



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology

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Review by

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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.

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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.

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