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1

What Is Positive Psychology?

THE BIRTH OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Martin Seligman introduced the term *positive psychology* in his presidential address at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. He then fortuitously met Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi during a vacation in Hawaii, and together they set to provide the foundation of positive psychology as a long-term endeavour aimed at enhancing the way psychology chooses its research objectives, frames research problems, and contributes to the betterment of the human condition. In January 2000, the journal *American Psychologists* published an entire issue – often referred to as the ‘millennium issue’ – devoted to the theoretical foundation and research agenda of positive psychology. In the leading article, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) identified the key limitations of psychology as it emerged from the end of World War II, and outlined the directions for a renewed, ‘positive’ psychology.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) pointed out that, before World War II, psychology had three missions: (a) understanding and curing mental disorders, (b) enhancing people productivity and sense of fulfilment, and (c) identifying talented individuals and helping them realize their potential. After the war, arguably because of the selective strategy used by research grant foundations, psychology increased its focus on the first mission and extended it to the understanding and prevention of all forms of human suffering. The key outcome variables became stress and its negative consequences to psychological and physical health. The key explanatory variables became negative environmental factors, such as disrupted families and inhumane work environments. Empirical research focused on how hostile and thwarted environments can cause stress and, in turn, psychological and physical disorder. In the study of the relationships among negative environmental factors, stress, and illness the individual tended to be considered as an essentially passive being, that is, as a mere respondent to incoming harmful stimuli.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) contended that absence of mental disorder, albeit a positive condition, is not the best human beings could aspire to and accomplish. There is a wide range of positive psychological processes and outcomes that go beyond mere absence of illness. These positive aspects of

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human psychology are more easily noticed at times of catastrophe, chaos, and despair, when only some individuals manifest resilience, maintain a state of serenity, and guide others with their example. These people are definitely not passive beings: they adapt and proactively strive in the midst of challenge. These people have remarkable strengths, virtues, and resilience. If we could learn how to foster those strengths in everyone, then we would have achieved more than mere absence of mental illness. As such:

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. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is much larger. It is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play.

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7)

Finally, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi argued that the expansion of the first mission of psychology to the study of strength would also redirect psychology to its two neglected missions: enhancing people engagement and productivity and fostering talent development.

THE ORIGINS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology seeks the 'better' for human beings. What is the better? Positive psychology presents a wide range of views of the 'better'. Nevertheless, the origin of the different views can be traced back to the classic philosophical definitions of *hedonic well-being* and *eudaimonic well-being*. The former essentially states that the 'better' is a human condition characterized by happiness and pleasant emotions in the here and now, and a positive outlook on one's own life in respect to the past, present, and future. The latter essentially states that the 'better' is a human condition characterized by optimal functioning, including absorption in meaningful and challenging endeavours, environmental mastery, resilience in facing challenges and setbacks, and lifelong organismic growth. Both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being can be called 'happiness' in everyday jargon, but they do represent relatively independent constructs. As such, hedonic and eudaimonic happiness do not necessarily co-occur in the same individual. Moreover, activities that foster one form of happiness do not necessarily foster the other form of happiness. Therefore, the definitional choice of what constitutes the 'better' for human beings heavily influences the strategies and techniques that different positive psychologists prescribe for the purpose of bettering the human condition.

Emotions are important for both the hedonic and the eudaimonic approach to well-being. Both definitions of the 'better' imply that happiness comes with abundance of positive, pleasant emotions and paucity of negative, unpleasant emotions.

The difference is that, while for the hedonic approach emotions define well-being (e.g., feeling strong joy, interest, and love equates to being hedonically happy), for the eudaimonic approach emotions are a sign of well-being (e.g., feeling strong joy, interest, and love is a consequence of being eudaimonically happy). Either way emotions play a ubiquitous role in positive psychology. As such, positive psychology is grounded in a long tradition of emotion research, which classified emotions, examined their relationships, and identified their evolutionary functions.

Strengths, virtues, and resilience are all terms that refer to relatively stable characteristics of individuals, and implicitly assume that individuals differ in the extent to which they possess them. Therefore, positive psychology utilizes all the research methodologies that were developed in the field of personality psychology for the purpose of measuring state and trait variables. Moreover, all the strength constructs developed in positive psychology have some conceptual link to – and in some instances overlap considerably with – constructs that were previously studied in personality psychology. In particular, Rogers (1963) and Maslow's (1968) phenomenological and humanistic theories of personality provided the conceptual foundation for the contemporary eudaimonic approach to well-being. As such, positive psychology is constantly interpreting its findings in relation, and sometimes in alliance with personality psychology.

The ambition of positive psychology is to change all people for the 'better'. This raises the issue of whether there is a single 'better' for people from all cultures. Cross-cultural psychology began questioning the cultural invariance of personality processes and structures already in the early nineties (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994). Given that positive psychology and personality psychology are deeply intertwined, cross-cultural psychologists have begun questioning and testing the universality of indicators of well-being and of explanatory factors for well-being that were primarily identified on participant samples from Western cultures. Moreover, some of the key cross-cultural constructs have driven, rather than followed, numerous investigations in the field of positive psychology. As such, positive psychology is grounded in cross-cultural conceptions of how cultural values and ways to perceive the self and the others influence cognitive and emotional functioning.

THE CHILDHOOD OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Twelve years after the millennium issue, positive psychology has grown into a strong child. There are two peer-reviewed journals – *The Journal of Positive Psychology* and *The Journal of Happiness Studies* – entirely devoted to publishing theoretical and empirical research in the field of positive psychology. This is only the tip of the iceberg though: perusing the articles published in a wide range of peer-reviewed journals spanning across different fields of psychology – including personality and social psychology, organizational psychology, and educational

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psychology – one can see that theories, constructs, and measurement instruments that were originally developed in the field of positive psychology are being utilized in research that is not formally labelled ‘positive psychology’. Positive psychology has thus been able to attract the attention of psychologists from all orientations, and has influenced their thinking and actions.

The fact that most of the research with a positive psychology connotation or nuance is published in ‘peripheral’ journals, and not in the two ‘core’ journals, constitutes both a threat and an opportunity. As the philosopher and historian of science Thomas Kuhn (1969) pointed out, core journals have the function to unite a ‘paradigmatic’ field of science, by providing a unified and coherent picture of what belongs to the field and what is external to it, including the topics to be dealt with in research, the methodologies that should be used, and the values that should guide the research endeavour and the interpretation of its results. As such, a key threat to positive psychology is that researchers who publish mostly in peripheral journals – and hence are not fully fledged positive psychologists – may with their work drive the field of positive psychology away from the ground that is agreed upon by the body of fully fledged positive psychologists. In turn, this external threat also constitutes a unique opportunity for positive psychology to grow in the direction of non-obvious research findings and applications.

Positive psychology is also facing threats and opportunities from within. The most obvious divide is the difference in the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to what constitutes the ‘better’ for the human condition. Yet, this only is the tip of the iceberg: there are different emphases and areas within positive psychology, and these differences are so big that one wonders whether positive psychology is a coherent field of psychology or just a mishmash of views. As such, a key threat to positive psychology is that its internal divisions will prevent it from becoming what Kuhn (1969) called a fully fledged ‘paradigm’, that is a conceptually clear and coherent domain of knowledge that is managed effectively by a body of recognized experts and their institutions. In turn, this internal threat also constitutes a unique opportunity for positive psychology to become more far reaching and complex before ‘crystallizing’ into a stable paradigm.

Finally, positive psychology is facing both opportunities and threats from politics. Various national governments have developed a keen interest in positive psychology and launched exploratory research programmes aimed at promoting national well-being. For example, the British Government led by Prime Minister David Cameron has commissioned the Office of National Statistics to develop and administer a survey to measure national happiness (e.g., Cohen, 2011), and former French President Nicolas Sarkozy had commissioned a team of researchers to develop an index of citizens’ happiness that could be combined with Gross Domestic Product to create a more comprehensive and satisfactory index of the well-being of nations (e.g., Easterly, 2011). These developments are a key opportunity for positive psychology to become more visible to the general public and to receive more research funding. In turn, this opportunity comes

with a risk of seeing the concepts and theories of positive psychology translated into a wide range of administrative languages that might distort their original meaning and eventually lead to policies and practices that run against the agenda of positive psychology as we know it today.

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK: FINDING AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

What, then, is positive psychology? As Alex Linley and co-workers (2006) put it, if you were to ask ten positive psychologists you would probably receive ten different answers. Taking this as a matter of fact, the only wise answer is to ask the reader of this book – you – to find the answer by yourself. This book was written to help you find the answer.

This book tries to accomplish its goal using three strategies. First, it proposes a unifying picture of the field of positive psychology organized by major topics, where each topic is dealt with in a separate and nearly self-contained chapter. Second, each topic-chapter presents approaches that differ in theoretical perspective, language, and research methods over and above the mere difference between the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to well-being: seeing diverse arguments in close proximity is designed to help the reader detect, process, and possibly resolve controversies. Third, the review of the literature presents a balance of classic, root sources and recent sources: this is designed to help readers decide for themselves whether recent contributions to the field of positive psychology have an incremental value or are just a camouflaged repeat of what was said or found before in other fields of psychology.

A final note on criticism. Finding an answer to the question ‘what is positive psychology?’ requires critical thinking. Critical thinking is valued universally because it is the propeller of engagement in the subject matter, learning, and eventually scientific progress, but it comes at a price: negative emotions. Nobody likes to be criticized, and those who criticize typically do so because they are somewhat dissatisfied with what they read. As such, the reader of a critical introduction like the present one is bound to experience some level – hopefully moderate – of negative emotions. The reason for accepting such a reading mission is ‘no pain, no gain’, where the gain is engagement in the subject matter and learning. I hope that in reading this book your gain will largely exceed your pain.

THE NARRATED ROADMAP OF THIS BOOK

Overview

Every book that is designed both for independent reading and as support for teaching, such as this one, is reviewed by a number of anonymous referees who

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are experts in the subject matter and are actively involved in teaching it at undergraduate and/or graduate levels. A referee commented that, although each chapter could be read independently of the others, it would be better to read the whole book sequentially, from start to end, particularly if the reader is new to the field of positive psychology. Another referee added that, because some of the chapters are extensive and intellectually challenging, it would be good to provide some advance guidance to the reader.

This book is made of this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), a concluding chapter (Chapter 9), and seven intermediate, substantive chapters (Chapters 2–8). The first five substantive chapters tackle the core theoretical concepts of the field of positive psychology: the definitions and measures of well-being (Chapter 2), the workings of the self in seeking well-being (Chapter 3), the personality traits that foster or hinder well-being (Chapter 4), the set of dynamic variables – such as optimism and metacognition – that influence well-being and are potentially amenable to change (Chapter 5), and the key optimal state – flow – that fosters both achievement and well-being (Chapter 6). As a set, these theoretical chapters focus on the theoretical debates, empirical tests, and theoretical developments that have made positive psychology a distinct field of psychological research.

The remaining substantive chapters focus on applications of positive psychology to the real world: relations with partners, relations with work, and relations with children (Chapter 7), and psychotherapy (Chapter 8). These applied chapters are included in the present book for three reasons. First, no matter how much they love a purely scientific discourse, positive psychologists ultimately aim at improving people's lives. Second, applications help to gain a better understanding of positive psychology theories. Finally, the analysis of applications provides invaluable cues as to how positive psychology theories should be improved in the future. As a set, these applied chapters focus on preliminary attempts to make positive psychology work for people, and they portray succinctly the area of positive psychology that is most likely to grow in the years to come.

Whether you decide to read the whole book or only the chapters that interest you, the following sections provide you with a narrated roadmap of the flow of contents and arguments that are presented in each chapter. After reading a chapter, you may find useful to return to the narrated roadmap in order to recap the main points of that chapter and to orient yourself for reading another chapter.

Chapter 2: Positive Emotions and Well-Being

This chapter has three sections. The first section reviews conceptions of emotions. Several classification systems for primary emotions were proposed. Four principles are common to all of them: (a) primary emotions can be broadly classified into positive and negative, with positive emotions being relatively

independent of negative emotions, (b) positive and negative primary emotions evolved over millions of years because they support both individual and group survival, (c) secondary emotions can be thought of as combinations of two or more primary emotions, and (d) not all emotions pass the threshold of consciousness to become feelings, meant as perceived emotions that individuals can report and assess. Researchers have developed valid and reliable scales to measure aggregates of feelings called positive affect and negative affect. The two types of affect are trait-like variables and are strongly influenced by genetic makeup. Nevertheless, momentary variations of affect occur as a function of whether persons judge their progress toward goals to be slow or right. Most important, momentary increases of positive affect and decreases of negative affect result in a broadening of attention, enhanced access to problem-relevant information, and more creativity in problem solving. In all, although one's overall levels of positive and negative affect are quite constant over time, momentary variations of affect provide useful diagnostic information on progress or lack thereof toward achieving one's goals in life, and they influence cognitive and behavioural approaches to problems.

The second section of Chapter 2 reviews empirical work aimed at measuring and understanding happiness and life satisfaction as global judgments people make about the quality of their lives. Research in this area has been descriptive more than theory-driven, and mini theories were proposed in order to explain some surprising but robust empirical findings. In particular, researchers found that happiness is not a linear function of income, and proposed two main explanations for the reasons why wealth does not necessarily result in more happiness: adaptation and social comparisons. Both processes make any attempt to enhance the happiness of all people via economical development short-lived, and hence somewhat useless: as on a treadmill, as people become richer, they will experience a peak of happiness that will rapidly deflate until there is another increment of wealth. Moreover, comparisons of happy and unhappy people revealed that the former tend to have a positive bias in evaluating their own lives, suggesting that happiness comes at the price of reduced objectivity. In all, there is no doubt that being unhappy is bad, but it is not clear the extent to which happiness can be enhanced and whether such an enhancement may have negative side effects.

The third and final section of the chapter reviews the opposing models of subjective well-being and psychological well-being, and analyses the empirical relationships between the indicators of the two types of well-being. On one hand, the model of subjective well-being is derived from empirical research on emotions and happiness, and defines 'the better' as a human condition wherein a person has highest happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect, and lowest negative affect; any variation from this ideal pattern constitutes a departure from 'the better' and hence a lower level of subjective well-being. On the other hand, the model of psychological well-being is derived from humanistic and

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phenomenological theories of personality, and defines ‘the better’ as a human condition wherein a person has highest self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth; any variation from this ideal pattern constitutes a departure from ‘the better’ and hence a lower level of psychological well-being. Although the indicators of the two opposing models of well-being differ in meaning and were derived using different research strategies, they converge empirically to such an extent that the two types of well-being are virtually undistinguishable. In all, decades of research and debates between opposing camps have generated substantial agreement on what constitutes well-being, leaving unsolved only some apparently minor differences in views.

Chapter 3: Positive Self

This is the longest and most complex chapter of the book. It has three sections. The first section reviews conceptions of the self as a concept. Two main constructs are considered: self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem is a self-belief of capability, significance, success, and worthiness. As is true of every belief, it changes across social roles and contexts, so that one may have high self-esteem in a given role (e.g., as a student) and low self-esteem in another role (e.g., as a tennis player). General self-esteem represents a kind of average belief of self-worth across situations and times, and hence is a trait-like variable. For decades, advocates of the construct of general self-esteem have investigated the associations involving general self-esteem and another variable (e.g., aggressive behaviour), and every time they found one they claimed that general self-esteem was the cause and the other variable was the consequence. However, other researchers had a more critical approach, looked for evidence supporting reverse causality, and found plenty. In particular, they found that self-esteem is the consequence of academic achievement, and not vice versa as previously believed. Moreover, they found that self-esteem correlates strongly with self-rated physical attractiveness and is virtually uncorrelated with other-rated physical attractiveness, which suggests that general self-esteem is mostly thinking highly about one-self. Finally, some sub-types of high general self-esteem – such as narcissism and egotism – are more conducive to aggressive behaviour – particularly of the retaliatory type when one’s own sense of grandiosity is threatened by others – than low self-esteem is. On the positive side, general self-esteem was consistently found to correlate fairly with happiness and life satisfaction while retaining the status of distinct variable. This finding makes general self-esteem one of the variables that can be included in models of well-being, with the caveat that it may flag problems on the high end of the scale.

Self-efficacy is a belief about one’s own capability to handle difficult situations. Unlike the construct of self-esteem, the construct of self-efficacy is grounded in a comprehensive theoretical framework, which explains how self-efficacy

interacts with other variables, such as expectations, goals and standards, to influence behaviour and how it changes over time in interaction with the environment. General self-efficacy correlates strongly with general self-esteem and other core self-evaluations, and it is thus a potential target for the heavy criticism that was directed against the construct of general self-esteem. Moreover, above a certain threshold, self-efficacy cannot explain why one keeps being interested in an activity. In all, the main conceptions of self as a concept are useful global constructs that can explain well the low end of the behavioural range (i.e., emotional and behavioural failure stemming from an ugly self-concept) but cannot explain the high end of the behavioural range (i.e., emotional and behavioural success). The bottom line is that success requires far more than a positive self-concept.

The chapter's second section reviews theoretical and empirical work aimed at understanding the self as a regulatory process. Ego psychologists introduced the concepts of effectance motivation, locus of causation, and sense of identity as central to the healthy functioning of the self. Self-Determination Theory further developed these concepts and integrated them into a broader framework that contains intrinsic motivation and self-determination as the core self-regulatory process for behaviours, motivations, and emotions. Cross-cultural psychologists contested the centrality of self-determination in Eastern, collectivistic cultures and developed a dual-process conception of self-construal that includes independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal as distinct and parallel processes, and allows for an individual to express more of one construal depending on the context of the activity. Reversal Theory pointed out that the self operates in two radically different modes, depending on whether a situation is perceived as work or play, and can shift abruptly between the two modes. Research on stress identified the various adaptive and maladaptive strategies the self adopts to cope with demanding situations, and highlighted that high levels of adaptation and resilience require coping flexibility, which consists of monitoring and responding proactively mostly to controllable stressors. Research on needs and motives pointed out that some of the most powerful forces that drive the self are somewhat below the awareness level, and take the form of imaginative and dramatic life stories that can have as recurrent themes achievement, power, and intimacy. Research on personal strivings and goals, instead, pointed out the powerful self-regulatory function exerted by conscious and volitional mental representations and anticipations of future desirable states, and found that avoidance goals and conflicts between strivings are important indicators of maladaptive self-regulation. Finally, decades of research on creativity highlighted that, in order to be fully functional, a self must work over and above convergent and goal directed behaviour, and must engage, in addition, in exploration of ideas and generation of new ideas. No less important is the need for the creative self to be armed with personal resources that are required to win acceptance of a novel idea by the gatekeepers

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of the field in which that idea would be most consequential. In all, this review of many theories of self-regulation clearly shows that self-regulation involves many simultaneous processes and is therefore complex.

The third and final section of the chapter reviews theoretical and empirical work aimed at understanding how the I – the self-regulatory processes as a whole – construes the Me – the self-concept – in a never ending writing and re-writing of one's own life narrative. This is primarily achieved by construing a sense of identity that makes one unique and yet consistent across situations and times as well as understandable to others. Although identity construction was originally regarded as an adolescent's task, further research pointed out that it is rather a lifetime endeavour. The I achieves this by writing personal stories that make sense of one's own life themes and life changes. This implies that there are risks inherent in construing a non-authentic sense of identity in that it may hinder rather than foster psychological well-being. In all, this line of research points out that what we tend to consider fixed objects under the umbrella of self-concept and traits are to some extent subjective constructions, and hence can change by re-writing parts of one's own life narratives.

Chapter 4: Positive Traits

This chapter has four sections. The first section reviews the empirically driven research on traits that led to the identification of the Big Five personality traits, and empirical findings on the relationships between traits and well-being. Extraversion or its sub-components emerged as the most positive trait in that it is associated with more subjective well-being and more psychological well-being. In a mirror image, neuroticism emerged as the most negative trait in that it is associated with less subjective well-being and less psychological well-being. The other traits – openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness – showed mixed associations with the different indicators of well-being, and hence could not be classified as consistently positive traits. Moreover, no single pattern of traits emerged as consistently positive. In particular, a pattern that would be optimal for subjective well-being would not be optimal for creative achievement – an indicator of psychological well-being – and vice versa. In all, it appears that, even if we were able to shape our Big Five traits at will, we could not have it all.

The second section reviews the conceptually driven research on traits that led to the identification of gender role attributes, general causality orientations, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations, and analyses what is known about the relationships between these traits and psychological well-being. Gender role traits emerged as consistently positive traits. Of the three causality orientations, autonomy emerged as a consistently positive trait, impersonal orientation emerged as a consistently negative trait, and control emerged as a mixed trait whose positivity-negativity depends on context. Finally, trait

intrinsic motivation has reasonably consistent positive effects on performance, and trait extrinsic motivation has reasonably consistent negative effects, with some contextual variability. In all, it appears that, as predicted by Bakan's theory and its operationalization via the circumplex model of personality, the two broad traits of agency and communion are consistently positive.

The third section reviews the conceptually driven research on character strengths, meant as socially desirable and moral traits, that led Peterson and Seligman to the identification of 24 universal character strengths organized in six core virtues. All character strengths were found to correlate with life satisfaction, and the correlations were particularly strong for the strengths of hope, zest, gratitude, curiosity, and love. However, factor analytic studies questioned the proposed dimensionality of virtues and the organization of character strengths. Moreover, empirically driven research using the psycholexical method generated quite a different classification and interpretation of virtues. In all, it appears that character strengths and virtues are important contributors to well-being, but there is uncertainty about their number, nature and function.

The chapter's fourth and final section reviews criticism of Peterson and Seligman's conceptual model of virtues and of their recommended interventions aimed at enhancing character strengths. The criticism was first derived from the writings of two ancient philosophers, Confucius and Aristotle. The section then reviews the arguments raised by contemporary psychologists. The analysis reveals a generalized concern about the risks of treating character strengths as if they were independent of one another, cultivating only a limited number of strengths, and ignoring the potentially negative effects of possessing and deploying too much of any one strength. In all, these concerns point to the risk of fostering a deformed, unbalanced, and excessive character that could hardly constitute a moral model.

Chapter 5: Optimism and Self-Regulation of Emotions

This chapter has two sections. The first section reviews psychological constructs that are theorized to foster persistence in goal pursuit, resilience, and ability to understand and utilize emotions toward goal achievement. The first reviewed construct is optimism. Seligman and collaborators defined optimism as an explanatory style, and proposed that optimists explain downturns with reference to external, unstable, and specific causes, whereas pessimists invoke internal, stable, and general causes. Preliminary empirical research suggests that an optimistic explanatory style fosters academic performance. Carver and Sheier defined optimism as the disposition generally to expect more good than bad events in life. Empirical research consistently showed that dispositional optimism fosters better health and adaptation, more approach coping under stress, and more well-being. The second reviewed construct is hope. Snyder and collaborators defined hope as a disposition characterized by the ability and willingness

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to set clear goals, viable strategies to achieve the goals, and the motivation to deploy the required strategies until the goals are achieved. Empirical research showed that hope is not redundant of dispositional optimism, and that it fosters well-being. The third and last reviewed construct is emotional intelligence. Salovey and Mayer defined emotional intelligence as the ability to understand and regulate emotions in the self and in other people, and to utilize emotions to guide one's own thoughts and actions. Empirical research found that the various instruments developed to date to measure emotional intelligence either as an ability or as a personality trait are not psychometrically sound, and that the positive effects of emotional intelligence on well-being are small once the effects of personality and general intelligence are accounted for. All three constructs reviewed in this section occupy a central position in the field of positive psychology.

The second and final section reviews psychological constructs that foster the self-regulation of emotions, particularly when one is engaged in challenging endeavours, encounters difficulties, and experiences negative emotions. The first reviewed construct is attentional control, which Derryberry and Reed defined as the executive function that allows to deliberately focus on the task at hand and to swiftly shift attention away from the task when it is no longer required. Empirical research indicates that attentional control reduces anxiety, depression, and aggression. The second reviewed construct is mindfulness, which is present-moment awareness, avoiding 'automatic pilot', and observing experience without judgment and reactivity. Empirical studies have consistently indicated that mindfulness fosters well-being. The third reviewed construct is meta-emotions, which are secondary emotions that have primary emotions as their object. Preliminary findings gathered by Mitmansgruber and co-workers suggest that positive meta-emotions, such as curiosity about one's own negative primary emotions, are powerful predictors of well-being. The fourth and last reviewed construct is metacognition, which is knowledge and beliefs about one's own cognitive and emotional processes. Empirical studies indicate that maladaptive metacognitions foster negative emotions and maladaptive coping strategies, whereas adaptive metacognitions foster positive emotions and adaptive coping strategies. All four constructs reviewed in this section occupy, to varying degrees, marginal positions in the field of positive psychology, and hence represent opportunities for theoretical and empirical developments of the field.

Chapter 6: Flow

This chapter is devoted to flow, defined as a state of profound task-absorption, enhanced cognitive efficiency, and deep intrinsic enjoyment that makes persons feel one with the activities they engage in, be they leisure, work or a combination of the two. This chapter has three sections. The first section reviews the different ways flow has been conceptualized into models and measured in

empirical studies. Five models were proposed: the original model of the flow state, the quadrant model, the octant model, the dedicated regression models, and the componential model. Each model somewhat simplified Flow Theory and put it in a form that allowed for its empirical testing. The original model of the flow state drove the development of the Flow Questionnaire, which emerges as the best method for measuring prevalence of flow – whether a person has ever experienced the flow state as defined by the simultaneous presence of concentration, merging of action and awareness, and loss of self-consciousness. The quadrant model, the octant model, and the dedicated regression models were developed in conjunction with the Experience Sampling Method, which is the best method for measuring the level of various facets of subjective experience – and hence the level of flow – as they occur in everyday life activities. The componential model drove the development of the standardized flow scales, which provide the most psychometrically sound method for measuring intensity of flow both as a state and as a trait. In all, this section points out that the various models are not perfectly consistent with one another, and that no measurement method emerges as the overall winner.

The second section reviews theoretical and empirical work aimed at understanding the origins of flow. The analysis points out that flow can be viewed as a specific process and state within the framework of Self-Determination Theory. From that perspective, flow is caused by the need for competence, and it fosters intrinsic motivation to the extent that it satisfies the need for competence when the person engages in self-determined activities. Flow can also be viewed as originating from the teleonomy of the self, which drives all individuals – and particularly those with an autotelic personality – toward ever-growing levels of perceived challenges and skills. Finally, a small number of studies indicate that, although flow can be observed in many different cultures, culture shapes the type of activities wherein people tend to experience flow, and influences the optimal challenge/skill ratio wherein flow is more likely to occur. In all, this section highlights that more research is needed on the definition and measurement of the construct of autotelic personality, as well on cross-cultural differences in the nature of flow, and its antecedents and consequences.

The third and final section of the chapter reviews evidence supporting the hypothesis that flow fosters creativity directly and indirectly, via the mediation of talent development, and performance in sports, work, and studying. The evidence is strong overall, as it comes in some instances from well-controlled longitudinal studies. The section also reviews evidence in support of the broad hypothesis that flow fosters positive affect and happiness and hence subjective well-being. This evidence is weak and preliminary, as it was for most part gathered using correlational study designs that do not allow disentangling antecedents and consequences of flow. In all, this section highlights the need to investigate the antecedents and consequences of flow using longitudinal and experimental study designs, and controlling for alternative explanatory factors.

Chapter 7: Positive Relationships

This first of the two applied chapters has three sections. The first section reviews research on dyadic, romantic relations. Researchers proposed several componential definitions of love, the simplest being the two-component view of passionate love and companionate love. Studies using measures of passionate and companionate love or measures of more specific components of love consistently showed that love is positively associated with subjective well-being and psychological well-being, with a caveat: passionate love is more strongly associated with affect, whereas companionate love is more strongly associated with happiness and life satisfaction.

The second section reviews research on relationships in the work environment. Studies on what constitutes well-being at work pointed out that work engagement is the best predictor of work performance. Studies on managerial behaviour revealed that the task of leading project teams in organizations is multifaceted and complex. In order to foster individual and team performance, the team leader needs to perform a wide range of task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviours that fall into the broad and interrelated categories of initiating structure and consideration. Recent research on the inner work lives of team members indicate that the key task of the team leader is to ensure that individual team members have a continuing, day-to-day perception that they are making meaningful progress in their work. Yet, contrary to popular belief, the negative emotions experienced at work seem to foster rather than hinder creative work achievement, provided that in the course of an endeavour the worker shifts from a state of heightened negative affect to one of heightened positive affect and low negative affect.

The third and final section reviews three studies on parent–child, teacher–child, and child–other relationships in the contexts of everyday parenting, classroom teaching, and extracurricular activities. The first two studies are inspired by Rogers' theory of democratic parenting. The first study found strong evidence in support of Rogers' idea that democratic parenting fosters children's creative potential. The second study found strong evidence in support of Rogers' idea that democratic teaching fosters children's proactive engagement in learning. The findings from both studies highlight the pervasive and enduring influence that parent–child and teacher–child interactions have on the current and future psychological well-being of children. The third study is exploratory, and assessed the extent to which structured, community-based extracurricular activities – typically conducted after school and under the supervision of adults other than parents or school teachers – foster developmental (i.e., positive) and negative experiences. The found ranking of activities is somewhat surprising and thought provoking for the many parents who wonder what could be best for their children. In particular, among all activities, sports and youth-based religious groups provide the highest opportunity for developmental experiences,

but sports also provide the highest opportunity for negative experiences. This raises the issue of whether negative experiences are altogether ‘negative’ or are a necessary component of experience for developing hardiness in adult life.

Chapter 8: Positive Therapy

This chapter has four sections. The first section reviews the subtle and important distinction between mental illness and mental health. On one hand, the construct of mental illness originates in the fields of clinical psychology and psychiatry. For every known illness, it takes the form of a binary (present/absent) statement, which is based on whether the total number of illness-specific symptoms that are experienced by a person exceed a certain threshold. On the other hand, the construct of mental health originates in the field of positive psychology. For every person, it takes the form of a graded judgment weighing into a total score the extent to which a person feels well, copes well with everyday life problems, is functional at work, and is socially engaged. A review of studies indicate that mental illness and mental health are relatively independent variables; it is thus possible to have one or more mental illnesses and to score high on mental health (‘flourishing’), as well as to be free of mental illness and score low on mental health (‘languishing’). Moreover, longitudinal studies indicate that mental health predicts the occurrence of mental illness, so that a person who is flourishing now is less likely to develop a mental illness in the future. In all, this section points out the important contribution that positive psychology has made to the understanding of the aetiology of mental illness.

The second section reviews studies that tried to enhance happiness through character strengths interventions. Seemingly simple techniques were developed in order to enhance each character strength and virtue, and the effectiveness of some of these techniques was tested in randomized clinical trials. The review indicates that character strengths interventions can be effective in enhancing happiness, but in order to have durable effects they need constant rehearsal.

The third section reviews studies that tried to enhance positive emotions in experimental conditions. Some interventions were found effective within the limited follow-up time of an experiment. However, there is still limited evidence indicating long-term, durable effects stemming from a single intervention.

The chapter’s fourth and final section reviews the theoretical framework of two novel and effective types of psychotherapy: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Metacognitive Therapy. These were originally developed in the field of clinical psychology, but depart substantially from the traditional clinical approaches to the treatment of psychological disorders. In particular, they emphasize acceptance of internal states such as worry and anxiety, no matter how negative these might be, rather than their modification. Likewise, these new psychotherapies clash with character strengths therapies, which essentially target the self-concept in order to induce a lasting modification of internal

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states. The review suggests that, because they challenge the intervention paradigms that are dominant in both clinical psychology and positive psychology and because they appear to be very effective, these new types of psychotherapy should be carefully considered by positive psychologists.

Chapter 9: Future Directions in Positive Psychology

This is the final chapter. It provides an impressionistic picture of future directions for positive psychology and tries to convey a sense of the field as a movement in time. The history of science has shown over and over again that new and good scientific ideas may take up to thirty years to be recognized as innovative. As such, any judgment of ‘likelihood of impact’ for a scientific idea rests on shaky ground. The only certainty I have is that in selecting and presenting the materials of this book I must have missed some excellent and creative ideas, most probably proposed by young and less well-known researchers, and I anticipate the guilt and shame I will feel when proven blatantly wrong in due time. As such, the final chapter humbly outlines three scientific themes that emerge all along the seven substantive chapters of this book, and that I find personally interesting, challenging and worth pursuing in future research and application. These are proposed to you in a ‘try it on for size’ spirit.

Measurement Issues

A note on the measurement of positive psychology constructs is in order. There is an important relationship between theory and measurement. A theory, such as Self-Determination Theory, is a set of interrelated constructs and propositions that describe systematically the relationships among the constructs with the purpose of explaining and predicting a set of measurable outcomes. A measurement method, such as the General Causality Orientations Scale, is an apparatus and a technique for using it that is designed to measure one or more theoretical constructs in order to test some predictions made by the theory. Therefore, when reviewing a theoretical construct, it is important to interpret it considering the measurement method(s) that is(are) used to tap it. This means, for example, that when considering a theory of happiness, one should ask the question: how does that theory measure happiness?

Most positive psychology constructs are measured using self-report questionnaires. Although a detailed analysis of the properties of these questionnaires is beyond the scope of the present book, sample items are provided whenever possible in order to give a sense of how the constructs are operationalized and measured. In terms of rights ruling their use, questionnaires can be broadly classified in three groups. The first group includes all the copyrighted questionnaires: these can be used only by purchasing them, and not even sample items can be published in a journal article or book. The second group includes questionnaires that can be obtained from the authors by sending them a formal

request of authorization: after receiving a scale from its authors, one can use it for the authorized use, but often not even sample items can be published in a journal article or book. The third and final group includes questionnaires that are published in a journal article or book, typically as appendixes: these are sometimes available on websites and can be freely used for one's own research and teaching. This book will provide sample items and hyperlinks, if available, to the full text of the reviewed questionnaires in the third group. You are encouraged to follow the links and make your own judgment as to what those questionnaires actually measure.

◇ RECOMMENDED WEB RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING ◇

Before delving into the next chapters you are invited to engage in some self-orienting. This section suggests websites and readings that are interesting and easily accessible, and that give a sense of the wide-ranging implications of positive psychology research and practice.

Websites

Associations for positive psychology, with information on their programmes and upcoming conferences:

- International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) at: <http://www.ippanetwork.org/>
- Global Chinese Positive Psychology Association (GCPPA) at: The Global Chinese Positive Psychology Association (GCPPA)
- The European Association of Positive Psychology (EAPP) at: <http://www.enpp.eu/>
- Positive Psychology UK, which presents clear definitions of theoretical concepts and reviews of empirical research, at: <http://positivepsychology.org.uk/home.html>
- Canadian Positive Psychology Association (CPPA) at: <http://www.positivepsychologycanada.com/>

Virtually every nation has a positive psychology association; in order to find the one you are interested in, just type the name of the nation followed by 'positive psychology association' in a search engine.

The websites of the founders of positive psychology and their research centres:

- Martin Seligman's Positive Psychology Center, University of Pennsylvania, at: <http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/index.html>
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Quality of Life Research Center, Claremont Graduate University, at: <http://qlrc.cgu.edu/about.htm>

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Information on many of the other researchers that are referenced in this book can be found through the Social Psychology Network at: <http://www.socialpsychology.org/>.

The main positive psychology journals:

- The Journal of Positive Psychology at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/aboutThisJournal?journalCode=rpos20>
- The Journal of Happiness Studies at: <http://link.springer.com/journal/10902>

If your library does not have access to full-text articles, you can still browse titles and abstracts of papers.

- The Good Project at Harvard Graduate School of Education, whose main objective is to identify examples of good work carried out by individuals and institutions, at: <http://www.thegoodproject.org/>

Finally, two interesting column articles that highlight the political and economical implications of positive psychology:

- Cohen's (2011) *The happynomics of life* at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/opinion/13cohen.html>
- Easterly's (2011) *The happiness wars* at: <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2811%2960587-4/fulltext>

Reading

- Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) manifesto, which provides the founding principles of positive psychology
- Linley and co-workers' (2006) stimulating update on the state of the subject

This book assumes a certain level of understanding of the nature of the research process in psychology, and some familiarity with reading research papers. If terms such as 'longitudinal study' or 'correlation coefficient' sound mysterious to you, you will benefit from consulting an undergraduate textbook on statistics and research methods. There are many good ones; Stangor (2011) is the one I like the most.

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