

Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology

“Contemplation, introspection, curiosity turning inward, and this entire meaning making system is fertile terrain for the future of positive psychology” – Todd Kashdan

“We almost don’t need to have a separate area called positive psychology, because now it’s become part of most people’s thinking. It’s achieved critical mass” - Sonja Lyubomirsky

“The single massive achievement of positive psychology is that it has legitimized the study of what’s right with people” - Alex Linley

“Everywhere in the world, people want to be happy, to get along with other people, to have their needs met, to develop and grow, and to have respect. People want to love and to be loved. It is these universals that we want to study as positive psychologists” - Ed Diener

“Positive psychology has grown and it’s captured practical, applied and research attention across many disciplines around this now widely accepted notion that we can learn how to be better off. That has been remarkable. I don’t think that anyone saw it coming” - Mike Steger

“Any time that I think of a prototypical positive intervention that I want people to stick with, I think of the gratitude visit and the three good things exercise as a place to start” – Acacia Parks

“I think that positive psychology has made incredible strides and has moved way beyond so many of the nay-sayers and people that were skeptical suggesting that positive psychology was just a fad, and that it was going to be done and over in just a few years. They turned out to be completely wrong on that” - Ryan Niemiec

“Counting your blessings is great but it’s not going to be an intervention that saves the world, and gratitude letters are not going to either” - Nic Marks

“One of the biggest achievements of positive psychology to date is just getting on the public radar; of being clearly an area of science worth investing in, worth paying attention to, worth applying” - Barbara Fredrickson

“The future development of positive psychology at the moment lies in its international appeal” – Ilona Boniwell

“The whole field of positive psychology is exploding; it’s great in terms of the future, in terms of what lies ahead” - Robert Vallerand

“I have been concerned about the use of strengths interventions as if they are a fool-proof way to enhance wellbeing. Strengths are not a wind-up toy, ready to be taken out of the box, and off you go” - Denise Quinlan

“The real interventions in our life are family, school, jobs, and the political systems in which we live: these interventions don’t last two weeks, they last all our lives” – Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Dr Aaron Jarden

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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, thirteen 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 July to October 2011 and thus reflect thinking at that time. Before publication, all interviewees approved their transcripts as being accurate.

Thirteen 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.

My sincere thanks and gratitude to the giants of this field, and to the up and coming stars for passing on their wisdom and knowledge. I 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, I 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.

Todd Kashdan

Todd Kashdan, a.k.a. ‘the guns of positive psychology’, is an associate professor of psychology and senior scientist of the Center for Consciousness and Transformation at George Mason University. Todd trained in clinical psychology and is well known for his research into curiosity, social relationships, personality in daily life, meaning and purpose in life, and their links to all aspects of wellbeing.

Are you curious about the questions I’m going to ask?

Of course! I hate to know the questions ahead of time.

Ok then, well, what prompted you to become interested in positive psychology?

I’ve been in positive psychology a little over a decade now. The origin for me was when I was sitting in a doctor’s office, and at the time I was studying anxiety and panic attacks. In the office was an issue of *Psychology Today* and the main article was about sexuality and high suicide rates, with a small subtitle referring to an article on happiness and flow (a concept I had never heard of before). Immediately I was thinking to myself that, while I’m devoting my career to helping people to deal with their anxiety problems, when it comes down to it, once their anxiety has dissipated, I’d basically shake their hand and say how amazing they’d been over the course of eight weeks and send them on their way; not thinking about or working with them on how they might organize their life now that they have eight extra hours of time and energy to devote to it. When I read [Mihaly] Csikszentmihalyi’s article on happiness and flow I thought to myself, it’s interesting, the idea that as psychologists, we’re

going to help people organize their lives, and that was the moment for me. I don't want just to reduce people's anxiety, in fact I don't know if that's always a good thing. I want to organize and structure people's lives in a way that's congruent with the values that they care most about. That all hit me when I was sitting in the doctor's office waiting for my dermatologist appointment.

What did you do before positive psychology?

Well before I did that I worked on the floor of the NY Stock Exchange as an assistant to a specialist. In brief, specialist firms create markets for particular stocks such that if there are lots of buyers but no sellers, they will step in and sell stock to particular people and companies. Essentially, for 30 stocks, any transaction in the world had to go through my fingertips.

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

My father left my twin brother and I when we were about two years old. My parents got divorced and then he just took off and never really spoke to us again. My mother died when I was thirteen. I never really defined myself as being someone who was an orphan or overcoming adversities, but everyone else always was surprised. I remember meeting a really distinguished psychologist at the University of Virginia, Irving Gottesman. He's well known for research on schizophrenia. After an interview with him he said to me, "You beat the odds, you're supposed to be in jail, you're supposed to be the drug addict, yet here you are, an orphan at 21 years of age, and you're just not supposed to be here at this stage of your life". It made me realize the power of resilience. You shouldn't be defining yourself by resilience, but it becomes embedded within the cells of your body. That's the type of idea that I like to

promote in people's lives. Not to make it their aim to make themselves become resilient, but use what we know about the human condition to help them overcome difficult life events so that they get bred into the bone. This resonates with me because I've overcome loss and adversity, but never defined myself by that adversity.

In general terms, and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

It's a tough question because there's the established foundation of positive psychology and then there's what I think it should be, and I always struggle between these two worlds. The core of positive psychology since its inception has been positive emotions and strengths of character; and then particular elements of relationships that allow them to flourish harmoniously for the long term. I think that all three of these are integral to living a well-lived life. I think that the problem is that positive emotions are the biggest strength and also the biggest problem for positive psychology. There are two ways of looking at positive emotions. One is that they are just a barometer or gauge that your life is going well. The other is that positive emotions are what we are aiming to construct—we want to construct our life so that there is a high frequency of positive emotions and a low frequency of negative emotions. To me, there are fundamental problems when this is the primary target for our interventions and what we want to create in our lives. I view positive emotions as the residual benefit of focusing on meaning and purpose in life, and close relationships. And from striving toward these personal projects, you're going to fill your pockets with emotional experiences. They're building blocks/cells and what's important is, 'What's the connective tissue among these moments?'. That is what should be more fundamental to positive psychology. What do you

want to be written on your tombstone? What do you want to be in your obituary? I think few people are going to answer 'here lies a person who had a high frequency of positive emotions and a low frequency of negative emotions'. Instead, they are going to want a tombstone that discusses intimate relationships, self-sacrifice, the search for ultimate truths, accomplishment, etc. But I can understand why these deeper topics are not at the forefront of positive psychology. After all, they don't work as well in a media sound-bite. But we should be interested in the connective tissue among positive experiences and the architectural framework that houses them, as opposed to just increasing the amount of positive experiences.

What is one big question that positive psychology answers?

How do you maintain a lasting, trusting, and satisfying relationship? Two people who want to be committed to each other in a way where each feels accepted, validated, understood, with a sense of vitality and room to continually evolve. I think we've nailed that.

Which professional groups of people are most interested in harnessing positive psychology?

That's a really tough one!

I mean positive psychology is being applied in education, in health, in organizations, in therapy, even in the army. Is there somewhere else you think positive psychology is going to go next?

I hope that it is in the government. I think that right now education is where the action is. Everything should focus on the future. One of my big beefs with positive psychology is that there is insufficient generativity and generosity right

now. There is an unusual culture of celebrities and hero worship: who's published the books, who are the distinguished professors, who's being cited in introductory psychology textbooks, who's making the money, those kinds of things. Who's the next generation? I don't know who the hell they are right now, but there are creative ideas floating around that people are afraid to reveal, given the possibility that they might look like idiots. Most people who come up with unusual great ideas, get rejected. I want to invest in the future of positive psychology. Right now education is where the action is. Everyone I talk to speaks about the idea that something is wrong at the government level in that they control resources, they decide how much money goes to improving the welfare of humanity, they decide how much money is going to the business organizations, they decide what products they are going to subsidize. With government at the highest realm of the hierarchy, that's where positive psychology needs to be playing a role. Right now there is almost nothing at the governmental level.

As a positive psychology practitioner and expert, are there any situations that you need to avoid, or things that you need to be careful of when you are applying the science in practice?

As a practitioner, here is the important question to attend to, 'What are the things the person, the couple, the organization that you are working with, are striving to obtain?'. Let's not impose outcomes on them. If they're interested in increasing courage and sharing creative ideas, and we end up being the world's greatest expert on morale and leadership, we have to start with and focus on the things they are interested in and not what we're interested in. What I worry about is that there are a lot of practitioners in positive psychology, but I don't know who is a generalist and who's a specialist. Ten years since the

inception of this thing called positive psychology and there are still no specialties. You're just a positive psychologist. And I think that's particularly problematic. Should you be working with parents if the work you're most familiar with is Richard Davison's and pre-frontal cortex activity? If your primary knowledge base happens to be in positive organizational behavior, what exactly makes you qualified to work with parents and children and the interaction between them?

I know you're clinically trained and also do clinical work. Do you think the scientist-practitioner model that a lot of clinicians gravitate to is a good model for positive psychologists to adopt as well?

The scientist-practitioner model has been a little problematic because of the requirement for everything to be empirically supported before it can be adopted in the world. The mantra that I have adopted over the past few years is that we should be guided, as opposed to governed, by the research. If that fits with the scientist-practitioner model, then I'm for it. However if the scientist-practitioner model sets the bar even higher before we can use the science, then I'm a bit unsure that this level of quality control can be sustained.

I think I've heard you previously term this approach as being 'empirically informed'?

Yes, scientifically informed. That's right.

If you could start learning about positive psychology again from the beginning, I mean you're a decade or more in now, what would you do differently?

Nearly everything that I have studied should be centered on the situational context that it is embedded in. That could be people in cults, it could be adults and their relationships with their friends or parents, it could be people embedded in their larger group cultural context. It doesn't have to be their country of origin, it could be the sub culture they identify with, such as hip-hop culture, Goth culture, the punk-rock culture. If I were to do it over again, I would have done two or three years focusing on understanding culture, understanding systems, understanding links between systems, and bringing that to my work with individuals and organizations.

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

My big thing is friendships and romantic relationships. For me, this is the most important aspect of our lives. Cultivating these friendships after the age of 30 is complicated; I have no idea what I'm doing and I know many other people feel the same way. What worked as a child, teenager, and young adult, doesn't work as well in our 30s. When I was 20 years old, surrounded by other people in dormitories and bars, hanging naked from the rafters of a building somewhere, it was nearly impossible to avoid friendships. As you get older, it takes greater effort to find people and consistent effort to maintain friendships. To understand positive aging, we have to get a handle on life transitions. I'm not even referring to life at 65, 70, and 80; I'm talking about 30 to 35 years old. How do you cultivate new relationships when the characters around you have no understanding of the serpentine road it took you to get to where you are? How do you maintain action in a romantic relationship and honor the fact that you are still going to be attracted, seducing and being seduced by, other people in your life? How can you hold these different worlds

simultaneously, with neither clashing? This is the realm that my work is going into, looking at people, looking at moments, all within a larger context.

Who are the emerging and unknown positive psychology researchers to look out for?

Good question. I think there are scientists in other fields of psychology that no one in positive psychology is talking about. Henk Aarts and Ap Dijksterhuis, in the Netherlands, study non-conscious processes, basically the idea that once you figure out your bike path to work, you get this mental module in your brain that you can access so quickly that you've got plenty of mental resources left over to focus on something else. For someone else who doesn't have a clear mindful way of getting to work, this is a resource intensive endeavor. What is powerful is the idea that we can shift mental resources to activities that are completely outside of conscious awareness so that we are better able to regulate the multitude of decisions, choices, and data that are flying towards us on a daily basis. Their work has great relevance to positive psychology, yet nobody is talking about this science much less how it can be applied when directly helping people.

Anybody else?

There's Jamie Goldenberg at the University of South Florida who's a Terror Management Theory researcher. What's interesting is that she applies this theory to sex and the notion that once you recognize the finality of existence and related existential issues, this affects how you treat your body in terms of dieting, in terms of sex, in terms of being attracted or repelled by the intimate sounds and smells of other people. It's the same notion that things outside of conscious awareness are constantly biasing and playing tricks on what we value

and how we behave. And positive psychology is simply not paying adequate attention to unconscious processes. Completing self-report questionnaires won't cut it. Your answers when completing a self-report questionnaire are not necessarily going to converge with what you will actually do in a given situation where multiple options are available.

What area of positive psychology do you still find difficult to understand? I mean, what's the real minefield for new players?

Everything with non-linear dynamics is complicated.

Can you be a bit more specific?

Think about Barbara's Fredrickson's 3-to-1 ratio [of emotions]. It's based on the notion that human experiences and behavior are dynamic and non-linear. Think of the multitude of moments within a single day working in an organization. There are mathematical equations that can be calculated where, when there's an attraction, there are two attractors, one that attracts negative moments and one that attracts positive moments. Two attractors at the same time. It's as if a person's psyche has two vacuums. And there's the notion that if you have a particular ratio of positivity, you're more likely to be functioning optimally. I understand everything I just said, but the mathematics leading to that result is beyond my comprehension. How do I apply this knowledge to understand a person's ratio of mindful to mindless moments? How do these formulas help people use their finite currency of time and energy more wisely over the course of a single day? Given the notion that there are certain ratios, frequencies, and durations of experiences that lead to more successful outcomes, how can this be used to understand and improve people's lives? There appear to be mathematical formulas to tackle non-linear life trajectories,

but I don't know how to calculate them, thus I can't ask the questions the way that I would like to.

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

The data are clear that it's about appreciating the benefits you get from each moment as it unfolds. It's a combination of gratitude and mindfulness, which are two overlapping circles. Gratitude is the mindful recognition of benefits received, and mindfulness is a kind of open receptive attitude towards what happens as each moment unfolds. Put those two together, that attitude, that mind-set, that beacon of consciousness, and you can catch particular moments and make them linger both in the present as an increase in vitality and you can recall them at a later date as a mood boost. That's where the action is.

In positive psychology you're renowned for research in the area of curiosity. Can you tell us a little bit about curiosity?

Curiosity is one of the engines that make other elements in positive psychology work. You can't use your strengths in new ways without this process of clarifying strengths as well as the situations where they can be used most effectively. Where should I be changing my behaviors, my mind-set? When you reverse engineer this exploration of how to best use strengths, you're talking about turning curiosity inward towards the self. This runs counter to how people typically think of curiosity. We normally think of curiosity as a mindset turned outward to novel, uncertain, or challenging external stimuli – from people to situations. And the reason why curiosity, the curiosity field, has such lasting power is that most people don't think about how curiosity can be wielded like a laser, at any given point in time, and we can direct it outward or

inward. We spend so much time trying to increase our positive mood that we forget periods of reflection and contemplation, and the importance of clarifying our values, about what's meaningful, about what we want, about what we want in 100 or so years on this planet to stand for. This mindset usually leads to a positive experience if we are willing to extract meaning, but the actual search itself, the emotional state, is pretty much inert, it's neutral. So there's a whole terrain of research and theory that is yet to be touched in terms of how you balance the external search for meaning and the external search for more positive moments as the building blocks for living a good life, versus using time for yourself to reflect on and synthesize how things are going and whether there is adequate movement in the direction of deeply valued life aims. Contemplation, introspection, curiosity turning inward, and this entire meaning making system is fertile terrain for the future of positive psychology.

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

Intellectually, I think we already have great scientists. We've got publications, we've got outlets, we're entering more territory than any other area of psychology ever has within a ten-year period. But what we don't have is those people who have that skeptical mind-set of, 'I'm not content with how things are and I want to continue building a future of new ideas, new theories, new ways to make things better', which sometimes means tearing things down and starting from scratch. Right now, the field of positive psychology is a bit too harmonious. Ironic in that this harmony serves as a strength and weakness. My hope is that in five years there will be an appreciation of rigorous challenges. Whatever is the ferment of the moment, whatever are the most exciting ideas, those will be challenged. Not by trying to win fame by tearing someone down,

because we're all trying to build the greatest architectural masterpiece possible. Right now there is too much fear and mistrust about having ideas challenged by other people, about dealing with the ambiguity of where ideas work. Nearly all psychological ideas have their tipping points and boundary conditions, where the benefits no longer apply. We need to find them, and map this terrain. The ideas that are getting the most traction in positive psychology, strengths, positive emotions, gratitude, and mindfulness are being overemphasized. This is a common consequence of a paradigm shift. I think we have to appreciate questions such as 'When do these things not apply?', 'When are they not working?', 'When do they need to be scaffolded by another process?'. We need to examine constructs and interventions in tandem as opposed to separate, isolated ingredients. My hope is that innovative, integrative skeptics will represent the future of positive psychology, people thinking in greater complexity and people challenging people and ideas, and enjoying that challenge.

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

It's already in psychology: regulatory processes outside of conscious awareness. This is already happening under the umbrella of social neuroscience. I think it's a nice way of describing the world! I'm not quite sure what you do with it in terms of improving the welfare of humanity. But recognizing that most of the things we do to enhance our lives occur outside of conscious awareness – that recognition alone can improve people's lives.

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?

To be a good practitioner or scientist in this field you need to start with psychology, and then choose the topics that resonate within this lens of positive psychology. The idea of positive psychologists, of people specializing in positive psychology from the get-go, worries me because we have a hundred years of great ideas that could get lost quickly by attempting to start anew when a body of knowledge already exists. Let's build off the shoulders of predecessors.

Sonja Lyubomirsky

Sonja Lyubomirsky is a research psychologist, professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and outgoing editor of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*. She has spent most of her research career studying human happiness and is author of the popular book *The How of Happiness*, which describes strategies backed by scientific research that can be used to increase happiness.

In general, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

Positive psychology is about what makes life worth living. It's about the positive side of life. Before positive psychology, most researchers were focused on studying topics like depression, divorce, stress, how to fix things, and positive psychologists are more interested not in what makes us unhappy, but in what makes us happy. Not why people divorce, but why they stay together. My own research is on 'happiness', which I really started investigating long before the field of positive psychology came into being.

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

Maybe the greatest achievement is that it almost does not need to be its own field anymore, because now so many researchers are studying the positive side of life. If you look at any top journal, like in my field, which is social/personality psychology, a huge fraction, sometimes like half, of the articles have something to do with wellbeing or optimism or some kind of positive topic. So it's just pervading the field of psychology. I don't know so much about related fields. We almost don't need to have a separate area called positive psychology,

because now it's become part of most people's thinking. It's achieved critical mass.

Can you tell me a bit about your work in positive psychology? You're renowned for your work in the area of positive interventions?

I started doing research on happiness in 1989, so that was quite a while ago. Just to give you a bit of history, the first day of grad school at Stanford, I met my advisor, Lee Ross, who is famous for studying conflict and negotiation, nothing to do with happiness or positive psychology. The very first day we somehow started talking about 'What is happiness?', and 'Why are some people happier than others?'. At that time the only person – literally the only person – who was studying happiness was Ed Diener, and he didn't even call it happiness, he called it 'subjective wellbeing'. He had told me that at one point that he started to call it subjective wellbeing because he was up for tenure at the University of Illinois and he thought that 'happiness' was too unscientific a term, so he had to find a jargon term that was more acceptable. Anyway, Lee and I started investigating 'How are happy people different from unhappy people?', and so for the first ten years of my career, from '89 to '99, that's what I did: trying to understand why some people are happier than others.

Most of that research was correlational, so reporters would often call me and ask me, 'Well, what can we tell our readers about how they can be happier?'. So, for example, one of my studies suggested that happier people are less likely to compare themselves to others. So reporters would call me and say, 'Shall we tell people that they should not compare themselves to others, they shouldn't engage in social comparison?'. And I would be like, 'well I don't know! I can't say that because all I know is that happy people do it or don't do it, and that is

just a correlational finding'. I thought that the question of how do you get people to do that, or how do you get people to become happier or look more like a happier person was solely an applied question. I thought that was a less interesting scientific question. It was very applied, and I was this basic scientist who was only interested in basic research. But then I realized that the question, 'How can people become happier?' or 'Can people become happier given that a lot of happiness is genetically determined?', was in itself a really interesting scientific question.

In 1999 I was invited to one of the Akumal, Mexico meetings where I met Barbara Fredrickson, Ken Sheldon, Laura King, Jonathan Haidt, and, of course, Martin Seligman and Mike Csikszentmihalyi. That's when we all just started talking, and two of the people there, Ken Sheldon and David Schkade, and I started talking about whether people can even become happier. Scientists up till then had been kind of pessimistic about whether people can really change their happiness set point. So we developed a theory about sustainable happiness. That's more or less how my work in positive interventions started. We had this theory about showing that, yes, people can become happier, and then in the last 10 years of my career, along with Ken Sheldon and others, we have been conducting many happiness interventions. But, again, my interest isn't just applied, so it's not just that I want people to be happier – although I certainly do, it's a nice fringe benefit – but my interest is really more in 'how can people become happier?'. I'm interested in what are the moderators and the mediators underlying success at achieving happiness. What is the 'how' and the 'why'? If people can become happier, why can they do that, and how can they do that? So that's what we are trying to achieve in our research right now,

looking at those root psychological mechanisms that enable people to be successful in achieving happiness.

Somebody comes to you and says they want to become happier. What would your first piece of advice to them be?

People come to me a lot asking that question! I wrote *The How of Happiness*, where my goal was to basically condense or summarize everything we knew up until then, in 2008, about how to become happier. So what I usually do is send them the 12 empirically-supported categories of strategies or activities that people can do if they want to be happier. I tell them that there is, of course, detailed information about how to become more grateful, or on nurturing their relationships, or pursuing meaningful goals, and I then talk about the research that supports all of these activities or strategies. So that's what I do, I point them to these 12 strategies that I describe in my book.

Are there any new interventions coming on board that you think are exciting that no one knows about as yet?

There are certainly some exciting studies that we are doing that I can tell you about. For example, one really exciting project we are working on is with Robert Plomin and his post-doc Claire Hayworth in London. You may know he's a behavioral geneticist, and he has something like 10,000 twins that he's studying and following from birth, just about every twin born in the UK in 1990. We're studying 2,000 of these twins. We've actually just finished the first study, which is a happiness intervention with the twins. There are identical twins and there are fraternal twins in this sample, and there are boys and girls, and so we can answer a lot of questions. What we are interested in in this study is to understand individual differences in people's responses to happiness

interventions. How much of those differences are genetic? Because some people, when they try the strategies in my book, find them very effective and they become happier. But some people don't become as happy to the same degree as others, or maybe don't get happier at all. So what portion of those individual differences in people's responses to happiness interventions is genetically determined? We can test that with this twin sample.

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

We don't really know the answer to that question. My students and I are actually only just now doing some studies where, in a positive activity intervention, we have people do several activities at the same time. Usually in experiments you want to have everything very controlled, so you study one activity at a time. We've just completed a study where we had people do gratitude and kindness at the same time; but we don't have the results yet. Generally my answer, without the evidence, is that what goes well together is what fits you as a person. One of the themes of my book was the idea of fit. You have to somehow find what works for you and what you feel comfortable doing. For you, it could be one set of interventions, and for me, it could be something else. We are testing this hypothesis right now in a couple of studies.

Where do you see your research going in the future?

We are still doing quite a few interventions to test 'the how' and 'the why'. I mentioned the study with the twins. We're also doing studies with kids. We just did a big study with a whole bunch of elementary school kids in Vancouver. So I think it's really interesting to apply the research to younger people. My friends keep asking me to write *The How of Happiness* for kids, because people

want their children to be happy so they really want to know. I don't think the advice would be really that different, but we need to find out. There are already some researchers engaged in studying that question. We're doing a lot of that kind of work – applying the interventions to different contexts.

Another line of research that I'm really involved in right now is about hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation is an obstacle to happiness; it's an obstacle to happiness interventions. If you adapt and get used to the rewards or benefits of whatever intervention you're engaged in, it's not going to be that successful. Ken Sheldon and I have a theory of how adaptation works, and how you can thwart it, forestall it, or prevent it. We're testing that theory now. Actually a paper that I've submitted with some colleagues about which we are really excited is about whether parents are less happy than non-parents. There have been a lot of articles, a lot of talk in the media about the idea that parents are unhappy, and most of it comes from just one study; and so we did three really nice studies that all used different methodologies, that go together really well. All three studies showed the same thing, which is that parents are happier and have more meaning than non-parents – in general, when they are with their children, and when they go about their days. So we're excited because this paper is going to really debunk this myth out there that parents are miserable.

Is there anything that I have not asked about, or general advice, that you would like to add?

It's so great that there is so much science out there: I think it's really important to emphasize that, because positive psychology is so 'popular', as it were. There are a lot of mental health practitioners and coaches, as well as doctors, addiction specialists, prison guards, who are all applying the concepts of

positive psychology, which is great. But we really need the science behind it, and so there are lots and lots of people now doing that research. We need to make sure people know about that, and, as I mentioned before, we almost don't need the field anymore because it has permeated everyone's thinking, so that's important. In terms of people – graduate students or college students – who are interested in getting into the field, I would say the most important thing is not to study positive psychology, but to obtain a really rigorous training in statistics and methodology and general psychology, in whatever area you're interested in, and then you can narrow your interests down to positive psychology.

Alex Linley

Alex Linley is the Founding Director of the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) in the UK. He is recognised internationally as a leading expert on positive psychology, and works as an organisational consultant applying strengths in organisations. Alex has written, co-written, or edited more than 150 research papers and book chapters, and seven books around the topic of positive psychology.

In general terms, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

One of the features of positive psychology is its inherent focus on the positive. By that I don't mean that it will ignore the negative, but it will pay attention to more of the positive things than has traditionally been looked at. I think that's fundamentally important because there used to be a view that if we understood the bad, then, by taking away the bad, we would actually create the good, and I don't believe that that is always the case at all. It's far more important if we want to promote the good and the positive, that we can understand the good and the positive.

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

Far and away positive psychology's biggest achievement is to have put a positive perspective firmly into psychology. Before positive psychology, psychology had been hugely focused on the negative side of things. Psychology could have been regarded as quite a depressing discipline. Since the advent of positive psychology anyone who is interested in the positive side of things has found a home. I think by virtue of that the single massive achievement of

positive psychology is that it has legitimized the study of what's right with people, and to then create new applications and interventions based on that knowledge that move people into positive territory, rather than just away from negative territory.

Do you think positive psychology has achieved things outside of psychology?

Without doubt! The positive turn in psychology has also legitimized a wider interest in things like happiness and wellbeing, as great examples. And we can see evidence for shifts in considering those in both social policy here in Britain, and in economics in relation to what some economists recommend that we look at (which is also supported by more of the shift towards behavioural economics). More widely, things like Martin Seligman's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme in the United States are superb examples of how you can take some of the principles of positive psychology and apply those in a way that makes a real and lasting difference to people's lives.

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

First, in the early days there was a very valid criticism that positive psychology had largely ignored some of the 'positive approaches' that had gone before. It was quite dismissive of Humanistic Psychology. That has now changed. Second, also in the early days there was a perception, although I don't think this was a reality, that positive psychology was more focused on the positive, and therefore didn't want anything to do with the negative, and therefore it would do the same things as traditional psychology had done, by just looking at one end of the spectrum. As that criticism was made, there was any number of people who came out and said that actually our view of positive psychology is that it incorporates the negative as well. But it is probably more oriented

towards the positive side. A third observation is that there is, and this is not specific to positive psychology at all, this tension between the speed at which people seek to move towards application, and the speed at which the basic research can move. There has been a view in some parts of positive psychology that applications are moving too quickly. On the other hand, there are hundreds of thousands of people working in practice who are out there trying things out and trying to do things that will make a difference, and who simply won't wait for the research to catch up with what they need to know. And it was ever thus. The two, as much as possible, need to inform each other; but we need to recognise that there are very different trajectories and very different agendas that research and practice can be working towards.

What area of positive psychology do you still find most difficult or challenging?

There is still loads and loads that we don't know, and still loads to be discovered about strengths, and the applications of strengths. I find that a hugely interesting and intriguing area, and obviously it's an area where I work a lot myself. The move into neuroscience, looking at the neuroscience side of things, is an area that is outside of my traditional expertise, so that's something that I need to work hard to understand; but it's great to have that angle looking at things as well.

Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology, particularly around strengths?

My work on strengths started way back, around ten years ago or so now. Obviously I was involved in positive psychology from pretty early on, and I looked at the way that the field was developing; and in very broad terms, there

was the work that had been done in happiness and wellbeing, and the work that had been done, or was starting to be done, in strengths. I thought, actually there are loads of people working in happiness and wellbeing, and a lot fewer people working on strengths; and yet, I see strengths as being one of the key ways in which we can achieve happiness and wellbeing. And it was one of the areas that seemed to have loads of potential for application. So I started off really trying to think about and understand what strengths were, and I wrote some early papers, probably five or six years ago now, with tentative definitions of how we could think about strengths. One of the things that came through from that early work was that the energy requirement of strengths was absolutely integral, and while it was implicit in some of the work that had been done so far, nobody had really put it as a hallmark of their theory, so that was something we set out to do. And then around about the same time we started working in practice, and I started working with the British insurance company Norwich Union, which is now known as Aviva, and found that we got very effective results working with them to recruit people according to the strengths that they had, using a strengths-based interview methodology that we developed. Since then our research work and applied work has developed hand in hand. Often we will develop ideas that we use to inform our work in practice around things like assessment and development and performance management, but from the ideas that we developed and try out in practice, we then develop the questions that we want to look at more rigorously or more empirically. The sorts of things that we are looking at now are to design studies about how strengths help you to achieve your goals, but we are also looking at some of the fundamental strengths. For example, we are designing a study where we look at the role of authenticity and mindfulness and organismic valuing and those sorts of concepts in relation to strengths. And then, of

course, there are all of the continual validation studies and things that we do with Realise2 as well.

Is there any new knowledge or studies around strengths that you would like to highlight that are particularly interesting?

We have recently done some work on ‘strengthspotting’, and developed the Strengthspotting Scale, and from that validated the Strengthspotting Scale against Realise2, to look at whether strengthspotters may have a particular strengths profile. It turns out that there are a range of characteristics that seem to define strengthspotting, and those tend to be things around the motivation to identify strengths, the situations in which you do so, the frequency with which you do it, and then, crucially, what you do with that knowledge. So we started to investigate that to see if we could help people to develop their ability to identify strengths in others in natural contexts. In addition to that, we validated that scale against Realise2, and showed that Connector, Enabler and Feedback were the key strengths that predicted strengthspotting capability across all the five strengthspotting domains.

What’s one aspiration you have for the field of positive psychology?

My biggest aspiration for positive psychology is that it continues to grow, but that it continues to grow in a way that influences applications and policy. The basic research needs to continue at pace, with real opportunity for positive psychologists to move into areas where positive psychology can make a sustainable, significant, and lasting impact on people’s lives for the better. I think where that is most likely to happen, sadly, is not from any individual research study; where it will come from is from a building of the body of data and that knowledge and then critically when that data and knowledge is

translated into practice. Whether it's the work we do with big organisations, which has the potential to impact the lives of thousands of people, or the way that we inform the development of social policy, or whether it's projects like the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme that Martin Seligman has developed with the US Army, things like that really help positive psychology to step up to the plate and go above and beyond just being a basic academic discipline to something which is realising its potential to catalyse a positive difference in the world. And that would be my big aspiration for positive psychology – that it continues to do that.

Which discipline do you think positive psychology can learn from most moving forward?

My gut instinct is economics. Rightly or wrongly, the economists have had the measure of policy for many, many, years, and economic terms have shaped much of what goes on in the policy arena. But there are huge opportunities for the melding of psychology and economics. We are already seeing this in things like behavioural economics, where economists are recognising that people are not the logical rational actors that we were always assumed to be by economic models, and instead we make irrational emotional choices based on a whole variety of different factors. For many years that was ignored by economics, and psychologists mocked them for the models being so wrong. But now positive psychology and economics are coming together a bit more and starting to say, 'Well, what can we take from psychology that can be applied in economic models that can then help us to better predict how people will behave and respond in different situations?'. Once we have that model, we will be able to shape policy and shape interventions in a way that are much more going with the grain of what people will naturally do. There is huge opportunity there, and

I think it's appropriate at this point to acknowledge the work of Daniel Kahneman, who was one of the key people who led the development of the behavioural economics field.

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

Well that's the million dollar question! I would guess it's going to be something to do with one of two things. It could be neuroscience-based. There are going to be some key validations or insights that come from understanding brain functioning. That's important, because as soon as you can start to talk about things at the level of the brain, people start to take you seriously and think this must be true. So it's a good way of getting through the door and getting people's attention. But now to the second topic, which has huge potential. I went to see Martin Seligman speak at the Houses of Parliament, in July [2011], and one of the things that he said he was working on was to develop algorithms with people like Facebook and Google to be able to map the prevalence of happiness-related words in our lexicon, in the things that people put in emails, in Facebook postings, in linked-in postings, that sort of thing. So harvesting the potential for real-time data collection and data analysis using the new social technologies that are available, and combining that with a solid underpinning of psychological theory could really take us into domains we have not even imagined before now.

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

Without question number one on that list has to be Martin Seligman for everything that he has done to develop and promote the field. But more than that, the thing that he has done that I've never seen any psychologist do, is the way that he has been able to take positive psychology and use it and apply it

and lead it in such a way that it has impact, that it makes a difference. So he's had a huge impact on the development of social policy in the UK, but also in other countries, as in the Comprehensive Solider Fitness programme that I mentioned before. But a whole raft of things like that really helps him to stand out in my mind as someone I admire enormously. Second on that list would be Barbara Frederickson, for the massive developments that she has made in our understanding of positive emotion. Her theory, the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions, is one of the stand-out theories in positive psychology. The third person would be Chris Peterson for his knowledge, but also his character and personality, the way that he brings positive psychology alive for people and makes it real. I look at a lot of his books and blog entries and postings to see where he's really done that. Another person, finally, would be Mike Csikszentmihalyi, simply for his erudition and scholarship. I don't think there is anyone in positive psychology who knows more about more different fields of study and the history of thought and philosophy and all those sorts of things than Mike, so I think he's quite an incredible character.

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

That would be different for each. For a researcher, my advice would be to find an area that you are fundamentally excited by and interested in, so that it will maintain your interest and enthusiasm as you work on it. You could also be strategic with that and find an area where you think there is not yet a lot that has been done, but you think the area is likely to grow in profile and significance, and you can grow with it. That is certainly something that I was able to do by being involved with positive psychology from the beginning. I think for a practitioner, my advice would be to use your best judgement in the

way that you work. It's easy to get bound up with best practice, which is all about what has been done before. But that really blows out of the water any opportunity for innovation, if we only stick at what has been done before. So I'm a big advocate of using what we call best judgement: understand the literature, know the research and the findings, but be prepared to take all of that and say, moving beyond what is already known, this is my judgement as to what would be the best thing to do in this situation. And that's how we have driven a lot of the innovation and a lot of the development in our methodologies for assessment, development, and performance management – around strengths. They have come through understanding the field, and then being prepared to make the adaptation and apply that in a practical way – even though there won't be a specific study that says that this will be the result. We do a lot of research in practice as it might be called, rather than research that will always end up being published in academic journals.

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Positive Psychology Resources

Online Wellbeing Assessment

- www.growthq.com (wellbeing)
- www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx (strengths and happiness)
- <http://viacharacter.org/www> (strengths)
- <http://www.capeu.com> (strengths)

Positive Psychology Associations

- www.ippanetwork.org (International)
- www.positivepsychology.org.nz (New Zealand)
- www.enpp.eu (European Network)
- <http://positivepsychology.org.uk> (UK)
- www.globalcppa.org/en/index.html (China)

Online Articles, Overviews and Information

- www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu
- www.actionforhappiness.org
- <http://positivepsychologynews.com>

Free Positive Psychology Programs

- www.thetuesdayprogram.com (Adults)
- www.biteback.org.au (Teenagers)

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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?

Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology explores these kinds of questions and issues by interviewing thirteen 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.

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.