**Critiques and Criticisms of Positive Psychology**

Is Positive Psychology a Science or Just Snake Oil?

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**1. Introduction**

What makes a “science”, a science? Karl Popper (1963) famously wrote that science is a systematic, organized and curated body of knowledge that helps to explain how or why things happen in the real world through a process of observation, experimentation and logical analysis. This process involves using rigorous methodologies to help us understand phenomena, to formulate ‘testable’ hypotheses and to develop theories based on an accumulation of evidence. However, science doesn’t just progress through the incremental accumulation of confirmatory evidence, but rather through a process of critical examination, scrutiny and continuous refinement (Van Zyl, 2025). In other words, a science is a set of well researched principles that helps us explain reality, but it thrives on scrutiny. The most robust scientific disciplines are those that have weathered the storm of sustained criticism and emerged stronger through rigorous debates and honest self-reflection.

Positive psychology, one of the fastest growing sub-disciplines of psychology, is no different (Wang et al., 2023). The field that began with a call from Martin Seligman in 1998 for a new focus on understanding human strengths, virtues and what makes life worth living, has been subjected to a significant amount of critique and criticism from both inside (e.g. Diener, 2012; Van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022; Wong & Roy, 2018) and outside the discipline (e.g. Friedman & Brown, 2018) . Over the last two decades, critics have raised various concerns about positive psychology ranging from its philosophical foundations, the coherence in its theories and the methodologies it favours to its western-centric focus and its potential to cause harm (Van Zyl et al., 2024). These criticisms are amplified by broader credibility issues facing the broader discipline of psychology due to replication failures, academic fraud, and questionable research practices (Efendic & Van Zyl, 2019). Ignoring these critiques not only risk stifling scientific progress and damage its credibility, but could also potentially harm our patients, clients, and research participants. It’s therefore imperative to develop a thorough understanding of the issues facing positive psychology, so that we can build out a credible, ethical and reliable science of wellbeing.

As such, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the systematic critiques levelled against positive psychology, focusing on the broad categories of critiques identified by recent systematic reviews that collated decades worth of scholarly concerns (c.f. Van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022; Van Zyl et al., 2024; Van Zyl et al., 2025). The central questions guiding our exploration include:

1. How has positive psychological research developed over the last two decades?
2. What are the fundamental criticisms facing positive psychology? And
3. How do these critiques challenge the field's theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and practical applications?
4. What are the solutions to the problems facing positive psychology?

Gaining a thorough understanding of these critiques is not merely an academic exercise, but rather an essential part of the field's continued development. For students entering the field, developing critical thinking skills about positive psychology's strengths and limitations is essential for ethical practice and to help make a meaningful contribution to the discipline. For practitioners, this critical examination can help inform the development of more effective and culturally sensitive interventions and facilitate more ethical practice guidelines. For researchers, engaging with these critiques opens up new possibilities for research with more rigorous methodologies and innovative approaches that contribute to a more robust and scientifically sound discipline.

**2. A Brief History of Positive Psychological Research: The Three-Waves**

In 2021, Tim Lomas and colleagues (2021) argued that positive psychology is entering into its third wave of development as a sub-discipline of psychology. They used the metaphor that positive psychological research has gone through three distinct “waves” (or phases/stages) of research. Each wave evolved out of the limitations of the one that preceded it and attempts to address these limitations through expanding its scope and improving its methods. A summary of the core elements of each phase is presented in Table 1.

***Tabel 1***. Three Waves of Positive Psychology Research

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| Factor | Wave 1: Positivity | Wave 2: Polarity | Wave 3: Complexity |
| **Time Span** | 1998-2010  (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) | 2011-2020  (Wong, 2011) | 2021-Present  (Lomas et al., 2021) |
| **Focus** | Defining positive states, -traits, -behaviours and -institutions | Embrace positivity in adversity | Embrace complexity, context, and individuality |
| **Role of Suffering** | Negatively affects wellbeing | Suffering is essential for happiness and wellbeing | Suffering and flourishing are context-dependent processes |
| **Character Strengths** | Defining signature strengths | Developing character through adversity | Dynamic, evolving capacities shaped by environment and identity which can have both positive- and negative consequences |
| **View of Human Nature** | Binary lens: Focus on the Positive | Dialectical lens: Finding balance between opposites (positives/negatives) | Contextual, relational, and systemic |
| **Unit of Analysis** | Individualistic focus | Universal and cultural focus | Person-in-context (idiographic and systemic focus) |
| **Level of Analysis** | Cognitive, behavioural, and affective mechanisms | Multiple levels and holistic | Multimodal, ecological, and intraindividual |
| **Methodology** | Favour experiments and quantification | Pluralistic and value phenomenological perspective | Narrative, computational, idiographic, N-of-1, implicit and participatory methods |

The first wave (1998 to 2010) of positive psychology focused on establishing the foundations (or the different pillars) of the field. This wave emerged due to a perceived imbalance in research on understanding the drivers of illbeing vs what constitutes optimal development and wellbeing (Seligman, 2011). Here, the focus was on understanding what constitutes positive experiences (e.g. joy, happiness, flow), what are positive individual traits (e.g. character strengths, talents and virtues), and how positive institutions (e.g. families, schools, organizations) can foster wellbeing. This wave brought about important insights about what constitutes wellbeing, what its drivers are and how we could potentially develop it in people. Yet despite its progress, the field was heavily criticized for being built on a poor theoretical foundation, that it created a fictitious divide between “positive” and general psychology to justify its reason for existence and that it brings nothing new to the table. One of the most persistent critiques in this wave was that it was using a superficial definition of what’s considered “positive” and that it neglected the importance of “negative” experience/emotions (e.g. suffering). Further, critics questioned the fields universalist assumptions and argued that it’s blind to context. They also highlighted that positive psychological research tends to over-exaggerate its findings, that its interventions don’t “work” and that it adopted a very superficial view of human nature.

In response, a second wave (2011-2020) of academic research was born out of the first wave’s over idealistic and culturally narrow views. Here the academic discourse shifted to try and understand wellbeing from a more dialectic view where the dynamic nature of “positive” and “negative” experiences took centre stage (Wong, 2011). In this wave, research started to show that not all positive aspects of human nature leads to positive outcomes (e.g. strengths-over use could negatively impact wellbeing) and that not all negative experiences lead to negative outcomes (e.g. trauma could lead to post traumatic growth). This wave also brought about calls for more indigenous and eastern approaches to positive psychology and helped develop the understanding that strengths develop through adversity and that suffering is a core driver for meaning. Positive psychological research also started to adopt more sophisticated research methods, and we saw a rise in more phenomenological work being published (Wang et al., 2023). Yet, this wave of research was criticized for its strong focus on the individual, its inability to capture group level experiences, for viewing context as something to be controlled for (rather than a causal factor of wellbeing), and for its strong empiricist approach to measurement and intervention design.

As such, the groundwork for the third wave (2021-Present) of positive psychological research was laid. Lomas et al. (2021) aimed to address these critiques by calling for a broadening of the field beyond the individual and for it to include more systems approaches to wellbeing, to develop more context/culture specific approach to wellbeing, to use more robust methodologies and to work more interdisciplinary. Specifically, this new wave of research aimed to position wellbeing as not just a function of what’s going on inside the individual, but to emphasize the importance of the dynamic interplay between individuals, their work environments, communities, and broader societal systems has on their wellbeing (Van Zyl, Dik et al., 2024). The calls for more contextual approaches also highlighted the importance of how ecological factors (e.g. climate, culture, socio-political condition) shape wellbeing. These systems-informed perspectives aimed to address the critiques related to the reductionist, linear cause-and-effect models of wellbeing that dominated the earlier waves by advocating for new frameworks that reflect complexity, non-linearity, and self-organization. Here, wellbeing is seen as emerging from a dynamic interaction between nested systems, with individuals embedded in multi-layered social, cultural, and environmental contexts.

Cultural and linguistic critiques also take centre stage in this wave. Lomas et al. (2021) called for science to move away from its Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) bias in research and practice. Here, a greater emphasis to be placed on collectivist, cross-cultural, and indigenous knowledge systems to be developed that promotes the decolonization of positive psychology (Van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022; Van Zyl, 2025).

Ethical concerns are also more pronounced in this third wave. Given the challenges in the application of positive psychological tools and techniques in practice, Lomas et al. (2021) also called for more professional regulation, standardization, and culturally competent training.

Methodologically, this wave also encouraged research to adopt more qualitative and mixed method approaches in order to not only describe, predict and explain, but to understand positive psychological phenomena. Further, they called for research to move beyond traditional self-report measures and toward more implicit and projective assessment approaches that can access unconscious processes and provide a more nuanced view of psychological dynamics. Together, these developments mark a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive, systemic, and ecologically valid science of human flourishing.

Yet despite Lomas et al.'s (2021) ambitious calls to broaden the scope and expand the methods of positive psychology, Van Zyl et al. (2024) argued that these recommendations alone were insufficient to address the field's fundamental challenges. Van Zyl and Rothmann (2022) contended that while the third wave proposals represented important steps forward, they only partially addressed what were essentially superficial manifestations of deeper, more systemic problems within positive psychology. They argued that meaningful progress requires a more comprehensive understanding of the actual scope and nature of criticisms facing the field before effective solutions could be designed and implemented.

**3. The Current Critiques and Criticisms of Positive Psychology**

To achieve this comprehensive understanding of what’s needed to take the field forward, Van Zyl et al. (2024) conducted a systematic literature review that examined the full spectrum of critiques and criticisms directed at positive psychology during its second wave. Their analysis revealed that the challenges facing the field were far more extensive and interconnected than Lomas et al. (2021) and others have previously recognized. Through their systematic review, Van Zyl et al. (2024) identified 117 distinct criticisms that could be organized into six broad categories of concern (c.f. Figure 1).

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***Figure 1***. The Six Main Criticisms and Critiques of Positive Psychology

In the following sections we will examine the six broad categories of critiques as found by Van Zyl et al.’s (2024). Specifically, we will discuss how critics of positive psychology thought:

1. Positive psychology lacks proper theorizing and has poor conceptual thinking
2. Positive psychology poorly operationalizes and measures its core constructs and favours poor research methodologies to investigate its claims
3. Positive psychology is a pseudoscience that shows poor replicability and lacks robust evidence for its claims
4. Positive psychology lacks novelty and self-isolates itself from mainstream psychology
5. Positive psychology is a decontextualized neo-liberal ideolog that causes harm
6. Positive psychology is a capitalistic venture aiming to exploit wellbeing.

**3.1 Criticism 1: Improper theorizing and conceptual thinking**

If we think of positive psychology as a grand mansion that was designed to inspire hope, celebrate human strengths and help offer people shelter from psychological storms, then “theory” would be the foundation on which its built. A strong theoretical foundation helps to anchor the walls (i.e. set the boundaries of the discipline), support the weight of new ideas (i.e. provide criteria for core-concepts and how to build out the discipline) and helps to ensure that the structure can stand the test of time (i.e. clear roadmap of what’s needed to take the discipline forward).

Yet, many critics have argued that much positive psychology has been built on shaky theoretical grounds. That it has significant structural weaknesses ranging from unclear philosophical foundations, inconsistent definitions, and loosely connected frameworks to a naïve understanding of human nature and poor understanding of positive institutions. According to Van Zyl (2024), these issues can be summarized in nine broad criticisms, and we will examine the ways in which these undermine the stability, coherence, and long-term growth of the field Table 2 provides a high-level summary of these nine criticisms.

***Table 2***. Positive Psychology Lacks Proper Theorizing and Conceptual Thinking

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| Criticism | Brief Description |
| **Lacks metatheory** | There is no shared “big picture” framework that explains what positive psychology is based on, what it aims to achieve, or how its theories should be built and tested. |
| **Poorly conceptualized virtues** | Virtues are treated like simple measurable traits or sets of ‘preferred behaviours’ rather than moral qualities that require thought, judgment, and alignment with ethical values. |
| **No clear definition of “positive”** | There is no agreement on what “positive” actually means. In some cases, its defined by the lack of negative experiences, and in others it’s viewed as feeling good, acting morally, or functioning well. This inconsistency creates ambiguity in theory development and measurement. |
| **Positive versus negative divide** | The field assumes that positive experiences are always *good* (i.e. beneficial) and negative experiences always *harmful* (i.e. destructive). Yet, it ignores the complexity of human experiences where challenging experiences or “negative” emotions can be beneficial to personal growth and development. |
| **Differences and inconsistencies in concepts/theories** | Key concepts like “strengths” or “resilience” are defined differently by different researchers. This creates confusion and hampers the field from building a clear, and shared knowledge base. |
| **Jingle and jangle fallacy** | Different concepts or approaches within a discipline are erroneously assumed to be the same because of a shared name or label (*Jingle Fallacy*: e.g. flourishing).  Different terms are used to describe the same construct or where old psychological constructs are either repackaged in new ‘jackets’ with new labels to seem novel or new (*Jangle Fallacy*: e.g. grit, PSYCAP) |
| **Level of abstraction** | Findings from one level (e.g., individual) are inappropriately generalised to higher levels (e.g., organisations or societies) without sufficient evidence. |
| **Lack of theoretical grounding of interventions** | Many positive psychological interventions aren’t based on a clear theory about how (i.e. empirical models) or why (i.e. change models) they should work which makes them hard test, improve, or adapt. |
| **Limited View on Positive institutions** | Although the field says it also studies positive institutions (e.g. schools, workplaces, and communities) it mostly focuses on individuals and pays too little attention to how institutions shape wellbeing. |

First, critics argue that positive psychology *lacks a unifying meta-theoretical perspective* that underpins the philosophy of its science. Several critics contend that positive psychology lacks a clear set of ideas on what constitutes a “positive” psychology, and how positive psychological phenomena should be conceptualized, researched and approached. In other words, positive psychology doesn’t have a clear set of philosophical principles that clarifies (a) the purpose of positive theories, (b) the types of theories/methods required to test these theories, (c) no criteria for theory development/evaluation and (d) no articulated views on how to address broad paradigmatic problems in theory building and evaluation. Without this solid theoretical foundation, positive psychologists risk working from a convoluted view of human nature that’s driven by a self-serving ideological bias. A stronger metatheory would clarify what constitutes the good life’, which assumptions about persons and contexts are warranted, and how theories should be developed, compared or refined over time.

The second main concern is that positive psychology has a *poor conceptualisation of human virtues*. Virtues are a core element of positive psychology and is heavily inspired by Aristotelian virtue ethics. Within Aristotelian philosophy, virtues are seen as broad, overarching qualities that represent human excellence and guides moral action. Virtues are not just desirable individual traits but are rather deeply embedded dispositions which are developed through deliberate practice and orients people toward ways to achieve and live a good life. Aristotle’s framework positions virtues as the foundation of good character which requires both moral intent and the wisdom to apply them appropriately across contexts.

However, in positive psychology, virtues are frequently stripped of this philosophical depth. They are often operationalized as being nothing more than measurable traits or sets of “preferred behaviours” which are measured on continuous scales. This action-orientated view sees virtues as being neutral experiences, whereby the presence of such can be classified on continuous scale ranging from low to high. However, virtues are not neutral skills, but qualities that are inherently tied to conceptions of what society values as being “good”. But in positive psychology, these virtues are often presented without the deep reflective or ethical dimensions which are central to the classical Aristotelian virtue ethics. For example, courage in an Aristotelian sense involves not only acting fearlessly but doing so in pursuit of moral good. Yet, in positive psychology courage is measured as simply the willingness to take risks, regardless of ethical outcomes. This reductionist approach transforms virtues into value-neutral competencies.

The problem is further compounded by the absence of a coherent framework for virtue ethics within the field. Without this anchor, positive psychology’s conceptualization of virtues risks becoming ideologically biased or culturally narrow through what researchers consider being “preferred” rather than those that are universally valued or defensible as indicators of moral excellence. In short, positive psychology’s treatment of virtues stands in direct contrast to Aristotelian philosophy by replacing a rich, normative account of what constitutes human excellence with a thin, decontextualised set of behavioural tendencies.

The third concern is that there is a lack of a clear and consistent definition of what the term *positive* in positive psychology actually means. From its inception, the field positioned itself as the study of “positive” human functioning, “positive” experiences, and “positive” institutions. Yet there has been little agreement on how to delineate the positive from the negative, or even whether such a binary classification is even valid. In many cases, critics argued that what positive psychology constitutes as being “positive” is only defined by the absence of “negative” experiences. This approach risks reducing the concept to a default category: if something is not bad, it is automatically assumed to be good. In other studies, positive experiences are classified as those that make one feel good, act morally, or function well. Both these approaches are considered by critics as being conceptually weak as it fails to capture the complexity of experiences required for human flourishing. This level of ambiguity not only blurs the line between what is considered pleasant, what is morally praiseworthy, and what is adaptively functional, but it also complicates its construct validity. In other words, if the meaning of the word “positive” shifts between studies, it creates challenges in how to effectively measure positive qualities, creates differences in opinions on what may count as positive characteristics, be counterproductive in our attempts to build theory and inhibits our abilities to design/evaluate effective interventions.

A fourth issue pertains to positive psychology’s tendency to draw a sharp *artificial line between what is labelled “positive” and what is labelled “negative*”. This split assumes that positive experiences, emotions, and traits are inherently adaptive, while negative ones are inherently maladaptive. This assumption oversimplifies the complexity of humans’ rich emotional life and is thus grounded in what van Zyl et al. (2024) describe as a convoluted understanding of emotions. Rather than recognizing that emotions are context-dependent signals, the field assumes that positive experiences are always *good* (i.e. beneficial) and negative experiences always *harmful* (i.e. destructive). This binary type of framing is not only conceptually problematic but also doesn’t reflect the real-world dynamic role emotions play in our lives. Emotions that are traditionally categorized as being “negative” (like anger, sadness, fear, or guilt) can have be important drivers for change or be facilitators for personal growth when experienced and expressed appropriately. For example, anger can mobilize action against injustice, fear can signal danger and prompt precaution, and sadness can help deepen empathy and strengthen social bonds. As discussed later in this book, trauma could also lead to post-traumatic growth and help us find meaning in suffering. In contrast, positive states, traits, or behaviours can also have negative consequences when used excessively or in the wrong context. For example, optimism is generally associated with hope and persistence, but unrealistic optimism can lead individuals to underestimate risks, ignore warning signs, or persist in failing strategies long after it would be wiser to stop. These examples illustrate that the value of a trait or emotion is not fixed but depends on its intensity, timing, and the demands of the situation. By ignoring the dynamic nature of these experiences, positive psychology risks promoting a one-sided view of wellbeing that favours the cultivation of positive feelings at the expense of engaging with and learning from difficult ones.

A fifth challenge for positive psychology lies in the *differences and inconsistencies in how its core concepts and theoretical frameworks are constructed*. Banicki (2014) offers a clear example in his critique of the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues. The VIA framework claims to be rooted in virtue ethics and to rest on two key assumptions: (1) that individual virtues are substantially interconnected that reflects the classical thesis of the unity of virtue, and (2) that there is a constitutive link between human virtue and happiness. However, as Banicki (2014) points out, these assumptions are not only absent from the VIA framework but are directly contradicted by it. In practice, the VIA treats individual virtues and character strengths as independent variables and officially endorses the separation of facts from values which is vastly different from the Aristotelian virtue ethics on which its built. These inconsistencies are not just limited to the VIA framework. Across the field, there are significant differences in how foundational factors like strengths, wellbeing, flourishing, and happiness are defined. These are functional concepts in positive psychology and they form the basis for many theories, measuring instruments and interventions, yet there is still little consensus as to their precise meaning (Held, 2018). As a result, different researchers may use the same term to refer to different phenomena, making it difficult to compare studies, build cumulative evidence, or develop a coherent body of theory. Without greater agreement on the conceptual foundations of these key ideas, positive psychology risks becoming a collection of loosely connected subfields rather than a unified scientific discipline. Tightening definitions, specifying boundary conditions, and testing rival explanations would reduce noise and help the field accumulate knowledge rather than reinvent labels (Van Zyl, 2025).

The sixth most common critique is that positive psychology is also rife with what is known as the *jingle–jangle fallacy*. The *jingle fallacy* happens when researchers assume that two different concepts are the same simply because they share the same name. A good example is the term flourishing. In the literature, at least three different models of flourishing exist: Diener’s (2012) wellbeing model, Keyes’ (2002) mental health continuum, and Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model. These models differ in important ways: they emphasise different components, use different measures, and make different assumptions about what leads to a good life. Yet, in practice, the term flourishing is often used as if it refers to a single agreed concept. This leads to mistakes such as using findings from one model to support arguments for another, even though they are not directly comparable.

In contrast, the *jangle fallacy* presents a different kind of problem. It occurs when different names are used for what is essentially the same construct, or when old concepts are repackaged to look like something new. For example, *joy* is sometimes treated as distinct from *pleasure* or *positive affect*, even though the measures used to assess them overlap heavily. Another example is *psychological capital*, which is presented as a novel concept but is essentially a combination of existing research on hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy. Both the jingle and jangle fallacies are often the result of vague or poorly defined constructs and have serious implications for the development of a science. They create unnecessary confusion in the literature, make it harder to compare studies, and risk inflating the apparent novelty of research when in fact the ideas are not new at all. For a relatively new field that’s aiming to build a cumulative science, avoiding these conceptual mix-ups is essential.

The seventh problem pertains to *positive psychology’s level of abstraction*. This refers to its tendency to take findings from one level (usually the individual level) and then cascading such upwards to higher levels (e.g. teams, organisations, or even entire societies) without sufficient evidence that the underlying processes work the same way at those levels. Instead of developing concepts and measures that are specific to the team, organisational, or societal level, researchers often combine or average the results of individual experiences and then label that as a group-level outcome. For example, if each member of a work team reports feeling highly engaged, those scores might be averaged to produce a number that is then described as *team-level engagement score*. But this assumes that “engagement” at the group level is simply the sum of the groups individual engagement score, which ignores the possibility that group dynamics, shared goals, leadership style, and interpersonal relationships might create a very different collective experience. In the same way, individual feelings of life satisfaction or happiness are sometimes taken as a direct measure of *wellbeing* at a societal level (Kristjánsson, 2012, 2013). Yet happiness is only one part of wellbeing, and focusing solely on it can overlook other important societal factors like as inequality, access to healthcare, education, or social justice. Without clear definitions and measures that are appropriate to each level of analysis, the field risks oversimplifying complex systems. What holds true for one person may not hold for a group or society, and assuming that it does can lead to flawed theories, inaccurate conclusions, and misguided interventions.

Critics argued that the eight most prevalent problem with positive psychology is that its *interventions have no theoretical grounding*. In other words, the activities, programmes, or strategies that aim to develop positive states, traits and behaviours are often not built on clearly defined empirical models (explaining how they work) or change models (why they work). Further, these interventions are seldomly informed by well-validated theories or robust empirical evidence from within the field. Without this grounding, interventions risk being based on appealing ideas rather than proven mechanisms. For example, an intervention might encourage people to write gratitude letters or identify their top character strengths, but if it does not clearly explain how these activities are expected to produce change and under what conditions they are most effective, and for whom they may or may not work, then it becomes difficult to know how or why the intervention worked (or didn’t work). This lack of clarity not only makes it challenging to adapt the intervention for different cultural contexts, target groups, or delivery methods but has a direct impact on its effectiveness. Without a clear theory to guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions, it is almost impossible to identify the active ingredients that make an intervention successful or to refine it when results are inconsistent. Over time, this undermines both the credibility of intervention research in positive psychology and the ability of the field to build a reliable evidence base for practical application.

Finally, despite *positive institutions* being a core element of the original definition of positive psychology, they have received far less attention than studies related to individual states/traits/behaviours (Vna Zyl, Dik et al., 2024). The field has devoted most of its research effort to studying *positive subjective experiences* (such as happiness, life satisfaction, and engagement) and *positive individual traits* (such as optimism, resilience, and strengths). In contrast, far less work has focused on understanding the structures, systems, and cultural contexts that help sustain wellbeing at a broader level (Diener, 2012). As Diener (2012) notes, this individual focus overlooks the crucial role of neighbourhoods, social groups, organisations, and governments in shaping opportunities for positive behaviour and flourishing. In other words, while individual choices and mindsets matter, they are significantly influenced by the environments in which people live and work. For example, a workplace with fair policies, supportive leadership, and a healthy organisational culture can enable employees to thrive, whereas a toxic environment can undermine even the most optimistic and resilient individuals. Further, as noted in the previous point, the limited studies on positive institutions tend to treat them as nothing more than the sum of individuals’ positive experiences which ignore the unique and complex dynamics that operate at the organisational or societal level. This reflects what van Zyl et al. (2024) describe as a *naive understanding* of positive institutions which tends to neglect the importance of structural factors such as resource distribution, social justice, governance, and cultural norms in the facilitation of wellbeing. Without a deeper conceptualisation of how institutions themselves contribute to, or hinder, collective wellbeing, the field risks missing opportunities to create systemic change and address the conditions that allow wellbeing to be sustained across populations.

Taken together, these critiques form a compelling argument that the field must invest more seriously in its conceptual development. Without clearer definitions, stronger theory, and more philosophically grounded constructs, positive psychology risks becoming a fragmented and internally inconsistent discipline. Further, these conceptual and theoretical gaps spill directly into how we measure and study positive phenomena. The next section turns to issues with measurement and methodology by examining how the operationalization of its concepts, research design, and analytic choices can either correct or compound the problems outlined here.

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| **Self-Reflection Questions**   1. Why is it important to have a clear meta-theoretical framework that underpins a discipline? 2. If positive psychology lacks a shared “big picture” framework, how might this affect the credibility and coherence of its research and interventions? 3. What problems could arise in practice if concepts like “flourishing” or “resilience” are defined differently by different researchers or practitioners? |

**3.2 Criticism 2: Issues with Measurements and Methodologies**

If the theories of positive psychology form the foundation of the field, then its measurements and methodologies are the tools and building plans we use to bring our vision to life. A strong building requires us to use well thought-out blueprints and reliable tools during construction, otherwise the structure will be unstable…. no matter how good the foundation might be. In the same way, even the most promising theoretical concepts in positive psychology can fail if they are poorly operationalized or measured with flawed instruments.

Critics argue that the field has several issues related to the ways in which it operationalizes its concepts and how it measures them, which is compounded by the methodologies it prefers to investigate its claims. Specifically, they highlight inconsistencies in its measurement practices, an overreliance on subjective self-report measures and careless methodological practices. This results in data that may be unreliable, results that are over inflated and instruments that aren’t representative of the constructs they claim to measure. The following concerns highlight how weaknesses in measurement and methodology can compromise the credibility and practical usefulness of positive psychology (c.f. Table 3).

***Table 3***. Positive Psychology Employs Poor Measurements and Methodologies

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| Criticism | Brief Description |
| **Problems with operationalisation and measurement** | Key ideas in positive psychology are not always clearly defined and are measured in a consistent way. This leads to confusion and different studies producing conflicting results. Most measures rely on people rating themselves in questionnaires, which can be biased, influenced by memory errors, and shaped by cultural norms. Many tools lack rigorous testing for validity and reliability, often being validated on a single sample without cross-validation or comprehensive checks. Because most items are worded positively, scores across different measures tend to be highly correlated, making it hard to tell constructs apart. |
| **Overemphasis on empiricism and positivistic approaches** | The field often focuses too narrowly on what can be measured, reducing complex human experiences to numbers and oversimplified answers. This rush to quantify can lead to quick conclusions, prescriptive ideas about how people should think or behave, and a tendency to describe rather than deeply understand phenomena. As a result, research risks prioritising rigid “scientific” proof over richer, more nuanced insights into human wellbeing. |
| **Poor research designs** | The majority of the studies in positive psychology employ quantitative, cross-sectional survey-based design which captures descriptive experiences at a single moment in time. These designs are sometimes used to suggest cause-and-effect relationships they cannot actually prove. Findings also tend to show high correlations between variables, raising questions about whether constructs are truly distinct. |
| **Lack of robust research approaches** | The field makes limited use of qualitative, mixed-method, or well-designed experimental studies. This narrow approach reduces opportunities to capture the depth, context, and complexity of human experiences, and limits the ability to validate findings across different methods. |

One of the most persistent *problems is how positive psychology chooses to operationalize and measure its core concepts*. Critics argue that the development of positive psychological assessment tools has been rather disorganized, with multiple instruments being developed that claims to measure the same construct, yet producing conflicting results (Bright et al., 2014; Cabanas, 2018; Coyne et al., 2010). For example, there are at least eight different psychometric instruments measuring grit with all measuring slight deviations or context specific versions of its core concepts (passion and perseverance). However, factorial validity tests show that there are around eleven different factorial models (e.g. unidimensional, two first order factorial model, three first order factorial models, bi factor models, and exploratory structural equation modelling versions of these) that could potentially fit the data, and the level of internal consistency is vastly different between different contexts (c.f. Van Zyl et al., 2022).

Critics also argue that there seems to be a disconnect between how positive psychological theories on wellbeing conceptualised vs. how they are how are measured and modelled (Van Zyl et al., 2024; Van Zyl, 2025). For example, Keyes’s (2002) dual continua model on mental health indicates that positive mental health (or wellbeing) is a function of a dynamic interplay between emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing, with combinations of certain “symptoms” resulting in a person being classified as flourishing, moderately mentally healthy or languishing. This is in direct contrast to the assumptions of classical confirmatory factor analytical models on which the factor structure of the Mental Health Continuum Short Form used to measure such is based (Van Zyl & Ten Klooster, 2022). This classical confirmatory factor analytical modelling approach assumes that each measured factor (emotional, psychological and social wellbeing) is considered a “pure” (i.e. a standalone) factor which is not influenced, nor affected by each other. Yet, these factors are not pure, nor do they function in isolation in the real world. For example, when we engage socially with our friends (social wellbeing) we also experience flow/engagement, and we feel pleasure, joy or happiness. These experiences cannot be neatly disentangled and measured separately from each other. Yet, the Mental Health Continuum positions each of the wellbeing factors as being distinct (albeit but related) experiences (Van Zyl & Ten Klooster, 2022). Therefore, traditional confirmatory factor analytical approaches are ill suited to capture the theoretical assumptions of the dual continua model as well as unable capture the reality of how these factors manifest in the real world.

Further, many of these measures are overly simplistic in their design and sometimes violate basic principles of proper psychological test design. For example, post-traumatic growth scales ask participants to recall their pre-crisis state, compare it to their current state, and attribute any changes to the crisis. As Coyne and Tennen (2010) note, this requires complex memory and judgment tasks that people are unlikely to perform accurately, making the results vulnerable to recall bias and inflated estimates. The problem is compounded by a heavy reliance on self-report measures, which detach concepts from their real-world, culturally specific contexts and reflect subjective perceptions that may not match people’s actual behaviour (Christopher, 2014; Qureshi & Evangelidou, 2018). Further, the use of objective measures to assess positive psychological phenomena is rare and not widely used. However, in the very few studies where these were deployed (e.g. neurological assessments), the relationship between subjective self-report measures and these objective assessments fail to converge (Coyne & Tennen, 2010; Diener, 2012).

Beyond these conceptual and methodological flaws, many positive psychological psychometric instruments are riddled with validity and reliability issues. Wong and Roy (2018) highlight that popular measures often produce inconsistent factor structures with varying ranges of internal consistency across studies. This undermines their predictive power and diagnostic abilities of these instruments. This is partly due to the field’s preference for employing “quick and dirty” development practices like validating a psychometric assessment measure on a single sample or failing to subject the assessment to a full range of concurrent and discriminant validity tests. Further, because most items in positive psychological assessments are positively phrased, they will naturally correlate highlight with other instruments measuring positive related experiences (multicollinearity) which makes it difficult to distinguish between different constructs (Thompson, 2018). Discriminant validity is also frequently quite poor. This suggests that some measures may be tapping into the same underlying dimensions. And as stated before, individual-level measures are often aggregated to represent a group-, organisational-, or societal-level experience (e.g. team engagement) which overlooks the unique qualities and dynamics which makes up collective experiences (Wong & Roy, 2018). Finally, many tools are criticised for being cultural bias, as they are typically developed in WEIRD contexts. These instruments may therefore not accurately reflect how a certain population group defines or experiences a given positive psychological factor like wellbeing (Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2012).

A second major criticism is *that positive psychology tends to lean too heavily on empiricism and positivistic approaches when it investigates phenomena*. Most empirical work in the field is heavily quantitative in nature and relies on predefined and standardised measurement tools to investigate its assumptions (Bright et al., 2014; Wong & Roy, 2018). While these approaches can generate useful insights to help describe reality and to help make predictions, they also tend to reduce complex human experiences (e.g. virtues, wellbeing) into small and measurable units. This reductionist way of framing tends to strip away much of the richness and context of these ideas. Breaking these complex human experiences into atomized “chunks” that are quantitatively measured, means we lose the ability to actually measure peoples real-world lived experiences. In other words, the fields inherent obsession with empiricism and reductionism, means that positive psychological instruments and models may not really reflect the lived experience capture and explain (Diener, 2012; Nelson & Slife, 2017).

This tendency has several unintended consequences. By focusing on what can be measured, the field risks “essentializing” its claims. In other words, when we present fixed, prescriptive ideas about what it means to be positive or what is required for living a good life, we start to overlook the diversity and complexity of real human lives (McDonald et al., 2021). These approaches also tend to favour the description of positive psychological phenomena over explanation or understanding why they exist. This implies that the field tends to prioritize knowledge about how factors relate but fails to explain why these relationships exist in the first place.

Critics also note that the field tends to Favor ‘advanced’ statistical methods when investigating its claims in the hope that the complexity of the analysis will shield its contributions from scrutiny or critique. When a field heavily prioritizes and values quantitative methods, it starts to treat its findings as infallible. There is thus very little room to question the limitations of the measures it uses, the assumptions of the analysis, or the broader contexts in which the research was conducted. This result in making rather prescriptive claims about what constitutes positive psychological phenomena or wellbeing without adequate attention being paid to how or why this exists in the first place (Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014; Held, 2018). This over-quantification tends to silence alternative perspectives on positive psychological phenomena and can ultimately narrow rather than expand the field’s understanding of human flourishing.

Another recurring criticism is that positive psychology *favours poor research designs*. Critics highlight that the majority of the studies in positive psychology employ cross-sectional, self-report survey-based research designs with small, convenience-based samples (Cabanas, 2018; Diener, 2012; Held, 2018). While these designs can reveal patterns of association between factors and can help us describe the presence of these phenomena in different contexts, they are not able to help us establish cause-and-effect relationships. Yet despite this limitation, the field often treats correlational findings as if they provide strong causal evidence for assumptions its testing thereby drawing stronger conclusions about findings than what the data can legitimately support (Kristjánsson, 2013). The limitations of these studies are also often only mentioned in passing in the recommendations and limitations sections of papers, thereby trivializing their importance and impact on how a reader should interpret the findings. Over time, this weakens the credibility of the field’s claims and makes it harder to build a robust, causally grounded science of wellbeing.

Finally, critics argue that positive psychology *fails to employ robust research approaches*. With its overly emphasised presence for empiricism, positive psychology tends to have a rather narrow view of what counts as “good science” by equating scientific rigour with advanced quantitative methods (Kristjánsson, 2010). This overemphasis on measurement and numerical data fosters the mistaken belief that only traditional quantitative approaches are needed to generate and advance knowledge. As a result, the field tends to deprioritise the value of qualitative research, mixed-method designs, and more innovative methodologies that can capture the richness and context of human experiences (Banicki, 2014; DeRobertis & Bland, 2021). In contrast, even within its strong quantitative focus, positive psychology rarely uses more robust designs (e.g. longitudinal studies, true experimental designs) that are essential for tracking changes over time, identifying causal relationships and testing assumptions (Held, 2018; Kristjánsson, 2010). Without these more diverse and rigorous approaches, the field risks producing findings that are not only limited in scope but also less able to inform interventions and policies that address the complexity of real-world wellbeing.

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| **Self-Reflection Questions**   1. What risks do we face when we base our interventions or policy decisions on measurement tools with poor levels of validity and reliability? 2. If you rely on a questionnaire that hasn’t been well-validated in your client’s culture or language, how might that affect your diagnosis and treatment plan? 3. In what ways could failing to adapt measures to different cultures or contexts be harmful? |

**3.3 Criticism 3: A Pseudoscience with Poor Replication that Lacks Evidence**

So, if a field’s theories are the foundation of the house, and its measurements and methods are the tools and blueprints, then its evidence base is the actual building (i.e. the walls, rooms, and structural features). A house might look impressive on an architect’s drawings, and we may have the most advanced machinery to help us build the house, but if the walls are unstable, the bricks crumble under pressure, or if the structure cannot withstand stress, its long-term safety is questionable. This is why construction workers and building inspectors test the structural stability of each building, at various stages of the construction process, to ensure the house is safe for someone to live in.

***Table 4***. A Pseudoscience with Poor Replication and Evidence

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| Criticism | Brief Description |
| **Poor replication** | Many high-profile models, findings, and interventions in positive psychology fail to produce the same results when studies are repeated. Some, like the gratitude visit, show mixed or even negative effects, while others, like the positivity ratio, collapse under scrutiny and cannot be replicated in later research. |
| **Accusations of pseudoscience** | Critics argue that positive psychology often makes claims that are weakly supported or unfounded, relies on confirmation bias, and defends theories even in the face of contradictory evidence. Some theories are based on circular reasoning, tautologies, or questionable research practices, making the field appear more like ideology than self-correcting science. |

In science, these kinds of “stress tests” come in the form of *replication* — the ability to produce the same results when studies are repeated under similar conditions. Critics argue that many of positive psychology’s most celebrated “rooms” (i.e. its flagship models, core findings, and popular interventions) tend to fail these stress tests. Some of the most well-known interventions, like the gratitude visit and the three-positive things exercise, have produced inconsistent results over the years… Sometimes they improve wellbeing, other times they have no effect, and in some cases even negatively affecting it (Kristjánsson, 2012). Others ideas, like Frederickson’s (2012) positivity ratio, have collapsed entirely when the mathematics it was built on was questioned and when its core assumptions could not be reproduced in subsequent studies (Brown et al., 2013). In other cases, claims made in positive psychology also sometimes tend to directly contradict findings from other scientific fields, such as medicine, where robust evidence shows no biological mechanism by which “positive thinking” increases cancer survival time (Coyne & Tennen, 2010). These failures to replicate not only undermine confidence in specific studies but raise broader concerns about whether the field’s evidence base is solid enough to support its claims.

Some critics go beyond questioning methods and results, arguing that positive psychology functions less like an evidence-based science and more like *a form of pseudoscience* or “new age” philosophy that’s dressed up in scientific language (Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). Critics argue that most of positive psychology’s claims are built on “unfounded speculation, interpretative alchemy, and linguistic secrecy” (Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016, p. 136) with the fields empirical support for these claims being small or marginal at best (Coyne & Tennen, 2010). Further, they argue that positive psychology tends to promote a socially constructed ideal of what people should aim to be (i.e. happier than the rest) and then sells this vision through interventions and models that, in many cases, lack robust evidence (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012).

There are a number of examples that support these assumptions. For example, high-profile theories like Frederickson’s (2013) critical positivity ratio and Lyubomirski’s (2007) happiness pie have been shown to rest on unsupported theoretical mechanisms and built on faulty empirical evidence (Brown et al., 2013). Critics further contend that the majority of the knowledge produced in positive psychology is tautological in nature (i.e. essentially repeating what is considered common sense or traditional wisdom) and offers conclusions that are superficial or self-evident at best (Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). This problem is compounded by the widespread presence of confirmation bias where researchers search for and highlight only the results that support their existing beliefs, while downplaying or reframing findings that contradict them (Coyne et al., 2010; Held, 2018).

Rather than being self-correcting, as science should be, positive psychology is accused of choosing to rather defend its theories rather than update them when faced with contradictory evidence. Unexpected results are often reframed in a positive way, and inconclusive results are interpreted in ways that align with the field’s preferred narrative (Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). Critics also highlight that positive psychological researchers engage in questionable research practices (e.g. p-hacking, removing outliers, and selectively reporting results) as ways of manufacturing statistical support for their preferred hypotheses (Brown et al., 2013). Finally, scholars have noted examples of circular reasoning (“a well-functioning individual must be goal-oriented to become goal-oriented”), unjustified correlations (“success is achieved by happy people”), and sweeping generalisations (“specific positive interventions can make anyone optimistic and fulfilled”) (Yakushko & Blodgett, 2021). Together, these behaviours contribute to the perception that positive psychology tends to prioritise preserving its appealing narrative over subjecting its ideas to the full scrutiny and updating its theories.

Taken together, the issues of poor replication and accusations of pseudoscience raise serious questions about the credibility of positive psychology’s evidence base. When findings cannot be reliably reproduced and theories are defended (and not updated) when confronted with contradictory data, the field risks undermining its scientific legitimacy. These concerns also shape how positive psychology is perceived within the broader psychological community. Rather than being seen as a robust and integrative science, it can appear insular by recycling ideas that are neither novel nor sufficiently distinguished from concepts long established in mainstream psychology. The next section explores how these issues affect the perceptions of the field within the broader scientific community.

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| **Self-Reflection Questions**   1. If the popular positive psychological interventions that you use in your practice hasn’t been reliably replicated in different settings, what risks do you take in recommending it to clients or organizations? 2. How might you guard against your own confirmation bias (for example, only noticing the client successes that “prove” that your chosen method works)? 3. What would you do if a core theory or model that you use in your practice was later discredited by new research? |

**3.4 Criticism 4: Lacks Novelty and Self-Isolates from Mainstream Psychology**

If the theories of positive psychology are the foundation, its measurements the tools, and its evidence base the structure itself, then its relationship with the rest of psychology is like the neighbourhood in which the house sits. A well-built house becomes more valuable when it is connected to the surrounding community — sharing resources, learning from its neighbours, and contributing to the overall character of the area. However, critics argue that positive psychology has chosen to fence itself off from the rest of psychology by creating a kind of artificial divide between what it labels “negative” psychology and its own focus on “optimal human functioning”. In doing so, critics claim the field lacks novelty and wilfully distances itself from concepts and research traditions that’s been long established in mainstream psychology. These concerns, outlined in Table 5, highlight how self-isolation and a lack of originality may limit the field’s integration, credibility, and growth.

**Table 5**. Lacks Novelty and Self-Isolates from Mainstream Psychology

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| Criticism | Brief Description |
| **Lack of novelty** | Critics argue that positive psychology does not offer genuinely new concepts, methods, or models. Many of its core ideas — such as studying happiness, motivation, and strengths — have been part of psychology for decades in areas like humanistic and counselling psychology. The field often rebrands existing ideas without meaningful innovation, overstating its originality to enhance its perceived importance. |
| **Self-isolation from mainstream psychology** | Positive psychology has positioned itself as separate from “negative psychology” and, in doing so, has distanced itself from the wider discipline. This has created an artificial divide, limited its integration with other fields, and allowed it to shy away from engagement with its critiques. Critics contend that it often ignores its historical roots and the contributions of earlier psychological traditions that addressed similar topics. |

Critics question whether *positive psychology brings anything genuinely new to psychology* or whether it simply rebrands ideas that have long been part of the discipline. They argue that studying the “positive” has always been a core concern of psychology, as the field’s fundamental aim is to not only alleviate peoples suffering but also to promote their wellbeing (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2013). Factors like motivation, happiness, and other elements of optimal functioning were explored decades before the emergence of positive psychology. Influential figures such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Marie Jahoda, and Norman Bradburn all produced valuable insights into “what’s right” with individuals (Diener, 2012). Likewise, fields such as counselling psychology and social welfare have long prioritised people’s strengths and aspirations alongside addressing their difficulties (Diener, 2012; Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2013).

From this perspective, the field’s claim to present something rather novel or innovative appears to be rather overstated. Critics’ claim that positive psychology has not introduced any fundamentally new theoretical models, paradigms, or methodologies that help us understand what wellbeing is and how we should develop it in people. As Fernández-Ríos and Novo (2012) note, its research methods are largely the same as those already used in general psychological science. They further contend that its core concepts tend to draw heavily from areas like cognitive-behavioural therapy and humanistic psychology, but without the integrative or cross-theoretical engagement that might position it as providing something fundamentally different (Yakushko & Blodgett, 2021). It’s therefore not surprising that many critics describe the field as a fad or kind of modern zeitgeist rather than a driver of significant progress in generating insights about what it means to live well (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012).

These concerns are compounded by the willingness of positive psychological researchers and practitioners to accept new ideas and theories without critically evaluating them first. For example, it has been repeatedly noted in the literature that there is no evidence linking positive psychological states to the rate in which cancer develops (Coyne et al., 2010) and no consistent evidence that positive psychological interventions prolong cancer survival rates, and no established causal connections between immune function parameters and positive psychological states (Coyne et al., 2010). Yet, these ideas are still heavily featured in positive psychological textbooks, popular positive psychological media, and conference presentations (Van Zyl et al., 2024). This pattern suggests that the field sometimes prioritizes more appealing narratives over careful evaluation. This reinforces critics perceptions that positive psychology is more concerned with promoting its own brand rather than with advancing cumulative, evidence-based science.

Critics also argue that positive psychology has deliberately distanced itself from the broader discipline by creating *fictitious divide between itself and mainstream psychology* (or what it labels “negative psychology”). By portraying mainstream psychology as having an inherent “negative bias,” the field has positioned itself as the sole champion of studying optimal human functioning to carve out its own “market share” within the broader psychological science (Sheldon, 2011; Wong & Roy, 2018). This approach has fostered an artificial positive–negative divide which oversimplifies the larger discipline’s developmental history and wilfully ignores the many ways in which other subfields (e.g. developmental- and organizational psychology) have contributed to our collective understanding of strengths, resilience, and wellbeing.

This self-imposed boundary has also limited positive psychology’s willingness to integrate knowledge from other more established domains like medicine (Banicki, 2014; Coyne et al., 2010). Critics argue that the field often provides a rather naïve and over simplified interpretation of reality and tends to be unreflective (néé defensive) when confronted with critiques or criticisms (Banicki, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2013; Yakushko & Blodgett, 2021). This lack of engagement with divergent or opposing views acts as a barrier to scientific discovery and slows theoretical development (Coyne et al., 2010). Furthermore, critics note that positive psychology frequently overlooks its own historical roots, disregarding the contributions of earlier psychological traditions that addressed many of the same questions (DeRobertis & Bland, 2021; Joseph, 2021).

Taken together, its lack of novelty and the tendency to self-isolate itself from mainstream psychology has left positive psychology in a vulnerable position. By overstating its originality, creating an artificial divide within the discipline, and neglecting to integrate insights from other well-established fields, the movement risks reinforcing its own conceptual and methodological limitations rather than addressing them. This insular way of thinking not only limits its scientific progress but also shapes the kind of worldview it promotes — one that critics argue reflects a narrow, decontextualized, and overly individualistic interpretation of wellbeing. In the next section we explore how these tendencies have contributed to the perception of positive psychology as a neo-liberal ideology that can obscure structural realities and, in some cases, cause harm.

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| **Self-Reflection Questions**   1. Which concepts or findings in positive psychology add something genuinely new to the science of wellbeing, and which seem to be rebranded versions from other areas of psychology? 2. How would you defend the unique value of positive psychology to a colleague from another discipline who believes it offers nothing new? 3. If positive psychology has historically separated itself from mainstream psychology, how might you work to bridge that gap in my own practice or research? |

**3.5 Criticism 5: Decontextualized Neo-Liberal Ideology that Causes Harm**

If the theories of positive psychology are the foundation, its measurements the tools, and its evidence base the structure itself, then its relationship with other areas of psychology is the neighbourhood, then the next layer is the land and environment on which the house is built. The terrain, climate, and local conditions dictate how a house must be designed to be safe and functional. A home in Finland, where heavy snowfall is common, needs a steeply sloped roof to prevent it from collapsing under the weight of snow in winter. In contrast, a house in the Sahara Desert requires features that provide shade and keep the interior cool. Assuming that building the same design for every person, in every country, in vastly different environmental conditions would be disastrous. A flat roof house in Finland could collapse during a snowstorm, while a sealed, heat-retaining structure in the desert could become uninhabitable.

Yet, critics argue that positive psychology fundamentally ignores this principle. It assumes that the “house” it has designed will work equally well for everyone, regardless of cultural, social, or economic context. By positioning itself as “value neutral” science that explores “universal principles”, the field risks framing wellbeing as a matter of individual effort and choice. Thereby promoting a decontextualized, neoliberal worldview that strips away the systemic and cultural factors affecting wellbeing. This perpetuating cultural- and gender biases and can ultimately cause harm to those it intends to help. A high-level summary of these concerns is presented in Table 6.

***Table 6.*** Decontextualised neo-liberal ideology that causes harm

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| Criticism | Brief Description |
| **Decontextualization** | Positive psychology often treats its ideas and interventions as if they work the same for everyone, everywhere, in every context. It tends to ignore how culture, society, and environment shape what people value and how they experience wellbeing. The majority of its concepts and models mainly reflect WEIRD ways of thinking |
| **Neoliberal ideology** | The field often assumes that happiness and success are entirely up to the individual (i.e. that it’s a function of your own efforts and personal choices). This can overlook bigger social and economic factors (like inequality or discrimination) and can make people feel responsible for problems that are actually influenced by wider systems. |
| **Causing harm** | Positive psychology can unintentionally turn normal feelings like stress or shyness into “problems,” set impossible standards for happiness, and sometimes make people feel worse after interventions. It can also reinforce stereotypes about gender or culture, misrepresent minority groups, and create stigma. |

The first major concern raised by critics is that p*ositive psychology has become a kind of decontextualized intellectual enterprise* whereby our study of positive states, traits, and behaviours are done outside of the cultural, societal, and environmental conditions that shape them. In other words, it assumes that these positive psychological phenomena are the same for, and develop in the same way, for people from different cultures, ages, genders and ethnicities. While the field was originally positioned as being a broad and inclusive science of human flourishing, it is now viewed by some as being neither objective nor universal. Rather, critics contend that the field has become rather prescriptive and directive in its understanding of wellbeing by advancing a particular set of cultural values while presenting them as universally valid. In practice, this has meant that positive psychology often assumes that what is valued in Western societies applies to all people across all cultures. This approach stands in stark contrast with established principles in cross-cultural psychology (Banicki, 2014; Christopher, 2014; Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2010).

This tendency reflects what critics describe as pushing WEIRD values, which places more emphasis on the individualistic conception of the self. Constructs such as strengths, virtues, and flourishing are therefore defined and operationalized through a Western lens which values independence, autonomy, agency and personal achievement. This is in striking contrasts with perspectives in many Eastern and collectivist cultures, where wellbeing is often rooted in interdependence, relational harmony, and community obligations (Van Zyl, 2025). As a result, positive psychology’s theories, measures, and interventions may inadvertently perpetuate cultural biases, through assessing and developing “positive” characteristics in ways that are less relevant or even counterproductive to those who are outside of Western contexts (Christopher, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2013). The result is an “indigenous psychology” of the West that claims universality while overlooking the ways in which positive experiences are contingent on local conditions and traditions.

A second major criticism is that *positive psychology functions less as a science and more as a neoliberal ideology*. This implies that it frames human flourishing as a matter of individual responsibility and personal choice. Within this worldview, individuals are positioned as being autonomous agents or consumers whose successes in life are largely as a result of their own decisions, and efforts which are supported by the freedoms and opportunities that’s made available to them in capitalist societies. This framing treats the individual as a self-contained and independent unit which functions separately from the social, cultural, and environmental contexts in which they live (Banicki, 2014).

From this perspective, positive psychology assumes that people can be taught the skills necessary to overcome any challenge, while overlooking the reality that life circumstances cannot be neatly separated from how they are experienced and evaluated (Burr & Dick, 2021). Critics argue that this mindset transforms positive psychology into an enterprise that promotes self-fulfilment and the importance of personal agency, and that downplays or ignores the structural conditions required for wellbeing (Kristjánsson, 2010). By emphasizing personal responsibility for happiness, the field risks shifting blame onto individuals while absolving institutions and cultural systems for their responsibility in perpetuating inequality and marginalisation (Yakushko & Blodgett, 2021). Over time, this can reinforce individualism at the expense of social responsibility (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012).

Some critics go further by suggesting that positive psychology’s promotion of neoliberal values functions as a kind of political tool that prescribes how people should think, feel, and act if they want to be happy. This subtly encourages, rewards and enforces conformity (Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). In this way, the pursuit of happiness becomes a form of control where wellbeing is monitored, standardized, and used to produce compliant citizens. This critique also points to the field’s instrumental view of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours by treating them primarily as tools for gaining control over one’s environment or achieving external goals (Banicki, 2014). This instrumentalist view could risk narrowing the scope of scientific inquiry and limiting scientific progress by reducing complex human experiences to means–end calculations.

Finally, critics caution that despite its intention to promote wellbeing, positive psychology’s models, theories, and interventions can have *unintended negative consequences or even cause harm*. One concern is that the field tends to pathologize normal life experiences and normal responses to toxic or destructive environments. For example, feeling exhausted after weeks of unmanageable workload, or experiencing sadness after a loss, can be reframed as signs of personal dysfunction rather than as reasonable reactions to external pressures (Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014; Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012; Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). This perspective risks shifting the focus away from addressing harmful environments and toward “fixing” the individual, regardless of whether the root cause lies in the person or in their circumstances. This framing can set unrealistic expectations of what “the good life” is by suggesting that happiness is something that anyone can achieve and that its both the norm and the ideal. In doing so, it reinforces the notion that wellbeing is a personal achievement that can only be attained through personal effort, through self-improvement programmes or with the guidance of a positive psychology practitioner (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012) rather than a dynamic state that’s influenced by context, relationships and social structures (Van Zyl et al., 2024).

Through this lens, positive psychology promotes the unrealistic belief that in order to be happy “all human beings can and must function above their [self-limiting] possibilities” (Van Zyl et al., 2024, p. 222). This may create unrealistic expectations about what is possible for an individual which could foster an unhealthy obsession with attaining an unattainable standard of wellbeing. In the long term, this can lead to repeated disappointments in not achieving personal wellbeing goals, being caught up in cycles of failed self-improvement attempts and even engagement in unnecessary or even harmful therapeutic interventions (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012; Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). In extreme cases, this pursuit contributes to the medicalization of positive experiences that encourages individuals engage in harmful behaviours like drug use or to constantly seek constant novel stimulation in the hopes that these could produce lasting positive emotions (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012).

Critics also warn that positive psychology’s classifies or “diagnoses” wellbeing (and related concepts) in the same way in which the disease model does with mental illnesses (Thompson, 2018). Whilst the act of categorising positive psychological phenomena may seem to be a neutral exercise, the act of prescribing labels to them is not. Labels carry powerful social meanings: they can shape how individuals are perceived by others, influence how people see themselves, and even affect the resources, rights, and opportunities they believe are available to them. For instance, labelling someone as “flourishing” or “mentally healthy” may seem affirming, but it inevitably creates a boundary that distinguishes those who fit the ideal from those who do not. These classifications imply that those who do not meet the criteria are somehow lacking, are “non-optimal” or even “dysfunctional.” As Thompson (2018) observes, whether the label refers to illness or flourishing, it can still be used to justify interventions or treatments for those deemed to fall short of the ideal. The risk of describing wellbeing in categorical, diagnostic terms is that it mirrors the effects of diagnosing distress: it situates the “problem” within the individual, thereby downplaying or ignoring the role of broader social and systemic factors in shaping wellbeing. In some cases, these positive diagnoses may also create stigma which could reinforce social divides rather than reducing them.

Critics argue that positive psychology is not only culturally biased but also pays attention to gender differences that perpetuate and reinforce existing stereotypes (Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014). For example, by focusing on “positive” gendered traits like kindness and empathy as “feminine” or leadership and courage as “masculine”, the field risks arguing that these characteristics belonging exclusively to one gender. This could inadvertently reinforce assumptions within traditional gender roles rather than challenging them. This can limit the deconstruction of gender norms and hinder broader social change. Furthermore, it is erroneous to assume there is a single, universal definition of what constitutes a “positive trait” for men or women. As Englar-Carlson and Smart (2014) note, different cultures hold varying views on what is considered positive for each gender. This means that traits seen as strengths in one context may be viewed very differently in another.

From a practical standpoint, critics note that positive psychological interventions are not universally beneficial and can, in some cases, cause real harm to the people it aims to help (Wong & Roy, 2018). A key concern is that researchers and practitioners often fail to anticipate or manage the potential negative consequences of popular positive psychological interventions. For example, gratitude exercises like the gratitude visit are generally positioned as prototypical positive psychological interventions that increases positive emotions and decreases negative ones. Yet, these can sometimes trigger feelings of guilt, obligation, embarrassment, and indebtedness which ultimately leads to unhappiness. Consider the case of a stereotypical introverted engineering student who is encouraged to write and deliver a heartfelt letter of gratitude to a former mentor. While the exercise is intended to foster connection and appreciation, the student may feel intense discomfort at expressing these kinds of personal emotions in a face-to-face way. They may interpret their awkwardness and discomfort as a failure to be “grateful enough”. If the mentor responds with surprise or downplays the gesture, the student might also feel embarrassed, indebted, or even burdened by an implied expectation to maintain ongoing emotional engagement. In this way, an intervention designed to enhance wellbeing can inadvertently heighten social anxiety, lower self-esteem, and reinforce the very insecurities it was meant to alleviate.

Taken together, these critiques suggest that positive psychology does more than just simply overlooking the importance of one’s environment and context in the pursuit of wellbeing. But rather, it actively promotes a worldview in which wellbeing is treated as a personal project that’s completely detached from structural realities. By framing happiness as an individual pursuit and a marketable skill, the field not only risks alienating those it seeks to help but also creates fertile ground for the commercialisation of its ideas. This sets the stage for one final criticism: that positive psychology has evolved into a capitalist enterprise that packages and sells the promise of happiness as a product in the global wellbeing marketplace.

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| **Self-Reflection Questions**   1. When you apply a positive psychology intervention, how do you ensure it reflects the cultural values and lived realities of the people you are working with? 2. How does framing wellbeing from a strictly individual perspective overlook the structural or systemic barriers people face? 3. How might your work unintentionally reinforce stereotypes about gender, culture, or socio-economic status and what safeguards could you build in to prevent this? 4. In what ways could you adapt your tools or approaches to better serve communities with different worldviews? |

**3.6 Criticism 6: A Capitalistic Venture**

Finally, if the theories of positive psychology are the foundation, its measurements the tools, its evidence base the structure, and its context the land it stands on, then the economic system surrounding it can be seen as the property market in which the house is bought and sold. In this market, homes are valued not only for their design or structural integrity but for how well they can be packaged, promoted, and monetized. Critics argue that positive psychology has, in effect, become part of such a market. That it has become a capitalist venture that sells the promise of happiness as a product, and in doing so, profits from people’s aspirations and insecurities (Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). A high-level summary of these critiques is provided in Table 7.

**Table 7**. Positive Psychology as a Capitalistic Venture

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Criticism | Brief Description |
| **Happiness as a product** | Positive psychology frames happiness as something essential to avoid misfortune and as a state that must be actively pursued and optimised, creating demand for products and services that promise to deliver it. |
| **Creating unrealistic expectations (‘impossible dreams’)** | By promoting the idea of being “100% happy, 100% of the time,” the field sets unrealistic expectations that keep people continually striving — and paying — for an unattainable ideal. |
| **Commercialisation of wellbeing** | Positive psychology has helped create a market for happiness, fuelling industries such as consulting, self-help publishing, assessments, and corporate training. Critics argue this reinforces individualism, consumerism, and the medicalisation of positive experiences. |

Over the years, critics note that positive psychology’s values are closely aligned with the ideals promoted by capitalists whereby wellbeing has become a neatly packaged commodity that’s easily obtained by those who can pay for it. In other words, positive psychology positioned wellbeing as a tool that promotes individualism, consumerism, and the commercialisation of positive experiences. It does so in subtly and commercially viable ways. For instance, positive psychology positions happiness as not only an essential element of living a good life but it is a fundamental requirement needed to avoid misfortune or personal failures. This narrative creates a perceived urgency to constantly pursue and optimise happiness by framing it as both a personal responsibility and a moral obligation.

In doing so, positive psychology is seen to have created a global “marketplace for happiness,” built on what Fernández-Ríos and Vilariño (2016) describe as the “impossible dream” of being 100% happy, 100% of the time. By idealising this unattainable standard, the field fuels demand for products and services that claim to help facilitate this goal. This includes the medicalisation of positive experiences, which redefines happiness and other valued states as things that require professional intervention to be achieved or maintained. The result is a profitable ecosystem encompassing psychological assessment firms, corporate training programmes, consultancy services, self-help books, online courses, and coaching packages that are all marketed as essential investments for cultivating happiness and wellbeing (Thompson, 2018). Critics warn that this commercial framing not only turns wellbeing into a costly product but also risks deepening inequality by making the tools of “happiness” only accessible to those who can afford them.

|  |
| --- |
| **Self-Reflection Questions**   1. When you recommend or use positive psychology tools, how do you decide whether they are truly evidence-based or simply well-marketed products? 2. How can you balance the use of commercially available resources with free or low-cost options to ensure accessibility for clients from all backgrounds? 3. What steps can you take to help clients recognise the difference between genuine psychological support and “happiness” products that promise unrealistic results? |

**4. Listening to Critique and Challenging Our Own Ideas**

It is important to note that not all of these critiques and criticisms are equally valid, nor do they carry the same weight. Over the past two decades, the field has actively responded to many of these concerns. Since 2020, there have been concerted efforts by researchers like Carol Ryff (2021), Marie Wissing (2021), Michael Steger (2025), Llewellyn van Zyl (2025), Ernst Bohlmeijer and Gerben Westerhof (2021) and many others to build out positive psychology’s philosophical foundations, to advance its theory development, and to improve the research methods we use in our investigations. Significant progress has been made in clarifying its metatheoretical assumptions (cf. Wissing, 2021), refining frameworks such as PERMA (c.f. Donaldson et al., 2022; Seligman, 2018) introducing more contextually sensitive and methodologically diverse approaches (c.f. Lomas et al., 2021) and building new bottom-up approaches to wellbeing (Van Zyl & Dik, 2025). Nevertheless, many of the challenges highlighted by critics remain unresolved, and the perceptions that they create continue to influence how the discipline is viewed outsiders. For this reason, it is essential that positive psychology remains open to critique, that it actively engages with and embraces opposing perspectives, and that it’s willing to adjust its priorities and practices in response to these valid concerns. The following section we briefly reflect upon each of the broader categories of criticisms and highlight some of the work that’s being done to address these challenges.

The first broad critique is centred around how positive psychology lacks a unified metatheory that can guide how its core concepts are defined, studied, and applied. While this point is not new, and debates about its ontology, epistemology, and axiology are ongoing, the absence of a shared philosophical foundation has significantly stifled positive psychology’s development as a discipline. However, in recent years scholars such as Wissing (2020), Lomas et al. (2021), and Seligman (2018) have started to articulate explicit criteria required for theory development that emphasizes contextual and cultural sensitivity and proposed interdisciplinary approaches to broaden the field’s scope. The revisions to PERMA, for example, illustrate how constructive engagement with criticism can lead to building out a more robust and relevant theory with real world impact (c.f. Donaldson et al., 2022). Yet there are still a number of challenges that remain unresolved. For example, coming to an agreement within the field on a single philosophical position for our understanding of human nature may be rather unrealistic, but developing more coherence in how we define what counts as “positive” or optimal functioning, along with a more explicit theory of human development could perhaps strengthen both the field’s internal consistency and its credibility with external audiences.

Critics have repeatedly raised concerns about how positive psychology measures its constructs and the kind of research designs it relies on. These critiques are not without merit, and they are also not just contained to positive psychology. Many of the same methodological tendencies are deeply entrenched across all branches of psychology. In the early stages of any new subdiscipline, these kinds of “quick and dirty” measures, coupled with simpler designs are very common because they allow researchers to explore emerging ideas and attract interest in novel phenomena. However, as the field matures, there is an expectation that its methods should evolve to help build a solid scientific base to support its claims. We are already seeing trends that positive psychology is moving towards more rigorous approaches to psychometric test development, a stronger focus on cross-cultural validation, using more objective measurement tools, and we are seeing more robust research designs such as longitudinal, mixed-method, and experimental research. However, qualitative research designs which are aimed at exploring experience are still vastly under-represented in our field. In this respect, positive psychology seems to be at a turning point: it has an opportunity to raise its methodological standards and distinguish itself from other domains by embracing more innovative, multi-method approaches and by ensuring its measures comply with established international guidelines.

Ultimately, improving measurement and methodology is not just a technical exercise but rather it goes to the very heart of the field’s credibility. Robust, culturally fair, and psychometrically sound tools will help avoid the “jingle-jangle” problem, reduce the temptation to overstate our findings, and build a more reliable evidence base for both theory and practice. Similarly, using a wider range of research methods and approaches will help deepen pir understanding of the processes underlying wellbeing, strengthen our causal claims, and encourage a more nuanced, self-correcting science. While the methodological challenges facing positive psychology are far from unique, how the field responds to them will be a major determinant of whether it is seen as a rigorous and evolving science or one that remains trapped in the limitations of its formative years.

Critics have also label positive psychology a kind of pseudoscience that makes exaggerated claims, resists self-correction, that suffers from confirmation bias, and which struggles with replicating its findings. While these concerns have merit, the broader accusation is not well supported when we judge them against the criteria of what actually constitutes a pseudoscience (cf. Table 8).

**Table 8**. Eight Pseudoscience Criteria and How They Apply to Positive Psychology

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudoscience Criterion | What It Means | How It Relates to Positive Psychology | Meets Criteria? |
| **Unfalsifiable** | A claim can’t be tested or proven wrong. | Most positive psychology ideas can be tested and measured, even if definitions sometimes vary. While terminology and theories can be inconsistent, hypotheses are generally falsifiable. | No |
| **Improper collection of evidence** | Only showing results that support the claim and ignoring the rest. | The field uses a lot of scientific studies, but there is still a tendency to highlight results that fit the narrative. | No (but some bias exists) |
| **Closed to criticism** | Avoiding feedback or outside review. | Positive psychology has been subject to scrutiny from both within and outside the field. For example, critiques of the “critical positivity ratio” led to a partial retraction and open academic debate. | No |
| **No theory updates** | Sticking with outdated ideas even when evidence says otherwise. | Some contested ideas still get promoted, showing a reluctance to fully move on from them. | Partially valid |
| **Confirmation bias** | Looking for evidence that proves what you already believe. | This happens in positive psychology, as in most sciences. Few studies report null or negative results, and data is sometimes interpreted to fit existing assumptions. | Partially valid |
| **Exaggerated or extraordinary claims** | Promising more than the evidence can deliver. | Early research and popular media often overstated findings, especially by implying cause from correlation. The academic literature has become more cautious, but exaggeration remains in public-facing interpretations. | Partially valid |
| **Lacks peer review** | Skipping expert review before publishing. | Most academic research is published in peer-reviewed journals. | No |
| **Poor replication** | Results can’t be reproduced in other studies. | Positive psychology faces the same replication challenges as psychology at large, including small samples, publication bias, and p-hacking. Replicating popular interventions like the gratitude visit has proven difficult in different cultures or contexts. | Yes |

Most positive psychological constructs are clearly defined and testable, the field publishes primarily in peer-reviewed journals, and its claims are generally grounded in empirical evidence — albeit with some notable exceptions in its early years and in the popular press where findings are sometimes overstated or taken out of context. Where the critique has more weight is in the area of theory progression and self-correction. Certain high-profile examples, like the persistence use of the “critical positivity ratio” despite its partial retraction, illustrate that the field can be slow to abandon or revise contested ideas.

Replication is also a challenge, but this is part of a wider replication crisis plaguing the entire psychology discipline. Problems such as confirmation bias, poor transparency, and low replicability are not unique to positive psychology, but the field still has a responsibility to address them if it wants to strengthen its credibility. Adopting more open science practices, such as pre-registration, data and code sharing, and publishing null results, would help to reduce analytical flexibility and selective reporting (Efendic & Van Zyl, 2019). Encouraging replication studies, experimenting with collaborative peer review, and fostering annual cross-journal discussions on best practices could all improve both the transparency and the quality of research. In this way, positive psychology can demonstrate that it is not only compatible with the scientific method but committed to the same self-correcting principles that underpin rigorous science. Addressing these concerns openly is not a sign of weakness but rather it is an opportunity to align the field’s public image with the standards of evidence and replication it aspires to uphold.

The next set of critiques we need to reflect on stated that positive psychology lacks novelty and has deliberately distanced itself from mainstream psychology. In fairness, Seligman (2011) has openly acknowledged that studying human strengths and virtues is not “new”. He traces the roots of positive psychology back to the contributions of influential figures such as William James, Abraham Maslow, Albert Bandura, Carl Rogers, and Viktor Frankl. The launch of “positive psychology” in 2000 was not intended to erase these contributions but to shine a brighter light on them and to argue for more focused research into the positive side of human life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This renewed focus has led to several noteworthy insights. For example, research in the field has shown that optimists live longer and healthier lives than pessimists; that young women showing genuine smiles at age 18 report higher marital satisfaction later in life; that self-discipline and grit predict academic performance better than IQ; that happier teenagers earn more as adults; that a meaningful life may be linked to a distinctive genetic profile; and that mindfulness interventions can boost resilience (Seligman, 2019). These contributions suggest that positive psychology has indeed advanced our understanding of wellbeing and that it provided some unique insights which we didn’t know before.

That said, critics are correct in noting that the way Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s (2000) vision was framed did create an unnecessary divide between “traditional” psychology and “positive” psychology. This division had some unintended consequences, such as reinforcing the perception that mainstream psychology was only concerned with pathology and that positive psychology was presenting something totally new and innovative. Seligman (2011, 2019) later clarified that the intent was never to reject mainstream psychology, but rather to balance it by focusing more attention on positive states, traits, and institutions. In recent years, this divide has begun to fade. Scholars like Wong (2011), Lomas et al. (2021), and Wissing (2021) have argued for a more integrated perspective on positive psychology that recognizes that “negative” experiences such as suffering and struggle are often essential for the development of strengths, happiness, and resilience. Models like Bohlmeijer and Westerhof’s (2020) sustainable mental health framework now explicitly incorporate mental illness, dysfunctional patterns, and negative emotions as part of a positive, growth-oriented approach.

Still, there are a number of challenges that we should consider. As Joseph (2021) points out, there is still no consensus about how humanistic psychology and positive psychology relate to one another, despite two decades of debate. Humanistic psychologists continue to critique positive psychology, and the reverse is also true. Moreover, many positive psychological interventions and therapy models draw heavily on cognitive-behavioural therapy principles, yet this influence is rarely acknowledged in the literature. In doing so, positive psychology does sometimes repackage interventions and methods from other well-established approaches as if they were unique to its own framework.

The next set of critiques blamed positive psychology being a decontextualized neo-liberal ideology that causes harm. From this perspective, the field frames flourishing and success as the sole responsibility of the individual, while largely overlooking the influence of culture, social context, and environmental conditions. These concerns are not entirely true anymore, but they recur often enough in the literature for us to pay serious attention to it. Scholars such as Marecek and Christopher (2018) have argued that the field has positioned itself as an “indigenous psychology” while failing to meaningfully incorporate indigenous knowledge or diverse cultural perspectives in its approaches. There is a lot of evidence of this as most western models of wellbeing (like PERMA and the Mental Health Continuum) are prolifically applied (as is) in non-Western cultures. These models are not contextually adapted, nor do they draw on indigenous perspectives on wellbeing, yet are used as the yard stick for developing and evaluating wellbeing interventions. Addressing this gap would mean that we have to develop more culturally grounded theories, methods, and interventions, and conducting more cross-cultural and cross-national types of research. This also highlights a need for more ideographic (person-centred, bottom-up) approaches to measuring and modelling wellbeing (Van Zyl & Dik, 2025). Finally, to prevent harm, positive psychology should establish its own ethical guidelines for culturally sensitive research and practice to ensure that its tools and interventions enhance rather than undermine the wellbeing of those we intend to help.

The final critique positions positive psychology as a capitalistic venture that’s primary aim is to commercialize “positivity” in ways that promote individualism, consumerism, and even the medicalization of normal positive human experiences. While the commercialization of positive psychology is undeniable, it’s important to consider the intent behind such. In many cases, commercialization of a product or service is driven by the goal of making tools and interventions more scalable and accessible to larger groups. Scaling up interventions requires investment in innovation, infrastructure, and content development which all costs money. Without investment, we are not able to reach larger groups of people and without scaling access, we can’t reduce costs of these products or services. So, there is a delicate balance that we need to maintain. But, not all the innovations in positive psychology have a cost attached to it for people. Alongside many of these commercial products, numerous universities, research centres, and non-profit organizations (such as the Greater Good Science Centre or the University of Pennsylvania’s free VIA strengths inventory) offer tools to assess your wellbeing and training on how to develop your wellbeing at no cost. This creates a balance between paid and freely available resources that aim to improve wellbeing on a large scale.

The real challenge lies in narrowing the gap between what science supports and what is being promoted or sold in the marketplace. Demand for wellbeing tools will always attract both evidence-based interventions and questionable “quick fixes.” To protect the integrity of the field, positive psychology must continue to rigorously test its interventions, train practitioners in science-practice integration, uphold ethical standards, and educate the public on how to distinguish robust, evidence-based practice from pseudoscientific or exaggerated claims. By doing so, the discipline can leverage the benefits of commercialization whilst also safeguarding people against its potential harms.

|  |
| --- |
| **Self-Reflection Questions**   1. Which of the critiques and criticisms do you believe is most damaging to the credibility of positive psychology in practice and why? 2. Thinking about your own current or future practice, how would you know if an intervention, tool, or framework is applicable for the purpose and population group you intend to use it for? 3. How can you, as a practitioner, contribute to improving the cultural sensitivity of positive psychology interventions in your own context? |

**5. Possible Solutions to Positive Psychology’s Problems**

While this chapter has primarily focused describing the main critiques of positive psychology, it is equally important to look at how these could potentially be addressed. Providing a full overview and detailed discussion of potential solutions lies beyond the scope of this chapter, however, we want to briefly highlight some of the most promising strategies identified in a recent study exploring positive psychologists’ perspectives on addressing these issues (Van Zyl, 2025). For a high-level summary of the proposed solutions see Table 9.

**Table 9**. Potential Solutions to Positive Psychology’s Problems

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Critique | Proposed Solutions | What This Means in Practice |
| **Improper theorizing and conceptual thinking** | Bring in more perspectives | Adopt different philosophical approaches and viewpoints to understand positive psychological phenomena as well as draw insights from other fields (e.g., sociology, anthropology, neuroscience) to guide theory building. |
| Develop “big picture” frameworks | Create broader and more holistic theories that connect different concepts and show how they fit together. |
| Build from the ground up | Develop new bottom-up approaches to wellbeing that start with the real-life experiences and everyday language of people. Then build shared definitions and facilitate agreement on key terms. |
| Collaborate on theory | Closer collaboration between science and practice. Work together across universities and countries with practitioners to create theories that make sense both academically and in practice. |
| **Problems with measurement and methodology** | Use a wider range of methods | Combine traditional assessment tools (i.e. questionnaires) with other approaches like interviews, observations, physiological measures, and community-level assessments to get a more holistic understanding of phenomena. Focus on assessing collective experiences |
| Share data openly | Publish studies even if results are not “positive,” share raw data and materials, and follow open science guidelines. |
| Reduce bias in responses | Design tools that make it harder for people to “fake good” and easier to answer honestly. |
| **Pseudoscience that lacks evidence with poor replication** | Improve scientific communication to the public | Explain findings clearly to the public, avoid hype, and promote accurate media coverage. |
| Centralize and share evidence | Have professional bodies collect and publish clear summaries of what the evidence really says. |
| Engage critics constructively | Test controversial claims and work with critics to improve methods and theory. |
| **Lack of novelty and isolation from mainstream psychology** | Collaborate more widely | Work with other branches of psychology to share ideas, clarify differences, and learn from each other. |
| **Decontextualized, neoliberal ideology that causes harm** | Be more culturally aware | Test theories in different cultures, develop bottom-up models from local contexts, and make sure interventions fit the population. |
| Act ethically and socially responsibly | Consider the broader social impact of interventions, focus on underrepresented groups, and avoid harm. |
| Balance positives and negatives | Recognize that negative emotions and challenges can also lead to growth. |
| Maintain quality standards | Adapt interventions to individuals, and ensure practitioners are properly trained. |
| **Capitalistic Venture** | Balance cost and access | Make sure some tools and services remain free or low-cost, use open-access models, and ensure that commercial products are evidence-based. |

Adapted from Van Zyl (2025)

**6. Conclusion**

In summation it is important to realise that every field has its blind spots. And sometimes, the people who see them most clearly are the ones standing on the outside, looking in. The criticisms we explored in this chapter should not be seen as attacks on positive psychology nor the value that it brings but rather should be seen as love letters to the potential of the discipline. Because they force the field to wrestle with the uncomfortable truth that progress isn’t measured by how well you defend yourself, but by how well you listen when the defence is over. Not every critique we discussed in this paper is entirely valid anymore and many have already spurred change. But taken together, they reveal something more fundamental: that the science of flourishing must be as curious about its own imperfections as it is about human potential. If positive psychology can resist the urge to become defensive when faced with critiques and if it can treat those criticisms not as threats but as fuel for reinvention, it could lead to a more robust and impactful science. One that might end up as something even better than what it originally set out to create. Not a shinier, more marketable version of itself, but a deeper, messier, more honest portrait of what it really means to live well.

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