

Flourish and thrive: An overview of positive psychology in New Zealand and internationally

For many people the term 'positive psychology' will draw a blank. For others, it will spark interest or even create excitement. Such is the current status of the field in New Zealand (NZ), and to a lesser extent, internationally. However, positive psychology has progressed substantially in its short 12 year history.

In what follows, I describe positive psychology, briefly review its development and history, outline a selection of current teaching and research in NZ, summarise its status within the wider government sector, and highlight a few interesting findings from the field to date. I also review trends in contemporary research and speculate as to where the field is heading in the future.

What is positive psychology?

In contrast to psychology's customary focus on the negative side of life and with what is going wrong with individuals, such as with depression, anxiety and trauma, a steadily growing number of researchers have begun to focus on the positive side of life and with what is going right with individuals (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009; Ben-Shahar, 2007; Boniwell, 2006; Burns, 2010; Carr, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Eid & Larsen, 2007; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Kashdan, 2009; Layard, 2005; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Schwarzer & Peterson, 2008; Seligman, 2002). These researchers have conceptualised the new and emerging field of positive psychology in various ways. For example:

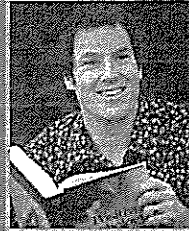
Positive psychology is the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive (International Positive Psychology Association, 2010).

We believe that a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5).

Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 103).

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Even with such broad conceptualisations as these, positive psychology complements, rather than replaces, traditional psychology. In doing so, the field's focus has been on constructs such as strengths (Linley, 2008), savouring (Bryant & Veroff, 2007), happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008), meaning (Steger, 2009), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), hope (Snyder, 2000), and mindfulness (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007) to name a few.



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The development of positive psychology.

Martin Seligman's 1998 American Psychological Association presidential address is seen by many as positive psychology's inception date (Peterson, 2006; Wood & Tattier, 2010). However, psychological research into the positive aspects of life pre-dates World War II (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Historically psychology itself was conceived of as a discipline that both cured mental illness, but also promoted excellence in individuals and focused on establishing positive communities (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Harold Dearden's pioneering work, *The Science of Happiness* (1925), is a prime example. Post-war however, the bulk of research funding was targeted towards treating disorders (e.g., the establishment of the National Institute of Mental Health in America in 1947). Since this time, psychology's focus has largely been on the negative side of life – to which it has made substantial and major accomplishments.

More recently though, psychologists have begun to focus on the positive aspects of human functioning. For example, Maslow pointed out:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side. It has revealed to us much about man's shortcomings, his illness, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology has voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that, the darker, meaner half (1970, p. 354).

Indeed, the term positive psychology originates from Maslow's 1954 book "Motivation and Personality." Other humanists such as Carl Rogers and Erich Fromm have also been influential in the development of theories related to human happiness (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009), with research by positive psychologists now providing empirical support for these theories (Wood & Tattier, 2010).

What is clear is that positive psychology has grown at a staggering rate since Seligman's presidential address. The first positive psychology summit took place in 1999, the first international conference in 2002, and since then a range of international and broader conferences. For example, in the past few months the 6th European Conference on Positive Psychology was held in Denmark, and two positive psychology conferences have been held in Beijing. Last year the First World Congress on Positive Psychology took place in Philadelphia with over 4000 participants, including the top positive psychology

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scholars. In addition to conferences and meetings, the field launched its signature journal, the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, in 2006, and the International Positive Psychology Association was founded in 2007 and now has over 3000 members. The publication of *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), also referred to as the Un-DSM, is also seen as a milestone, representing the first attempt on the part of the research community to identify and classify the positive psychological traits of human beings. There are now graduate programmes in positive psychology, notably the University of Pennsylvania's Masters in Positive Psychology programme and the University of East London's Masters in Applied Positive Psychology programme.

Positive psychology in New Zealand.

Although the development of positive psychology as a scientific discipline has been substantial in its short history, the history of positive psychology in NZ is diminutive by comparison. The New Zealand Association of Positive Psychology (NZAPP) was founded in June 2008, and has since blossomed to having over 500 members and has links with international positive psychology organisations. The purpose of the NZAPP is to "promote the science and practice of positive psychology and its research-based applications, and to foster communication and collaboration among researchers, practitioners, teachers, and students, and across disciplines, who are interested in positive psychology" (New Zealand Association of Positive Psychology, 2010). This being the case, membership, which is free, is diverse and eclectic, involving, for example, lawyers, counsellors, clinical psychologists, coaches, journalists, health care professionals, philosophers and policy analysts. The NZAPP provides members with quarterly newsletters informing them of positive psychology activities around NZ and internationally, and in January 2011 will launch *The International Journal of Wellbeing* in collaboration with a number of tertiary institutions (e.g., Victoria University of Wellington, The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, Nanyang Technological University Singapore).

In addition to the NZAPP, positive psychology is slowly beginning to register on the radar of national psychology departments, with some sooner than others to pick up on demand and follow international trends. For example, Auckland University provides an undergraduate stage two lecture (by Fiona Howard), and a stage three social psychology paper on psychological wellbeing (by Niki Harré) that is largely informed by positive psychology. Other programmes within the department (e.g., applied behaviour analysis) teach positive psychology content under a different guise, and various staff are conducting positive psychology research (e.g., Helena Cooper-Thomas' research on employee engagement, and Fiona Howard's research on positive supervision). It is also noteworthy that Barbara Frederickson, one of the top positive psychologists from America, will be visiting Auckland University in March 2011 to give a series of lectures. At Massey University there is mindfulness and meditation research

(by Heather Buttle), and two large scale studies have recently looked at population levels of happiness to determine aspects of positive ageing (these datasets are freely available - contact Andy Towers). At Victoria University of Wellington Paul Jose integrates positive psychology material into first year psychology courses, and is soon to offer a post-graduate positive psychology course. In addition, a team (a post-doctoral fellow and many post-graduate students) are investigating the topic of savouring. At Waikato University PhD students are investigating work-life balance (Derek Riley), and mindfulness (Jenny Pevreal). Auckland University of Technology is teaching their first positive psychology paper this semester, and has recently hosted a conference on "Quality of Life". A PhD student at Canterbury University (Alison Ogier-Price) is looking at how increases in happiness can be sustained over the longer term (the holy grail of positive psychology research), and an Otago University PhD student (Denise Quinlan) is looking at student wellbeing and classroom climate in younger children. Many other Masters projects are also being conducted.

Although these are selected examples, positive psychology material is reported as being extremely well received by students. Internationally there is huge demand for tertiary level positive psychology courses; for example, the positive psychology course at Harvard University by Tal Ben-Shahar has been the most popular course for almost a decade. Most psychology departments in NZ have staff that are interested in positive psychology, and who are beginning to align their current research focus with an area of positive psychology. However, rather than offering or teaching positive psychology directly, it is common for positive psychology to be integrated into current areas of teaching and research. Given that no tertiary level training in positive psychology exists in NZ, students wishing to obtain qualifications in positive psychology are heading to the University of Pennsylvania's Masters in Positive Psychology programme, or have positive psychology PhD supervisors stationed overseas – most commonly in Australia.

Moving past the universities, the government sector is also becoming interested in positive psychology; largely in response to the national government's rhetoric regarding the importance of wellbeing. As examples, personnel at Statistics New Zealand are becoming interested in measuring national accounts of wellbeing (for a review of this area, see: Diener, Helliwell, & Kahneman, 2010), Treasury is interested in policy initiatives related to wellbeing (for review of this area, see: Bok, 2010), the Ministry of Education is interested in assessing wellbeing and flourishing in schools (for review of this area, see: Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009), and the Mental Health Foundation is interested in how positive psychology approaches can increase resilience and improve general mental wellbeing (for

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a review of this area, see: Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005) – indeed the theme for this year's Mental Health Awareness Week was "flourishing". Although this work in NZ is welcomed and promising, the extent of consultation with positive psychology experts seems lacking; many initiatives may succumb to poorer than possible outcomes.

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Positive psychology research.

Research into the positive aspects of life has been conducted for some time now, however there has been exponential growth over the last 10 years. Contemporary researchers include the field's founders, such as Martin Seligman, Ed Diener, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Christopher Peterson, but also many cutting edge researchers, such as Carol Dweck, Todd Kashdan, Barbara Fredrickson, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon Sheldon, Jonathan Haidt, Charles Snyder, Robert Biswas-Diener, Charles Carver and Robert Emmons to name a few. Each of these scientists has published influential and frequently cited articles, both in positive psychology and in their own areas of psychology. This research in the last decade has highlighted some very interesting findings, most of which have gained media attention. For example:

- Optimistic people are less likely to die of heart attacks than pessimists, controlling for all known physical risk factors (Giltay, Geleijnse, Zitman, Hoekstra, & Schouten, 2004).
- Happiness is contagious as people surrounded by happy friends, family members and neighbours who are central to their social network become significantly happier in the future. For example, an individual will become 25% happier if a friend who lives within a mile becomes significantly happier with his or her life (Christakis & Fowler, 2009).
- Women who displayed genuine (Duchenne) smiles to a photographer at age eighteen went on to have fewer divorces and more marital satisfaction than those who displayed fake smiles (Keltner, Kring, & Bonanno, 1999).
- Positive emotions build skills and resources. For example they broaden awareness, improve creativity and inventiveness, increase resilience, and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions (Fredrickson, 2003). This is in contrast to negative emotions which prompt narrow and immediate survival-oriented behaviors.
- According to Set Point Theory, life satisfaction is approximately 50% genetic, 10-15% external and circumstantial, and 35-40% due to personal choices. For example, when externalities (e.g., weather, money, health, marriage, religion) were totalled, they accounted for no more than 15% of the variance in life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).
- Largely due to hedonic adaption, lottery winners and paraplegic accident victims were both equally satisfied with their lives a year on. For example, winning the lottery creates a form of unwanted cognitive dissonance as the money is viewed as not fully deserved – although this effect dissipates over time (Schnittker, 2008).
- Positive emotion reduces at least some racial biases. For example, although people generally are better at recognizing faces of their own race than faces of other races, putting people in a joyful mood reduces this discrepancy by improving memory for faces of people from other races (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005).
- The pursuit of meaning and engagement are more predictive of life satisfaction than the pursuit of pleasure (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005).
- Economically flourishing corporate teams have a ratio of at least 3:1 of positive statements to negative statements in business meetings, whereas stagnating teams have a much lower ratio; flourishing marriages, however, require a ratio of at least 5:1 (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Gottman & Levenson, 1999).
- Self-discipline is twice as good a predictor of high school grades than intelligence quotient (IQ) (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).
- People tend to exaggerate the positive impact of events they think will make them happy, as well as overestimate the negative effect on happiness of tragic events. For example, individuals tend to overestimate the extent and duration of the emotional impacts of events such as a pay rise, the death of a loved one, or moving to a warmer climate (Gilbert, 2006).
- Money has a very small effect on happiness. According to the Easterlin Paradox (named after the economist Richard Easterlin), GDP has steadily increased over the past 50 years, however levels of national wellbeing and happiness have remained almost the same (Layard, 2005).
- Happy teenagers go on to earn substantially more income fifteen years later than less happy teenagers, controlling for income, grades, and other obvious factors (Diener, Nickerson, Lucas, & Sandvik, 2002).
- Once basic needs are met, money buys additional happiness only if it can lead to higher status in society, or is spent on experiences rather than possessions (Bok, 2010).
- Relationships and marriage are robustly related to happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). In addition, how you celebrate good events that happen to your spouse is a better predictor of future love and commitment than how you respond to bad events (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

These are only a few examples of findings that have been of public interest. The field has come a long way since Seligman (2002) identified three paths to happiness and increased wellbeing; the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life (his next book, *Flourish: A new understanding of life's greatest goals – and what it takes to reach them*, is due out early next year). Given the general lack of knowledge on positive functioning, there is still much uncharted territory. However, some main areas of positive psychology research are developing and coming to fruition, in particular, positive clinical psychology, the economics of happiness, positive organisational psychology, positive health, international differences in wellbeing, and positive education.

To give one example, the area of positive clinical psychology aims to equally focus helping professionals (clinical psychologists, counsellors, coaches) on positive functioning as just an important focus as on decreasing negative functioning. 'Post traumatic growth' (for a review, see: Jarden, 2010) defined as "the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1), is an example of a topic that naturally aligns positive psychology with clinical psychology. Another topic, 'positive interventions' (for a review, see: Rashid, 2009), aim to directly increase wellbeing, and includes practical applications such as helping individuals to identify and use their strengths.

Positive psychology trends.

Positive psychology is gaining in recognition with its solid emphasis on science, and its well designed research and intervention protocols; much unlike the self-help genre which bids instant change. For example, currently Martin Seligman

is training all one million soldiers in the US army in positive psychology in order to promote resilience and prevent the onset of trauma. The field of positive psychology is set to play a larger role in addressing people's drive to lead happier, more fulfilling lives. In order to do so, its research agenda and focus needs to be astute. Currently, researchers are interested in defining and measuring subjective wellbeing (or happiness), comparing hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions of wellbeing, assessing cultural and national accounts of wellbeing, and testing various positive interventions to increase and sustain wellbeing. However, other areas are also set to make an impact; for example, the area of time perspective and wellbeing (see: Boniwell, Osin, Linley, & Ivanchenko, 2010; Drake, Duncan, Sutherland, Abernethy, & Henry, 2008; Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008), and the NZ led International Wellbeing Study has found that the extent to which people are satisfied with how they spend their time is the second strongest predictor of individual wellbeing. However, with such rapid academic and research progress, caution is still needed in order to avoid damage to the field's reputation. Positive psychology researchers and practitioners need to remain within their scientific boundaries and resist popular media's craving to report sensational claims.

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