed as ADHD are located by Marino Pérez outside the clinical setting. Advocates of ADHD appear to be very concerned about the stigma of ADHD. What better way to end the stigma than by avoiding the differentiation that is made when talking about ADHD children and normal children?

Self-control and self-regulation are two things we can learn, so education and training seem a more than reasonable measure, without the need to resort to stimulants or other drugs that have proved to be more harmful in the long run than anything else. The author turns away from genes and the brain and places the focus on society and its contexts. A functional analysis of behavior is much more desirable than a diagnosis: it informs us of the problem in its own context. The analyses proposed by the author to understand the problem have a depathologizing perspective. A problem is not a disease, remember. Stopping thinking about symptoms and instead talking about styles and ways of being should be the first step.

The author presents a battery of contrasted aids that do not require prior diagnosis and that work on the problem in the context of the problem, not on the assumption that something bad is happening to the child’s brain. They are alternatives to treatment, not treatment alternatives. And to finish off, he gives ten reasons to dismantle ADHD. It must be dissolved as a clinical entity. Only in this way will the children be safe from the “friendly fire” that diagnoses them with a mental disorder they do not have.

What this professor explains in the final part of the book is very significant: that it is not possible to race against the mainstream. This would explain why, despite the multiple defects of the ADHD construct, so few academic voices are denouncing it. He also regrets the lack of philosophical training of current generations, which would be desirable, incidentally, to explore the nature of any issue, such as what we talk about when we talk about ADHD.

A very documented, meticulous and profound book, with an agile and remarkably pleasant style, which does not take anything for granted and reviews everything. It is a brave book, which expresses a rebellion with a cause supported by an implacable argument. It is a book that was much needed.





DEALING WITH ... BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION. THERAPEUTIC SKILLS FOR ITS IMPLEMENTATION

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Behavioral activation (BA) is part of what has come to be known as contextual therapy (Pérez Álvarez, 2014). BA is in itself a therapy aimed at the treatment of depression and the prevention of relapse and it is specifically aimed at behavioral change. It emerged from the study of components of Beck's cognitive therapy carried out by Neil Jacobson and his team back in the 90s. These studies revealed that the behavioral component alone had the same efficacy as the complete therapy and that the cognitive components of the therapy did not improve its effectiveness. It is also fair to recognize the influence exerted on BA by the pioneering works of Ferster and Lewinsohn, as the author of this book correctly points out. From here, the authors create an intervention protocol and put it to the test. The experimental studies carried out with demanding and careful experimental designs, demonstrated the results of its efficacy. After the revisions of Division 12 of the APA, BA is considered to be a treatment with robust empirical support for depression, as reported by the author.

In this book the reader will find a manual for the application of BA, but also the therapeutic skills to carry it out are described, which is innovative. And this is done by Jorge Barraca Mairal with expert knowledge, not only at a conceptual or theoretical level—he is perhaps the author who has published most on the subject in the Spanish-speaking world (Barraca, 2009, 2010, 2016; Barraca-Mairal & Pérez-Álvarez, 2010; 2015, to mention just a few works)—, but also as a clinician due to his professional practice and his teaching, since he has taught a large number of workshops on BA, not only in this country.

The book is divided into 8 chapters. In chapter 1, the origin of BA, the studies of its efficacy and its model of understanding depression are briefly described. The next chapters go into the subject matter in a concise and direct manner, continuously providing examples of the skills exposed conceptually in therapist-client dialogues of the most arduous BA materials. Chapter 2 focuses on explaining the phases of the intervention and the BA techniques. Chapter 3 describes the evaluation phase but focuses on the specific skills of the therapist in order for the client to feel free to express themselves, to determine the objectives of the therapy based on the real values and interests of the client, and to

achieve completion of the questionnaires and self-records. In chapter 4, the necessary skills to formulate the clinical case are presented as well as the best way to return this information to the client. Chapter 5 is devoted to describing the skills necessary for the implementation of the treatment program. In chapter 6, the skills for the programming of activities are exposed, as well as for the extinction of avoidances and to counteract the effect of private events of the client that interfere with the treatment. In Chapter 7, the skills aimed at finishing therapy and preventing relapse are described. Finally the book ends with a chapter dedicated to skills for applying BA to other problems (anxiety, dysthymia, bipolarity, cancer, etc.) and in different formats (group, adolescents, seniors, through the internet, etc.).

In short, this book is written by an expert in BA and a pioneer author in contextual therapies in this country. It is more than recommended reading not only for the lay clinician, but also for those more versed who wish to deepen their therapeutic skills in order to apply BA. A phrase from the book sums up this therapy perfectly: "Change what you do and what you feel will change."

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