

Positive psychology's promise of happiness: A new form of human capital in contemporary neoliberal governmentality

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tap**Rodrigo De La Fabián**

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Abstract

The article seeks to contribute to governmentality studies by looking anew at the subjectivities posited by neoliberalism and especially by positive psychology. Focusing in particular on Sam Binkley's critical work on this psychological sub-discipline, we offer a political analysis of the new ways of becoming a subject it proposes. For Binkley, positive psychology operates as a subjectivising vector by promoting a specific kind of work on oneself. His approach, we suggest, rests on a conception that relies on the classical disjunction between production and effort, on the one hand, and consumption and satisfaction, on the other. With references to Foucault, Marx, Becker, and Schultz's conceptions of work and subjectivity, the article shows that positive psychology's novelty is to enable a new happy subjective perspective from where happiness, rather than a long-term objective, is considered to be a precondition of work, a radical new form of human capital.

Keywords

happiness, human capital, neoliberal governmentality, Positive Psychology, subjectification

One of the main contributions of Governmentality Studies to the critical analysis of contemporary flexible capitalism lies in its approach to neoliberalism, not only as a political-economic model but also as a practice of governing the self and others (Burchell, Gordon, Miller, 1991; Castro-Gómez, 2010; Dean, 1999; Miller & Rose, 2008). Going back to

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Michel Foucault's (2007, 2008) pioneering work on liberal and neoliberal rationality, these authors have analysed neoliberal governmentality as a strategy situated in a larger bio-political context (Gane, 2013), characterised by the use of political economy as its main rationality, in order to manage the population. The aim is to use different technologies, such as those created by the "psy" knowledges (Rose, 1998, pp. 19–20), to "conduct the conduct" of individuals (Foucault, 2007, pp. 194–195) and regulate their field of action. In the case of neoliberal governmentality this is done by enabling certain ways of relating to oneself and others based on the adoption of specific values, affections, and desires; by embedding individual freedom in the scope of neoliberal rationality (Du Gay, 2000), and by encouraging people "to view their lives and identities as a type of enterprise, understood as a relation to the self based ultimately on a notion of incontestable economic interest" (McNay, 2009, p. 56).

The recent work of Sam Binkley (2011a, 2011b, 2014) on the expansion of positive psychology and its conception of happiness is a vital contribution to this effort to comprehend neoliberal contemporary governmentality and in particular the processes of being *subjectified*¹ that it promotes. Indeed, in little more than a decade (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012; Ruark, 2009) happiness has been transformed from being merely a topic of philosophical speculation or a tenuous attribute of personal experience (Binkley, 2011a), to becoming a new dimension in the problematisation and intelligibility of the social and the individual in contemporary societies.

It is precisely in this sea-change in our relationship to happiness that positive psychology plays a major role. Originating in the late 1990s, this sub-discipline defines itself as: "the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive" (Positive Psychology Center, 2007, para. 2).

Viewed from the neoliberal governmentality perspective, and following Binkley's writings, this new discourse could be considered a strategy of "governing at a distance" (Miller & Rose, 2008) by building a hybrid set of instruments, techniques, knowledges, and spaces that are structured by a practical rationality (Rose, 1996). Instead of acting on people through "experts," as most of traditional psychology does, positive psychology offers a set of exercises and practices that anyone can do on their own. Indeed, "the cultivation of the happy life is a project undertaken in the intimate space of everyday life" (Binkley, 2011a, p. 375).

Unlike other critical perspectives on positive psychology,² governmentality studies pursue the "productive" effects of this sub-discipline. This implies a kind of critical analysis that resorts to no external normative frame but aims instead to recreate the contingent historical conditions that make possible certain ways of becoming a subject. In this sense, what is new about positive psychology within the wide field of neoliberal governmentality?

From Binkley's standpoint, first, happiness might function as a hinge between the government of others and the government of oneself; or as Binkley (2014, p. 5) points out, the personal pursuit of happiness, in the context of positive psychology, is to govern oneself as one is governed by others. Second, for this author, positive psychology will encourage individuals to cultivate this emotional subjectivity by doing a work of denial on themselves; that is, by the "peeling back or stripping away from our private and interpersonal lives of the dead weight of habit, negativity, routine, and a sense of obligation

to others, so that we might liberate the vital drives and forward thrust that constitute emotional existence itself” (Binkley, 2014, p. 2).

Binkley places much importance on this everyday practice of negation and he defines it as the “work of governmentality”: “Habits resist government, and have to be worked ... The straining to remake oneself is what I call the work of governmentality” (2014, p. 48). Binkley explains that governing oneself as one is governed by others operates first by problematising certain ways of being or certain habits that people should change. In this particular case, positive psychology will identify all *welfarist*³ traces as the characteristics on which the neoliberal subject should work on: “The labour of thinking positively is the same labour directed against those institutional forms identified with the state apparatus, those forms that govern too much” (Binkley, 2014, p. 132).

In other words, for Binkley the substance on which self-government works is the gap between the docile and dependent *welfarist* personality of which we still bear traces, and the entrepreneurial, autarchic subject that we should become: “neoliberal government’s methodology is uniquely negative, seeking to dispel social dependencies in the hope of activating an agentive, entrepreneurial, and enterprising spirit among its subjects” (Binkley, 2014, p. 21).

While this is certainly a very interesting way of reading the positive psychology discourse and the process of subjectification that it promotes, we maintain that Binkley does not take full account of how neoliberalism in general, and positive psychology in particular, transform the notion of work itself. Expressed differently, we consider that Binkley’s way of analysing the kind of work on oneself that positive psychology promotes, and the subjectivity enabled by it, resorts to certain categories and to certain conceptual presuppositions that are alien to positive psychology.

Following Foucault’s analysis of the emergence of the human capital theory in the late 1950s and 1960s, and its enabling of the neoliberal subjectivity that he dubbed “the entrepreneur of himself,” our hypothesis in this paper is that, in order to correctly appreciate the novelty of the happiness promoted by positive psychology, it is important to consider it as a new form of human capital, as Binkley does, and to draw the radical conclusions that derive from this unprecedented shift in the history of happiness in Western culture, which Binkley does not. In short, we argue that positive psychology accomplishes a possibility that human capital theory dreamed of 50 years before: the transcendence of the classical capitalist disjunction between work—associated with the present moment of production and sacrifice—and consumption—associated with the future moment of satisfaction and happiness.

In the first place, for positive psychology, work should no longer be considered a means to future happiness, but as a set of practices in which happiness that we already have is put to work. The first task for someone who wants to work on oneself in order to be *subjectified* by positive psychology would not be to start producing happiness, but to recognise the internal happiness one already has. Second, for positive psychology happiness is no longer the effect of other variables, such as money or health, but is intended to be the cause of them: happy people earn more money, live longer, and can enhance their happiness. In other words, for positive psychology happiness is no longer only the aim of human life, as it has been for the West since the Enlightenment (McMahon, 2006, pp. 402–405), but also the means to obtain it: “If you are not happy today, then you won’t be

happy tomorrow” (Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 39). Only happy people can be even happier; only happy workers can enhance their happiness.

In this sense, positive psychology does not expect people to produce happiness out of something they lack or through the transformation of an “alien substance,” such as *welfarist habits*. The work on oneself contemplated by positive psychology is not intended to work on any external substance. If this were the case, its transformation would be simultaneously a negation and recognition of its external existence. On the contrary, positive psychology enables a kind of work on oneself which seeks to create a new subjective perspective, from which the resistance of the substance to be worked—within or outside ourselves—becomes an illusion. In order to be more productive (and even happier) one has to be a happy worker, which means to negate the negativity of the substance to be worked.⁴

So, what positive psychology problematises⁵ in us is the sense of contradiction and effort associated with work. The classic capitalist moral and erotic dilemma which supposes an irreducible disjunction between the moment of production and the moment of consumption is the problem on which one has to work.

Therefore, first, this article will build on Foucault’s analysis of human capital theory and show its transcendence of the production/consumption disjunction to be a central aspect of the reconfiguration of work and subjectivity. We will then show how positive psychology should be considered a relatively original declension of human capital discourse which enables neoliberal subjectivity to enhance its own happiness without external restrictions. We will then analyse in depth the specificity of the work on oneself enabled by positive psychology. We close with some general conclusions.

Finally, we would note that this article seeks to shed new light on the specific kind of subjectivity enabled by positive psychology. Another different and complementary task—to analyse empirically how people in specific situated contexts adopt or resist this type of new neoliberal subjectivity—is beyond the scope of this paper.

The human capital theory and the limited transcendence of the production/consumption disjunction

The expansion of economic rationality

In his lecture of March 14, 1979, delivered as part of his course on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2008, pp. 220–223) argued that since the time of Adam Smith until the first half of the 20th century, the main concerns of economic science were the mechanisms of production, exchange, and consumption. Nevertheless, said Foucault, the development of the concept of human capital during the 1950s and 1960s, led mostly by Gary Becker, Theodor Schultz, and Jacob Mincer, radically changed the preoccupations of economics and by so doing created the foundations of neoliberalism. In fact, from the standpoint of human capital theory, economics is the science of human behaviour that seeks to explain and predict the way in which scarce means are allocated to competing ends (Becker, 1976, p. 4; Foucault, 2008, p. 222).

A consequence of redefining the scope of economics in this way was to expand its rationality to all areas of life, public and private, collective and individual, as each and

every human choice can be analysed using this very simple equation between scarce means and competing ends (Lemke, 2001).

Becker (1976, p. 4), for example, thinks that apparently disparate decisions such as whether a nation should go to war, whether someone should get married, or how often one should go to church, etc., could all be analysed in terms of that simple formula. Every time an individual thinks that certain choices could lead to the maximisation of a scarce means, no matter how little justified the choice may be, human capital is being produced. In other words, the distinction between productive and unproductive practices can only be determined from a subjective point of view. For Becker (1993), the economic analysis “assumes that individuals maximize welfare *as they conceive it*, whether they be selfish, altruistic, loyal, spiteful, or masochistic” (p. 386). This strictly subjective way of determining the value of goods has been called “consumer sovereignty”: “[Consumers] are the sole and unchallengeable arbiters of value” (Keat, 2011, p. 228). Therefore, Becker (1976) concludes that “the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior” (p. 8).

The entrepreneur of himself and the “capitalist/worker” contradiction

According to Foucault (2008, p. 223), the possibility of capitalising all areas of life leads to a major modification in the relationship between the worker and the capitalist and produces a new form of *subjectivation*: the “entrepreneur of himself.”

As Foucault (2008, p. 224) observes, in the decade of the 1950s—for the first time in the history of capitalism—economic science would begin to study the relationship between worker and capitalist from the standpoint of the former. This new point of view, combined with the expansion of economic rationality, led the authors of the human capital theory to rebut Marx’s view of wages as a reward for innate labour power. In this section and in the next we will follow Foucault’s (2008, pp. 220–221) steps, showing the novelty of the human capital theory by contrasting it with Marx’s point of view.

According to Marx, the expansion of capital found its limit in the biological life of the worker. Thus, the value of the wage to be paid to the proletarians was determined by the cost of keeping the worker alive (Marx, 1935, p. 40). In Foucault’s terms, by contrast, from the human capital perspective a wage should be considered an income which is “quite simply the product or return on a capital. Conversely, we will call a ‘capital’ everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income.” And the capital of which we are talking, continues Foucault, “is the set of all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage” (2008, p. 224).

If labour power was an innate natural capital that could only be maintained or reproduced, the worker conceived as human capital turns out to be a “produced means of production” (Schultz, 1961, p. 3) that can be indefinitely enhanced. In other words, in a world which is thought to be full of opportunities, wealth creation depends on the abilities that individuals have to enhance their human capital. Everything, including the most negative experiences,⁶ is a potential means to augment human capital: “every action, from taking courses on a new computer software application to having their teeth whitened, can be considered an investment in human capital” (Read, 2009, p. 30).

Therefore, concludes Foucault (2008), the “*Homo œconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself ... being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (p. 226).

The enabling of this new entrepreneurial subjectivity implies a major shift in the history of capitalism. Because, without touching the distribution of wealth, but by a new production of subjectivity (Read, 2009), the category of worker has been effaced and, therefore, everyone has become a capitalist. This effacement is confirmed by Schultz (1961) when, in his critique of Marx, he affirms that: “Labourers have become capitalists not from a diffusion of the ownership of corporation stocks, as folklore would have it, but from the acquisition of knowledge and skill that have economic value” (p. 3).

Through the universalisation of the entrepreneurial subjectivity, neoliberal discourse seems to have overcome the contradiction between worker and capitalist. The worker is now his own boss, which means that he can no longer blame anyone but himself for his inability to increase his capital. This implicates an ethics of the self which prescribes: “autonomy, responsibility and the freedom/obligation of individuals to actively make choices for themselves” (Du Gay, 2000, p. 166). The only restriction of freedom is freedom itself: one is obliged to permanently enact freedom (Rose, 1999, p. 87) by choosing new ways of self-enhancement (Rose, 1998, p. 158) that will maximise one’s human capital.

The entrepreneur of himself and the “production/consumption” contradiction

Universal happiness and gaiety will reign. A unity of interests and views will arise, crime and violence [will] disappear ... and end the evil distinction between Producers and Consumers. (Fourier, 1820)

Foucault (2008, p. 225) argued that the subject in classical liberalism was defined as the partner in an exchange between the producer and the consumer. The fact that these positions were not confused ensured the dynamics of the economy and hence its ability to make capital grow. But what is more relevant for our analysis is that this dichotomy produced two subjective perspectives that divided not only the partners of the exchange, but each individual internally. As Weber stated,⁷ in capitalist societies, that is, in societies in which production should create a surplus value, one must always choose between being productive or enjoying through consumption. In this respect Foucault’s central thesis is that in neoliberalism, the entrepreneur of himself would avoid this dilemma by becoming the producer and the consumer of his own satisfaction (Lepage, 1978, p. 327, as cited in Foucault, 2008, p. 236, n32). In what follows, we will analyse how this new conception changes the notion of work and thereby contributes to the rise of the new entrepreneurial subjectivity.

At first sight we can say that there should be a disjunctive relationship between production and consumption, the latter being the destructive antithesis of the former (Marx, 1993, p. 89). But this tension between consumption and production is much more complex than that. In fact, Marx argues that there is “nothing simpler for a Hegelian than to posit production and consumption as identical” (1993, p. 93). This identity between

production and consumption, referred to since the 19th century as “productive consumption” (Newman, 1835, p. 296) was conceived by Marx as an inherent characteristic of labour: it consumes means of production in order to produce and the finality of the product is to be consumed.

Nevertheless, this circularity only exists when we make an abstract analysis of society, says Marx (1993, p. 94); that is, when we take it as a single homogeneous subject, which is not the case of capitalist societies, built as they are upon labour and class division.

Therefore, from Marx’s standpoint, the producer and consumer perspectives, in capitalist societies, are irreducible to one another (Marx, 2001, pp. 47–48). Even though the same person may potentially be in the position both of consumer and producer, she cannot be both at the same time.

For Marx, the relationship between worker and capitalist should be considered a special case of an encounter between a producer and a consumer: “You [the labourer] and I [the capitalist] know on the market only one law, that of the exchange of commodities” (Marx, 2001, p. 258). The particularities of the worker/capitalist relationship would be the following:

1. The worker has no commodity to sell other than his labour power; meanwhile the capitalist disposes of a surplus capital that allows him to buy it and consume it.
2. In capitalist societies, that is, in societies organised by class divisions, these positions are not changeable. The wage that the worker receives is just enough to keep him alive and to reproduce his labour power. Only the capitalist can increase his wealth.
3. The worker always works for another; only the capitalist works for himself (Marx, 2001, p. 181).
4. The capitalist’s relationship with labour power is the only exception to the irreducibility of production and consumption: when it is consumed productivity increases (Marx, 2001, p. 186).

Against this conception, the key concept that allows Schultz to rethink the worker’s subjectivity and to transcend the production/consumption contradiction is “investment” (López-Ruiz, 2007). For example, expenditures in studies or cosmetic surgery are forms of present consumption but also future investment. In other words, this kind of productive consumption “enables the satisfaction of current needs and, at the same time, increases the productive potential of labour. As a consequence, the potential for satisfaction of future needs rises” (Steger, 2000).

So, the human capital theory universalises the capitalist’s position, and empowers a new entrepreneurial subjectivity by splitting the worker into his present and future existence. In other words, the worker of today consumes and produces for the other that he is going to be tomorrow.

But if, according to Marx, the capitalist is in possession of labour power, that is, of the only commodity that by being consumed increases productivity, what kind of use value should the worker consume in order to produce future commodities? Following Becker, we can say that the worker finds in herself, in the field of what was traditionally considered to be leisure time, another *me* to exploit:

Not only is it difficult to distinguish leisure from other non-work but also even work from non-work. Is commuting work, non-work or both? How about business lunch, a good diet or relaxation? Indeed, the notion of productive consumption was introduced precisely to cover those commodities that contribute to work as well as to consumption. (Becker, 1965, p. 504)

So, the *working me* consumes the labour power of the *idle me* in the present time to produce surplus values to be consumed by the *future me*.

Schultz (1961) is aware of the radical shift that this movement from hetero- to self-exploitation supposes:

No less a person than J. S. Mill at one time insisted that people of a country should not be looked upon as wealth because wealth existed only for the sake of people. But surely Mill was wrong; there is nothing in the concept of human wealth contrary to his idea that it exists only for the advantage of people. By investing in themselves, people can enlarge the range of choice available to them. It is one way free men can enhance their welfare. (p. 2)

At first sight it is obvious that Marx would not agree with Mill's statement. For the former, all capitalist societies rely on class division. This means that for Marx, "some people" are always the source of wealth for "other people." Nevertheless, Marx and Mill both identify the breaking of the homogeneity of the social subject ("people") with the vertical antagonism of class exploitation—or working for another. On the other hand, Schultz agrees with Marx on the fact that for the expansion of capital it is necessary to split the homogeneity of the social subject by introducing differentiated partners of exchange. Nevertheless, Schultz displaces this vertical antagonism for the horizontal depoliticised differentiation⁸ of the present and the future people. The producer and the consumer are the same but in different time frames. Through this figure of self-exploitation Schultz can morally justify that people can be the wealth for themselves.

We are therefore in the presence of an entrepreneur of himself who is compelled to produce his own satisfaction in an autarchic way. He is no longer subjected to exchange: "Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want" (Smith, 2008, p. 22). The entrepreneur of himself no longer asks his boss, the State or anyone, to give him what he wants. The satisfaction that counts for him is the one that he can produce. Said differently, what the other gives to the entrepreneur himself, be it his wage, affection, etc., is nothing more than an opportunity for him to produce the satisfaction that he is going to consume.

Nevertheless, we can identify this transcendence of the production/consumption contradiction as a partial one. What in Marx was a synchronic and external contradiction between labourer and capitalist, has now become an internal and diachronic contradiction between the present and the future *me*. This means that part of present satisfactions linked to work are the effect of a re-signification of it as a future investment in oneself. In other words, when someone works, she is still negating the positivity of an external resistant substance: work is considered to be a process of transforming this substance into a future thing that will produce self-satisfaction. Therefore, even in this radical transformation within the capitalist framework, happiness still remains a promise. The difference is that as the entrepreneur works for herself, present efforts "feel better."

In fact, Binkley's interpretation of the work on oneself promoted by positive psychology fits well with this conception of work and subjectivity. If we change *idle me* for *welfarist me*, we can realise that Binkley still operates with a classic Calvinistic conception of work. He assumes that to work is a process of transforming an "obdurate substance": "the temporality of work comes with the degree of intransigence posed by something in the path of the worker." As we have seen, in this particular case, for Binkley the work on oneself promoted by positive psychology encounters the resistance of "deeply embedded predispositions to *not* act independently and resourcefully" (Binkley, 2011b, pp.87). In other words, the *welfarist me* is a resistant independent substance—a vestige from the past—and, therefore, happiness remains as the result of the process of self-transformation.

In what follows we will show that positive psychology will conceive of happiness as a capital *per se*, that is, not only as a promised horizon, but as the substance on which one has to work for it to grow. This implies a more radical transcendence of the production/consumption disjunction, because to produce happiness you no longer have to negate something different from it, but just consume it.

Happiness as a new human capital and the radical transcendence of the production/consumption disjunction

That's right! Happiness is liquid, in the same way that monetary instruments such as stocks are liquid. Humans are built with emotional systems that include happiness, and that happiness is intended to be spent. It is a type of emotional currency that can be spent, like money, on the outcomes in life you truly value, such as your health, your relationships, and success at work. (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 40, as cited in Binkley, 2014, p. 1)

Diener and Seligman (2004, p. 2) say that traditionally economics assumed that objective indexes, such as GDP or per capita income, informed us about the degree of well-being of people. In this sense the authors asked: "if economics and other policies are important because they will in the end increase well-being, why not assess well-being more directly?" The answer they gave is that until now, we used those indirect indexes of well-being because we didn't have the tools to measure it or the technologies to produce it.

Nevertheless, according to Seligman (2011, p. 96) these times are over because general well-being is now quantifiable and it should therefore become a "new measure of prosperity." In fact, one of the consequences of this new approach was to question the relationship between economic prosperity and well-being. Diener and Seligman (2004) found that only when per capita income is under U.S. \$10,000 is there a direct relationship between these two variables. Above that ceiling the rise of per capita income does not necessarily produce more well-being. Therefore, a first thing to consider is that positive psychology's efforts to enhance people's happiness are addressed only to wealthy nations:

The wealthy nations of the world—North America, the European Union, Japan, and Australia—are at a Florentine moment: rich, at peace, enough food, health, and harmony. How will we invest our wealth? What will our renaissance be? (Seligman, 2011, p. 237)

Besides Seligman's odd description of our contemporary world, the answer to these questions is obvious: rich nations should invest in happiness. It is important to notice that this discourse naturalises the achievements of capitalist societies. In other words, positive psychology addresses individuals that "have made it," that, as we have said, "are already happy," and promises them that they will be able to further enhance this satisfactory condition.

Therefore, we are dealing with a major shift in the status of happiness in the West. If, since the Enlightenment, it was one of the most important normative horizons for almost any kind of individual or collective enterprise, for positive psychology happiness now involves not only a promise, but also the means to achieve it (Binkley, 2011a):

One of the most widespread beliefs is that happiness is a result, that is, an emotional state that occurs when we achieve something (like a professional title), engage in a certain behaviour (like going to the cinema) or when something good happens to us (like the birth of a child). While this is true, what we didn't know is that there is also a strong reverse relationship: happiness leads to good results. One of the major findings of positive psychology has been to discover that happier people live longer, are healthier, more productive, have better achievements, enjoy better relationships and are more generous. This discovery ... can be expressed as follows: dedicate yourself to being happy and everything else will follow. (Ibáñez, 2011, p. 11, our translation)

The novelty of positive psychology is what Ibáñez calls the "strong reverse relationship," which implies that happiness is no longer only an end, but also a capital in the present moment that boosts the production of other capitals such as health, or good relationships, and the enhancement of happiness itself. In short, to become happier you have to be already happy; only a happy worker can pursue more happiness.

If the classical Calvinistic notion of work supposed that in order to be productive one has to postpone the moment of satisfaction, when happiness turns into a human capital (and you are therefore expected to be a happy worker) you are not only negating the positivity, but the negativity of the substance on which you are working. In other words, no matter what you are working on—a particular state of mind, or answering a phone in a call centre—as long as you enjoy what you are doing, work actually negates the resistance of the substance to be worked on, as well as the subjective sacrifice linked with the moment of production.

In fact, if there is any kind of negativity that could threaten positive psychology's happiness, it is not the persistence of welfarist habits, but what Seligman (2011, p. 182) identifies as "dysphorias": depression, anxiety, and anger. Nevertheless, these dysphorias are not to be considered as the positive presence of a negative resistant substance on which the happy subject should work. What we are suggesting is a double displacement from Binkley's theory: first, what negates happiness are dysphorias—not traces of welfarism—and second, as the presence of a negative resistant substance, dysphorias are not the target of happy work. Seligman is explicit on this issue:

the skills of enjoying positive emotion ... are entirely different from the skills of not being depressed, not being anxious, and not being angry. These dysphorias get in the way of well-being, but they do not make well-being impossible; nor does the absence of sadness, anxiety,

and anger remotely guarantee happiness. The takeaway lesson from positive psychology is that positive mental health is not just the absence of mental illness. ... Positive mental health is a presence: the presence of positive emotion. (Seligman, 2011, p. 182)

So, for Seligman the kind of work promoted by positive psychology does not target anything but the presence of positive emotions. Dysphorias threaten the initial capital of happiness that anyone who would like to be happier still should have. It is this capital that allows individuals to find and “enjoy positive emotions” in any kind of work, and, by doing so, to become even happier. But neither working directly on dysphoric feelings, nor working on any other kind of positive, independent, resistant negativity, nor their absence, has anything to do with the possibility of enhancing happiness. In fact, criticising the scope of traditional psychotherapies, Seligman (2011, p. 54) says that a patient who has been freed from depression is not a happy patient, but an “empty” one. Moreover, he criticises traditional psychotherapies exactly because they focus on the transformation of negative aspects; in other words, because they always involve the effort of “fighting against something,” instead of enhancing positive emotions. In the following, we can clearly identify his critique of the traditional Calvinist conception of work:

From the first day I took up skiing until five years later when I quit, I was always fighting the mountain. Skiing was never easy. Every form of psychotherapy I know, every exercise, is a “fighting the mountain” intervention. In other words, these therapies are not self-reinforcing and so the benefits fade over time. In general, talk therapy techniques all share the property of being difficult to do, no fun at all, and difficult to incorporate to your life. ... By contrast, try this next positive psychology exercise. It is fun to do and self-maintaining once you catch on. (Seligman, 2011, p. 48)

Whether you are working on yourself to become happier, to get rid of your depression, or welfarist habits, and even if you are working on something other than yourself, happiness, as a new human capital, dissolves the obduracy of the object to be worked on. It changes the subjective experience of work, unleashing all kinds of positive emotions which are the substance to be consumed in order to produce more happiness. This means, for example, that if you are depressive, and you don’t only want to become “normal”—or, “empty” as Seligman puts it—you don’t have to fight against your depression; on the contrary, you should have fun with your therapy, and capitalise the positive emotions that working on it produces. Nevertheless, if the depression is so strong that it overwhelms your initial happiness capital—that is, if you are no longer able to work happily to get rid of it—you will need a traditional intervention. Again, Seligman (2011, p. 47) is explicit on this point: positive psychology addresses people who “have made it.” In terms of depression, that means people with mild symptoms.

Therefore, work on oneself or on something else is no longer the place where happiness is promised, but where the happiness one already has is put to work:

I worked there for about a month when my boss pulled me into a small room and told me I “obviously wasn’t happy enough to be there.” Sure, I was sleep deprived from working five other jobs to pay for private health ... and student loans ... Plus, I didn’t realize anyone had to be happy to work in a call centre. (Anonymous testimony as cited in Ehrenreich, 2010, p. 54)

What is the problem that this boss sees in this worker? The problem is that she is not having fun; probably her face shows traces of effort. In other words, she lacks the initial capital of happiness needed to invest in her work. She has been unable to dissolve the resistance of the hundreds of telephonic demands that she has to respond to, in order to experience positive emotions.

So, positive psychology, by isolating and assessing happiness as the human capital of human capitals,⁹ creates the conditions for a radical transcendence of the production/consumption disjunction in which to produce means to consume present happiness. By eliminating what for more than two centuries seemed to be an irreducible subjective dichotomy, between the producer and the consumer, the new happy subject accomplishes Fourier's utopian dream.

Working on oneself from a happy perspective

Until this point we have shown how positive psychology allows us to recognise major shifts in the way people are subjectified through work. In the final section, we focus specifically on the kind of work on oneself that this sub-discipline encourages. As Binkley (2011a) points out, a common problem in governmentality studies is that they put more emphasis on the processes of subjection or domination than on the processes of subjectivation. This means that many Foucauldian treatments of contemporary "psy" practices do not "fully embrace the autonomy, freedom and agency implied in neoliberal governmentality" (Binkley, 2011b, p. 84).

In this context, let us remember that for Binkley the happiness discussed by positive psychology forms a kind of hinge between the government of others and government of oneself. In other words, the pursuit of self-happiness—through individuals' free engagement in everyday practices—aligns them with the major neoliberal normative horizon of the entrepreneur of himself. Specifically, according to Binkley, the kind of work on oneself enabled by positive psychology is aimed at negating welfarist habits which are the substance to be transformed. In his words, those habits are "the things to be worked upon, those parts of the self not yet subjectified, parts which must be made more free, more agentive, more enterprising, etc." (Binkley, 2011b, p. 87). The negative work carried out upon that alien substance implies, for Binkley, a double movement of subjectification: becoming a neoliberal entrepreneur and leaving behind or getting rid of welfarist habits. In Binkley's words:

To be subjectified is also to engage in a project of de-subjectification, and what one is disposed against is the residual effect of a historically retrograde set of technologies, discourses and practices of the self ... De-subjectification occurs through the renunciation and negation of these historical vestiges. (2011b, p. 88)

To critically analyse this hypothesis, we will use an analytical grid composed of four concepts, conceived by Foucault as a way of understanding how technologies of the self¹⁰ or ethical practices¹¹ worked:

1. The ethical substance: "the aspect or the part of myself or my behaviour which is concerned with moral conduct ... For instance, you can say, in general, that in our

society the main field of morality, the part of ourselves which is most relevant for morality, is our feelings” (Foucault, 1983/1997b, p. 263).

2. Mode of subjectivation: “that is, the way in which people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations” (Foucault, 1983/1997b, p. 264).
3. The ethical work: by means of which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects (Foucault, 1983/1997b, p. 265).
4. The *telos*: the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way (Foucault, 1983/1997b, p. 265).

Subjectivation

In order to analyse the kind of work on oneself enabled by positive psychology with this grid, we will begin with the second concept proposed by Foucault: *subjectivation*. In the first place, if we compare it with the notion of *subjectification*, we can see that it emphasises the subjective axis of the relationship between subject and power. Second, we have chosen to begin with this concept because, as explained below, it refers to the set of pre-conditions that the subject must accept in order to give sense to the process of working on himself.

In fact, Foucault (1983/1997b, p. 264) sheds light on the scope of subjectivation by raising some fundamental questions: the ethical rules which guide the subject through the process of working on himself, are they rational, or divine? Is the subject who is supposed to follow these ethical precepts a master of himself? Is he a rational being? These are the kinds of questions Foucault poses, and through them we can identify two dimensions of the process of subjectivation. First of all, this concept leads us to analyse how and through what kind of concepts or discourses the practical rules are justified and make sense to the individuals following them. Second, they imply that to analyse the processes of subjectivation one also has to answer what kind of “ideal subject” is supposed to fit and be responsive to the specific order created by those rules. Therefore, if the practical rules are justified because they are rational, then the subject about to follow them must be rational too, and so on.

In order to justify the laws governing work on oneself, positive psychology uses an apparently irresistible combination: strong scientific rhetoric and the hypnotic spell of the signifier “happiness”: “This all may sound mushy and preachy to you. What transforms it to science is that there are at least eight controlled-outcome studies” (Seligman, 2002, p. 81). Because, who can resist the invitation to pursue self-happiness, or find it unjustified? Moreover, who can resist this promise if it is part of a discourse that has been sanctified with all the trappings of science?

On the other hand, regarding the kind of ideal subject for responding to that promise, as we have seen, positive psychology addresses the kind of First World capitalistic individual who “has made it.” And by this we mean that she is supposed to already possess an initial quota of happiness that can be enhanced.

In fact, this sub-discipline quantifies the different factors that can affect happiness as follows: genetic set point explains 50% of our happiness; circumstantial factors, such as money, political context, health, etc., 10%; and finally, intentional activity explains 40% of individual happiness (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2009, pp. 667–678). In other words, only 10% of happiness is out of the subject’s reach, because through voluntary actions

(40%), one can enhance the initial capital of happiness everybody is supposed to have (50%), even though it may vary among individuals.

Therefore, we can say that the first step in the technologies of the self is an authoritarian binary moment that implies accepting or refusing to consider oneself an individual who has an initial amount of happiness, that is, as a kind of subject who fits, or does not fit, the practical rules that will guide her through the work on herself. To put it more technically, the process of subjectivation begins when individuals accept to be situated within a particular field of sense, or domain of “veridiction,” that is: “a site of verification-falsification for governmental practice” (Foucault, 2008, p. 32). However, if someone rejects being positioned in that particular field of sense, then no work on oneself can be done—either because it will not make sense to do it, or because the individual will experience herself as lacking the basic skills to engage in such a task.

Ethical work

Seligman divides the ethical work prescribed by positive psychology into three different kinds according to their temporality (past, future, present). In the first place, following Aaron Beck (or Tim Beck as he refers to him) Seligman thinks that the reality and significance of *past experiences* to our present lives is no more than an interpretation. In other words, whether we are happy or unhappy with our past doesn’t depend on the contingent events that we have experienced, but on how we interpret them. Therefore, for Seligman, cognitive therapy for depression was: “developed as a technique to free people from their unfortunate past ... So I count Tim Beck as one of the great liberators” (Seligman, 2002, p. 68).

The initial capital of happiness that positive psychology seeks to enhance allows us to dissolve the resistance of the past, making it fully available for present action by the individual. In other words, only pessimistic or dysphoric people who do not believe in this actual capital experience their past as something external that limits their possibility of being happy:

The divorcee whose every thought of her ex-husband is about betrayal and lying, and the Palestinian whose ruminations about his birthplace are about trespass and hate, are both examples of bitterness. Frequent and intense negative thoughts about the past are the raw material that blocks the emotions of contentment and satisfaction. (Seligman, 2002, pp. 75–76)

The divorcee and the Palestinian are wrong to consider that their present misery is an unavoidable effect of their past experiences. For positive psychology the past is nothing but present cognitive interpretations. Therefore, the first movement an individual has to make is a kind of act of faith, by which she accepts that she has an initial capital of happiness that allows her to start working, not against the past, but by negating its negativity. Accordingly, positive psychology teaches different techniques that do not seek to “fight against” negative past experiences, but to fight against the idea that there is something we have to fight against: “Merely to know the surprising facts here—that early

past events, in fact, exert little or no influence on adult lives—is liberating” (Seligman, 2002, p. 68).

When we consider the ethical work directed at the *future life*, we arrive at the same conclusions, because for Seligman the future also should be considered as merely a question of variously pessimistic or optimistic interpretations (Seligman, 2002, pp. 88–91). In order to learn how to project our future as a happy one we have to “argue with ourselves” (Seligman, 2002, pp. 95–101) and dispute our pessimistic thoughts with evidence. Because pessimistic beliefs: “are merely beliefs ... And just because a person fears that he is unemployable, unlovable, or inadequate doesn’t mean it’s true. It is essential to stand back and distance yourself from your pessimistic explanations” (Seligman, 2002, p. 95). So even before you are fully convinced that you are not unemployable or unlovable, the sole fact that you start to work on the future as if it was simply an interpretation—the moment of taking distance from it—places you already in the happy worker perspective.

Considering both kinds of ethical work together, we can say that they pursue one and the same objective: to produce a pure present moment: “If you’re unhappy with your job, your friends, your marriage, your salary, or your looks, the first step you should take towards reaching greater lasting happiness is to put those things aside in mind for now” (Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 52). Don’t fight against it, put it aside or dissolve its materiality. Only when this kind of ethical work is done—negating the negativity of past and future—can positive emotions, the ethical substance of positive psychology, emerge.

Therefore, we have to distinguish two kinds of ethical work: those that seek to negate the negativity of past and future, and those that seek to enhance positive emotions and happiness in the present. The first kind of work on oneself has a negative orientation, and in a certain way we can consider it to be equivalent to the process of de-subjectification, as described by Binkley. But they are equivalent only in a limited sense. First, because these practices of negation focused on the past and the future they seek to create the conditions in which another kind of affirmative work on oneself will lead to an enhancement of happiness. In other words, these works of negation on oneself are not the dialectical reverse of the pursuit of happiness, as Binkley thinks. And, second, because these exercises do not seek to “fight against” past or future dysphoric feelings, but to dissolve their materiality, their exteriority, they allow the subject to focus his or her attention fully on the present. To express it more simply: to start working on the enhancement of happiness the individual has to fully engage in the present, which means that he or she cannot be haunted either by anger generated by the past, or by anxieties provoked by the future.

Let us turn now to the third modality of ethical work, the modality centred on the present. If the problem with the past and the future was how to re-signify them in a happy way, the problem with present happiness is how to capitalise positive emotions—or how to turn consumption into a productive task:

When we engage in pleasures, we are perhaps just consuming. The smell of perfume, the taste of raspberries, and the sensuality of a scalp rub are all high momentary delights, but they do not build anything for the future. They are not investments, nothing is accumulated. In contrast,

when we are engaged (absorbed in flow), perhaps we are investing, building psychological capital for our future. Perhaps flow is the state that marks psychological growth. (Seligman, 2002, p. 116)

This very specific state of mind, available for every person who is fully engaged in almost any kind of activity —“painting, making love, or playing volleyball” (Seligman, 2002, p. 114), has been characterised as “total absorption, [and] the suspension of consciousness” (Seligman, 2002, p. 111).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 31), flows happens when there is a certain relationship between skills and the difficulty of a specific task. For example, the combination of highly challenging tasks with low levels of skill produces anxiety. On the other hand, unchallenging tasks combined with high levels of skill, are boring experiences. Therefore, Csikszentmihalyi shows that flow happens only when both variables—difficulty of the task and skills levels—are high. In other words, only those tasks for which your skills are great but nevertheless present a challenge that takes you out of your comfort zone will produce enjoyment and perdurable happiness:

Pleasure is the good feeling that comes from satisfying homeostatic needs such as hunger, sex, and bodily comfort. Enjoyment, on the other hand, refers to the good feelings people experience when they break through the limits of homeostasis—when they do something that stretches them beyond what they were—in an athletic event, an artistic performance, a good deed, a stimulating conversation. Enjoyment, rather than pleasure, is what leads to personal growth and long-term happiness. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 12)

If, to arrive at this state of extreme satisfaction, “you need to deploy your highest strengths and talents” (Seligman, 2011, p. 11), positive psychology promotes another kind of “proven exercise,” of which the most important is termed “The Signature of Strengths” (SS), aimed at identifying those strengths that will make you flow. To do so, the subject must submit to an online test called “The VIA Survey to Character Strengths” (University of Pennsylvania, 2015). If, for example, their SS shows them to be a creative person, they are encouraged to engage more often in creative and challenging tasks in order to flow.

This state of mind produces an immanent kind of motivation towards work: you do not work to earn more money in order to pay your debts, or to repair your self-image that has been damaged in the past, but simply because you love doing what you are doing. At this point it doesn’t matter if you are working on yourself or on something else, because in fact the object on which positive psychology works is always inside you:

Happiness is not out there for us to find. The reason that it’s not *out* there is that it’s *inside* us ... happiness ... is a state of mind, a way of perceiving and approaching ourselves and the world in which we reside. (Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 40)

Therefore, only a happy a worker—an individual who has accepted that he or she is already happy and has got rid of the past and the future—can dissolve the materiality of the object to be worked on and transform the subjective experience of the task. By doing

so, all kind of positive emotions can be liberated whose enjoyment can produce even greater happiness.

Ethical substance

Consequently, the ethical substance of this kind of work is “positive emotions,” which are consumed and produced at work in the flow state of mind. This is an affirmative work, because it doesn’t appeal to a lacking subject, but to someone who already has something—initial happiness capital and positive emotions—but still wants more. Therefore, positive psychology work on oneself doesn’t participate in the rationality of common psychotherapies, but in the rationality of enhancement (Rose, 2007, pp. 20–22):

Lying awake at night, you probably ponder, as I have, how to go from plus two to plus seven in your life, not just how to go from minus five to minus three and feel a little less miserable day by day. If you are such a person, you have probably found the field of psychology to be a puzzling disappointment. (Seligman, 2002, p. ix)

Telos

Unlike therapy, this sub-discipline is not situated in the “abnormal–normal” axis but in a “normal–extraordinary” axis. This means that its telos is the extraordinarily happy subject.¹² Therefore, more precisely, it is not really *work* that positive psychology enables to make it possible to reach this telos, but *enhancement*, that is the affirmative process of increasing a positive ethical substance. In this sense, the “strengths” that individuals need in order to transcend normal happiness are what Seligman (2011) identifies as “the skills of enjoying positive emotion” (p. 182).

The analysis we have presented in this section on Foucault’s four concepts for understanding the technologies of the self differs significantly from Binkley’s argument about the processes of subjectification/de-subjectification in neoliberal governmentality. Some of the most significant differences apply in general and specifically to positive psychology.

The work on oneself advocated by positive psychology does not seek to transform an alien substance, but to enhance positive emotions that we already possess. The work of negation, or the process of de-subjectification, first does not work on welfarist traces, but on dysphoric feelings such as anger, depression, or anxiety. Second, these dysphoric feelings are not the ethical substance that the individual should transform in order to become happy. Working on them only makes you “normal,” not “extraordinarily happy” as positive psychology’s telos commands. Therefore, the work of negating those bad feelings seeks to negate their materiality, in order to create a pure present moment where another kind of work on oneself, now absolutely affirmative, is possible. The “flow” state of mind is the specific ethical work in which happiness is increased. In fact, strictly speaking, it should not be considered as work at all, but as enhancement. The task of enhancing oneself is a radical form of productive consumption: consuming positive emotions

produces, at the same time, happiness at work and adds to the capital of happiness for future productivity, by consuming more positive emotions.

Conclusion

This article shows the overlap between certain forms of conducting the conduct of others, embedded in the neoliberal subjectivity of the entrepreneur of himself, certain games of truth (positive psychology), and the new kind of subjectification enabled by them: already happy individuals who invest this initial human capital in becoming even happier. In other words, our main hypothesis is that the new happy subjectivity has been freed from the disjunction between production and consumption, and therefore represents a more radical version of that proposed by human capital theory.

By considering all the consequences of the transcendence of this subjective disjunction we have arrived at a new analysis of the processes of neoliberal subjectification. Returning to the insightful works of Sam Binkley on neoliberal governmentality and positive psychology, we have shown that Binkley does not fully appreciate this major shift, and that as a result he still conceives of work on oneself according to the Calvinistic paradigm: a subjectivity divided between present effort and future satisfaction. Instead of this, we seek to demonstrate that the main purpose of the work on oneself enabled by positive psychology is precisely to erase this classical division. Thus, the new entrepreneur of oneself does not really *work* in order to produce the happiness one lacks, but by consuming the happiness one already has, one seeks to enhance it, and by doing so, become an extraordinarily happy subject.

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Notes

1. For “*subjectification*” we understand the double process of becoming subject which involves the simultaneity between submission and agency (Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011), between the “objective” dimension of power, which is how power *objectivises* and restrains individuals to certain forms of subjectivities, and the active ways in which individuals restrain themselves willingly to certain ways of being subject (Butler, 1997, p. 14). In other words, the concept of subjectification implies analysing how the processes of *subjection*—or *domination*—interact with those of *subjectivation*.
2. For a critical review of the conceptual underpinnings and guiding ideals of positive psychology, see Christopher, Richardson, and Slife (2008). For a critical review of North American contemporary culture and the search for happiness see Wilson (2008) and Ehrenreich (2010). On how the search for happiness can make us unhappy, see Bruckner (2010). For a feminist

critique from a cultural studies perspective, see Ahmed (2010). For a series of papers that approach the relationship between governing people and happiness from different angles, see the special issue of *Health, Culture and Society* (Aubrecht, 2013). For a critique from a contemporary critical theory perspective, see Morgan (2014). For a review of critical perspectives on happiness discourses, see Frawley (2015). Finally, on how the contemporary promise of happiness diverts critical attention away from broader political and economic problems see Davies (2015).

3. By “welfarist traces or habits” Binkley refers to a set of deeply embedded personal characteristics and values, rooted in Keynesian welfarism. This economic discourse, “projected an overarching faith in an implicit human collectivism and in the capacity of states to manage social provisioning” (Binkley, 2014, p. 20). Therefore, it promoted ways of being which believed and counted on social integration, institutional trust, interpersonal dependency, etc.
4. We can find the distinction between work as negating a positivity or as negating a negativity in Hegel’s dialectic of the Lordship and Bondage. For Hegel (1977) the bondsman’s work consists in a never-ending transformation (negation) of an independent and irreducible substance: “the thing is independent *vis-à-vis* the bondsman, whose negating of it ... cannot go the length of being altogether done with it to the point of annihilation; in other words, he only *works* on it” (p. 116). On the other hand, the lord’s relationship with the thing, through the mediation of the bondsman, “becomes ... the sheer negation of the thing, or the enjoyment of it.” The lord “takes to himself only the dependent aspect of the thing and has a pure enjoyment of it” (p. 116). Therefore, the bondsman’s work consists of a never-ending negation and recognition of the positive and independent existence of a negativity that resists—the substance to be transformed. On the other hand, the lord does not work, he enjoys and consumes. This means that he is not facing an independent positive presence of a resistant negativity, consequently his action, mediated by the effort of the bondsman, consists in the negation of the negative resistance of the substance.
5. “Problematisation does not mean the representation of a pre-existent object, or the creation by discourse of an object that does not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices which makes something enter into the game of truth and falsity and constitutes it as an object for thought” (Foucault, 1984/2001, p. 1489, our translation).
6. For the link between resilience conceptions and neoliberalism, see Neocleous (2013) and Walker and Cooper (2011). As a radical example of the possibility of capitalising even the worst experiences of war, see: “Turning Trauma into Growth,” by Seligman (2011, Chapter 8).
7. “The acquisition of money, and more and more money, takes place simultaneously with the strictest avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of it” (Weber, 2001, p. 17).
8. For the distinction between horizontal and vertical antagonism, see Žižek (2002, p. 65).
9. Happiness is a human capital that, at the same time, reproduces itself—happy people tend to be happier—and enhances all other forms of human capitals—happy people learn more, are healthier, etc.
10. Technologies of the self: “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1982/1997a, p. 225).
11. Ethical practices: “the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions” (Foucault, 1983/1997b, p. 263).
12. The telos of enhancement has been described as the search “for more, for better, for the unlimited, or even for the merely different [desires that] will not be satisfied with the average, nor will they take their bearings from the distinction between normal and abnormal, or even between the healthy and the better-than-healthy” (Kass, 2003, p. 17).

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