



# Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology

Aaron Jarden, ed., Amazon Digital Services, 2012

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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).<sup>1</sup> He is also lead investigator of the International Wellbeing Study,<sup>2</sup> co-editor of the *International Journal of Wellbeing*<sup>3</sup> and director of GROW International.<sup>4</sup> 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,

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

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wellbeingstudy.com/>.

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

<sup>4</sup> <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)<sup>5</sup> from the new president, Robert Vallerand, and the University of East London's MAPP program<sup>6</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ippanetwork.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> <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.

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