

## Pioneers and Fellow Travellers? A brief note on Positive Psychology, Isabel Briggs Myers and C.G. Jung

*I never had any doubt that it wasn't a good idea to be me*

Isabel Briggs Myers

Being positive, seeking it or desiring that others take that perspective, however defined, has a kind of natural appeal. It can also be problematic, avoidant and distinctly unhelpful, as Voltaire's *Candide* or Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) have expressed.

The MBTI Step III Manual identifies Isabel Myers' work as "positive psychology" which antedates Martin Seligman and others' work by several decades, seeking to identify her work with this movement.

I think this is a mistake, but not because Myers' ideas weren't positive in intent. In an apocryphal statement made to Mary McCaulley she said "You psychologists tell people what's wrong with them...I want to tell people what's right with them." She avoided pathologies, but not pitfalls or developmental issues.

This is not Positive Psychology, however, but an attempt at a normal psychology of individual differences. What's "right" about people isn't necessarily being positive; Myers mentions an "over-positive" person in her early work. Elsewhere, she wrote:

*"The two kinds of people we wished to distinguish on Extraversion-Introversion were the normal well-adjusted introvert and the normal well-adjusted extravert. Since we sharply disagreed with the prevailing tendency to confound introversion with neurotic tendency we took the precaution of not even reading existing introversion tests. The questions should therefore deal with self-reportable surface contrasts in habits reactions and points of view that do not imply inferiorities."*

Isabel Myers is not a pioneer of Positive Psychology. She may be considered a precursor of positive ideas about personality, somewhat like humanistic psychology and similar movements. Her ideas had no general influence outside a small coterie and were not part of general psychological discourse. Her complete method wasn't made public until very recently, in a professional Manual. Allen Hammer has mentioned a similarity between Myers' approach and Bandura's ideas, but there are no papers published that examine this proposition.

C.G.Jung's work sets out in part to claim legitimacy for introversion and a life free of neurosis for an individual self, but his focus as a clinician is not the positive, but what has gone wrong. Seligman refers to Jung, but not his types (2000).

A thinker has the right to be critical

Isabel Briggs Myers

Sheldon and King call Positive Psychology "the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and values" (2001) i.e. using standard empirical methods to investigate relevant topics, suggesting method has been decided before examining any content. Whether the perspective of logical positivism is appropriate for the subject matter is conjectural. It seeks to distance itself from the self-help movement, of which its application nonetheless appears a part. This is a perspective of character traits. Type codes don't identify bundles of traits, but psychological orientation.

Positive Psychology appears a natural progression from Martin Seligman's earlier work in learned helplessness and optimism, grounded in the cognitive perspective of Beck and others. These useful methods and ideas favour extraverted thinking and eschew an unconscious of any sort.



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