

Running Head: DOES THE POSITIVITY MOVEMENT IN PSYCHOLOGY PRODUCE
OPPRESSION?

DOES THE POSITIVITY MOVEMENT IN PSYCHOLOGY PRODUCE OPPRESSION?

By

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Abstract

The positivity movement in psychology has inspired an individualistic, elitist, and consumer-driven wellness culture, that leaves out societies most vulnerable, and therefore most in need of support. Neoliberalism in the West and free-market capitalism combine to create the conditions for individuals to flourish, rather than communities. Self-optimization has become so entwined with western capitalism, that its initial message of strength-based, individual flourishing has been distorted, repackaged and resold to consumers as a product. It encourages consumerism and classism through the promotion of expensive luxury items sold as self-care, which only the wealthy can afford, and further isolates and ignores those with little economic power or spare time. We are pressured to market ourselves and compete for resources as individuals. This wellness culture has the potential to confuse consumers with pseudoscientific claims, which are perpetuated by the media and our celebrity-worshipping culture, and may promote unfounded alternative health measures which can be harmful to consumers. Furthermore, the competitive self-optimization enmeshed with our online culture exacerbates these concerns and embodies the issues inherent in a neoliberal, capitalist society. Through these social media apps, wellness products are promoted by a plethora of wealthy celebrities and influencers under the guise of self-care, available only to the economic elite. I will examine the oppression this wellness culture produces in our society and explore how it seeks to benefit primarily the wealthy, rather than creating a better community for all.

Keywords: positivity movement, capitalism, mental health, neoliberalism, wellness culture

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This is dedicated with love to my 14-year-old self, and to the well intentioned customers who told me to smile more while I was depressed and working at McDonalds.

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Introduction

“That which we do not bring to consciousness appears in our lives as fate.” — Carl Jung

In Western capitalist society, the self-improvement industry is booming. According to Marketdata Enterprises, Inc. (2007), “The total self-improvement market was estimated to be worth \$9.59 billion in 2005... We estimate that \$693 million worth of self-improvement books were sold last year” (para. 3). This growing wellness industry is concurrent with troubling mental health statistics,

The World Health Organization caused a stir in 2001 by predicting that mental health disorders would have become the world’s largest cause of disability and death by 2020. Already, some estimates suggest that over a third of European and American adults are suffering from some form of mental health problem, even if many are going undiagnosed. The economic costs this imposes are vast (Davies, 2016, p. 107).

These harrowing statistics give us cause for pause, to wonder what effect the self-improvement industry has on our collective mental health as a society.

Much of the self-improvement industry is theoretically rooted in positive psychology. Positive psychology has seen a paradigm shift from its first mention in 1954 by Abraham H. Maslow in *Motivation and Personality*. It began as an alternative to problem-focused therapies, with a shift towards solution-focused approaches and positive narratives about the future. “Its premise is that if individuals engage in positive thinking and feeling and abandon or minimize their preoccupation with the harsh and tragic—that is, the stressful side of life— they will have found a magic elixir of health and well-being” Lazarus, (2003, p. 93).

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Additionally, “the initial impetus for the creation of the field was a sense of disenchantment with the way ‘psychology as usual’ appeared to be preoccupied with disorder and dysfunction” (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2015, p. 1). Initially, the movement gained traction because it spurred a much-needed shift in thinking within psychology. It moved us away from pathologizing every malady and focusing on what was ‘wrong’ with a person. Psychologists noticed that people were responding well when the focus shifted towards what was working, with an emphasis on one’s strengths. Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000), some of the founding fathers of the positivity movement, highlighted wellbeing from a subjective perspective, while also considering how we function as a group:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic (p. 5).

In other words, the newest wave of the positivity movement focuses more on the idea of “flourishing.” This gives room for those who are otherwise happy, to continue to improve themselves and enhance their well-being, indefinitely. Furthermore, the definition of positivity itself is still in flux and always evolving. According to Lomas & Ivtzan (2015), “...over recent years, a more nuanced ‘second wave’ of positive psychology has been germinating, which explores the philosophical and conceptual complexities of the very idea of the ‘positive’” (p. 1).

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As is evident in the aforementioned quotations, the definition of the positivity movement is somewhat convoluted. The focus of this paper will be on the rise of self-optimization it inspires, and an examination of the critical effects thereof.

In recent years, a polemic against the current state of the positivity movement as it has manifested through wellness culture has started to surface. In her article published in *The New Yorker*, entitled *Resolutions: What if self-improvement is making us worse?*, Alexandra Schwartz writes:

In our current era of non-stop technological innovation, fuzzy wishful thinking has yielded to the hard doctrine of personal optimization. Self-help gurus need not be charlatans peddling snake oil. Many are psychologists with impressive academic pedigrees and a commitment to scientific methodologies, or tech entrepreneurs with enviable records of success in life and business (Schwartz, 2018).

According to Schwartz, the idea of self-optimization is enmeshed in modern culture on both an economic and an academic level. She implies that many psychologists and other academics are amongst those selling positive functioning as “self-help gurus,” rather than evidence-based practitioners and researchers.

In *The Negative Side of Positive Psychology*, Barbara Held (2004) writes: “...our professional culture is saturated with the view that we must think positive thoughts, we must cultivate positive emotions and attitudes, and we must play to our strengths to be happy, healthy, and wise” (Held, 2004, p. 12). She goes on to say:

The tyranny of the positive attitude lies in its adding insult to injury: If people feel bad about life’s many difficulties and they cannot manage to transcend their pain no matter how hard they try (to learn optimism), they could end up feeling even worse; they could

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feel guilty or defective for not having the right (positive) attitude, in addition to whatever was ailing them in the first place (Held, p.12).

Susan David (2018), another psychologist who recently gave a TED talk that went viral, discusses “Why It's Good to Embrace Negative Feelings.” She states:

Being positive, has become a new form of moral correctness. In a survey I recently conducted with over 70,000 people, I found that a third of us — a third — either judge ourselves for having so called “bad emotions,” like sadness, anger, or even grief, or actively try to push aside these feelings... Normal, natural emotions are now seen as good or bad.

I too have had concerns with wellness culture, as echoed above, and feel compelled to deconstruct and examine it further.

In this paper, I aim to discursively reveal the oppression inherent within the positivity movement, and show how the wellness industry has the effect of transferring power and privilege to the social and professional elite while leaving out society's most vulnerable - those most in need of support. I will do this by examining the recent body of research on the positivity movement and explore connections between the self-help industry and a neoliberal agenda – an agenda that economically benefits the elite. I will analyze data on social media culture, and probe into pseudoscientific claims which may have influenced our understanding of happiness and well-being. I will argue that our fixation with self-improvement and the implication that we must help ourselves and ‘just think positively’ has the potential to dismiss and shame those who are struggling with mental health issues or are economically oppressed. This same fixation can entail victim blaming, gas-lighting, spiritual bypassing, and create the conditions for isolating people in their grief and pain.

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Ultimately, I aim to explore how the positivity movement in psychology has become closely intertwined with western capitalism. I aim to tease apart the oppressive and illusory elements of this phenomenon. I suspect that an individualized wellness culture encourages us to pursue our desires and suppress our fears and anxieties with consumerism. I argue that within this yearning for happiness and relief, the positivity movement may have blinded us to some darker aspects of our culture that we need to inspect if we truly wish to create a better society for all.

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Chapter 2: The Economics Behind Neoliberalism and Self-Improvement Hysteria: How self-help gurus are duping consumers

“Our society is excessively individualistic. Markets reduce everything to a question of individual calculation and selfishness” (Davies, 2016, p. 210). Free-market capitalism and the self-interested behavior it produces has been widely criticized by psychologists. Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began their article in *American Psychologist*, *Positive Psychology: An Introduction* (2000), by saying this about American culture:

Entering a new millennium, Americans face a historical choice. Left alone on the pinnacle of economic and political leadership, the United States can continue to increase its material wealth while ignoring the human needs of its people and those of the rest of the planet. Such a course is likely to lead to increasing selfishness, to alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair. (p.5)

The pioneers of positive psychology were aware of the potential effects neo-liberalism and capitalism could have on our collective well-being. Eighteen years later, we are left wondering if this prediction has materialized in our rapidly changing world.

In order to adapt, the positive psychology movement has undoubtedly altered its message since its origins and attempted to broaden the scope of what happiness means. In *Flourish*, a more recent book by Seligman, he says:

I used to think that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, that the gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction, and that the goal of positive psychology was to increase life satisfaction. I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing. (Seligman, 2012, p. 13)

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For many in the West, discourse around happiness has evolved into well-being and flourishing. We no longer strive to arrive at a place of peak contentment. Now, our optimal state of being is considered to be in a constant flow of upwards and onwards. What does this look like in 2018?

The promotion of a positive attitude is apparent in popular culture, in commercials encouraging us to go on a cleanse to rid our bodies of toxins, and on t-shirts sold in Yoga studios with slogans such as, “Spiritual Gangster.” It has become a lifestyle - an image that we purchase. Optimal health and clean-living are in fashion. In *The Wellness Syndrome* (2015), Cederström and Spicer discuss the underlying feelings of guilt, and the narcissism inherent in this constant push for better health, more mindfulness, and greater self-optimization:

They encourage an infectious narcissism which pushes us to take the great turn inwards, making our body into our first and last concern. They generate a creeping sense of anxiety that comes with the ever-present responsibility of monitoring every lifestyle choice. They feed a sense of guilt that comes from the inevitable slip-ups when we don’t follow our diet or fail to live up to our life goals. (p. 133)

William Davies writes in a similar vein and provides additional examples of wellness culture within our society in *The happiness industry: How the government and big business sold us well-being* (2016): “Self-improvement today is so integrated into our society that it is hard to know where it begins and ends. Yoga is taught at elementary schools. Mindfulness is used in prisons. Life-coaching is promoted as a way of combating poverty” (p. 9).

On one hand, one could argue that if Yoga and mindfulness produces positive results, why not encourage it? For instance, there is data to support that Yoga can improve the psychological functioning of prisoners. Auty, Cope, and Liebling (2015) found that, “as

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psychological well-being and behavioral functioning of prisoners are positively affected, yoga and meditation could contribute significantly to improving prisoner quality of life, prison culture, and outcomes" (p. 17). One could argue that the positive effects of yoga and meditation ought to be used in these institutions. I would caution that we also ought to examine the systemic forces that led to imprisonment in the first place. At what point are we exhausting our resources attending to the symptoms, rather than addressing its origin? In the next section, I aim to examine why wellness culture seems to avoid or minimize the importance of this question.

God is Dead, and We're Moving to the City!

How did we become a neoliberal society, rooted in individualism? Neoliberalism is a broad concept with many definitions. For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing primarily on neoliberalism as a psychological and social concept. Ayn Rand, who is regarded as one of the founders of neoliberalism in the West, understands it as "a new social order geared to the individual: 'a free, productive, rational system that rewards the best in every man, and which is, [as Frederic Jameson rather feared it might be] obviously, laissez-faire capitalism'" (Ashford, 2014, p. 977). I will be basing my argument on this definition, and its focus on the individual within a capitalist system.

We live in a fast-moving time of globalization, rapid technological advancement and automation; however, our modern society did not come into existence overnight. It developed as a result of growing urban populations and a free-market economy. In order to unravel how we became a culture with a booming self-help industry, it is important to start from the beginning and understand the roots of neoliberalism. In *Selfie: How We Became so self-obsessed and What It's Doing to Us* (2018), Will Storr describes how our neoliberal society and our individualistic mentality evolved from the industrial revolution:

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Farmworkers moved in considerable numbers to the towns and cities. There, they no longer lived side-by-side with relatives and old acquaintances but with strangers, on whom you had to make a good impression. The post-war years were a time of salesman and corporation, of the company taking care of you for life. Increasingly the individual became just a small component of the larger corporate organism. (p. 126)

When the population farmed locally and lived in close-knit communities, people had to rely on one other for survival. Now, as most the population lives in modern cities, they are expected to be more self-reliant. Today, our smiling, waving, neighbor is often competing with us for jobs and resources, rather than providing an extra set of hands and working towards the same goal.

It follows that the market would have also evolved to suit the new needs of a growing and mobile population. As more and more of people moved away from rural areas, they became free as individuals to work hard, get ahead, earn money, and spend it on whatever life-enhancing product or experience they desire. In *The happiness industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-being* (2016), Will Davies writes:

From Adam Smith through to Karl Marx, the factory and labourer were deemed to dictate the price things were sold for in the market. From 1870 onwards, all of this changed.

Now it would be the inner ‘wants’ of the consumer where the all-important question of value would be established. From this perspective, work is simply a form of ‘negative utility,’ the opposite of happiness, which is only endured so as to gain more money to spend on pleasurable experiences. Subjective sensation, and its interaction with markets, was elevated to a central question of economics. (Davies, 2016, p. 55)

No longer would family members be required to lean on each other to get by or rely on trade with neighbors. People were no longer born into roles or homes from which there was no

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escape. People were free! Free to acquire skills, follow their interests, “sell themselves,” and learn to get by in modern society. Whether that meant presenting well at a job interview or finding clients and selling homes as a real estate Agent, (which may entail putting your smiling face on a billboard), you - and you alone - are considered to be responsible for guaranteeing yourself a place in society. The power of the individual emerged along with the mass migration to the cities.

With the rise of the individual came the increasing pressure on the individual to succeed and excel. Simultaneously, along with migration to cities, the structure of traditional communities dissolved along with the invisible structures of traditional thought. Following the age of Enlightenment, many were moving away from traditional religious beliefs and towards reason, critical thinking, and the space to contemplate new ideas, free from the austere influence of the church. Were individuals to become their own Gods? As this widely quoted phrase from *The Gay Science*, by Friedrich Nietzsche (1882) suggests, “God is dead!” Nietzsche, “the fountainhead of post-modernism, tells of a madman who on a bright morning lights a lantern and runs to the marketplace proclaiming “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” (McConnell, 1993, p. 163). Perhaps in some ways, people have come to worship their ideal selves instead, in the fashion of Narcissus. Our culture of excessive and competitive wellbeing may be a part of this enduring reflection, and a reaction to the mounting pressure to become the “market subject” ourselves. Storr (2018) writes:

Of course, this preoccupation with the state of our inner selves - its moral cleanliness, its strength, its ‘peace,’ its worthiness - is still an enormous part of our culture and daily experience, regardless of our faith, not least in its manifestation in the multimillion-dollar self-help and wellness industries. (p.106)

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In our current capitalist culture, self-obsession and lust for an immaculate inner self, concurrent with a multimillion-dollar self-help industry, makes a lot of sense to many people. If we can somehow buy a better self, or at least buy a book which promises to help us “win friends and influence people,” which would, in turn, make us more money, why should we not invest?

Other academics have also identified this desire for moral cleanliness within wellness culture, as previously mentioned by Storr (2018). For instance, Bloom (2017) says:

how this imperative to ‘do good’ translates into an appealing identity as an ‘ethical subject’ that ironically structurally reproduces this form of hyper-capitalism organizationally, politically and interpersonally. In sum, it reveals how the success of neoliberalism depends on its production of the ‘ethical’ capitalist subject. (p. 20)

Again, as self-sufficient, individual, money making agents, this is logical. Why would we not want to see ourselves as ethical entities, in the same way that many desire companies to do so? Just as Amazon owner Jeff Bezos (2018), who, due to the rising value of his stake in Amazon, was recently named the wealthiest man in the world, famously tweeted that he was accepting suggestions for how to give away his wealth (para. 1). The end results of his philanthropic spirit are yet to be seen. Whatever the case may be with this, in a society characterized by massive financial inequality and stress, the wellness epidemic may seem to make a great deal of sense to many people. It allows a back alley for people to slip into, where they are permitted to breathe a sigh of relief and shake off any guilt they might feel about their excessive levels of consumption. How can it be wrong to spend \$400 on a weeks worth of organic groceries from Whole Foods and another \$200 on Yoga if the person is doing it to better themselves? What if this lifestyle allows a person to then show up to work rested, healthy, and better equipped to succeed? One might ask, who this is hurting? I would argue that prioritizing

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one's own health and wellbeing and working hard is nothing to be ashamed of, and something I myself aspire towards. However, another question that we could ask is: "Who can afford this kind of lifestyle, and why is this the case?"

In order to further uncover how neoliberalism has affected the wellness industry, we ought to further examine the state of Western capitalism. Doing so will reveal some extreme criticisms of where capitalism has brought us:

In the 21st century, capitalism has supposedly invaded and colonized every aspect of human existence. Indeed, the current age is defined by the inevitable rise of 'marketization.' Once sacred public institutions, from education to transportation to healthcare, are being increasingly privatized... In the new millennium, the public good is primarily a private interest... Far beyond just being subjected to market excesses and exploitation, modern humans have now become fully thinking and acting market subjects. (Bloom, 2017, p. 1)

If we fast forward from the days of Nietzsche to 2018, we may see how far marketization and the rise of the individual has taken us. If I can imagine any one human being as an all seeing, all knowing, far reaching, punishing and powerful God, it would likely be Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook. Privatization provides even more potential power to individual human beings, as we see in the rise of tech billionaires like Bezos and Zuckerberg, who have acquired extraordinary wealth, power, and influence. These billionaires are no doubt powerful, acting market subjects.

Surely, not every charitable gesture from a billionaire is entirely rooted in self-interest or lacking in empathy. That said, when we examine these philanthropic, public tweets from people such as Bezos in a historical context, another perspective comes to light. For instance:

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As society evolved in industrialized countries, oppressed groups were often pegged as “immoral” and “inferior.” It often served as a way to dehumanize other races to justify slavery. As moral justifications for luxury ensued, it then extended to individuals. The inability to be successful was due to personal irresponsibility rather than structural conditions. Whereas previously individuals were trapped in the condition given to them by their birth, the market-at least theoretically-permitted anyone to advance. The failure to do so could be traced back to individual failings and in no way reflected on the overall morality of capitalism itself. (Bloom, 2017, p. 22)

From this perspective, it would make sense for a billionaire, especially one from humble beginnings who fought the odds and acquired monstrous wealth as an individual agent, to promote themselves as benevolent -and therefore superior. If *he* could do it, why not *you*? Rare success stories like these seem to imply that the system is well and good, if only a person is intelligent enough to work it to their own advantage.

In theory, there are many great things about a capitalist system. In an ideal world, the notion of a free-market is that it will give more power to the people and that the entire population will be better off as a whole if they allow room for innovation and healthy competition. Such a system will challenge and motivate everyone to push the limits. In theory, this can seem to be inspirational, freeing, exciting, and hopeful. Each person is left feeling like maybe they can be the next big thing that will change the world. The only thing that is required is to simply believe in oneself. As Storr (2018) puts it:

The neoliberal revolution brought with it a new definition of government... In order to encourage competition, it would deregulate business and banking; sell off and release into the markets its utilities - telecommunications, water, electricity, gas - and, in the UK,

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council houses; cut arts funding; dismantle protections for those not willing to work, thereby gifting them the motivation to get up and join in; cut taxes for the creators - the entrepreneurs, industrialists and their corporations - which would reward them for their superior gameplay and enable them to compete all the better. (p. 181).

However, in 2018, the world is in late stage capitalism, and there are unintended consequences to this individualized, free-market society that are demanding our attention. What is the result of fierce competition when the game is rigged, some people have great advantages, and the majority must contend with massive barriers and insurmountable obstacles?

When referring to an unfair economic playing field or a rigged game, we ought to “follow the money” for this hyper-individualized state of being to take shape. In essence, it could be argued that our self-reliance is entangled with a desperate strategy to collectively dig ourselves out of debt. Each person is an individual; however, a person cannot completely untangle themselves from the national debt of the country within which they live. Consider the situation as it existed in 1993:

On 17 February, in his first State of the Union address, Clinton announced his new economic plan. Warning of a national debt that, if stacked in thousand-dollar bills, ‘would reach 267 miles,’ he insisted that America had to learn to live within its means, telling the people, ‘each of us must be an engine of growth and change’ (Storr, 2018, p. 234). This might seem simple enough, but consider the financial crisis which occurred 15 years later. “In 2008, this already intensely competitive, status-obsessed neoliberal realm collided with a global economic catastrophe. In the fallout of the financial crisis, even greater pressure was placed on the ordinary Western individual” (Storr, 2018, p. 254).

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It would seem that the individual was unable to be an effective engine of growth and change, as Clinton had stated. Even so, the fierce belief in individualism has stubbornly persisted. We might well wonder what effect this pressure has on an individual and their mental health? Within this neoliberal mentality is the implication that if a person fails, it is because of their choices, or their lack of will. To succeed, a person must become a self-sustaining, well oiled, money-making machine. Self-care, which is entirely the responsibility of the person, has become a requirement if the “self” is the primary or the only means to success.

According to such a perspective, all that is necessary for a person to succeed financially is for them to *will* their own success -whatever that means. As stated by Poon (2016), “Neoliberal subjectivity endorses the care and transformation of the self in order to take best advantage of a market economy since the means to achieving material affluence is seen simply as a matter of individual choice and personal will” (p. 1). Of course, many tend to feel a great sense of urgency about obtaining a source of guidance towards self-improvement, which will in turn lead us to prosperity, success, and happiness. One only needs to walk into any large commercial book store and observe the wide assortment of self-improvement books which are offered for sale to see this in effect. Such books offer rapid (and temporary) relief to consumers in search of guidance. As one author summarized the situation: “People felt that they also could be part of the American dream, if only they would know how. Self-help books offered appropriate guidance” (Bergsma, 2007, p. 347).

The Self-Help Book You Never Needed

What exactly does “self-help” mean? “A dictionary description of self-help is ‘the acts of helping or bettering oneself without the aid of others.’ In the context of psychology books self-help is a form of coping with one’s personal or emotional problems without professional help”

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(Bergsma, 2007, p. 343). One might ask why such books have gained so much popularity in recent years, and why they serve as an alternative to seeking professional health.

Various authors have pointed out that there appears to be a correlation between the rise of individualism and the sale of self-help books:

Self-help books started more than 200 years ago with a new conception of society based on what Jefferson called the individual ‘pursuit of happiness’ in the Declaration of Independence. The rigid, fixed-class systems of European countries were replaced by an open system in which ‘a man could hope to rise in station according to his merits and abilities, and to be judged solely on the basis of his individual accomplishments.’

(Starker, 1989, p. 169)

This new focus on the individual that seeded the soil for the rise of neoliberalism did not happen immediately. At the time, many people were excited. As previously discussed, for the first time, many poor people experienced some hope of improving their socioeconomic status and escaping the imposed restrictions of heredity, fate, and bad luck. Times were changing. “The ideal self was now one who relied on neither the lord of the manor nor the Lord of the heavens for sustenance and protection” (Storr, 2018, p. 123).

It is possible to trace the origins of the self-help novel that accompanied this new frontier, the “new bible,” so to speak, back to its earliest roots:

In 1859, Samuel Smiles published *Self-Help with Illustrations of Character and Conduct*, the original book which gave the genre of self-improvement literature its name... *Self-Help* proved immensely popular with a rising Victorian middle class with aspirations to increased status and socio-economic dominance. The book provided examples of individual and invariably male success in industry, commerce, politics, government,

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engineering, science, and exploration to demonstrate how self-reliance, hard work, and self-discipline were a sure recipe for advancement. Smiles advocated an individualism sans government, institutionalized structures, and other forms of sociality, mixing uplift and moral probity with the promise of success. (Poon, 2016, p. 2)

Will Storr (2018) says: “For someone living in Britain before the Industrial Revolution this would have seemed an impossibly optimistic message. No longer were you obediently stuck in your place - now, with hard work and character, you could improve your lot spectacularly” (p. 123). Now consider the situation in the 1930s in America, where there is again a connection between a zest for self-improvement and economic insecurity, as could be seen with Bill Clinton’s State of the Union Address in 1993 and an impending financial collapse that followed a few years later:

Take the commercial boom of self-improvement in the 1930s. It is no coincidence that it emerged in the wake of the Great Depression in the United States. In *Think and Grow Rich*, from 1937, Napoleon Hill offered a calming theory, saying the Depression was merely an effect of people’s fears and opinions. Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, from the year before, offered similarly hopeful advice: smile. It would seem that, in a time of economic and social depression, when people had nothing to rely on except themselves, self-improvement was an attractive proposition (Davies, 2016, p. 9).

Can optimism and self-optimization actually dig a nation out of an economic depression? Can it lift an individual out of their own emotional depression? Would it not be worthwhile to also examine the problems, the pain, and how the situation came into being? It is interesting to consider that, “a surprise might be that the growth-oriented books outnumber the problem-

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oriented books. In the top 57 of best-selling psychology books, there is only one book about overcoming depression and no books that specifically target anxiety disorders or addiction” (Bergsma, 2007, p. 347). It appears that when it comes to self-improvement, the message is still one of militant individualism and self-reliance, rather than how to find support within the community. Furthermore, these books tend to have exciting and catchy titles. Contemporary Western people tend to want rapid results with minimal effort. It would be difficult to point to a best-selling self-help book with a banal, realistic message, such as, “it is statistically unlikely that you will become rich and famous, so get a career in a field that interests you with a foreseeable future that pays well, even if it’s not your first choice or passion project.”

Various authors have criticized the grandiose proclamations offered in self-help books:

Csikszentmihalyi (1999, p. 20) claims it is apparent self-help books will not help most readers to be thin, powerful, rich and loved; and even if they succeed the readers will still be as unhappy as before they read the book. Polivy and Herman (2002) claim that buying self-help volumes must be part of a false hope syndrome. Salerno (2005) holds self-help responsible for the end of romance, soaring divorce rates, the decline of the nuclear family, excessive political correctness and rising substance abuse, although this is by quite an inferential leap (Weiten, 2006). (Bergsma, 2007, p. 349)

Whether or not self-help books can produce meaningful and lasting change for an individual, they have certainly endured the test of time. Perhaps this has something to do with their unfalsifiable nature, or the placebo effect. One of the most infamous self-help books in recent history, which draws on supernatural forces and magical thinking a strategy to success, is *The Secret* (2006) by Rhonda Byrne. Whether by coincidence or not, it became immensely popular right around the time of the financial crisis of 2008. In this book, the author proselytizes

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about the “law of attraction,” and the ability of people to manifest the lives they desire. Oprah Winfrey loved this book, and actively promoted it. Davies says this about Byrne:

She presents the perfect ideological complement to neoliberalism. She calls it *The Secret*.

As with positive psychology, this secret is based on science, the scientific law of attraction... “The secret will bring happiness, good health and extraordinary wealth—and any other thing you may wish for. So what is this secret? That thoughts are powerful and that you can use your thoughts to bring good things into existence.” (p. 79)

The message of Byrne was very optimistic and enticing – and sold very well. Her message highlighted the power of the individual to overcome their circumstances, primarily through the sheer exercise of will. It was a very attractive concept and was presented as if the author was for the first time revealing a great secret which had been kept hidden since antiquity from all but some highly privileged elite. However, as we have already seen, this notion was obviously not original. Essentially, Byrne says that all a person has to do in order to succeed is to think hard—*really* hard. This echoes the traditional Judeo-Christian belief in the power of prayer, yet it receives the secular stamp of approval and claimed to be rooted in science.

Byrne seems to say this power of manifestation extends to everyone regardless of their circumstances. Many people might doubt that such a rapid improvement in condition will occur for say, a struggling single mother just barely getting by, if she would only imagine herself in a better life, even with no community supports or opportunities provided. Even so, that is what Byrne seems to promise.

Having an optimistic attitude is one thing, but that is not what *The Secret* is proposing. For Byrne, the answer to all your problems lies in your imagination, or your “frequency” (Davies, 2016, p. 81). If you think about something hard enough, say, a new car, it will come

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into your life, with no or no effort on your part. According to Byrne, this ability to attract or repel extends to groups as well as individuals. Many academics have challenged Byrne on her claims, as noted by Davies (2016):

What about natural catastrophes? Asked this question after the 2004 tsunami, Byrne explains: “By the law of attraction, they [the victims] had to be on the same frequency of the event.” Byrne’s insistence on the individual and his or her personal responsibility is the perfect corollary to a politics which aims to legitimize injustice, poverty and class division. Poor people are not structurally discriminated against; they simply lack sufficient thought power.” (p. 81)

What Byrne, and those to ascribe to her way of thinking are implying is that both individuals and groups of people are responsible for the bad things that happen to them. This provides a slippery slope towards justifying class difference and absolving oneself from any responsibility to help others when tragedy strikes. For instance, when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in the fall of 2017, there was ample criticism of the Trump administration and their lack of assistance to the American citizens left stranded on the island without electricity or running water for weeks. If the mentality in America is to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” it raises the question of how much help we are obligated to offer other citizens who are hit by misfortune. Byrne’s message lends credence to the notion of blaming the victim and absolving oneself of guilt for being in a position of privilege. It places a sort of metaphysical responsibility on the individual for their circumstances, for it separates “us from them.” The “law of attraction,” as Byrne sees it, could lead society into murky moral waters, where those in power could potentially pick and choose whom they deem worthy of social assistance. The idea that, “they brought it on themselves,” opens the floodgates for invalid arguments used to justify racism,

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misogyny, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression towards particular groups. Self-help books began as a tool to empower the individual, but books like *“The Secret”* (2006) give us cause for pause. All of this raises a serious question: Is the nature of these messages beneficial for all individuals, or just to some?

Conclusion

Our neoliberal, individually-focused culture, fiercely devoted to self-optimization, seems designed to benefit only certain groups of people. Despite many advances and improvements in the modern world, Western societies still have a mental health epidemic and economic disparity and insecurity. It is worth considering whether it may be more beneficial to turn our eyes outwards, so to speak, and focus more of our time and energy on our communities rather than upon ourselves. Collectivist cultures often have a different perspective on change. For instance:

studies suggest, not only that Asians don't feel as in control of their lives as Westerners, but that they don't feel the need to be. Change is the function of the group, rather than the individual, their priority harmony rather than freedom.” (Storr, 2018, p. 75)

Perhaps contemporary Western culture could use some of this wisdom. Perhaps our hyper-individualism has begun working against us?

What Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000) initially hoped when they developed positive psychology was for civic virtues and institutions to “move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic” (p. 5). They had a vision for positive psychology that extended beyond the individual and included everyone. Unfortunately, in the true spirit of capitalism and fueled by our competitive drive to get ahead, this notion appears to have been chewed up, repackaged and sold back to us.

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Based on the statistics of a flourishing self-help industry, a high percentage of modern people have bought into it.

Individual change is part of the mosaic, but it is only one component of a much larger picture. The changing economy that was set in motion over 200 years ago, and the politics that followed from it, are primarily responsible for the rise in self-help books sales we see today. Messages such as, “it’s all in your head,” or “it’s all up to you” that we read in so many popular books and motivational posters at the gymnasium are intimately connected with the rise of neoliberalism and the economy system linked to it. In a consumer-driven economy, our culture offers countless options for a quick route to “feeling good.” Whatever our dopamine fix of choice, whether that be video games, excessive shopping, or drugs and alcohol, people can purchase it. Buying a “good vibes tribe” t-shirt may satiate a person temporarily; however, I wonder what would happen if people looked outwards, and we became more motivated to change our environment, rather than ourselves?

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Chapter 3: The Illusion of Positive Inspiration on Social Media as a Tool for Change

The positivity movement has been integrated into popular culture and social media. However, it is somewhat unclear what is driving this trend and what its ultimate effect will be. One major reason is probably that it sells. The connection between manipulating the concept of positivity to increase consumerist behavior patterns is evident in a largely unsuccessful video commercial. In this advertisement, Pepsi attempted to peddle “good vibes” through Kendall Jenner, a model and celebrity, but things all go terribly wrong. After the release of this commercial, the internet collectively called out Pepsi for attempting to manipulate intense emotional states concerning social inequality as a means to sell soda. An article in the *Washington Post* on April 5th, 2017 describes the gist of the commercial: “For more than two minutes, we see a cellist, a Muslim woman in hijab and Kendall Jenner join a diverse crowd of street protesters who are marching for some nondescript cause. The cops are there. Kendall hands one a Pepsi. Everyone's happy” (Izadi, 2017). The ad “prompted ridicule and an outcry among critics who viewed the campaign as a failed attempt to appropriate social justice movements in service of selling soft drinks” (Izadi).

Pepsi responded to the criticism with this statement: "Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize" (Izadi, 2017). Memes surfaced in the following days, sarcastically prodding along the lines of, if only we had a Pepsi the civil rights movement could have been more effective! Thanks Kendall! In this case, the public pushed back, and the ad was removed. The self-serving mercenary intent of the Pepsi ad was starkly transparent. However, not every manipulative marketing attempt is so obvious. Many companies continue to get away with covertly manipulating the idea of positivity or social change to sell their products.

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In theory, the concept of a moral, socially conscious brand can sound appealing. However, complications can arise in practical application. The example of Tom's Shoes is instructive. We are told that this shoe company

created an out-of-the-box solution to its objective of helping people even while running a for-profit business. The company founded on the principle that it would give away one shoe to a poor child for free, for every shoe it sold. (Naeini, Dutt, Angus, Mardirossian & Bonfanti, 2015, p. 1).

In this way, customers are able to buy shoes, feel good about helping others in need, and perhaps, signal to other people their desirable trait of being charitable and socially aware. Perhaps this is a win-win situation? Whatever the case, it has proved to be an effective business model. "So far, the company's website states that it has provided more than 35 million pairs of shoes to children in 70 countries across the world" (Naeini et al., 2015, p. 1). Despite positive intentions, it may be questioned how helpful these free shoes have been in addressing the root causes of poverty, such as the imbalance of global power and autonomy. This subject was addressed in the documentary entitled *Poverty, Inc.* (2015). This documentary investigated whether this charitable cause was in fact undercutting local shoemakers - and possibly harming the local economy by taking away their business. Whether this is true or not, the point is clear: people were eager to purchase the shoes which were promoted as charitable. The business model of Tom's Shoes worked. The question that should be asked is who benefits from this successful business model? Does a company that identifies as socially conscious and moral in fact bring more positivity to the world? Does the world need more shoes?

Social justice and advertising have joined forces. Social media has provided a new way for companies to reach and interact with consumers, and to utilize individual consumers to assist

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in the advertising themselves through their personal accounts. There are financial and psychological benefits that now come from aligning one's self, at least one's online presence, with a brand. We see this through paid partnerships and sponsorships, especially on Instagram, and in the additional friends and likes this behavior can generate.

A substantial amount of evidence suggests that while pressure to be positive has infiltrated our online spaces, this way of using social media may be affecting the well-being of people in negative ways. Beyond surface level instant gratification and attempts to 'inspire' each other online, there is little to no evidence that this translates into improved well-being. In fact, there is some reason to suspect this online behavior may be harmful, which I will address further on. On the other hand, it could be argued that some online movements and socially conscious business models, such as the #metoo movement, have far reaching benefits for democracy and society at large. When discussing the online positivity movement and the ways it oppresses people, I am not referring to all movements. The aim of this study will be to specifically address how the positivity movement has affected a more specific type of online behavior, within the framework of well-being and general "thriving." I will explore more specifically, online inspiration between individuals in the interest of economics, and how this digital culture fails to produce meaningful change.

Instagram and Its Culture of Positivity

How did this online culture of positivity come into being? In recent years, people are exposed to more advertising through phones than from television or billboards. There are a variety of popular apps which run ads, such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram (which is now owned by Facebook). In this study, I will focus specifically on Instagram usage, partly because

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“some 27% of the internet users between ages 18-29 use Instagram” (Rainie et al, 2012, p. 3). Furthermore, “industry studies reported that around 85% of the top global brands have accounts on Instagram and have found that consumer engagement rate was about 58 times higher than Facebook and 120 times higher than Twitter” (as cited by Zhao, Yang, Xie & Wang, 2017, p. 243). In addition, Instagram is especially and increasingly used as a peculiar marketing tool in which each person is their own “brand.” In fact, “the photo sharing platform saw advertising revenues grow 122 percent year-over-year due to significant increases in both inventory and pricing” (as cited by Benzinga, 2018). In other words, Instagram is very interactive. It is a space where things spread quickly, and companies have gravitated to this interconnected circuit of consumers.

On Instagram, “users consume photos and videos mostly by viewing a core page showing a “stream” of the latest photos and videos from all their friends, listed in reverse chronological order. They can also favorite or comment on these posts” (Hu et al, 2014, p. 596). Members of the general public are considered “the creators.” The platform allows users some degree of agency and control over the management of their own accounts. In that sense, Instagram is more alive than the old model of media consumption, a family gathered around the glow of the television, resigned to sit quietly, listen, and passively *receive*. Now, everybody can broadcast. In other words, “social networking sites are different from traditional media in that a large proportion of the content is self-generated. Users are simultaneously information creators and consumers” (Holland, 2017, p. 76).

The fact that companies have infiltrated supposedly private online spaces under the guise of being our peers may be problematic for our collective mental health. There is an immense power imbalance there, and the illusion that an account like Pepsi is interested in each individual

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consumer on a personal level, or “partnering,” feels exploitative. On Instagram, a person has the ability to follow Pepsi, to like and comment on their posts, and Pepsi has the ability to do the same for each individual. In this sense, a billion-dollar company is perceived as having an equal amount of power as any other individual account. This provides people with the illusion of equality, and of the possibility to become “friends” with Pepsi. This seems to be deceptive, manipulative, and perhaps even psychologically dangerous. It opens the door for profit-motivated companies to hook into the private lives of people on an emotional level and provide them with a sense of belonging and validation. This may be giving these companies an inordinate amount of power to be intrusive and invade privacy. This notion of people branding themselves and partnering with companies puts a new spin on traditional advertising models, for it begins to have corporations become involved with consumers on an intimate level. What are the implications of this toward a sense of trust among people, when individuals advertise to their friends and family members on behalf of a corporation, as is the case when people pose with a Pepsi, post it, and tag the brand? Are economics and digital socializing coming to be forever fused?

In these types of situations, the company is paying an individual to advertise their products on Instagram. Social media is different from traditional advertising in that companies can now locate specific potential customers and can actively reach out to interact with them. It is no longer only hired, professional models who drink Pepsi in a commercial. Everyone can work for Pepsi now, and the advertisements are scattered throughout millions of digital images in our social feeds online. If the reach of a company is large enough to make it worth their while, in the sense of having enough followers, they may offer unpaid, (or paid) “sponsorships.” This means that a person will display their product, whether it be a shirt, home decor, or baby products, take

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an aesthetically pleasing picture, and post a caption approving of the product. If the individual is fortunate, the company may even send them monetary compensation. Harmless? The company makes money, and the consumer makes money? One statement from Instagram, an online blog, describes this situation as follows:

The relationships people form on Instagram are what makes our 700M+ community so unique... It's here where the world comes together to discover and connect to their passions. Because of this, creators (influencers & publishers) and businesses often join forces to tap into Instagram's passionate communities with branded content. (As cited by TopRank(R), 2017)

The reference by the advertising giant to “passionate communities” is particularly noteworthy. What does this mean? How does a paid sponsorship with Pampers Diapers provide any kind of meaningful connection or cultivate a passion? Some mothers are spending their precious time staging artful photos of their babies, strategically placing the branded box in the background, editing, cropping, re-taking, and posting the images. What is their motivation for doing this? Are they doing so from a desire to help Pampers sell more diapers, in exchange for likes and a pay cheque? One could argue that if this pay cheque empowers the mother by making it financially easier for her to stay at home and raise her children, then perhaps this may be worth the time and effort. This may be true for at least some people. However, perhaps we should be curious about the potential toll this type of competitive, interactive marketing will ultimately have on the collective psyche of the population. What is entailed in pretending to be passionate about or inspired by products all day, and what effect will constantly staging and posing for photos have on young children with developing brains? It is also rather difficult to believe that most hopeful “creators” attempting to acquire a paid sponsorship will make a sufficient amount

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of money through this method to significantly improve their lifestyle. Furthermore, aspiring to be an online brand ambassador, and joining this competitive online culture may have dangerous implications that shake the foundation of honesty and truth as a cultural virtue. Suppose, for instance, one scrolls through their news feed and notices a photo posted by a female relative, who has just tagged a cosmetic brand in her smiling selfie. She left a glowing review of the product in her caption. Is she simply trying to make money by selling a product to her relatives, or is she genuinely trying to *connect*? Such digital interactions will tend to undermine trust in the motivations behind the post.

As a result of such pressures, online spaces can begin to seem oppressive and predatory. Did we create this online culture, or were we influenced by brands and celebrities selling products? It seems as if the positivity movement has seeped into these types of online advertisements we are inundated with daily, to the point where people are beginning to internalize them. This pressure to appear happy and thriving online is not motivated by the genuine desires of individual users of social media, but, but rather by the advertisers who have entered what previously were personal spaces. This monetization of these online spaces may be the inevitable consequence of the use of any tool in an increasingly individualistic, capitalist society. In such an environment, the only interest corporations have in each new form of social media is to discover how they can use it to make money. Companies are playing to the deepest desires and insecurities of people in order to remain relevant, and to continue to make money. People want to feel connected, and corporations are well aware of this. However, the quality of this connection in the online world is questionable. When people are frozen in time on their screens in photographs, in a premeditated, curated context, the quality of social interaction may become increasingly compromised, particular in terms of its authenticity. People may lose

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authentic connection even more when they compete with each other for paid sponsorships. As stated by Storr (2018), “you had to be more entertaining, more original, more beautiful, with more friends, have wittier lines and more righteous opinions, and you’d best be doing in looking stylish in interesting places with your breakfast healthy, delicious, and beautifully lit” (p. 254). Advertisements have long been criticized for their harmful effects on society, such as for their unrealistic body images sold to young people in music videos, aspects of racism, and commonly referenced misogyny in ads in newspapers from the 50s. However, in recent years, it is as if the advertisements that were once contained in television commercials and magazines have leaked into our collective stream of consciousness to become ever more omnipresent. Interactive social platforms have changed the game substantially, and this may be causing changes to the collective psyche. According to Storr (2018), “social media is about more than just appearance. It’s also a deeply neoliberal product that has gamified the self, turning our identity into a pawn that plays competitively on digital platforms for likes, feedback and friends - the approval of the tribe. These advertisements and product placements have seeped into cell phones and nearly all types of private spaces, all without anyone having ever given consent. They have soaked into the very fabric of our being.” (p. 293).

Sharing is caring?

How did this emphasis on sharing positivity and inspiration online come to be? Everyone is familiar with the infamous phrase, “sex sells.” In 2018, “good vibes” sell. Particularly as a result of the use of social media, the world may be undergoing a transformation – the birth of a “new age” in which personality reigns, with an emphasis on connection. “Brands tweet at each other, in a coy, almost flirtatious fashion... Corporations now want to be your friend” (Davies, 2016, p. 187. In addition to Pepsi’s attempt, albeit disastrous, at promoting “good vibes,” Coca-

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Cola has also “tried a number of somewhat twee marketing campaigns, such as putting individual names (‘Sue’, ‘Tom’, etc.) on their bottles as a way of including gift-giving, and even offered a ‘twin pack,’ with the assumption that the drinks will be enjoyed by two people together” (Davies, 2016, p. 187). There is no doubt about it, connection is “in.”

A significant amount of research has demonstrated that content such as “positive messages, shocking visuals, motivational or inspirational quotes, and thought-provoking material, can attract social media consumers as well” (Lister, 2015, p. 2250). On one hand, this could be a good thing. People may be able to use this data to effect positive social change on a larger scale. For instance, if social media users are attracted to thought-provoking material, it is possible this could be used as an avenue for public education. However, this is not necessary the case, for some studies “have shown that individuals who use social media are much more likely to share entertaining content than educational content” (Lister, 2014, p. 2248). If individuals are more likely to share entertaining content, it is likely that companies will play to that strength in order to maximize sharing, and therefore profits. Brands and companies are competitively searching for ways to increase interaction, in order for the contagion of consumption to maintain its momentum. Where then, does this leave the moral responsibility for a company to do what is best for public interest?

It is possible to imagine that in some alternate reality, once the beverages were purchased at the local supermarket, Coke really did bring about pro-social interactions. In such a scenario, would it contribute to the greater good for people to continue to spread this positive message online, through sharing, commenting, tagging, and liking? We might compare this idea to the case of someone’s hypothetical aunt sharing about her positive experience with a cosmetic product. Aside from selling the product, and possibly making a small amount of money for

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herself, what is the motivation of the woman for taking the time to bother “sharing” in the first place? Is her sharing actually facilitating a pro-social interaction?

In order to address this question, it is worth probing into the motivations behind sharing photographs, aside from monetary gains. One aspect could be ranking and comparison in order to enhance the social status of a person. For instance:

Research suggests that we start mimicking people who we see displaying competence when they’re completing tasks at around the age of fourteen months... In our hunter-gatherer pasts, it would’ve made sense to copy the actions of the hunter who wore many necklaces of teeth made from his kills, for example, as his success cue demonstrated high competence. (Storr, 2018, p.95)

As society has developed in the West, following the industrial revolution, these cues became expensive cars, mansions, diamond rings, and other luxury items that signal success to others. It would seem these symbols and cues have recently undergone a further transformation. In some ways, people have moved away from such obvious declarations of wealth, towards more justifiable, socially conscious, covert signifiers of superiority.

The proud hunter of 2018 may be wearing a necklace of expensive healing crystals, his yoga membership, and receipts from charities he has donated to. It is as if virtue signaling, positivity, and “wellness” have become the new status symbols of our time. For the super-rich, if everyone in the social circle of the individual is also independently wealthy, how might they break away from the pack, show dominance, and gain respect from peers? When money is no object, where does superiority come from? It may be that indicators of social awareness, health and wellness, spirituality, and “self-care,” have become intertwined with luxury. For instance, consider the case of Gwyneth Paltrow, the wealthy and beautiful actress who operates the

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lifestyle website entitled Goop. “In 2012, the famous foodie told British TV host Jonathan Ross that she would ‘rather smoke crack than eat cheese from a can’ (France, 2016). Consider also the case of Beyonce, who recently decided to try veganism along with her husband Jay Z. “Her meals, which cost from \$9.76 (pounds 6.43) to \$16.50 a head, are also free from gluten, soya, dairy and GMOs. ‘All you have to do is try,’ she said in a statement. ‘If I can do it, anyone can’” (Khomami, 2015). On one hand, one could argue that celebrities endorsing social consciousness is a good thing, especially if it encourages the general public to emulate them. On the other, most people are not multi-millionaires, and cannot afford the kinds of food that receives the stamp of approval in the aforementioned statements, nor do they have personal chefs at their beck and call. So, are these celebrities embracing expensive, health conscious lifestyles sincere in their efforts to promote health and wellbeing –or have such activities become new signals of luxury and social status? Are they merely the latest ways of justifying excessive consumption and capitalism for the elite? Is promoting health consciousness and wellness culture helping everyone - or just those who can afford it?

What we see online matters

What celebrities post online and the agendas they push matters. People are heavily affected by their own online behavior and what they are exposed to. Online worlds cannot entirely circumvent real world needs, and dependence on rapid gratification can lead people down a dangerous path. In the book, *Man, Interrupted: Why Young Men are Struggling & What We Can Do About It* (2016), Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Coulombe discuss how the online realities of gamers can affect their abilities to function in the real world. They describe the three higher-level needs of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs— belongingness, love and esteem, and self-

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actualization, and ask if these needs can be met in digital reality. In some ways, gamers apparently are able to meet their needs for self-esteem through their accomplishments within the online games they play. Zimbardo and Coulombe write, "...a person who is, for example, gaming alone may well be able to achieve their esteem needs yet completely bypass a sense of belongingness and fail to address their love needs" (p. 91). It is possible this pattern could extend to social media use, and the rush of enthusiasm many people experience when likes roll in. The danger to personal development may lie in the ambiguity about what constitutes reality in the digital age. Can online friends ever fulfill our needs in the same way that genuine friends in the real world do? According to Zimbardo and Coulombe:

self-actualization could not be reached without the fulfillment of the other needs, so a lack of intimacy and appreciation for others creates a distorted sense of potential and actualization that is not based in any shared social reality. In other words, the lack of relatable skills, especially social skills, can distort the ability to evaluate social competence and success. (p. 91)

In other words, people cannot "hack" Maslow's hierarchy of needs online. The real world and the digital world are separate and distinct.

Furthermore, 'likes' are addicting, which may be potentially dangerous. To what extent do people go online to quench their thirst for hearts and thumbs up notifications? The process of climbing social ranks online, or rather the illusion of doing so, is not unlike other potentially harmful addictions. Storr describes a warning generated from a paper on self-esteem, co-authored with Mark Leary of Duke University:

It compared the pleasure of hollow self-esteem boosting to cocaine abuse. "Drugs take advantage of natural pleasure mechanisms in the human body that exist to register the

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accomplishment of desirable goals,” they wrote. “A drug such as cocaine may create a euphoric feeling without one’s having to actually experience events that normally bring pleasure, fooling the nervous system into responding as if circumstances were good. In the same way, cognitively inflating one’s self-image is a way of fooling the natural sociometer mechanism into thinking one is a valued relational partner’ (Storr, 2018, p. 226).

If one has more likes, it may create the illusion that they are more valuable and inflate their ideal self-image. This is a phenomenon that many corporations have exploited. Consider this hypothetical situation: A person posts a smiling picture of themselves sipping a Coke and tags the brand. Suppose further that the official Coke account reposts the picture and makes a positive comment about it, such as, “You rock!” Following this, the likes and new followers start to accumulate, which causes the person to feel good. Further imagine this person, who is made to believe they are “connecting” online, is really alone in their room, perhaps struggling with mental health issues, craving meaningful social connection and friends. Other than the fact that Coca-Cola has made a small amount of money, in what sense has anyone else received a genuine benefit? A large number of likes do not actually constitute a real connection between individuals.

People Feel Worse When Engaging with Social Media

Corporations capitalize on the desire of people to connect and feel good about themselves. They use this awareness to sell products. This may further accentuate the shallow and insincere quality of many online interactions, and also contribute to the competitiveness of the online culture in which individuals compete for sponsorships, followers, and likes. The net result of all this may simply be further isolation and greater frustration, if we are unable to meet

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our deep-seated social needs. Furthermore, within this paradigm of “likeability,” what is framed as “online inspiration” does not genuinely help people, and in fact appears to do harm to people. “What we see is studies that show social media is associated with diminished well-being and lower life satisfaction, because people are always looking at other people with better lives” (as cited by Storr, 2018, p. 294).

Furthermore, if people are always looking for signs of happiness and striving to immerse themselves in online communities where they can soak up that good energy and transmit it back into the group, hopefully solidifying their status as a valuable group member, what do people do with the negative feelings and pain they will inevitably experience in their lives? If people fear spreading “bad vibes,” or feel at risk of ostracization if they do so, how does that affect them in their relationships, and what happens to authenticity? On this subject, Davies (2016) says this:

What is left unquestioned by the science of happiness and any social media innovations that may spin off from it is the social logic which relationships are there to be created, invested in and — potentially — abandoned, in pursuit of psychological optimization. The darker implication of strategically pursuing happiness via relationships is that the relationship is only as good as the psychic value or kick that it delivers (p. 210).

Therein may lie the problem with inspirational online communities: The way people use each other as means to an end. People use each other for positive affirmation, monetization, and ultimately, for likes. The greater implications of the potential decay of trust and authentic connection that result from this type of culture is unsettling. A person might ask themselves, “Does this person really like this picture of my new car, and are they happy that I am happy, or are they hoping that if they like my picture, I will do the same for them?” Of course, online discourse, sharing of important information, authentic encouragement and genuine support do

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exist within online communities. What I am examining in this paper is the “shadow side” of social media culture, and how monetization has crept into these spheres and manipulated the positivity movement by encouraging digital sharing as a means to sell products, without considering the real-world implications for the public.

One could argue that this is a pessimistic outlook, and that yes, the person who liked your picture is truly happy for you. Perhaps we give them the benefit of the doubt. Could we be motivating each other to be better, and inspiring joy in the lives of others by sharing our own happy moments? After all, “a combination of positive psychology with social media analytics has demonstrated that psychological moods and emotions travel through networks” (Davies, 2016, p. 196). Following this logic, a smiling picture will “rub off” on others, maybe even despite the fact that it is the result of a paid sponsorship. On the other hand, human beings tend to be interested in the intentions of others, and I suspect this subject requires deeper investigation. It seems doubtful that moods and emotions can be transmitted in such a straight forward and simple way. The emotional lives of human beings are more complex than a simple happy vs. sad dichotomy. It is possible to like a picture, but also be slightly envious and irritated. Furthermore, people are capable of lying, feigning happiness, hiding negative emotions, and of simply lying. The images people see online are analyzed, and as conscious creatures, humans cannot help but wonder about ulterior motives or inauthenticity.

Many have asserted that constantly seeing other people online, when depicting themselves as happy and successful, whether it be true or not, often makes people feel worse about themselves. Storr (2018) cites a *New York Times* report about the rising suicide rates among 15 to 24-year old’s in the US, featuring Gregory Eels, the Director of Counselling and Psychological Services at Cornell University. “He described his belief that social media is a ‘huge contributor to the

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misperception among students that peers aren't also struggling” (p. 16). In the article, Eels states that “when students in counseling remark that everyone else on campus looks happy, he tells them, ‘I walk around and think, that one’s gone to the hospital. That person has an eating disorder. That student just went on antidepressants” (p. 16). Appearances can be deceiving, and most of the time we have no idea what people are struggling with in their personal lives. When this notion is extended to the internet, an edited, curated, strategic realm aiming to inspire each other with good vibes or display “our best selves living our best lives,” it only heightens the misperceptions people have about each other, and consequently makes people feel worse about themselves.

The Dark Side of “Fitspiration”

According to Marketdata Enterprises, Inc. (2007), “Self-improvement customers are most likely female, middle-aged, affluent, and live on the two U.S. coasts. 70% of SI books buyers and seminar participants are women.” The custom of presenting everyone in a positive, inspiring manner on social media, when a darker underbelly lurks beneath, is apparent under further examination of the popular online community known as “Fitspiration.” How does “fitspiration” show up in the self-help industry, which predominantly affects women, and what effect does it have on people? Can pictures of fit people paired with inspirational quotes bring about positive change? “Fitspiration (fitness and inspiration) consists of images and text that are designed to inspire people to pursue a healthy lifestyle through exercise and eating well and has been promoted as a healthy alternative to thinspiration” (Holland, 2017, p. 76). The idea here is to promote exercise and health as a means of attaining a desirable body image, rather than focusing on thinness and restrictive dieting. Whatever the case, the movement has spread very rapidly. A search (March 11, 2015) of the #fitspiration hashtag on Instagram returned over 5.2 million

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pictures” (Holland, 2017, p. 76). Although there are no formal rules or guidelines, “the majority of fitspiration images are of women exercising or in exercise gear, sometimes overlain with inspirational quotations (e.g., “Strong beats skinny every time”). There is no denying the massive reach of this movement, but how do we know if it is helping or harming people? Massive reach and popularity do not always equate with goodness, as is evident in popular online trends amongst teens such as the tide pod challenge, in which they encourage each other to film themselves eating laundry detergent pods and post about it. “The American Association of Poison Control Centers last year reported 220 teens were exposed to the toxic pods, and about 40 cases have been reported so far this year” (ValueWalk, 2018). Of course, as pointed out in the ValueWalks (2018) article, “there are a few positive examples of internet peer pressure, such as the 2014 ice bucket challenge that raised awareness about Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS),” and the #metoo movement, which used social media as a platform to address sexual assault. Nonetheless, the lure of celebrity and likes associated with these viral challenges has dangerous implications that cannot be dismissed. The notion of “going viral” may be changing how people do business, and many movements have shadow sides that have gone largely unexamined.

Oppressive and unrealistic body images are real problems, that can contribute to low self-esteem and potentially serious eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. The body positivity movement has been an attempt to correct these paradigms and create a healthier culture of acceptance and self-love. More specifically:

Positioning itself against mainstream media images of idealized, largely inaccessible female bodies, the body positive movement advocates for the revision of beauty norms through making visible a greater range of diverse bodies, with related websites showcasing people of all shapes, sizes, races, genders and abilities (Sastre, 2014, p. 2).

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Significant attention and research have been given to the effectiveness of this largely digital movement. It is not yet clear whether this movement has truly shifted popular perceptions in a healthy way, and more research is needed about how it interacts with social media.

Regarding the specific topic of fitspiration, however, some research has revealed troubling aspects of this online trend, which questions the truth of its inherent “inspirational” powers.

As pointed out by Holland (2017), “despite the positive intentions, there are several elements of fitspiration that are concerning. These include the repeated representation of only one body type (lean and toned) that is unattainable for most women, and the promotion of appearance- related rather than health benefits of diet and exercise” (p. 76). In other words, the focus is very much still on *image*, which has been part of the problem all along. In addition, the images still show traditionally attractive bodies. Furthermore, part of the root of this distorted thinking is that it aims to persuade people they must mould themselves into someone else’s image. Perhaps an alternate direction could put a greater focus on how person *feels* when they exercise. What would happen, if instead of placing emphasis on the physical, our culture placed greater value on an individual’s mind, how they treat other people, what they love, and what they accomplish? The focus of fitspiration is arguably too narrow. Idealizing a slightly less emancipated version of what has traditionally been the ideal physical form and ignoring what is happening internally does not seem to be doing much good.

Even within the body positivity movement, images are deceiving. For example, it is possible for what appears to be a lean, toned body, to be full of steroids or too much alcohol. The person who is depicted as beautiful may still be restricting their food intake for weight loss purposes. Internal experience, health, and self-harm are lost in the discussion. In addition, some people are just born thin, and may struggle to develop muscle and tone. Some people are

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disabled and may not be able to work out or may not have the time or resources. Where do they fit into this movement? Considered from this perspective, fitspiration still appears to be rigid and oppressive, and for the privileged.

Feminist authors have long pointed out how women in particular have been negatively impacted by the glamorization of a narrow range of largely unattainable ideal body images to the exclusion of all others, which is exacerbated through online comparisons on social media. In modern society, the value of a woman tends to be heavily based on her appearance, and this pattern has been exacerbated with internet culture. One study found that “consistent with previous research, women were also more negatively affected than men were by checking out attractive pictures of others” (Fox & Vendemia, 2016, p. 5). Furthermore, these same authors report that “these feelings may be compounded by the other information made visible on social media interfaces, such as complimentary comments or who “liked” another’s picture.” Another study which examined Facebook use and negative body image found that “more time on Facebook related to more frequent body and weight comparisons, more attention to the physical appearance of others, and more negative feelings about their bodies for all women” (Eckler, Kalyango, & Paasch, 2016, p. 249). They also found that “for women who wanted to lose weight, more time on Facebook also related to more disordered eating symptoms.” Some assert that fitspiration is different from the glamorization of thinness. They claim it is healthier. Even if this is true for a small number of people, most of the evidence shows that fitspiration has an overwhelmingly negative impact on the majority of people.

Is there any evidence that fitspiration at least helps women who are recovering from eating disorders? According to Holland (2017):

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Women who post fitspiration images scored significantly higher on drive for thinness, bulimia, drive for muscularity, and compulsive exercise. Almost a fifth (17.5%) of these women were at risk for diagnosis of a clinical eating disorder, compared to 4.3% of the travel group. Compulsive exercise was related to disordered eating in both groups, but the relationship was significantly stronger for women who post fitspiration images (p. 76).

These findings indicate that the desire to appear toned and fit does not prevent eating disorders or unhealthy exercise habits. Another study found that when comparing pro anorexia sites known for thinspiration, in which people with eating disorders encourage each other to lose more weight, the fitspiration:

Sites did not differ on guilt-inducing messages regarding weight or the body, fat/weight stigmatization, the presence of objectifying phrases, and dieting/restraint messages.

Overall, 88% of Thinspiration sites and 80% of Fitspiration sites contained one or more of the coded variables. (Boepple & Thompson, 2016)

Fashion and body image trends evolve and change over time, but if fitspiration continues to focus primarily on the “image” of the person, do these subtle variations really matter? Fitspiration does not appear to be moving people away from the maladaptive and unhealthy behaviors required to achieve the idealized body image of the moment, whatever that may be.

Could fitspiration be useful and healthy for any group of women? Consider women who are quite overweight, who aim to shed a few pounds in a healthy way and are looking for a supportive online community and encouragement. Perhaps fitspiration could help this particular group? So far, current research suggests that this type of goal setting for weight loss purposes, the type where a person “fantasizes” and looks at pictures of other people, is ineffective.

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For example, it has been shown that women who fantasized about size 36 that they would reach with the latest diet, actually gained weight, if they didn't pay proper attention to all the obstacles on the way and didn't realize how much willpower they would need in order to stick to the diet. (as cited by Bergsma, 2007, p. 355)

I would not argue against the obvious benefits of a healthy diet and exercise. Engaging in healthy behaviors is probably quite effective and beneficial for nearly everyone. However, there is no evidence that this "inspirational" trend towards healthy living and fitspiration of the type currently being practiced throughout the internet actually encourages healthier lifestyles. Such "inspiration" as provided by these online activities does not necessarily pass beyond the "inspiration stage," or translate into positive, healthier behaviors in the real world. As is evident from the previous discussion about Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006) and the so-called "law of attraction," simply imagining a positive outcome, but then failing to implement the necessary steps required to achieve the desired goal, tends to make a person feel worse – and does nothing to bring the person closer to their desired goal. Staring at a smiling photo of someone preparing healthy food or working out, accompanied by an inspirational quote such as "excuses don't burn calories!" does not necessarily stimulate meaningful and lasting positive change. Regarding this, Storr offers an interesting observation:

The neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky has argued that the brain's dopamine reward system, which guides our behaviour by giving us little druggy hits of pleasure, is more active not when we seize the prize that we're after, but when we're in pursuit of it (Storr, 2018, p. 99).

This notion is active in fitspiration culture, and in the endless pursuit of self-improvement that it entails. It seems that part of the appeal lies in this pursuit, which becomes troublesome

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when we consider the eating disorders and compulsive exercising that can accompany dieting and fitness, especially when it becomes competitive.

Fitspiration demonstrates the failure of the positivity movement to truly inspire positive change for individuals through social comparison and online encouragement. This is different from online support groups, for the nature of the fitspiration movement is based on the physical image of the person and the attainment of goals, rather than the providing of an environment to discuss feelings and ideas in a non-competitive way. This apparent spreading of positivity and promotion of health consciousness is not what it appears to be.

Conclusion

Social media has established itself as an enduring and influential part of modern culture. Advertisers saw the opportunities social media offered, and wasted no time seizing them. In our neoliberal, individualistic, capitalist society, people live under the pressure to “sell themselves.” This is apparent on many of these online spaces such as Instagram, where people have begun to “brand themselves.” Whether this rewards them with money through paid partnerships and sponsorships or not, the population collectively continues to play the game by engaging with these platforms. Today, the pinnacle of a desirable, successful online persona, as described by Storr (2018), is “usually depicted as an extroverted, slim, beautiful, individualistic, optimistic, hard-working, socially aware yet high-self-esteeming global citizen with entrepreneurial guile and a selfie camera” (p. 18). Whether a person prefers Coca-Cola or Pepsi, they are both collaborating with the corporate agenda. The corporations have caught on, and they offer us crumbs, or rather likes and burst of dopamine - if we play their game.

This illusory online “reality” has real life consequences. Considering the amount of time many people spend online, it is nearly impossible for people to avoid being influenced by this

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type of interaction and the values it promotes. Whether it is celebrities selling an unattainable lifestyle under the guise of promoting “self-care,” fitspiration, or videos of teens making themselves sick in exchange for views and likes, the internet has downloaded itself into the lives of nearly everyone. To borrow a term from Instagram, even if we are the “creators” of our reality online, this relationship is circular. The way people interact with social media will shape their internal worlds - and how they connect with each other. Perhaps we ought to proceed with caution. At first glance, even when an online movement *appears* to be positive and pro-social, under closer examination, this is often not the case. Real change is more complex than “positive” or “negative,” and what is good for *some* people may not necessarily be good for *all* members of society. The positivity movement has infiltrated online spaces, and corporations have displayed great ingenuity and aggressiveness in manipulating positivity to sell products. This suggests there may be a great risk that people will increasingly use each other as a means to an end in inauthentic ways. Many online communities only provide people with shallow and temporary rewards. Part of the duty of internet users and consumers in a post-modern society is to think critically - to not do only what feels good, or what is best for us - but to do what is right, and to distinguish truth from illusion.

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Chapter 4: The Erasure of Science: What Does Happiness Mean in a World of Alternative Facts and Pseudoscience?

The internet era has spawned a peculiar time of “alternative facts” and misinformation, in which phrases such as “speak your truth” are thrown around without much discernment. In her 2018 Golden Globes speech that went viral, Oprah proudly stated: “What I know for sure is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all have.” The speech sparked an impassioned discussion, largely online, of her potential run for president.

In the merging worlds of celebrity and politics, this gray area of “truth” can be twisted and manipulated to suit the personal agenda of almost anyone. In the highly charged political climate of today, which side you are on is a major part of each person’s identity. For instance, “being for or against GMO labeling... can help to define the type of individual you are. It becomes part of your personal brand” (Caulfield & Fahy, 2016, p. 26). Hollywood in general, and Oprah in particular, are known for their unabashed liberalism, which is in direct opposition to the stereotype of the far-right Trump supporter who wears a Make America Great Again hat at all times. A world in which everybody is labelling themselves and attaching ideas to their identity or personal brand is very different from a world full of ideas that people are sorting through together.

If any specific person can be said to have made themselves into a brand, it is Oprah Winfrey. Oprah first became an immensely famous talk show host, but this was just the beginning. She went on to own her own magazine, which, not coincidentally, is entitled *Oprah*, and always features a picture of herself on the cover. She also now runs her own television network, OWN. She has an immense power and ability to publicize her thoughts, so her personal beliefs are therefore important. It is one thing for Oprah to claim that people should “speak our

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truth” when discussing our own emotions, but the game changes when the subject under discussion becomes political. And the game did change, when Oprah allegedly announced that she was seriously considering running for president of the United States.

In a culture where we have *our* truth, and *their* truth, where to the facts lie? Do we divide them up amongst ourselves and then turn our backs on each other? In the past, Oprah has been widely accused of supporting pseudoscience, and was a huge fan of Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* (2006), promoting the “law of attraction.” When Oprah refers to “speaking your truth,” what does she mean?

Some authors have expressed concern that the public may be losing their appreciation for objective reality and scientific facts. This cultural tension between science and pseudoscience - between the skeptics and the fringe groups -has been very evident in recent years. In this era of “alternative facts” and elusive truth, a growing mistrust for conventional medicine has made way for a growing number of natural remedies in the place of medicine, and fired up oppositional groups, such as the anti-vaxxers. There are valid concerns that *some* aspects of conventional medicine have been corrupted, legitimate fears that *some* medical professionals no longer have our best interests at heart, and evidence that at least *some* pharmaceutical company are motivated by greed at the expense of public health concerns. Even so, there are limits to what people should accept in the place of conventional medicine. For example, just because a certain drug may be over prescribed for profit does not mean that everyone should start treating meningitis with herbs from our kitchens.

It would be far beyond the scope of this study to explore in detail whether or not vaccines are so “toxic” that they negate their value in providing the population with herd immunity. However, as some authors have pointed out, the existence of a very vocal and influential faction

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of people who are zealously against all types of vaccination might, in and of itself, be an even greater cause for alarm. The general consensus amongst most scientists is that vaccines are very necessary. As stated in an article published in *Nature*:

There is already ample evidence that vaccines do not elevate the risk of autism. A 2015 study of more than 95,000 children found no association between the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and an increased risk of autism - even among children with a family history of the disorder. (p. 259).

More importantly, the effects of this “anti-vaxxer” movement has serious consequences not only for the children left unvaccinated, but for the rest of the public:

The United States has already experienced a series of outbreaks of preventable diseases. In 2014, measles affected 667 people in the country, primarily those who were unvaccinated. The outbreaks are expensive, too: In 2011, it cost public-health institutions up to US\$5.3 million to cope with 16 measles outbreaks that made 107 people ill (*Nature*, 2017, p. 259).

Despite all this, considering the risk involved, and against the caution of the majority of scientists and medical practitioners, we may wonder why anyone would hold onto this belief. Scientific claims can be slippery at times. Some studies do have flaws. Some medical studies do report inconclusive results. Even the best researchers can have their own bias, and the possibility of errors can never be entirely dismissed.

Scientists can make mistakes. Even so, the scientific method is still the best form of testing that humans have invented. Keyes (2010) points out that the definition of the scientific method as given in a popular biology textbook says that: “The classic vision of the scientific method is that observations lead to hypotheses that in turn make experimentally testable

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predictions” (p. 21). Keyes provides another definition from a sociology textbook, which says it this way: “the scientific method is an approach to data collection that relies on two assumptions: (1) Knowledge about the world is acquired through observation, and (2) the truth of the knowledge is confirmed by verification--that is, by others making the same observations” (p. 21). This method is not perfect, and there are some variations to our understanding of scientific claims, as is evident in the academic debates on virtually every topic. However, most academics accept this to be true: observation is superior to human reasoning. It has been our guiding light for hundreds of years, since the Scientific Revolution began. We might assume the scientific method to be essentially universally accepted throughout the secular, modern culture of the Western world. However, in recent years, it is evident that it is not as widely accepted as many have assumed it to be.

This departure from scientific thinking appears in the media, in the American election of 2016, and in the idea of “alternative facts,” in pseudoscientific solutions to serious medical concerns, and in the “junk science” that is woven through self-help books. These empty platitudes and mantras appear on social media feeds and on billboards, in store shelves and on t-shirts, blasting people from all directions with slogans such as— “Smile more, science says it will make you happier!”

Moreover, with so many diverse opinions out there, it may be more important than ever to be wary for signs of pseudoscience. A common red flag for pseudoscientific claims entails that “any claims made can typically not be falsified” (Lack & Rousseau, 2016, p. 35). This applies to many things that people cannot see clearly in a laboratory, things that are more difficult to measure, such as the “law of attraction,” or happiness and well-being. People know that they want to feel better, but who should they trust, and how do they know what to believe?

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Lost Trust in Science and Conventional Medicine

It seems that a significant portion of the general public has lost trust in science. They may be losing not only trust in scientific facts, but even the concept of truth in general may become debatable and subjective. Throughout the Trump presidency, his administration has made accusations that certain news sources spread “fake news,” and infamously, “alternative facts” (Conway, 2016). Botei (2017) recalls one of the extreme false news stories circulating about Hillary Clinton and the pizzeria in Washington DC, which had very real results. The news claimed the pizza parlor was in fact:

the facade of a pedophile network that was run precisely by Hillary Clinton! So big was the impact of this news that the day after its publication a man opened the fire in that pizzeria without harming anyone. Asked why he had done that, the man told the police that he wanted to save the abused children. (p. 134)

We cannot put the constant onus on the public to discern which news is “real” and which is not, but when competing networks crank out story after story as they do, faster than the average person can keep up with, where does that leave the public? This battle over the news cycle continued beyond the campaigns and into Trump’s presidency. “President Trump posted a message on Twitter (March 20, 2017) in which he stressed that “despite what you heard in FALSE NEWS, we had a WONDERFUL MEETING with Angela Merkel” (Botei, 2017, p. 135). This example is important, for it has the president confirming the existence of “false news.” It implies that people cannot trust the news media – a sentiment that is dangerous in a democracy.

On one hand, it can be argued that the increasing doubts that the government and private corporations can be trusted to consistently look out for the best interests of the public, is not

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unreasonable. For instance, it may be a fair criticism to suggest that modern Americans rely too heavily on prescription pills. In addition, some hold “the pharmaceutical industry... responsible for the rising costs of health care” (D’Arcy, Moynihan, 2009, p. 1). By all accounts, “the relationship between doctors and drug companies is the subject of intense scrutiny—there is widespread skepticism about the intent of industry” (D’Arcy & Moynihan, 2009, p. 1). News stories are published frequently which accuse the pharmaceutical industry of exploiting or bribing doctors to promote drugs for their own profit or personal financial gain rather than the best interest of the patients. In 2013, an article appeared which was entitled *Dollars for Docs Mints a Millionaire*. It claims that “ProPublica’s Dollars for Docs database... has been updated to include more than \$2 billion in payments from 15 drugmakers for promotional speaking, research, consulting, travel, meals and related expenses from 2009 to 2012” (Weber, 2018). Of course, not every doctor is prescribing unnecessary medication for profit, but the seeds of doubt have been planted in the public, and some doctors have been found guilty. In addition, one could argue that there is public demand for increased health and longevity, and that the industry must be allowed to compete and innovate in order to survive within a free-market based capitalist economy, which will, in turn, improve the quality of life for everybody. Modern medicine has undeniably improved public health and cured many diseases. However, this tenuous and complex relationship between medical practitioners and pharmaceutical companies has been cause for much mistrust of the conventional medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry. However, in response to the misgivings some people have of Western medicine, numerous sources of “alternative medicine” have quickly stepped in to fill the void. These sources offer numerous types of “natural” products or procedures – many of which have little or no scientific evidence to support their claims. Vendors and practitioners enthusiastically promote the sale of

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all manner of herbs, crystals, and vials of “homeopathic” medicine and similar unorthodox treatments that have never been validated by even the most preliminary of scientific investigations. Is it ethical to charge people for these types of untested treatments? If the only benefit is due to the placebo effect, is it unethical to claim otherwise?

For a modern democratic, pluralistic culture to operate, society needs the skeptics, just as it needs dissent and opposing viewpoints to challenge accepted dogmas and conventional ways of thinking. The expression of skepticism, contrary views, and contrarian perspectives promotes critical thinking, debate, and the evolution of ideas. In the current political climate, there are extreme groups at the fringes, which include people who deny evolution, climate change, and even those who deny that the earth is round. For example, “Flat-Earthers believe NASA is part of a broad conspiracy to fake the evidence of a spherical Earth, and there are societies of people, such as this Flat Earth Society, that produce materials “proving” the conspiracy” (Strauss, 2017). This all seems to be quite distant from where most of the world has progressed to today, which involves discussions about the launching rockets and plans for colonizing Mars. Somehow, our society is simultaneously in both places: One segment of society is contemplating a fast approaching future, dreaming of space travel and AI, while at the same time another faction is stuck in the past, still pondering whether the Earth is flat or round. This peculiar equilibrium might be related to the widespread use of the internet and the mass amounts of misinformation to which the average person now has access. When combined with a lack of adequate education to provide them with the critical thinking skills required, or the time to sift through the great mass of material with discernment, presenting people with a huge amount of complex and unfamiliar information can confuse and overwhelm them, and may give rise to numerous other difficulties. This situation might also be related to moral concern over the integration of AI and other

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technological advancements into our society, heightened by the fear of displacement that will likely ensue. Will the human race lose our humanity if machines take control? Will machines take our jobs? These are complex issues that require analysis beyond the scope of this paper. However, one thing is clear: Modern society is now confronted with a massive discrepancy between the claims of pseudoscience and actual science.

Why do People Accept Pseudoscience?

Many of us would like to think that modern society has advanced beyond the snake oil salesmen, the burning of witches, and belief in the supernatural over evidence-based research and reason. We pride ourselves in thinking our own society is vastly superior to the culture that prevailed during the Dark Ages. With internet access has come an abundance of peer-reviewed, scientific articles. On the other hand, widespread access the internet has also led to phenomena such as the Pizzagate conspiracy, in which false information online spread to real world potential violence. With this ever-growing network of links, people can easily become overwhelmed and confused by what is fact and what is fiction. Few people track down every claim they encounter on the internet. This leaves people at the mercy of well-funded organizations with hidden agendas that systematically spread false information, as was done during the 2016 election in the United States. The Russian government was accused of posting a mass of false and misleading ads on Facebook with the intention of swaying the election results in favor of candidates who supported what was believed to be pro-Russian policies. People want to be able to trust their news sources, but this may become increasingly difficult to do. Mistrust in the free press has serious consequences. Rapp and Braasch (2014) write, “we witness the consequences of scientific illiteracy in several current issues: climate change denial, anti-vaccination lobbying,

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end-of-world prophecies, and school boards voting to include creationism in the science curriculum” (as cited in Kaufman & Kaufman, 2018, p. 21).

Belief in myth over scientific reasoning can have devastating consequences. We see this in the mass slaughter of elephants and rhinoceros for their horns as a result of an ancient superstition in traditional Chinese medicine that claims these horns have metaphysical healing powers. The spread and adherence of this myth benefits poachers and traffickers financially and leads to horrific animal cruelty and potential extinction. The New York Times (2014) reported that over “100 elephants were slaughtered for their incisor teeth... Similarly, rhino horn is regarded as an irreplaceable ingredient of traditional Chinese medicine... The largest land creatures on the planet are being slaughtered to extinction for vanity and myth of healing” (*Stop this Massacre of Elephants, Rhino*, 2014, p. 1). The rise of science illiteracy in modern western society has not gone unnoticed. On April 19, 2017, Neil deGrasse Tyson, an American astrophysicist, author, and science communicator, posted a four-minute clip on Facebook. In it, Tyson notes that

“some of the people who both understand science the least and deny it the most now hold the most power in our society, and he calls this catastrophically dangerous situation out: ‘That is a recipe for the complete dismantling of our informed democracy.’”

He is speaking, presumably, about groups such as the Flat-Earthers, and anti-vaxxers. “Tyson highlights issues that have somehow become highly controversial despite overwhelming scientific evidence that should stamp out any such dispute: human-caused climate change, evolution, and vaccinations, for example.”

Aside from serious examples such as climate change, why does the preservation of scientific thinking matter so much to people like Tyson, and why should we be concerned? To

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begin with, “It has been argued that science is *the* discipline needed to promote twenty-first-century skills such as nonroutine problem solving, adaptability, complex communication skills, self-management, and systems thinking” (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2018, p. 21). Everyone is susceptible to bias in our thinking. This includes scientists as well as people who believe they fell ill because a witch cursed them and therefore do not seek adequate medical treatment.

“Across the research reviewed, the factors that influence acceptance or rejection of science and acceptance or rejection of pseudoscience apply to all of us” (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2018, p. 35).

These authors argue that people should aspire to do their best to account for our blind spots, avoid passively accepting easy, enticing, conclusions that “feel” correct, and attempt to answer life’s mysteries with empirical research. Such authors also encourage people to acknowledge when they do not have the answer. The world becomes dangerous when different groups draw upon on weak science or misinformation to support their own agendas and justify their behaviors, or when people refuse to change their minds based on new evidence.

For every Neil deGrasse Tyson and Bill Nye, there seem to be an equally influential and popular promoter of non-scientific thought. It only takes one person creating one attractive website to begin spreading misinformation. In the internet era, it is all too easy to choose a side, become a loyal follower, and forget that the other side exists. An attractive (but inaccurate) opinion can spread rapidly and go unchallenged. People are at risk of relying upon online sources to supply them with nearly all their information, and thus end up living within their own personalized echo chamber of thoughts and communicating only with other people who agree with them and who reinforce their own biases and prejudices. As soothing as it might feel to constantly have our reality reconfirmed, there is darkness surrounding our collective of isolated “safety bubbles”. These online groupthink systems and their leaders depend on such bubbles to

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be effective. Without followers, the “leader” is just one individual with one idea. Despite the fact that everyone has biases and blind spots, most people do not live within such extreme isolation or psychological insulation. Even so, it appears that our culture is struggling to distinguish fact from fiction or science from pseudoscience. Many intelligent people have very little formal education, and do not necessarily have well-developed skills for evaluating the credulity or reliability of information sources. Caulfield and Fahy say this:

Researchers in science communication have long known that once citizens leave formal education, the primary source for information about science becomes the media, with audiences now seeking out information from Internet search engines and social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Caulfield & Fahy, 2016, p. 24).

Data and information can be easily misunderstood. This is especially true when the subject under discussion is complex, and when people only have the opportunity to briefly glance at the material without the opportunity to analyze it deeply. Consider a situation in which a reader briefly glances at a headline which says: “High Self-Esteem = High Grades.” At first glance, this may sound simple and straightforward. Upon deeper examination, it is important to note that when analyzing research, it is always very important not to equate correlation with causation. For instance, in this example, “a correlation had been repeatedly found between high self-esteem and good grades. So, the logic went, if you boosted self-esteem, you’d boost grades” (Storr, 2018, p. 224). This claim could easily be used as the premise for a self-help book. However, this seemingly obvious interpretation is not necessarily correct, for that it is not what the reported pattern of evidence actually showed. “When they tracked people over time... the grades come first and then the self-esteem. It was a result, not a cause” (Storr, 2018, p. 224). This does not suggest that simply increasing the self-esteem of a child will automatically lead to

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higher grades. On the contrary, what this seems to say is the if a parent wishes to increase the self-esteem of their children, one way to accomplish this would be to encourage academic success, teach them to devote the necessary time and attention to master course material, and to foster effective study habits in the children. Such studies as those which point out the correlation between high self-esteem and high grades have real world consequences, and could potentially affect future generations in a very positive way – but only if they are correctly understood. Simply reading the headline of an article or subjecting it to an incomplete analysis will not enough provide sufficient information to accomplish anything worthwhile.

The ways people take in news and information has changed, but journalists still have a duty not to mislead their audiences. The responsibility of news sources and social media platforms to deliver accurate information and sound reporting is great. People now live in a world of iPhones and 24-hour news cycles, and many people spend many hours each a day immersed in these feeds. It is possible the collective nervous system of the human race is changing as a result these information consumption patterns. As pointed out by Nicholas Carr in his novel *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010):

Such clicking... contrary to the technology of the printed book, has diminished our ability for sustained concentration, focus, and thinking in a linear manner. Rather we skim, scan, and hopscotch on the surface of knowledge. We do not delve deep into the depths of data (Levinson, 2014, p. 1).

Although some advocates for science, such as Tyson, are trying to improve the situation, people would need to look up from their cell phones to gain any benefits.

Many of the most popular celebrities may well be contributing to the problem:

“Traditional and new media celebrity culture has become increasingly influential, as a seemingly

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endless stream of celebrities endorses products (books, shampoos), lifestyles (vegan, gluten-free), and ideas (pro-labeling of genetically modified organisms [GMOs], anti-vaccination)”

(Caulfield & Fahy, 2016, p. 24). Furthermore:

Research studies have shown that other areas where the celebrity voice has hurt public discourse include the perceived health value of gluten-free diets and high-dose vitamins and the health risks of GMOs. In all of these cases, the celebrities with scientifically unsupported views have played a prominent role, clouding public debates and fostering health practices that are not supported by the available evidence (Caulfield & Fahy, p. 25).

There are many different apps, online communities, celebrity Instagram accounts, and news sources. It would be interesting to see more data concerning celebrities and their promotion of pseudoscientific practices, and the purchasing patterns of the public.

Celebrity or figurehead endorsements may have larger consequences for the public, aside from encouraging excessive consumption. When snake oil is used as a substitute for essential medicine, the consequences of scientific illiteracy can be a matter of life and death. In addition to spending money on products that may not work, the embracing of pseudoscience can sometimes be dangerous. For instance, a Canadian father David Stephen and his wife Collet were found guilty of “failing to provide the necessities of life” to their 18-month-old son Ezekiel. Their young son died because his parents relied on alternative medicine to treat his serious fever and difficulty breathing. It was reported that they “relied instead on natural products including vinegar, onion powder, ginger, garlic and hot peppers.” Some say he was likely suffering from meningitis. It was further reported that “less than a year after being convicted of endangering his severely ill son by relying on natural remedies, David Stephen was on the road this week

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promoting the merits of alternative medicine” (Hamilton, 2017). “On Facebook, he has described himself as the victim of a cover up, accusing the Crown of “trickery” and arguing that Ezekiel's death was the result of inadequate treatment from the ambulance crew” (Hamilton). If interpreted from the perspective of cognitive dissonance, perhaps this makes sense. In such a situation, the father would be asked to accept some responsibility for the death of his son. This would require him to change his beliefs. This would be a painful story to tell. Thus, it may have been easier for him to adjust his beliefs so as to depict himself as a victim of “the system” - a hero fighting for natural medicine to prevail against the forces of evil.

Pseudoscience is difficult to refute. In *The Unpersuadables: Adventures with the Enemies of Science* (2015), Will Storr describes having attended a massive, group yoga session conducted by the guru Ramdev, and recalls being told that a particular exercise “expels ‘toxins’ from the body. And then there is ‘the bumblebee,’ which is designed to ‘balance dopamine levels’ and sharpen memory and involves us putting our hands over our faces to prevent ‘energy’ leaking out of our eyeballs” (p. 34).

Storr (2015) recites a conversation with a woman who believes that Ramdev’s yoga teachings can cure cancer. According to this woman:

It has been found that cancer cells cannot thrive in a highly oxygenated environment. When you do this type of exercise you flood your system with oxygen and this brings about huge biochemical changes. One of the exercises is the equivalent of chemotherapy and one is the equivalent of radiotherapy. (p. 35)

In her anecdote, the woman uses scientific sounding language, such as the terms “biochemical” and “radiotherapy.” Despite this, she is not protected from confirmation bias, nor the placebo effect. Even though they appeal to claims of having been validated by scientific

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research, in fact, no such research has even been conducted or published. Thus, such unsubstantiated metaphysical claims such as breathing curing cancer must be considered to fall under the umbrella of pseudoscience. “Pseudoscientific claims make predictions or offer explanations, just as scientific claims do, and so can be difficult to distinguish from “proper” scientific claims” (Lack & Rousseau, 2016, p. 35). Communication with such “true believers” can be awkward and difficult. How precisely could someone prove to a person who strongly holds such beliefs that her breathing did not cure her cancer, or that thinking positively did not cure cancer?

Why People Need to Suffer

It sounds harmless enough to tell people they should “think positively,” but is it helpful? Even if doing so accomplishes nothing beyond creating a placebo effect, if it helps a person feel better, is that not helpful? Several authors have concluded that it may not be. “This inspirational message comes with a risk. Active coping can lead to frustration if it is impossible to control a stressor. It may inspire persons to blame themselves for things that occur to them outside their responsibility” (Bergsma, 2007, p. 355). Modern culture tends not to give much opportunity for grieving, and few people like to feel pain. Medication is readily available to alleviate any discomfort, whatever it may be. Sedatives and pain suppressing narcotics are available at any local drug store. Such medications are available even for extreme, acute, emotional pain such as the death of a family member or close friend. Western culture seems to have diminished patience or tolerance for such emotional discomfort. For example, Wellbutrin, an antidepressant drug, is widely promoted as a means “to alleviate ‘major depressive symptoms occurring shortly after the loss of a loved one’” (Davies, p. 178, 2016). In fact, the APA altered the DSM-V so that

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“to be unhappy for more than two weeks after the death of another human being can now be considered a medical illness” (Davies, p. 178, 2016).

Many authors have suggested that modern people must accept that they cannot outrun pain. Pain – both physical and emotional - is a part of life, and an entire industry has been built on the illusion that people can somehow abolish all these “toxic” and “negative” experiences once and for all. This notion is somewhat perplexing, especially since it is so contrary to all the ancient traditions and philosophies which have informed the development of Western spirituality. “The general understanding that suffering and distress can be possible sources of positive change is thousands of years old” (Tedeschi, 2004, p. 2). In fact, many ancient philosophies speak to the potential for growth and transformation amidst adversity.

Many people draw on studies of well-being, religion, and ancient wisdom in their attempts to understand its nature. People buy self-help books and go to Yoga retreats, searching for that inner peace they have heard about. In desperation, people can succumb to quick fixes, such as addiction, over-consumption, and miracle cures. As a result, Western, consumerist culture can fall victim to what several writers have referred to as “spiritual bypassing.” Such spiritual bypassing has been defined as “a very persistent shadow of spirituality, manifesting in many forms...’ such as extreme detachments, numbing of our emotions, the inability to allow for negative feelings especially anger, lack of boundaries, and an overdeveloped rational way of seeing the world” (as cited by Hoffman, 2012, p. 103). When viewed from this perspective, the positivity movement, specifically, the profit-making aspects of it – which attempt to sell people the identity of “well-being,” may be seen as having co-opted the notion of spirituality. It has done so through the erasure of a deeper meditative and meaningful practice. In other words:

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Spiritual practice can be counterproductive within a society that places a high value on so-called enlightenment techniques. ‘When people use spiritual practice to try and compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the true nature of spiritual practice.’ (Welwood, 2000, p. 206)

Spiritual bypassing, and quick fixes for pain, attempt to “fast-track” people to enlightenment and rush them through their feelings, without allowing adequate time to feel, sit with, and work through the pain. For example, one therapy session, or one yoga class, will generally not bring a person out of a severe depression. Much more is generally required. As stated by William Davies in *The Happiness Industry* (2015), “The philosophical deficit in the science of happiness is dealt with by importing ideas from Buddhism and new age religions. Somewhere in between the quantitative science and the spiritualism sits happiness” (p. 38). Perhaps people are looking at the matter in the wrong way. Perhaps people are too impatient, and not willing to walk through the fire to get to the other side.

What does make people better? What helps people heal their wounds, and gather strength? How should people approach the matter of feeling *good*? Rather than try to tackle the aloof concept of happiness, perhaps the problem can be broken down into smaller, measurable, chunks. There is an endless array of life experiences that people try to understand and put words to. For instance, the concept of change, of renewal and strength after overcoming adversity and challenge, is referred to by various psychologists as posttraumatic growth.

Posttraumatic growth is the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. It is manifested in a variety of ways, including an increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal

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relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life. (Tedeschi, 2004, p. 1)

There is some evidence to support this notion, especially in relation to trauma. Dekel, Mandl and Solomon (2010) say, “Over the past decade, an abundance of studies have documented PTG after various traumatic events and similar forms of growth in the face of adversity, for example, benefit finding and adversity-activated development” (p. 241).

Each individual is complex and unique, with an array of life experiences that make each person who they are. In addition to PTG, it is important for people to examine whether “positive thinking” is always the best default answer to our problems. It is difficult to argue that being optimistic can ever be wrong, or to find evidence to prove that it may not always be the optimal approach. Nevertheless, at least some authors have expressed skepticism about this. For instance, for people with anxiety, one study reported that “the recommendation to look at the bright side is counterproductive for people who are very anxious. The induction of a positive mood deteriorates their performance and satisfaction. For them a strategy that is called defensive pessimism yields better results” (Norem, 2001). Only a small amount of research has ever explored on this topic, and more data on the concept of defensive pessimism is needed. However, this study raises the possibility of diversity within the positivity movement. According to Bergsma (2007):

Defensively pessimistic individuals set themselves unrealistic low targets and devote considerable time to all the possible outcomes they can imagine for a given situation. The result is twofold: On the one hand they no longer have to fear that they will mess up, because this is what could be expected; the other result is an increase in motivation. They

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know what might happen. The end result is a good performance, which would have been threatened by imposed optimism. (p. 350)

Each person has their own coping mechanisms. For some people, realistic risk/benefit analysis may feel safer than “hoping for the best.” Perhaps the process of imagining multiple outcomes helps some people to prepare emotionally and logistically for a variety of outcomes, and for whatever reason, doing so makes them feel better. Whether this can be supported with scientific evidence or not remains to be seen. Whatever the case, when discussing the merits of positive thinking, it is wise to stay open to, and be sensitive to any relevant mental health issues and individual coping styles. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that “sometimes cultural change may be necessary instead of individual change” (Bergsma, 2007, p. 355).

Bring on the Bad Vibes

Some people may need to imagine the worst-case scenario at least briefly in order to calm down and ground themselves. It may be useful for a person to sit with their uncomfortable feelings long enough to be able to put a name to them. At times, it may be valuable for a person to verbally acknowledge their feelings – to say, “I feel angry,” or, “I feel hurt.” People have feelings, and they often need to talk about them.

In the words of J. K. Rowling’s fictional character named Professor Albus Dumbledore: “Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic.” There may well be some scientific explanations for that burning need many people have to *talk*. “Recent neuroimaging research has begun to offer insight into a possible neurocognitive mechanism by which putting feelings into words may alleviate negative emotional responses” (Lieberman, Eisenberger, Crockett, Tom, Pfeifer & Way, 2007, p. 421). Words themselves can have therapeutic benefits. “A number of studies of affect labeling have demonstrated that

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linguistic processing of the emotional aspects of an emotional image produces less amygdala activity than perceptual processing of the emotional aspects of the same image” (Lieberman et al., p. 421). The implication that words can affect activity in the amygdala, the brain region that processes fear, is enormous. Words can be beneficial. Words have the power to heal. However, this process entails identifying and naming negative feelings. It follows then, that negative feelings, which are inevitable, can be beneficial for health and well-being. Perhaps, in at least some circumstances, “good vibes only,” is not the best approach. Sometimes, when people are upset, they need to *say* so. At times when people are upset with each other, they need to be what some would describe as “negative”. As Lieberman et al. puts it, “putting negative feelings into words can help regulate negative experience, a process that may ultimately contribute to better mental and physical health” (p. 421).

So how are people to know when it is best for them to “think positively,” and when it might be better to accept and explore negative feelings? Perhaps part of the problem lies in the labeling of certain feelings as either “bad” or “good.” Truth is often more of a grey area. One group of neuroscientists have made this claim:

If you and I derive similar pleasure from sipping fine wine or watching the sun set, our results suggest it is because we share similar fine-grained patterns of activity in the orbitofrontal cortex. This is a relatively innocent remark when it is fine wine or sunsets that are at stake. But when profound experiences of love or artistic beauty are rendered equivalent to baser experiences, such as drug taking or shopping, the claim that all pleasures are computed in the orbitofrontal cortex in the same way becomes problematic. (as cited by Davies, 2016, p. 21)

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Quality and individual taste matters. Some people love white fences, others love with fences with graffiti. Of course, there are some aspects of our brains and the thirst for pleasure that are fairly common and apply to all, such as enjoyment of food, sex, and other primal rewards. It is well established that “the economic mechanics of the mind appeared to come down to a single brain chemical: dopamine” (Davies, 2016, p. 66). Much of this research comes from the testing of rats and their behavior with various stimulus. People, like rats, crave rewards. “The notion of a neurological ‘reward system’ first appeared in the 1950s, as scientists began to probe the brains of rats to see how they altered their behavior in pursuit of pleasure” (Davies, p. 66). Despite this research being groundbreaking and extremely helpful in understanding human behaviors, it is not the full picture of human motivations, nor indicative of what produces lasting fulfillment. Acquiring food when hungry will not be the same nuanced and rich experience as achieving a goal to compete in the Olympics, raising a child, writing a novel, or falling in love. When we talk about well-being, these vast distinctions between momentary pleasure and deeper feelings of peace, meaning, and fulfillment, are important to acknowledge. A rat alone in a cage will press the lever over and over to artificially stimulate the pleasure centers of its brain until it dies. Humans, ideally, are more advanced beings.

Oprah Winfrey may have a point when she says, “speak your truth.” Human beings are complex, as are the concepts of truth and reality. Our personal perceptions about others, and about ourselves, are considerably more fluid than scientific facts about changing global temperatures and rising sea levels, or rats and dopamine activation. Moreover, our stress response, our fight or flight system, is connected to how we *perceive* our interactions, and potential threats. In this sense, “speaking our truth” really does matter. Part of these perceived

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threats involve social stimuli, in which the amygdala, the main fear center of the brain, is involved. Taylor Burkland, Eisenberger, Hilmert, and Liebermana, (2008) say this:

Previous research has shown that the amygdala is involved in processing fear- or threat-related information, such as threatening facial expressions. The amygdala is also involved in fear conditioning. Additionally, amygdala hyperreactivity has been reported in people who are particularly sensitive to social threats (p. 198).

It makes sense that humans have evolved to pay attention to social threats. The actions of other people can help a person or harm a person. Sometimes these threats can be clear, as when someone is pursuing you, and at other times it can be subtler, as when someone is manipulating you, or lying to you. Although the human ability to identify lies is far from perfect, the human brain does seem to be quite sensitive when detecting falsities when communicating with others. There are many microexpressions and dishonest interactions that the brain can identify that would not necessarily qualify as lying.

Smiling is an example of when the positivity movement can lead people astray. Most people have all been uncomfortable in front of a camera at some point, posing with a group, when the photographer instructs them to “smile!” What could be wrong with that? “The physical practice of smiling has been shown to accelerate recovery from illness. The experience of seeing smiling faces has been shown to lower aggression” (Davies, 2016, p. 36). On the surface, it seems that the amygdala would enjoy seeing smiling face of another person and would perceive it as situation of reduced threat. However, as is so often the case, when this is examined more closely, a deeper truth becomes apparent. The human brain is skilled at detecting when other people are wearing fake smiles. “Experiments show that ‘real’ smiles achieve different emotional and behavioral responses from ‘social’ smiles” (Davies, 2016, p.36). The implications of this are

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great, and this once more leads us to question the social pressure to constantly be positive. If the subconscious minds of people can detect a fake smile, what is the point? Is anything of genuine value actually created by all this unsuccessful deception? Perhaps it would be more productive to work towards creating a world that elicits meaningful social interaction, where ‘real’ smiles are all that we need?

Whatever the case, such deceit does not appear to be accomplishing anything worthwhile. A recent study on deception cues includes this statement: “Previous work consistently demonstrated that lying is cognitively and emotionally taxing. Research shows that brain areas associated with cognitive processes such as self- and other monitoring, working memory, and executive control, are more active when lying compared to telling the truth” (Ströfer, Noordzij, Ufkes, and Giebels, 2015, p. 2). This, in turn, affects the sympathetic nervous system, and contributes to stress levels. It is not to say that everyone who fakes a smile is “lying” per se, or to discount the subtle discrepancies between outright lying, misleading, or concealing, but it does call into question the very nature of dishonesty. Consider for example, the case of a woman who is debating leaving a verbally abusive partner but instead forces herself to “think positively.” If she followed this advice, perhaps her response might include thoughts such as, “I need to change,” “everything happens for a reason,” or “love conquers all.” If the woman is feeling pain, but relieves herself of those feelings in an attempt to be positive, wherein, exactly, lies the deceit? It could be argued that all such attempts to artificially create a sense of positivity ultimately amounts to little more than self-deception. What is all this enforced self-deception doing to our nervous systems and our ability to self-regulate?

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Summary

The internet, alternative facts, an over emphasis on celebrity culture, and the ambiguity of “speaking your truth,” has contributed to a society in which pseudoscientific claims are rampant. These claims are utilized in the positivity movement to sell ineffective products, including useless medicines, which can have serious consequences. In other cases, people seem to be persuaded to paying for the placebo effect, or spiritually bypassing. Like a rat in a cage pressing a lever repeatedly in order to receive drugs, when people chase quick and easy “feel good” solutions to the symptoms of deeper societal problems and repressed personal traumas, perhaps they are at risk of continuing to press the lever indefinitely, without ever doing the real work required to grow and change.

Perhaps it would be better if people were instead encouraged to more directly engage with the world around them. When people become polarized and reside within their safety bubbles, they are not exposed to other ways of thinking, and are at risk of losing touch with the truth. If we unfollow our group leader, how do we make intelligent decisions if we do not know how to respectfully disagree, listen to other ideas, and debate issues? We have seen the dangers of groupthink, polarized groups, and unchallenged authority play out over and over again throughout history, and it does not bode well. Our democracy and our education system are sacred, if anything, because of the commitment to critical thinking, and instilling that tool in new generations is crucial. Without it, I fear for the worst. We are not perfect, but the closer we can get to logic and scientifically supported truths, as free of human error as possible, the better.

When we wonder who to trust, and what to believe, the answer is not finite, or simple. We should not turn to Oprah, nor should we turn to Donald Trump. At times, we will not have an answer, and the search will continue. However, we may want to keep in mind that if a product

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costs money, we ought to consider who it is benefiting before we make a purchase. Furthermore, the possibility of the placebo effect ought to be considered before we reach for our wallets. Thirdly, when we lie to ourselves, it is *us* who pays the price. Happiness and well-being take a great deal of hard work, and life cannot be authentically lived without experiencing and acknowledging pain.

Conclusion

“Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.” —

- Mark Twain

Each of us has a shadow side, and it is with us always. “The term *shadow* refers to that part of the personality which has been repressed for the sake of the ego ideal. Since everything unconscious is projected, we encounter the shadow in projection—in our view of ‘the other fellow.’” (Abrams & Zweig, 1991, p. 12). The shadow self is a part of us, and it does not go away just because we turn our heads and refuse to acknowledge it. This extends to our collective unconscious as a global community. As Carl Jung once said, “one does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular” (as cited in Abrams & Zweig, p. 4). The best we can do is stare it right in the face, accept it, understand it, and integrate it into our consciousness. I wonder about our wellness culture and its fixation on health, and although I acknowledge the obvious benefits of health and longevity, I cannot help but wonder if an unexamined fear of death lurks?

When we ignore the shadow sides of ourselves, and of society, they always seem to surface anyway. We can see an example of this pattern in the recent chaos that has followed the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. For example, racism is alive

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and well in America, as we see with the rise of neo-Nazis, police brutality, and the outrageous deportation policies in the daily news. In addition, the misogynistic character of our patriarchal society has made itself seen in a new light. Such blatant manifestations of this can be seen in the treatment of Hillary Clinton during the presidential debates, as Donald Trump followed her around on stage, and encroached on her physical space. It is also evident in the derogatory way she was spoken about in the media and called a “nasty woman.” It is even more clear in the comments Donald Trump flippantly made about his own history of sexually assaulting women. It can also be observed in the increasing number of accusations of sexual assault through the #metoo online movement. All of these examples make it virtually impossible to deny the intensely misogyny inherent in our culture.

Perhaps we are realizing that for most people, the “American dream” has been just that all along, a dream. The classic 1950s photograph of a smiling, successful family of four with a house and two vehicles is an illusion for most if not all. The shadow side of that image is the treatment of women within some of those homes, and the treatment of non-Caucasian people in other neighborhoods throughout America. As we now see, even with the passage of time, the shadows have not disappeared. They were festering there all along and have surfaced once again and demanded our attention with a renewed sense of urgency. As stated by Will Davies (2016):

despite the best efforts of positive psychologists, disempowerment occurs as an effect of social, political and economic institutions and strategies, not of neural or behavioural errors. To deny this is to exacerbate the problem for which happiness science claims to be the solution (p. 250).

It follows that although positive psychology has its uses, it may be time to reign it in, or at least examine it from another angle. Human suffering is inevitable, and although we strive to

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minimize it, pain and discomfort is often necessary for the experience of growth. Grief is a process we work through over time. Some types of pain have the potential to stimulate growth, wisdom, and resiliency, and in this sense, they are sacred. If we want to avoid slaying future dragons, our shadow sides need to be seen and acknowledged. Constantly pressuring ourselves and others to “think positively” will not help us take action and address oppression. Refusing to acknowledge experiences that might feel uncomfortable or painful in the short term, or that might lead to giving up some of our space at the table to make room for others, will not make the problems go away, and does not work towards a better society for all.

Leslie Jamison (2018), in her memoir of addiction, elegantly states, “I was born into late capitalism, an economic system that sold me on the notion that I was insufficient so it could sell me on the notion that consumption was the answer to my insufficiency” (p. 155). I question whether this economic system is any different when we throw in some “good vibes” t-shirts and \$80 healing crystals. If that which we do not bring to consciousness appears in our lives as fate, I wonder where our Western culture is headed. Those in positions of economic power do not get to bypass the responsibility we all share, to face uncomfortable truths, and to change. What once was the positivity movement in psychology, has become so entwined with neoliberalism and Western Capitalism that it has led us astray. How do we move forward? In the words of Robert Frost, “the only way out is through.”

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