

The Science of Positive Psychology

Adrian Booth

Reference: Seligman, M. E. P., Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5>

Finally!! ... a science that psychologists can follow and utilise to assist others to develop lives that can be meaningful, purposeful and engaging. Sound pretty good? Well, this science is known as Positive Psychology.

I must admit that when I was learning the art (and science) of being a psychologist many years ago now, I was taught to notice, assist and develop strategies to help people get rid of the pain and suffering they were experiencing. Throughout my study years I had been exposed to therapies, approaches and psychometric tests that provided ways to identify and counter levels of distress and ailments common to the human condition including depression, anxiety and stress.

Thinking back now to my undergraduate and postgraduate training (mid-1980s to mid-1990s), I really did not have much encouragement or opportunity to go in search of the flip side to illness – wellness or wellbeing.

Professor Martin Seligman (University of Pennsylvania), founder of Positive Psychology and former head of the American Psychological Association along with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Claremont Graduate University) changed that through an influential edition of [American Psychologist in 2000](#). This special edition contained 15 articles on the [new] science of positive psychology, a term back then still unknown to many people including psychologists. In the foreword of this edition, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi outlined a framework for the science of positive psychology as well as highlighting unknowns and potential challenges the new science faced over the next century.



For many of us, past events and experiences often shape the way we develop and learn how to navigate the world. This was no different for Martin Seligman who spent much of his early career in the late 1960s and early 1970s [focusing on depression, sadness and despair](#).

In fact, the focus of psychology as a discipline during these years was primarily on “repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning”.

But Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi were proposing something unique, although strangely commonsense. They were proposing a science of psychology focused on positive experience.

According to Seligman, Positive Psychology has a number of levels. There is a subjective level, which includes valued subjective experiences like *well-being*, *contentment* and *satisfaction* (past focus), *hope* and *optimism* (future focus) and *flow* and *happiness* (in the present focus).

There is also an individual level, describing positive characteristics that individuals might have or develop - capacities for *love*, *courage*, *forgiveness*, *high talent* and *wisdom* to name a few.

Finally, there is also a group level or broader community level if you like, which involves how we conduct and operate within wider contexts. At the group level, we may observe *civic virtues*, *citizenship*, *responsibility*, *tolerance* and *work ethic*.

Whilst these might sound unremarkable to you, as they reflect concepts we live with every day, the notion of going in search of these strengths and attributes throughout the early history of psychology was pretty much absent.

So how did Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi move into the positive psychology space?

Seligman tells a story in the paper that happened just after he was elected President of the [American Psychological Association](#). While gardening, he told his five year old daughter Nicki off for throwing weeds around, dancing and generally not helping. Her response changed his thinking dramatically.

She responded ...”Daddy I want to talk to you”,

“Yes Nikki?”

“Daddy do you remember before my fifth birthday? From the time I was three to the time I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. When I turned five, I decided not to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch”.

Seligman remarked he took Nikki’s statement as a ‘marvellous’ strength, calling it ‘seeing into the soul’. This ‘revelation’ contrasted with the pursuit of illness that psychology had been focused on. According to Seligman, psychologists were heavily invested in ‘illness’ because they were able to make a living from it, and psychological research benefited from research grants being available for studies of pathology and illness.

It had not always been this way though. There had been early versions in the late 1920s and late 1930s of what we now call Positive Psychology. Areas such as the study of giftedness, marital separation and effective parenting are examples of this. Overall though psychology, extensively throughout the 1960s and 1970s, was dominated by a pursuit of “repairing damage ... damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhoods, and damaged brains”.



Psychology had become overly fascinated with things that were broken

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi also had his own story as to how he became interested in Positive Psychology. He noted during and post-World War II that some people, even in the face of adversity, were able to stay stoic. Csikszentmihalyi started to wonder what were the strengths or personal characteristics they were drawing on to show such resilience in difficult times. He dabbled in the writings of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud.

Mihaly then travelled to the USA but became disillusioned with what was then an almost exclusive focus on behaviourism and scientific (statistical) measurement as a way of explaining variances in human behaviour. According to Csikszentmihalyi, a ‘third way’ perspective led predominately by [Abraham Maslow](#) and [Carl Rogers](#) offered some hope, but it lacked empirical clout at that time.

With an emphasis on the self, these newer approaches tended to dilute the notion or possibility of collective wellbeing. Also the importance of prevention (i.e. intervening before pathology) was not really promoted or integrated in therapeutic models. It was not until 1998 that the American Psychological Association had it as a presidential theme.

The dominance and disadvantages of the ‘disease model’ in psychology had failed to recognise how strengths, human ones like resilience, optimism, and courage, could in fact immunise against illnesses, especially mental health ones.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi stated ...

“Whatever the personal origins of our conviction that the time has arrived for a positive psychology, our message is to remind our field that psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best”

At last, a psychological science was being promoted that was more than just the study of illness or recovery. It was concerned with broader influences such as education, the environment, how we love, how we make decisions, how we survive. This broader perspective was important as it challenged the view that humans are mere ‘vessels’ that respond to stimuli (a position that behaviourists were originally focused on) ...in other words victims to external forces. Instead, humans act and react, we can decide, make decisions and navigate and seize the day to change outcomes and decisions.

As a current practising Clinical Psychologist I like this perspective. I like the notion that the people we work with and try to help have an ‘ableness’, a potential and worth, which is essential in any collaborative and/or recovery-focused interaction.

How was this paper influential?

There were 15 papers in the [special issue of American Psychologist](#) in addition to the central paper by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi. These papers covered a diverse range of topics:

Happiness and positive experience

Positive personality like traits subjective well-being (how we think and feel about our lives), optimism, happiness and self-determination

Biocultural evolution - impact of evolutionary processes on how we respond and survive in the world

Optimism

Self-determination (*Editor: see Matthew’s article from Day 4*)

Mental adaptation

Emotions and health - that is could positive emotions such as happiness, joy, love and pride influence how people deal with and protect themselves against distress and mental ill-health?

The pursuit of excellence

Wisdom

Creativity

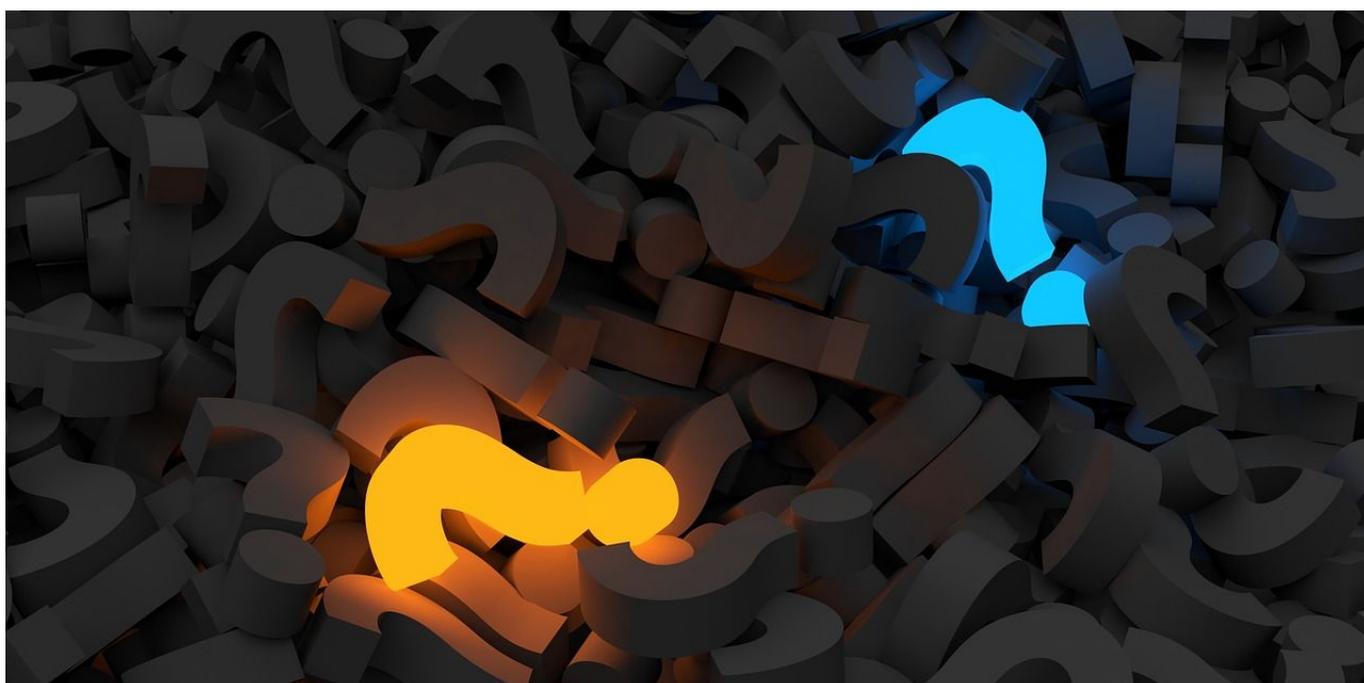
Giftedness

The real contribution of the Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi paper at the head of this issue was that it pulled together many strands of research under a coherent and powerful theme: Positive Psychology.

Positive psychology was not just whatever research Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi themselves were doing. Rather, positive psychology was the sum total of what many independent researchers and teams were doing. They just didn’t necessarily realise their combined efforts were shaping a new future for psychology.

To that body of research Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi posed new questions and ideas for future research. For example, they asked the questions:

- Is wellbeing the sum total of episodes of happiness across the lifespan?
- What is the biology of positive experience and positive traits?
- Why do we often choose pleasure over enjoyment when it is enjoyment that is more strongly linked to personal growth and happiness?
- How do we balance individual vs collective wellbeing?
- Can too much positive experience create a fragile or brittle personality? Is negative experience needed to build resilience?
- How will positive traits like courage or interpersonal skill buffer against mental illness?
- Will the science of Positive Psychology generate specific 'prescriptive' advice about how to live life?
- Is it realistic to be positive?



Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi were asking very different questions to what had been asked before

These were breakthrough questions that required a new approach for psychology – a new way of approaching sadness and distress, but now also strengths and virtues – essential I believe for fully understanding the often complex and diverse range of features, parts, thoughts and elements of the human condition.

Where are we now and what have we achieved regarding a science of positive psychology?

Personally, I think it is a great time to be a psychologist. I recall as an undergraduate psychologist being told, following a mental health assessment that I did, that it was 'ok' but the trouble with me was that I wore 'rose coloured glasses'. Was this resiliency? Was this an overabundance of happiness and positive regard for the patient I showed? I recall making the 'patient' laugh in the assessment – obviously not the done thing for psychologists to do!

Interestingly, Seligman recently has reflected on some of the critiques of positive psychology. In a [recent interview](#) hosted by the Langley Institute, April 2018, Seligman stated that criticism is crucial to any science so we should embrace it. Common criticisms of positive psychology include that it is selfish, given the impression it focuses too much on the self.

Others have argued that if we invest in creating economic equity thus leading to a much more supportive and inclusive world, we may not require personal strengths such as optimism, purpose and engagement. An interesting point.

If you would like an up to date perspective of Seligman's views on positivity check out his new book – [The Hope Circuit – A Psychologist's Journey from Helplessness to Optimism, 2018](#).

I will leave you with my assessment of the accomplishments and resources we now have in place 18 years on from Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's influential paper:

- We now have the Science of PERMA + -Seligman's Wellbeing Framework. PERMA + stands for Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment PLUS Physical Activity, Nutrition, Sleep and Optimism. Supporting this framework is extensive research and a training program conducted with the US military.
- The availability of online positive and wellbeing resources like the Values in Action survey (<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/The-Survey>). This is a free resource that provides a list of 24 character strengths that Seligman has developed under six core virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence). I did the survey recently and my top three strengths were Humour (those rose coloured glasses again!), kindness and leadership.
- The Warwick and Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale – a 14 item measure of wellbeing, not illness, not sickness, not vulnerability but wellness - <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/>
- Through neuroimaging techniques we can now see that mindfulness and other cognitive boosting therapies cause parts of the brain 'light up' and come to life following episodes of depression.

I hope you have found this brief review interesting and I would strongly encourage you to learn more by visiting the various links included.

Me ... I will continue to wear my rose coloured glasses as I think the world looks ok when I wear them.