
How the “Culture of Positivity” Debilitates Fear Studies



R. Michael Fisher

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In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute

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Fear Studies

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How the “Culture of Positivity” Debilitates Fear Studies

- R. Michael Fisher,¹ Ph.D.

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Abstract

The author explores the intersectionality of two forms of oppression that debilitate the ongoing growth and maturity of Fear Studies in general and the overall philosophy and theorizing about “fear itself.” The more common form is “culture of fear” and lots has been written about that. The one less talked about, and another “enemy” of Fearlessness, is the rapid growing “positivity culture” where it is reinforced in popular culture and even in parts of academia and professional practices, that “we should promote positive” thoughts, ideas, emotions, and not the negative. Fisher briefly explores this latter problem in fearwork and his own experiences, including the way positivity (also he calls “fear-positivism”) has debilitated the critical theory perspective of research and practices on “fear(ism).” He calls for all people to be extra aware and critical that there may be a downside to being overly positive and that such an attitude, becomes an ideology itself to prevent critical thought. We have a Fear Problem problem!

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Introduction

There is a vast literature now a days in popular culture especially that promotes “be positive.” The arguments are many of why this is a good thing. I won’t be repeating or summarizing that literature, but one can research it yourself, starting with the search term (if you wish) “positive thinking” or “positive attitude.” Many teachers, ‘gurus’ alike, even professionals and academics have bought into this largely (neo-)liberal idea that it is better to be positive than negative. It’s better for your health and success in life, etc.

On first hand this is a reasonable notion. I too think being “positive” can be a good way to avoid playing out self-harming and “negative” thinking that disables one to function well, to grow and develop their human potential. It can also enhance relationships. So, there are obviously some partial truths to be had about why “positive” is positive. That’s not my critique here. There is also a growing literature of skepticism about this tendency. I want to say there is an old battle amongst philosophers as well about this, and what is the best balance of being “positive” and “negative.” Again, you can search out the positivity literature, and even search the term “positivity culture” which is what I will focus on in this discussion paper. You ought to also look at the backlash criticism to positivity culture and positive thinking.

My interest is to apply the critiques of positivity culture and its imposition of its views of “how to be” and “how to think”—that is positive—and what that does to influence the growth and development of Fear Studies. I have lots of articles on Fear (‘Fear’) Studies on the internet in a Google Scholar search with my name “R. Michael Fisher” you will find these articles available. So, to do good fearwork as a research endeavor, which has occupied me for 30 years, and to write and teach about the importance of good fear education, I have often run into a massive resistance amongst people to support this endeavor, this Fearlessness Project or whatever else I have called it over the decades. People often say, “fear is too negative” and they don’t want to go there. Similarly, they may say that with the use of “fearism” (e.g., Desh Subba’s work) and this is no different of a popular attitude as one would find if they tried to talk about “racism” or any of the other major oppressions that exist. It’s not popular. And its becoming less so as well, in my experience and with others who do anti-oppression work. Again, I’ll cover some of what is behind “anti-oppression” work (i.e., based on critical theory, decolonization theory, and a lot of postmodern criticism) (see the overview discussion of Jamila Malika). But this paper is not going to focus on that battle for what is the best theoretical stand-

point(s) for bringing liberation to our societies. In fact, with the positivity culture and its discourse, it is near impossible to have anyone interested in a discussion of oppression and liberation. The latter word, is what I bring to my work. And, it is even harder to have a discussion about “being critical” as so often that is written off as “being too negative” and people don’t want to go there. I have written lots on this over the decades of noticing this creeping “enemy” of fear and fearlessness research and teaching. Now, to the brief points I want to make about positivity culture as germane to Fear Studies.

Brief Background Context: Psychologism

If you follow any of my publications and teaching since late 1989, you’ll see that I have promoted a counterhegemonic movement called “In Search of Fearlessness Project” (later called “Fearlessness Movement”) as a means to organize itself to challenge and undermine the ‘Fear’ Project, the latter which dominates and toxifies the planet. I will not repeat all that background here.

It is arguable, that even though I had studied many disciplines of knowledge, had many career tracks, and had been a life-long learner before 1989, there was a ‘gap’ that I intuited in human understanding. I felt it was so significant that unless we ‘fix’ the problem of this ‘gap’ in our knowledge and practices, our species and many others would become extinct before too long. The ecological and human crises, when I was a teenager and young 20s person, were always the background of all my post-secondary schooling. They formed the context of meaning and constant critique of the status quo of societies and civilization, for my own existence and became a concern and purpose for my life. But it was not until the jolting awakening in late 1989 did I realize that fear and fearlessness would be central to my research and search for solutions to that ‘gap.’

My growing and big critique is that psychology is continually (for the most part) unaware of its own “cognitive pathologies” (e.g., psychologism) of which Maslow (1966) detailed as a psychologist himself.² Few if any psychologists today know about Maslow’s or Ken Wilber’s critique as in the “death of psychology” he called for some years ago, never mind my own. My quick point is that Psychology with its pathologies, biases, unreflexivi-

² Maslow, A. (1966). *The psychology of science: A reconnaissance*. New York: Harper and Row.

ty (for the most part) and its curricular hidden domination (i.e., psychologism) have led it to be very powerful in influencing societies everywhere, especially in the last 150+ years or so, especially in the Human Potential Movement, and ‘New Age’ movement, as we live in a Psychological Age—referring mainly to the West, and to the so-called “developed countries.” Cognitive-behaviorism as one psychology of the many, has in particular stolen itself to become the biggest (political and ideological) power and most commonly relied on psychology of the day. For these, and many other, reasons my learning led me to be very critical of psychology and Psychology. I actually began to avoid associating with it for many years.

The DREAM I Just Had

The “Enemy” of Fear Studies: Positivity Culture in Yoga

I had a dream last night (April 23). It came after listening to a podcast by a tough-thinking reflective yogini (young black woman, named Jamila Malika³) talking about the need to bring serious systematic critique into the way that yoga is being taught too often in yoga studios (especially, in the popularized Western versions) without a critical consciousness regarding oppression.

She has a great love for yoga and the spirituality of embodiment practices and is joyful that yoga can help people feel better. However, most of the podcast is her talking about the predominant failure of yoga teachers and yoga cultures and subcultures today in that they often have the problem of “positivity culture” (neoliberalism ideology) disabling the real liberation of people.

Her viewpoint and ‘other’ practice she brings to yoga teaching is what is called anti-oppression work. Most basically the term *anti-oppression*, often taught by visibly oppressed groups, for e.g., Black people and others of color, people with visible physical disabilities, those in chronic poverty, etc., is the work of theory and practices

³ https://kathrynbruniyoung.com/jamilah-malika-anti-oppression/?fbclid=IwAR0AljZXR0mYrfRx81G4BypVJWqFrJpcjZwVyFE7bR_nxHVkylWaP6vEoRw

(i.e., praxis) which attempts in all situations to make sure that one is not passing on unconsciously or consciously, or supporting the passing on, of oppression (of all kinds). It is bringing critical theory into whatever humans do together. Listen to her podcast talk for more info.

Immediately, my paper here has the attitude of “negative” and is proud of that. This is not politically correct so much anymore especially in many circles of popular culture and beyond that. I want to talk about the negative impact of “positivity culture” and explain that more, and go beyond what this yogini was addressing as a problem in yoga communities of practice, especially today and in the Western world. I have no idea if there is this same problem in other parts of the world, I am speaking mostly, as is this yogini, of what happens in the North American context. That’s where she and I were raised and live.

But now to my dream to intro what I feel is the same serious problem of infectivity that comes into Fear Studies, into philosophy of fear(ism), into methodologies, into teaching, and interrupts the deepest understanding in my own fearlessness philosophy and psychology as I have been talking about these domains of fearwork for three decades.

DREAM

The scene was I was with a small group of people in a house and was involved in various activities, with fine details about delivering various “teachings” and not all by me, as there was someone else who owned the house and was facilitating the overall event. Somehow I was connected to this learning community but the dream gave no more information as to how. It turned out I seemed to be getting along with everyone and we were all respectful and positive with each other and the work and learning we were doing. So far, so good. The dream narrator was creating an environment of cooperation and helpfulness and I felt good about it all to this point. Then suddenly, the dream took a bit of a turn, and as observer of the dream it took me by surprise. A lesson to come.

I noticed that we moved from the house into a big theatre kind of space as the participants were growing substantially in numbers. At one point, there was some kind of summary of the “teachings” and our experience as a group going on. The leader of this was a man and was being listened to carefully and all seemed fine. Then he introduced the topic of “fear” and was implicitly referring to me to say something. I playfully joined in to say my part, and introduced myself as the Fear Doctor. The crowd had already heard from me in other venues and the leader knew of my work too and so all was just fine and I said something very “acceptable” to the crowd about my teaching on fear. It went something like: “Yes, fear can be a springboard for your growth.” I even demonstrated this with my body and sprung up off my feet above the heads of the crowd and smiled at them. They all seemed to enjoy my brief performance and the leader was nodding in agreement and repeated more or less what I just said, and that was all positive.

However, I was aware after saying and demonstrating the positive side of understanding and working with fear in this metaphor, that there was more to tell and the not so positive side. As the leader was near dismissing the group gather for a break or ending the workshop, I said I have more to say. “I want to say one more thing.” He was not so keen on it, and interrupted me as I got my first few words out, and as I was forming in my mind the message I wanted to pass on which in my head went something like this: “As well as fear being a springboard for your growth and human potential, there is another thing. Fear is also a mystery. We don’t actually know all there is to fear and we ought to remember this on our journeys to grow, heal and transform.” The leader immediately stopped me after a few words out of my mouth on this larger issue, as he said, “There’s nothing more to say. You’ve already said it.”

The Fear Problem Problem

I awoke from the dream with some anger. Then I realized this is what happens to me most of the time when I teach. People want to hear *only the positivity side* of the Fear Factor. They don’t want to

hear what my experience and research about the other issues around Fear involve. I have so many experiences of being interrupted by leaders promoting some “positive” means of personal growth and development when I attend lectures. Or spiritual circles and I interrupt with another view. I could go on and on at the ways I have been dismissed when serving on Boards, Committees, and other group processes ever since I can remember. I simply, find there is not space in these various diverse groups for critique, and I mean serious critique. This is not a good or positive thing! People are losing the capacity to enter critique and be constructive. They are avoiding conflict and not learning effective conflict management or fear management because they are so afraid of conflict and critique will bring up in all likelihood some conflict. Fear is controlling the avoidance. Then if you look closer below the first round of how positive thinking is positive, for a lot of reasons, you see that the ideology now is growing to exclude the negative—that is, good critique and good anti-oppression work. One is always supposed to be “positive.”

Much of this is taught unfortunately by well-meaning counselors and psychologists of various kinds because they have read the literature on the psychology of being positive and how it produces more health and good results than the psychology of being negative. They have, again, very unfortunately read and interpreted the psychological research on these topics in a skewed way—meaning, a very (neo-)liberal way, and a way that is good for their business. People in general want to feel better, so these professions typical “sell” the client what they want, and so, focus is on being positive and feeling better. Meanwhile, the psychology and cultural context of a broader world, and an oppressive society are largely side-lined and omitted, if not such a conflict perspective and critical theory are demeaned by the “liberal” practitioners and leaders of all stripes.

When I began writing about a Fear Problem decades ago, much of that problem is that people are afraid to talk about “fear” and they get even more afraid to talk about that which is discomfoting. They don’t want to look very deep. And the Fear Problem won’t be solved by superficial and/or positive thinking. Again, my point of this paper is not to make all those arguments over again, they are in my other published writings. What I have noticed is that in the field of people who study “fear” seriously, and

even some of the more radical versions of that in the movements of “fearism” studies and philosophy (e.g., Desh Subba et al.)... there is a tendency among some of the proponents to “be positive” with fear and its construction. They tend to fall into a motivational (insspirational) psychology discourse and ignore or downplay the very toxic versions of *fearism-t* (toxic form)—or simply, they try so hard to make fear a positive thing. Remember, my dream above. When I first spoke in the big group about “fear is a spring board” for growth and development. Everyone in the big group and their leader wanted to hear about that but they didn’t want to hear about the rest of what I had to say. My message is that most people become over confident too quickly, with a little information, or a workshop, that they now understand all there is to understand about fear and its management and they stop being critical and looking at the sources of fear-knowledge production biases—and, how fear serves the oppression and thus many who have big power in oppressive societies don’t really want people to have access to all of what “fear itself” is and how it forms and makes us conform to authority—that is, to oppressive systems of power (and abuses of power). That’s the crux of the Fear Problem, that is, when it is framed within an anti-oppression framework of analysis. That’s why I have called the ‘Fear’ Project what it is or ‘Fear’ Matrix as oppressive systems controlling everything and everyone, more or less. I then called it “fearism” as early as 1990 and I have been developing that notion and scholars have picked up on it. Again, you can search that all in my many publications available to read up on it more.

Fearism-t and racism, sexism, classism, etc. are a Fear Problem because “fear” is at the core of their oppressive dynamics. That seems so obvious to me. But boy, when you are operating in a liberal environment, not radical, there is a strong positivity culture that emerges to try to make everything said about fear more positive. They want me more positive. They don’t want to take on more problems and the Fear Problem is a bigger problem they don’t feel they can handle, or simply they say it is “too negative” focused and that isn’t healthy. You know that anyone who has this negative attitude towards the negative critique type of analysis, is not really being “positive” now are they! No, they are only positive when it suits them to be positive about being positive. I find these people the “fear-positivists” for example, very annoyingly in denial of just how negative and critical they are about the Fear Problem. But the real problem is they deny they are so afraid, and it is fear-based motivation that determines the formation of their “positivity.” That’s something they are very avoidant of considering. Look, if they want to argue otherwise, and suggest my fearanalysis is inaccurate, then go for it, let me hear the arguments.

You all have the right to disagree with me, and visa versa. But, reality of my experience is that they don't want to have that debate, conversation, or simply they don't want to know about "*fearism*" (i.e., fearism-t) as a form of oppression below all other forms of oppression. In general, most of my colleagues also don't want to pursue this problematic, that is, the problem with the problem of how we talk about and conceptualize "fear itself." And, as I said, in my dream, it is a "mystery" and I don't just mean that in some romantic spiritual and mythic sense, or magical way of relating to fear. That's part of it, but mystery means a lot more when you come from the perspective of an anti-oppression analysis. That's where the liberal minded and standing people who study fear don't want to look at. Anti-oppression work is not so pretty, and not so positive. You ought to listen to the podcast of the yogini teacher and she gives really good and rational reasons why positivity culture really is oppressive itself to the oppressed. Now, there's a very uncomfortable thought!

My point, of this largely "opinion piece" is that I am not just giving my opinion, and I am not just being "negative" for the sake of being anti-positive. That's not my intention or means of argumentation. I am well aware of that rebellious tendency and it is common out there in the world today of "opinions" everywhere. I think anyone who studies a topic for 30 years is expressing more than an opinion. But, I have chosen to be more opinionated than scholarly, that is true, and that's merely a strategy to try to say from the heart—and say it straight—without a lot of academic sounding diversions and objectivity. I've done my homework on many aspects of the problem with the Fear Problem and why fear-positivism is not going to work to enhance the field of Fear Studies. That's what I am really concerned about. The field has already been largely crippled, if not stalled, in relative terms to how it could really grow, if it weren't for two major forces: (a) the culture of fear dynamic, and (b) the culture of positivity dynamic. That's what I want people to investigate more closely, and especially the latter because much less has been written and researched on it. I smell it out as the really oppressive ideology of our times—again, in the North American context, at least. It is an "enemy" of Fearlessness.
