

The Denial of Values in Positive Psychology's Approach to the Good Life: Comprehensive Soldier Fitness and Critical Positivity Ratio

Positive psychology positioned itself as a value-neutral scientific discipline, and achieved remarkable success in so doing. However, despite its supposed value-neutrality, it is unavoidably value-laden (from its foundation to its applications). Even its name values one pole of a continuum (privileging the positive over the negative), while its adherence to a narrow version of science (emphasizing quantitative over qualitative approaches) excludes more holistic approaches. The problems inuring from its denial of values has resulted in various quandaries, two of which are explored. The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program is based on the notion that resilience can be taught to warfighters through using procedures demonstrated with small samples to have salutary outcomes in adolescents. As the largest social science intervention and research study ever conducted, which mandates the involvement of every U.S. soldier, CSF is being applied with minimal pretesting on this large and vulnerable population--and with little concern for possible unintended consequences. One such consequence has been lawsuits based on its spiritual component, which can be seen as inadequate for addressing diversity among spiritual values (through implicitly promoting Judeo-Christian theocentric assumptions, while presenting them as value neutral). Similarly, with a commitment to a narrow science, positive psychology has shown excessive zeal in over-valuing quantitative approaches. This was taken to absurdity in the Critical Positivity Ratio (CPR), which is a number specified to four decimals and supposedly derived from complexity mathematics leading to an invariant universal constant defining a "tipping point" in the ratio of positive to negative phenomena, below which individuals and groups would languish and above which they would flourish. The CPR was recently shown to be seriously flawed. Together, CSF and CPR demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the role values play within positive psychology and, more broadly, in all areas of psychology related to the good life.