

# Positive Psychologists on

# Positive Psychology

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## Dedications

### Aaron Jarden

*My favourite quote of all time is by Ralph Emerson who said “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm”. Ralph was right. There are a lot of enthusiastic people in the field of positive psychology, accomplishing great things. You know who you are... keep going!*

### María Mercedes Ovejero Bruna

*When I think about the passion and energy of positive psychology, what comes to my mind are all the dedicated, enthusiastic, optimistic, and courageous people in the field; people whose curiosity and professionalism moves the world and makes it a better place to live in. My dedication is to Marta, Laura, and María. All of you are a great example of how through talent and enthusiasm we can achieve great things. Keep believing in your dreams!*

### Emilia Lahti

*There is nothing more fulfilling in life than to be completely immersed in your purpose. Perhaps the next best thing is surrounding yourself with the elevating presence of others who are also following their passions. Being part of this project has been a privilege and a great source of inspiration. Thank you to all of the magnificent trailblazers who shared a piece of their heart with us—and to all of you out there who aspire to create a more positive human future. Rock on!*

### Yukun Zhao

*I am very grateful for the opportunity to work with Aaron, Emilia and Maria on this project. It's inspiring to read the leading positive psychologists' thoughts on the field I feel passionate about, and it was thrilling when interviewing them directly. I want to dedicate my small part of this book to my wife and 3 year old son, who remind me every day of what life is worth living for.*

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## Introduction

Interest in positive psychology is rapidly expanding as the field continues to make swift progress in terms of scientific advancement and understanding. There are more courses, more workshops, more conferences, more students, more associations, more journals and more textbooks than ever before. The news media and public are thirsty for information related to happiness and, specifically, wellbeing, and for all facets of positive psychology generally. Psychology departments are increasingly looking to teach courses and offer qualifications that focus specifically on positive psychology, and various organisations are trying to understand how they can best capitalise on and harness the field's initial scientific findings.

What you don't hear so much about is how positive psychology operates in the real world, how researchers and practitioners became interested in positive psychology, how they work with clients and the various models and theories they use. What do they find most useful? What happens to their thinking and practice as they become experienced and knowledgeable in the positive psychology arena? Why did they decide to move into positive psychology? What do they get out of being involved in the positive psychology community? What directions are they and the field heading towards?

This book discusses these kinds of questions and issues, and is a book for all those in the wellbeing, helping professional and psychological fields interested in knowing more about the development, theory, research and application of the new field of positive psychology. It is a book that spans an eclectic range of

interests from psychology students to psychologists, to coaches, to media and beyond.

In the following chapters, fourteen people with various degrees of knowledge and skill in different facets of the positive psychology field share their experiences, concerns, hopes and dreams, thoughts, and opinions in interview format. All interviews were conducted June to September 2013 and thus reflect thinking at that time. Before publication, all interviewees approved their transcripts as being accurate.

Fourteen interviews is obviously too small a number to arrive at any generalisation. This book is not research *per se*; it is exploratory in nature and should be consumed in that light. Placement and order of each interview is random rather than sequential, meaning that they may be read in any order. Both US English and Commonwealth English are used.

Our sincere thanks and gratitude to the giants of this field, and to the up and coming stars for passing on their wisdom and knowledge. We hope this book may be useful to those wanting to know more about what positive psychology is, how it developed, where it is going, how it is going to get there, and to those looking to move into the positive psychology arena. In short, we hope these interviews are engaging and provide further insight into this new and rapidly developing field, and that it enriches your understanding of positive psychology as it currently stands.

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Volume

The first volume of *Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology* (2012, ASIN: B007IXU1RY, ISBN: 978-0-473-20944-5) was a huge success by any reasonable standard: The complete book was downloaded some 5,600 times; individual interviews downloaded some additional 15,000 times; and the demand meant it was also translated into Spanish and Chinese. Reviews by respected experts (Margarita Tarragona & Bridget Grenville-Cleave) were very positive (i.e., the book was described as “Original, engaging and enjoyable”). With such data and feedback, we saw very little reason to change the formula for the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume.

However we did aim to make a few minor changes. The first volume was compiled of interviews from people from the United States, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, and as such largely represented a traditional western perspective. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume we intentionally included more diversity and breadth by including more European and eastern researchers and practitioners; the aim was specifically to go beyond the western perspective. Thus it is likely that not all of the interviewees will be recognisable, yet their personal insights certainly enrich our understanding of positive psychology as it stands globally.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> volume was also compiled by four interviewers (Aaron, Maria, Emilia, and Yukun) in order to make this more global reach possible, and to allow for the book to be translated into various languages on completion.



## Robert Biswas-Diener

**Robert Biswas-Diener**, a.k.a. ‘the Indiana Jones of positive psychology’, is a leading authority on strengths, culture, courage, and happiness. Dr. Biswas-Diener has published multiple books on diverse psychological topics including, ‘*The courage quotient*’, ‘*Positive psychology as social change*’ and ‘*Practicing positive psychology coaching*’, and he sits on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* and the *Journal of Positive Psychology*. Dr. Biswas-Diener is the foremost authority on positive psychology coaching.

### **In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?**

That’s kind of a stumper! I think the standard answer is that positive psychology has to be psychology, that is, it is a science. It’s ensconced in science, it’s rooted in scientific theory including all the attention to parsimonious and comprehensive theory – you know the stuff. That it uses valid assessments that show good psychometric properties, that it’s careful in its intervention strategies and its recommendations for policy and so forth. Basically, all the hallmarks of science, is one answer. And second, I think it is an applied science, much like clinical psychology. So principally it is about science that is somewhat prescriptive, with improving ‘the lot’ of humanity as its principal endeavor. And third, and perhaps a little problematic, is that it’s positive. What that means is that it does not just look at improving the lot of humanity by alleviating suffering. I think positive psychology errs on the side of having a narrow focus on the positive, which I think is a mistake, frankly. All the lip service that is given, such as people saying, “We should focus on weakness too”, or, “You shouldn’t ignore your weaknesses”, or whatever, I think it’s all

bullshit. I think that positive psychologists look just at positive stuff and there's very little solid integration of negative with positive psychology.

**What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?**

Great question, I love it. I think that positive psychology has achieved a number of things. It has, through the scientific stamp of approval, placed happiness on the map as a worthwhile endeavor. So it's taken the historic skeptical approaches out of happiness and said, "This is actually important for your health, for society", and so forth. And it's done it in a way that I don't think has ever been possible before, because we've used science to do it, and in particular the health-happiness relationship, among all the benefits of positive affect, is the strongest or most strongly researched. That's a pretty capital achievement. Also, I think that a fair amount of good policy recommendations have been made. I don't know if positive psychology gets to take total credit for this, but I know that gross national happiness is 'en vogue' and Danny Kahneman created behavioral economics; but I think that all of this is part and parcel of one big thing that says, "Traditional economic drivers are not adequate to describe the human condition," and I think that positive psychology has played an important role in that. I'd say that those are the two largest achievements.

**People in the positive psychology community seem to pick up nicknames. Like I know that Todd Kashdan is known as the 'guns' of positive psychology, Ed (Diener) is "Dr. Happiness", I'm sometimes referred to as the 'ninja' of positive psychology, and you're referred to as the "the Indiana Jones of positive psychology." How did that nickname come about?**



The Indiana Jones thing is mildly embarrassing to me, but I also feel a little bit of pride about it – back and forth. It was first shackled to me by Chris Peterson. I think he just said it as an off-the-cuff remark but he happened to say it in front of 300 people at a conference. He was describing some of my research and he said “Robert’s like the Indiana Jones of positive psychology.” I think that is a pretty good brand really and I don’t mind leveraging it a little bit. But really it’s because of my research with difficult-to-access groups, which I do take pride in. I’ve worked with some groups for which it’s pretty difficult to obtain their trust and get into their communities, and I’ve had to spend months doing it – it’s not your typical laboratory studies. That said, it’s nowhere near what any graduate student in anthropology is doing, literally living in the bush for a year doing ethnographic studies and learning a language and so forth, so I recognize the limitations of it as well.

**I hear you even have the branding to prove it?**

That is true, I do have a branding on my chest by the Masai in Africa.

**Which hard-to-reach groups are yet untouched by positive psychology? I guess I’m thinking if you could tell us about some of the other groups that you have worked with, as well as areas where positive psychology could reach?**

Among the groups I’ve worked with, the Amish are very difficult to work with, they basically don’t want to have anything to do with outsiders. The homeless are extraordinarily difficult to work with, for a variety of reasons: for one, they tend not to trust you, they have fairly closed communities, but they are in dire need of help, and for that reason they are a great group to work with and I’d like to see more research with that community, especially from positive

psychology in particular. I have worked with remote groups, both tribal groups in Africa and people near the North Pole in Greenland – that was a very difficult study to run. One study I never published, only because it didn't work out well, was a study on empathy between Palestinian and Israeli peace protestors who were protesting in solidarity with one another. I thought that was a nice exemplar of a positive psychology ideal. But it was a totally crap study, so it never went anywhere. I think there should be more of those types of studies. I disagree with Wayne Jencke, and I hate to even bring up his name in something like this, but he is willing to throw out every college student study ever.<sup>1</sup> I happen to believe that college students are humans, and have normal human psychological architecture, and are a pretty reasonable place to start when asking people about emotions. I don't think their emotions are invalid, and that fire-fighters' emotions are valid. But I don't see many studies coming out of Kazakhstan, or Venezuela; there is just like a whole world out there to study, and all of our studies are all coming out of Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America, Israel, Japan, Korea, and that's it. That's the entirety of positive psychology; there are a couple of other countries, but if there are 200 countries in the world, I think that we can cast a wider net.

**I know you are involved in a lot of projects in positive psychology or related to positive psychology. Can you tell us about one of your projects that you currently feel really passionate about?**

Yea, but there are a lot of them. The thing that I am really jazzed up about, although if you spoke to me tomorrow it might be something different, is that I'm really excited about studying hospitality right now. This came about because I was presenting the VIA list of virtues in Turkey one time and I was

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Wayne Jencke disagrees with Robert Biswas-Diener's portrayal of his perspective on student research. Rather than "throwing out every college student study ever", Jencke suggests caution when extrapolating research based on student cohorts into the real world.

really trumpeting how great the universal list of virtues were, yet the Turkish people were laughing at it. They thought the most important virtue, hospitality, was not even on the list. I really took that to heart, and thought that really there is no culture that doesn't have a hospitality norm, and I think that it is a conspicuous omission from the VIA list. And you might be able to argue, "Oh well, generosity somehow covers hospitality", but if you get broad enough labels, why don't you just call it 'being nice', and then that covers everything. So I decided that I would start studying hospitality and I created a measure of hospitality. It's an ok measure. I don't particularly like creating measures but I got a demographic sample representative of the United States, more than 1000 people, and that was a pretty good 'out of the gate' measure. We're now taking it to Turkey, Singapore, South Korea, and we are also looking at it in the workplace, looking at hospitable attitudes and how that affects performance. Think about a hospitable attitude towards other people, thinking of hospitality as sharing your resources with another person – you can take quite a broad definition of that – for example, if you come to a flow-way stop and you wave someone through. You might think that is a charitable attitude, but I am of the opinion that it is a tiny act of hospitality, because you are sharing a small resource you have, your right of way, your physical space, and you are allowing them to use it. I view this as one of those world-healing endeavors: if more people were hospitable at large, the world would be a better place. So I am definitely 'jazzed' about that.

**I've really enjoyed reading your books, the coaching ones and especially *Positive psychology as Social Change* which was awesome. But I have not read *The Courage Quotient* as yet, so I am just curious to hear how that book has been received and how it is going?**

It did terribly, let's be honest. Of all my books it's the one that's done the least well in the marketplace. I think it has kind of a hard-core, very small, following. The people who actually read it, I think that they're kind of mixed on it: a few people hate it, they find it superficial, but some people find it really helpful. I think to the extent that it resonates with people, it's because people are ready to hear a little rallying cry about courage, they want to hear that taking risk is ok, that failing is ok, that they may be more capable than they think. But it did terribly, I don't know why. It's got a terrible title – which was not my title for it –and I think that kind of hurt it, but it just kind of went nowhere.

**One of the bits of your writing that I thought was cool was that, as far as I know, you're the only one to take on the huge challenge of a 'positive diagnosis model' with your multi-axle approach. I'm quite surprised that has not got more traction, or that more debate or thinking has not come from that. What are your thoughts or views on that? I mean, it's kind of what the field needs really...**

Thank you, I appreciate you saying that... I think I have a particular role within positive psychology, you know. If my dad brings to the table, 'He's just a great researcher', you know his work is solid, he thinks very carefully about methodology, about sampling, about data analysis, then he sort of trundles out the same types of studies over and over again and he's great at them and that's sort of his role. There are things I think that I have the freedom and flexibility to do, because I'm not a proper academic, I'm outside of academia, but I peer review articles, I edit books, I still do academic types of things, but no one can really penalize me for saying what I want. That is probably why Todd Kashdan and I collaborate well, because people can penalize him, he just doesn't actually give a f@#k. So one of the things I think my role is, is that I just want to

look at holes or gaps in positive psychology, and I want to weigh in on them; but I'm limited at it because I don't have the research apparatus that a university position would bring, I don't have graduate students, I don't have grants, I don't run a laboratory, so it's difficult for me to publish – and yet I've published fairly frequently. A lot of it has to be out of pocket funding and what-have-you. This is already such a long-winded answer, I'm really sorry. To get to your point about positive diagnosis. To me it seemed obvious, in that people were treating the VIA like it was the UN-DSM, and it was positioned that way, by Marty (Seligman) most of all, and they were saying, 'So now we've created this alternative to the DSM'; and I just thought that, in no way is the VIA comparable to the DSM. It's not even a conceptual cousin to the DSM, it has none of the same structure. So I just went back and said, 'What if we had something that did follow the structure of the DSM?', which I think has some cool things about it. I'm not a DSM hater, like some out there. So I threw this positive diagnostic system out there. I'm not sold that it's the be all and end all. Not much has happened with it: this is one of those ideas that I've sort of held out to the community, but I think that because there's not a single assessment associated with it, it's too cumbersome for people. And because positive psychology has so many coaching practitioners, they don't really have what it takes, quite frankly – I don't mean that in a pejorative way – to actually do the positive diagnostic system. If I had an iPhone app to do it all for you and spit out a multi-axial diagnosis with some write-ups, I think that it would be widely popular.

**Just back to the start of your answer: what other gaps in positive psychology do you see the need for plugging?**

Besides hospitality, which I think is a major one, I've always thought it is problematic that people talk about 'How can I be happier?'. Regardless of what people from within the ranks of positive psychology tell you at a cocktail party, positive psychology is about the individual pursuit of happiness. I mean, this is what people are selling. I sell it, others sell it. How can we improve an individual's capacity for ... and then just input whatever topic here, their grit, their happiness, their optimism, their resilience. I recognize the limits of that, so I think that social change is, while not totally ignored, a fairly overlooked agenda. That's why I did that book *Positive Psychology of Social Change*. I invited a majority of non-American authors to contribute. I also invited Neil Finn from Scotland and Nick Marks from England, who were quite critical of positive psychology. I really, really love that book, in part because it was like a dream book. I see all these books being put together that ask the usual suspects the usual questions and put out the usual info, but that's kind of what we already have. Why wouldn't all edited volumes not put in at least one chapter that is critical of the edited volume itself. And this is one of the reasons why I loved that particular book, because I thought that it was so far reaching: we were going to have non-Americans write, we were going to have people be critical, we were going to talk about social change not individual change, and again, that book hasn't got a lot of play or publicity unlike many of my projects. It's kind of like the fifth sister in a family: some people are friends with it, but it's not like the eldest child. One other thing related to that, and it's starting to get more play now, is that I think the idea that we should be making others happy has not gotten a lot of play. For example, I was part of this felicitators' project—I thought it was an amazing, called "project +": this group of

interdisciplinary academics talking about, ‘Who are the people who have made others happy?’. Why aren’t we spending just as much time looking at making other people happy as making ourselves happy? You get a few people like Elizabeth Dunn talking about pro-social spending and some of that altruism research, but I think that making others happy is a fairly neglected area. There are tons of neglected areas, frankly. In fact it drives me crazy how faddish positive psychology is. No offence at all to Angela Duckworth, because I like her research, but there are like three articles on grit and people act like it’s this amazing new pillar; and yet there are like 4000 articles on altruism and no one is talking about it or Dan Batson’s work on things like this. So, you know!

**So you balance a lot of competing demands –you’re a coach, an author, an entrepreneur and a business owner, you’re an academic at Portland State University, the list goes on and on. I want to know how you do it and what positive psychology tools and strategies enable you to do what you do?**

I sometimes do it well, and I sometimes do it poorly, so I want to be honest about that. Yeah, sometimes I do it really poorly. I think if you were introducing me before a talk, I might look accomplished or successful – oh, he’s published all these books and he serves on this editorial board and whatever. But the truth is, sometimes I totally fall apart because I don’t have good detail orientation, good workflow practices. All my articles will come due at once, I’ll be delinquent on stuff. So I want to be honest, sometimes I’m rough in the work I do because I wear too many hats. And I think there’s a certain cachet about being honest about that kind of stuff, because I don’t want the positive psychology world to be like, well these people use these three happiness tips and now they’re really happy. You might find me being pretty damn stressed out. Todd (Kashdan) and I talk about this a lot. I mean, he’s a total stress case



and I also am a total stress case. We're not any different to a bus driver or taxi driver or anyone else when we stress out. That said, in the last two years, I have really, really come to love taking time off. I have never in my life been able to vacation, and this is something that I have learned from my dad. If you know my dad at all, he'll get up at like 4am and go and analyze data. He'll get quiet in the middle of a conversation on Christmas Day and I'll say, 'What are you thinking about?', and he'll say he's doing his 19 times tables or thinking about whatever his new research project is. He's just like always, always thinking about this, and I thought that, 'That's what it means to be successful'. And we preach this in positive psychology; that if you love what you do sooooo much, it becomes your life's mission. And I think that the problem with that is like fusion, like you get so fused into your work, I just realized that my greatest moments are like having a cup of coffee in the morning with my wife in the yard, and not even talking but just watching a woodpecker on a tree. Or being on the airplane with my son and listening to him giggle at a movie – just these really non-work related things. Those really have been the most charming moments of my life, regardless of what I achieve academically.

### **Five years from now, what do you want to be doing?**

I don't even know if I should say! I want to be doing a bunch of stuff, but it's not necessarily just more of the same. Again, I'm outside of academia. If I was a tenured professor I would be like, I want to have a legacy of great grad students under my belt, and like win a teaching award, and have a bunch of publications. I think I'd like in five years to have hitchhiked across Namibia; I think I'd like to have worked on a movie; I'd like to have written a novel, some things that are not positive psychology related. I'm really bored with flying around the world and giving strengths-based workshops. I'm really burned out

on that. It pays the bills right now, and I enjoy some of the new projects, like hospitality. But more and more I'm finding that I just want a little bit of something else to round it up.

**I just realize that I have not asked you anything about how coaching aligns with positive psychology.**

I think that coaching and positive psychology are natural bedfellows. Coaching is not just positive therapy, but coaching is a tool by which the coach acts as a facilitator to draw out the best in a person, whether it's a sports coach or a life coach. I believe that you can cajole, stretch, champion, challenge, explore; and all of these are interesting tools by which we can help people to achieve more than maybe they believe is possible or maybe than what they are currently achieving. I am really excited in particular about the new trend in coaching psychology, because I think that previously coaching has been a fairly intuitive endeavor, and I'm really glad to see research brought to bear on it. For example, people love 'aha' moments because they're these flashes of insight that are positive, but they seem true because they happen so spontaneously; and any information that is easy to retrieve, you have more confidence in. So whether it's in therapy or in coaching, when someone has an 'aha' moment, basically everyone thinks that the 'aha' moment is true. But I think that we are beginning to understand that maybe they're not true. Or maybe they are true, and I don't know. But as an empiricist, I'd love to see these types of things studied. I think that coaching psychology is a perfect place to do that.

**Last question. What one piece of advice do you have for aspiring positive psychology practitioners getting into the field?**

Positive psychology is psychology, and you have an ethical obligation to keep abreast of current developments in the science. If you are not actively subscribing to academic journals, and are not able to read them and process them, then I believe that it is irresponsible to hang out your shingle and market yourself as if you are working on the point of this scientific sphere. Some of the things with the gratitude exercise, where we understand that using it with depressive individuals might backfire, for example, is just a great example of the idea that when you tinker with people's psychology, even if it is positive psychology, you can potentially cause them harm. I think that is a weighty responsibility and I'd recommend that all practitioners hold it dear. As another example, I've read two articles in the last year that have basically said that a gratitude intervention can lower self-esteem with certain individuals. When training coaches aspire to be positive psychology coaches, I want to say, "Don't rush to closure on these issues". Don't read a study on grit or gratitude and then just think, "Oh now we understand it, that's what it's like". Keep up with the research because we are constantly changing our understanding.

## James Pawelski

**James Pawelski**, PhD, is Director of Education and Senior Scholar in the Positive Psychology Center, and Adjunct Associate Professor of Religious Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences, at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the founding Director of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is also lecturer on positive interventions, as well as on the humanities and human flourishing. Dr. Pawelski is a sought-after keynote speaker and workshop leader (regularly making presentations in English and Spanish) and the founding Executive Director of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA).

### **In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?**

I think what makes positive psychology distinctive is its combination of a particular metaphysical stance with a specific epistemological commitment. Mihály Csikszentmihályi has argued that positive psychology is essentially a 'metaphysical orientation' toward the positive, meaning that it holds the positive to be real and not merely the absence of the negative. I think Csikszentmihályi is right, yet there are many other thinkers and traditions (including self-help, for example) that share this metaphysical orientation. Positive psychology also has a specific epistemological commitment. It relies for its results on the rigorous methods of empirical science. Yet there are many other areas, including at least much of mainstream psychology, that also rely on these methods. What makes positive psychology unique is that movements that subscribe to a positive metaphysical orientation typically do not base themselves on empirical methods of inquiry, and domains that rely on

empirical methods of inquiry typically do not subscribe to a positive metaphysical orientation. Positive psychology is distinctive in its rigorous, scientific approach to the study of human flourishing.

**What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?**

Fifteen years ago, I was just beginning my academic career as an assistant professor of philosophy, teaching philosophy to undergraduates at Albright College, about an hour outside of Philadelphia. I started to realize that, in order to maximize the value of philosophy for my students, I needed to address it from both a theoretical perspective and an applied point of view. To facilitate this dual approach, I decided to create a course that would have both a theoretical component and a lab section, like courses in the sciences often do. As I began working on this course, I invited a psychology professor from another university to help me teach the class, and she asked me to check a book out of my college's library for her, a book called *Learned Optimism* by Martin Seligman. I got the book, started reading it, and absolutely loved it! The book seemed to connect in such powerful ways with philosophy, because it was largely about beliefs. I then went online to find out more about Martin Seligman. I discovered that he was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, located in Philadelphia, and that he was at the forefront of a new field called positive psychology. I wanted to learn more. I found out that the first public meeting on positive psychology was going to be held in Washington, D.C. in October of 2000, so I went. That's where I met Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson and got to learn more about their empirical approach to wellbeing and share with them my interest in human flourishing from a philosophical perspective. We really hit it off, and I became involved in a variety of projects,

starting with a meeting the very next week on what would become the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues.

**You come from a strong background in philosophy, and you have already touched upon the next question a bit. On a practical level, what is it that philosophy can bring to positive psychology that enables positive psychology to achieve its main goals?**

That is a very important question. There is a lot of value and promise in positive psychology, and scientific researchers have already generated many exciting empirical results. I think it's important, however, that the field stay connected to other disciplines like philosophy so that it can get a better perspective on itself. I believe positive psychology as a term is dialectically unstable. Let me explain what I mean. Ironically, there is a deficit in deficit-oriented psychology; namely, that it doesn't pay proper attention to the positive. Positive psychology, of course, can help correct that. Ironically, however, there is also something more positive than positive psychology; namely, an integrated psychology that brings together and balances the best of both deficit-oriented psychology and positive psychology. This integrated psychology is just what psychology itself should be. The term 'psychology' in 'positive psychology' is also incomplete in a curious way, in that what brings people to positive psychology (for example, human thriving – what makes individuals and communities flourish) is not simply a matter of psychology. It's also a matter of sociology, political science, economics, of social science in general. Furthermore, it's at the heart of the humanities and the liberal arts, and it has been a foundational motivation for the development and study of the natural sciences. As you can see, this domain of human flourishing or wellbeing is an area that has been of interest to researchers and scholars from many different

disciplines for a long time, and not just psychologists (for more on this, see Pawelski & Prilleltensky, 2005, *“That at which all things aim”*).

Given these complexities, I believe philosophy and intellectual history can provide a broader perspective on our quest for the good life and help deepen our understanding of the terms at the core of positive psychology. For example the notion of the ‘positive’ itself needs to be developed much more carefully. Positive psychologists have defined it in terms of positive topics, positive target audiences (populations of people who are already well and want to be even better), and positive methods; at the same time, they have also defined it in terms of the good life. The good life, however, does not simply involve embracing positive things. It also involves avoiding negative things, and avoiding negative things can sometimes be just as important, if not more important, than embracing positive things. So is positive psychology mostly about the subset of the positives in life, or is it mostly about the general balance of a life well lived? Is positive psychology about the best things in life, or is it about living the best life we can? These distinctions are important for theory, research, and practice in positive psychology, and philosophy can help psychology address them more adequately.

In addition, I think philosophy—and the humanities in general—can help positive psychology in its development of foundational theoretical perspectives and testable insights on human flourishing. The philosopher Valerie Tiberius (2013, *“Philosophical methods in happiness research”*) has written a wonderful piece on how philosophical methods can aid positive psychology research, in part through helping psychologists develop more nuanced experimental constructs. Interestingly, many of the tools and concepts for research in



positive psychology come from the arts and humanities. For example, film clips are often shown in psychological laboratories as a way of increasing positive emotions, and the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues is based on an investigation of world cultures throughout history. Furthermore, among the activities we turn to most frequently in our daily lives to increase our wellbeing are positive interventions from the arts and humanities: music, literature, film, visual art, and so on. Finally, I think the humanities, with their emphasis on culture, can help positive psychology by giving it an enhanced understanding of empirical results. Mathematical methods and empirical research are really important; however, cultural context is key to the effective interpretation and application of the resulting data.

**We spent one semester studying the positive humanities in the MAPP program. Could you tell the readers more about this field?**

I think there is a natural connection between positive psychology and the humanities. As I already indicated, the questions about the nature of the good life, happiness, and human flourishing that are at the core of positive psychology are also thematic areas of inquiry in the humanities. Similar to what has happened in psychology, however, the humanities have become imbalanced in their examination of the positive and the negative, with more attention being placed on what goes wrong in life and in texts. With the rise of critical theory at the end of the twentieth century, for example, literary studies became fixated on what Paul Ricoeur (1970) had called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Reading texts against the grain to try to uncover and correct underlying attitudes of sexism, racism, and classism can be a very valuable endeavor, but if that is all we do, then we will miss the possibility of discovering the equally important clues to beautiful experiences, meaningful actions, and

healthy relationships a text may contain. To develop this point, I teamed up with an English professor Don Moores to edit an anthology of critical essays we called *The Eudaimonic Turn: Well-Being in Literary Studies* (2013), in which we asked a dozen literary studies scholars to join us in exploring these questions. Further work needs to be done in literary studies and in the other disciplines in the humanities to balance out the approach between the positive and the negative.

I will mention two reasons why this balanced approach to the humanities is important. First, insofar as positive psychology is about a comprehensive approach to the good life, it is part of an enormous, multidisciplinary, cross-cultural endeavor that must include the humanities. I mentioned earlier that positive psychology is unique because it combines a metaphysical orientation toward the positive with an epistemological commitment to empirical methods of inquiry. The 'positive humanities' are unique because they combine a similar metaphysical orientation toward the positive with an epistemological commitment to their own methods of inquiry. Each of the disciplines has its own rigorous methods for creating new knowledge, each of which is important for discovering new insights into human flourishing. A rich understanding of human flourishing and an effective cultivation of it require the insights and collaboration of all scholarly disciplines with their robust methods of inquiry.

A second reason why a balanced approach to the humanities is important is that much of what we are taught in school (including literature, history, and art), as well as a great deal of what we experience in our lives outside of school (including music, film, and architecture) comes from the humanities. A balanced approach to the humanities is necessary for a balanced approach to

education and culture, both of which are crucial for the cultivation of wellbeing.

**What do you consider to be the most exciting areas of interest in positive psychology right now?**

There are so many exciting things going on in positive psychology that to keep my answer to an appropriate length, I'm going to limit my reply to a discussion of research I am working on directly. First, I will mention again the conceptual analysis of positive psychology. Using an arboreal metaphor, in the past 15 years positive psychology has grown from a seedling into a towering tree. Quite a number of empirical branches of study have developed, supporting an ample supply of applied fruits. But I believe the root system hasn't quite kept up with the growth of the branches and the maturing fruit. For this reason, conceptual analyses of core ideas in positive psychology—and even of the 'positive' itself—are much needed. Other important questions, as well, can help deepen positive psychology's roots. How is the work of positive psychology connected to the history of ideas? How can we show that positive psychology isn't something that has just 'come along', that it's not just 'pop psychology' or merely a fad of the last 15 years, but rather something that is actually rooted and grounded in—and informed by—cultural history? These are important questions for positive psychology and for carrying forward the entire science of flourishing.

The second exciting area I want to mention is work on positive interventions, which is critical for the furthering of this field. I believe we need to reconceptualise our work in this domain because we can do so much more than we are currently doing. Crucial here is a clearer conceptualization of what we mean by positive interventions, an expanded scope for where to look for

them, and a more granulated approach to their analysis and synthesis. One result of this approach, for example, would be the ability to move beyond one-size-fits-all interventions toward more tailor-made activities with better individual fit.

The third exciting area I will discuss is something we have already mentioned: the positive humanities. I think this collaboration between positive psychology and the humanities stands to bear very important fruit—at the theoretical level, both for the field of positive psychology and for the way the various disciplines in the humanities understand themselves and their work; and at the practical level, by enhancing the cultural value provided by the humanities. In the United States, and I suspect in many other countries around the world, as well, there's a lot of pressure on the humanities. Some university administrators are asking, "What is the return on investment when studying the humanities?". If you go to a university and study business, it is likely that you will be able to find a job, make money, contribute back to the university you graduated from, and become an economically viable citizen. If you study medicine or law, you can have similar expectations for career and financial success. But what if you study literature, philosophy, history, religion, art or music? How can you make contributions back to the world that way? I think that by continuing the dialogue between the disciplines of the humanities and positive psychology we can do better at measuring the effects of the humanities on our lives. It is pretty easy to find out someone's annual income. If we say that's a proxy for how well they are doing or how much they are flourishing, we may well be able to make the argument that people in business or law or medicine are flourishing more than those with degrees in the humanities. More and more, however, we are coming to see that neither on an

individual level nor on a national level is income or GDP an effective indicator for wellbeing. When we measure wellbeing in a more nuanced way, we come to see that there are many people who make lots of money but inside feel their lives are meaningless. Perhaps the humanities can help with the study and development of meaning and purpose in ways not possible in other disciplines. So, although one might make the argument that there are some disciplines and courses of study that result in greater economic growth than the humanities, the humanities are a rich repository of meaning. The more we can measure ways in which the humanities contribute to human meaning and overall wellbeing, the more powerful arguments we can make for the humanities and for why these programs should not be eliminated from universities, but instead supported. Conversely, these measurements might also act as guides for the humanities, indicating how they can be even more effective in supporting wellbeing.

**Where would you like to see positive psychology in the long term, maybe in 15 years?**

One of the conceptual distinctions that needs to be made in positive psychology is between its complementary mode and its comprehensive mode. In its complementary mode, positive psychology is a move to balance out the emphasis of mainstream psychology on pathology and healing. In 15 years' time, I hope positive psychology will have made a lot more progress in understanding the psychological causes and correlates of the best things in human experience. I also hope more progress will have been made in integrating positive psychology and mainstream psychology. Human flourishing is dependent both on an ability to move toward what is good for us and away from danger. Perhaps most importantly, it is dependent on an ability to judge

how many of our resources we should expend on moving toward what is good for us and how many to expend on moving away from danger. Clearly, neither mainstream psychology by itself nor complementary positive psychology by itself is sufficient to find this proper balance.

In its comprehensive mode, as I have already suggested, positive psychology is part of a much larger movement to understand, measure, and cultivate human flourishing. This movement includes not only psychology, but many other areas as well, such as philosophy, economics, government, neuroscience, medicine, education, and business. In the next 15 years, I hope collaborations among these different fields of endeavor become more robust, and I hope many new fields join in the work, as well. Human flourishing is an important and complex enough goal that it requires the efforts of all in order to reach it.

**You are the founding director of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania. Could you tell us a little bit about the program?**

Ten years ago there weren't any post-graduate programs in positive psychology. About that time Marty Seligman gave me a call saying he wanted to start such a program and wondered if I would come to the University of Pennsylvania to help him develop it, launch it, direct it and teach in it. This sounded like a wonderful adventure, so I came on board. In the fall of 2005 we opened our doors and we have now graduated over 300 students across eight years.

The program is one full calendar year of very intensive study. The mode of delivery is hybrid, which means we meet on campus face to face once a month for a weekend of intensive classes and use distance learning modules in the

intervening weeks. Since this is a professional program, we created a brand new degree for it. At the end of their studies, graduates receive a MAPP degree (and not, for example, an MS or an MA).

The program was created for two groups of students. One group already have their professional credentials, have been successful in their respective domains, and would now like to have a year of intensive study in positive psychology. After the program they typically return to their respective positions to apply what they've learned. We have professionals from education, medicine, law, business, psychotherapy and many other areas who fit this profile. A second group of students are younger, perhaps just out of college, have not yet earned their professional credentials, and want to learn about positive psychology before doing so. After MAPP, they go on to PhD, MD, JD programs, or other kinds of academic or professional training. Readers interested in learning more about the program may visit our website at [www.pennpositivepsych.org](http://www.pennpositivepsych.org).

I'm delighted that now, some ten years after we started our program, there are approximately 20 post-graduate programs in positive psychology around the world. They take a number of different forms. I mentioned that ours is a MAPP program; others are Master of Science programs in applied positive psychology. Still others are graduate certificate programs (often called diplomados in Latin American countries), or PhD programs like the first ones started at Claremont Graduate University in 2007.

**A bit more about the future of MAPP. How do you see the MAPP program at the University of Pennsylvania in the future? Also, you mentioned that there are now approximately 20 post-graduate programs in positive psychology**



**around the world. How quickly do you think programs like this will spread to other universities in the future?**

These are great questions. We are continually working to grow and develop our program here at the University of Pennsylvania. We currently take between 35 and 40 students each year, but with 200 applications for each class, the demand is far greater than the supply. We have talked to universities around the world who are interested in collaborating with us to deliver MAPP programs in their respective countries. I can't predict exactly how these discussions are going to go, but I do think there will be some collaboration as we move forward.

With respect to the proliferation of MAPP programs, I think it would be great to have an abundance of them all around the world. Probably the most important reason progress in this area has been slower than we would have liked is because the field is still quite young. Relatively few people in the world so far have actually been trained in this area, with the number of PhDs in positive psychology still small, so the number of universities with sufficient numbers of instructors qualified to teach in a MAPP program is limited. Even so, the field is growing quickly, the demand is large, and I would encourage more universities to explore the possibility of opening MAPP programs in the near future.

**James, you are a wearer of many hats. Besides other roles within positive psychology you are the founding executive director of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA). Could you tell us about the organization and what it is most involved with at the moment?**

The suggestion to start an association was initially made by Ray Fowler, who is a past president of the American Psychological Association (APA) and was its long-term CEO when Marty Seligman was the president of APA. Here is the

story of how it happened. In 2006, Marty, Tal Ben-Shahar, and I had a conversation at a positive psychology conference. Marty had just come back from South Korea, Tal had just come back from China, and I had just come back from Argentina, and we had all experienced the same thing: interest in positive psychology was enormous. With this type of demand, we wanted to make sure that positive psychology research and evidence-based application be disseminated responsibly. We consulted with Ray, who happened to be at the meeting, as well, and he suggested we start an international association. We followed his advice and started the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) the next year.

We have achieved a number of important things since our founding. First of all, we enjoyed wonderful growth the first year of our existence, going from zero members to 4000. We have now held three World Congresses on Positive Psychology, each attended by over 1200 delegates from more than 50 countries. We have published a regular newsletter, organized a large number of conference calls with leading researchers in the field, collaborated with the International Association of Applied Psychology to establish a journal called *Applied Psychology: Health and Wellbeing*, helped our members get access to research and discounts to journals, and so on. Right now we are in a really exciting time of strategic planning. We're proud of the things we have accomplished to this date, grateful to those who have joined with us to support IPPA's mission so far, and believe there's so much more we can accomplish in the future. I hope we will see many of those reading this interview at the next World Congress. More information about IPPA and our World Congresses can be found at [www.ippanetwork.org](http://www.ippanetwork.org).

**Thank you so much, James. I guess the only question left to ask is when do you ever sleep?**

That's a good one. You should probably ask my lovely wife, Suzie!

## Margarita Tarragona

**Margarita Tarragona** is coordinator of the Diploma in Positive Psychology at the Universidad Iberoamericana, member of the Board of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), and editor of the Spanish version of the *Positive Psychology News Daily*. Dr Tarragona is a psychologist specialising in personal and relational transformational processes, such as coaching, consulting and psychotherapy where she integrates scientific findings on wellbeing from positive psychology with ways of working that are based on conversation and dialogue: collaborative, narrative and solution-focused practices.

### **What made you become interested in positive psychology?**

Since I studied psychology as an undergraduate in the early 80s, I felt a sort of disillusionment with what I learned; I had the feeling that it was not what I was looking for. At the time, I did not know how to put that feeling in to words, but I sensed that a lot of emphasis was put on pathology and that approach was prevalent throughout the department of psychology. It was commonplace to view people as worse off than they actually were. You would go into a Family Systems class thinking that you had a very normal family and you would leave thinking that you had a highly dysfunctional one. Or you would start a course believing you were a normal, happy young woman and by the end the term you would be questioning that, thinking that maybe your happiness was just a defence mechanism for not wanting to cope with the reality. I wasn't satisfied by this way of looking at things, I was searching for something different. Then, through good fortune, I was able to study abroad, in the United States – which I had always wanted to do – and there I had the amazing good fortune of

meeting Mike Csikszentmihályi. It really was only luck. He was one of the founders of what is now known as positive psychology. At the University of Chicago, I studied in the Committee on Human Development, an interdisciplinary committee that already had a tradition of questioning pre-existing notions in psychology. For example, the idea that human development ended in young adulthood was questioned and transformed. Professors there also studied resilience; how the children of mothers who suffered from severe mental disorders frequently did not have mental illnesses themselves. It was a psychology department that worked very differently from others; for example it was interested in studying what actually worked in psychotherapy. I felt as if the world had opened up for me.

In parallel, I'd always wanted to be a therapist, and once again thanks to good fortune I was there when family therapy and brief therapy were booming. This was a new movement that didn't search for the origin of pathologies, instead these therapies focused on what allows people to change. It was a very fortunate combination of, on the one hand what was happening in the world of family therapy that helped break the traditional paradigms of therapy, and on the other hand the great luck of finding myself at the University of Chicago with Mihály Csikszentmihályi studying the psychology of creativity and happiness. I felt, in the words of a musical star, like I'd fallen into a jar of jam. That was something that marked me forever. I then dedicated many years to practicing psychotherapy. When positive psychology really started to take shape I contacted Mike Csikszentmihályi, met more people, and was lucky enough to be a part of the group that brought positive psychology to Latin America.

**What are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?**

What distinguishes it from other areas of psychology? Well, obviously studying the best of human beings in a serious, scientific and rigorous ways. You can talk about, you know, there is some debate about whether to speak of happiness or of wellbeing, but ultimately, positive psychology studies people from their best angle, their skills, the best of human beings. I believe that the original definition from the Akumal manifesto is still very valid: to study the “factors that help individuals and communities live fully.” That’s a definition that I really like.

### **What are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?**

I know of a critique by professor Marino Pérez that Carmelo Vázquez answered very well. I think Carmelo can answer much better than I can. When I speak of criticism, I feel that there are three sources: two that I find weak and one that I believe we must take very seriously. I think that there is a current of criticism that is weakly supported, and reflects a lack of knowledge: people who say that positive psychology is about viewing life through rose colored glasses or that everything is good or “hakuna-matata” or that we shouldn’t worry about anything or that we believe that everyone has to feel good all the time. I think that this criticism comes from misinformation or a superficial understanding of positive psychology. I believe that no serious author would propose that, for example, negative emotions are undesirable. I don’t think this is a serious or well-grounded criticism. There are also the personal criticisms against the founders of positive psychology, particularly against Martin Seligman. *Ad hominem* attacks that are then extended to his work. I think one should criticize ideas and concepts, not the people who propose them. In the third place are the criticisms that I’m most interested in and that I take very seriously. These have to do with questioning, for example, if this is a vision of psychology that is too individualistic and does not take interpersonal factors

seriously enough. I believe this is something important. Another criticism depicts positive psychology as an “American Psychology” since most of its authors are American. I disagree because happiness is a concept that exists in all cultures and is something that is desirable in most of them, even if we do have cultural differences. Another criticism is that contextual differences are often over-simplified. For example, literature about character strengths sometimes sounds like you “have” a certain character strength, almost as if it were a substance that you “contain”, when it could be that these strengths manifest themselves or exist in a contextual way. I think this is an important point as well.

Some other critics argue that by emphasizing happiness as a personal matter, we’re putting aside or covering up social inequalities or other kinds of terrible situations, and that it’s an insult to ask very poor people to be happy. I believe that this is another misreading or misinterpretation, since there is a lot of evidence that demonstrates how important economic factors are for wellbeing. Yet another criticism has been expressed by my dear friend Gonzalo Bacigalpe, who wrote that positive psychology was a psychology of “white men” since the majority of authors in the field were all men in academia. This is something that affects the entire field of psychology, not just positive psychology, but it’s changing with new generations. Among these new generations, we have people like Barbara Fredrickson and Sonia Lyubomirsky, stars in the field who are women.

On a personal level, in my practice as a therapist, as a coach, I have been influenced by a social constructionist view that questions the idea of the psychologist/practitioner as an expert. I work from a position that believes that



the best way to help people is in a relationship of equals, not as an expert who tells you what's wrong and where you need to go, but as a partner with whom, together through a dialogue, we can generate ideas and possibilities. To me this becomes an interesting dilemma when I bring in positive psychology: How can I maintain my narrative, collaborative and solution-focused practice and incorporate into it the scientific knowledge from positive psychology? I wouldn't want positive psychology to be the counterpart of "I am the expert on pathology and I will tell you what is wrong with you" and be "I am the expert of happiness and I will tell you how to be happy". This is a personal dilemma of mine, which isn't shared by many in positive psychology. I think there's a potential risk that positive psychologists can become engineer-like, that we will try to impose models and practices to make people happy. This is something I'm interested in figuring out.

**What positive psychology activities and strategies do you think work really well together?**

I feel that many of them work well and what's most important is *how* you introduce them. I use many interventions (I don't like the word intervention very much) and I think the difference is that in a more traditional approach you have an *a priori* set of interventions or techniques that you believe everyone can benefit from. For example, that every client should keep a gratitude journal. I had one client who told me that she wanted to enjoy her job more. This wasn't the primary objective of therapy for her, she had come in because she was struggling with depression, but when she talked about her lack of enjoyment I thought of a modification to the gratitude journal. I told her about the gratitude journal and how there's evidence that it works, and I wondered if she would like to write an enjoyment journal, in which every night she would

write down something that she had enjoyed at work that day. This isn't an empirically validated intervention but it could be interesting for her. We'll see. In that case and in many others I use various interventions depending on the client and what comes up during our conversations. I don't have them as a ready-made protocol, I instead use them depending on what is happening to that specific person, in that concrete situation. I adapt the exercise to the situation and what is being demanded at that time... for example cultivating gratitude or forgiveness. I sometimes have couples who have a lot of resentment and anger, so there are interventions that deal with forgiveness. It's about listening carefully to what people are saying. So if someone comes and talks about hope, then I'll propose exercises that have to do with hope. There are some exercises that have been validated and work well together, but I don't understand these activities as the equivalent of taking a pill and it having a certain effect, I view them more as a part of a very important life experiment in which you have to continue talking and exploring.

**Who do you admire to in the field, either as practitioners or academics?**

Wow! I think this list would never end. I really admire Mihály Csikszentmihályi, both because he was my professor and because I believe he is a true Renaissance man, of which there are few left. He has a capacity to see the big questions, the big themes. He's an extremely cultured, intelligent, kind and humble person, so I admire him immensely. I really admire James Pawelski, who is a close friend of mine. I love his way of thinking, his intelligence as well as his generosity. Martin Seligman for his intelligence, conceptual brilliance, his ability to convene people and his executive skills. Barbara Fredrickson as a role model, somebody to look up to... Sonia Lyubomirsky. I don't want to leave out a number of people whose work I love. In terms of gratitude, well Ed Diener!

What amazing productivity, what an impressive intelligence he has! Chris Peterson, of course. George Vaillant, who shows such wisdom, Kim Cameron, Robert Biswas-Diener, who has managed to translate theory to practice. All of those psychologists of different generations, I admire them immensely.

**Who do you think are some of the emerging researchers in the field of positive psychology? Who do you look at and think ‘their research is cutting edge and cool’?**

I believe Todd Kashdan has an incredible level of productivity and breadth of spectrum in his research. I really like Sarah Pressman’s work as well as Barbara Fredrickson. Well I’m not sure if she is considered of the new generations, with Sonja, or if they are considered to be among the “well established” generation of researchers. I also really like Aaron Jarden and Merche Ovejero. There are so many incredibly capable people and I don’t want to leave any of them out. I also admire colleagues in the first generations of students of positive psychology like Jeanne Nakamura, a great friend, Kim Cameron. I can’t stop adding names. Caroline Miller, who applies positive psychology to coaching. I don’t want to leave anybody out because I admire so many people.

From the new generations Sara Pressman, Aaron Jarden and Todd Kashdan come to mind. There is also a new generation of researchers who are Jean Nakamura’s disciples. I don’t know them personally but they presented at the congress and I found them to be incredibly brilliant, I unfortunately don’t know their names. Once again I apologize if I didn’t cite all the names that deserve to be on this list. Amongst the young researchers I admire are also Acacia Parks and Alejandro Adler. There are just so many people

### **What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers or practitioners?**

Advice? I don't know! I think it depends on what you want to do. I believe my advice would be: know the basics, have a good general grounding in positive psychology and don't try to apply it all too fast or prematurely. I think it's important to follow Kurt Lewin's famous words: "*there's nothing as practical as a good theory.*" In this case, it is not a theory *per se*, but a corpus of research that is worth knowing before trying to translate everything to applications. This is a bit odd for me since I am more of a practitioner than a researcher...

I would also stress the importance of appreciating and preserving the nuances of research findings. I think it's hard to try to transmit this information in the media: TV, radio and the newspapers. Instead of saying "there is a correlation between this and that" reports end up saying "this causes that" and when taken into practice instead of saying "this works for a large percentage of people" we say "this works for everyone." I think that staying sensitive to these complexities is important.

### **What book you would recommend to someone new to positive psychology?**

There are so many books! I love Chris Peterson's *A Primer in Positive Psychology*, but it's not available in Spanish. It's an excellent introduction, I love it! *The Science of Happiness*, by Sonja Lyubomirsky, I really like, as well as Barbara Fredrickson's *Positivity*. Also Fredrickson's new *Love 2.0* and Sonja's *The myths of happiness*. In the more academic realm there are also many. I just reviewed the *Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, edited by Ilona Boniwell and I like it a lot. In Spanish, I love both Carmelo Vázquez's and Gonzalo Hervás' books *La ciencia de la felicidad* and *Psicología positiva aplicada*. I think both of them are really good. And well, we have more and more great books all the time. I also

really liked *Happiness* by Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener, as well as *Happier* by Tal Ben Shahar, which are really good introduction to the field. I find them very good and accessible. I think one of the virtues of positive psychology is that it has generated many good books that divulge its findings that can be very useful to the general public.

**Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on that I haven't asked about?**

I really appreciate all of the work you are doing. I think it's a great idea that you're making this book and I believe it speaks to the speed of the generation that you [Merche Ovejero] and Aaron Jarden are a part of. You have an idea and you quickly bring it to life, and I'm very grateful that you included me in this book.

## Ken Sheldon

**Ken Sheldon** is Professor of Psychology at the University of Missouri, and researches goals, motivation, and psychological wellbeing. Professor Sheldon is known for his 'Self-concordance model' which integrates goal-striving, need-satisfaction, and wellbeing change constructs into a single time-sequential model, and his 2004 book *Optimal human being: An integrated multi-level perspective* and 2011 edited book *Designing the future of positive psychology: Taking stock and moving forward*.

### **In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?**

The most interesting thing, or defining feature, is that it steps over a line in science by attaching a value judgment to a phenomenon. If you look at the hard sciences in comparison, like chemistry and physics, there is no such thing as positive chemistry or positive physics. Whereas with positive psychology it goes beyond the stance of 'let's be objective' and put aside our values and look at what the truth is; instead, we're in this nebulous area of making a value judgment about what is positive and 'What does positive mean?' before we even begin studying the phenomena on their own terms. So that's one thing. This aspect makes me a little uneasy at times, when discussing this with my colleagues who work in chemistry, physics, engineering who say, "Positive psychology? Isn't that a kind of assumption that you are making in advance?". There are ways around this though, and one is that psychology is a human science, and as such cares about what the science can do for us in improving people's lives. So perhaps it makes sense to talk about positive psychology in those terms. But perhaps chemists would say the same, "We're using chemistry

to make better products, to improve human life, understand how the world works”, but they don’t need to have the term ‘positive chemistry’ to describe what they are doing.

**So essentially positive psychology is value-laden from the start?**

Yes, correct.

**What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?**

The main thing that it has done has been to focus more research attention on thriving, and also legitimizing the study of personal thriving. If you look around at the pop-literature, positive psychology is a big part of inspiring hundreds, if not thousands of happiness books that are out there – although this makes me a little nervous because a lot of these books are not science based, and one of the things positive psychology promised to do was to reinvent humanistic psychology from a scientific perspective and not shy away from collecting data and using statistical analysis. Those of us working in the field believe in that, and we have to get our articles through peer review in order to get published. But there is also quite a large bandwagon I think of people who are on the edges of the field or who are not really trained scientifically who are presenting their ideas under the umbrella of positive psychology without having done the research to support their ideas. So that’s one contribution – focusing research attention on thriving.

Another contribution is that it has brought together a community of like-minded people, and I would describe those people as optimists about human nature and its perfectibility. It’s given them a forum and a means of communicating with each other to share their ideas. Also, it has provided some

funding. In the early 2000s NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health) actually funded quite a bit of positive psychology research, but it doesn't do that anymore. There has also been quite a bit of funding from the Templeton Foundation, and a few other places, that have really helped push a lot of this work forward. But the main thing is giving a label for optimists about human nature to share their ideas and their work with each and to legitimize their work to some extent.

**What's one aspiration you have for positive psychology moving forward?**

I have more than one, but one is that I would like it to become more integrated and less phenomenon-driven or particular trait-driven. I think we need more general theories of thriving and malaise, out of which the particular phenomena studied by positive psychology would fall. If we have a general theory then you could use it to understand a lot of different types of phenomena, all with the same set of processes. What I have in mind is a theory I use, Self-Determination Theory, which was around long before positive psychology, but has been used to understand a lot of different kinds of topics. If you look at the positive psychology literature there is often a lot of new phenomena being studied without consolidating understanding first. The multiplication of types of wellbeing is a good example. For example, I have a position on the concept of eudaimonia, which I find to be barely distinguishable from the regular conceptions and measures of wellbeing. But positive psychologists have jumped on the eudaimonia bandwagon; it's like a buzz word these days, and I think the idea gets pushed more than it deserves to be. Once you start to multiply the many different kinds of wellbeing to be understood, then you are multiplying the different types of research that we need. For example, we have a different theory for each type of wellbeing. I would



disagree with that. I think the opposite: we need to keep the outcomes as limited as possible and use many different theories to predict those limited outcomes. For example, I do research on consumerism, materialism, self-concordance, intrinsic values – how do I tell which of those predictor concepts are really important for wellbeing? I keep my wellbeing outcomes simple and then compare the different theories as predictors of it. So what I do in my work is I discover what kinds of measures on the predictor side get us to wellbeing, and I would much rather keep those on the predictor side rather than putting them all on the outcomes side.

**So being more integrative is one aspiration. What are some other aspirations for positive psychology?**

Sometimes the research is not as strong as it could be. I don't particularly want to criticize one particular positive psychology concept, but I do want to give an example. One example is the strengths phenomenon – I think it's a good idea, but the approach that was taken was to identify 24 strengths through a literature search and then claiming that there are 6 factors that underlie those 24 strengths. If you actually collect data you don't necessarily get those 24 strengths or those 6 higher order factors. So, to me, that's a case of multiplying phenomena, maybe beyond what is legitimate or efficient, to focus attention on. So there is a lot of topicism in positive psychology and maybe not necessarily a lot of integration. There are many positive adjectives in the dictionary, you could probably develop measures for all of these, but the problem is that there are thousands of positive adjectives. So once again we have become more differentiated without becoming integrated at the same time.

## **What do you think are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?**

I've touched on a couple of those already – maybe it's too phenomenon driven, not always as scientifically rigorous as ideally it should be, possibly too optimistic about human nature. I believe that people are more good than bad, when context and circumstances allow, but you can also underestimate how evil people can be. In my chapter in our book *Designing Positive Psychology* (2011) I worked with Todd Kashdan and Mike Steger. I talked about the different meanings of the word 'positive' in 'positive psychology', asking, 'What do we mean by positive psychology?'. One thing we mean is, ok, we are just going to appreciate humans more than perhaps we have previously, we're not going to assume they are messed up, and that's ok. Another meaning is that we are going to assume human nature is basically good. It might actually be true, but it's a very difficult thing to prove. Dr. Keltner's book *Born to be Good* tried to make a case that we are born to be good, and he is a good researcher. I think he had a lot of good arguments for that thesis, but we need to be critical and careful before we accept that idea. Another possible criticism is that lots of people are on the fringe, without much training, who have jumped on the bandwagon and use it as a marketing tool for themselves. I'm thinking of the life coaching trend – I think life coaching could be a good idea, but it needs to be better defined, and the training for that, and the licensing, needs to be better, in order to make sure it's not a place for charlatans or people who maybe don't know what they are talking about as well as they think they do, to go and make a buck.

### **Can you tell me about your research work in positive psychology?**

I was doing positive psychology research well before positive psychology came along. I was studying self-determination, autonomy, self-concordance, intrinsic values, wellbeing. Of course, there's been a long tradition of studying happiness and wellbeing that goes well back before the 1998 "birth" of positive psychology. The things that I've studied that have attracted the most attention have been my work on sustainable happiness with Sonja Lyubomirsky. She and I have been a good research team, working to address the question of whether it is possible to either boost one's wellbeing and keep it up, or whether you are always bound to fall back to where you started, called a 'genetic set point'.

### **And what essentially have you found?**

We found that it is possible to go up and stay up, although we have not done a long enough course of research to be sure about that. What we would do is measure wellbeing at three different times, with some predictor of change occurring between time 1 and time 2, and show that, yes it does go up between time 1 and time 2, and then we usually find it goes down between time 2 and time 3, but then we would look at moderators that would prevent that regression to the personal baseline. Looking at things like making a point to continue to appreciate whatever the positive change and original cause of the boost was. You can't just take it for granted and stop noticing it, you have to keep interacting with it, deriving pleasure and meaning from it. One example I like to use is, if you buy a painting, it's wonderful, you can't stop looking at it, and it's almost always the case that after a few weeks, it's just there on the wall and you hardly ever stop to look at it. So in order for wellbeing to stay up and for a boost to be maintained, you have to interact with whatever caused the boost in the first place. The second thing we looked at is trying to avoid

wanting more and more of that thing too soon. So there is this natural process of aspiring to more: the positive change becomes the new normal, and now you want even more of it – and now what’s next? That’s an important thing for human progress to keep moving forward, but it’s also an important cause of materialism, and overconsumption. In our quest to stay up, and overcome hedonic adaptation, we are always restless to get the next best thing without extracting enough enjoyment from the last thing. So that’s been the focus of our happiness research over the last few years. We had a 2011 PSPB article on the HAP (Hedonic Adaption Prevention) model which brought together a lot of the ideas I’ve just mentioned.

**What would you say is your most proud moment in the field to date?**

It was great to win a Templeton Prize back in 2002. It created a lot of media attention and validation of the work I was doing. This was telling me I was doing some good things. I also do research in psychological needs and we had an article published in 2001 that the American Psychological Association did a press release on and that caused my phone to ring almost nonstop for about three weeks. It was both an exhausting and exhilarating experience. It was cool to have that many people care about what I was doing, but I was sort of glad when it was over. Those are the two things that stick out.

**What do you think is going to be the new hot topic for positive psychology in the coming two years? Is a topic that is already getting some legs expanding, or do you see something new on the horizon?**

I don’t know if I see anything new. There are always people coming up with new scales, and new phenomena to look at, and again I’m a little worried that that multiples out of control. What I would like to see happening, and I think it

is happening in some ways, is better grounding biology. We have to tie these kind of nebulous happyology concepts – thriving, growth, eudaimonia – we have to tie them back in to the biological subsystem in order to boost our credibility and to have better understanding. A great example of that is the research Kirk Warren Brown has been doing over the last couple of years. Kirk's a well-known mindfulness researcher who has been publishing on brain processes, physiological processes, cognitive processes, that are helped by mindfulness, both as a trait and as a state, at least according to the literature. And I think that helps the concept of mindfulness to be taken seriously. It's not just a side effect of something else. To be mindful you have to reach down into your own bodily processes that effect your health in a very basic kind of way. So I would like to see more of that kind of integrative work being done.

**Perhaps also linking emotions and cognitions to behaviors as well as biology I suppose... So if Kirk is one researcher to look out for, are there any other emerging researchers to look out for? People whose work you think is going to stand out and make a difference?**

To be honest, I don't put my head up that much to look around, and I don't even go to a lot of positive psychology conferences like the World Congress. So nobody occurs to mention, although I do flip through quite a few journals.

**What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers?**

I would say, forget about the label, and just do good science. I think there is a sort of a bandwagon to positive psychology that is potentially dangerous. What I find is that conventional psychologists sometimes get offended by the idea that they are doing "negative psychology". Everybody is trying to gain knowledge to help people thrive, even depression researchers, or even military

researchers studying torture tactics. If you accept the premise that we need this knowledge in order to protect the security of a large mass of people, I'm not against that kind of research. You could even extend that research to positive psychology. So to me it's important to get away from the label 'positive psychology' and just think about what you want to understand, what kind of research you want to do. I get emails all the time from people telling me how wonderful positive psychology is, and how can they get into it? There's this phrase, 'If you meet the Buddha by the side of the road, kill him'. I think you can almost apply that to positive psychology. The meaning of that phrase is don't get hung up on 'Who's the Buddha, who's my guru'. But, rather, keep seeking understanding.

**Sounds like wise words to me...**

Thanks!

## **Kaiping Peng**

**Kaiping Peng** is the Chair of the Psychology Department of Tsinghua University, China, and a Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. He is also Chair of the Academic Committee of the School of Social Science of Tsinghua University. He is well known for his work in cultural psychology, and is now the leader of the positive psychology movement in China.

### **In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?**

I think the most distinctive feature of positive psychology is its assumption about human nature. This is a revolutionary change. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many disciplines, such as economics, sociology and philosophy, based their assumptions about human nature on social Darwinism. Economics emphasizes the maximization of interests, sociology tends to overlook positive motivation, and psychology has focused on negative affect and psychological reactions like anxiety, depression and autism. Positive psychology corrects this research tradition, based on modern scientific findings in evolution. Chinese people actually advocated that “human nature is benevolent” a long time ago, which fits positive psychology. That’s why I think the rise of positive psychology is a good opportunity to promote Chinese culture.

### **What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?**

In 2008 I took a sabbatical from Berkeley, which I spent in China. I found that the development of the nation had reached an important transition period. My

feeling was that we had hit a bottleneck, and the wealth gap was increasing. As a country with huge potential, China will have a strong surge if it can go through this transition period, comparable to developed Western countries. But if it fails, China will go back to the era of chaos and turmoil. This is something we don't want to see. Positive psychology can effectively help people to handle the negative affects caused by the injustice they encounter during the transition period. Therefore I changed from cultural psychology, which I was already very familiar with, to the science of wellbeing, because I believe that individual work can only be meaningful when it can make a difference in society.

**What did you do before positive psychology?**

I was, mainly, studying cultural psychology, especially the influences of cultural variables like language, ethnic awareness, values and self/others attitudes on human psychological processes and behaviors. A major work was on the cultural differences in attribution styles. We found that Asians tend to attribute behavior to the environment, while Westerners tend to attribute it to individual traits, which led to the problem of fundamental attribution bias in Western culture. I also found that Asians are influenced by a dialectical thinking style and more tolerant of contradictory information, while Westerners tend to become polarized when processing contradictory information. In respect of affects, we found that the Asians experience more dialectical affects.

**Were there any other key events that changed you and made you move into the field of positive psychology?**

In May of 2008, I took on the role of founding director of the Berkeley-Tsinghua Program of Advanced Study in Psychology, and later as the founding chair of



the Department of Psychology at Tsinghua University, the most prestigious university in China. I was overwhelmed by the rapid changes taking place in China. I was also impressed by how much the Chinese people desire individual wellbeing and flourishing after two decades of steady growth in wealth and in economic developments. Given the rapid social and psychological changes taking place in China, a scientific understanding of the psychology of Chinese people, particularly their desire for happiness and wellbeing, and the various ways of pursuing it, seems to be necessary and meaningful for both China and the rest of the world.

### **What is one big question that positive psychology answers?**

The big question is, “what is the purpose of human existence and social development?”. Human beings have been grappling with the purpose question for centuries. How should we define the goals of our development, power, wealth, happiness, or wellbeing? The Chinese seem to have some difficulties defining their goals of development; even a simple question, “What is happiness?” troubled many Chinese, including the Chinese Nobel Laureate in literature, Mr. Mo Yan. Buddhist teaching emphasizes the techniques of detachment from striving and desire as the purpose of living. Then how can we go about conducting ourselves in such a competitive world to fulfill ourselves by not doing anything? Positive psychology can help answer this big question.

### **What do you think is the biggest challenge in positive psychology?**

The study of the mechanisms will be a big challenge. The experience of happiness is a holistic experience that integrates the body and the mind. Whether it’s physiological and psychological mechanisms can be studied by the traditional reductionist methods is a big challenge. In other words, we know

that there's a reward center in human brains, and some neuro-chemical mechanism might be related to the happiness experience, but whether there exist other mechanisms, or whether the known mechanisms are enough to constitute the happiness experience, is a big question.

**If someone wants to be happier, what's an individual's best bet for increasing their happiness and wellbeing?**

First of all, happiness is not just positive emotion. Positive emotion can be simple physiological satisfaction, like a delicious dinner or a good movie, which are easy to get. These are simply positive emotions. Happiness has to have the meaning pillar. It's an experience that involves three aspects – the correct recognition of the meaning of happiness, the subjective senses of positive emotions and self-efficacy together, and positive behavior. A Mercedes will make me happier; that's what many people think. But a happiness notion like this is not only too costly to pursue, but also brings negative influences, as it sets social comparison as the goal of happiness. In Eastern philosophy, there's a state called "No self nor world", which makes people engage in an activity and pursue their goal tirelessly, without attending to anything else. Mihály Csikszentmihályi calls it 'Flow'. This happy state does not require money, nor power, nor stimulation nor support. "No self nor world" is a state that leads to happiness. When we pursue happiness, we may want to contemplate what could bring us this state. Many studies have shown that sports, beautiful music and literary works, or traveling, a gathering of friends, or card playing, could be sources of happiness.

**In positive psychology you're renowned for research in the area of culture.**

**Can you tell us a little bit about it?**

In contrast to other fields of psychology, positive psychology is influenced by Eastern wisdom. Dr. James Pawelski opened his speech at the 3rd China International Positive Psychology Conference in 2013 with the first three lines of *Analects of Confucius*: "Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters? Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?". This was actually talking about happiness. Happiness is not about money or finance, power or position. Happiness is about friendship: "to have friends come from distant quarters"; about learning: "learn with a constant perseverance and application"; about virtue: "feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him". Tolerance, kindness, happiness, benevolence – these are Chinese culture's contribution to the world. Positive psychology is a science that we Chinese will be able to do a good job in.

**You are the leader of positive psychology in China. How is positive psychology in China going?**

Now "positive psychology" has become a catch phrase in the Chinese language. It is not only a scientific discipline in psychology dedicated to the study of human strength and happiness, but is also a social movement that involves the Chinese government at all levels, that promotes wellbeing and happiness cities, educators trying to teach young generations of Chinese to be happy, healthy and flourishing, along with academic discussions about cultures and human behaviors. It is a colorful discipline that looks at art, beauty, mediation, yoga, music, and all the playful elements of human life. It is also a serious discipline

that embraces all kinds of intellectual traditions, from Chinese philosophy to contemporary neuroscience. The Baidu Index, which measures the frequencies of the use of the phrase “positive psychology” by Chinese netizens, shows that use is increasing.

We can see a strong strategic alliance between the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) and a group of Chinese scholars and practitioners who are followers of Martin Seligman and the positive psychology movement in the US. We first invited renowned international scholars in the field of positive psychology from around the world to visit China, when we had the first *International Conference on Positive Psychology* in China in August 2010. We then had a second conference last year in November. Martin, James and many directors of the board of IPPA attended the conference and gave wonderful speeches there in China.

**Tsinghua University is famous for its technology and down-to-earth application style. Is this style also reflected in your department and your vision about positive psychology?**

Traditionally Tsinghua University is an institute of technology, renowned for its technical innovations and applications in China. The Tsinghua style of study is also oriented to problem-solving, encouraging students to find methods to solve problems. Therefore, our Department of Psychology certainly hopes to be able to use technology to solve some of the problems in positive psychology, as well as to create some new techniques related to positive psychology. For example, we are using big data and cloud computing to analyze the experience and state, and map the happiness, of the Chinese people. We also want to find some methods to improve individual wellbeing, such as mobile phone apps and

terminal technology, as well as websites to monitor, increase and support people's psychological functions. To summarize, we want to apply technologies commonly used in psychology – such as brainwave, magnetic resonance and biological feedback techniques in biology, and eye movement, virtual technology and cognitive virtualization technology in behavioral science – to invoke positive energy, cultivate positive emotions and support positive actions. All the scientific methods and technologies that psychologists use, discover and understand, we want to validate, apply and promote in the field of positive psychology.

**What are your plans for the future with regard to positive psychology?**

I want to talk about positive psychology in China specifically. Countries around the world are actively involved in the construction and discussion of the science of happiness. China ought to participate. First, China should have some people who know both the East and the West well, to get involved in related international associations and academic research discussions. Secondly, we have to develop some of our own unique concepts, sum up some samples with Chinese characteristics, so that we have tangible results to communicate. More importantly, we need to take a leading role, we need to organize activities on wellbeing and happiness, to attract people to China to discuss and participate. We should take the initiative to lead the international trend of positive psychology research.

**What's your one big hope for the future of positive psychology? Five years from now what would you like to see changed?**

I want to see four questions answered by positive psychology, or at least to see progress in answering them, in the next five years. The first question is the one

I mentioned earlier, “What is the purpose of human existence and social development?”. The second question has a lot to do with the current state of wellbeing of Chinese at this important historical juncture. How can the wellbeing of individuals, family, organizations, communities and countries be measured? We are gradually moving from the paper and pencil kind of self-report survey to using data mining techniques by analyzing big data sets generated by social media and modern computer science technologies. The third question addresses the importance of collectivism in cultivating wellbeing, asking questions about such matters as how social relationships contribute to key aspects of positive psychology, or how the collectivism of Chinese cultures influences one’s sense of wellbeing. No doubt, the quality of friendships, social networks, marriages, or intimate relationships are vitally important for Chinese, but that is also true for people around the world. Recently, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the national policy for achieving Chinese dreams: the requirements are national wealth, cultural revitalization and individual happiness. So why are the notions of nation and culture so important for the dreams of the Chinese people? The fourth question focuses on how traditional Chinese wisdom may help us better understand and better promote positive psychology in China. One of my own research areas is about the Yin and Yang thinking styles of the Chinese people. We found that in China people can feel happy while feeling dialectical emotions: that is, they might feel happy while feeling sadness at the same time. Americans find this hard to understand. Chinese ancient wisdom offers much-appreciated insights on individual wellbeing and happiness. In general, my big hope for positive psychology in the next five years is to see progress made in answering these four questions.

**What do you think is going to be the hot topic in the field over the next five years?**

I think the hot topics will be in three areas. First, breakthroughs in conventional biological mechanisms. In recent years, a growing number of psychologists have joined the field of positive psychology. Many of them actually have begun to focus on studying the neuro-biochemical mechanisms of positive emotions and positive experiences. There may be some unexpected discoveries as biotechnology advances. No matter how it goes, I believe that the study of neuroscience, electric neurophysiology, biochemistry and even behavioral medicine in positive psychology may become very hot. One main reason is that the United States may shift the focus of study from disease to positive psychology and biology. Second, a hot topic will certainly be related to the rapid progress of information science, including cloud computing, mobile technology, digital technology and virtual technology. All these technologies that can be used in the virtual world, may also form some hot topics in the field of positive psychology. Third, cultural and scientific breakthroughs in the humanities can also affect the field of positive psychology, including cultural evolution and mechanisms selected by it, and the unique genetic code and each culture. These may involve some research in positive psychology about our cultural differences. These are likely to be some hot topics in the future.

**Is there anything else you'd like to comment on that would be useful or interesting for someone looking at moving into the field of positive psychology?**

I think positive psychologists should have a broader vision and not be confined to the discipline of psychology or to helping people to create a positive mind. Positive psychology is a theoretical assumption. It is not just a field of research;

it is more of an ideological movement. This movement should be able to affect other human subjects: politics, economics, literature, philosophy, law, etc. This is perhaps one of the few areas of psychology that can provide theoretical guidance to other human disciplines, just as humanistic philosophy has done. Positive psychology research could and should also affect other disciplines in humanity sciences. This is my greatest hope for positive psychology.



## Angela Duckworth

**Angela Duckworth** is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. She studies non-IQ competencies that predict success and has done extensive research on the character quality of grit. Dr. Duckworth is passionate about helping to create more opportunities for children and adults alike through her work. She received a BA in neurobiology from Harvard and a Masters in neuroscience from Oxford. She completed her PhD in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Duckworth was also recently selected as a 2013 MacArthur Fellow.

**Can I first ask what you had for breakfast this morning?**

Ok, let's see. I had a pumpernickel bagel with cream cheese and jam, and a cup of coffee.

**All right, so no grits for you? I was dared to ask this question!**

Haha, I hate grits! I thought you were asking everybody that!

**All right, let's begin. How would you define positive psychology in general terms?**

Positive psychology is banal in its methodological approach but unique in its substantive focus. Using the same experimental and correlational designs as any other field of psychology, positive psychology aims to explain wellbeing, character and virtue, and all other aspects of the life well-lived.

**Could you tell us about your background and what you did before joining the psychology department at the University of Pennsylvania?**

Before I became a psychologist I was mostly working in education. I had done several years of teaching in middle school and working with high school students. I spent a couple of years starting and running a summer school for low income kids around age ten years. The other thing I did in education was that I helped to run a non-profit website called GreatSchools.net, which I think is one of the most popular websites for parents of school aged kids. So I worked mostly in education but had also done a bit of management consulting and neuroscience. In a way, I was doing a bunch of things that were a little bit all over the map. However, there was a theme that was emerging and that was kids.

**At that point did you have any education in psychology?**

I don't think I took any college-level courses in psychology. I was a neurobiology major and things like axons, dendrites and glial cells were my thing. I did my senior thesis on Alzheimer's disease, so it was very biological. Honestly, I feel like I didn't really know much of anything when I came to graduate school when I was 32 years old. I do remember that when I was 16 and went to summer school, I had the choice of picking any subject I wanted, and I chose psychology. So I think the interest was there, but I hadn't really taken any formal courses.

**When joining the psychology department, did you immediately get involved in positive psychology or was there a long in-between phase?**

I had never heard of Marty Seligman before learning about the field. So, unlike many of the students, who are attracted to working with him because of the

work that he does in wellbeing and flourishing, I only found out after meeting him that he was the leader of this movement. What happened was that I came to Philadelphia with my husband, who had a new job. I knew I wanted to become a psychologist and for that I had to go to graduate school. I looked up the website for Penn psychology department and went down the faculty list in alphabetical order. When I got to “S” I clicked on Marty Seligman's name, looked at him and thought, “He seems very thoughtful and I like the way he writes”. Marty had also written some articles about children and that's how I came to know him.

### **When did grit come into the picture?**

When I first started working with Marty, I said I want to go into psychology for only one reason and that is to understand how to make kids more successful. This came from my experience in education and teaching, and is the whole reason why I went from classrooms and teaching to psychology. I had come to a realization that there were some psychological dimensions of learning that were not obvious and not solved in the current educational practice. So Marty said: “Fine, you can do whatever you want”. You know, that’s Marty. I started off actually wanting to work on how individuals persist in a hard task. I created tasks that were difficult and would time how long people would persist in them. Ironically, I gave up on persistence testing because people actually kept doing the tasks too long, and it was hard to design something that wasn't completely dependent on one’s ability. I sort of put that aside and started studying self-control – which is the ability to inhibit impulses that get you into trouble, or are fun in the moment but do not align with your long-term goals. It is, of course, related to persistence, but is different. There was also a much larger research literature, so I didn't have to invent my own measures. That

was my first year. During that year, I met with Marty on a weekly basis and we started talking about the kinds of people who are really successful. People we had known who had become very prominent in their respective fields: Pulitzer Prize-winning writers, academics, athletes, politicians, CEOs, entrepreneurs and the like. What did they all have in common? We started to talk to people. I started to interview them and that's how we got to the idea of grit. Sort of like you [Emilia] with your work on *sisu*; just talking to people about what their intuitions were.

### **Would you consider yourself as having been a gritty child?**

Well, they say research is often 'me-search' and I think you either study the things you are or what you want to become. I guess I am pretty gritty, but was I a gritty child? Well, here is one story about why I majored in neurobiology. It was spring semester of my first year of college and I was taking a class in neurobiology, which is a class that you are supposed to take only after you took Biology 1 and Biology 2. I kind of felt like "Nah, I don't have to take the basics. I already had enough advanced classes in high-school." I remember I took this neurobiology class and ended up failing the hour exam and also the midterm. At that point, the professor asked to see me and said: "You probably should drop the class now so the bad grade doesn't end up on your record". To which I said, "Thank you very much", and walked immediately to the registrar's office where I signed to major in neurobiology. So I think I have always had this thing when people tell me I can't do something, I just dig my heels in and think "Ok, watch me". And by the way, I studied pretty hard for that neurobiology class. I think I managed to get a perfect score in the finals and ended up with a B or a B+ in the class. So, I do think I have this kind of stubbornness and grit.

Furthermore, when I look at people's resumes and want to code for grit, I look for multiyear interests and activities – things which people pursue over time. I am embarrassed to say, but I was actually a cheerleader for five years in a row and I ended up being the captain of the team. So, if I would code this activity from my own resume, I would code it as grit because it is multiyear and I went to the highest level in the end. Another thing I was really interested in, in a sort of abiding, continuous way, was public service. From eighth grade all the way through high-school, I was really serious about volunteer work. By the time I was in college I was doing something like 35 hours of volunteer work per week. So I guess just by looking at my own biography, I could say I have been pretty gritty.

**Some people may think that talking about adversities and challenges is far from feeling happy or being positive. How does studying grit relate to positive psychology?**

If you think about positive psychology very broadly – as it was intended to be – whatever makes life worth living is a legitimate subject for positive psychology. Therefore, it is not just about pleasure or contentment, but for example about accomplishment, as Marty points out in his theory of wellbeing in Flourish. When I was growing up my dad used to say that he didn't want to be happy, but successful. He wanted to achieve something. That time I never really understood what he was saying and thought, "Well, that is just your way of being happy". On a personal note, for me, it is more important to make a contribution to the world than to feel happy. So I do think that grit is an integral part of the study of wellbeing and happiness. For a lot of people, character is as important as is their subjective wellbeing or happiness, and grit is a character strength.

**Which one of the five elements in Marty's theory on PERMA would you consider most important to your own wellbeing?**

I would say that, apart for the relationships with my two kids and my husband, which are of course the most important thing to me, I think accomplishment is the next most important thing. Relationships are important to me to that extent. I would love to have enough time for really good friends, but I don't. I only have time to work really hard and to have a few friends – who I definitely don't see as much as I would like – and also to have my family. I would also say that positive emotion is very low down on my list. I feel much better when I achieve something, when I get a journal article accepted, than I do when, for example, I go out for a nice meal. I like being in flow, so that is engagement. I feel flow when I am teaching but that is still not as important to me as a sense of accomplishment is. About meaning, I have chosen to accomplish something that is meaningful, so that is where meaning and accomplishment blur a little bit for me. What motivates me is the work that I do and the fact that it might possibly help other people. So I would say that the 'A' in PERMA probably resonates with me the most.

**That was actually a perfect segue to the next question. Your field of study sounds so hard-core: grit, perseverance, self-discipline. How does studying grit show in your own life? Does your family do Ironman triathlons just for fun and practice martial arts in their spare time?**

We talk a lot about grit and psychology in our family. My kids are now 10 and 11 years old and they are both girls. My husband has to be the grittiest human in the world – no one is as gritty as him. For me the boundaries between work and family are blurry because my kids actually know what I do for a living and

what I research. In fact, they sometimes even read my papers. In terms of raising our kids, of course, I am very conscious about the extent to which we are encouraging them to be gritty. Naturally, we are encouraging them to be so many other things too that are important, like being honest, empathetic and generous. But with grit, in particular, we have a rule in our family, which is that everyone has to do a hard thing.

### **That is very William Jamesian!**

Yes, very Jamesian, exactly. My kids know who William James is, by the way, and we definitely talk about grit. When my daughter is practicing on the piano, I sometimes ask her, “Was that deliberate practice?”. She knows that deliberate practice is a very effortful form of practice, where you are doing things which are really hard for you and which you cannot do yet. You are really drilling into the task, performing several repetitions and with complete, focused attention. She knows about this, so she might say her practice was about a seven out of ten, on a scale of one to ten. So we do talk about it and I ask them for ideas. Kids are never too young to learn about psychology. Another rule in our family is that you have to finish what you begin. If you, for example, begin ballet classes and pay for the classes for the year, you have to finish it. You can switch, but not when you are having a bad day. You switch when you have finished what you have started.

### **What would you consider to be the highlights of your career so far?**

Well, let’s see. Last year I was able to go to the 20th-year anniversary celebration of the summer school that I founded when I was 22 years old. I felt proud that I had done that back then. When beginning, we had all the possible crises you can imagine and I paid all the expenses with my credit card. Now this

program covers about 10 percent of the kids in its local public schools. My husband came too and it was really good to share that with him. It also made me realize that nobody really does anything by themselves. The program has gone through, who knows how many, executive directors and also teachers who I have never even met. It also gave me a warm reminder about how one person doesn't have to try to do everything on their own, but that we can definitely start something and it multiplies and ripples. So, I was happy to start a ripple. Furthermore, I got tenured this year, which is great because I really like my job! I was crossing the street the other day with my daughter and suddenly, right in the middle of the crossroad, she goes: "Mom, you have an awesome job! Your job is to try to make people perfect!". I said it is not exactly that I'm trying to make anyone perfect, but that I am trying to help people to be better, happier and more successful. She continued, "That sounds great!". So anyway, I am really grateful and happy to be able to do the job that I do.

**Your background is deeply rooted in education but you have also pioneered the study of grit. Do you feel you are now where you should be or do you see yourself conquering yet another distinct field in the future?**

I feel that I have figured out where I want to be, but still wake up with the same questions as always.

- Why does it feel bad when we make a mistake and why don't we like making mistakes?
- How do we help people do more things that are good for them, even though they don't necessarily feel good in the moment?
- When does self-control start? Is it when you are there with the temptation or way before that?



These are the questions I have been waking up with for ten years, or since I started psychology. I am very well aware that any one person can make only a small contribution and I will work on these questions till I'm done. Maybe I will make a small contribution, and then the next generation will continue, and so on. The questions will not be fully solved in my lifetime, but I'm happy staying right here where I am, trying to make progress.

**You teach statistics in the MAPP program at Penn. I heard from some of my previous classmates it was one of the most fun classes during the semester and that they sometimes laughed so hard it hurt. What's that all about and how is this even possible? Do you spray the students with 'laughing gas' before starting the class?**

This is interesting. You know, I have never been afraid of or bored by math the way some people may have been. So when I got the assignment to teach research methods and statistics, I was thrilled. I thought that's great, this is such a terrific topic! I also knew that the MAPP students, because of what they wanted to do, needed to be able to read and understand scientific papers and articles. This is what they actually need, so I got really excited about it. It never occurred to me that it would be anything but fun. One of the things I enjoy about teaching statistics is that it is really not what people sometimes think it is. Often, when people actually start doing it many who never liked math, but know how to reason, understand that statistics is just a certain way of thinking and reasoning. The thing is that I really enjoy it. I teach statistics and positive psychology, and I almost enjoy teaching statistics more. They are just both equally fun. Every year I try to improve the course and think about how to make it more hands-on. I think if I keep changing and improving it, it keeps me interested and the course interesting.

### **What is the most exciting thing you are working on right now?**

Right now, I am most excited about developing interventions. Marty always encouraged me to do an intervention but I was hesitant because I was afraid we didn't know enough. I think he really taught me that if you try to intervene and change something, that is actually the fastest way to understand some phenomenon. So I am now going forward with it and we are trying to develop interventions that increase grit and that increase self-control. These are the two things I am most excited about right now.

### **What is the schedule for this work?**

We are working on grit interventions right now and we are trying to teach people about the science of deliberate practice: how talented people don't always try harder, why applied effort is incredibly effective in improving your skill and why people don't like to do it. My graduate student Lauren Eskreis-Winkler is going to pursue that for her doctoral research. On self-control, we have already done a bunch of studies showing that certain strategies help you. The big idea for me about self-control is that, it is not just about clenching your teeth and resisting the marshmallow or the next drink of alcohol, it is about using strategies that make it easier to be self-controlling. For example, if you don't turn on your TV, it is a lot easier not to watch it. If you face the TV away from you or place it in another room, it is a lot easier not to turn it on. These are all strategies that help you be more self-controlling but without the feeling of, "Oh no, this is really hard".

### **Who would you say have been your biggest inspirations for your research?**

Yes, this is really interesting. I have been really blessed to be mentored by some truly great people and great minds. Marty Seligman of course, who was

my advisor. Who, more than anything, taught me how to think, how to ask good questions and have a taste for what is important. A lot of people, who go to graduate school, focus so much on things like, "Did I answer the question the right way?", but what Marty focuses on a lot is, "Are we answering an important question in the first place?". Then there is Walter Mischel, who did the first delayed gratification experiments. I read his work and re-read it and re-read it. Every time there is some amazingly profound insight into the way people work. His intuitions about children, self-control, and more generally about human nature, are incredibly astute. It has been a pleasure being sort of mentored from a distance by him. I also worked relatively close to Jim Heckman, who is a Nobel Laureate economist. He is the grittiest, most curious person I know. I mean, he is really up there and must be in competition with my husband for the title of the grittiest man in the world. Finally, Carol Dweck, whom I think is such an important role model to me. She is out there changing the world, right now. In schools they know Carol Dweck better than they know Sigmund Freud, which is probably a good thing. She is also such a good person, and a warm and caring mentor. All of her students talk about how kind she is and how much she cares about her work. If I could accomplish a fraction of what she did and live that kind of a life with such integrity, that would be awesome.

**Thank you so much, Angela. Lastly, could you be so kind to share with us your favorite quote on grit?**

I don't know if this is particularly profound but I will just go for it. I was recently reading *Philadelphia Magazine* and I came across the following quote: "In the end it is all ok. If it's not ok, it's not the end".

## Adam Grant

**Adam Grant** is an award-winning teacher, researcher, and tenured management professor at Wharton. He is the author of the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling book *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*. Dr. Grant's research focuses on work motivation, prosocial giving and helping behaviors, job design and meaningful work, initiative and pro-activity. He has been recognized as the single highest-rated professor in the Wharton MBA program, one of *BusinessWeek's* favorite professors, one of Malcolm Gladwell's favourite social science writers, and one of the world's top 40 business professors under 40. Dr. Grant received his Ph.D. and M.S. from the University of Michigan in organizational psychology and his B.A. from Harvard University.

**What do you think are the defining characteristics of positive psychology, in general terms?**

Fundamentally, positive psychology is about how to bring out the best of the human condition. You can define that in a lot of ways – enhancing flourishing rather than just reducing suffering, promoting meaning and purpose instead of just alleviating alienation, and encouraging and fostering engagement rather than just reducing boredom.

**Could you tell us a bit about your background, how it relates to positive psychology and what actually made you become interested in the field?**

My interest in psychology was sparked when I was a kid. I remember my dad talking about self-fulfilling prophecies, and I didn't know it was a term from social science. It really piqued my interest when I started learning how to

perform magic, as so much of magic is about, “How do you surprise an audience?” or, “How do you misdirect attention?”. So it deals with the basic questions of cognitive psychology. When I started diving, I began to get much more interested in social and personality psychology. I remember trying to motivate myself to leap off of heights that felt terrifying, to somersault and twist in midair (and probably have a crash landing). Motivating myself was really challenging, as I was afraid of heights. It was also really interesting when I started coaching and had to motivate others to do similar things; it made me realize how useful psychology can be. When I got to college, I was drawn to take psychology and physics but felt like we had much more to learn about the fundamentals of psychology than the fundamentals of physics, and that I could probably contribute more to our understanding of the social world than the physical world.

I was incredibly lucky to have several mentors point me in the right direction. I don't know if any of them would call themselves positive psychologists, but they were interested in research and topics that aligned very well with the basic ideas from the field. One of my first mentors was Ellen Langer, who taught social psychology in Harvard. Ellen invited me to join a research lab at the end of the semester, and at that time I had no idea what research was. I thought professors were like high school or middle elementary school teachers; I really had no clue where the research came from. Ellen had, since the 1970s, studied how you can help people live longer by changing their assumptions about their lack of control and responsibility. She was also really interested in education: “How can you help people overcome negative stereotypes and help children overcome the mindset that certain skills are fixed?”. These core questions about how to make people's lives better were fascinating to me, and

I worked with Ellen for several years. At the same time, I was working as a manager at Let's Go Publications, and I applied a lot of what I was learning in my psychology classes to figure out who I should hire, how to motivate my staff, and how to negotiate effectively with clients. As a junior in college, I signed up for an organizational psychology class with Richard Hackman and was totally hooked. Richard published a seminal paper in 1971 with Ed Lawler on how to enrich jobs. The original model was about giving people autonomy and skill variety, involvement in a whole and identifiable piece of work from start to finish, as opposed to just a small portion of it, and helping them see the results of their work. The idea of enriching jobs was exciting. We spend most of our waking hours at work, but how many of us truly find our jobs fulfilling and rewarding and meaningful? Furthermore, Tal Ben-Shahar, who was a graduate student working with both Ellen and Richard at the time, approached me one day and said he was going to teach a new seminar with Philip Stone. It was going to be called positive psychology. Tal was a phenomenal teacher and a great mentor, and the topics included optimism, hope, creativity, resilience, happiness, and meaning. It's funny looking back: there were fewer than 25 of us in that first seminar, and within two years, it was the most popular class at Harvard, with over 1000 students. Tal recommended another class, which was taught by Brian Little, a visiting professor and personality psychologist. Brian has been studying personal projects since the 1960s, looking at human flourishing, wellbeing and happiness. In fact, he came to Harvard on a fellowship to work on a project called 'lives, liberties, and the happiness of pursuit'. He wouldn't define himself as a positive psychologist, but his work for four decades had covered many of the topics. I was mesmerized by Brian and his course, and ended up asking if he would advise my thesis, which he did. It involved studying individual and group effectiveness at Let's Go Publications,

blending some of my favorite concepts from Brian, Richard, Ellen, and Tal. That experience crystallized my decision to become an organizational psychologist.

**This is all incredibly interesting, Adam. It really offers people a chance to look behind the screen and understand the path that led our interviewees where they are now.**

When I made a list of schools I was interested in, I sat down and discussed them with Richard. He said, “If you get into Michigan, don’t go anywhere else”. Then I sat down with Brian, who said the exact same thing. I was excited about that because I grew up in Michigan, and after being away for four years, I was looking forward to being back home. I chose Michigan without any knowledge that Positive Organizational Scholarship was underway there! One of my mentors was Rick Price, who had done two decades of field experiments on helping people who lost jobs become reemployed, building their job search skills and self-efficacy. He was, yet again, another person studying topics you might put in the positive psychology bucket. Looking back, it is so funny that I chose Michigan for reasons completely unrelated to Positive Organizational Scholarship but which then ended up being a big focus there. At Michigan, my primary mentor and dissertation chair was Jane Dutton. As one of the leaders of the Positive Organizational Scholarship movement, she and her students put topics such as compassion and job crafting on the map, and fundamentally changed the way I saw the world.

**You’re a business professor and the business world is not necessarily seen as a beacon of altruism or pro-social behavior. How does working in Wharton help you pursue your goal of helping people live fuller lives?**

I had some hesitation when I was considering the offer to join Wharton because I saw it as a finance school. You know, images of Gordon Gekko came to my mind pretty quickly when I thought of Wharton. However, I have been very pleasantly surprised at how wrong this image was. There are many people and initiatives that are connected to the core values of what positive psychology stands for and cares about. One example is the Wharton Social Impact Initiative, which is about enabling students, faculty and organizations to make a greater difference. If you take any school with over 200 faculty members, you can see it has very diverse areas of expertise. For example the marketing department, which is usually associated with selling things, has professors who study happiness and moral identities. There is also an ethics department, which is rare at a business school.

**How does your work in Wharton relate to positive psychology?**

I am slightly ambivalent about positive psychology as an enterprise. On the one hand, it has been quite helpful and enormously productive in balancing out our research and making sure we study the good, not just the bad. On the other hand, some of the ideas have been misappropriated and studied with poor methods, and researchers sometimes make the mistake of only studying the positive side of things. I'm a huge proponent of studying the benefits of negative experiences and the costs of positive emotions. Understanding the full range of the phenomena we are studying is really important. That said, I have three domains of research that relate to positive psychology. One stream is on relational job design, which is about how we can connect employees who strive to make a difference with the people who they actually help, so they can see their impact. This ties very closely with relationships and meaning. The second stream of work grows right out of that and is at the heart my book, *Give and*



*Take.* What are the conditions that motivate people to give and help others, and what are the consequences for individual and collective success? A lot of work in positive psychology has been focused on the self and I'm interested to see how we can motivate people to engage in pro-social behavior for the benefit of others. Pro-social motivation and pro-social behavior can be seen as one of the foundational topics of positive psychology. The third topic grapples with proactivity and initiative. What motivates people to advocate for change, to challenge the status quo and to make organizations better? There's a positive psychology thread in how you support those behaviors and enable people to challenge the status quo to initiate change without being penalized for it (which so often happens).

Recently, I have been dabbling with a few other areas that relate to positive psychology. One is about challenging myths about extroversion that are especially pervasive in the United States. Introverts are often stigmatized as poor leaders and ineffective communicators. My recent studies, however, have shown that introverts are as effective as extroverts in leadership roles, and — when leading proactive employees—introverts actually turn out to be better leaders than extroverts. There is a connection to positive psychology: my colleagues and I examined a trait that is typically perceived as negative, and found the virtue in it. Also, Barry Schwartz and I wrote a paper in 2011 called “Too much of a good thing”, where we argue that if you go back to Aristotle, instead of studying strengths and virtues, we should be studying the mean between deficiencies and excesses. If we take every strength and virtue, and push them too far, you actually see negative effects on wellbeing and performance. For example, instead of saying how do we cultivate the character strength of generosity, I would ask, “How do we enable people to find the right

amount of generosity?” . We issued a challenge to positive psychology to study what causes a positive trait or strength or virtue to turn negative at high levels, what are the conditions that can delay that, and how we can prevent that sort of unintended consequence.

**You mentioned *Give and Take*, which was published earlier this year. Could you tell us a bit about the main ideas of the book?**

In a nutshell, I wanted to take a fresh look at what makes people, groups and organizations successful. I was struck by the fact that when we think about success, we tend to focus on individual factors like hard work, talent, and luck. However, the world of work has become more connected than ever before, and that means our interactions with others are a critical driver of success. That, for me, was somewhat missing from the conversation. I look at three fundamental styles of interaction that emerged as pretty close to universal across industries and cultures from several different bodies of research. I ended up calling them ‘taker,’ ‘matcher,’ and ‘giver’ styles. When people walk into interactions with others, they have different motives, goals or values. Takers are trying to get as much as possible from others, matchers are those who try to maintain an even exchange, and givers are those who frequently help others without any strings attached. By giving, I don’t necessarily mean volunteering or being a philanthropist; I’m interested in behaviors like freely sharing knowledge, introducing two people who could benefit from knowing each other, stepping up to be a mentor to a new hire in your organization or helping a colleague solve a problem.

What really intrigued me was evidence that in life people often hold really strong giver values, yet at work most people act like matchers. I was interested

in how the three styles play out, and I looked at research on performance in a bunch of different domains. It turns out that if you look at engineering, medicine and sales, the givers had the worst results: they were the least productive engineers, the medical students with the worst grades, and the salespeople with the lowest annual revenue. They were so concerned about helping other people that they lost a lot of time and energy needed to get their own work done productively and efficiently. The givers were more likely to burn out, and they were more likely to be exploited and taken advantage of by takers. Yet, when I looked at the top, at who was the most successful, it wasn't the takers or the matchers; it was the givers again. The most productive engineers, the medical students with the best grades, the salespeople with the highest annual revenue, were also people who had the most concern for helping others. The matchers and the takers were more likely to be somewhere in the middle with average performance. The book is about two questions that sprang from that set of findings: 1) what do successful givers do that takers and matchers can learn?, and 2) what differentiates the givers at the top from the givers at the bottom? How do you help others without sacrificing your own success and wellbeing?

**Do you remember a specific moment that prompted you to write this book or when did you get the feeling that this was the direction you wanted to pursue?**

I had many role models who inspired me as examples of successful givers. My diving coach, Eric Best, spent a remarkable amount of time outside of the season coaching me and other divers for free. He must have spent several thousand hours over the course of four years just helping me become a better diver, helping me outside of his job description for no compensation. Not only

did he give a tremendous amount of time to his divers, but he had the best track record of any diving coach in the state. In college, Brian Little in particular stood out as an extraordinary example of a giver who would drop everything for his students, giving countless hours to recommend studies to explore, provide feedback on drafts, recommend additional statistical analyses, and talk with students about their lives and careers. After working with Brian, I decided that if I could have a fraction of the impact on students over a career that he's had in a typical week, I'd feel like I did something really worthwhile.

**What role do you think the business world and corporations play in creating a more flourishing world?**

Most people spend most of their waking hours at work, and that makes organizations possibly the most influential site for shaping our experiences. I also think that organizations play a huge role because, unlike a lot of the other domains of life, they set practices and policies that affect us on a daily basis. If you were a psychologist trying to help people have better marriages, a lot of your work would be influencing people one or two at a time, whereas if you're trying to create a better workplace, you can often do that on a much larger scale. Work is a major source of identity, not just a place where we spend a lot of time, so many people define themselves by their jobs. It's not the case in all organizations, occupations, or countries, but here in the US, when you meet someone for the first time, most often the first question you're asked is, "What do you do?". The expected answer to that is not, "I am a father" or, "I volunteer for the community". 'What do you do?' means what is your job, where do you work? That is one of the illustrations of the centrality of work in people's lives, and as a result I think organizations play an enormous role in shaping whether people flourish or flounder.

**How do you think organizations (on a broader level) can impact global change which has potential to lead to a more flourishing world?**

Through the lens of *Give and Take*, I would love to see more organizations create conditions where givers are successful, as opposed to the all-too-common situation of givers contributing to the organization at their own expense. There are a lot of different ways to think about that. We could think about creating mechanisms for supporting ‘help seeking’ as well as ‘help giving’, screening out people who have a history of acting like takers, and also finding ways of discouraging ‘taking’ behavior. If we can create norms where it’s acceptable to be helpful, that you can do that without compromising your wellbeing or your success, I think that would be a nice contribution.

**What would your message be to the new generation of business leaders and future influencers?**

My message would be that, some people succeed by cutting others down, and others succeed by lifting others up. I would love to see more research on how the latter group achieves success and how to sustain their wellbeing.

**Dr. Marty Seligman stated recently that “The world is turning”, implying that the world is becoming more open to positive psychology and its applications. Do you see this happening in a business context as well? Will we see more and more ‘givers’ in top leadership positions?**

Yes, I think so. I’ve been in touch with a surprising number of leaders who are working on building cultures of givers in their organizations, and designing mechanisms to reward and promote people who don’t only have excellent individual results, but also consistently act for the benefit of others.

**Business is often a harsh, cut-throat environment, and might not be considered to go hand-in-hand with wellbeing. What advice would you give to young business students at your school? How does one not only stay sane, but also live a life of fulfillment and flourishing while being immersed in an environment which is often highly stressful?**

For me, this is a stereotype that doesn't necessarily hold true as widely or deeply as many people assume. There are aspects of the business world that are ruthless and extremely competitive, especially industries and professions that are dominated by takers. But there are also many workplaces where people are helpful, supportive and caring, where that is an industry norm or an organizational value. I think what's interesting is that most organizations, like most people, fall somewhere in the middle of that spectrum and basically follow matching norms, where people play it safe, trade favors, and are a little bit cautious with others. That's more common than organizations being competitive, cut-throat places. One of the best pieces of advice that I received was from Jane Dutton. She observes that if you find yourself in an environment that's toxic, you can build a micro-community of people who share your values and aspirations. It may be the case that you work in an organization where a lot of people are not supportive, but I'm willing to bet that most people in most organizations can find pockets of mentors or colleagues who are willing to help and support each other.

**What do you think will be the next hot topic in positive psychology in the coming years?**

I would like to see more research on the 'too much of a good thing' phenomenon. I would also love to learn more about the conditions that support helping and giving behavior, and make the consequences positive for

the giver — not only the recipient. In terms of big topics, one question that I've discussed with a number of people is whether there is such a thing as a 'eudaimonic treadmill'. We're all familiar with the hedonic treadmill: people often adapt to positive experiences, to the point that they can be fleeting and difficult to sustain. I believe the question was posed by Robert Rebele: is the same true for meaning and purpose? In the work context, if you experience a particular task as meaningful, does doing that task over and over again cause the sense of purpose to fade?

**Thank you so much, Adam. Do you have a favorite quote and would you mind sharing it with the readers?**

Here's one of my favorite funny quotes, from an anonymous source: "I dream of a better tomorrow, where chickens can cross the road and not be questioned about their motives".

## Esa Saarinen

**Esa Saarinen** is professor of applied philosophy at Aalto University in Finland, specializing in philosophy of life, creative problem solving and systems analysis. Dr. Saarinen is an eminent figure in his home country and a beloved international speaker, who has made it his life mission to tangibly improve the world, as well as to reduce emotional negativism by creating accessible contexts of personal insights on living one's life. He is also a co-creator of a field called systems intelligence thinking. Dr. Saarinen has been a presenter for the current Master of Applied Positive Psychology class at the University of Pennsylvania.

**In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?**

Positive psychology offers a scientific outlook to the classic Socratic call for a better life. Instead of approaching human beings from the perspective of deficiency, positive psychology investigates, identifies and helps foster “the better angels of our nature”, as Abraham Lincoln put it.

**Could you tell us a bit about yourself? Who are you and what do you do?**

I'm a philosopher. I was trained in analytic philosophy, and was quite theoretically oriented at first, then went on to existentialism, philosophy of culture and to media philosophy, but for the past twenty years or so my interest has been in helping people live better in their everyday. I consider my approach as one of applied positive philosophy and as a positive philosophical practice. Much of my work takes place in lecture contexts, i.e. orally, rather than literally. I view philosophy as a performative art. The sources of inspiration



are multiple but the aim is one: to create lecture-based contexts for people to engage in the reflection of their lives and their modes of thinking.

### **What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?**

I came to positive psychology fairly late through my positive philosophical practice. That practice had started with my work with organizations in the 1990s and with my interest to develop the lecture form in an experiential and performative direction. In organizational settings, working with people of various ranks and professions, it was clear one could not ride with the argumentative, analytic and knowledge-based paradigms of academia. In particular, the need to make things work, and work better, was pressing. Even at the university, since the early 1980's, I had searched for expressive power philosophy that would have emotional appeal and communicative reach. What helped that project was the fact that in 1980 I became a media figure, known as the "punk doctor", as a result of some cultural interventions and controversial appearances. After meeting my special lady and falling in love with her, I continued the high profile approach I had already adopted and I just couldn't help talking about her all the time, also at my lectures. Accompanied by constant media appearances all this created extra draw to the lectures. My passion was to find ways in which philosophy could be more relevant, more personal, more vitalistic and rock 'n roll-like – a positive force in people's lives and also great fun. This drew criticism on the basis of my alleged populism, naive positivity and lack of serious substance. After developing and practicing a personally engaging life-philosophical lecture style both at university and in work-life settings, I found in positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship a welcome research-based justification for what I had tried to do for years.

**Were there some key events in your life which prompted you to become interested in positive psychology or did it happen gradually over time?**

Since 1995 I had organized seminars on “Magnificent Life” in Paphos, Cyprus, as an off-site, one-week, lecture-based set-up open to anybody, at which surprisingly much seemed to happen to the participants. Whatever personal characteristics I might have provided nothing like an adequate explanation of why so many people found the Paphos week so rewarding. Nor was the objective content the reason, because mostly I discussed themes that have been the same for 2000 years. Nor is the set-up that special. Basically it is just myself speaking for a few hours per day in sessions of about one hour, followed by a short discussion in spontaneous groups. While the approach is lecture-based, I do not really teach anything. I do not introduce a discipline. I do not present techniques or engage the participants in group work or exercise. So what is the reason for the elevation and uplift, the flow of insight and energy, the big and small personal transformation that the participants invariably experienced? Once I learned of positive psychology I started to look for explanations for what seemed to happen at Paphos. The point of positive psychology for me, and of positive organizational scholarship, was to make sense of why something that worked so powerfully in practice might also work in theory.

Fredrickson’s *Broaden and Build Theory*, indeed Barbara’s whole approach to positivity, was a great eye opener to me along with Losada’s work on team dynamics. One could make science out of the phenomena I had approached through practice! I had long been frustrated by what I felt was the lack of life and an implicit negative bias in academic philosophy. It was tremendous to see that the Socratic approach to philosophy that I wished to represent – one that

is devoted to the project of a better life – could be linked with empirical facts of the human condition. I felt that my own Socratic philosophical practice was part of a major development of our time, the emergence of the science of the positive.

### **Systems thinking and positive psychology, isn't that kind of like olives and honey? How do they go together?**

Life is fundamentally a holistic phenomenon. Systems thinking is basically an effort to conceptualize holistic structures and the functioning of interdependencies. As a science of wholes, systems thinking deals with relationality, feedback mechanisms, co-creativity, dynamism and change. Positive psychology is an effort to address the holistic question of what makes life worth living; and systems thinking, along with chaos theory and the theory of adaptive systems, is its natural ally.

### **How is systems intelligence thinking different from systems thinking, if at all?**

Systems intelligence is basically positive naturalistic systems thinking as embedded in a context. It is an operative concept, not only descriptive. The point is to acknowledge the situational, embedded nature of the human condition along with the orientation to act intelligently in the absence of complete knowledge of the multiple-layered situation. As we saw with Raimo Hämäläinen, the pivotal idea of systems intelligence was to address intelligence of acting within systems beyond your cognitive reach. Our focus was on intelligent behavior in the context of complex systems involving interaction, feedback, co-evolution and incomplete knowledge. The point was to shed light on action that perceives itself as taking place from within wholes that remain partly invisible. What become critical are the influence and the co-evolutionary

possibilities that emerge and the fundamental human capability to operate intelligently in the midst of complex interdependent compounds. We offered systems intelligence as an umbrella term through which people could orient themselves more successfully within their pragmatic environments – breaking systems dictatorships in favor of more intelligent approaches. As such, systems intelligence was an instrumental concept at the same time as being theoretical. We cherished the pragmatist idea of making things work in the present moment as opposed to explaining them in retrospect.

As a concept, once accessed systems intelligence is remarkably easy to use. With its emphasis on systems it opens the door to dynamics and wholes but does that from within, unlike systems thinking, which is a descriptive enterprise that looks at systems from without. From the point of view of the positive psychology movement the concept of systems intelligence can help people realize their positive psychological potential. We are an assembly of dynamic wholes – systems empowered with intelligence. The challenge is to be intelligent with the complexity of that largely cognitively inaccessible system that we are.

**Can you describe some recent practical applications within the field of systems intelligence thinking with regards to positive psychology?**

Therapy discourse is one. A key idea of positive psychology is improvement, the building up from one's resources. That of course applies to therapy context quite naturally, to which systems perspectives have been applied with considerable success. With Frank Martela we point out that the systems concept of therapy discourse cannot be one that reifies the therapist-patient dyad to something you envision from outside in objective terms. The therapist

is looking for leverage from the dyad as a system but largely instinctively, through her sensibilities and attunement, i.e., systems intelligently. Frank Martela has also conceptualized elderly care as systems intelligence, and Nina Sajaniemi and her students have applied the concept for years to teacher education, particularly from the point of view of how to deal with challenging children in a systems intelligent classroom. There are exciting applications to environmental contexts by Raimo Hämäläinen and his collaborators. We've also applied the concept to decision-making as well as to understanding team dynamics. Katariina Nummi-Kuisma has related the concept to music teaching, and of course it is a key component in my own organizational and work life interventions and a key tool in my life-philosophical lecturing.

**You come from a strong background in theoretical philosophy and have great passion for positive psychology. What do you consider to be the greatest benefits of combining these two fields? Can philosophy somehow help positive psychology achieve its ultimate goal of a more flourishing world?**

I think pragmatic philosophy is the twin sibling of positive psychology, along with character ethics. Positive psychology wants to improve life by uncovering scientifically the realm of human strengths. The aim is to pave the way for a more meaningful, better life. This is essentially the project of Socrates. Even the more analytically, conceptually oriented philosophy, in spite of its tendencies to slide into esoteric directions, can be helpful in clarifying the conceptual basis of positive psychology.

**You mentioned the Paphos seminars. Could you tell us a bit about that?**

The Paphos seminar is a project I have run 41 times since 1995. With about 100 participants per seminar, twice a year, I travel to Cyprus for a get-away retreat.

About 3500 people from all walks of life have participated, many repeatedly. The seminar is a semi-structured environment for extremely intense, focused, elevated thinking about one's life. What is amazing to many participants is that there are no privileged teachings or techniques he or she would be expected to internalize. Nobody needs to participate in any specific way. There are no tasks of any kind, nothing in which people could stumble and feel inferior. There are no secret rites or tension-building proceedings. The set-up is extremely down-to-earth, straightforward, minimalistic and transparent. But it amounts to an opportunity to engage in a highly personal reflection with excitement and nuance, to jump into the energized flow of one's own thinking, with a possibility to discuss with other participants the emerging insights. My role is to stimulate the process, to offer perspectives and suggest alternatives, and to guide the atmosphere to be warm, respectful, accepting, open, sensitive to alternatives, supportive and non-judgmental. It is a context for elevated reflections for anybody and for everybody – a kind of mindfulness intervention, if you will.

**You were born and raised in Finland. How is positive psychology taking off there, and what are you most excited about in this regard?**

Positive psychology is very much on the rise in Finland – and for reasons of some interest internationally. Finns are typically suspicious of positivity due to its associations with superficiality and pretense. Finns are a pragmatic, no-nonsense people who appreciate authenticity, straight talk and facts. This is good news for positive psychology because of its science and because it works.

**Imagine you fell asleep and woke up five years later. Imagine also that the principle of positive education, positive governance, positive leadership and**

**the like were being implemented in Finland. What would the country look like?**

Finland would be a leading country in the world in generating grass roots innovations for sustainable solutions for people to live together and work together. Building up from our strong egalitarian culture and communal orientation, it would strengthen the life projections of individual people while at the same time be looking out more openly to the global scene. It would be a less speedy, less hectic Finland – and more productive. In my view, working from one's strengths on the basis of our common human endowment, with upscale categories of life bright and high on the mental and social landscape, leads to a more positive future almost irresistibly.

**I guess that was a nice utopian question for a philosopher. Now back to real life. What do you consider the most important steps in achieving this vision?**

Reflection is the key. That means putting issues in perspective, and putting perspectives in perspective. Sensing the truly significant as well as the systemic effects of our actions. Only thinking can save us – better thinking by each of us.

**You also taught at the University of Pennsylvania's Master of Applied Positive Psychology program. How did you get involved and what was your vision for this class?**

Yes, Marty asked me to join his crew for one of the current MAPP onsite, which was indeed an enormous honor. My hope was to create a platform for elevated reflection and for accelerated insight; a moment for positive philosophy on one's personal everyday. It draws inspiration from the ancient promise of philosophy – to engage in reflection that is relevant for one's life, for the benefit of all. A life worth living is a life that is examined and re-

examined. We are guided by our thoughts, but one of our inborn strengths is the capacity to become more mindful of those thoughts and dig deeper into our own miracles and the wonders of life with our reflective powers.

**You are a beloved figure in Finland. Any chance we will also see you more abroad in the coming years?**

As I grow older, I look less for travel as a value in itself. But people are the same everywhere. I love people; I love the concert-like seminar situation. The last seminar I had here in Finland had 18 nationalities. Elevation is a chief ingredient in my seminars and that is a communal affair, something that a group of people can stimulate one another to create and to enjoy. As far I am concerned, it emerges equally well using the Finnish language as English, and I love doing both. What inspires me most is the beauty of the process as a kind of music of the possibilities of life, as played out by the master orchestra assembled for the occasion. Serving as a part of such an orchestra of intensive life-philosophical reflection is what I live for.

**What are your plans for the future with regard to positive psychology and what are you most passionate about right now?**

My greatest passion is in the joining of forces with others in the shared living presence of a life-philosophical reflection process. I love the attunement to people and the processes by which they gain insights as they emerge in settings such as my Paphos seminar or my shorter Elevation seminars. But I also want to compose, to write in literary form on the miracles that happen, as well as to understand the ensuing process of positive emergence; the kind of uplifting spirals that I have witnessed transform people, and create beautiful long tails with astonishing belated change effects.



**Who do you most look up to in the field of positive psychology and who inspires you?**

More than I can describe I admire Martin Seligman, Barbara Fredrickson and Mihály Csikszentmihályi, as scholars, visionaries, thinkers and human beings. For me, they are the greatest of the greats, but then again there are people like Jane Dutton and Adam Grant whose work is breathtaking, but whom I do not know personally. I seldom go to conferences or visit departments so I do not meet that many people. The field of positive psychology should be open at its borders and low in its thresholds to neighboring disciplines, to philosophy, education, cognitive science, therapy, developmental studies, anthropology, economics, systems sciences, and so on. A positive psychologist, at least a positive pragmatist philosopher, should be open to everything. This leads to towering figures such as Howard Gardner, Mark C. Taylor, Pierre Hadot, Christopher Alexander, B. Alan Wallace, Beatrice Beebe, Daniel Stern, Edmund Phelps, Peter Senge, thinkers and scholars of the positive and visionaries for a more positive future.

**Lastly, could you share with us your favorite quote of all time?**

“There is more to us than meets the eye – more that is good”.

## Dianne Vella-Brodrick

**Dianne Vella-Brodrick** is a Senior Lecturer at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, and an adjunct Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology and Psychiatry at Monash University. Dr. Vella-Brodrick is Director of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program at the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne, is Secretary of the International Positive Psychology Association, and Editor in Chief of the journal *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*. Dr. Vella-Brodrick's research interests include the development and evaluation of wellbeing programs, particularly in the areas of positive education and workplace wellbeing.

### **In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?**

Happiness is multifaceted and so there are a number of different dimensions and pathways that can be followed to attain happiness. This means that people have options on how to pursue happiness. At the same time, however, I think there are core ingredients that are necessary for happiness. Essentially happiness is most likely experienced as a by-product of being a good person who considers and cares about other people. That's an important message to send out, because often people think that it's about feeling joyful and looking for pleasure all the time, so it's an important reminder that happiness is multifaceted and that there are different components. And really, the core components are less about the joyfulness part of it, and more about the eudaimonic qualities. It is a bonus if all the components of happiness are experienced, especially if these are simultaneous.

### **What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?**

Positive psychology has provided practical tools for people to use in their day-to-day life. So it's been able to deliver easy to use strategies for enhancing wellbeing. For example these include, the three good things and the best possible self activities, gratitude visits, or savouring exercises. These are methods that anybody can take up and practice at their own convenience and usually without the aid of health professionals. So positive psychology has been instrumental in being able to come up with these very simple, effective interventions. Along with that, positive psychology has been able to create a bridge between the academic world and the lay person. This is achieved by developing and evaluating activities and interventions that are easy to relate to and apply in the course of everyday life. This makes the science more accessible to the general public. So there is that transfer of knowledge that is often lacking in some of the other scientific disciplines.

### **The applied part of it?**

Yes, the applied part. But the applied part comes as a result of the empirical studies. The way in which the results from the empirical studies are presented and articulated is digestible to the general public.

### **What's one aspiration you have for positive psychology? In five years from now, if it all went as you desire, how would positive psychology be different?**

What I'd like to see for positive psychology is for it to have an open account of all the ways in which a positive life is helpful and at times not helpful. For example, the work of Jo Fordyce illustrates that there are situations in which it is not helpful to be positive, and that being negative also has useful functions. Positive psychology has a role to play in teasing out and articulating these

differences. I'm not saying that positive psychology is not doing that. In some ways we are. But a lot of the criticism that is levelled at positive psychology is because we are not sufficiently explicit and open about the specific conditions that facilitate or hamper particular outcomes. We need to ask the hard questions ourselves, but we also need to receive the hard questions and think about ways in which we can test those hard questions collaboratively, to be more effective at ideas addressing concerns with evidence. The other aspect is that the development of positive psychology has been very fast paced. We've achieved a lot in the time that positive psychology has been around, so it's important for us to stop and reflect on our achievements. At the same time we must acknowledge our shortcomings and develop a collective strategy for moving forward. One way could be through the development and distribution of grants on prioritized research areas and methods.

**What do you think are the most valid criticisms of positive psychology at the moment?**

One of the biggest criticisms is that positive psychology is fairly insular. There are more people from diverse backgrounds being trained in positive psychology, so the positive psychology circle is going to continue to grow; but I mean insular in the sense that there are some outstanding scientists, scholars, practitioners from other disciplines who could provide some really fundamental information to feed into positive psychology, to be able to propel it further than it has already gone, that we could be drawing on. Often I don't think we are drawing on and integrating that expertise as much as we could be.

### **We are reinventing the wheel a bit?**

Yes, at times. But also that we are not taking up new developments and methods from other fields. For example, it could be things like using physiological measures and social mapping via the latest technological advances. At present, positive psychology seems to rely predominantly on self report, cognitive – and to a lesser extent emotional – assessments, and I think it needs to integrate more effectively with contemporary developments occurring in other disciplines. Another example concerns integrating professional practice and ethical frameworks into our positive psychology work and understanding how previous reflections on topics such as virtue, morals and community connectedness intersect. Other disciplines such as theology, sociology and philosophy can offer some important contributions which might be worth deeper exploration and integration than has occurred to date. So I think that we could be better connected with different disciplines that would offer unique expertise and complement the significant developments occurring in positive psychology. More synthesis of ideas and practices from different disciplines needs to occur in my opinion.

### **So a bit more of an interdisciplinary focus rather than a sole focus on positive psychology?**

Yes, most definitely; a more integrated approach would help to address a common criticism of positive psychology.

### **Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology?**

At the moment my main focus is on developing a multi-method approach to evaluating programs. Positive psychology has made great inroads with developing interventions, whether they are workplace or school-based

interventions, individual or online interventions. However, I think an area that does need more work is in evaluating those interventions. So I've been working with a team of scholars from the University of Melbourne and Monash University on a multi-method approach which focuses on identifying thoughts and feelings, psychobiological factors and behavioural measures of wellbeing. In particular I think the behavioural part is a very important ingredient of this whole measurement approach because we are about behaviour change, and that's what is going to create improved wellbeing. The behaviour change impacts the biology and then cements the whole enhancement process. Ideally interventions should be aimed at achieving not just short-term effects, but also long-term effects, and I think that if you can permeate at the deeper, biological levels, that will create more lasting impact. What we've been doing is using a variety of assessment methods, including biological markers of wellbeing and the experience sampling method (ESM). For the ESM we've been using iPod touch devices with purpose designed software that taps into relevant contextual factors like who the person is with, what they are doing, whether they've had a pleasant or unpleasant experience since they were last beeped, and the strategies they have used to respond to their noted experiences. Participants use dropdown menus to select a range of strategies in response to their nominated experience. We are interested in knowing whether the positive intervention or wellbeing program being evaluated has enabled participants to improve the strategies that they use in response to their daily functioning, and whether they have been satisfied with the outcome that has emerged from the use of that strategy. What this means is that we can see whether the program is indeed having the intended effect, and whether the strategies that are being endorsed or advocated for the participants are realistic, and whether they can be implemented in their real world. We also

assess daily cortisol level slopes, so we ask people to provide saliva samples throughout the day. We also run focus groups in which we strive to understand the thought processes and experience of that person. Collectively these methods provide us with a more complete picture about how that person is engaging with the intervention not just at the statistical level, but also at the practical real-world level.

**It really sounds like you're stepping up a notch in design and complexity, which is no easy feat! Can you tell me a bit about the Masters in Applied Positive Psychology program you are involved in developing at Melbourne University?**

It's a new program with its first intake of students occurring in July 2013. The MAPP caters for people who are working, so that they can commit to further study in a realistic way and implement the new knowledge and skills acquired from the MAPP into their professional and personal lives. Classes are taught in teaching intensive blocks (3 x 2day blocks per subject) and then there are on-line activities using an innovative e-learning platform that promotes higher order thinking, reflection and peer to peer learning. In 2014 we will also be offering full-time places for those who wish to focus more intensely on their studies. The MAPP comprises four subjects: the first is a foundational subject on positive psychology; the second focuses on the application of positive psychology in a variety of life domains, the third is on positive leadership and organisations, and the fourth is a research project. The program accepts and attracts people from a wide range of disciplines who can offer different perspectives on key themes within positive psychology. It's important that you have educators, policy makers, work place leaders, economists and psychologists all working together to create positive change. This

interdisciplinary collaboration and whole systems approach can generate good traction for creating widespread real-world improvements. So to have people from those different disciplines coming together to discuss various issues within positive psychology and how to make changes, would ignite connections, passion and strategic action. The third subject about leadership and organisations is critical because, in essence, we want to train these MAPP students to be leaders of positive change, to go out there and play key roles in making a difference, whether to families, school settings, or more broadly in the community, at government and policy level. The research project is important because we want to ensure that each of the students has a good knowledge base to be able to understand the practical implications of research. Some may also want to conduct research of their own or progress to further postgraduate research studies in the future. Providing students with opportunities to conduct applied research with some of our partner organisations will help them to develop the necessary research methods skill set. We also want to promote the science behind positive psychology and research and critical thinking are integral components in this respect.

**So it's a one or two -year program?**

The first intake is part-time taught over two years (one subject a semester over two years). From 2014 we are also offering full-time places and this will take one year to complete (two subjects per semester).

**What's the new hot topic for positive psychology in the coming two years? Do you see any area coming on strong or do you see a new area that has not been developed yet?**



Connecting with the environment and nature is an important topic, because nature is accessible to most people and it's not artificially induced. Although you can try to replicate nature in buildings and urban planning, nature takes us back to our grass roots. Most people, when they experience fresh air and green vegetation around them, feel a strong connection and this helps them to unwind from the pressures of a hectic lifestyle. There has been some initial work done on the physical and psychological effects of green spaces and I believe positive psychology would have an important role to play in this field too. Although George Burns has focused his clinical work on nature-guided therapy, I don't think green space and exercise has been explored to its full potential. Positive psychology can examine the utility of nature as an intervention for enhancing wellbeing and desired outcomes such as creativity, environmental sustainability and pro-social behaviours. The connection with nature is not just about looking at nature, but it is also about being immersed in it. I would love to see more attention paid to this, and to linking natural environments and physical exercise (e.g., bushwalking, camping, snow skiing). Methods of re-creating nature at times when we cannot immerse ourselves in nature are also needed and this is something positive psychology could work with others from urban planning, architecture and environmental sciences to take the lead on.

### **What else is happening in positive psychology in Australia at the moment?**

A lot of work is taking place in Australia, particularly in the space of positive education. Schools with a strong positive psychology curriculum such as Geelong Grammar School are now involved in comprehensive evaluations to examine the longer term effects on wellbeing and academic performance of introducing positive education. Many more schools, including government

schools, are now adopting positive education programs to varying extents. The city of Adelaide is also thriving at the moment, particularly in response to Marty Seligman's recent visits as part of the 'Thinkers in Residence' program. Marty's brief was to create a flourishing city. There has been a lot of discussion about how to develop and implement wellbeing and positive psychology programs to make a happy city and how to measure the effects. One way of accessing large numbers of people is through education, so there is a lot of work being done at the moment through education systems. And it's largely based around the PERMA model.

**What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers and practitioners?**

Positive psychology needs to be sampled first hand. You've got to lead by example and it's critical that you are aware of the enablers and prohibitors of being able to implement positive psychology interventions. First-hand experiences puts you in the position of being more critical and realistic about the best ways to implement and to maintain positive interventions. At first, people can be very excited about using positive psychology practices in their day-to-day life, but it's maintaining that same level of interest in the long term and embedding these approaches and behaviours in their life that is really important. If you are able to do that yourself, then it means that you've thought through some of the issues such as adaptation, and developed strategies for countering these which you can share with others. The other thing that I would advise is that you consult widely with others, read a variety of books in positive psychology and related areas, and regularly refer to appropriate journals and read some of the key research studies, and watch some TED talks. This will provide you with a good knowledge base and the

confidence to generate and implement your own innovative and bold ideas. In this way you can leave a valuable and notable imprint that will help to progress the field of positive psychology and our understanding of what contributes to the experience of the 'good life'.

## Tayyab Rashid

**Tayyab Rashid** is a licensed clinical psychologist and researcher at the University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada. Dr. Rashid's expertise includes positive clinical psychology (positive psychotherapy), strength-based resilience, posttraumatic growth, multicultural psychotherapy and positive education.

### **In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?**

The defining features are, to me, first that positive psychology brings equal attention to strengths that are authentic and the intact resources of individuals, of groups, of communities, of societies. And that is critically important because we have an in-built negativity bent, so we don't need much to look for negatives. Our consciousness captures and often capitalizes on them almost seamlessly. We do need some extra push to look for positives, and positives in a genuine and realistic manner, not in a shallow way. So the first salient feature of positive psychology is that it has brought to the attention of psychologists that life is not always about damage control, life is not all about looking at the glass half empty. Life is also about looking at the genuinely filled part of the glass. Sometimes it is less than half full and sometimes it is more than half full but the beauty is in embracing these fluctuations. Positive psychology is looking at the silver lining, even in the toughest circumstances. For me the genuine, scientific attention to the positive is a defining feature of positive psychology. And the second feature, I would say, is that as human beings we are not just a product of catastrophic thinking, faulty neurocirculation, genetic causalities, damaged childhoods, or victim of harsh circumstances. There is inbuilt good in us, there is inbuilt capacity to grow, to

be good, not to be just happy. I think that positive psychology makes a very concerted effort to distinguish between a smiley cheery happy face versus being just a good human being who is grateful, resilient, who is working towards the benefit of others and also themselves. Someone who is kind, who provides goodness that tends towards opening up the future. To summarize, positive psychology features equal attention to the positive and to the capacity to grow as human beings. That is what positive psychology has brought from philosophical abstract ideas into the scientific realm. It's a genuine, exciting scientific question now.

**So you trained as a clinical psychologist and then moved into the world of positive psychology also. What brought you into positive psychology?**

Misery! I was doing my doctoral work in clinical psychology and all I needed to do in order to pass my exam was to remember which seven of the nine symptoms would qualify someone to be measuredly depressed. Which constellation of symptoms would make someone qualify as anxious or obsessive or compulsive? Ok, they need to have obsessions, and what are their compulsions. All these are so seductively exciting, but ultimately portray a depressing but quintessentially, incomplete picture of a human being. I saw my role as sitting on this chair and my client is sitting in front of me. So they come in and they are in psychiatric distress, and all my hours are spent rehashing their distress into a very elaborate symptomology and it gave me a sort of a power. I could dispense a diagnosis and they would accept it readily. But ultimately, the joy that I got once I moved into positive psychology, eliciting, elaborating and enhancing accounts of human kindness. I'll give you one example. I had a client today, who two weeks ago was in a very bad way and has previously been diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder. This person

was having relationship problems and not knowing quite what to do and quite unsure of herself, and she described seeing “things missing in me” and “things missing around me”, people telling her, and a loved one telling her, what she should have done but hasn’t done. She was always thinking about the inadequacies. So what I have done is give her a hand-out which asks her to deliberately look for something positive, genuinely positive. She came in today after two weeks and said, “Sorry, I haven’t done your exercise”, and I said “Humm.” She said, “I didn’t write it, but I started thinking, and once I started thinking, I noticed that there are certain positive things in my life and I felt less miserable, less anxious, and less depressive.” And lo and behold, we also set an outcome measure before every session. Clients come in and do a measure about their symptomology. Her score has declined significantly. So that is an illustration that if I was doing typical clinical psychology and looking at only the depressive thinking I would not bring her attention to the positives or train her to find them. So that has been rewarding.

**Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology? You’re obviously well known for positive psychotherapy. Actually, I guess I’m also interested in how positive psychotherapy actually started.**

The birth of PPT came about when I was doing my clinical training at the University of Pennsylvania. At that point positive psychology had just gathered some attention and some momentum, but most of the experimental and social studies at that point were done with college students. So Marty said, “Tayyab, you are doing your PhD in clinical psychology,” – at that time I was also working in a clinic – “do you think that positive psychology has any application or any viability for clients who might be depressed or anxious?” So I said “Let’s ask this question as a genuine scientific question.” At that time Marty had already

started some testing exercises, such as exploring your strengths, gratitude visits, acknowledging blessings. So what I did was to put them together in a manual and started thinking about their application – their flexible application – with clients who might have psychiatric issues, genuine problems which have lingered long enough for them to need professional help. So I put this package together and we randomly assigned people to one of three PPT groups: individual, treatment as usual, and treatment as usual plus medication. And we found that PPT did pretty well; and since then there have been a couple of studies by myself and by others, and we are finding that it is quite effective. I'd be very careful about calling it a "gold standard" treatment: it's not where CBT is today, I won't say that. To establish efficacy of treatment one needs well designed studies completed by independent clinicians and researchers. But I think it has potential. We need more studies but I have seen first-hand evidence of its value when you do it carefully, without dismissing negatives. You need to do it with enough people and with some mindfulness of the application of concepts such as what gratitude is; and also paying equal attention to how strengths might be related with weaknesses, with symptoms. It's not that you look only at symptoms of depression or anxiety, but you can also conceptualize looking at strengths such as kindness. Maybe sometimes people are too kind, and that kindness can go either way. That could be a sign of symptoms. Sometimes people are too narrowly focused on some things, for example they might be curious, but curious in only one way and not in others, such as in a narrow domain. Life requires a balanced and modulated use of strengths. The birth, evolution, and future of PPT is in understanding the nuances of strengths in a very mindful way.

**It's a good point and really important. I know there have now been a couple of intervention studies that have shown that there is a potential for harm here as well. Like, a gratitude intervention can backfire in depressed individuals.**

Yes, and I'll give you a couple of case scenarios. I had a client recently whose strengths, according to the Values in Action scheme, were spirituality, humility, authenticity, love, and kindness. If you look, there is a common theme here. The client had been chronically depressed, and once we started discussing the application of their strengths –it was a group therapy session – then as a group we were able to understand that these strengths definitely were able to help this client, but at times they are the source of known assertiveness. Think of humility, love, social intelligence. The combination of these strengths was making this client not assert her rights, and she was sunk inside and could not speak up. As a result she would have certain depressive thinking patterns. So you have to be careful in understanding how these strengths can be detrimental. I have a worksheet I use to guide my clients about under- or over-use of strengths and lack of or excess of strengths. For example, lack of kindness can be cruel but too much kindness and you can be taken advantage of. If you have too much social intelligence, you are too much out there and don't take time for reflection; and if you lack it, you feel isolated.

**I'm wondering how PPT has been received by the clinical world – the clinical folk? And also how much reach does it have?**

I see more and more attention to and appeal of PPT in the clinical world. For example, there are at least three big studies going on at this point and the biggest one is at the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College in London, a renowned – and one of the oldest – institutes of psychiatry in the UK. They are



doing the largest study on PPT thus far. Interestingly, they are using it with clients who have psychosis, or psychotic symptoms, so when they invited me to come and train their staff a couple of years ago, I said, "I really don't have any evidence that PPT can work for psychosis," and they said, "But we believe that it can." We then started conversing, and in January 2013 I began training about 10 clinicians, and now they are running groups. What they did was adapt it. It's a very simple yet large study, with eight groups and a randomized design. So, going back to your question, I think it is the interest of people and more than interest, maybe search for fresher and new ways of helping people. The complexity of our contemporary world cannot be treated by a few standard therapeutic approaches. Consumer are smart; they are seeing that the data from other domains in positive psychology, from organizational, social, educational (especially) research, is convincing them that there is maybe something to it. Why not apply it to clinical, counseling or social work settings? So it is getting their attention. I want to just mention another study in the Netherlands. They are interested in the application of PPT. Also, recently one of my friends in New York, who works in neuropsychology rehab, used some of these concepts in a neuropsychology rehab protocol and she found some very interesting and promising results, and we are publishing those. And another marker of attention, or how PPT has been received by the clinical world, concerns one of the primary textbooks for grad programs, *Current Psychotherapies* by Corsini and Wedding. The book is widely read in most grad programs, at least in North America. For the 10th edition they decided to replace one of the big sections on psychotherapy with a chapter on PPT. So Marty and I wrote the chapter together. It has now been published; and also one of the big psychiatry textbooks now has a section on pp. So I think that school leaders are showing some momentum.

**You are in the media quite a bit. Do you have any tips in explaining positive psychology?**

I don't know if I would say, "Quite a bit", but they do come to me. I think my biggest tip is, well, there are many self-proclaimed positive psychologists, and they give these tips around positive interventions, for example: discover your strengths or write three blessings. My fear is that people are naive, today's readers and the consumers of media are literate, and there are some wonderful other interventions of wellbeing, from mindfulness to body movement based exercise, with good evidence, and there are tons without scientific evidence from aromatherapy to The Secret. I think sometimes some self-proclaimed positive psychotherapists or psychologists tend to run ahead of the data, so my tip would be, whenever you are presenting the science of happiness, it's a very seductive, very interesting topic, because people have always been searching for meaning and they are doing more so these days after being saturated with material good. However, it is important to not muddle fact with fiction, well-established, independent lines of research from well-sold but over-simplistic media snippets. Therefore I wouldn't say that forgiveness would work for everyone: no, some people cannot forgive, and perhaps a few people shouldn't be forgiven. I won't say even that the most powerful and effective positive psychology interventions would work for everybody, because no, they don't. People have different ways of reception. So we, as positive psychologists, have to be very careful when we speak to the media to state only what we have found so far. We must also to be humble. Positive psychology is a new umbrella term, but the message has been there from Buddha to Oprah and Tony Robbins. These are age-old advice from sages, and we are now testing those messages under the microscope of science. However, attributes such as gratitude, spirituality, self-regulation or loving kindness have existed from time

immemorial. Try not to present this as a whole new world. So we need to try to be humble and we need to give credit to the philosophy and to our cousins in humanistic psychology. Otherwise we will come across as arrogant and exclusionary. I also believe that positive psychology needs to do a lot more research on applications across cultures, across various stages life span, and with multiple outcomes. It has become widely popular, but mostly in the western hemisphere. It is getting good attention in China but I don't hear much about positive psychology from South Africa or from South America. So I think when we present to media we also need to qualify that our findings are not universal thus far.

**What's the new "hot topic" for positive psychology in the coming years?**

Marty touched upon that at the Third World Congress: the study of propection – the study of the future – which is really exciting. For me the hottest topic would be about the nuances of interventions around certain strengths, for example, self-regulation. Roy Baumeister has done some very interesting work and it is becoming quite a topic of interest for me, but I can speak only from my perspective. We are seeing a huge spike in terms of emotional disregulation. Marty talked about the kids who have been on Ritalin and as adults are being diagnosed as bipolar. So I recently ran a study with Borderline Personality Disorder clients with those kinds of profiles. I think it will be very interesting to see how positive psychology has application for emotion disregulation, from the clinical world. From the non-clinical world, I think the hottest topic will be about love. Barbara Fredrickson talked about it, but I think she talked about love as these moments of connection and how these moments of connection can help on a bigger level (this is needed because still there is so much turmoil in the world). So I'm looking forward to application of some of these ideas in

terms of societal or policy changes. Finally, I think it'll be enormously interesting if we can find more concrete evidence about how, if you are happy, it influences your physical health.

### **What do you think about the post-traumatic growth literature?**

This is my area of interest. This is quite relevant in the clinical world, because you rarely have a client who hasn't experienced trauma, so it is a genuine thing. I have been fortunate to work with 9/11 families and with Asian tsunami survivors. I think that they have taught me much more than I could ever teach them. What I have learned from them is that everyone has their own course of growth. It's the patience we need. This is a very sensitive topic. So if positive psychologists go with this notion of "PTG is there, so let's find it or let's hammer it out", it will not work. I'll give you an example. I had a client who came to Canada as a refugee. That person had seen bodies being torn apart. His home was destroyed in a war-torn area three times and he had experienced all kinds of trauma. Every time the client showed up (the client's life situation was quite miserable) I asked, "What keeps you coming back?" The answer was, "After all that I went through and survived, I would never give up." I feel this was telling as his circumstances were quite miserable. Three months ago I had to send the client to hospital, he was so despondent about life and thinking about taking his life, and had become a danger to himself. Slowly I have been able to nudge him and he has been able to nudge himself (having seen bodies being torn apart and every imaginable horror under the sun) not to give up but to keep on going. I can instill hope but I cannot push the button too quickly. I must honor the problems and challenges the client has faced (and he has faced enormous challenges) while also gently helping him to see the bigger picture,

and not to give up. So that's one aspect of PTG. It's genuine and can be happen, but has to be done very carefully.

**What's one aspiration you have for positive psychology?**

Humility. Let's be humble and not run ahead of the data. Let's not proclaim that we have found out everything there is to know about human happiness and wellbeing. There is far, far more to be discovered. However, while being humble, we should also be hopeful and not underrepresent our work.

**What's one book you would recommend to a clinically orientated person who has just found about this this thing called positive psychology or this thing called PPT?**

I would recommend reading George Burns' *Happiness, healing, enhancement: Your casebook collection for applying positive psychology in therapy*. It's an edited handbook that has clear vignettes and cases, and they have described those cases with a little bit of theory but mostly they are just descriptions of cases from depression to relationship problems. It's a very nice book for clinical work. He's also a very humble and soft person.

## Dafne Cataluña

**Dafne Cataluña** is the Director of the European Institute of Positive Psychology (EIPP, Madrid, Spain), where she works as a therapist and coach helping people to know themselves and their strengths better, and identify their positive emotions, promoting action plans designed to help people be aware of greater wellbeing. She is a member of the Work and Organizations Psychology Section at the Madrid Psychologists' Association and group coordinator of the Applied Positive Psychology workgroup. Dafne is also coordinator and professor of the course in Positive Psychology (which has been taught since 2008) and professor of the EIPP course in Coaching Psychology taught at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

### **What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?**

Initially, I became interested because I did a course in which one of the teachers talked about positive psychology, and it was very different compared to what I had studied until then. I had spent a lot of time in the clinical psychology field. In fact, the course was about psychotherapy and also forensic psychology. Therefore, my formative life was full of psychopathology. So to hear about positive psychology as a tool to enhance developmental aspects in humans was a total change. As one of my main strengths is curiosity, I could not help investigating this field and discovering a little bit more about it. I saw that it really complemented what I had learnt in the field of clinical psychology. I felt that something was missing when I did clinical interventions and I saw that people had difficulty maintaining long-term results. When we introduced positive psychology techniques, such changes were maintained over the long term. That was for me a master key. And change was not only at the

professional level. From the beginning, I've always been in favor of using on myself what I use with people with whom I work, and when I analyzed its impact on me, I decided to use positive psychology in all the cognitive behavioral protocols that I applied at that time. I experienced personal-related changes thanks to this discovery, not only professional changes.

**So, for you positive psychology has been a paradigm shift, because you were working in clinical and forensic fields. What would you consider to be some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?**

For me, above all, it is the acceptance of human beings as they are. Positive psychology has a deeply rooted humanist part; and also this field has a trust that any person has resources enough to keep going on. That belief that people have strengths, the ability to experience positive emotions, that sense is vital. As professionals, we can guide, explore and develop all these factors. Those were the elements which represented the most significant change, compared with positioning ourselves in a place of expertise, in which you indoctrinate people about what they are doing wrong.

**On the other hand, and especially in Spain, positive psychology has had a lot of critics, such as the article entitled "Positive Psychology: sympathetic magic" [Psicología Positiva, magia simpática], or "Papeles del Psicólogo" (an issue that revolutionized positive psychology in Spain), and even in other countries. We want to know your point of view. What are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?**

I believe that just as one can be biased towards research that selects only positive and wellbeing variables, in ignoring some data, it can also happen to the contrary. I have the feeling, with that article, it set out to constantly seek

where the gap is, where the mistake is and what is the deficit. When we are talking about research, there is always an error rate, and this also relates to positive psychology as to other disciplines. At the end there is a subjective perception. But I sensed the author wanted to attack with anything that was against positive psychology, rather than trying to expand the focus of reality we have in positive psychology research and give a realistic point of view of what works and what does not. It is true that, like any discipline of psychology, positive psychology is a humanistic science and a social science, and it has aspects that can be improved. So, although positive psychology has progressed a lot, we still have work to do.

It is true that those of us who are practitioners noticed that positive psychology lacks a degree of theory development. A more solid epistemological basis, with greater consistency, is desirable, especially in the strengths model, a model that really does explain strengths and why those strengths are there, why strengths are so important and why they are correlated with wellbeing. We miss some of those issues, especially in the field of professional training, or even when trying to validate the protocols that we are creating. When we tried to describe them, we noticed these deficiencies. In the positive psychology group of the Madrid Psychological Association one of the goals we have set is to give these techniques a theoretical framework. Although researchers are making an effort to validate intervention techniques, I really believe it is necessary to establish such a theoretical framework. In conclusion, related to the strong attack on positive psychology, I find the same bias as that which the author criticizes.



## **What positive psychology activities and strategies do you think work really well together?**

I think there are some key strengths, which have a great impact on people's wellbeing. One is gratitude. It is one of the strengths we have seen change the focus of people's vision from, "What I do not have" to, "What I have". And that is important, because you always have something. Being oriented towards what you have evokes your positive emotions. That is a strength which, of course, we introduced in the "Bienestar 10" protocol, but it is also included when working on positive psychotherapy, either through a gratitude journal or a gratitude letter. Another strength which has a positive impact is forgiveness. In cases where, maybe, there is already great discomfort, especially in the field of personal relationships, we can work with a different concept of forgiveness that is not so external, but that is internal. It is something where a grudge is not maintained over the long term, but is transformed into another, different, emotion that has an important benefit for people. The only thing is that we have found that this strength requires prior preparation of the individual, and cannot be addressed from the beginning in a clinical intervention, because the person must first have some mood stability in order to work with that strength. And, of course, another strength is optimism. It is the "star strength", and at a cognitive level has very important benefits. It is used in almost all protocols. In fact I had already always worked, directly or indirectly, with this strength in cognitive behavioral therapy. In any of the protocols we use, we apply elements of flow and mindfulness. When we have a future, or past-oriented vision which is really marked, the person creates a balance and harmony far greater with the present and with the future by taking into account this model, with conscious attention to their senses, to the elements that the person perceives every second...

**Who do you look up to in the field, either as practitioners or academics?**

Well, it is a complex question. I do not like giving politically correct answers, or saying I admire any person who contributes to positive psychology, but I think for his dedication, it would be Robert Biswas-Diener. His recent book, *Positive Psychology Coaching*, opened a door for me to see that, at last, positive psychology literature is developing into high quality and practical literature. And the book is coaching-oriented, which is a tool that is now part of my daily job. I feel much affinity to coaching. I think he has made a tremendous effort to give coaching an important theoretical corpus and very powerful assessment systems. And, although I have not had the pleasure of meeting him in person, I know other people who have had contact with him and who have told me that he is a person of great humility and memorable presence.

**In the future, where do you see yourself as a either a practitioner or a researcher?**

I have to recognize that research is not my field of work. I think I have an obligation to be connected with that area, especially so people can have evidence of the effectiveness of what is being done. It is like a moral obligation for those who are dedicated to professional practice. But is not my main area; what I am interested in is in creating protocols which are effective in the short term and which aim to increase perceived wellbeing, whether in the field of psychotherapy, or within the field of personal development and coaching.

**What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers or practitioners?**

Well, first of all, it is to have good training. If you are a professional who wants to pursue your field you need to have a realistic view of the scope of this type

of tool. And of course, as with any other discipline, training is required: not only theoretical training. Knowledge can be acquired through reading; and now we have lots of books about positive psychology, including practical ones. If aspiring positive psychologists are people who simply want to evolve and develop, I would encourage them to read a lot, to be curious, to investigate on their own, or to get in touch with professionals who can provide references for further reading, because I really think positive psychology provides exercises and reflections which may change a person from deep inside. I know that from personal knowledge. So I always encourage everyone to get in touch with positive psychology.

**What is the first book you would recommend to someone new to positive psychology?**

I always recommend starting with *Authentic Happiness*, written by Martin Seligman, because I think this is the basic book. But there are so many. I love *Flow*, written by Mihály Csikszentmihályi. There are a lot of good books. To start, I think Seligman is the worldwide reference and would be the first choice.

**Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on that I haven't asked about?**

First of all, I appreciate the opportunity to appear in this book. Gratitude is another of my signature strengths. And the second thing is that I really hope that this effort contributes to both academic and practical fields joining forces, because we are all aware of the scope that this discipline has. Also, I want to see that, however much time it takes, it is settling, it is really settling.

## Paul Wong

**Paul Wong** is a psychology professor, clinical psychologist, author, speaker and justice fighter. Dr. Wong founded the Meaning-Centered Counselling Institute, International Network on Personal Meaning, and the International Society for Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy. Dr. Wong is known for his work on meaning.

### **In general terms and from your point of view, what are some of the defining features of positive psychology?**

Because of my Chinese cultural background, personal history, and past research experience, I have a very different idea about the defining features of positive psychology. To me, positive psychology is about bringing out the noblest qualities of human beings in their struggle for survival and fulfillment in spite of the bleak condition of human existence. I was born and raised in a tumultuous time of China's history. Having survived the Japanese occupation, civil war, life as a refugee, reversal of family fortune, a dysfunctional family, poverty, unemployment, and depression, personal happiness has never been a concern to me. If anyone were to come to me and teach me how to be happy during my dark days of depression, I would have turfed him out for being insensitive and senseless. How could I be happy when my family was falling apart, millions of my countrymen were drowning in the bitter sea of suffering, and there was no hope, no love, and no meaning in my life? What mattered most to me during those painful years of my youth was to desperately search for a purpose, an ideal that was bigger than all my problems, that was worth striving for; only in struggling and suffering for something much greater than myself could I find the needed strength to rise above my circumstances and

move forward. If Viktor Frankl's logo therapy was developed in the crucible of the Nazi concentration camps, then the seed for my vision of positive psychology was sown during my many years of struggle for some positive reason for my miserable existence in the midst of a harsh fate, injustice, and depression. One of the self-help tactics that I used in my teenage years was to read the biographies of great men and women who made extraordinary contributions to humanity, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Marie Curie, Helen Keller, and Alfred Nobel. Another intervention I developed for myself was to write down at least one inspirational thought a day either from my readings or from self-reflections. I found that a heavy dosage of idealism per week and a daily dosage of inspiration were effective in saving me from sinking deeper into depression. Even today, I still continue the habit of reading the biographies of great human beings and posting daily inspirations on Facebook, because I find them to be more effective than any positive interventions offered by Marty Seligman in inspiring me to pursue my vision of achieving excellence and making a great contribution for the common good. To me, this is positive psychology at its best.

### **What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?**

My answer to this question may surprise a lot of positive psychologists. This is my chance to tell the untold story of positive psychology. First of all, as I mentioned earlier, even without knowing the term "positive psychology", my experience in overcoming my own depression and overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles through daily feeding on great people's life stories, great books, and great ideas already predisposed me to favor a type of positive psychology, one that was strong enough to lift up the suffering masses. When I finally was able to do my graduate work in the late 60s, on scholarship, I had to

choose from among Daniel Berlyne, Endel Tulving, and Abraham Amsel. All three were the most famous psychologists at the University of Toronto and, arguably, in Canada. Finally I decided to work with Dr. Amsel because I was really motivated to discover the most positive and productive ways to cope with prolonged “frustrative non-reward”, the most familiar theme in my life. At that time, learning theory was the king and Amsel’s frustration theory was very influential – he was the only psychologist who had published two papers identified as among the top 10 most-cited publications in social sciences in the last 100 years. I was busy working with Amsel to extend frustration theory in several new directions, when Marty Seligman started publishing a series of papers on learned helplessness. My immediate gut reaction was disbelief: how could dogs become helpless just after a few uncontrollable shocks? I bet that this was just an artifact of using laboratory dogs, which had been reduced to a state of helplessness already due to prolonged periods of confinement. A street dog would not be so easily rendered helpless. I was even more puzzled that college students were rendered helpless after working on an unsolvable puzzle. If college students could be so easily rendered helpless, they would not be able to graduate and survive in a society where so many things were beyond our control. I thought this finding must also be an artifact of demand characteristics, because participants probably figured out that everything was rigged by the experimenter and that there was no need to waste time and energy (I call this the energy conservation principle). I proposed that the learned helplessness phenomenon could be readily explained in terms of a stage model of coping with frustration and non-contingency. I am sure Marty Seligman would agree with my analysis now, not only because he has moved over to my side of emphasizing resilience rather than helplessness, but also

because subsequent research supported my frustration theory interpretation (Wong, 1995).

In addition to my own personal experience with suffering, Seligman indirectly prompted me to develop an animal model of positive psychology with his popular theory of learned helplessness. I became more motivated than ever in my research to demonstrate the creativity, optimism, courage, and resilience of organisms if they had developed endurance and optimism through behavioral technology. I went on to do numerous experiments demonstrating the fundamental resilience of both animals and humans. For example, in one experiment I was able to train rats to press a lever more than 100 times in order to receive a single small pellet. In order to teach rats creativity, I trained them to vary patterns of responding on two levers, Left and Right, from trial to trial (e.g., LLRR, LRLR, RLRL, etc.) in order to get a food reward. This series of experiments, under the umbrella of learned generalized persistence, was summarized in a book chapter (Wong, 1995, "A stage model of coping with frustrative stress") and a review article (Wong, 1979, "Frustration, exploration, and learning"). In sum, I was able to demonstrate that through carefully planned behavioral technology, animals were able to persist in the face of frustration and fear, thus demonstrating learned optimism and courage. This was also the beginning of my attempt to develop a deep-and-wide hypothesis of negative emotions as a necessary part of a complete positive psychology.

### **How did you transfer your animal model of positive psychology to human positive psychology?**

In the early 70s, the empire of learning theory collapsed and was taken over by the cognitive revolution. I was very grateful for this negative turn of events,

because it redirected me to investigate optimism, meaning, and wellbeing in human subjects before such research was popular. However, my focus was still focused on how human beings cope with adversities, such as failure, stress, and aging, in an adaptive, resilient, and positive way. My first major publication on human positive psychology was about when people ask why questions (Wong & Weiner, 1981, “When people ask ‘Why’ questions and the heuristic of attributional search”). This was the first empirical demonstration of spontaneous attributional search when people encounter negative or unexpected outcomes. This publication started my interest in meaning research, which continues to this very moment. Most of my meaning research has been included in my two edited volumes, *The Human Quest for Meaning* (1998, 2012).

I guess that to summarize, my contribution to human positive psychology includes the following topics and aspects. (1) Successful Aging – demonstrated the importance of meaning and spirituality in aging well. (2) Death Acceptance – developed the most widely used instrument on death acceptance and demonstrated the importance of meaning and spirituality in death acceptance and dying well. (3) Reminiscence Therapy – demonstrated that only instrumental and integrative types of reminiscence contribute to the well-being of the elderly. (4) Stress appraisal – developed the most comprehensive and most widely-used Stress Appraisal Measure. (5) Resource Congruence Model of effective coping – developed the most comprehensive Coping Schemas Inventory to test the theoretical model that people are able to adapt effectively only when they have sufficient internal and external resources and employ culturally as well as situationally appropriate coping strategies. (6) Meaning therapy – developed numerous meaning-based measurements and



interventions. Publications related to the above research areas can be found on my website ([www.DrPaulWong.com](http://www.DrPaulWong.com)).

In sum, in my long research career, from animal learning to meaning therapy, I have made a significant contribution to many areas of positive psychology, even though such areas have not been generally accepted to be under the umbrella of positive psychology. When I was battling cancer about five years ago, Marty Seligman e-mailed me and said, “Hope you get well soon. Positive psychology needs you”. Other leaders in positive psychology also sent me get well messages. This indicates that the leadership of positive psychology at least recognizes my contribution to positive psychology, even though at that time they did not openly recognize the validity of my meaning-centered approach to positive psychology.

### **What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?**

I am most grateful for Seligman’s APA presidential address. It really struck a responsive chord in hundreds and thousands of psychologists. Personally, I believe that it is probably the most influential presidential address ever, because it has dramatically shifted the focus in psychology to positive emotion, positive strengths, and the good life. In addition, Seligman has been able to make positive psychology relevant to education, management, and health care.

### **Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology?**

I have been doing research on meaning since the 80s. I believe that meaning research will not advance very much if we continue to ignore existential givens and the human condition that affects all of us. If we focus only on specific concrete meanings that can be achieved by individuals, such as having a family,

relationships, and career success, with total disregard for existential and spiritual issues, we would not be able to achieve a full understanding of what it means to be fully human and how to achieve the good life. As I have already indicated, all my research on positive psychology has empirically demonstrated the importance of meaning and spirituality. I will continue to work towards integration between positive psychology and humanistic-existential psychology, not only in research, but also in psychotherapy. I believe that such integration will benefit not only positive psychology but also society at large.

**What is your most proud moment in the field to date?**

My most proud moment in positive psychology was in organizing the first International Meaning Conference in 2000, when I brought in the top guns in positive psychology, like C. R. Snyder and David Myers, and the top guns in existential psychology, like Irvin Yalom and Ernest Spinelli. I have been organizing meaning conferences every other year to facilitate dialogue between positive psychology and existential psychology. In the most recent meaning conference (2012), I was able to bring Chris Peterson, Laura King, and Todd Kashdan to sit at the same table as Emmy van Deurzen, Harris Friedman, and Jonathan Raskin to discuss what makes life worth living. We have already published two volumes on the proceedings of meaning conferences - *The Positive Psychology of Meaning and Spirituality* and *The Positive Psychology of Meaning and Addiction Recovery*.

**You're based in Toronto, Canada. How's positive psychology in Canada fairing?**

Positive psychology remains fractured in Canada. There are many people who are doing research on positive psychology topics but who refuse to be

identified as positive psychologists. Among those who self-identify as positive psychologists, there are those, like myself, who take an integrative and broad view of positive psychology and those who are diehard loyalists to Marty Seligman's brand. In fact, the Canadian Positive Psychological Association (CPPA) was born in my living room and consisted of both of the above-described types of positive psychologists. Unfortunately after my critical review of Marty Seligman's book *Flourish*, his loyal followers in Canada turned against me. As a result, I and my positive psychology colleagues have disassociated from the CPPA.

**I'm sorry to hear that. Why do you think some people are not keen to be identified as positive psychologists?**

I think some people just don't want to be drawn into the controversy surrounding positive psychology. For example, some people in health psychology, or the area of developmental psychology, do research on positive psychology topics such as wellbeing and resilience, but they don't want to get involved in controversies related to personality clashes and exaggerated truth claims.

**What's one aspiration you have for positive psychology going forward?**

My aspiration for positive psychology is outlined in my review article, *Positive Psychology 2.0*. I envision a positive psychology free from domination by personality cults and the dogmas of its founder. I would like to see an integrative and balanced positive psychology that is equally interested in the negative potentials of positive emotion and positive traits, such as the hubris of feeling competent, and the positive potential of negative emotions, such as digging deeper into one's resources in times of frustration or fear. I would also

like to see positive psychology research focus no longer on college students but on people from all walks of life situated in real life situations. I would like to see positive psychology open up to include divergent theoretical positions and challenging ideas. If positive psychology is dominated by a single official position, it will alienate many researchers who would otherwise join the positive psychology movement. Personally, I favor a positive psychology that is truly cross-cultural and existential. Studying just happiness, without taking into account the relevant cultural context or existential conditions, is like teaching people how to be happy on board the Titanic while it was headed towards a catastrophe.

**Although you mentioned that there are some real reputational barriers to emerging into the field of positive psychology where controversies abound, I'm wondering who you think are the emerging and unknown people in positive psychology to look out for? I'm guessing you're kind of saying there are some there who may be unwilling to challenge the status quo, but I'm sure there are some, right? And also I guess, what can they learn from your experience?**

My late friend Chris Peterson stated many times that in positive psychology there is no pope and no dogmas. If this was indeed the case, then there would be no need for such persistent clarification. My advice to young people is not to fall into the trap of the personality cult for personal benefit, and to challenge some of the entrenched assumptions in positive psychology. I even encourage young researchers to question some empirical findings, such as the myth of the positivity ratio and the myth of a happiness set point to which both lottery winners and paraplegic victims must eventually return. At the moment I'm sorry that I don't see any emerging unknown positive psychologists who have

the courage to challenge the status quo of positive psychology. Such individuals probably are still hidden underground because they don't want to be blacklisted and place their academic career in jeopardy. You are very courageous yourself for asking about this. For myself, I have labored in positive psychology since the 70s, but really without recognition from the leaders of positive psychology. The irony is that many of the MAPP (Masters of Applied Positive Psychology) students are my secret admirers; they have often written me to express gratitude and appreciation for my ideas and research.

**Thanks for mentioned that I'm courageous. I guess I've got a lot of strings to my bow, so I'm not putting the house on positive psychology so to speak. I guess I'm an early career positive psychologist really, but I also need to be invested in learning the full breath of psychology as a discipline. I follow the sage advice of people like Chris Peterson and Todd Kashdan and others about the pathways to becoming a good scientist, a good communicator, a good practitioner.**

As I said above in relation to when I started in positive psychology, Marty was promoting his learned helplessness theory. I have never been afraid of speaking the truth based on research and running the risk of being black-listed. I am always motivated to find answers to human suffering, even though in the early days so many positive psychologists told me that positive psychology has nothing to do with suffering. My answer to them is that suffering is the essence of being human, as Viktor Frankl and the Buddha stated a long time ago. I have discovered positive psychology through the pain of suffering and the joy of overcoming. So, there may be many pathways to becoming a good positive psychologist and a good scientist.

### **What do you think are the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?**

The most valid criticisms include the following: Firstly, there is too much focus on the individual and not enough on the cultural context and the universal human condition. Secondly, there is too much focus on simple-minded outcome measures, not enough on the process. For example, both winners of lottery tickets and victims of paraplegia will return to their baseline of happiness, but the process is very different. In the former, the process is one of missed opportunities and regret while in the latter case, the process is one of striving to overcome and developing resilience. The two may have the same score in life satisfaction, but they are qualitatively different. Lastly, there is too much focus on the positive and not enough on the functionally positive potentials of negative forms. I think that pretty well sums up my assessment of positive psychology.

### **What do you want to be doing five years from now?**

My motto is to bring happiness to the suffering people. My vision for five years from now is to develop a positive psychology that brings many people from negative 8 to positive 8.

### **What's the new hot topic for positive psychology in the coming two years?**

According to my crystal ball, the new hot topic will be self-transcendence, which is contrary to the current positive psychology, which focuses on satisfying the ego. I have proposed many provocative ideas about self-transcendence vs. self-seeking in my recent chapter, *Viktor Frankl's Meaning-Seeking Model and Positive Psychology*. I believe that the future of psychology and the future of Western civilization depend on learning to switch from egotistic concerns to the spiritual values of compassion, justice, and altruism.

**What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychologists?**

Be curious. Follow your passion and imagination. Pursue the truth, even if it means being ostracized and criticized. I hope that their lives are driven by higher values for the greater good, and that they have the courage to challenge the status quo to make life better for all. It is through such heroic and selfless efforts that we are able to move forward to fulfill the positive vision of being able to live in harmony with each other and with nature.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have not asked about?**

I appreciate that you have the courage to invite me for an interview, because even Chris Peterson said that he had to “run the risk” of citing Paul Wong. I am grateful that you are able to introduce me and my research to many young people in positive psychology who might never have heard about me from more official channels.

## Carmelo Vazquez

**Carmelo Vazquez** is president of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) and one of its founding members. He is full professor of psychopathology at the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain). He is Spanish regional representative of the European Network for Positive Psychology (ENPP). He is an expert in the study of resilience and positive emotions and is the author of several books about positive psychology.

### **What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?**

Positive psychology officially has a start date, but what interests me is positive psychology's interest in positive functioning. That interest started slightly before the onset of the movement itself. I began from the field of clinical psychology and was interested in negative emotions; but at the same time, for more than 20 years, I have been concerned, with other colleagues from my own department, about the matter of positive emotions. Where does this interest come from? It arises from an almost accidental circumstance. I started doing some research on depression for my PhD, when I was as young as you [Merche Ovejero]. What I realized in my PhD research and in subsequent studies (e.g., a meta-analysis published in 1992 in *Clinical Psychology Review*) is that normal people, without mental disorders, had a certain tendency to distort reality. They showed a tendency to remember more positive than negative things, a greater tendency to attribute success in what they did, or an inclination to show illusory control biases. So, people with depression manifested negative biases (they were not at all realistic), but healthy people distort reality in a positive way. That made us understand that 'normal' is not neutral, is not balanced, flat, from the point of view of bias, since healthy



people are people who have a vision of reality that is positively biased. This finding, confirmed in many investigations, shocked me and changed my view of the epistemology of reality.

Why did positive psychology interest me when it emerged as a movement initiated by Seligman in the late 90s? I think this interest is due basically to the support of people who already had, as Marty had, a high academic reputation. I met Seligman when he was a young graduate student (on a trip he took to Madrid in 1982). He liked many of the results that I had found about perceived control in depression, and we have followed one another closely since then. And if people with an important intellectual reputation such as Csikszentmihályi or Marty (remember that the first Doctor Honoris Causa from Complutense University of Madrid is Martin Seligman, in 2005) were promoting a new movement in a reasoned and excited way, it was well worth going to listen to their arguments.

Well, on the other hand – I do not know if this should appear in this part of the interview – but, sometimes, I discussed with my friend Chris Peterson if we should call it “positive psychology”. Maybe we should have used other adjectives, but at this point it was necessary to float a new boat. The truth is that we are interested in the positive or optimal functioning of the human being, and I think you and I would not be talking now if someone (Seligman and Csikszentmihályi) had not thought of the name “positive psychology”, and dared to describe this movement by means of a recognizable name. This surely has some disadvantages (positive psychology might be seen as a separatist force within psychology), but every time I think that, I recall it has served to

create an identity and to give support and visibility to colleagues who have a genuine interest in positive issues.

**This part of your answer leads to the next question. What are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?**

Well, first of all, positive psychology exists: and this is an important issue, because it was something unthinkable a few years ago. Positive psychology created a renewed identity in people who have that interest in positive functioning in its broadest sense. I think the most important thing about positive psychology as a movement is this attempt to structure what many people have been doing for a long time in psychology. Probably, many people have trouble with calling themselves "positive psychologists," because that means adding qualifiers to something more global, more comprehensive... but let's say that the existence of positive psychology is necessary, as long as we are able to give it an essential rigor. This scientific rigor should guide and provide coverage for those who are called positive psychologists, so they can continue having a special sensitivity to the study of the things that make life worth living (ah! that definition by Chris Peterson!) supported by the best that science can offer.

**What are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?**

I think that criticism must come from both inside and outside positive psychology. I think some of the criticism from outside often responds to clichés of what people (including some colleagues) stereotypically understood about positive psychology. It is easy to caricature positive psychology ("a bunch of naïve happy people"), and there are some experts in doing this. But that only distorts the reality of what positive psychology is, in fact. What are some

criticized elements of positive psychology? Well, maybe I'm not the best for giving ammunition to the enemy... they must seek it! But I'll answer the question. I think the main potential enemy of positive psychology is the lack of consistency and rigor. This can be applied in particular to the inconsistencies of some steps... You [Merche Ovejero] are doing a PhD on character strengths and you've seen that we have to improve a lot in this issue. I think it's very important to refine the assessment instruments which we apply in order to have psychometric guarantees. It is important that there is rigor in their construction and validation (something remarkably complicated in the field of psychological wellbeing).

One problem that positive psychology faces is to counter or to regulate the enthusiasm of its followers. If this real enthusiasm and passion of the people for this movement is not supported by science or scientific and academic practice, positive psychology in general terms will run very serious dangers. Applications, in a broad sense, should never be ahead of the science that supports them. This is an internal danger to the movement and we must be constantly alert. Many attacks from outside positive psychology are due to this. The idea of focusing on the positive is very powerful. It raises genuine enthusiasm and passion but also other commercial interests (books, programs, interventions, etc...) that go a step or two beyond what science can support. We have to be very cautious about what we can offer to society and which things have important support and which do not. And we must be upright and honest in what we present to the audience.

Positive psychology has also been accused of being part of a capitalist psychology centered in maximum individual benefit. I think this is quite absurd.

It is hard to find a discipline of psychology which worries so much about the actual role of economics in human wellbeing. I think positive psychology has introduced many elements of discussion and criticism, based on data on the role of economic wealth, which is not easy to see in other areas of psychology or, at least, in most academic psychology. So rather than a scourge of positive psychology, I think it's a strength; that vision is barely present in the standard perspectives of psychology.

Then, on the other hand, there is the criticism that follows us like a shadow, the 'Eurocentrism' or 'Euroamericancentrism' in our view of human wellbeing. It is true that science is done with values. It is inconceivable without values. And it is fair to say that Euroamerican values, if I may say so, are very present within the scientific work and in what is published in positive psychology. It is true that we should have a more extensive view of what is human wellbeing. But recognizing that this is a challenge, we must also recognize that there are few areas of psychology that have this interest in cultural issues and in providing analytical sensitive perspectives to cultural differences. For example, there is a collection of books in Springer, directed by Antonella Delle Fave, which most directly addresses these issues. I do not see much concern about these cultural issues in other areas of psychology or social sciences. However, positive psychology received some criticism precisely for being insensitive to cultural aspects! While it is true that it would be foolish to ignore cultural aspects on subjects like wellbeing (although we could say the same for many other areas of the social sciences), I think there is, in positive psychology, a kind of antibody: that is, the many researchers who generate knowledge and who generate many answers, who take into account these dilemmas about cultural contexts and how they may affect psychological wellbeing experiences.

I think this concern about the transcultural limits of our findings is very present in many of us. For example, one of the things that concerns me is this obsession for the ranking of countries and, in particular, with the ranking of happiness. Giving simplistic messages in this direction, without analysing the complexity of how lives are woven in every country, in every neighbourhood, in every family, can be misleading. Interestingly, there are always western European countries or American countries in the highest positions, without considering that there are other more intangible indicators which may also contribute to people's wellbeing; and, probably, we lack a more comprehensive view that tries to understand the differences between countries and why people continue to live in those countries and have lives with suffering which also have rewards. But in any case, I think these are empirical problems that can be solved only with research. And a good example is the work of authors like Oishi, Diener, Carol Graham, and many others.

**You are recognized for your work in the area of optimism and positive emotions. Can you tell me about your work and research in relation to positive psychology?**

I said, in the last IPPA Congress in Los Angeles, at a meeting of the Board of Directors, that I have "two legs"; one that is rooted in clinical psychology and one that tries to be anchored in the study of emotions and positive cognitions. I am very interested in the intersection between these two fields: how positive psychology can help us to understand, and to alleviate, psychological suffering. Some of my research in this direction is related to the scope of emotional disorders. I want to analyse what kind of cognitions and positive emotions may fail or may be absent in emotional disorders. I believe that positive psychology adds a deep perspective of what are the clinical problems. I think we cannot

understand depression, or clinical problems, in full if we do not understand the role of positive emotions, the absence of certain strengths, or even the presence of strengths that clinicians are unable to see in their patients. So I believe that positive psychology has a great potential impact in clinical settings. Then, within this scope of the research, I was also very interested in the most extreme situations of adversity, trauma and the potential for growth there. Genuine growth may be something casual but it certainly is a fundamental phenomenon that may help us to understand the full experience of trauma. I am also interested in cross-cultural boundaries of post-traumatic growth. We studied post-traumatic growth in patients with myocardial infarction; we are currently doing research with hospitalized children with chronic illness; and we have done studies with populations subjected to natural disasters or terrorist attacks. In all cases we have seen that positive emotions have an important role in adaptive functioning and we found that positive emotions are predictors of post-traumatic growth. All of these issues are very important components to consider if you want to understand deeply what human nature is: human nature against adversity, against pain, against trauma. None of this is foreign to positive psychology.

**Is there any research that you would highlight as particularly interesting?**

I should not do this now because I am president of the International Positive Psychology Association. There is a very large spectrum of studies which interest and fascinate me. At the 'micro' level, to give an example, I am very interested in health studies and the impact of emotional variables on biological and even immune system parameters. Research by Sheldon Cohen and his group is very interesting. This type of research, as bright and elegant examples, can open many doors that let us understand the role of positive emotions in something

as important as health. From a point of view even more 'micro', more molecular, there are excellent researchers working in neuroscience programs that are making very interesting contributions. And, at this point, we should highlight the support of the Templeton Foundation in some of this research. At the other extreme, in a 'macro' perspective, I am very interested and I read with great interest large survey-based studies, studies whose attempt is to assess community wellbeing. I think this is a growing challenge that can throw light on aspects of human nature. I have been fortunate to participate in the sixth edition of the European Social Survey. This survey is being done in most European countries. We already have data and, in fact, this month (September 2013), I received on my computer the first string with data from seven or eight European countries. We have a chance to draw a picture of the welfare landscape in Europe, not only in terms of positive emotions but also of negative emotions, life satisfaction, and eudaimonic functioning. Our team (led by Felicia Huppert and with the collaboration of Nic Marks and Joar Vittersø) developed a questionnaire that assesses hedonic happiness, eudaimonic happiness and social happiness in about 30 countries in Europe, including Russia. We will have these data available by 2014 but, as I mentioned, we have the first pilot data. From the 'micro' perspective, we have lots of studies covering the spectrum of human wellbeing. It would be a little bit pointless pointing out just some; but I am happy because we have more and more studies that open more doors to have a thorough understanding of human functioning.

**Who do you look up to in the field, either as practitioners or academics?**

This is a complicated question because it could be like one of those endless interventions of the Oscar ceremonies... people who name their father,

mother, her husband, his wife and delivering an endless amount of praise... Giving names can be a little bit... committed. I will not say anything particularly novel. I would emphasize, especially for his courage in dealing with unforeseen scenarios and his visionary ability, the contribution of Martin Seligman. We could discuss several things raised in criticism of some of his most popular books. But I admire the courage of a scientist who often had to deal with fierce criticism from colleagues for many years, and who decided to move forward against the mainstream. Another name that seems to me to be fundamental is that of Ed Diener, who I admire for many reasons. One of them is that he was an “outcast” researcher in the 70s when he engaged in investigating this very weird matter called “wellbeing” and created solid assessment instruments. Many colleagues thought, “What the hell is this?” I think that he has maintained a fixed pace with high-quality publications, and is a person who combines very enviable informative publications with continuous scientific research about human wellbeing.

Naturally there are many other names, and many of them have already been interviewed. Among some formidable leaders, the place of some is relatively indisputable, as Mihály Csikszentmihályi. I would also like to include the names of some scholars, thinkers and scientists who have had a major role in this historical awareness of the positive. They probably have not had the recognition they deserve in positive psychology; and I do not know if they would have wanted it or not. But there are people who have been opening unexpected doors. For example, Marie Jahoda, who in the 50s was one of the first scientists who thought about positive mental health and after her, Carol Izard, Alice Isen, Carol Ryff... These people have made pioneering contributions to the study of the positive issues of being human, and they deserve very



explicit recognition within positive psychology because many roads have been opened by them and they have helped us to understand positive functioning. We could never understand these key anthropological and psychological issues about human beings without their contributions.

**Who are the emerging and unknown positive psychology researchers to look out for? Who would be a person who you could look at and say, "Your research is really interesting"?**

Well, I do not know what is the limit of youth... Sonja [Lyubomirsky]: I think she is a very creative person. Barbara [Fredrickson]: I think she is a person who has a lot of courage in taking new steps. I think both Sonja and Barbara can, despite the risk, open new fronts; indeed they are already doing it. I think there's a generation of bright young people who dared, within their demanding academic environments, to study positive issues. And then, there are emerging names we all have in our minds who will be the future of positive psychology, such as Todd Kashdan, who has received several institutional awards. And there is a young professor at Yale University, Jane Gruber, who is also doing very interesting things about psychopathology and positive emotions. Well, I believe that as the extent to which we are able to introduce positive psychology within the academic world grows, there will certainly arise more names of very young people who are interested, without prejudice and without self-justification – as we have had to do with many more “senior” academics.

I also think that there are very young people doing fascinating research right on the edge or border of positive psychology. They may not call themselves positive psychologists but I think we can make positive psychology attractive enough (through scientific meetings, rigorous publications, relevant academic

programs, etc.) that, like a magnet, we can attract and incorporate these people who are working at the limits of positive psychology. We need to make positive psychology a friendly territory, but rigorous and attractive for young researchers to go beyond their borders, in both directions, without difficulty. For example, I am very interested in the research of a young Belgian psychologist, Jordi Quoidbach, who is at Harvard working with Paul Gilbert. Jordi has done some very interesting things about savoring and also about the predictions people make about their own potential for change in the future. I think there are many people working around positive psychology themes and we have to try to “catch” them and make them feel comfortable participating in the positive psychology movement and in its publications.

**What’s one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers or practitioners?**

Perhaps, the most important thing is to read a lot, to study hard... Sometimes you get the idea, as some colleagues of mine put it, “This is what my grandmother said”; but I think that’s not exactly true. And if that idea were true, what our grandmothers told us about life, we have to validate it. I think the first thing is to read and to be very critical. One of the things we have to require of positive psychology is to be very critical. It is not enough to fend off external criticism (sometimes very simplistic and cartoonish), because this could create a paranoid mentality within the movement. Our duty is to be very demanding from the inside about the quality and spread of our investigations. I think this is something we have to ask of people who join positive psychology: they must be very critical while simultaneously applying the strengths of wonder and gratitude when studying positive psychology issues. We have to ask them not to forget the need of criticism; on the other hand this criticism

can be friendly. The more serious tools of scientific discourse must not be lost, because then the movement would really be finished. It's a lesson other historical movements which have failed in the history of psychology has given to us. I understand that many colleagues do not feel the need to participate in this movement. But I do believe that psychology must incorporate future positive performance analysis as an additional perspective to complete our vision of reality. I hope that psychologists, whether denominated "positive" or not, keep doing what they do, and deal with training in their natural disciplines (organizations, medical and health, education... ); but also they have to incorporate in a natural way the indisputable fact that positive emotions, strengths, and positive functioning exist and we cannot ignore them. These positive elements have been an elephant in our room and we have been ignoring them for a long time. It is no longer possible to ignore them. To make it possible to take notice of them we have to fight to incorporate positive psychology in the standard training of our college students. This is one of the biggest challenges we have for the survival of positive psychology.

**What is the first book you would recommend to someone new to positive psychology?**

I do not know! Perhaps one way to approach positive psychology issues is through some books that can help us to understand what is legitimate and desirable to analyse within positive areas of human functioning despite the fact they might not be related to psychology and might not perhaps be entirely "positive". But there are formidable reads.... If someone reads *Ethics* by Spinoza or *The Conquest of Happiness* by Bertrand Russell, he or she could possibly have a platform to understand many things. The need to think about happiness, which is a subject that has always concerned both philosophers, is

latent in some of these books forged in some of the greatest minds in human thought.

What book would I recommend? Sure, if you speak Spanish, I would recommend Maria Dolores Avia and my *Optimismo Inteligente* (laughs). This book, with a foreword by Martin Seligman, is one of the first rigorous books about positive emotions. A full professor of social psychology wrote me a letter congratulating me on this book, but in his greeting underlined our courage for writing a book on a subject that then raised some suspicion in the academic field. In any case, this book could perhaps be a more general approach in Spanish for those who want to read about positive emotions. If it is for the general public, I recommend the book written by Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard *In Defense of Happiness*. Sonja Lyubomirsky's book, *The How of Happiness*, is also a good introduction to how the study of happiness has implications for intervention in and improvement of our lives.

**Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on that I haven't asked about?**

Well, I don't know. It has been a fairly comprehensive interview; possibly I have more things to say with greater detail. Although it is covered in the above, I would like to underline that I think that the future of positive psychology is implicit in much of the interview. I think it's a healthy future if we can add a very solid practice of science to the enthusiasm of its followers. And that's complicated, because it involves achieving a balance between passion and reason. Positive psychology triggers enthusiasm and this is awesome. But enthusiasm is also a risk. In fact, one of the things that strikes me about the positive psychology movement is the passion of its followers (you are a good

example of this!). It is very difficult to find much enthusiasm within “normal psychology”. I have spent many years of my life going to clinical psychology conferences, of all types and all grades, and it is very difficult to see the passion and enthusiasm of the audience. This is fantastic! It means that there are people who are willing to change the world and change things and transform reality as the ultimate goal of human happiness, and seek an answer to questions about the tools that psychology can offer. This is something not seen in any other field of psychology! And one of our tasks now is how to use that energy and enthusiasm of the fans, supporting it with scientific rigor. In this sense we have, from the IPPA or from organizations related to positive psychology, a duty, let’s call it “institutional emotional regulation”. It is a kind of institutional regulatory process to feed that excitement and break new ground while, at the same time, correcting false expectations and mistakes, which can be fatal for the future of positive psychology. As Alex Linley said, and I wrote about it several years ago, an imaginable, and perhaps desirable, future is that positive psychology disappears but is metabolized within psychology. Of course, while this has not happened, we need organizations like the IPPA, or national associations (such as the Spanish Society of Positive Psychology), which help to structure, coordinate, and shape positive psychology.

And finally, I want to thank Aaron Jarden for his initiative, because these interviews are an important element in the development of positive psychology.

## María Dolores Avia

**María Dolores Avia** is full professor of Personality Psychology at Complutense University of Madrid (Spain). Dr Avia is an expert in the study of optimism, personality, and character strengths.

### **What prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?**

What I can say. Firstly, everything that makes up positive psychology was inside me from long ago. However, there was one specific thing that woke me up, and I've included it in an article I wrote recently. It happened when I went to a very poor place, the Central American University in Managua, Nicaragua, for a masterclass with colleagues from Complutense University. What we tried to do was to update professors and practitioners who worked there in everything related to their profession. There were many of them who were very experienced clinicians, since they had to deal with very difficult situations, but they lacked knowledge of recent developments in their field. We took everything we could; each of us took something of his own. I remember perfectly that Charo Martinez Arias was the first who brought a computer and taught them to work with him. That was definitive for them. I was explaining the cognitive models of depression when a professor, who was sitting in the front row, raised her hand and said, "I am very grateful for what you are doing for us, trying to explain to us why we feel bad, but look, we have so many reasons for being sick... We have had everything: earthquakes, wars, hurricanes. We have no money, we are poor, and therefore, we know that there are many reasons that make the discomfort, pain and depression understandable. What I want you to explain to me is why, given all that, there are some people who are well. That is what is important for you to tell us". She

was a very interesting person. Then, I talked to her and said, “Look, what you asked me is very interesting, and what you said is what we have to do”. And there we were, trying to understand the processes that lead to and sustain mental health, which is what positive psychology does, alongside traditional psychology, which tries to understand the disease. That fact shocked me a lot, and when I came back to Madrid I thought I could not continue to maintain my clinical practice as I was doing it, so I left it. What I thought was that all my efforts had to go into what that woman was saying, rather than continuing to work with people who were wrong, and continue helping them to see themselves as sick. I thought this was somehow unfair. I found that psychologists were trying to manage patients who were not able to manage themselves; but I saw, when I was in Nicaragua, that most of them had spare capacity to manage their lives for themselves. Most of the problems I saw as a practitioner were life’s daily problems. I thought I could leave that kind of work and, instead, put my efforts into something else – the analysis of healthy processes of normal personality. And that was what I started to investigate.

I think that is an interesting process and I enjoyed the work. However, I am thinking about taking up my work as practitioner again, partly because I have completed a cycle, and also, of course, because positive psychology can and should be applied in clinical settings, as I had already been doing for some time and which I had applied naively, without specific training in it.

### **What are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?**

Positive psychology is characterized by looking at a different aspect of psychology compared to traditional Psychology. I know that it seems a piece of cake but it is actually really hard work. It is trying to introduce a shift from the

interests of traditional psychology to many other aspects that were almost neglected. To the extent that the focus begins to appear in the positive side of people, a lot of processes and research agendas began to emerge. Above all, the emergence of positive psychology gives a more complete vision of human beings than we had before, when a quite negative view prevailed. That is how the development of positive psychology has changed psychology.

**On the other hand, and especially in Spain, positive psychology has had a lot of critics, with articles like the one by Marino Perez, entitled "Positive Psychology: sympathetic magic" [Psicología Positiva, magia simpática], and the "Papeles del Psicólogo" issue that revolutionized positive psychology in Spain, and even in other countries. We want to know your point of view. What are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?**

I know that Professor Carmelo Vazquez has written and published a very comprehensive article that refutes what Marino Perez said. I think it is very easy to take anything and start making criticisms of it. It is valid to begin to see mistakes that have been committed in a particular field, to question to what extent it is heading towards something that may be the best way to solve the problem, and to what extent the problem and the processes need further investigation... All this is lawful and must be questioned in any field. But to start making sarcastic and ironic comments centered on one person (because instead of criticizing positive psychology it seems that Perez laughed at one of its best representatives) – I frankly do not see that as being humorous and I think it is a big mistake. People who truly have critical capacity should focus on something higher than that and should carefully generate their own research, strategies and research groups, not criticize others without a reason. On the other hand, to do a good review is not easy.



There is a pretty tough series of articles written about positive psychology, such as those written by Richard Lazarus, and many others. I have had occasion to refer to them and in part I agree with them. We have to be a little more aware that we like to make a lot of noise about what we stand for, when some of these proposals were already in psychology. As Lazarus says, we seem to be like a noisy orchestra, with people shouting, “Here we are”. No big deal, I should say, you keep working quietly and then see if you really are so special...

But there is an issue I cannot understand in the criticism that you have pointed to, and in other similar critics of positive psychology, and is why positive psychology “annoys” some people. It’s something that really catches my attention. I always think that when there is a field that has moved forward, that has a lot of power, as at the time of Behavior Therapy, that usually generates a tremendous amount of criticism (in the case of Behavior Therapy people said that it would be inhumane and what seemed a cure would appear later as a different problem: but these objections did not occur). It seems that many of these criticisms come from fear, from people afraid to lose power and position and to move to other streams which, until that moment, were not a priority. In sum, I think all that is simple and pure competitiveness.

**You are recognized for your work in the area of intelligent optimism and personality. Can you tell me about your work and research in relation to positive psychology?**

The relationship between positive psychology and personality is a very interesting field. Because personality psychology theory says –proclaims– that it is about healthy individuals and adults. Ok, it is about adults, but healthy individuals... In almost all classifications about personality traits we have

descriptions such as “tendency to be neurotic, to be psychotic, to be rigid.” I think people must be described by normal functioning, because we are surrounded by normal people. I think we have to study how positive psychology affects personality. It is very interesting! A very important area here is that referred to by ‘strengths’. Strengths can be understood as traits, and there is a lot of research that needs to be done. The classification by Peterson and Seligman is a classification by consensus, but we still have to see if it is supported by psychometric data – I mean, if a particular strength really belongs to this virtue and not to another. We have to see how to associate all that and whether or not the classification proposed reflects what happens in an area about which we do not have enough evidence: in personality, which is human character. This term has been avoided because it has “moral nuances”. At last, we have recognized that there is nothing negative about having moral values. We are moral individuals and our vision of personality must include them; it would fail if it did not include them. Character strengths, despite requiring a lot of research, have opened the field of personality psychology. In some areas, enough research has been done (for example, gratitude, forgiveness) but other traits have little evidence. I’m about to finish the direction of a PhD about the appreciation of beauty and excellence, one of the strengths that has hardly been studied at all. We must make an effort to examine strengths such as humility, zest, bravery. I am very interested in bravery! Bravery and vitality are closely related. Both belong to the same virtue, and I think they have biological variables in common. We have a lot of work to do in these fields.

Related to other positive psychology areas, lately I've worked on one that I like very much, and which I continue working in. This is the application of positive psychology to the elderly, people who are 100 years old (really elderly!) and are

in residential centers because they cannot stay in their homes. With these people we have done a very useful study, with the help of my undergraduate students. We really want to repeat this research. We have seen some changes in these people which we found fascinating, and which made us feel great. It is a type of applied research work, very inspiring and exciting, that changes the autobiographical memory of the elderly.

**Is there any research on optimism that you would highlight as being particularly interesting?**

There is a lot of research in the field of optimism, but perhaps I would highlight that the relationship between cognitive variables, as the manifestation of certain degrees of optimism, and the prediction after a reasonable time – two or three months – of a very specific behavior, such as health, performance sports tasks, work functioning and so on, is something that helps to show that the association between optimism and many other positive variables is not a spurious relationship, but that dispositional optimism at one time can really predict very precise answers relevant to life. This ranks optimism as being much more powerful than we had considered until recently.

**What do you think is going to be the hot topic in the field over the next five years?**

I do not know whether to consider it a hot topic, but I think it has to be something related to the topic of strengths. But then there is something that is already known and that is getting a lot of attention, and that is the relationship between certain procedures that we are using in positive psychology and left frontal activation, as seen in many works by Richard Davidson. That is truly fascinating. Another area is mindfulness, which is gaining a lot of acceptance.

This practice does not arise in principle from positive psychology, but has been hailed as one of its strategies. The implication that it has on modifying brain structures has caught a lot of my attention. That is an issue that can only grow in the future.

**Who are the emerging and unknown positive psychology researchers to look out for? Who would be a person who you could look at and say, "Your research is really interesting"?**

I like very much seeing people who are not well known but who suddenly publish something that is very striking. Right now I could not identify any specific person, but I'm used to reading research in which I say, "What a good job, he used this or that well" or, "Those authors have applied this idea really well". There are many people in that line who will give us some surprises. I am still surprised by Barbara Fredrickson. She has lots of well done research that is exciting and varied: one of them is on just love and compassionate mindfulness meditation. I would like to see more research about positive institutions. I think it's an area that is far behind others, because it is more difficult to analyse.

**What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers or practitioners?**

People starting on positive psychology are usually very enthusiastic. I would ask them to be cautious and not to think that this is a panacea. Traditional psychology continues and must continue. Both are to be supported. Do not feel that we have to throw away all that we have done previously, because we never know. Psychology has effective therapies that have been working for many years, and many things we do are well done. What happens is that positive psychology has the right and legitimacy to propose changes, despite

what some people say. We must be very careful about having too much enthusiasm, and, above all, we must understand that positive psychology is neither a paradigm shift nor a panacea, but a trend that gives and will give much to talk about.

We have not talked about positive psychology in the field of psychotherapy. I have worked for a long time with OCD patients and I remember that, at the end of therapy, if things had gone well, I would think, "Okay, this patient is quite well" and then I turned to consider, "It is not ok, a person is not ok simply because he has no obsessions. What about positive emotions?". Then, when apparently it was all over, I tried to increase those emotions, and it was much more difficult compared to removing the pain. Working on positive emotions needs to be done; and it can be done in different circumstances, with a little imagination. There are people who come to therapy feeling very crushed and having no sense of self-efficacy or autonomy; and making them look at the best they have, perhaps to even change, this starts by the person looking at what brought them to therapy. That's a very nice job.

**What is the first book you would recommend to someone new to positive psychology?**

There are many good books published, but I'm a little sentimental and I would recommend a book that is quite academic and is very well organized, the book by Chris Peterson, *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. I am sorry that Professor Peterson died unexpectedly. I remember his effort and enthusiasm and have recommended his book several times. It has a very good bibliography, is it very pedagogical and didactic and covers various aspects that are very good. I also

like *Positive Psychology at the Movies*, by Ryan Niemiec. It's great and it seems very useful. There are books I should recommend for my students.

**Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on that I haven't asked about?**

I have in press a new edition of a book that I wrote few years ago, *Cartas a un Joven Psicólogo*. In this new edition, three new psychologists collaborate, plus participants from the previous edition. When it was all over, I thought, "This is a book written by me and I don't know why I'm not writing a chapter". So then I wrote one that related to positive psychology. Like everyone else, I say something about my experience in this field and give advice to people who are starting with positive psychology, although I do not really like the word nor the concept of "advice". I tell them to be careful about a tendency in some PhD and other research I read – that is, to repeat like a parrot what the mainstream authors say. I always tell them, "Okay, that's what Seligman says, but try to put it another way, or try to question him a little". In positive psychology, as in almost all new fields, there is a tendency to revere, almost idolize founding members, and that is not only absurd but contrary to science, which should always be discussed and questioned. That said, I must admit that it is very gratifying to see how people who contribute to positive psychology, which comes from different areas and consistently converges, are gradually being joined by people who work in other fields, some of whom are well known in other areas of psychology. To take an example close to home, Zimbardo's criticism interests me. When you say you are not wholly responsible for internal variables concerning behaviors related to people's strengths, or resilience, because everything also depends on the environment, I think it makes sense. The environment sometimes makes us do things we've never

thought. This is very important for personality psychology, which has always criticized the exclusive focus on features, making you forget that people act in response to what the environment demands. Exactly the same thing can be said about character strengths. Strengths psychology must not fall into the same problems as classic personality psychology.

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## Positive Psychology Resources

### Online Wellbeing Assessments

- [www.workonwellbeing.com](http://www.workonwellbeing.com) (free general wellbeing assessments)
- [www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx) (strengths, happiness, and other positive constructs)
- [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org) (free strengths assessments)
- [www.capeu.com](http://www.capeu.com) (strengths assessments)

### Positive Psychology Associations

- [www.ippanetwork.org](http://www.ippanetwork.org) (International)
- [www.enpp.eu](http://www.enpp.eu) (European network)
- [www.positiivinenpsykologia.fi](http://www.positiivinenpsykologia.fi) (Finland)
- [www.positivepsychology.org.uk](http://www.positivepsychology.org.uk) (UK)
- [www.positivepsychology.org.nz](http://www.positivepsychology.org.nz) (New Zealand)
- [www.globalcppa.org/en/index.html](http://www.globalcppa.org/en/index.html) (China)
- [www.positivepsychologycanada.com](http://www.positivepsychologycanada.com) (Canada)

### Online Articles, Overviews and Information

- [www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu)
- [www.actionforhappiness.org](http://www.actionforhappiness.org)
- [www.positivepsychologynews.com](http://www.positivepsychologynews.com)

### Free Positive Psychology Programs

- [www.thetuesdayprogram.com](http://www.thetuesdayprogram.com) (adults)
- [www.biteback.org.au](http://www.biteback.org.au) (teenagers)

## About the Authors

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**Emilia Lahti** is a positive psychology expert whose work is focused on understanding how individuals can rise above challenges and come out of hardships with a newly discovered, profound sense of strength, purpose and adaptability. She is the co-author of Finland's most prominent positive psychology website and co-founder of the *Finnish Positive Psychology Association*. Emilia wrote her MAPP master's thesis at the *University of Pennsylvania* on the Finnish construct of *sisu*, under the supervision of Dr. Angela Duckworth. Her goal is to unearth possible ways for the cultivation of this universal strength capacity, and also to ensure a culturally diverse vocabulary of the determinants of resilience and achievement (as well as the good life) within the dialogue of positive psychology. Emilia is also an outspoken anti-domestic violence advocate and avid systems thinker. Contact: [www.emilialahti.com](http://www.emilialahti.com) & [info@emilialahti.com](mailto:info@emilialahti.com)

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## Back Cover

What is positive psychology? When, where and how did positive psychology develop? What is it like to use positive psychology applications in the real world of professional practice? How much do helping professionals utilise positive psychology frameworks? Why do some practitioners opt for particular positive psychology applications and frameworks over others? How much do they know about positive psychology? What kind of positive psychology research is being applied in the real world, how and by whom? Who is doing the cutting edge positive psychology research? Where is the field of positive psychology heading, and how is it going to get there? How does positive psychology differ internationally?

*Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology* (volume 2) explores these kinds of questions and issues by interviewing fourteen experts in different areas of positive psychology. It also looks at what leads people to become involved in positive psychology, what has happened to their viewpoints over time, and what concerns, hopes, and observations they have about this promising developing field. All the interviewees are vastly experienced experts in the field of positive psychology, either because of their research or publication track record, or because they are well known in the positive psychology community either internationally or in their respective countries.

This book is intended to be of interest and use to those who have recently moved into the field of positive psychology or to those who are thinking of doing so. If you would like to know what some of the experts think and are looking for more insight into the field of positive psychology, this book will help.