



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology

Edited by Aaron Jarden

“Contemplation, introspection, curiosity turning inward, and this entire meaning making system is fertile terrain for the future of positive psychology”—**Todd Kashdan**

“We almost don’t need to have a separate area called positive psychology, because now it’s become part of most people’s thinking. It’s achieved critical mass”—**Sonja Lyubomirsky**

“The single massive achievement of positive psychology is that it has legitimized the study of what’s right with people”—**Alex Linley**

“Everywhere in the world, people want to be happy, to get along with other people, to have their needs met, to develop and grow, and to have respect. People want to love and to be loved. It is these universals that we want to study as positive psychologists”—**Ed Diener**

“Positive psychology has grown and it’s captured practical, applied and research attention across many disciplines around this now widely accepted notion that we can learn how to be better off. That has been remarkable. I don’t think that anyone saw it coming”—**Mike Steger**

“Any time that I think of a prototypical positive intervention that I want people to stick with, I think of the gratitude visit and the three good things exercise as a place to start”—**Acacia Parks**

“I think that positive psychology has made incredible strides and has moved way beyond so many of the nay-sayers and people that were skeptical suggesting that positive psychology was just a fad, and that it was going to be done and over in just a few years. They turned out to be completely wrong on that”—**Ryan Niemiec**

“Counting your blessings is great but it’s not going to be an intervention that saves the world, and gratitude letters are not going to either”—**Nic Marks**

“One of the biggest achievements of positive psychology to date is just getting on the public radar; of being clearly an area of science worth investing in, worth paying attention to, worth applying”—**Barbara Fredrickson**

“The future development of positive psychology at the moment lies in its international appeal”—**Ilona Boniwell**

“The whole field of positive psychology is exploding; it’s great in terms of the future, in terms of what lies ahead”—**Robert Vallerand**

“I have been concerned about the use of strengths interventions as if they are a fool-proof way to enhance wellbeing. Strengths are not a wind-up toy, ready to be taken out of the box, and off you go”—**Denise Quinlan**

“The real interventions in our life are family, school, jobs, and the political systems in which we live: these interventions don’t last two weeks, they last all our lives”—**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**



Contents

Introduction	70
Todd Kashdan	72
Sonja Lyubomirsky	79
Alex Linley	83
Ed Diener	88
Mike Steger	92
Acacia Parks	98
Ryan Niemiec	105
Nic Marks	110
Barbara Fredrickson	116
Ilona Boniwell	119
Robert Vallerand	125
Denise Quinlan	131
Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi	136
Acknowledgments	140
Positive psychology resources	141
About the author	142
Review of Positive psychologists on positive psychology <i>Margarita Tarragona</i>	143
Review of Positive psychologists on positive psychology <i>Bridget Grenville-Cleave</i>	146



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology

Introduction

Interest in positive psychology is rapidly expanding as the field continues to make swift progress in terms of scientific advancement and understanding. There are more courses, more workshops, more conferences, more students, more associations, more journals and more textbooks than ever before. The news media and public are thirsty for information related to happiness and, specifically, wellbeing, and for all facets of positive psychology generally. Psychology departments are increasingly looking to teach courses and offer qualifications that focus specifically on positive psychology, and various organisations are trying to understand how they can best capitalise on and harness the field's initial scientific findings.

What you don't hear so much about is how positive psychology operates in the real world, how researchers and practitioners became interested in positive psychology, how they work with clients and the various models and theories they use. What do they find most useful? What happens to their thinking and practice as they become experienced and knowledgeable in the positive psychology arena? Why did they decide to move into positive psychology? What do they get out of being involved in the positive psychology community? What directions are they and the field heading towards?

This book discusses these kinds of questions and issues, and is a book for all those in the wellbeing, helping professional and psychological fields interested in knowing more about the development, theory, research and application of the new field of positive psychology. It is a book that spans an eclectic range of interests from psychology students to psychologists, to coaches, to media and beyond.

In the following chapters, thirteen people with various degrees of knowledge and skill in different facets of the positive psychology field share their experiences, concerns, hopes and dreams, thoughts, and opinions in interview format. All interviews were conducted July to October 2011 and thus reflect thinking at that time. Before publication, all interviewees approved their transcripts as being accurate.

Thirteen interviews is obviously too small a number to arrive at any generalisation. This book is not research *per se*; it is exploratory in nature and should be consumed in that light. Placement and order of each interview is random rather than sequential, meaning that they may be read in any order.

My sincere thanks and gratitude to the giants of this field, and to the up and coming stars for passing on their wisdom and knowledge. I hope this book may be useful to those wanting to know more about what positive psychology is, how it developed, where it is going, how it is going to get there, and to those looking to move into the positive psychology arena. In short, I hope these interviews are engaging and provide further insight into this new and rapidly developing field, and that it enriches your understanding of positive psychology as it currently stands.



Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Todd Kashdan

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Todd Kashdan, a.k.a. ‘the guns of positive psychology’, is an associate professor of psychology and senior scientist of the Center for Consciousness and Transformation at George Mason University. Todd trained in clinical psychology and is well known for his research into curiosity, social relationships, personality in daily life, meaning and purpose in life, and their links to all aspects of wellbeing.

Are you curious about the questions I’m going to ask?

Of course! I hate to know the questions ahead of time.

OK then, well, what prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?

I’ve been in positive psychology a little over a decade now. The origin for me was when I was sitting in a doctor’s office, and at the time I was studying anxiety and panic attacks. In the office was an issue of *Psychology Today* and the main article was about sexuality and high suicide rates, with a small subtitle referring to an article on happiness and flow (a concept I had never heard of before). Immediately I was thinking to myself that, while I’m devoting my career to helping people to deal with their anxiety problems, when it comes down to it, once their anxiety has dissipated, I’d basically shake their hand and say how amazing they’d been over the course of eight weeks and send them on their way; not thinking about or working with them on how they might organize their life now that they have eight extra hours of time and energy to devote to it. When I read [Mihaly] Csikszentmihalyi’s article on happiness and flow I thought to myself, it’s interesting, the idea that as psychologists, we’re going to help people organize their lives, and that was the moment for me. I don’t want just to reduce people’s anxiety, in fact I don’t know if that’s always a good thing. I want to organize and structure people’s lives in a way that’s congruent with the values that they care most about. That all hit me when I was sitting in the doctor’s office waiting for my dermatologist appointment.

What did you do before positive psychology?

Well before I did that I worked on the floor of the NY Stock Exchange as an assistant to a specialist. In brief, specialist firms create markets for particular stocks such that if there are lots of buyers but no sellers, they will step in and sell stock to particular people and companies. Essentially, for 30 stocks, any transaction in the world had to go through my fingertips.



Were there any other key events that changed you and made you move into the field of positive psychology?

My father left my twin brother and I when we were about two years old. My parents got divorced and then he just took off and never really spoke to us again. My mother died when I was thirteen. I never really defined myself as being someone who was an orphan or overcoming adversities, but everyone else always was surprised. I remember meeting a really distinguished psychologist at the University of Virginia, Irving Gottesman. He's well known for research on schizophrenia. After an interview with him he said to me, "You beat the odds, you're supposed to be in jail, you're supposed to be the drug addict, yet here you are, an orphan at 21 years of age, and you're just not supposed to be here at this stage of your life". It made me realize the power of resilience. You shouldn't be defining yourself by resilience, but it becomes embedded within the cells of your body. That's the type of idea that I like to promote in people's lives. Not to make it their aim to make themselves become resilient, but use what we know about the human condition to help them overcome difficult life events so that they get bred into the bone. This resonates with me because I've overcome loss and adversity, but never defined myself by that adversity.

In general terms, and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

It's a tough question because there's the established foundation of positive psychology and then there's what I think it should be, and I always struggle between these two worlds. The core of positive psychology since its inception has been positive emotions and strengths of character; and then particular elements of relationships that allow them to flourish harmoniously for the long term. I think that all three of these are integral to living a well-lived life. I think that the problem is that positive emotions are the biggest strength and also the biggest problem for positive psychology. There are two ways of looking at positive emotions. One is that they are just a barometer or gauge that your life is going well. The other is that positive emotions are what we are aiming to construct—we want to construct our life so that there is a high frequency of positive emotions and a low frequency of negative emotions. To me, there are fundamental problems when this is the primary target for our interventions and what we want to create in our lives. I view positive emotions as the residual benefit of focusing on meaning and purpose in life, and close relationships. And from striving toward these personal projects, you're going to fill your pockets with emotional experiences. They're building blocks/cells and what's important is, 'What's the connective tissue among these moments?'. That is what should be more fundamental to positive psychology. What do you want to be written on your tombstone? What do you want to be in your obituary? I think few people are going to answer 'here lies a person who had a high frequency of positive emotions and a low frequency of negative emotions'. Instead, they are going to want a tombstone that discusses intimate relationships, self-sacrifice, the search for ultimate truths, accomplishment, etc. But I can understand why these deeper topics are not at the forefront of positive psychology. After all, they don't work as well in a media sound-bite. But we should be interested in the connective tissue among positive experiences and the architectural framework that houses them, as opposed to just increasing the amount of positive experiences.

What is one big question that positive psychology answers?

How do you maintain a lasting, trusting, and satisfying relationship? Two people who want to be committed to each other in a way where each feels accepted, validated, understood, with a sense of vitality and room to continually evolve. I think we've nailed that.

Which professional groups of people are most interested in harnessing positive psychology?

That's a really tough one!

I mean positive psychology is being applied in education, in health, in organizations, in therapy, even in the army. Is there somewhere else you think positive psychology is going to go next?

I hope that it is in the government. I think that right now education is where the action is. Everything should focus on the future. One of my big beefs with positive psychology is that there is insufficient generativity and generosity right now. There is an unusual culture of celebrities and hero worship: who's published the books, who are the distinguished professors, who's being cited in introductory psychology textbooks, who's making the money, those kinds of things. Who's the next generation? I don't know who the hell they are right now, but there are creative ideas floating around that people are afraid to reveal, given the possibility that they might look like idiots. Most people who come up with unusual great ideas, get rejected. I want to invest in the future of positive psychology. Right now education is where the action is. Everyone I talk to speaks about the idea that something is wrong at the government level in that they control resources, they decide how much money goes to improving the welfare of humanity, they decide how much money is going to the business organizations, they decide what products they are going to subsidize. With government at the highest realm of the hierarchy, that's where positive psychology needs to be playing a role. Right now there is almost nothing at the governmental level.

As a positive psychology practitioner and expert, are there any situations that you need to avoid, or things that you need to be careful of when you are applying the science in practice?

As a practitioner, here is the important question to attend to, 'What are the things the person, the couple, the organization that you are working with, are striving to obtain?'. Let's not impose outcomes on them. If they're interested in increasing courage and sharing creative ideas, and we end up being the world's greatest expert on morale and leadership, we have to start with and focus on the things they are interested in and not what we're interested in. What I worry about is that there are a lot of practitioners in positive psychology, but I don't know who is a generalist and who's a specialist. Ten years since the inception of this thing called positive psychology and there are still no specialties. You're just a positive psychologist. And I think that's particularly problematic. Should you be working with parents if the work you're most familiar with is Richard Davison's and pre-frontal cortex activity? If your primary knowledge base happens to be in positive organizational behavior, what exactly makes you qualified to work with parents and children and the interaction between them?

I know you're clinically trained and also do clinical work. Do you think the scientist-practitioner model that a lot of clinicians gravitate to is a good model for positive psychologists to adopt as well?

The scientist-practitioner model has been a little problematic because of the requirement for everything to be empirically supported before it can be adopted in the world. The mantra that I have adopted over the past few years is that we should be guided, as opposed to governed, by the research. If that fits with the scientist-practitioner model, then I'm for it. However if the scientist-practitioner model sets the bar even higher before we can use the science, then I'm a bit unsure that this level of quality control can be sustained.

I think I've heard you previously term this approach as being 'empirically informed'?

Yes, scientifically informed. That's right.

If you could start learning about positive psychology again from the beginning, I mean you're a decade or more in now, what would you do differently?

Nearly everything that I have studied should be centered on the situational context that it is embedded in. That could be people in cults, it could be adults and their relationships with their friends or parents, it could be people embedded in their larger group cultural context. It doesn't have to be their country of origin, it could be the sub culture they identify with, such as hip-hop culture, Goth culture, the punk-rock culture. If I were to do it over again, I would have done two or three years focusing on understanding culture, understanding systems, understanding links between systems, and bringing that to my work with individuals and organizations.

What are your plans for the future with regard to positive psychology?

My big thing is friendships and romantic relationships. For me, this is the most important aspect of our lives. Cultivating these friendships after the age of 30 is complicated; I have no idea what I'm doing and I know many other people feel the same way. What worked as a child, teenager, and young adult, doesn't work as well in our 30s. When I was 20 years old, surrounded by other people in dormitories and bars, hanging naked from the rafters of a building somewhere, it was nearly impossible to avoid friendships. As you get older, it takes greater effort to find people and consistent effort to maintain friendships. To understand positive aging, we have to get a handle on life transitions. I'm not even referring to life at 65, 70, and 80; I'm talking about 30 to 35 years old. How do you cultivate new relationships when the characters around you have no understanding of the serpentine road it took you to get to where you are? How do you maintain action in a romantic relationship and honor the fact that you are still going to be attracted, seducing and being seduced by, other people in your life? How can you hold these different worlds simultaneously, with neither clashing? This is the realm that my work is going into, looking at people, looking at moments, all within a larger context.

Who are the emerging and unknown positive psychology researchers to look out for?

Good question. I think there are scientists in other fields of psychology that no one in positive psychology is talking about. Henk Aarts and Ap Dijksterhuis, in the Netherlands, study non-conscious processes, basically the idea that once you figure out your bike path to work, you get this mental module in your brain that you can access so quickly that you've got plenty of mental resources left over to focus on something else. For someone else who doesn't have a

clear mindful way of getting to work, this is a resource intensive endeavor. What is powerful is the idea that we can shift mental resources to activities that are completely outside of conscious awareness so that we are better able to regulate the multitude of decisions, choices, and data that are flying towards us on a daily basis. Their work has great relevance to positive psychology, yet nobody is talking about this science much less how it can be applied when directly helping people.

Anybody else?

There's Jamie Goldenberg at the University of South Florida who's a Terror Management Theory researcher. What's interesting is that she applies this theory to sex and the notion that once you recognize the finality of existence and related existential issues, this affects how you treat your body in terms of dieting, in terms of sex, in terms of being attracted or repelled by the intimate sounds and smells of other people. It's the same notion that things outside of conscious awareness are constantly biasing and playing tricks on what we value and how we behave. And positive psychology is simply not paying adequate attention to unconscious processes. Completing self-report questionnaires won't cut it. Your answers when completing a self-report questionnaire are not necessarily going to converge with what you will actually do in a given situation where multiple options are available.

What area of positive psychology do you still find difficult to understand? I mean, what's the real minefield for new players?

Everything with non-linear dynamics is complicated.

Can you be a bit more specific?

Think about Barbara's Fredrickson's 3-to-1 ratio [of emotions]. It's based on the notion that human experiences and behavior are dynamic and non-linear. Think of the multitude of moments within a single day working in an organization. There are mathematical equations that can be calculated where, when there's an attraction, there are two attractors, one that attracts negative moments and one that attracts positive moments. Two attractors at the same time. It's as if a person's psyche has two vacuums. And there's the notion that if you have a particular ratio of positivity, you're more likely to be functioning optimally. I understand everything I just said, but the mathematics leading to that result is beyond my comprehension. How do I apply this knowledge to understand a person's ratio of mindful to mindless moments? How do these formulas help people use their finite currency of time and energy more wisely over the course of a single day? Given the notion that there are certain ratios, frequencies, and durations of experiences that lead to more successful outcomes, how can this be used to understand and improve people's lives? There appear to be mathematical formulas to tackle non-linear life trajectories, but I don't know how to calculate them, thus I can't ask the questions the way that I would like to.

If someone wants to be happier, what's an individual's best bet for increasing their happiness and wellbeing?

The data are clear that it's about appreciating the benefits you get from each moment as it unfolds. It's a combination of gratitude and mindfulness, which are two overlapping circles. Gratitude is the mindful recognition of benefits received, and mindfulness is a kind of open receptive attitude towards what happens as each moment unfolds. Put those two together, that

attitude, that mind-set, that beacon of consciousness, and you can catch particular moments and make them linger both in the present as an increase in vitality and you can recall them at a later date as a mood boost. That's where the action is.

In positive psychology you're renowned for research in the area of curiosity. Can you tell us a little bit about curiosity?

Curiosity is one of the engines that make other elements in positive psychology work. You can't use your strengths in new ways without this process of clarifying strengths as well as the situations where they can be used most effectively. Where should I be changing my behaviors, my mind-set? When you reverse engineer this exploration of how to best use strengths, you're talking about turning curiosity inward towards the self. This runs counter to how people typically think of curiosity. We normally think of curiosity as a mindset turned outward to novel, uncertain, or challenging external stimuli—from people to situations. And the reason why curiosity, the curiosity field, has such lasting power is that most people don't think about how curiosity can be wielded like a laser, at any given point in time, and we can direct it outward or inward. We spend so much time trying to increase our positive mood that we forget periods of reflection and contemplation, and the importance of clarifying our values, about what's meaningful, about what we want, about what we want in 100 or so years on this planet to stand for. This mindset usually leads to a positive experience if we are willing to extract meaning, but the actual search itself, the emotional state, is pretty much inert, it's neutral. So there's a whole terrain of research and theory that is yet to be touched in terms of how you balance the external search for meaning and the external search for more positive moments as the building blocks for living a good life, versus using time for yourself to reflect on and synthesize how things are going and whether there is adequate movement in the direction of deeply valued life aims. Contemplation, introspection, curiosity turning inward, and this entire meaning making system is fertile terrain for the future of positive psychology.

What's your one big hope for the future of positive psychology? Five years from now what would you like to see changed?

Intellectually, I think we already have great scientists. We've got publications, we've got outlets, we're entering more territory than any other area of psychology ever has within a ten-year period. But what we don't have is those people who have that skeptical mind-set of, 'I'm not content with how things are and I want to continue building a future of new ideas, new theories, new ways to make things better', which sometimes means tearing things down and starting from scratch. Right now, the field of positive psychology is a bit too harmonious. Ironic in that this harmony serves as a strength and weakness. My hope is that in five years there will be an appreciation of rigorous challenges. Whatever is the ferment of the moment, whatever are the most exciting ideas, those will be challenged. Not by trying to win fame by tearing someone down, because we're all trying to build the greatest architectural masterpiece possible. Right now there is too much fear and mistrust about having ideas challenged by other people, about dealing with the ambiguity of where ideas work. Nearly all psychological ideas have their tipping points and boundary conditions, where the benefits no longer apply. We need to find them, and map this terrain. The ideas that are getting the most traction in positive psychology, strengths, positive emotions, gratitude, and mindfulness are being overemphasized. This is a common consequence of a paradigm shift. I think we have to appreciate questions such as 'When do these things not apply?', 'When are they not working?', 'When do they need to be scaffolded by another process?'. We need to examine constructs and

interventions in tandem as opposed to separate, isolated ingredients. My hope is that innovative, integrative skeptics will represent the future of positive psychology, people thinking in greater complexity and people challenging people and ideas, and enjoying that challenge.

What do you think is going to be the hot topic in the field over the next five years?

It's already in psychology: regulatory processes outside of conscious awareness. This is already happening under the umbrella of social neuroscience. I think it's a nice way of describing the world! I'm not quite sure what you do with it in terms of improving the welfare of humanity. But recognizing that most of the things we do to enhance our lives occur outside of conscious awareness—that recognition alone can improve people's lives.

Is there anything else you'd like to comment on that would be useful or interesting for someone looking at moving into the field of positive psychology?

To be a good practitioner or scientist in this field you need to start with psychology, and then choose the topics that resonate within this lens of positive psychology. The idea of positive psychologists, of people specializing in positive psychology from the get-go, worries me because we have a hundred years of great ideas that could get lost quickly by attempting to start anew when a body of knowledge already exists. Let's build off the shoulders of predecessors.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Sonja Lyubomirsky

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Sonja Lyubomirsky is a research psychologist, professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and outgoing editor of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*. She has spent most of her research career studying human happiness and is author of the popular book *The How of Happiness*, which describes strategies backed by scientific research that can be used to increase happiness.

In general, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

Positive psychology is about what makes life worth living. It's about the positive side of life. Before positive psychology, most researchers were focused on studying topics like depression, divorce, stress, how to fix things, and positive psychologists are more interested not in what makes us unhappy, but in what makes us happy. Not why people divorce, but why they stay together. My own research is on 'happiness', which I really started investigating long before the field of positive psychology came into being.

What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?

Maybe the greatest achievement is that it almost does not need to be its own field anymore, because now so many researchers are studying the positive side of life. If you look at any top journal, like in my field, which is social/personality psychology, a huge fraction, sometimes like half, of the articles have something to do with wellbeing or optimism or some kind of positive topic. So it's just pervading the field of psychology. I don't know so much about related fields. We almost don't need to have a separate area called positive psychology, because now it's become part of most people's thinking. It's achieved critical mass.

Can you tell me a bit about your work in positive psychology? You're renowned for your work in the area of positive interventions?

I started doing research on happiness in 1989, so that was quite a while ago. Just to give you a bit of history, the first day of grad school at Stanford, I met my advisor, Lee Ross, who is famous for studying conflict and negotiation, nothing to do with happiness or positive psychology. The very first day we somehow started talking about 'What is happiness?', and 'Why are some people happier than others?'. At that time the only person—literally the only person—who was studying happiness was Ed Diener, and he didn't even call it happiness, he called it 'subjective wellbeing'. He had told me that at one point that he started to call it subjective wellbeing because he was up for tenure at the University of Illinois and he thought



that 'happiness' was too unscientific a term, so he had to find a jargon term that was more acceptable. Anyway, Lee and I started investigating 'How are happy people different from unhappy people?', and so for the first ten years of my career, from '89 to '99, that's what I did: trying to understand why some people are happier than others.

Most of that research was correlational, so reporters would often call me and ask me, 'Well, what can we tell our readers about how they can be happier?'. So, for example, one of my studies suggested that happier people are less likely to compare themselves to others. So reporters would call me and say, 'Shall we tell people that they should not compare themselves to others, they shouldn't engage in social comparison?'. And I would be like, 'well I don't know! I can't say that because all I know is that happy people do it or don't do it, and that is just a correlational finding'. I thought that the question of how do you get people to do that, or how do you get people to become happier or look more like a happier person was solely an applied question. I thought that was a less interesting scientific question. It was very applied, and I was this basic scientist who was only interested in basic research. But then I realized that the question, 'How can people become happier?' or 'Can people become happier given that a lot of happiness is genetically determined?', was in itself a really interesting scientific question.

In 1999 I was invited to one of the Akumal, Mexico meetings where I met Barbara Fredrickson, Ken Sheldon, Laura King, Jonathan Haidt, and, of course, Martin Seligman and Mike Csikszentmihalyi. That's when we all just started talking, and two of the people there, Ken Sheldon and David Schkade, and I started talking about whether people can even become happier. Scientists up till then had been kind of pessimistic about whether people can really change their happiness set point. So we developed a theory about sustainable happiness. That's more or less how my work in positive interventions started. We had this theory about showing that, yes, people can become happier, and then in the last 10 years of my career, along with Ken Sheldon and others, we have been conducting many happiness interventions. But, again, my interest isn't just applied, so it's not just that I want people to be happier—although I certainly do, it's a nice fringe benefit—but my interest is really more in 'how can people become happier?'. I'm interested in what are the moderators and the mediators underlying success at achieving happiness. What is the 'how' and the 'why'? If people can become happier, why can they do that, and how can they do that? So that's what we are trying to achieve in our research right now, looking at those root psychological mechanisms that enable people to be successful in achieving happiness.

Somebody comes to you and says they want to become happier. What would your first piece of advice to them be?

People come to me a lot asking that question! I wrote *The How of Happiness*, where my goal was to basically condense or summarize everything we knew up until then, in 2008, about how to become happier. So what I usually do is send them the 12 empirically-supported categories of strategies or activities that people can do if they want to be happier. I tell them that there is, of course, detailed information about how to become more grateful, or on nurturing their relationships, or pursuing meaningful goals, and I then talk about the research that supports all of these activities or strategies. So that's what I do, I point them to these 12 strategies that I describe in my book.

Are there any new interventions coming on board that you think are exciting that no one knows about as yet?

There are certainly some exciting studies that we are doing that I can tell you about. For example, one really exciting project we are working on is with Robert Plomin and his post-doc Claire Hayworth in London. You may know he's a behavioral geneticist, and he has something like 10,000 twins that he's studying and following from birth, just about every twin born in the UK in 1990. We're studying 2,000 of these twins. We've actually just finished the first study, which is a happiness intervention with the twins. There are identical twins and there are fraternal twins in this sample, and there are boys and girls, and so we can answer a lot of questions. What we are interested in in this study is to understand individual differences in people's responses to happiness interventions. How much of those differences are genetic? Because some people, when they try the strategies in my book, find them very effective and they become happier. But some people don't become as happy to the same degree as others, or maybe don't get happier at all. So what portion of those individual differences in people's responses to happiness interventions is genetically determined? We can test that with this twin sample.

What positive psychology activities and strategies do you think work really well together?

We don't really know the answer to that question. My students and I are actually only just now doing some studies where, in a positive activity intervention, we have people do several activities at the same time. Usually in experiments you want to have everything very controlled, so you study one activity at a time. We've just completed a study where we had people do gratitude and kindness at the same time; but we don't have the results yet. Generally my answer, without the evidence, is that what goes well together is what fits you as a person. One of the themes of my book was the idea of fit. You have to somehow find what works for you and what you feel comfortable doing. For you, it could be one set of interventions, and for me, it could be something else. We are testing this hypothesis right now in a couple of studies.

Where do you see your research going in the future?

We are still doing quite a few interventions to test 'the how' and 'the why'. I mentioned the study with the twins. We're also doing studies with kids. We just did a big study with a whole bunch of elementary school kids in Vancouver. So I think it's really interesting to apply the research to younger people. My friends keep asking me to write *The How of Happiness* for kids, because people want their children to be happy so they really want to know. I don't think the advice would be really that different, but we need to find out. There are already some researchers engaged in studying that question. We're doing a lot of that kind of work—applying the interventions to different contexts.

Another line of research that I'm really involved in right now is about hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation is an obstacle to happiness; it's an obstacle to happiness interventions. If you adapt and get used to the rewards or benefits of whatever intervention you're engaged in, it's not going to be that successful. Ken Sheldon and I have a theory of how adaptation works, and how you can thwart it, forestall it, or prevent it. We're testing that theory now. Actually a paper that I've submitted with some colleagues about which we are really excited is about whether parents are less happy than non-parents. There have been a lot of articles, a lot of talk in the media about the idea that parents are unhappy, and most of it comes from just one study; and so we did three really nice studies that all used different methodologies, that go together really

well. All three studies showed the same thing, which is that parents are happier and have more meaning than non-parents—in general, when they are with their children, and when they go about their days. So we're excited because this paper is going to really debunk this myth out there that parents are miserable.

Is there anything that I have not asked about, or general advice, that you would like to add?

It's so great that there is so much science out there: I think it's really important to emphasize that, because positive psychology is so 'popular', as it were. There are a lot of mental health practitioners and coaches, as well as doctors, addiction specialists, prison guards, who are all applying the concepts of positive psychology, which is great. But we really need the science behind it, and so there are lots and lots of people now doing that research. We need to make sure people know about that, and, as I mentioned before, we almost don't need the field anymore because it has permeated everyone's thinking, so that's important. In terms of people—graduate students or college students—who are interested in getting into the field, I would say the most important thing is not to study positive psychology, but to obtain a really rigorous training in statistics and methodology and general psychology, in whatever area you're interested in, and then you can narrow your interests down to positive psychology.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Alex Linley

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Alex Linley is the Founding Director of the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) in the UK. He is recognised internationally as a leading expert on positive psychology, and works as an organisational consultant applying strengths in organisations. Alex has written, co-written, or edited more than 150 research papers and book chapters, and seven books around the topic of positive psychology.

In general terms, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

One of the features of positive psychology is its inherent focus on the positive. By that I don't mean that it will ignore the negative, but it will pay attention to more of the positive things than has traditionally been looked at. I think that's fundamentally important because there used to be a view that if we understood the bad, then, by taking away the bad, we would actually create the good, and I don't believe that that is always the case at all. It's far more important if we want to promote the good and the positive, that we can understand the good and the positive.

What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?

Far and away positive psychology's biggest achievement is to have put a positive perspective firmly into psychology. Before positive psychology, psychology had been hugely focused on the negative side of things. Psychology could have been regarded as quite a depressing discipline. Since the advent of positive psychology anyone who is interested in the positive side of things has found a home. I think by virtue of that the single massive achievement of positive psychology is that it has legitimized the study of what's right with people, and to then create new applications and interventions based on that knowledge that move people into positive territory, rather than just away from negative territory.

Do you think positive psychology has achieved things outside of psychology?

Without doubt! The positive turn in psychology has also legitimized a wider interest in things like happiness and wellbeing, as great examples. And we can see evidence for shifts in considering those in both social policy here in Britain, and in economics in relation to what some economists recommend that we look at (which is also supported by more of the shift towards behavioural economics). More widely, things like Martin Seligman's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme in the United States are superb examples of how you can take some



of the principles of positive psychology and apply those in a way that makes a real and lasting difference to people's lives.

What are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?

First, in the early days there was a very valid criticism that positive psychology had largely ignored some of the 'positive approaches' that had gone before. It was quite dismissive of Humanistic Psychology. That has now changed. Second, also in the early days there was a perception, although I don't think this was a reality, that positive psychology was more focused on the positive, and therefore didn't want anything to do with the negative, and therefore it would do the same things as traditional psychology had done, by just looking at one end of the spectrum. As that criticism was made, there was any number of people who came out and said that actually our view of positive psychology is that it incorporates the negative as well. But it is probably more oriented towards the positive side. A third observation is that there is, and this is not specific to positive psychology at all, this tension between the speed at which people seek to move towards application, and the speed at which the basic research can move. There has been a view in some parts of positive psychology that applications are moving too quickly. On the other hand, there are hundreds of thousands of people working in practice who are out there trying things out and trying to do things that will make a difference, and who simply won't wait for the research to catch up with what they need to know. And it was ever thus. The two, as much as possible, need to inform each other; but we need to recognise that there are very different trajectories and very different agendas that research and practice can be working towards.

What area of positive psychology do you still find most difficult or challenging?

There is still loads and loads that we don't know, and still loads to be discovered about strengths, and the applications of strengths. I find that a hugely interesting and intriguing area, and obviously it's an area where I work a lot myself. The move into neuroscience, looking at the neuroscience side of things, is an area that is outside of my traditional expertise, so that's something that I need to work hard to understand; but it's great to have that angle looking at things as well.

Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology, particularly around strengths?

My work on strengths started way back, around ten years ago or so now. Obviously I was involved in positive psychology from pretty early on, and I looked at the way that the field was developing; and in very broad terms, there was the work that had been done in happiness and wellbeing, and the work that had been done, or was starting to be done, in strengths. I thought, actually there are loads of people working in happiness and wellbeing, and a lot fewer people working on strengths; and yet, I see strengths as being one of the key ways in which we can achieve happiness and wellbeing. And it was one of the areas that seemed to have loads of potential for application. So I started off really trying to think about and understand what strengths were, and I wrote some early papers, probably five or six years ago now, with tentative definitions of how we could think about strengths. One of the things that came through from that early work was that the energy requirement of strengths was absolutely integral, and while it was implicit in some of the work that had been done so far, nobody had really put it as a hallmark of their theory, so that was something we set out to do. And then around about the same time we started working in practice, and I started working with the

British insurance company Norwich Union, which is now known as Aviva, and found that we got very effective results working with them to recruit people according to the strengths that they had, using a strengths-based interview methodology that we developed. Since then our research work and applied work has developed hand in hand. Often we will develop ideas that we use to inform our work in practice around things like assessment and development and performance management, but from the ideas that we developed and try out in practice, we then develop the questions that we want to look at more rigorously or more empirically. The sorts of things that we are looking at now are to design studies about how strengths help you to achieve your goals, but we are also looking at some of the fundamental strengths. For example, we are designing a study where we look at the role of authenticity and mindfulness and organismic valuing and those sorts of concepts in relation to strengths. And then, of course, there are all of the continual validation studies and things that we do with Realise2 as well.

Is there any new knowledge or studies around strengths that you would like to highlight that are particularly interesting?

We have recently done some work on ‘strengthspotting’, and developed the Strengthspotting Scale, and from that validated the Strengthspotting Scale against Realise2, to look at whether strengthspotters may have a particular strengths profile. It turns out that there are a range of characteristics that seem to define strengthspotting, and those tend to be things around the motivation to identify strengths, the situations in which you do so, the frequency with which you do it, and then, crucially, what you do with that knowledge. So we started to investigate that to see if we could help people to develop their ability to identify strengths in others in natural contexts. In addition to that, we validated that scale against Realise2, and showed that Connector, Enabler and Feedback were the key strengths that predicted strengthspotting capability across all the five strengthspotting domains.

What’s one aspiration you have for the field of positive psychology?

My biggest aspiration for positive psychology is that it continues to grow, but that it continues to grow in a way that influences applications and policy. The basic research needs to continue at pace, with real opportunity for positive psychologists to move into areas where positive psychology can make a sustainable, significant, and lasting impact on people’s lives for the better. I think where that is most likely to happen, sadly, is not from any individual research study; where it will come from is from a building of the body of data and that knowledge and then critically when that data and knowledge is translated into practice. Whether it’s the work we do with big organisations, which has the potential to impact the lives of thousands of people, or the way that we inform the development of social policy, or whether it’s projects like the Comprehensive Solider Fitness programme that Martin Seligman has developed with the US Army, things like that really help positive psychology to step up to the plate and go above and beyond just being a basic academic discipline to something which is realising its potential to catalyse a positive difference in the world. And that would be my big aspiration for positive psychology – that it continues to do that.

Which discipline do you think positive psychology can learn from most moving forward?

My gut instinct is economics. Rightly or wrongly, the economists have had the measure of policy for many, many, years, and economic terms have shaped much of what goes on in the policy arena. But there are huge opportunities for the melding of psychology and economics.

We are already seeing this in things like behavioural economics, where economists are recognising that people are not the logical rational actors that we were always assumed to be by economic models, and instead we make irrational emotional choices based on a whole variety of different factors. For many years that was ignored by economics, and psychologists mocked them for the models being so wrong. But now positive psychology and economics are coming together a bit more and starting to say, 'Well, what can we take from psychology that can be applied in economic models that can then help us to better predict how people will behave and respond in different situations?'. Once we have that model, we will be able to shape policy and shape interventions in a way that are much more going with the grain of what people will naturally do. There is huge opportunity there, and I think it's appropriate at this point to acknowledge the work of Daniel Kahneman, who was one of the key people who led the development of the behavioural economics field.

What's the new hot topic for positive psychology in the coming five years?

Well that's the million dollar question! I would guess it's going to be something to do with one of two things. It could be neuroscience-based. There are going to be some key validations or insights that come from understanding brain functioning. That's important, because as soon as you can start to talk about things at the level of the brain, people start to take you seriously and think this must be true. So it's a good way of getting through the door and getting people's attention. But now to the second topic, which has huge potential. I went to see Martin Seligman speak at the Houses of Parliament, in July [2011], and one of the things that he said he was working on was to develop algorithms with people like Facebook and Google to be able to map the prevalence of happiness-related words in our lexicon, in the things that people put in emails, in Facebook postings, in linked-in postings, that sort of thing. So harvesting the potential for real-time data collection and data analysis using the new social technologies that are available, and combining that with a solid underpinning of psychological theory could really take us into domains we have not even imagined before now.

Who do you look up to in the field, either as practitioners or academics?

Without question number one on that list has to be Martin Seligman for everything that he has done to develop and promote the field. But more than that, the thing that he has done that I've never seen any psychologist do, is the way that he has been able to take positive psychology and use it and apply it and lead it in such a way that it has impact, that it makes a difference. So he's had a huge impact on the development of social policy in the UK, but also in other countries, as in the Comprehensive Solider Fitness programme that I mentioned before. But a whole raft of things like that really helps him to stand out in my mind as someone I admire enormously. Second on that list would be Barbara Frederickson, for the massive developments that she has made in our understanding of positive emotion. Her theory, the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions, is one of the stand-out theories in positive psychology. The third person would be Chris Peterson for his knowledge, but also his character and personality, the way that he brings positive psychology alive for people and makes it real. I look at a lot of his books and blog entries and postings to see where he's really done that. Another person, finally, would be Mike Csikszentmihalyi, simply for his erudition and scholarship. I don't think there is anyone in positive psychology who knows more about more different fields of study and the history of thought and philosophy and all those sorts of things than Mike, so I think he's quite an incredible character.

What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers or practitioners?

That would be different for each. For a researcher, my advice would be to find an area that you are fundamentally excited by and interested in, so that it will maintain your interest and enthusiasm as you work on it. You could also be strategic with that and find an area where you think there is not yet a lot that has been done, but you think the area is likely to grow in profile and significance, and you can grow with it. That is certainly something that I was able to do by being involved with positive psychology from the beginning. I think for a practitioner, my advice would be to use your best judgement in the way that you work. It's easy to get bound up with best practice, which is all about what has been done before. But that really blows out of the water any opportunity for innovation, if we only stick at what has been done before. So I'm a big advocate of using what we call best judgement: understand the literature, know the research and the findings, but be prepared to take all of that and say, moving beyond what is already known, this is my judgement as to what would be the best thing to do in this situation. And that's how we have driven a lot of the innovation and a lot of the development in our methodologies for assessment, development, and performance management—around strengths. They have come through understanding the field, and then being prepared to make the adaptation and apply that in a practical way—even though there won't be a specific study that says that this will be the result. We do a lot of research in practice as it might be called, rather than research that will always end up being published in academic journals.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Ed Diener

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Ed Diener, a.k.a. ‘Dr. Happiness’, is Joseph R. Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois and senior scientist at Gallup. He has over 300 publications, with about 200 being in the area of the psychology of wellbeing, and is one of the most highly cited psychologists with over 30,000 citations.

In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?

One defining feature of positive psychology is a desire to study positive aspects of human behavior and functioning; aspects of life that make it happier, more peaceful, and more desirable in general. Although there are some cultural differences in what might be considered ‘good’ or desirable behavior, there is certainly some consensus too. Everywhere in the world, people want to be happy, to get along with other people, to have their needs met, to develop and grow, and to have respect. People want to love and to be loved. It is these universals that we want to study as positive psychologists. Of course people did study these things even before the advent of positive psychology, but the level of interest shown was much less than the interest shown in negative behavior, in problems. The second defining feature of positive psychology is that we are attempting to build it on a scientific base. Many people talk about positive behavior, and try to increase it—from politicians to religious leaders to youth clubs. These are usually good things. But we want something new—the study of positive behavior using scientific methods. As the science grows, we will then be in a position to test interventions scientifically as well.

Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology, particularly around subjective wellbeing and happiness?

I began studying subjective wellbeing, ‘happiness’, in 1981. For the first 10 years there were only a few pioneers working quietly in the area, and we received little attention. We were a backwater research area. In the 1990s we started to receive more notice, and more researchers entered the field. In the late 1990s positive psychology was founded by Martin Seligman and others, and this created more research in our field. In other words, positive psychology research and practice occurred before the positive psychology movement, but the movement gave this research a big boost. All of a sudden more attention and interest flowed to these positive research topics. We initially used the Experience Sampling technique in the early 80s to study people’s moods across time and situations. At that time there was a lot of focus on



demographic factors such as income and sex, but we paid careful attention to personality, and how it affected people's happiness. We looked at a broad range of personality traits such as extraversion and self-esteem, but we also examined people's goals, aspirations, and social comparisons. In the 90s we began to look more systematically across cultures to see if some societies were happier, and whether the same factors predict subjective wellbeing in different cultures. Not only did we find that some societies tend to be happier than one might expect, such as the Latin American nations, but we also found that certain variables predict happiness more strongly in some cultures than in others. For example, my daughter Marissa and I found that self-esteem is a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in individualistic nations than in collectivistic ones. We have continued these lines of research to the present, but we also have begun to look more carefully at the outcomes of subjective wellbeing—are happy people healthier, more productive, and do they experience better social relationships? What we have found has surprised me. Not only is happiness a pleasant state, but in most ways it is a particularly helpful one. For instance, happy people are healthier and live longer. They have better social relationships and stay married longer. They volunteer more, and they are better citizens at work. Some of our work even finds that they make more money. When I started I was not Pollyanna, I was skeptical of some of the claims made for the benefits of happiness. Of course these claims have occasionally been exaggerated, but by and large I have become convinced that a general happy state is a very good one in terms of success in life.

Is there any new knowledge or studies around happiness you would like to highlight that you think are cutting edge?

We are finding out more and more about happiness around the globe. Two decades ago very little was known. We now know a great deal about which cultures are happiest and unhappiest, and some of the causes. For instance, we know that not having your basic needs met leads to low life satisfaction, and that corruption and other social interactions that lead to distrust lead to low levels of positive feelings. We also know that although a high income is associated with high life satisfaction across nations, other factors such as health and peace also lead to higher life satisfaction. An interesting thing is that some predictors of happiness are universal, such as having basic needs met, and having others one can count on for help. But there are some predictors of happiness that seem to be stronger in some cultures than in others. Self-esteem is a much stronger predictor of happiness in individualistic cultures compared to collectivistic cultures, for example. Another area of research that I am proud of is the development of new scales for use in positive psychology, and research showing the validity of these scales. We first developed a scale to assess life satisfaction, and showed that this scale has a strong level of reliability and validity. We have also developed a scale to measure feelings and emotions. A very short scale we created is designed to assess human flourishing by quickly tapping people's feelings that their life is meaningful, that they have supportive family and friends, and so forth. This scale is very short, and therefore can easily be added to studies without taking up much time. All these scales are available on my website.

Your proudest moment in the field?

I recently received the American Psychological Association's Distinguished Scientist Award, and this was very rewarding. But my proudest moments have come not from awards, but have come in seeing what my family and my students have accomplished. My wife and three of our children are psychologists, and this is a great thing for a father. We never tried to convince our kids to become psychologists, we never even mentioned it. But they saw how much we loved

it, and that apparently drew them to it. In terms of my former students, many of them are turning out to be stars. They are doing such important research and accomplishing so much. Beyond research they are becoming journal editors and department chairs. This gives me great joy.

Which discipline do you think positive psychology can learn most from moving forward?

We can learn from every discipline, from neuroscience to anthropology to sociology. But the discipline I am learning a lot from is economics, and this surprises me. Economists have sometimes overstressed the importance of money in happiness. However, we do need money in the modern world to meet our needs and to develop and to do interesting things. So money can be beneficial to happiness. But what I have learned from economists is an objective approach to problems and a reliance on data. Too often in positive psychology people think they already know the answers to questions, or gain the answers from their intuitions. My fear is that positive psychology should not be the province of well-meaning people with strong opinions, without a scientific base for those opinions. I have found that economists really take a hard look at data, and they are often quite objective about that. I admire this aspect of economics.

Positive psychology is being applied in health, education, the army, in therapy, or more recently at the governmental level with a focus on assessment. Where next? Are there fields and areas that positive psychology is beginning to move into and gain traction?

One of the really important applied movements is 'national accounts of wellbeing'. Martin Seligman and I rekindled interest in this with our 2005 article, *Beyond Money* (Psychological Science in the Public Interest). We argued that governments need to measure various forms of psychosocial wellbeing to complement the measures of economics that all governments collect. People pay attention to what is measured, and right now the economies of nations get the lion's share of attention. Indeed, I would guess that the economy receives about 90 percent of the attention of politicians and the news media. National accounts of wellbeing are able to give a broader view of quality of life, and how citizens are faring.

We are seeing progress across the globe. The prime minister of the United Kingdom announced that wellbeing would become a concern of the government, and instituted a set of simple measures that would be collected in his country. Other nations are following suit, and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is devising a set of prototype measures. I see this as the most important advance in applied positive psychology. Measuring wellbeing might not seem as exciting as going out and intervening to make people happier or more virtuous. However, the national accounts promise to have a very widespread effect. In their ability to capture the interest of the entire population, they can provide leverage for many different types of changes in society that go far beyond the work of individual positive psychologists. I have my fingers crossed.

What's one aspiration you have for positive psychology?

My strongest desire for positive psychology is that it not be a cult or a club. Too often positive psychologists just look at the work of other positive psychologists, rather than broadening out and looking at relevant work of those who are not in the positive psychology fold. Too often people look at a handful of leaders for what positive psychology is, and what other positive psychologists say about an issue. Instead, we need to examine both what positive psychologists

say and also what others who have studied that topic have to say. There is a great deal of valuable material about positive psychology coming from people who are not 'members' of the positive psychology movement. If we don't pay attention to this work, positive psychology will never flourish.

One piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology students, researchers or practitioners?

I have two pieces of advice for aspiring positive psychologists. First, although work in this field is fun, it takes a lot of hard work and perseverance. Some people pop into the field thinking that they will find magical and quick answers. Instead, in a developing field such as this one we are searching for answers, and this requires deep thought and hard work. My second piece of advice is to build your work on science. Listen to what other positive psychologists say, but always remain critical and a bit skeptical. Learn to think for yourself. I see many young people who want to find out what the leaders of positive psychology think so they will know the truth. We are not at that point yet. You need to listen to the experts, but also look at the evidence and think for yourself.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Michael Steger

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Michael Steger is an assistant professor in the Counseling Psychology and Applied Social Psychology programs at Colorado State University and has been involved in the field of positive psychology for the last ten years. Mike’s research focuses on the foundations and benefits of living a meaningful life, and he is well known for developing the widely used Meaning in Life Questionnaire.

What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?

My interest came first from the topic of ‘meaning’. It was sort of an idealistic thing. I considered myself to be a little counter-cultural, a little hopeful that I would be able to find some tool that could help me shake people up or give people motivation to find a different way of living, a little bit more in accordance with collectivist values. So I stumbled on ‘meaning’. It was only after I started reading about meaning that I ran into a buddy of mine who said, “Hey, here’s a good conference for you, you should check it out”, and I think it was the second Positive Psychology Summit, which was the first one I went to.

How long would you say you’ve been interested in positive psychology?

Well as soon as I found out about it, that is, since about 2002. So for just about ten years now I’ve been interested in positive psychology.

Over the course of your career in positive psychology so far, what would you say are some of the key events?

The major events for me were early influences by two different people. One was my advisor, at the University of Minnesota, where the tradition is measurement. She invited me to evaluate the measurement of meaning and I did, using all the graduate school tools for ripping things to shreds—and it wasn’t good. I didn’t like any of the measures and I pointed out flaws that other people had identified in them as well. So she said, “Here at Minnesota, we fix it, so that’s your next project”. So I developed the Meaning of Life Questionnaire. The next big thing was that Martin Seligman put it on the Authentic Happiness web page and that got it out there. For me as a grad student at the time, it made me feel like I was actually doing legitimate science in this area and made it feel important in that way.



In general terms what would you say are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

For me the most defining feature is that it's science driven. It captures an appealing array of aspirations that people have and experiences that people desire, and find important and helpful. But what really sets us apart from other people looking at those same things has to be the science.

What do you think is one of the big questions that positive psychology is seeking to answer?

How can we have people experience the best that they can experience? And the question that we are neglecting is 'what does that mean?' —What is the best that people can experience? And that's not actually probably an empirical question. So you have all these battles of values and perspectives that take place; and so that, to me, is the interesting subtext: that we're all pushing for the same thing but we view it, oftentimes, in very drastically different ways.

What would you say were the field of positive psychology's greatest accomplishments to date?

It's really been amazing. It has created an interdisciplinary space that, originally, was only interdisciplinary within psychology, with a few economists and one philosopher. It's grown and it's captured both practical, applied and research attention across many disciplines around this now widely accepted notion that we can learn how to be better off. That has been remarkable. I don't think that anyone saw it coming right before and on the heels of Sept 11th in this country [the United States].

If you were in charge of positive psychology now, what is one thing you'd change?

It seems that a lot of people in positive psychology are heavily linked into revenue streams and that's OK, I don't have a problem with that. But in the early days of positive psychology there was a concerted effort to get graduate students to these conferences and allow them to meet these mentors and to fire them up. A lot of the graduate students at those earlier conferences were given \$500 scholarships and didn't have to pay the fee to come. And then you'd be right next to these people you'd been reading and marveling at. There used to be a top to bottom approach to really fuel new and exciting ideas. Positive psychology has in some ways gotten to the place where the top stays at the top, the middle stays at the middle, etc., and a lot of people seem to be pulling resources out of positive psychology and into their own areas of interest, rather than returning it back into the field to continue feeding the growth. I don't know if that's a fair criticism or not, but it feels a lot more expensive and isolated to be a positive psychology graduate student now than it used to be.

What's one aspiration you have for the field of positive psychology?

One of my aspirations for the field has already been answered in some ways. I really hoped when I started getting excited about this and trying to participate in my own way, that we'd catch the eye and the ear of the people who have influence to actually impact on lives. In one way that has happened, with those people who are trying to go from a seven to a nine on the 10 point scale—instead of the people who are trying to go from the negative two to the positive three—the people that are not clinically suffering. But for those people who are socially disadvantaged, economically disadvantaged—outside of the people that can pay a lot of money

to be treated or coached—I think that is really where a lot of exciting things will happen in the future.

Is there anything that you think particularly stands out in that space?

Based on some recent experiences in South Africa, there are a lot of indigenous cultural models of people who are incredibly disadvantaged in comparison to the wealthy nations in the world; yet there's some sort of positive and inspiring homeostasis that they've reached amidst all the deprivation, all the brutality, all the lack of opportunity. What would be really cool would be continuing to grow out from the Western, affluent origins of positive psychology to join with the growing indigenous knowledge of psychologists around the world working within their own people, with what really works in their own places. I think we'll have lots of really neat ideas and inspiring stories to reach out and broaden the impact of positive psychology around the world. In psychology as a whole, we're getting good at developing Western models for positive change, and then showing that they can be readily adapted for elsewhere. So, the stuff we do seems to work, but are we missing things that could be grown from other traditions? What things are created and work elsewhere that we could all benefit from? What are the other 'mindfulnesses' out there?

Which particular professional groups (aside from psychologists) are becoming more interested in positive psychology or perhaps your work on meaning?

Those interested in the work I do on meaning are career coaches and career psychologists, particularly doing work related to women's issues in careers. Almost all the interviews I do are from women's magazines and are related to mid-career women, and career-balancing women, and also looking at the emerging workforce and those wanting to go to the next level in their careers. But I think that the world of work has been the biggest outside consumer of positive psychology. It seems like there are dozens of people who are doing industrial consulting and looking at happiness in the workplace leading to more productive, happy, workers. Education will be a really cool place—they're interested, they just need more support. Those interested in more general meaning in life issues often appear to be in medical fields, particularly oncology and palliative care.

Who do you look up to most in the field of positive psychology?

That's a great question. I really like Laura King, her work bounces around a lot of different methods, a lot of different perspectives. She's done some really inspirational work on meaning in life with a graduate student named Josh Hicks. But I also think that just as a person, she is super approachable, super generative. I think Bob Emmons, as a person and as a scholar, has been really giving of what he does. The same is definitely true about Ed Diener. The list of people whose work I admire is very long, going back to the inspirational folks like [Victor] Frankl, and those that have done really solid, foundational work like Carol Ryff. These people have some 'meaning' angle. I like that because it shows that you can step outside of your research area and attack a question.

If you could start learning about positive psychology again, what would you do differently?

I probably wouldn't want to start with measurement. One of the things that happens when you start developing a measure is that it's great because it gives you a focal point and a tool to begin to do what you want to do; and if the measurement in the area had been better, then I wouldn't

have done it. But it also, in a sense, locks you into that tool, and so a lot of my early research was around ‘how do I validate this thing in this group?’, and ‘how do I validate it in this group?’. And I did a lot of things that were right because they were fun, collaborating with people who had different perspectives. The biggest thing that we can do in this field is collaborate, especially by doing different things. Starting again, I’d avoid measurement and I’d really try to challenge myself more to meet folks who are using methods that I’d never heard of.

Who do you think are some of the emerging or unknown researchers in the field of positive psychology? Who do you look at and think ‘their research is cutting edge and cool’?

I really like Matt Vesser’s work. He’s been looking at the role of meaning in Terror Management Theory and that’s been something that is really cool and that there is a place for, but I never did the work myself. He’s published in *JPSP* [*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*], so he’s not really super unknown or anything like that. What is astonishing is that as the access to international researchers has grown, I’ve realized that there is amazing research going on all over the place that we don’t hear about because we just keep reading the same journals. There are some really cool people, including Lazslo Brassai, who’s doing some really cool work with adolescents in Romania; there are people like Linda Theron doing great work in South Africa on AIDS orphans and there are other just amazing pieces that don’t get circulated, except for in places like the *International Journal of Wellbeing* of course.

What do you think positive psychology could learn from the field of psychology as a whole?

I have two pet peeves about positive psychology that are also true about the field of Psychology as a whole. They are closely related. The first is losing your grasp of what it means to be a scientific discipline where your job is not just to defend your position, but it’s also to attack your position. It’s to really pressure what you think is right in a brave fashion. That doesn’t seem to happen a lot of the time. I think a lot of people get excited about what they’re doing and they love their initial research findings and they want to see their baby live and succeed. In positive psychology though, that stuff gets applied and becomes apocryphal immediately. People somewhere are going to turn it into a book or an intervention and say it’s the truth. That’s really dangerous if we’re not out there making sure that we are really putting pressure on our assumptions. The other thing is that forgetting what it means to be a science discipline leads to a lack of consistency in definitions of constructs and the creation of new constructs. Everyone is mixing and matching terms and inserting their values into the definitions of constructs, and that really needs to be scrutinized. It confuses the science. One example is that people seem to want to define ‘purpose’ as having an altruistic aim to it. That is being offered as a definition of ‘purpose’, and it is difficult for folks to learn that that is just one type of purpose—and you might like it best, but that doesn’t mean that it’s the only kind. People have asshole purposes too. We just need to figure out how to be objective about these things.

What area of positive psychology do you think is the most difficult area for people to grasp and learn?

The central area of positive psychology is the most difficult to grasp. What are we studying? What is happiness? Do we want happiness? What are we trying to learn? What is our ultimate dependent variable? I think that is hard to express to people without being a little inaccurate.

What is the first book you would recommend to someone new to positive psychology?

My first thought is *Stumbling on Happiness* by Dan Gilbert, although I don't really agree with all its assumptions. It's great to start with a little bit of a skeptical eye. A fun book to read that I think is also challenging is Todd Kashdan's book *Curiosity*. And in terms of how we can try to be as scientific and rigorous as possible, even in a popular book while still offering practical suggestions that people might be able to use, is Sonja's [Lyubomirsky] *The How of Happiness*, which is very good. She's pretty honest about what we know and where we're speculating, which I admire. So there are three good books.

What's the most cutting-edge book you've read personally in the last couple of years that stands out?

I teach abnormal psychology, and I'm writing an abnormal psychology textbook at the moment, and so I'm reading a lot of the psychopathology literature. That challenges my perspective on positive psychology because I've been convinced that there really is a gap in perspectives. I originally thought it was all part of a continuum, which I think is true. But we haven't addressed the continuum. So if you look at the treatments for psychopathology, a lot of them really do fall short of going beyond simply getting rid of bad things. So that's helped me to figure out what are the things that are scalable that can bridge the gap between helping people eliminate problems, which we know how to do really well, and giving people the tools to set out some aspirations and to help to achieve them.

How does someone go about getting more meaning in life?

The easiest way to not have meaning in life is to really try to focus on having more meaning itself. Meaning comes from doing, not just thinking. I think that the main thing is to have self-understanding and an appreciation of your true strengths and limitations. I wouldn't say that just learning your strengths is good enough, you need a true and honest appraisal of who you are and an honest encounter with life in the moment. That should be used to help people to develop a purpose, an overall life aim or mission—maybe more than one, and sometimes they compete. But really just engage in that and in life and in those things that match your values. And from time to time check in with the question 'Are you doing the things that matter to you?'. Make sure you catch yourself once in a while doing something that matters to you and appreciate that you have that gift and the ability to do that. So it's a little bit of that reciprocal acting and being aware of what we're doing.

Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on that I haven't asked about that you think would be useful to someone picking up a book on positive psychology who doesn't know anything about positive psychology?

If someone really wants to have a research career in positive psychology, I think that the main thing is to read old stuff. A lot of what we're talking about is old. This year is the first year that I've heard people at a positive psychology conference talk about Maslow very much, even though that book was published quite a while ago. So there are great ideas out there, there are great models being used outside of positive psychology. The most important thing for a researcher to do is to read outside of positive psychology, because we are really still just studying people. For practitioners, the most important thing to understand is that some prudence is necessary because the things that we are seeing work in these correlational studies or daily diary studies, or even in internally valid experiments, aren't the same things that might

work with clients. The creativity that coaches, and therapists, and clinicians can have is awesome, but there is a responsibility with using research to do practice that means that you can't guarantee anything about that: so maybe giving researchers a break for not always knowing what works might be helpful.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Acacia Parks

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Acacia Parks is an assistant professor of psychology at Hiram College and completed her PhD with Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania. Acacia's area of expertise is in positive interventions and applying positive psychology using new technologies.

What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?

My interest was a marriage between my original interest and my advisors' interests. It grew from first talking to Marty Seligman about research ideas when I was still applying for graduate school, and conversations with a couple of prospective research advisors. Whenever you're starting graduate school there is a compromise between what you're interested in, and what your advisor is interested in. I came in with an interest in preventing depression using cognitive therapy. I thought that that was a really cool model instead of treating. By the time I had talked to Marty about that, the positive psychology thing was just starting to gear up and he was beginning to think about this positive intervention idea. He suggested to me that cognitive therapy stuff for prevention was not really where the future was headed, and what we're going to do instead is this wellness approach, this improving wellbeing. That's going to do the same thing, only better; and that really resonated with me, it sounded really promising because one of the problems that they had with CBT was that people struggle with it, especially if you're not depressed already. Why would you do all this difficult stuff for depression? It wasn't really compelling to people in the way that happiness is. So, we started talking about positive interventions and it all just blossomed from there. We developed this manual, and everything I've done has been steps beyond that.

So your area in positive psychology, would you describe it as positive interventions?

Yes, totally.

And how long have you been working in this area?

Since I started graduate school, which was in 2003.

In general terms, in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

I think about positive psychology as being split into a basic theory and then applied sections. There are some really fundamental areas, like [Barbara] Frederickson's positive emotion



research, where ‘I can think of applications but that’s not the purpose of the research’; the research is ‘We want to understand the function that emotions serve’. Areas like that are basic science contributions. [Shelly] Gables’ work about relationships has been translated into interventions, but it’s about relationship processes, not interventions. They did not do that research seeking to come up with an application. Areas like that, I feel, are a more theoretical piece. On the other hand, there’s this more applied piece where we say, ‘What’s the outcome we want?’ and ‘How can we work backwards to figure out how to best do that?’; and that’s where the positive intervention research comes in. Also, things like coaching and workplace situations and trying to change organizations fit in that applied sector. So I see positive psychology as having those two areas.

A lot of fields have that kind of split, though, so it’s not really what makes positive psychology distinctive. What’s really unique about positive psychology is the interplay between researchers—both basic and applied—and practitioners. Unlike clinical psychology, which is broken in half and has been trying for decades to bridge the ‘gap between science and practice,’ our practitioners want very much to do what is research-based. They are a huge asset to us. I think they could be even more of an asset if we (researchers) spent more time talking to them and learning from them. But yeah, if you look at various subfields of psychology, I’m not sure you’ll find any other area where practitioners are so eager to learn more about the science, and to put science into practice.

When you think of the big questions that positive psychology addresses, what are the questions that stand out to you?

That’s a really interesting question, because in some ways I see that there is no difference from other areas of psychology that are trying to change behavior. Of course, I’m biased because I’m an intervention researcher. I think about positive psychology and then I think about the applied half, because that’s the half that I work in, but to me it’s about ‘How do you get a person to change their behavior?’, which I think is applicable to therapy research, health psychology and to a variety of parts of psychology. It’s not unique to positive psychology. What’s new and different are the outcomes we are interested in, and the specific behaviors we are trying to change. But a lot of it is just, ‘How do you get something to stick?’, ‘How do you get people to change their ideas?’, and that flows through social psychology and other areas as well. But I do think that those are the central questions.

What do you think are some of the most valid criticisms that the field of positive psychology faces to date?

One thing I worry about is the rate at which things become applied. I remember when we first started talking about positive interventions in the popular media in 2004 and those things started to get published. Those things were already getting used out in the world. For example, coaches were using them, people were hearing about them in the news and using them, and we just had this one study. But that’s just how it seems to go, it’s very fast moving, and the second that news gets out that something is helpful in a single study, it’s all over the place. On one hand that’s really cool, because it’s getting out there, but on the other hand, it’s a little worrisome because you wonder ‘What if there’s a mistake in the data analyses?’, or if this was just a funny sample that doesn’t replicate. It’s already out there. It’s too late by then. So I worry about that a little bit, more so than in fields like clinical psychology, which I think may be overly cautious and overly slow to get things out there. Things get out here even faster than you can keep hold of them. People who argue about that have a valid point, especially when it

comes to research findings that are lost in translation somewhat. One critique that positive psychology gets a lot from people like [Barbara] Ehrenreich and James Coyne is that positive psychologists tell people with cancer that they should just 'buck up' and that they should just be optimistic and they'll do better. I don't know anyone who actually says that, but what happens is that it gets out there to the popular media and misunderstood and mistranslated. Then, all of a sudden, that is what positive psychology is saying to a good number of people. So I think in some ways we're not as careful as we could be about the sound bites that we release into the ether, or about maintaining the integrity of those sound bites so that they are accurate. What happens is that people like Barbara Ehrenreich hear something that just isn't what we're saying, but by the time it gets to her it is, if that makes sense. So I think that there are definitely some messages from positive psychology that reach the general public that aren't what we intended; and those messages, even though they are not the intended messages, may be harmful. I think that this is a valid criticism.

What is your view on the relationship between a positive intervention and assessing the effectiveness of these interventions over time? I mean there are a lot of people doing interventions but not everyone is assessing whether they are working or not. What are your thoughts about that?

In some sense, I'm always surprised when practitioners aren't assessing whether something is working, even just within their practices. For example, when I did clinical training as a graduate student (I'm not a clinician, but I started off as one), every time we saw a client they took assessment measures. Next time we saw them they took more assessment measures, so we were constantly checking to make sure that we were actually doing something. I know that that is a practice that a lot of practitioners use, but then I also know that there are practitioners who don't. That's effectiveness on a much smaller scale, but equally important. If you're taking something that's manualized and you're trying to implement it in the real world, you want to make sure it's working in your setting. You should check, you shouldn't just assume that because the research says it's going to work it will. But at the same time, you shouldn't assume that the research is invalid and not even try using it in your setting, which is another thing that practitioners can do sometimes, in that they figure that this is not relevant to me, this wasn't tested on my population. Researchers and practitioners are both falling down on their responsibilities in terms of getting everything to the practitioners in a digestible way. But then there are also the practitioners being concerned with efficacy and understanding that there is literature out there that shows that judgment and intuition are not perfect, that they are flawed; so if you think that this is working because I think that it is working, that doesn't always match up.

What's one aspiration you've got for the field of positive psychology? In five years from now, how would you like to see the field of positive psychology?

I would like to see some way to get the general public to care about the difference between something that is empirically validated and something that is not. Because right now I think that people are just as happy to read *The Secret* as they are to read *The How of Happiness*. Each of these is not like the other, but to the general public they are all grouped in the same category: books about happiness. Part of the onus of this is on us not to do research and then write a book and put it out into the ether and assume that that works, but to actually test the books. Test the things that we are putting out there up against quackery and show that they are better, so that eventually the idea can get out to the general public that yes, there are lots of choices.

For example there is Tony Robbins, and he's going to tell you how to get happier, and there is *The Secret*, which says that if you think about being happy suddenly the world will attract happiness to you: and those ideas are not like what we are doing. We need some way to get the general public to be more discerning about that, so that they can tell the difference about something that's tested and something that someone just made up one day. That would just be superb.

What do you think is going to be the next hot topic for positive psychology over the coming few years?

I know what I would like the new hot topic to be! One of the conference talks I've just heard was looking at how physiological measures may be an alternative to self-reporting. I'd really like to see an emphasis on measures other than self-report, which has been used in psychology for a long time. But the problem is that nobody has a viable replacement for it and it's very cumbersome to do anything other than self-report. What I would love to see are methods that aren't cumbersome, and that are alternatives to self-report. For example, wrist bands that measure your level of stress so you don't have to ask a person how stressed out they were this last week, because you have aggregate data to show you how stressed out they were; and it's not done with cortisol, because measuring cortisol levels is expensive. These other physiological measures we were unable to use because they were prohibitive in cost. An alternative can be a thing you can buy upfront, and put on your participants, and it doesn't have on-going expense. So I would really love to see a move towards methods that assess happiness in a way that doesn't alienate the economists because it's not a hard outcome, it doesn't alienate the medical people because it's not a hard outcome either, but something that feels more real than self-reported happiness. I feel like this will not only strengthen the field because it will also address the criticism that people get really upset at the idea of self-reported happiness, but it will also help us learn a lot more about what we're actually doing for people, what it actually means when we change their self-reported happiness. Does that mean we're changing their moment-to-moment happiness or just their retrospective evaluations of their lives? We can learn so much more from that kind of moment-to-moment data collection instead of retrospective self-report, which we know from a lot of researchers is totally flawed. I'd really like to see a movement towards more sophisticated data. We're better than self-report, we just haven't figured out how we want to be better than self-report yet.

Who do you look up to in the field of positive psychology?

I have got a lot of really excellent advice from Shane Lopez, who has edited numerous volumes, and as I have tried to move towards that myself, he just always has such sage wisdom. Shane has been supportive, even when he barely knew me, when I was just becoming a graduate student. He has continued to be very supporting, knowledgeable and accessible. Sonja Lyubomirsky is another leader in the field who has been so supportive of me from the very beginning of my career. She has been a great mentor over the years. She got me started as a reviewer at the *Journal of Positive Psychology* and nudged me towards Associate Editorship. More recently, Sonja has been a great collaborator, too, and has graciously found time to contribute to both of my edited books. It takes a special kind of person to spend so much time and energy on someone who isn't their own student. I am constantly grateful for her. The other person I really admire is Ed Diener, who is actually the epitome of positive psychology. He's happy, he's energetic, he's curious, he's engaged, he's supportive, and he's personable. Ed

Diener is to me a paragon, he is a truly happy person and something about interacting with him is a very lively and inspiring experience.

Who do you think are the other young emerging researchers who are doing great things?

I think by now that people generally know Todd Kashdan. Even though he's not the old guard, he's a whippersnapper who's making noise and good trouble. What I love about Todd is that he's got balls of steel; he's brave and oppositional, in just the way that the field needs. There's such a strong status quo in any field, everyone is doing things their own way, then there's Todd, who just comes along and goes 'No, No, not that way, this way, or some other way'. He gets people to think in a way that I really respect. I always try to get Todd involved in anything that I do. For example if I'm in a symposium I always think, let's get Todd in here and see what he has to say because I think that this is really great, but I'm sure that there's something that I haven't thought of and Todd has always thought of something that I haven't. I'm also a big fan of Michelle Louis. She recently published a paper suggesting that talking about strengths as a fixed personality trait might make people less willing to work on them, figuring they are stable so what's the point. Very cool stuff. We need more people adding nuance to positive intervention research. Not just, 'do they work?' but 'when do they work and for whom?' and 'when might they backfire?'

What are your plans for the future?

I just started in a new tenure track position, so I'm getting my lab settled and spending my startup and just trying to figure out what I'm going to be doing for the next few years. I'm really interested in this physiological measurement thing, so I'm hoping to drop some money on that and I'm also hoping to be doing ambulatory assessment—that's the new fancy term for 'experience sampling'—research. I think that's the direction we're headed in as a field. I'm hoping to establish myself there and I also have these teaching projects that I'm working on, for example, an edited book with positive psychology activities that's going to be completed at the end of this summer. I'm hoping to continue along that line. For example, I am guest editing a special issue for the *Journal of Positive Psychology* on 'positive psychology and higher education'—that's a passion of mine. I've been teaching positive psychology since I started in graduate school. That's eight years now. I've taught positive psychology a lot and it's always my favorite course to teach and I really like helping other people learn to teach it and mentor people in that area. So, I hope to continue that in addition to the research.

For someone new to the field of positive psychology, what is one book that you would recommend they read first?

Although it's an old standard, I really recommend the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. It's been around since 2003 I think, and they have a new edition so it's updated, but no book provides, for a researcher, a better basis in a really broad array of topics, and a great orientation to who is doing the lead research. For people interested in positive interventions in particular, I am working on a *Handbook of Positive Interventions* that should be coming out in late 2012. I'm really excited about it. It's got a nice line-up of contributors.

What about for someone who's not a researcher?

For the general public, *The How of Happiness* would provide the best overview. There are other good books, for example *Curious*, but that is very specific. And *Authentic Happiness* is a great

book, but it is very theoretical. *The How of Happiness* is a perfect mix of research summary that's clear and digestible, and also actual techniques and things that people can try. Reading them in that way is very helpful because it shows the things that researchers are having people do — this is what we mean by increasing happiness. So that is really nice. I always have my positive psychology students read *The How of Happiness* because it's such a good introduction to the field.

So your area of expertise is positive psychology interventions. If someone comes to you and says they want to be happier, which ones would you suggest?

It depends on the context. I've been consulting on this grant by Chris Kahler at Brown and he's adapting positive psychotherapy for smoking cessation. One of the things that they do in smoking cessation is start the intervention two weeks before they actually quit. One of the things they are trying to do in this intervention is frontload with a lot of positive emotion because positive emotion is a predictor of good outcomes. So they are trying to make people experience as much positive emotion as possible so they have this protective factor when they are trying to quit that's going to predict their success. There are a couple of exercises in that situation where it seems really logical that they should start with that, for example, the gratitude visit has been demonstrated to have a very powerful but temporary effect, so if what you're looking for is an immediate benefit to get a person moving, then the gratitude visit is a good choice because it's very intense. But as a long-term technique the gratitude visit is not a good choice because it is not very reusable and its effects are lost very quickly. I recommended that and I also recommended 'three good things', which has a low-grade, but more sustained, benefit. So what they did was start with 'three good things'. It takes a while for that to build up, but once it does, it is a sort of constant source of positive emotion. Combine that with the gratitude visit so that you have an immediate increase from the gratitude visit and, by the time that's faded, 'three good things' has picked up and will carry it in the longer term. They have different strengths as activities: one is more on-going and sustained and is effective but takes time, but in the time that it takes you can be doing this other activity that keeps the person interested and engaged. I think that those are examples of two activities that are helpful to most people. The other activities involve a lot more nuance and consideration of which is best for whom. But any time that I think of a prototypical positive intervention that I want people to stick with I think of those two as a place to start.

Is there anything that you would like to comment on in general that you think would be useful for somebody who doesn't know about positive psychology and who is reading a book about positive psychology to find out a bit more?

There are a lot of misconceptions about positive psychology. As somebody who has taught not just a positive psychology course, but also these freshman writing seminars on the topic of happiness, I've had a lot of exposure to the things people think about happiness, and a lot of these are very disturbing to me. One of these includes misconceptions about optimism. People think that it is great to be positive all the time, and that that is what optimism is; but there is so much more nuance to what optimism is as a concept, so much more than just thinking everything is going to work out all the time. What I try to explain to people is that optimism is much more about entertaining the possibility that things could work out. So, if you're a pessimist you think that things are not going to work out, and then you don't even bother, so of course it doesn't work out because you didn't try. But optimism is just keeping open the idea that it could work and trying, as if it will work, so that you maximize your chances of it

working. That's the reason that optimists are more successful. It's not magic, it's effort, and your level of effort depends on what you expect. So maybe optimists are wrong some of the time because they might think that something is possible when it's not; but people worry about there being some danger to that, like 'Oh what if they're deluded, you know, they think that everything's going to go right and then they're lazy and they don't do anything'. That's not what happens at all. People who don't do anything are the pessimists who think that it's not going to work out in the first place. Optimism is a really good example of something that just got lost in translation. Everyone in positive psychology understands what it is and outside of positive psychology it became this 'think positive' mantra, which is not at all what optimism is.

The other thing I think that people really misinterpret, going back to the earlier positive psychology and cancer example, is just because there are research findings that suggest that outlook affects your health, doesn't mean that you should be telling people that they are responsible for what happens. There is such a difference in saying that something is predictive and telling somebody what they should do. Marty Seligman and others constantly say that we're not prescribing, but people want prescriptions and people take prescriptions away. It's in some ways on us to be careful about what we say because it will be made into a prescription no matter what. I think that the solution to that is not to refuse to make prescriptions, but to control the direction of the prescriptions. For example, if you're going to report that people who have a more optimistic outlook survive cancer for longer, you should not say, 'But there's no prescription here, I'm just describing'. Somebody else is going to make up the prescription and then it could be wrong. If you're going to throw that idea out there, then in a way it's your responsibility to harness it so the take home message is something that isn't harmful. For example, in this situation the take home message might be, 'If the person is coping well, don't tell them that they are wrong'. Bonnano has all this research about how people get a bad rap when somebody dies and they're not doing poorly, for example when someone loses a spouse and they're relieved because their spouse is out of pain, or because they were older, or had a disease, and they're doing alright because they're coping well, then people say, 'You're making a mistake and you must secretly be upset and you're not expressing it', and people get all this social flack for that. So it might be, in the cancer case, that you don't give people flack if they're doing alright. It's possible to do alright and it's acceptable to do alright. There's no evidence for this idea that you need to do 'grief work', or that you have to be upset. There's no evidence that it will come back to bite you if you don't express some underlying distress. So, I think that you can turn that into a reasonable take home message that isn't harmful to people. My recommendation is that people take control of that by doing it themselves.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Ryan Niemiec

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Ryan Niemiec is Education Director of the VIA Institute on Character, a licensed psychologist, coach/consultant, and co-author of three books including *Positive Psychology at the Movies*. Ryan has a passion for teaching, practicing, and/or writing about character strengths, mindfulness, and the portrayal of positive phenomena in movies.

How long have you been involved in the field of positive psychology?

Well, that depends on your definition of positive psychology really. If you consider the field of positive psychology as starting when Martin Seligman coined the field in 1999 or so, I became interested at that point and read the original papers in the *American Psychologist* in the year 2000 and pushed on from there. But, if you consider positive psychology as starting long before Marty's articulation then I'd say that in the late 90s, I was infusing the principles of positive psychology into my practice as a psychologist. I always tried to embed ideas of strengths and happiness and wellbeing and take a more holistic look at people in my practice, rather than limiting myself to 'what's wrong?'

What prompted you to become interested in the area of positive psychology?

Back in the mid to late 90s I was interested in what you might say is 'holistic health', or the bio-psychosocial-spiritual model, where we look at the individual as a whole, rather than just relying on traditional training in psychology that had camps predominately focused on working with just the person's thinking or just their past experiences. I was always really interested in learning about those dimensions but going beyond that into the social realm, the cultural realm, the spiritual realm, and seeing people as so much more than just a couple of different parts, and more than the sum of their parts. So, integrating this with an inclination towards looking at what was going right with people is what primed me to be interested in this field. It was that push towards a bigger, more holistic view, that made me want to gravitate toward positive psychology and infuse that more into my work.

Was there any key event that led you to stumble into positive psychology or did it just happen over time?

It was a gradual process over time, rather than one catalyst. I've had some major events happen that have moved me forward deeper and deeper into the field of positive psychology though. For example, my connection with VIA. Prior to working at the VIA Institute on Character, I'd been involved in positive psychology for quite some time and had co-authored the book



Positive Psychology at the Movies, which looked at character strengths portrayed in movies; and at that time, which was 2007 or so, I had not known about the existence of the VIA Institute because it was the VIA Survey and VIA Classification that were prominent at that point. I was living in St. Louis [USA] with my wife and we had decided to move closer to our families (more East). We decided to move to Cincinnati, without knowing much about the city, yet it felt right. So it was an intuitive move. This is particularly striking because we were making this decision at the worst time in the American economy since the great depression, that's in about 75 years or so, we had to buy a house, sell a house, and look for two jobs, but something told us it was the right thing to do and we were just going to do it. And while I was sitting in St. Louis one day I sent a message to a positive psychology listserv about the *Positive Psychology at the Movies* book and I got this query from Neal Mayerson, the chairman of VIA. My wife happened to be looking over my shoulder at the e-mail message and she noticed that the phone number in the signature line was a Cincinnati number, exactly where we were headed. This connection eventually led to VIA hiring me to help educate practitioners on how to bridge the science and practice of character strengths. So, you could call this a stumbling deeper in the thicket of positive psychology, events of synchronicity, luck, or some combination of each.

In general terms what do you think are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

I might be a little biased, but I, and many others, see the work on character strengths as being the backbone to positive psychology. I say that because whatever theory or approach or topic people are interested in, you can apply character strengths to it, or that particular topic stems from character strengths. For example, a lot of people are interested in happiness, or they are interested in positive emotions, and we can clearly link character strengths to those two topics. We can say that the practice of character strengths is quite strongly connected with these two areas. For example, Marty Seligman has shared how he views character strengths as the underpinnings of each area of his theory of authentic happiness, as well as his PERMA theory of wellbeing. One of the hottest topics in positive psychology is resilience. We can link in character strengths with resilience, and what character strengths an individual can use to become more resilient. Or another major area in positive psychology that is emerging for positive psychologists is mindfulness, even though mindfulness has its own following of practitioners and researchers independent of positive psychology. But when we look at the actual definition of mindfulness, researchers in studying it have formed a consensual definition, or as close to one as one can get. What it really boils down to is two character strengths: the self-regulation of our attention, and taking an attitude of curiosity and openness and acceptance. Another big area is the area of the positive institutions, which then moves into the wider areas of 'positive nations' and 'positive cultures', and creating a healthier world really. Here, we can explore how character strengths might be ingredients of a positive or virtuous institution and contribute to a healthier society. These are some of the major areas in positive psychology, and some that I am interested in myself, and we can link character strengths as underpinnings to these, as parts of the process, or as outcomes.

What would you say is the big goal of positive psychology, as a field?

There are probably several goals. But one that stands out most is the need to gain more appreciation by psychology as a whole and by other practitioners, and by the general public. I think that positive psychology has made incredible strides and has moved way beyond so many of the nay-sayers and people that were skeptical, suggesting that positive psychology

was just a fad, and that it was going to be done and over in just a few years. They turned out to be completely wrong on that. But still, I think that positive psychology has a long way to go in terms of getting into every household, and directly impacting people of every nation, and getting deeper into government, and schools, and businesses, and every therapist's office, to be able to take more of the whole picture of the human being.

How can we do this? What's the best way?

Perhaps it's just me being impatient, but from what I can tell at IPPA [International Positive Psychology Association] and other organizations and from talking to leaders in the field it seems like we're all doing our part, and we are going in the right direction. As long as organizations like IPPA, and VIA, and other organizations can stay strong to continue to educate and promote the findings to both the general public and to various professions, then I think this will continue to grow. There are positive psychology educators, consultants and practitioners going into governments, into business, and into the school systems around the world. This is the path. We need to build and expand upon this in terms of the positive psychology principles that are taught, the professions that integrate them, and the countries this is done in. So it's coming, and it's better than any of us thought it would have been, but there's still a long way to go.

What do you think is the best way that positive psychology can make this world a better place?

A very challenging question! If each person can do their part, then that is going to spread. I think of 'pay it forward' as a good example. If each practitioner, educator, researcher, can pay this work forward, and gives positive psychology away to X number of people or students, and puts forth the best that they know about positive psychology to those people, maybe it's to clients, maybe it's to other colleagues, to family members, to students, and then those people can pay it forward to more individuals. We can create and spread that web of positivity, kindness, and goodness. This would make that goal more realistic, and every one of us could play the part right now and encourage and influence other people to influence others as well.

What would you say is your proudest moment in the field of positive psychology over the last 10 years?

I'm probably most proud when doing a one-on-one meeting with someone, for example a coaching type session, and applying some principles of strengths-based practice in positive psychology, and that individual completely and totally has a 180 degree shift. For example, I'm thinking of one person in particular who had been suffering tremendously over the years and who felt very weak, who had not acknowledged any of her strengths, and who had started to learn about them but still had a significant amount of blindness about her strengths. Through a conversation, just a simple little 30 minute conversation, she began to look at herself in a completely different way and began to say that she had hope now, and how she could go about making some of the tough decisions that she was facing. So that's one of the most down-to-earth things that I'm proud of. I am also proud of that person in that moment for making that shift. I'm also honored to be able to stand up in front of a large group of people, for example a few-hundred people at an IPPA conference or the European Conference on Positive Psychology, and to have the opportunity to talk about something that I'm very passionate about. For example, at the beginning of an international presentation recently I showed a close-

up image of my newborn son making eye contact with me and I spoke of how there's a moment when he rotates his head and suddenly 'sees' me. I related this to how the practitioner can shift their own perceptions and 'see' their client's core character strengths. The audience gave me an ovation for this example. I was only 5 minutes into a 2-hour talk and I was getting an ovation—and the fact that it related to my son—that was a thrilling and proud moment.

What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers and practitioners?

To stay true to the field. That is, to stay true to the science in terms of the research, and stay true to thinking 'how does this translate into best practice?'. That's what positive psychology is all about - linking the two.

Who do you look up to in the field of positive psychology?

I look up to a lot of people. To be honest, I actually look up to every researcher in positive psychology, and that's the truth. I don't look up more to the popular figures or those that garner the most attention. I'm a practitioner and an educator so I look up to those that have mastery in an area that I've not mastered myself, thus I appreciate researchers. I think of someone like Rhett Diessner, who works at a small university in the state of Idaho. I look up to him. He's doing research with some of his students on 'appreciation of beauty'. I also look up to some of the larger scale researchers like Chris Peterson, who has done so much wonderful work in the field.

What do you think fits well along with strengths, so to speak? For example if you were going to work with someone on strengths, what would you additionally work with them on?

I would link in mindfulness, as that's what I'm also passionate about as a practitioner. I am beginning to study this interrelationship more closely. But I would weave this in, helping the individual to become more mindful of those strongest qualities inside them and the resources around them, and using mindfulness and strengths to deal with problems and with different issues; and how we can be mindful of overusing our character strengths or not using enough of them. I would link how to find that balance and how to be mindful of applying strengths in the right context and how to be mindful of how to use strengths in order to flourish. I think that they are natural bedfellows. I recently created and piloted a new eight-week programme focusing on the integration of mindfulness and character strengths, and I will look forward to advancing this and sharing it in the future.

Is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked about that you think would be useful for a person looking at moving into the world of positive psychology?

I see movies as an incredible medium for helping people to realize their potential, to become better, and to apply positive psychology principles. One of the major reasons for me saying this is that when an individual takes an approach to movies, whether they are paying attention to themselves, or paying attention to the impact of the character on the screen, they will often feel inspired or feel what researcher Jonathan Haidt has coined as 'elevation'. Movies can be cinematically elevating in that we observe a character doing something inspiring, or we observe a character displaying bravery or wisdom or perseverance in some strong way, and maybe we need to build that strength within ourselves, or maybe it just reflects a part of ourselves. We feel the physiological sensations of tingling and warming in the chest; and then, most importantly, we are motivated to do good, or are motivated to be better people, or are

motivated to be more altruistic. This is an exciting area that needs to have more research. It also links in with the question about making the world a better place, because movies are something that can transcend cultures and nations and therefore they have potential to reach each person and can help people to be stronger and to flourish.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Nic Marks

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Nic Marks is a recognised expert in the field of wellbeing research and positive psychology, and undertakes innovative research in the use of wellbeing indicators in public policy environments. Nic founded the New Economics Foundation's 'Centre for Wellbeing' and has led the wellbeing programme at the New Economics Foundation since 2001. This has included creating the very influential 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' campaign which now has global reach.

What prompted your interest in positive psychology?

I came to positive psychology to try to unpick the question around sustainable development, which is how we try to create for people good lives that don't cost the earth. It became fairly obvious that we need to think more about the quality of life than the quantity of life, trying to unpack the difference between economic growth and quality. So, I came to the field of the science of wellbeing, international quality of life studies, and latterly positive psychology, to work out whether we could measure that experience of life because that seems to me critical in how we re-vision what the future should be.

And you've been in the field for a while?

I've been in the field of thinking about alternative indicators of GDP for about 20 years, but wellbeing and subjective wellbeing for some 10 years now, since about 2001.

What would you say are some of the most distinctive features of positive psychology and how it applies to what you're doing?

Firstly, it's a great, fun, topic and it's very appealing to people. We've had so much psychology that's been about fixing the bad things, which obviously is important, but I think there's been a lack of giving people the opportunity to fulfil themselves—so positive psychology is great for that reason. And then there's some good science coming out, showing that wellbeing is not exactly the opposite of ill-being, and I think that that is interesting. Barbara Frederickson's work is standout work in the positive psychology area.

So when you think about the big questions that the field of positive psychology addresses, what would you say those questions are?

How do lives go well? What are the causes of lives going well? How can we define that and how can we improve people's lives? Ultimately it's about making a difference. Positive



psychology is about making a difference, an improvement to people's lives and I think that's positive psychology's aim. It's a noble aim.

What's a social justice issue that positive psychology should focus on, in your view?

This is a developed world social justice issue. There are developing world social justice issues as well, but we know that people at the bottom of the income spectrum have lower happiness, wellbeing, than people further up it. But what positive psychology shows us, if you actually unpick it a bit, is that money is not the only causal thing that is going to get them out of that. So it's not about throwing benefits and such things to those at the lower end of the income spectrum, it's actually about giving them a sense of agency, and actually getting them to critically and wholly participate in society, or helping them to participate—'getting' them to participate is too strong. It's not about being prescriptive, it's more about facilitating that process, and so they're not activating the sort of things we know about that bring people wellbeing. That's because they don't have that capacity to support, they haven't had that love and care. So positive psychology reframes the issue of inequalities into an inequality of agency, rather than an inequality of money.

What do you think is the best way for them to achieve that?

Who? Policy makers or people individually?

Both, really. I mean that is the problem and if you had unlimited ways to fix it, how would you go about fixing it?

Right at the bottom of the income spectrum needs to have funded interventions because you'll then have future benefits. That would actually save the government a lot of money. Those interventions might be in part financial, but they'd be more things such as access to small micro credit loans and things like that. But they also need to be about getting social support and mentoring and helping people learn, not necessarily formal learning, but learning from others in their community. Communities can work together and actually release passion and interest; and engagement in them is very, very interesting. Most of these people couldn't even begin to think about how to set up a small business or something like that. Yet they have skills and passions and interests and strengths: but how do you release them? So it's a very facilitative approach, which is unusual for government. Government usually tends to be happier if it's building things or putting in place infrastructure, physical things. So it's quite a different sort of a process.

It seems from what you're saying it needs to be a bit of top down, but also has to be a bit of bottom up, for those 'bottom rung' people?

Yes, you can't tell someone what their passions should be. You've got to have a conversation about that. So, the 'top down' needs to be putting facilitators and coaches into these communities. Rather than building community centres, actually pay for these people to live in the community and to get to know the community and find out how they can get to work with people and have a very free remit to do that. And maybe setting up small funds that people can dip into to borrow that first 200 pounds or whatever to set up something small. There are really big returns on investment for those sorts of projects.

So it's more about a hand-up than a hand-out?

Yes, the process has to be bubbling up rather than trickling down. It has to be using people's energy and releasing that in their communities.

What do you think are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?

There have been far too many claims made far too quickly about certain interventions. The press have got very excited about it, and people have over-claimed success. Quite a lot of the claims made can come across as too theory-led or they haven't actually done enough to enable people to use it. On other occasions they are too focussed on specific interventions that can be proved in clinical studies, in rigorous trials and blind studies and that sort of thing. That's all fine, but we have to generalise out from that if we are really going to make it useful. So, you want to have the science and you want to be able to go from that, so you want to be able to use the social marketing techniques. We need to be able to communicate things better. So, counting your blessings is great, but it's not going to be an intervention that saves the world, and gratitude letters are not going to either. Also, claims of universality across all cultures, when they're quite culturally specific, have been a problem. But, generally, I think that the field of positive psychology is doing a great amount of human good.

What's the one thing that brings your work to the attention of others?

One of the things we do well at NEF is communicating, and by that I mean taking relatively complex ideas and presenting them in ways that are simple, but not simplistic. That's the aim. We do some good work, and some of it is less good than other parts; but you know when something is good, that's when it travels and people start using it. There are a few things that we have done that have really travelled. The 'Happy Planet Index' and 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' are two examples, but there are others as well—and these are things we have tried to simplify, without making them too simplistic.

I liked what you said once about starting with the people and then working backwards, and I don't think many people think that way at all and that's where the application of the science breaks down...

Yeah, you can see that there are lots of people that want to coach in positive psychology, and this is not to say that there are not ways to make money out of positive psychology, but it would be nicer if it was a bit more focussed on human good and less on individual ways to set up consultancies. That is somewhat problematic and is reflected in the fact that we have a very poor ethnic mix of people coming to positive psychology conferences—it's pretty much all European Americans. People are not going to be naturally attracted to positive psychology, and the positive psychology community is going to have to work very hard. There should be a conscious effort to attract a broad range of people to positive psychology.

In what ways do people make money out of the field of positive psychology?

There is a lot of business consultancy, and there is nothing wrong with business consultancy. People need to be able to make money. But there has been too much focus on how that happens sometimes.

Who do you look up to in the field of positive psychology?

Ed Diener. He is a fantastic empiricalist. He has taken risks in his career and I think he is outstanding. John Helliwell, because he brings the social into it. He understands how communities work and understands the importance of how that works in that context. Barbara Frederickson is a great experimental psychologist and has a great ability to communicate really well. Her work has a really good grounding in science. They would be my top three.

Have you made any big mistakes, or do you have any regrets, in your progress as you have moved into the positive psychology field? Things that you look back on and think “I really should not have done that!”?

Not regrets; of course you make mistakes and think about how you could have done things better, but that's your learning process. When I came to the field in 2001, in the early days, I was learning here. I'm not a psychologist, I'm a statistician and a psychotherapist, but that's not a technical psychologist, so clearly in the first projects we did we had questionnaires that were too long, because we didn't understand enough about them, but you learn from that, so I don't think that there are any regrets with that.

There are the established people in positive psychology who are really well known. Are there any people who stick out for you, who aren't well known, who are emerging, at the cutting edge of the science, who you'd like to flag for the future?

Joar Vitterso from Norway. I don't know if you have heard of him, but he's doing good work on interest and also curiosity as well. Looking at how there are different types of positive emotions that may have previously been put into one bracket, suggesting that they all behave the same way, whereas actually they don't. For example, pleasure does not operate the same way as enthusiasm or engagement; and how do we start to differentiate between some of the positive emotions and their effects on people? So his work is very interesting.

An under-thought about a field in positive psychology is genes and environment interplay. We haven't seen nearly enough work on that, and it's quite technical work; but it's really important. We need to know how we intervene with people, and if we're thinking that the environment and the interventions in the environment are going to work the same for all people—that's rubbish. So, we need to know much more about genetically informed datasets, and particularly around interventions with children.

Over the last three or four years, of all the books you've read about positive psychology, what's the one that stood out to you, changed your mind, as being fresh, the most inspirational book in the area of positive psychology?

A book is hard because I read Barbara Fredrickson's book *Positivity* and I actually think that I preferred some of Barbara's papers, but that's just me. It's like Sonya Lyubomirsky's book *The How of Happiness*; it's fine but it didn't really inspire me. I guess that Barry Schwartz's books [*The Paradox of Choice* and *The Loss of Wisdom*] really stuck out to me. I'd put him up there with someone who I enormously respect, he's challenged the positive psychology movement and challenged the VIA strengths and how they are defined, and he's very smart. So probably his was the book I really went 'wow' at, although that's probably about six years old now.

What book would you recommend to someone who doesn't know anything about the field of positive psychology? When they find out about positive psychology, what's the first book they should read?

The one I normally recommend is *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell* by Ilona Boniwell, which is just a small book, about 100 pages, which is succinct, but probably needs updating now, although I realise she also has a new textbook on positive psychology just out. In the past I have quite strongly recommended *Authentic Happiness*, because it is good for the field. And then there's *Flourish*...

Thinking of the current concerns in the field of positive psychology, what two concerns would you list as most needing to be addressed in order to make positive psychology a better discipline going forward?

Firstly, it needs to address its cultural bias, its ethnic bias. That's critical. Secondly it needs to think climate change and think about the environment. I find it so shocking that there are no tracks on interaction between nature and positive psychology. You can take it very softly, for example there's nothing looking at human beings and just how it feels to be outside. I know there is an article that's just come out in the *International Journal of Wellbeing* that focuses on nature, context and human wellbeing and uses Central Park in New York as an example and we need more of that kind of stuff. It's really important that we understand that there is a huge contextual impact in how the environment impacts on people, and that it's not all individually based. It's important to positive psychology to get out of the individual, and into the social.

What do you think are the pros and cons about the main governing body, IPPA?

It's too American-based: this conference [the 2nd World Congress on Positive Psychology] was supposed to be in Europe, but they didn't take the risk to do that. I also think it's too narcissistic in a way, too inward turning. For example, to give six fellowships to six of the almost founding fathers of positive psychology. So you found an organisation and then get awarded by it? They should have given Barbara [Fredrickson], or Sonya [Lyubomirsky], or Todd [Kashdan], or Tim Kasser, people who are doing really good research in different areas, these awards. They should be using the organisation to give people a leg up in the field, not to go "jolly well done". There are lots of pros to IPPA though; I don't want to say it's not a good organisation. There is a lot that needs to be debated though. There are a lot of really good people involved here and there is a really interesting scientific base. The International Positive Psychology Association should also be a bit stricter about the empirical robustness of work sometimes—although it's better than five years ago when people used to give papers on positive psychology. It's improved a lot.

What discipline do you think positive psychology can learn the most from, moving forward as an early science?

It needs to learn more from systems theory, complexity. It's too linear sometimes. It could learn more from social psychology, just generally, get out of the individual. The European tradition in psychology is more social and cultural. Also, probably evolutionary psychology. Barbara [Fredrickson] does this very well, whereas PERMA does not really have an evolutionary story behind it. Ed Diener is much clearer that he thinks life satisfaction is the best measure; now, you can agree or disagree with that, but he has a stance on that.

What do you think about the distinction ‘pushed from the past and pulled into the future’ as a point for positive psychologists to focus on or think more about?

I have not really digested what Marty [Seligman] said about that in a lot of ways yet, but I do think he’s right to think that there’s a distinction between reminiscing about the past and anticipating about the future, and that views about the future are very much influenced by the now. We don’t need to be as much weighed down by the past as psychodynamic theory has told us to be. For example, people don’t necessarily need to delve into the past to explain their present quite so much. I like the way that positive psychology is an optimistic science and does include things about the future too. Psychotherapy and counselling is often not focussed enough on that, and I’m treating those as disciplines that have tried to improve the human lot, and they have done. But you should only think about the past in as much as it affects the present right now. Negativity gets you caught in patterns. Do I think that there is a pull from the future? It is very difficult scientifically to say that, but personally, yeah I do.

This is a book for people looking to move into the field of positive psychology. Is there anything else you’d like to comment on that I have not asked about?

Coming to positive psychology with an open mind has the potential for lots to be learned from it, as there is a lot to be learnt and discovered. It is an exciting discipline and I would like it to be linked more closely to social dimensions and cultural dimensions – which it is trying to do. Ultimately, I’d like it to start to help us tackle what are some of the most pressing issues of our day. The 21st century is going to have to come to terms with the entrenched poverty in the world and how we deal with that, and climate change and how we dematerialise our economies. Positive psychology, although not many currently think this way, has a huge contribution to make towards that, because it looks at what makes life go well, and it gives us the freedom to think in a different way.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Barbara Fredrickson

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Barbara Fredrickson is the Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Director of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab (PEP Lab) at the University of North Carolina, and is a leading scholar within positive psychology, social psychology, and affective science. Barbara's research centers on positive emotions and human flourishing, and her work is cited widely, including her 2009 book, *Positivity*, which describes the relevance of her 20-year research programme on positive emotions for a general readership, and her Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions.

In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

The distinctive features of positive psychology are rather nebulous because a lot of things that can be called positive psychology are often not necessarily termed positive psychology. At the overarching general level would be looking at the aspects of human nature that help us become a better version of ourselves over time, that help propel us towards growth, or greater confidence, greater resilience, greater honesty, greater integrity. The study of those aspects and a lot of that work happens under the umbrella of positive psychology, and a lot of it happens outside of it. The boundaries I think are very blurry.

What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?

One of the biggest achievements of positive psychology to date is just getting on the public radar; of being clearly an area of science worth investing in, worth paying attention to, worth applying. The tremendous interest right now in creating resilience training programs, and trying to create a more resilient public, or a more resilient military force, really speaks to the strength of this perspective.

If you had a magic wand, what would be one thing that you would change about positive psychology?

That there would be a clear source of funding for positive psychology. Right now it's unclear where more funding for the more basic science pieces of it will come from. The demand for the fruits of positive psychology is far larger than the supply of good science, and that in part is because we don't necessarily have the funds to be training people in the basic science areas of positive psychology. Positive psychology spans both basic science and applied science, and right now we have a situation where the applied side is not necessarily being fed by enough of



the basic science pieces. That's in part because funding for the basic science pieces is harder to come by and training dollars for training scientists in those areas is tough to come by. So that would be my magic wand: to invest in the basic science side, especially in training the next generation of people to do it.

What do you think is the new hot topic for positive psychology over the next few years?

Health is getting stronger attention in that we need to go beyond looking at wellbeing or happiness as simply judgments and emotions, and really anchor them in how they are affecting the bottom line of people's life expectancy, their illness histories, the dollars they cost their employers in health care visits, and also more and more in how much positive psychology within organizations affects their bottom line. I think ways of making those metrics concrete are especially vital. And then at the basic science level, looking at how wellbeing and emotions are part of larger dynamic systems is going to be ever more crucial because wellbeing is not a single state, you know—it's not like you reach some happiness plateau and you're forever there—instead people get caught up in upward spirals or downward spirals, or some self-sustaining system in one way or another. We need to better understand those temporal dynamics and how they unfold and how they reinforce wellness or illness over time.

Can you tell me a little bit about your work in the area of positive psychology?

I work on emotions, and positive emotions in particular. My students and collaborators and I are interested in everything about positive emotions, which are short-lived, momentary, fleeting experiences that have, in the moment, ways of altering the ways we think, the ways we behave, the way we see other people. Over time those momentary effects of positive emotions add up and really change who we become, change how people grow and change over time. So I'm interested in those short-term and long-term accumulated effects of positive emotions. We're looking at those in a wide variety of ways, especially right now focusing on physical health.

As you have been working in the field of positive psychology, what's one learning experience that's made a big difference for you?

One that's really a challenge is going from basic research on laboratory studies and finding out the cognitive effects, say, of positive emotions, to making the transition into applied work, and trying to help people achieve more positive emotions so they can have the good outcomes that those emotions may bring. There is a vexing additional piece of people's wishful thinking: people sometimes so hunger to have wellbeing and have positive emotions that they lose sight of whether they are really having them when they fill out a questionnaire. There's a lot of, in jargon terms, experimenter demand or demand characteristics, but it's just, in general terms, kind of wishful thinking. So as a researcher, working in that more applied domain, you really need to be looking to see whether this is a genuine, bona fide, positive emotion that this person is reporting, or do they wish they were feeling a positive emotion? Do they earnestly wish that, so they're in a way presenting a counterfeit positive emotion? Because wellbeing and wellness and happiness are all things that people so earnestly strive for, they can sometimes lose sight of 'What's the real thing?' versus just too quickly saying, 'Oh yes, I'm happy', without really examining the data for that.

What's your proudest moment in the field of positive psychology to date?

It's when people put the ideas into use. I'm trained as a lab researcher and a basic scientist. I think of myself as an emotion theorist. What positive psychology offers really well is an interface between people doing the basic science, and practitioners in all different kinds of domains, industry, education, the military and so on, who want to put that science into action. So some of the proudest moments I've had are when people do that, they translate what I've been working on into application, and are finding success with that. So again, there is only so much one person can do, and the ideas that emerge from the science that I've been doing, I can communicate those in a way that I can pass the baton on to others who can do great things with those ideas. That's something that makes me really proud.

Who are the emerging and unknown researchers in positive psychology to look out for?

I can give some names of people I know well because they have been junior collaborators of mine. Sarah Algoe is one who is doing phenomenal work on gratitude in particular, and other ways that certain positive emotional moments can transform social opportunities and relationships. She's working at the interface of emotions and relationships. One of my current doctoral students, Bethany Kok, is diving into the physiological substrates of the upward spirals that we think sustain people's wellbeing, so she's a name to keep an eye out for in the future.

What's one book, other than your book *Positivity*, that you think all those getting into the field and learning about positive psychology should read?

The best initial take is perhaps Sonja Lyubomirsky's book *The How of Happiness*, which is excellent in helping people understand the basic exercises that have a track record for improving wellbeing, and in helping people understand the hurdles and the sluggishness they must overcome, for happiness and wellbeing to improve. I think it gives a good realistic account.

What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers and or practitioners?

Stay actively invested in the positive psychology community and also in the home discipline your training is in, whether it's social psychology or affective neuroscience or others. Both of those affiliations are really vital. Identifying in positive psychology can be useful and productive, but it wouldn't be the only identity that you would want or the only identity hat that you would want to wear. Make sure that the work that you are doing is equally turning heads within a related discipline that isn't necessarily under the umbrella of positive psychology.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Ilona Boniwell

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Ilona Boniwell is a principal lecturer in positive psychology at the University of East London, founder of the European Network of Positive Psychology, as well as the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology at the University of East London. Ilona's main research is on subjective time use, time perspective, eudaimonic wellbeing and applications of positive psychology to one-to-one work, business and education.

In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

Positive psychology looks at the optimal side of human functioning, and the distinctive feature is its positive approach and the fact that it relies on solid empirical evidence. This is what distinguishes it from humanistic psychology, which was prominent in previous years.

What are some key questions that positive psychologists seek to answer?

What makes people happy? What contributes to lasting happiness? What contributes to lasting physical health? What constitutes personality strengths? What contributes to wisdom? What makes us more resilient? What is happiness in itself, and how do we define it and how do we measure it? What are positive emotions, and what can positive emotions contribute to? This in particular is a very important question that Barbara Frederickson is working on. The interesting questions for me at the moment are around the areas of resilience, post-traumatic growth, and positive aging. The interaction between positive psychology and psychology as usual poses a real challenge at the moment. Fascinating also is 'what is positive parenting?' and 'how can we bring up children in a better way and be better parents?'. As a mother of four teenagers and a baby, this is also a very practical question for me. How can positive psychology help people in the real world, how can positive psychology contribute to education, to business, to work-life in general? How can positive psychology help us to understand one-to-one helping professions, like coaching and counselling, and what can it really bring to coaching and counselling? On the one hand, it sounds relatively easy and positive psychology can, in fact, bring a lot to coaching. But when you get down to it and start teaching coaches about positive psychology, surprisingly they are very often lost. That's one of the difficult questions for me: how can you really make positive psychology very tangible, so when practicing psychologists work with it and work with its tools, they can actually get quite a lot out of it and go in depth with their clients, rather than just stay on the surface?



What is one big challenge you think positive psychology faces?

The challenge of the future, and what is going to happen with positive psychology in general. Whether positive psychology should become more integrated with ‘psychology as usual’ or not? Remaining a distinct positive psychology tradition with certain distinct personalities within this tradition is potentially a negative trajectory, because it can become a field that is a little bit stuck with itself and is relatively unopen to the rest of psychology as a discipline. So for me the big challenge is how to integrate positive psychology back into psychology as usual in such a way that it still remains its own distinct field in some way, but is fluid and transparent and accepted by the rest of the discipline, and penetrates the rest of psychology fully enough without becoming a one-camp stop.

Someone wants to become happier. What’s your first piece of advice for them?

That would be the ‘count your blessings’ exercise. This is an exercise that I was quite against when it first appeared and when I first came across it because it seemed to me to be incredibly light hearted. Nevertheless, after seeing many, many people try it—I’m talking mainly about my students and seeing students exercising positive psychology tools and trying the exercises and different approaches—I would have to admit that it is the most profound and helpful tool that there is. The implementation of this tool, from theory to real life, is probably a bit tricky because it does sound simple and you have to write it down and so on. Nevertheless, just focusing on the positive features of the day appears to have profound effects on becoming happier.

What’s the new hot topic for positive psychology in the coming two years?

I’m a bit biased by my own research interests, but really it’s the definition of eudaimonic wellbeing. Being able to distinguish between eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing, which seems to be on the one hand quite an obvious trajectory and something that makes intuitive sense, and on the other hand is something that is extremely difficult to achieve; to draw the line between eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing, if there is such a line. Or to draw the line between eudaimonic and hedonic personality such as the work of Joar Vitterso. This is something that really excites me, to see if there is this difference between eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing, to see if we can define eudaimonic wellbeing. If you look at the literature, sometimes eudaimonic wellbeing is a cluster of distinct constructs, related in some respects. In some situations it is a distinct construct, but not necessarily falling under the umbrella of eudemonia very easily. So, the objective is to try to understand what eudaimonic wellbeing is, whether it is associated with a specific experience that is different from hedonic wellbeing; whether there are different drivers of eudaimonic wellbeing, and whether we can measure it differently from hedonic wellbeing; and whether there are indeed different personalities dependent on their eudaimonic and hedonic choices. These are the hot questions.

Who do you look up to in the field of positive psychology?

I always get excited by Ed Diener’s work. Every time I see him present he comes up with something new. Obviously he is an extremely solid researcher who has done fantastic work in the field, but in addition he is dynamic. Every time he speaks, there is something different and something new, and he is definitely progressing in his thinking. I look up to him because he is not only robust, but truly progressive; a true researcher who challenges himself and takes steps further and further. If research findings disagree with his previous conclusions, he’s the first to

admit it. The second person is Martin Seligman, because of his energy, and the energy he brings to the field of positive psychology and the capacity for leadership of the field. The third person is Joar Vitterso, who is a Norwegian professor. He is one of the people who does really solid work and is not limited to the existing constructs of positive psychology. He often proposes new ways of representing information and challenging previous conclusions, so his research on eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing is probably the most progressive. He has come up with amazing findings and experiments, some of the most ground breaking experiments, and so excites me very much because his thinking is non-standard, and he is able to approach the same questions from different directions and look at them from a different perspective as well. So I admire his work very much.

Can you tell me about your research work in positive psychology?

I have two main areas of research. One part of my research is on time, and that further breaks down into research on balanced time perspective and research on time use and perceived time use. Most of my research in recent years was around balanced time perspective. So overall the question of time, as you know from your research on the *International Wellbeing Study*, which asks about time, is very important for positive psychology, and is something that has not been looked at sufficiently. There is a distinction between perception of time and perception of time in terms of its use. Research on time, in terms of time management and the use of time in daily life, is something that has not been hugely developed in psychology overall. A recent review of time management research managed to identify 37 empirical papers on the subject. If you step away from this conversation and think about how many thousands of books exist on time management compared to a total of 37 studies, there is an amazing gap. There is the question of time perspective, not time perception, in research studies that is a bit different. I'm not talking about measuring whether your perception of the duration of 30 seconds was accurate, I'm not talking about that; I'm talking about time as it is used in everyday life. If you consider that time management only managed to produce 37 research studies, then there is a huge gap in our understanding in how we can actually use and manage our time more productively and happily on an everyday basis. So it's unsurprising that this research topic is extremely important.

In recent years, however, my research was mainly focused on time perspective, and again the question of balanced time perspective, not necessarily how to define it. Now we are quite clear with definitions and different approaches to balanced time perspective, but now the focus is on how to enhance it. This is something that interests me a lot. With my students, I'm trying to identify the key factors that contribute to us being able to balance time perspective better, for example, factors such as cognitive flexibility and being able to switch between different temporal zones in our perception more successfully. That's one part of my research. The second part of my research is on educational interventions in the area of positive psychology. I have two big programs currently running. One is a programme with a group of secondary schools to enhance wellbeing in school-aged children. This is a programme which runs a course from year 1 to year 10 of these primary and secondary schools, it's a big group of schools called the Haberdasher's Aske's Federation, that are implementing this educational program. We are exploring what can contribute to the enhancement of wellbeing in school-aged children. The second part is that we have developed with colleagues an educational programme for the enhancement of resilience, I suppose in some ways similar to the Penn Resilience Program, but relying on the wider literature. It's not just relying on cognitive behavioural approaches in trying to enhance resilience, but also incorporating ideas from post-traumatic growth and

positive psychology directly. We have developed a 12-week curriculum called the Spark Resilience curriculum. We are working to see to what extent this curriculum enhances resilience in children. It does seem to be working and we have good findings that we are writing up, in terms of decreasing depressive symptoms and enhancing resilience, and self-esteem; self-esteem was a by-product. These are my two areas of research at the moment, educational research and time research. The third area is eudaimonic wellbeing.

Can you tell me a bit about the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) programme at the University of East London?

This is my favourite project within positive psychology in terms of trying to make things happen. The MAPP programme has been running for five years now, extremely successfully. It was the second programme in the world on positive psychology. Nowadays there are more programs opening up, for example in Portugal; there are about five or six around. We have an incredibly positive student intake, so the last four years out of five the programme has had quite substantial competition, which is exciting because it means we are able to attract a very good calibre of graduates from different disciplines to enter this program. I suppose the best feature of this programme is its interdisciplinary nature. The students on this programme are the most interesting people I have come across in my life. They bring with them experience and knowledge from so many different domains of life and all are dedicated to the betterment of humanity. So we have people coming from the social sector, from the voluntary sector, from the business sector, from the education sector; we even had a vet in the program, and we typically have a couple of lawyers on every cohort. All of them bring with them this very different understanding, depending on their professional background experience, and I think this enhances and enriches positive psychology hugely, dramatically. I really see the future of positive psychology not only integrating with psychology, but also going very much multidisciplinary and trying to find the usefulness of positive psychology in different domains through cooperation with people from different professional backgrounds. So the MAPP programme is something I am really, really proud of. I think it is working, and I think it is something that is developing positive psychology because it is these very students that pose many challenges for me when I teach, or to our team when we teach, and I think those challenges are being fed back into the field of positive psychology as a whole. These are very important challenges, because these students are the ones who bridge the gap between the ivory tower and academics and different theoretical approaches, and discover what works in real life and what doesn't work.

Who are the emerging and unknown researchers in positive psychology to look out for?

Here I would like to mention one of my students, a PhD student who is doing research on eudaimonic wellbeing. Her name is Francesca Elston, and she is adopting both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, which is quite unusual in the positive psychology field, to look at the construct of eudaimonic wellbeing; and to understand the interaction between eudaimonic wellbeing and values specifically, and how we can define and measure eudaimonic wellbeing overall. She is definitely one of the people to look out for. Another person, Veronica Huta, is also a researcher in the eudaimonic wellbeing field and she is becoming more prominent now, and her research is very interesting. Another person is Michael Pluris. Michael is working on the concept of 'differential susceptibility to environmental influences', the basic premise of which is that (a) because psychology has been so disproportionately concerned with the adverse effects of negative environmental conditions on pathological outcomes (b) it has failed

to appreciate that it may not be, as long presumed by diathesis-stress thinking, that some individuals are more 'vulnerable' to adversity than others, that is, disproportionately likely to be negatively affected by negative experiences, but that (c) these very same individuals are actually more generally plastic or malleable than others and thus also disproportionately benefit from supportive or nurturant environmental conditions. To summarise it briefly, the idea of differential susceptibility is that often the people who are perceived as most vulnerable in genetic terms, benefit the most and progress the best from positive environmental characteristics and different environmental conditions. So rather than viewing certain types of people as possessing genetic characteristics that make them more vulnerable to negative environmental influences, it is extremely liberating to understand that these same characteristics that make them vulnerable to negative environmental influences also make them positively vulnerable to positive environmental characteristics. That is something he has been doing for a number of years, and this is research to look out for. He has also carried out some studies on differential susceptibility in samples of school children who undertook the Spark Resilience program. Again, some interesting findings have come out of his research.

I really enjoyed reading the textbook *Positive Psychology* you wrote with Kate Hefferon that's just come out. It's a great general introduction to the field. Other than that, what's one book that you think all those getting into and learning about positive psychology should read if they don't know much about positive psychology?

For me it's not so much Martin Seligman's' books, but the books by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi that are the best. Unless somebody is after a very structured introduction and understanding to positive psychology, I think the first book they should read is *Flow*. Furthermore, to put it more broadly, the core book on positive psychology has not been written by a positive psychologist. For me, it is *A Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. I think these two books capture the essence of what positive psychology is or could be about. There are many well-structured books summarising a number of different constructs very well. But the starting point for me would be these two books.

What's your most proud moment in the field of positive psychology to date?

The graduation ceremony, about three years ago, when the first bunch of MAPP students were graduating with their Masters degrees; the Chancellor awarding the degrees started to read out "and now I'm proud to present the award for the very first graduate of a Masters of Applied Positive Psychology in Europe". At this point I cried and felt really, really proud.

Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have not asked about?

Just to add a little bit to your question about the MAPP program. The future development of positive psychology at the moment lies in its international appeal. We have quite a lot on positive psychology in America, in Europe and in Australia. I think the next organisational step is really Africa, South America and Asia, in terms of regional movement of positive psychology. I'm really excited about the MAPP programme reaching further. We are going distance learning from next September, and will be able to reach different parts of the world. I'm also excited about different developments in these regions and different research findings that are coming from these regions. I recently had an opportunity to present with one of the Chinese professors on positive psychology at one of the international conferences, and what struck me—and what I was not prepared for—was the opposite research conclusions, for

example in the area of time perspective. That really opened my eyes to the importance of cultural understanding and cultural specificity with regard to positive psychology findings, and this is something I find really exciting in terms of future developments in positive psychology—to integrate cross-cultural findings to the extent possible and to learn from the research of each other.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Robert Vallerand

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Robert Vallerand is professor of social psychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, and President of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA). His research focuses mainly on motivation and passion, and he has written more than 200 articles and book chapters mainly in the area of social motivation, as well as five books.

In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

First, Aaron, let me congratulate you on your attempt to bring together in a book people who are involved in the field of positive psychology. I think it is a highly important service to the positive psychology community. To answer your question, obviously there are several distinctive features and, depending on who you ask, you might get different answers. When you look at positive psychology and some of its defining features, the science is clearly present. You look at textbooks and different websites, and usually people will point to the science. For instance, at IPPA we define positive psychology as the scientific study of what enables or makes people and communities thrive and to do their best. I think that Chris Peterson, in his book *Primer in Positive Psychology*, mentions the fact that it's the study of what makes people get up in the morning and to do their best and be at their best. So the science is very important. At the same time we also care about the applications and how to use that science and apply it so people can actually be better. I would say that both elements are very important, as long as it helps people (and organizations) to thrive and do better and be at their best. So the science and the scientifically-informed applications that will help people to be at their best are both very important elements.

What's the biggest challenge that positive psychology faces as it is developing?

There are a few; but obviously, because positive psychology is really the interface between the science and the applications, one of the challenges that we have is to make sure that everybody is happy with the interface we have. Scientists are saying, 'Well, we need more science', and people who are more applied are saying, 'We need more application'. One of the challenges is to make sure we are on the same page, and that we progress together in the hope that positive psychology, as a field, will thrive and be even better. While we need everyone to be on the same page, sometimes you will have those kinds of disagreements; but that's fine, I think it's part of the game and more of a challenge. Another challenge is at some point to make sure everybody from psychology takes positive psychology seriously. That's why the science is so



important. Already people back in the 50s and 60s, with humanistic psychology, attempted to create some kind of revolution and it didn't work because the science was not a big part of it. I think that with positive psychology, one of the reasons why it's working is that the science is very important. Another challenge is to involve a lot of people from different areas of psychology; in fact I would say all areas of psychology. That means neuroscience, like what Richard Davidson is doing, in emotion research with Barbara Fredrickson, culture with people like Shinobu Kitayama, and motivation with Ed Deci—all these people have to be on board. At the 2nd World Congress on Positive Psychology organized by IPPA [July 2011] we had these people in Philadelphia, which was just great. These are some of the challenges we face, but they are manageable. We are progressing towards having positive psychology being a thriving area of research and application.

Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology?

My work is basically on passion. When Chris Peterson is saying, 'What makes people get up in the morning?', I say passion makes people wake up in the morning. If today's basketball day, or if today's music day and your looking forward to jamming with your friends, or going to the gym to scrimmage and play basketball or whatever, I think that passion is extremely important in people's lives. In fact some philosophers like Hegel have said that there is nothing great in this world that has been done without passion. So passion makes a big difference in people's lives. The thing is that, as some people have said, you have to look at the positive as well as the negative, and with passion there are two types of passion. One is 'harmonious passion' which gives you a lot of mileage, you will be happy and reach a lot of objectives and goals; but 'obsessive passion' can be a down side, and can lead to some negative effects, especially on one's physical and mental health. We have been doing a lot of research and publishing our work regarding the role of both harmonious and obsessive passion in optimal functioning in society. Obviously, harmonious passion is what will get you towards living the good life, and to be happy, and contribute to society, reach a high level of performance, and is what some people should shoot for. But basically, that's what we do in terms of research; look at the psychology of passion.

So passion must be pretty closely related to purpose, meaning, and values as areas of psychology?

That's right! The basic definition of passion is, 'a strong inclination towards a self-defining activity that one loves, finds important (or cares about), and spends time and energy on'. So, you really care about the activity very deeply, it has a lot of meaning to you, and you value it quite a bit; but you also love the activity, spend a lot of time on the activity—you basically like to talk about it, and you develop friendships around it. It's a central part of your life. How you go about engaging in the activity, what it means to you, that can sometimes get you into trouble (with obsessive passion). But you're right in that meaning and values are very much part of it, and if the activity itself is a positive activity, like volunteering, taking care of others, teaching, obviously it can lead to a lot of good consequences for you, and for other people as well. You tend to contribute towards society; and that's what we find in our work, especially with harmonious passion. You derive from your engagement in the activity what we call 'optimal functioning in society', where you're psychologically happy, physically healthy, and have positive relationships in your life; you achieve high levels of performance and you contribute to society at the same time. So these five elements, we find, are positively predicted by harmonious passion; whereas with obsessive passion you may get a few, but you don't get

the whole package. With obsessive passion, something gets in the way of positive relationships with other people. And even sometimes your health might be in jeopardy.

As the newly-elected president of IPPA, what's one thing you're personally aiming to change about either positive psychology or IPPA?

Past presidents, Ed Diener and Antonella Delle Fave, have done a great job, because it's not easy taking on a new association. IPPA was created in 2007, so we are just four years old. It's like having a child and trying to make sure it knows how to walk. They have done a great job. My job is basically to continue on that path, while trying to make some changes that will help us progress along the way. There are a lot of different things we are trying to do. A first goal is to modify the 'front office' so that we are more efficient in getting the work done. This entails bringing in additional people to work with us to connect with our membership. A second goal is to facilitate a grass-root movement within the association and make sure that people from different countries and all individual members feel that they are really a part of IPPA. So, we are in the process of creating 'divisions', just like the APA has, so that people can feel that it resonates with what they do and what they want to get from the association. So instead of having only a group of 2500 IPPA members, we are going to have divisions dealing with health, education, organizations, clinical psychology, and coaching. There will be presidents (or Chairs) for each of the different divisions and people can feel that they are part of some specialized community within IPPA. A third goal has to do with the dissemination of knowledge. This is done through different means such as having our Newsletter out 4 times per year, pursuing the 'positive psychology leaders' series' (with David Pollay who is doing a great job). We are also looking to the possibility of having perhaps either journals or a series of books on positive psychology that would be under the editorship of IPPA. In essence we are looking at different ways of connecting with our membership and to disseminate relevant information. Finally, and perhaps the more important thing we are trying to do is to help countries across the globe get their own national associations off the ground, so they can be part of IPPA and at the same time remain autonomous entities, eventually leading positive psychology to be truly global.

Can you list some countries that you have been helping out or who you are starting to help out, just as examples?

Different countries—obviously the US, the UK, and New Zealand have been forerunners—but in fact Russia too. There are different countries where Spanish is the main language; Spain, Venezuela. Right now, as I speak, there is a conference in Brazil on positive psychology (September 2011); and Canada is starting its own association of positive psychology and will have its first conference in July 2012. So it's burgeoning, it's here, there and everywhere, and that's what makes it exciting. When you're trying to set up an association, who do you look up to? IPPA! So we are there to help, trying to do all kinds of things. We have helped people before establish associations in their countries and we are more than willing to do it again, so I think it's our role to be able to assist.

Do you have a plan of countries that you would like to see positive psychology associations in, or is it more that you wait to be approached from a certain country for assistance?

Well, obviously, we would like to see all countries involved. What we are trying to do is look at, across the globe, what is happening. James Pawelski has been doing a great job as the

executive director on that front. For instance, James is currently in Brazil with Martin Seligman, who has been a great ambassador of positive psychology. We are looking at the situation in Brazil, and at the same time we are trying to help them in any way we can with their association. The same thing will take place next summer (2012) in South Africa. So usually what happens is that people from a given country will contact us and we give them information and then there is discussion back and forth in terms of connecting, and then at some point we go there and try to help them out. That's what we have been doing so far.

A lot of people wonder how positive psychology differs internationally by country. So I wonder, from your perspective, which are strong countries that are leading the way and which are up and coming?

There are countries like Spain, for instance, with Carmelo Vázquez over there doing a lot of good work. New Zealand has a thriving national association with yourself and others involved. Australia is doing very good work with Dianne Vella-Brodrick and Tony Grant; they are very strong and they do contribute a lot, not only to their country, but also to IPPA. So Australia is very strong, and in different areas, which kind of makes it interesting—like coaching and the scientific part of it. These countries, I think, at some point will lead the way. I was just talking to someone in Australia who wants to create a whole new centre on positive psychology in one university. It's not finalized yet, but that's what they want to do, so we are trying to help them out in some ways. That's why it was so gratifying at the last conference, the 2nd World Congress in Philadelphia, to see so many people show up with so many ideas; so many people who want to go back to their own countries and bring positive psychology to them and make sure that they can do something that will last beyond the conference itself. That's what we are seeing and we are very excited about it.

IPPA has faced some criticisms since it was launched, as well as having accomplished a lot of good stuff. Can you outline some of these criticisms that IPPA has been dealing with and how they are being addressed?

One of the criticisms was that initially people felt that there are a lot of scientific people involved and we need more applied people. When you look at the history, obviously when you have to start something and the science is part of the definition, you want people on the board who will be involved with science. But the application of positive psychology is also important and the current board seems to reflect both dimensions (i.e., the science and application) of positive psychology. Another thing is international representation. We want to have people from a number of countries on the Board of Directors who will reflect this international flavour and who display very high quality. This is not always easy to do, but out of 40-some people on the board, I think there are about 25 or 30 countries represented, perhaps more. So, we have a lot of countries involved and when I look at the meetings we have, the conferences we have had, I can see that people across the globe are very much involved in IPPA. I'm very appreciative of that, so international representation has been addressed as well. A last criticism has to do with the fact that people want to be even more involved in IPPA. People say, 'Well, IPPA's a big thing, how can I be part of it a bit more?'. Now, with the divisions we are creating, people will be part of it and feel much more involved. They will not have to interact with IPPA as a whole; they can be part of smaller divisions and feel much more involved.

Just out of curiosity, how many members does IPPA have?

I think at last count it was around 2,500. I would assume that those numbers will get higher, because in years when we have a conference, membership increases. I would not be surprised if our number was beyond three thousand after the conference, we will see.

Who do you look up to in the field as the future leaders of positive psychology? Or alternatively, who are the future leaders of IPPA? For example, James Pawelski stands out for me as someone who has done some great work for both positive psychology and IPPA, but who do you think?

That's a tough one, because there are so many good people involved, including James Pawelski as you mentioned. There are two ways to look at it. Who in the field of scientific positive psychology makes a contribution? The answer is, a lot of people. There are a lot of young people coming up and obviously I don't have to talk about Martin Seligman, Chris Peterson, Barbara Fredrickson, and Richard Davidson, who people already know. The other way to look at this issue is to have top people in other fields of psychology being more involved in positive psychology. What we tried to do during the last conference was to bring 21 invited speakers with about half of those, about 10 or 12 coming from positive psychology, from the field itself; but the other half were top people from other areas. What we wanted is for people in positive psychology to know about their work. But also, when these invited speakers leave the congress, they go back home and they have been changed. They know more about positive psychology and they can perhaps create centres on positive psychology or make a statement about positive psychology in their own field. I heard initially people say, 'Well, I did not know these people, but now, wow, it was really exciting'. For instance Ed Deci presented at the 2nd World Congress and obviously some people may not know of him, but he's a giant in the field of motivation. Arie Kruglanski is a top social psychologist doing work for the past ten years on terrorism and applications that we can address in a more positive light. What can we do for prevention? People like Joan Duda on sports and exercise psychology. We can use exercise psychology in a more positive psychology way, so that we can actually address one of the important problems people have in the UK and across the globe, which is young people becoming obese; what can we do regarding that? So many other people, Herb Marsh in education, Jacquie Eccles in social developmental psychology, the list goes on and on. These are giants in their own field that people in positive psychology did not know much about, but now they do. Hopefully, these people will now spread the gospel about positive psychology. There are also some young people who are doing some very good work. So many people are involved; it would not be fair to mention just a few names. But the whole field is exploding; it's great in terms of the future, in terms of what lies ahead. The issue is for IPPA to become—and that's one of my aspirations—the hub of international positive psychology so that we're there to help, we are available, we disseminate knowledge and application, and we are helping people to set up their own associations in their own countries. People need something, they come to us. We hope we will be able to provide those services and at some point everybody will become one big interconnected happy family. That would be the goal.

What's one piece of advice for individuals looking to help contribute to the growing field of positive psychology?

Get in touch. The best way is to contact us directly. People have our email: James, myself, people on the executive committee, Carmelo Vázquez the incoming president-elect, Antonella

Delle Fave the past president. Dianne Vella-Brodrick the secretary and Kim Cameron the treasurer. All these people are willing to help and remember we are all volunteers. We are not perfect, but we get involved because we care about the field and want it to progress. So, if you want to help and make a positive contribution, get in touch with us and let us know your views and ideas and we'll pay attention and try to see how those ideas can be transformed into action. Already we are making a lot of changes that hopefully will allow people to connect with us and benefit from IPPA. We hope that people will take advantages of these changes, get on board, and contribute positively to positive psychology.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Denise Quinlan

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Denise Quinlan is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's Masters in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program. She is currently completing a PhD in Psychology at the University of Otago in New Zealand on group strengths interventions with children.

In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

It's the focus on understanding what enables and supports wellbeing and how we can enhance it. Within positive psychology there are many different areas of research examining how that occurs, but we don't yet have an integrated understanding of wellbeing, for example understanding the relationship between hedonics and eudaimonics, and how happiness unfolds across time and within the person.

What would you say are some of the goals of positive psychology?

To better understand and support people to experience mental health and wellbeing, at an individual level in therapeutic settings and individual coaching settings, and at the group level, in schools, workplaces, and right up to the societal level, where we can think about flourishing as a societal good. One of the challenges that positive psychology can perhaps address is that of wellbeing being regarded as an individual benefit and not the purview of government. If positive psychology can demonstrate that wellbeing has societal benefits, if it is seen as a public good, then supporting wellbeing at a societal level becomes part of the political agenda.

What are some of the big challenges that positive psychology currently faces?

The one that jumps to mind is research catching up with the practice. People are keen to implement research, and are sometimes basing that on one or two pieces of research which perhaps aren't even with their population, and that's the best they have got to go with. A better understanding of the mechanisms through which interventions work will enable us to design more effective and appropriate interventions for different populations. There is a growing awareness of the importance of context among researchers and that's good; but I don't know if consumers of the research are as aware. We expect a lot of people to be very sophisticated consumers of research, and that's one of the challenges of positive psychology. I have been concerned about the use of strengths interventions as if they are a fool-proof way to enhance wellbeing. Strengths are not a wind-up toy, ready to be taken out of the box, and off you go. Creating a shared language of strengths, understanding different definitions and how strengths



are valued differently by different groups and in different contexts is important when using a strengths approach. Another big challenge is really understanding what wellbeing is, how it occurs and unfolds with different individuals and groups. Hedonic and eudaimonic theory have both provided valuable insights into human behaviour, but are often studied separately by different people, but both actually occur in a single human being, in a given context. Every individual enjoys moments of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. By focusing on them separately we perhaps miss the interplay and balance between them that supports wellbeing. I don't think it's always possible to parse wellbeing into constituent elements; are my hoots of laughter with my family at the end of a challenging ski run pure pleasure at the run or meaning and fulfilment at being loved and part of a family, or a sense of being aligned with my purpose of being a good mother? I do know that if I tried to look at it, I would kill the moment, and if I did it out loud, my kids would probably kill me.

Were there any key events that made you move into the area of positive psychology? I mean, how did you get into the field of positive psychology?

I had read *Learned Optimism* and *Authentic Happiness* by Marty Seligman and was using some of that work in workshops I was running. I had a business called 'What To Do Next', which delivered three-day seminars for people who were trying to work out where they were going to go next with their lives. The seminar used a lot of different tools, some of which came from positive psychology. I saw an advert for the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) programme and I thought, 'that would be interesting, but impossible from NZ'. I applied and my very loving husband said we'd manage the fees and travel costs. He has pointed out to me that I could have had a diamond ring, a sports car and some change. Luckily, we share an interest in wellbeing so he thought it was worthwhile.

So that's the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology programme in Philadelphia? Can you tell us a bit more about that?

The programme is run on an executive study model with three days a month onsite, and study and assignments in between. Each on site was three days of lectures from some of the leading people in the field. To sit in a lecture theatre and have someone share their work and learning with you always feels like a privilege to me, so it was a fantastic time. In between on sites, there were lots of assignments and online meetings; that was a lot of work. But honestly, getting to go to Philadelphia and to listen to people like Barbara Fredrickson, Chris Peterson, Martin Seligman, Sonya Lyubomirsky, George Vaillant and Jonathan Haidt was a joy. David Cooperrider and Isaac Prillettensky both focus on wellbeing at the community or group level – where positive psychology has the least research. Their work provided a great opportunity to balance the individual focus of much of positive psychology research. They were also both inspiring individuals to listen to.

So you go to Philadelphia for three days a month, for about 10 trips over a year, and you get access to all these world leaders. What would you say is the overall highlight of the training?

It's really hard to say! Probably the first immersion week because I got to hear so many people in that week; George Valliant, Barbara Fredrickson, Sonya Lyubomirsky, Martin Seligman, Chris Peterson. It was amazing to be suddenly immersed in an environment where people really cared about wellbeing and were making it their life's work. I had worked in stock broking and management consulting for big firms in the UK and in New Zealand, so I'd often

been in environments where wellbeing was seen as soft and fuzzy, and not something worthwhile—it was all about ‘show me the impact on the bottom line’. So to be in an environment where people were actually all interested in wellbeing, that was really exciting.

Can you tell me a little bit about your work in positive psychology?

I’m currently a PhD student at the University of Otago studying group strengths interventions with 10-12 year olds. When I had previously worked with adults, participants on my programme often said, ‘Why didn’t I learn this at school?’, and ‘Why is no one teaching this to my kids?’. After the MAPP programme I worked with Karen Reivich as a trainer helping deliver positive psychology training to teachers which included strengths, resilience training and information on meaning and purpose. I was interested in wellbeing interventions for schools and finding out whether or not a ‘pure’ strengths programme without the other components would actually make a difference to wellbeing. Once into the PhD I became just as interested in questions like, ‘What kinds of outcome measures are most appropriate?’, ‘What are the strategies being used to teach strengths?’, ‘How can we enhance the effectiveness of strengths interventions?’ and ‘Why has no one looked at the effect of a strengths intervention on the group?’. I developed a classroom intervention involving teachers and students which focused on recognising strengths in others as well as the self. I delivered the programme to six classrooms over seven weeks. I’m currently analysing the data and hope to finish in the next six months.

Who do you admire in the strengths area?

The people that jump out to me are some of the teacher practitioners who’ve taken the research and applied it in very thoughtful and insightful ways with their students. Some of the teachers at Geelong Grammar [Australia] that I’ve seen working are very inspiring. In terms of the research, Chris Peterson deserves so much credit for creating the VIA. I’ve been re-reading the introduction to the VIA handbook; his insights into the VIA’s potential and its limitations are worth another look. I think he was aware from the start of the potentially different role of strengths in different societies and the role of groups in encouraging strengths or not. Karen Reivich and Jane Gillham have done very good work in developing strengths programs for schools with a balance of creative and engaging exercises and awareness of the importance of relationship and group culture in strengths programs. People like Jenny Fox Eades in the UK, have adapted the VIA for younger students and use it in conjunction with oral story-telling to create a powerful approach. Jenny is very aware of what works for students and teachers so she is a good example of a critical user of positive psychology research.

What would you do differently if you started learning about positive psychology again?

I’d get much more critical information much earlier on. I’d like to know more about the ‘boundary riders’; the people who are not necessarily classified as positive psychologists, but are doing related work. I would have spent more time studying the social psychology side of positive psychology, and emotions research. Overall, I would have liked to have had more exposure to some of the good critiques of positive psychology and to have had a clearer picture of where positive psychology sits in relation to the other branches of psychology.

What would your advice be to someone starting out who could not afford to do a MAPP programme or similar? What kind of training advice would you give to someone in that situation who wants to learn a lot more about positive psychology?

Harvard and Penn both offer cheaper online programs where you can get a programme similar to the MAPP syllabus. I would say get your hands on some of the good readings in the area. Resources like Chris Peterson's *Primer in Positive Psychology*. Just read widely.

What's one book to read for someone coming into this area who has not read anything yet?

Jonathan Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis* is one I really enjoyed reading. I don't know if it's a good first book, but I really like the ideas in it. Chris Peterson's *Primer in Positive Psychology* is a good broad starting point. Kate Hefferson's and Ilona Boniwell's new book *Positive Psychology: Theory, Research and Application* is also a great starting point.

In your training, you have met a lot of the key people in the field. Who do you look up to in the field?

Jonathan Haidt was a great lecturer at MAPP—I really like his work on hive psychology. I look up to George Variant for his appreciation of humanity, to Barbara Frederickson for her pioneering research, to Karen Reivich and Jane Gillham for the work they have done on the Penn Resilience Programme and Marty Seligman for his breadth of vision. I also respect people like Tayyab Rashid, who integrates his practice as a therapist with good research, and who is quietly innovating within the strengths area. Todd Kashdan is helping invigorate and challenge the field, and I think that's helpful.

Who do you think is helpful in the field?

Martin Seligman has been very helpful and supportive to me and other MAPP graduates. Everyone within positive psychology who I've e-mailed or spoken to has been helpful. I've learned a lot from working with Karen Reivich who is a great trainer and programme designer. Todd Kashdan has been helpful in discussing ideas and so have Tayyab Rashid and Carmel Proctor from the UK.

Is there an area of positive psychology you still find difficult to understand?

It will be nice when we are able to join the dots up a little more. It sometimes feels like we're looking at lots of different areas under a microscope at different levels of magnification, so it's hard to know how things map across to each other. Whether we're looking at emotions and emotional responses, at a very micro level, or at long-term social support and wellbeing, getting from 28,000 feet to ground level and back up again is sometimes quite a challenge—to mesh that together. These theories have been described as metaphors, and I think it'd be great if the metaphors knitted up a little more. I really like an article by Ken Sheldon which described six different irreducible levels at which wellbeing occurs, from psychological need satisfaction at the bottom level up to cultural factors at the top. It was good to see a big picture map.

Is there anything you'd like to add or comment on that I have not asked about?

If I was talking to someone coming into the field of positive psychology, I would say there are lots of really interesting pockets, but don't lose sight of the big picture. My concern is that people jump into a pocket and act like that is the one solution, when the reality is that no one factor explains everything. The area within positive psychology that most excites me is

relationships because it's pivotal for wellbeing across the life span but so challenging for most people. I think we still underestimate the importance of relationships in many areas of life, including education. Most of the great educators I've met have a sense that teaching is all about connection with the student. I tell teachers that if they have a broadband connection with a student, then they can teach them anything. If they're on dial-up, it's going to be hard. One of the interesting things about strengths for me is how appreciation of another's strengths can be used to build a relationship. I often describe the VIA strengths to teachers as 24 ways to love a difficult child.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University, and Director of the Quality of Life Research Center. He is noted for his work in the study of happiness and creativity, and the immensely popular book *Flow*. Martin Seligman has described Mihaly as “the world’s leading researcher on positive psychology”.

In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

The distinctive feature is that it allows me to interact with people whom otherwise I would have had a hard time finding. I’ve been in this field for 35 or 40 years and I’ve always felt marginalized and now suddenly, there are all kinds of interesting people that we can deal with, interact with and stimulate each other ideas. That’s the field aspect of positive psychology. The question could refer to the content and ideas, or to positive psychology as a social endeavor (I hate the word movement), so I’ll give you the explanation in terms of the joint endeavor. In terms of the content, it is a very varied assortment of different things. It’s hard to find an exact common element of positive psychology, except in terms of the fact that everybody is trying to understand how to leverage and increase positive aspects of human experience and human life. That can vary from physical wellbeing to alternate meanings of life, and the subjective aspects. I’m mostly interested in the subjective quality of experience, as you probably know.

Are there any key events that changed the course of your career into moving towards positive psychology?

I never moved towards it, I always did it since I wrote my dissertation in 1965, which is now about a half century ago. That was essentially about one aspect of positive psychology that I’m still involved with, namely creativity, which I think is an important aspect. Back then there was no positive psychology to turn towards. We just started it with Martin Seligman in Hawaii in the late 1990s, when we met accidentally there and we kind of decided we should have a more visible group studying the aspects of human behavior that had been neglected by psychology for half a century. This involved all of the things that people are now pursuing and calling positive psychology. But to us, as we started the whole thing, we had no idea where it would go. I was just hoping to be able to connect with some colleagues across the US and elsewhere who had the same interest that I had. I envisioned a little special interest group of 50 or 60 people who were interested in this issue; but at the recent World Congress on Positive Psychology in Philadelphia there were 1,600 people from all over and that’s almost scary,



because I think good ideas are probably more often killed by premature promises than they are killed by opposition. Suddenly we have a huge response from everyone who was kind of frustrated and stymied by psychology previously. I saw the field growing so quickly and so exponentially into the future, and that's why I started this positive development PhD programme here at Clermont University. I thought, 'hey, we should begin to train people to act as kind of gatekeepers or at least supports to this developing field' so that it's not all kind of superficial enthusiasm, but it's grounded in critical, reflective, even skeptical, research as science should be.

What do you think are the best things that positive psychology has achieved to date?

It has suddenly broken across the whole globe, and connected people who would not have known each other before. I mean there you are in New Zealand and we are talking about these issues and we could turn and talk to South Africa, Korea, Germany, and know that there are people there who are also concerned with the improvement of human life and true psychological understanding. Just to create this network has been sensational in such a short period. People are now beginning to really take seriously these things that before were so marginal to people's interests, like gratitude, or forgiveness, or courage, all things that people thought were kind of really minor or uninteresting areas of studying psychology. Students now can really get PhDs done by writing a good research plan to study these issues at the human level. So there are two things. One is empowering people to feel that what they are doing is not flying in the wilderness, but there is an echo coming back from all over – that's very important. The other one is that the subject matter of positive human activity is being taken seriously and researched and is entering the vocabulary of psychology.

What are the current issues of concern for the field of positive psychology?

The ones that I sense are really important are to maintain a healthy balance between the basic research, and application and discrimination, because it's very easy to get excited by the ideas and then say, 'Ok, I read a book and now I can be a life coach' or something. If too many people take it at that level, positive psychology will have a very short life because it's not so easy to change things. If we promise and come across as knowing all the answers and being able to apply them, and then they don't work, then the public will say, 'It's just another fad, forget about it', and positive psychology will get a bad name. So we need both, we need to take seriously the issues. One of the things that positive psychology is now doing, kind of routinely, is that so many people are using so-called interventions. Interventions last for a few weeks of doing something, like writing letters to people who you are grateful for, or another intervention may be to think about what you are grateful about and so forth; and then thinking that these types of interventions can be spread around to everyone to make life better. Now, those interventions are really important to understanding the mechanisms of gratitude, but as solutions to the human condition I don't think that's where it's at. The real interventions in our life are family, school, jobs, and the political systems in which we live: these interventions don't last two weeks, they last all our lives. I mean, if you go to school, it's thirteen years of sitting at a bench, and that's an intervention and it's much more powerful in many ways than what we can come up with. Positive psychology needs to inform schools and change their pedagogy so that the intervention of education is going to be more growth-producing for humans. And the same thing for jobs, the same thing for families, and so on. I think eventually we have to realize that if we want to be successful, we have to address the kinds of institutional context in which we live, which are the ones intervening in our lives in a substantive way. The kind of

interventions which we can do is to learn what works and how it works, and it may be a good adjunct to therapy in some ways, but we can't stop there and believe that we will solve the problems of human kind by doing those things. That's why I'm worried about prematurely institutionalizing positive psychology so that we have a canon—this is what positive psychology is, this is how you apply it. If we do this now, we are going to paint ourselves into a very narrow corner of reality. We have to keep being open and growing conceptually and as practitioners; both our practice and our knowledge have to stay open and grow.

Which discipline can positive psychology learn from most, moving forward?

Other disciplines outside of psychology that are the closest in some ways to our field are biology on the one side, and sociology on the other. Both of those are quite relevant to add to our knowledge base. But then you could also jump and say, 'Well how about spirituality?'. That's one of the most attractive fields that our students respond to, meditation and various forms of Buddhism practice and so forth, and again, I think those are very valuable and we should by all means understand them better and integrate them in what we do, but I don't think they have the final answer. Because of my original work in creativity and my interest in evolution, I really believe that for these new idea systems to really become influential and paradigm shifting, they have to grow, they have to be open, they have to keep refining their objectives and their purpose as they go, rather than say, 'Ok, this is it'.

Who do you look up to in the field? Or who do you think is going to lead the field forward over the next 10 years?

I don't want to single out any person because there are so many, but I know that when we started positive psychology with Martin Seligman, we started it with the Akumal conference in Mexico. When we decided to start, I insisted that what we really needed to influence is the new generation. So we developed this method, which was to write to fifty of the most influential psychologists in the US; and Martin knew them because he was just elected president of the APA (American Psychological Association). We asked each one of these fifty people if they knew of a former student or psychologist under 30 who would be interested in working on these issues that we wrote in a couple of sentences, defining positive psychology. We were after people who were interested in these issues and who, at age 50, were likely to become chairperson of a psychology department. So that was our idea. All of these fifty people answered and sent us names, and then we wrote to these fifty nominees and we asked them to send us their CVs and statements. Then we selected 20 out of them, and invited them for a week, all expenses paid, to a fishing village in Mexico called Akumal. All twenty candidates accepted and we had this week in which we were always, 24 hours a day, in swimming trunks and flip flops and talking, just very informally, about what we saw was missing in psychology and what we could do to make it right. Of the twenty people, since then half of them have written books and the other half have written influential articles. For example, Barbara Fredrickson was there, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Tim Kasser, and John Haidt—all of those people. So this method kind of worked, because it represented something that I believe in, which is that we have to appeal to the imagination of the minds of young people because whatever we do, it is not going to be carried over by us, meaning Martin or myself. We just started it out and we hoped to leave it in good shape, but the real responsibility is in the hands of that generation.

Are there any positive psychology projects going on that excite you, or that you are involved with that you are excited about?

Well, it's not directly positive psychology but it's because of the kind of work in positive psychology that I've been doing, even before positive psychology started; so, for instance, there is a new academy in China which is trying to be a kind of intellectual spark plug for the country. They built a huge campus, a beautiful elegant campus, and they invited masters from other places to go and start studios where people from the government and business can go and sit around and talk about how to apply, for instance, flow and creativity. I didn't need to go there and start a studio. I want to go and find out what's going on, but I don't plan to move and learn Chinese from scratch at my age. That's one interesting thing that is going on. Otherwise I continue to do research with my students on the same kinds of things that I did before, namely flow. There are a couple of new articles on flow in chess which I think are very interesting, and potentially kind of paradigm shifting. Also work on creativity: I just came back from the European creativity conference in Portugal, where people are using some of my ideas to do research and I collaborate with some of those people. A lot of my energy is directed to making this PhD programme at Claremont work, because it's not easy to start something from scratch and make it work. So that's one thing I'm working on.

What's one piece of advice for individuals looking to help and contribute to grow the field of positive psychology?

If they want to contribute, the only advice I can give is that they should do good work. They should take it seriously, they should not assume that they know what it is, but they should try to push the envelope and try to understand better what humans need for the next step in evolution and try to make it work. That's what they should be focusing on. It needs to be something that they decide. The important thing is not to take it lightly and not to take it dogmatically: there are two extremes.

Author

Aaron Jarden
Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.



Acknowledgments

The following people assisted in providing the enabling conditions for this book to flourish to fruition—I am immensely grateful!

- 13 Interviewees (Encouragement / Time)
- Rebecca Jarden (Proofreading / Transcription)
- Dr Alex Mackenzie (Skepticism / Trash-talking)
- Associate Professor Paul Jose (Feedback)
- Associate Professor Todd Kashdan (Ideas)
- Gaynor Parkin (Feedback)
- Denise Quinlan (Encouragement)
- Margarita Tarragona (Feedback)
- Professor Simon Kemp (Academic mentor)
- Dr Jo Mitchell (Ideas)
- The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (Copyediting support)



Positive Psychology Resources

Online Wellbeing Assessment

- www.growthq.com (wellbeing)
- www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx (strengths and happiness)
- <http://viacharacter.org/www> (strengths)
- <http://www.cappeu.com> (strengths)

Positive Psychology Associations

- www.ippanetwork.org (International)
- www.positivepsychology.org.nz (New Zealand)
- www.enpp.eu (European Network)
- <http://positivepsychology.org.uk> (UK)
- www.globalcpa.org/en/index.html (China)

Online Articles, Overviews and Information

- www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu
- www.actionforhappiness.org
- <http://positivepsychologynews.com>

Free Positive Psychology Programs

- www.thetuesdayprogram.com (Adults)
- www.biteback.org.au (Teenagers)

About the Author

Dr Aaron Jarden is a senior lecturer in psychology at the *Open Polytechnic of New Zealand*, president of the *New Zealand Association of Positive Psychology*, lead investigator of the *International Wellbeing Study*, founder of *The Tuesday Program*, co-editor of the *International Journal of Wellbeing*, organizer of the international conferences on *Wellbeing and Public Policy*, and director of *GROW International*. Dr Jarden describes his goal as “complete understanding of human wellbeing, why it is as it is and how it can be improved”.

Contact

aaron@jarden.co.nz
www.aaronjarden.com



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology

Aaron Jarden, ed., Amazon Digital Services, 2012
ASIN: B007IXU1RY, 136pp, US\$2.99

Also published as

Aaron Jarden, ed., *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2012
doi:10.5502/ijw.v2i2, 79pp

Review by
Margarita Tarragona

Abstract: Aaron Jarden interviews 13 outstanding researchers and practitioners of Positive Psychology and invites us to listen in as these friendly and stimulating discussions among colleagues take place. We get the opportunity to know these “insiders” of positive psychology a little better as they share their views on what is exciting in the field, whose work they admire, their favorite books, criticisms about positive psychology, what they have learned in their careers and the advice they would give to young colleagues.

Keywords: positive psychology, Aaron Jarden, interviews, wellbeing, well-being

A few months ago I had an idea: wouldn't it be wonderful to have conversations with some of the most prominent positive psychologists and put together a book of interviews with them? I soon realized that this was indeed a good idea because Aaron Jarden, whom I respect so much, had already come up with it and was about to publish such a book! I am glad he did. *Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology* is a unique work that is appealing both to newcomers who are interested in learning what positive psychology is and to researchers and practitioners already involved in the field. (Can we call it a field, or sub-field, within psychology? Probably not, according to most interviewees in this book. A movement? Many would not agree with that definition either. I like how Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about positive psychology: as an *endeavor*, a joint endeavor of people who are “trying to understand how to leverage and increase positive aspects of human experience and human life”).

Jarden interviews a baker's dozen of influential researchers and practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic: Todd Kashdan, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Alex Linley, Ed Diener, Michael Steger, Acacia Parks, Ryan Niemiec, Nic Marks, Barbara Fredrickson, Ilona Boniwell, Robert J. Vallerand, Denise Quinlan and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Reading the book feels like hearing a conversation between colleagues about their work. I imagined I was eavesdropping in the hallways of a positive psychology conference as Jarden's respondents shared their views about positive psychology: what they are excited about, whom they admire, their favorite books,



criticisms of positive psychology, what they have learned and the advice they would give to young psychologists. Some talk about their own life and career development, others comment on their concerns and hopes for positive psychology. They are all passionate about their work: that comes across in every interview, almost from the first sentence. Their interests range from the study of passion itself, to defining and measuring happiness, understanding the relationship between wellbeing and our natural environment, flow and creativity, testing interventions that can increase people's happiness, studying meaning and purpose, researching positive emotions and the neural processes associated with them, how to improve life for people who are disadvantaged, how people use their time, exploring if we can teach young people to have happier lives, how the movies depict human strengths...

Each interviewee has contributed in a special way, and each from a different angle, to our understanding of what makes life good and worthwhile. At the same time, I am struck by how much they agree on some topics regarding positive psychology: many of them turn to the relationship between research and practice and how important it is to keep solid science at the heart of positive psychology. They point out there is a great demand for applications; and that sometimes there is not enough "coming in", in terms of funds and resources for research, to respond to the demand for knowledge that is applicable to education, coaching, clinical work and organizational consulting. Several interviewees warn against the risk of translating research findings to interventions too soon. Citing Csikszentmihalyi again: "If we promise and come across as knowing all the answers and being able to apply them, and then they don't work, then the public will say, 'It's just another fad, forget about it', and positive psychology will get a bad name".

Most of the positive psychologists in the book call for a healthy dose of skepticism about findings (including their own) and positive psychology applications. This can be hard to achieve when research is translated in the popular media; but it is crucial in order to keep positive psychology credible and to help it grow in a healthy way,

Participants also agree on the importance of being active in and connected to other areas of psychology and with other fields: social psychology, neuroscience, economics (an area in which Ed Diener has become especially interested as he studies wellbeing among nations). They recommend that young positive psychologists do not define themselves as positive psychologists too soon, cautioning that it may be a better idea to have at least two professional identities: for example, as both a social psychologist and a positive psychologist. Sonja Lyubomirsky comments: "maybe the greatest achievement is that it almost does not need to be its own field anymore, because now so many researchers are studying the positive side of life". And Ed Diener makes this need for disciplinary and interdisciplinary communication very clear when he says: "My strongest desire for positive psychology is that it not be a cult or a club. Too often positive psychologists just look at the work of other positive psychologists, rather than broadening out and looking at relevant work of those who are not in the positive psychology fold."

Several of the interviewees talk about the importance of acknowledging the contributions of the predecessors of positive psychology and, as Michael Steger puts it, "reading old stuff". Another common theme has to do with studying cultural differences more carefully and striving for a more culturally diverse community of professionals and scholars in positive psychology. In this regard, I felt the book might have been more representative of the international make-up of positive psychology: all of the interviewees are from English speaking countries (except for Bob Vallerand from Canada, half English speaking...). I noticed this especially because I have just come back from the first National Positive Psychology Conference

in El Escorial, Spain, organized by Dr. Carmelo Vázquez and his team and I was very impressed by the quality of the research presented there. Dr. Ma. Dolores Avia presented the closing plenary on “The Contributions of Positive Psychology to Psychology”. From the perspective of over thirty years as a researcher and clinician, Dr. Avia gave a very balanced account of the well-deserved excitement positive psychology has generated and of possible pitfalls. She canvassed premature or exaggerated enthusiasm over findings and applications, the need for more culturally nuanced concepts and instruments and to acknowledge previous researchers, and cautioned against positive psychology becoming too centered on the individual, stressing a need for more attention to be given to relationships and social issues. My favorite, I must confess, was her assertion: “It is not a fad. Psychology will never be the same after positive psychology”.

I am struck by the coincidence between her views and much of what the interviewees express in Jarden’s book: a balance of passion and enthusiasm with scientific rigor and perspective. Maybe this convergence of views shows how positive psychology is maturing internationally and finding its place in the field of psychology as a whole, and in relationship to other disciplines.

Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology conveys where positive psychology is today, and where it may head in the future, in just 127 pages. In fact, that is my only complaint about the book: like many good things in life, it seems too short.

Author

Margarita Tarragona
Iberoamericana University
margarita@grupocamposeliseos.com



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology

Aaron Jarden, ed., Amazon Digital Services, 2012

ASIN: B007IXU1RY, 136pp, US\$2.99

Also published as

Aaron Jarden, ed., *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2012

doi:10.5502/ijw.v2i2, 79pp

Review by

Bridget Grenville-Cleave

Abstract: This 130-page e-book, *Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology* by Aaron Jarden, explores topics that all positive psychologists, experienced or novice, researcher or practitioner, will find interesting. It's original, engaging and enjoyable, plus it provides plenty of inside information. The concept is very straightforward—transcripts of thirteen personal interviews with a variety of positive psychology experts on their favourite topic. But don't let that simplicity fool you—at the same time this book will challenge your understanding of what positive psychology is, how to apply it, and how the field is developing.

Keywords: positive psychology, Aaron Jarden, interviews, wellbeing, well-being

1. Introduction

This 130-page e-book, *Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology* by Aaron Jarden, explores topics that all positive psychologists, experienced or novice, researcher or practitioner, will find interesting.

Not only does the book provide answers to basic questions, such as “What is positive psychology?”, it also addresses more challenging ones, such as:

- When, where and how did positive psychology develop? (The answer to this one is a great lesson in how to do change management effectively, by the way).
- Who is doing cutting edge positive psychology research?
- Where is the field heading in the next five years?
- What kinds of positive psychology research are being applied in the real world?

2. The usual suspects?

The book consists of the transcripts of interviews which Aaron Jarden carried out with thirteen positive psychologists between July and October 2011, one chapter per person. If you're not well versed in positive psychology, you will not have heard of all of them. In my view, that's not a weakness but a great strength—it gives us diversity and breadth we wouldn't otherwise



have and (if I can paraphrase Todd Kashdan) it's important because there's a great deal more to positive psychology than what you usually hear about in media-friendly sound bites about positive emotions, strengths, and gratitude.

In alphabetical order, the positive psychologists featured are: Ilona Boniwell, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ed Diener, Barbara Fredrickson, Todd Kashdan, Alex Linley, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Nic Marks, Ryan Niemiec, Acacia Parks, Denise Quinlan, Michael Steger, Robert Vallerand.

3. The author

Dr Aaron Jarden is a senior lecturer in psychology at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand and president of the New Zealand Association of Positive Psychology (NZAPP).¹ He is also lead investigator of the International Wellbeing Study,² co-editor of the *International Journal of Wellbeing*³ and director of GROW International.⁴ Aaron describes his goal as “complete understanding of human wellbeing, why it is as it is, and how it can be improved.” Given this pedigree, I'm sure I'm not the only reader who wishes he'd provided answers to the questions he posed the other positive psychologists in the book.

4. The audience

Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology has been written primarily for those who are new to positive psychology or are thinking of entering the field. It is a great resource for that purpose. Hearing what positive psychology means to the experts who are right there, working at the coal face every day, is invaluable. But even if you're a relatively old hand in the positive psychology world, this book has much to offer.

You get a lot of personal insights which you wouldn't otherwise hear. The book is well balanced—the downsides are spelled out too, not just the age-old perception of positive psychology being too Pollyanna-ish. It also includes emerging concerns about research being applied too quickly, and even misapplied. Acacia Parks suggests testing the effectiveness of positive psychology books written for the general public against non-science based 'quackery' such as *The Secret*. All this is useful material for those of us who've been working in the field on an applied basis.

5. Common questions

What are the distinctive features of positive psychology? A simple question for experts to answer, you might think! We get three different types of response. Some refer to the importance of positive psychology's scientific grounding, and its focus on the positive and on optimal human functioning. Others refer to a clear split between research and application. The third group answers in terms of specific positive psychology content, such as strengths and positive emotions. If you're an experienced positive psychologist, how would you answer this question?

What are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology? In the early days of positive psychology our old friend, optimism, took most of the flak. Now the loudest criticisms focus on the speed and manner in which positive psychology is making its way into practice,

¹ <http://www.positivepsychology.org.nz/>.

² <http://www.wellbeingstudy.com/>.

³ <http://www.internationaljournalofwellbeing.org/>.

⁴ <http://www.growthq.com/>.

and the way it's communicated. Nic Marks, Alex Linley, Todd Kashdan and Acacia Parks refer to these concerns. According to Acacia Parks, "...in some ways we're not as careful as we could be about the sound bites we release into the ether, or about maintaining the integrity of those sound bites so that they are accurate". Nic Marks supports this: "There have been far too many claims made far too quickly about certain interventions. ...We need to be able to communicate things better...".

A further criticism concerns cultural applicability. Nic Marks disputes any claim that positive psychology interventions are universally applicable. Todd Kashdan goes deeper and refers to the overriding importance of the situational context of research and applications. Whilst there's a lot to be learned from positive psychology's strengths, there is much we can learn from its weaknesses.

What are some of positive psychology's achievements? There's consistency here in the thrust of responses. They revolve around how positive psychology is communicated and disseminated. For example, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi mentions getting the subject of positive human activity to be taken seriously, and creating a vocabulary for it; Sonja Lyubomirsky talks about gaining traction within the wider field of psychology; Michael Steger about gaining traction in other disciplines; whilst Barbara Fredrickson refers to getting positive psychology on the public radar.

What is evident from reading this book is that the positive psychology field is so much wider than strengths and positive emotions, although these tend to dominate because they make good sound bites. The book suggests that we need to work harder to raise awareness about the importance to wellbeing of other, less glamorous, topics such as meaning, mindfulness, self-regulation, and time perspectives.

6. Why you should read this book

The aim of the book is to enrich our understanding of positive psychology as it currently stands. It succeeds very well, but it does much, much more. It provides the inside track on what positive psychology experts really think about positive psychology; where positive psychology is going next; what the hot topics for the next five years are; who the upcoming positive psychology researchers to watch are; and it also gives valuable advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers and practitioners.

If that wasn't enough, you get to hear from the horse's mouth about new developments, such as the direction of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA)⁵ from the new president, Robert Vallerand, and the University of East London's MAPP program⁶ from the course director, Ilona Boniwell. If you want to find out more then you're going to have to read the book!

7. Recommendation

This book is original, it's a quick and easy read, it provides inside information but at the same time challenges your understanding of what positive psychology is, how to apply it and how it's developing. The concept is very straightforward—transcripts of thirteen personal interviews with an assortment of positive psychology experts on their favourite topic—but don't let that simplicity fool you.

⁵ <http://www.ippanetwork.org/>.

⁶ <http://www.uel.ac.uk/postgraduate/specs/positivepsychology/>.

The only real downside is that the book (like most others in the field) is biased in favour of a traditional western perspective. All of those interviewed are from, have been educated in, or work primarily in, the USA, Canada, the UK, and New Zealand. It's true that the cultural weakness of positive psychology as it stands is raised several times. I wonder whether the presence of more European and eastern researchers and practitioners would have enhanced the book.

While you'd expect a lot of agreement amongst the positive psychologists featured in the book, there's sufficient diversity in the knowledge and opinions to ensure that you can't just take everything as read. You have to assess it yourself, assimilate it and make up your own mind. That, I think, is the power of a good book. This one gives you a foundation on which to craft your own positive psychology path. I wish it had been available when I did my MAPP program in 2007. I highly recommend it.

Author

Bridget Granville-Cleave
Workmad Ltd
Bridget@workmad.co.uk