

Introduction to Positive Psychology

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The world's great spiritual traditions have long touted the importance of human virtues. Paul the Apostle, for example, in his first letter to the Corinthians penned the oft quoted verse "So now faith, hope, love, abide, these three: but the greatest of these is love." In Buddhism we find descriptions of, and practices for, cultivating the Divine Abodes of loving kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity. But what, we might ask, does the field of Psychology have to say about positive human capacities?

Humanistic Psychology

Towards the middle of the 20th Century, a small group of psychologists looked at the development of their field to date and found it wanting. Led by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, this group noted the accomplishments of the Freud's psychoanalytic movement that the behaviorism that grew out of the work of Ivan Pavlov, J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner. Yet they yearned for a more holistic view of psychology and the human experience than the measurement-bound empiricism of behaviorism or the clinical observations of the neurotic mind described by psychoanalysts. They wished to incorporate into psychology several streams of western intellectual history, especially existentialism and phenomenology, and welcomed Eastern philosophical and psychological perspectives, as well. Their goals were not limited to changing behavior or curing neurosis. Rather they were interested in such human experiences as health, hope, love, creativity, meaning, and self-actualization. They wondered what the outer limits of human potential might be in these areas. Their movement became known as Humanistic Psychology and by 1971 they had received enough professional acceptance to be accorded their own section of the American Psychological Association.

Perhaps one of the best known theoretical accomplishments of this group is Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. In this theory, Maslow describes a pyramid of human needs, from the physiological requirements of the human organism to its security requirements, to the need for love, then self-esteem, and finally to the pinnacle of human needs, self-actualization. In Maslow's theory each layer must be met before a person can move towards satisfying the next higher level in this hierarchy of possible human fulfillment. Maslow first published his Hierarchy in 1948. (Maslow A (1948). ["Higher" and "lower" needs](#). J of Psych: Interdisciplinary and Applied 25: 433-436.)

Within Humanistic Psychology, with its grounding in phenomenology, research was more pluralistic than Behaviorism, adding an openness to qualitative research modalities (for example, analyzing subject reports of what it feels like to grieve). Humanistic psychotherapy developed treatment modalities intended to help clients find healthier ways to live and a richer sense of self. These outcomes led clients towards the ultimate goal of self-actualization, the apex of Maslow's Hierarchy, defined as the reaching of one's full potential as a human being.

Yet in spite of the progress made by the Humanistic Psychology movement, Maslow would still write the following in 1987:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side. It has revealed to us much about man's shortcomings, his illness, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology has voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, the darker, meaner half. (Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Psychology*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1987, p. 354)

The Advent of Positive Psychology

Whether intentionally or not, Maslow's late 80's lament about the self-imposed limitations of the field seems to have catalyzed a small but significant shift in the scientific halls of Psychology towards the empirical study of virtuous human capacities and how they can be cultivated. Positive Psychology, the new field birthed in this shift, seeks to complement, rather than replace, other clinical modalities in the treatment of mental health issues. The approach of Positive Psychology is to nurture and develop innate human qualities, such as gratitude, forgiveness, and mindfulness, that contribute to human happiness and fulfillment. With its emphasis on promoting mental health rather than seeking to cure or ameliorate disease and its symptoms, Positive Psychology complements mainstream medicine and psychotherapy. Lastly, it is central to the work of Positive Psychology that claims about positive human capacities be backed with strong quantitative research results.

In this relatively new field within Psychology, three prominent psychological pioneers, Ed Diener, Martin Seligman, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, have been leading the way.

Ed Diener

Ed Diener was an early pioneer in the study of what makes human beings happy. For his seminal work in this field, Diener, who fittingly holds the Smiley chair, the Joseph R. Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology, at the University of Illinois, has been given the moniker "Dr. Happiness." He is especially well-known for his scientific examination of the relationship between happiness and money on the one hand (once basic needs are met, additional income has little to do with happiness) and social ties on the other (the single most important factor that distinguished the 10% happiest college students was their strong connections to family and friends).

In the mid 1980s Diener developed a simple but effective tool for assessing human happiness called "The Satisfaction with Life Scale." On Diener's [website](#) you can use this scale to assess your own level of happiness as well as find links to research articles on this highly respected measurement tool. (For a similar but more complex happiness self-assessment tool, try [The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire](#).)

In 2005, Diener teamed up with the polling organization Gallup to study human happiness on a global scale. This effort is called the Gallup World Poll. For an engaging account of the results of that poll, which included 155 different countries and covered such factors as culture, diversity, economic status, inequality, and stress, see this video

Happiest Place on Earth

In a recent research application of the Gallup World Poll, Diener decided to put Maslow's 60 year old Hierarchy of Human Needs to the empirical test. For a popular media account of Diener's findings, read "[Ingredients of Happiness Around the World.](#)" The original research on which this article is based can be found at Tay L, Diener E (2011) [Needs and subjective well-being around the world.](#) J of Personality and Soc Psych 101(2): 354-365.

For two additional brief Ed Diener videos on Positive Psychology topics see these videos:

Happiness and Character

social wealth and mastery as aspects of happiness

Martin Seligman

During the early years of his career, Martin Seligman studied topics then in vogue in the field of Psychology, becoming a recognized expert on pessimism and depression. He was inspired by his colleague at the University of Pennsylvania, Aaron Beck, the developer of Cognitive Therapy and was prominent in that field, as well. Then in the late '80s Seligman began to realize that another side of the psychological landscape needed to be emphasized.

According to Seligman, in the early years of Psychology there had been a better balance between what he saw to be Psychology's three missions: treating and curing the mentally ill, nurturing mental health, and identifying and developing exceptional human abilities. But in the aftermath of World War II, and with the creation of both the Veteran's Administration and the National Institute of Mental Health along with the money both channeled into the field, the balance shifted towards healing mental illness.

Deciding to buck this trend Seligman shifted his own research emphasis towards the study of qualities like optimism and resilience. Then, when he, himself, was elected President of the American Psychological Association in 1998, he felt that time was ripe for this new direction of psychological research to really go mainstream. He made the promotion of Positive Psychology the major theme of his presidency.

For an engaging account of Seligman's election and term of office, see Hirtz, Rob, "[Martin Seligman's Journey: from Learned Helplessness to Learned Happiness](#)", *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, The University of Pennsylvania, January/February 1999.)

Among Seligman's more recent endeavors is his authoring, along with Christopher Peterson, of the manual [Character Strengths and Virtues](#), published in 2004 and envisioned to be the Positive Psychology equivalent of the DSM-IV.

In his latest book, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* published in 2011, Seligman proposes an expanded vision for the field of Positive Psychology. In his original description of the field, Seligman focused on what he called Authentic Happiness. Authentic Happiness is composed of three aspects of human experience "that we choose for their own sake": positive emotion, engagement, and meaning/purpose. While these three elements coincide with happiness and remain in the mix, Seligman now feels that happiness alone is too narrow a domain for Positive Psychology. His new catchword for the field is "flourishing." Flourishing involves to additional elements: relationship and accomplishment. (To read an excerpt from Seligman's new book on this topic, see "[What is Well-Being?](#)")

While Seligman credits Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi with being the greatest positive psychologist, he sees himself as its primary spokesperson. To get a broader sense of the message he is spreading, take a look at the videos below.

Martin Seligman gives an overview of the field of Positive Psychology in 2008 (24 min.)

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Martin Seligman presents five research findings from Positive Psychology that you probably don't know
Martin Seligman: discusses the relationship between Positive Psychology and psychotherapy

Martin Seligman on the most vexing finding of positive psychology

Diener and Seligman, together with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi have inspired a generation of new psychological research into the positive qualities of human experience. The results of that research are explored more fully in the rest of the curriculum on Positive Psychology.

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