

The Science and Application of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology tackles the big questions: What does it mean to live a “good life”? What helps people to flourish and access their optimal potential? And how can we increase our capacities for joy, meaning, and hope? This engaging textbook emphasizes the science of positive psychology – students don’t simply learn about positive psychology in the abstract, but instead are exposed to the fascinating research that supports its conclusions. Bridging theory and practice, this textbook connects up-to-date research with real-world examples and guides students to apply evidence-based practices in their own lives. Its comprehensive coverage includes major new topics, such as spirituality, therapeutic interventions, mindfulness, and positive relationships. Featured pedagogy includes “Are You Sure about That?” boxes presenting methodological and statistical principles in context, and “Practice Positive Psychology” activities to extend student learning, while online resources include lecture slides, a test bank, and an instructor manual.

Jennifer S. Cheavens, Professor of Psychology at The Ohio State University, is a teacher and scholar with expertise in positive psychology, particularly hope and gratitude. Dr. Cheavens was awarded the inaugural George Valliant Award for Contributions in Positive Clinical Psychology by the International Positive Psychology Association’s Positive Clinical Psychology Division for her work in the development of hope therapy and capitalization models of treatment. She developed the Positive Psychology course at The Ohio State University, and has taught the course to approximately 240 undergraduate students annually for more than 10 years. She has been recognized with several teaching and mentorship awards.

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The Science and Application of Positive Psychology

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Preface

It's not clear exactly when the field of positive psychology was founded. Many trace its origins to Martin E. P. Seligman's 1998 term as president of the American Psychological Association. Although his advocacy unquestionably popularized the study of human psychological assets, he certainly wasn't the first to do research on the topic. The work of such luminaries as William James (1902) and Abraham Maslow (1962) long predated this most recent iteration of the field. Of course, inquiry regarding what makes life worth living didn't begin with these scholars either. Many of the basic questions asked by positive psychologists (and even a number of the field's most celebrated hypotheses) can be traced to some of the greatest minds in history: Plato, Aristotle – as well as Jesus of Nazareth, Moses, Muhammad, the Buddha, Lao-Tzu, and others.

No matter from when we mark the founding of positive psychology, it's clear we no longer can consider it a new field. It now boasts a variety of well-attended national and international conferences, highly cited academic journals, and an increasing number of courses at major colleges and universities, not to mention numerous best-selling popular-press books. Positive psychology has come into its own.

This textbook grew out of a desire to honor this wide-ranging field in a contemporary, scientifically minded, and comprehensive way. Primarily intended for use in undergraduate courses, it addresses questions that many students naturally ask themselves during their college years: What does it mean to live a “good life”? What conditions help people to flourish, live up to their potential, and achieve their goals? How can people increase their capacities for joy, meaning, empathy, and hope?

But, this is a challenging audience. At many universities and colleges, positive psychology courses enroll a large number of students. With approximately 1,200 students, for instance, the positive psychology course at Yale is the most popular in the institution's 316-year history (Shimer, 2018). Such versions of the course often have no prerequisites and, as such, contain students from many majors. Their only exposure to psychology may be through questionable television “experts,” self-help books, and social media posts. A competent textbook should meet them where they are, dispel myths, and demonstrate the value of adopting a scientific approach to human psychological strengths and thriving. In contrast, at other institutions, the course is limited to psychology majors who often bring with them substantial knowledge from earlier classes. For this audience, a textbook should be conceptually sophisticated, containing in-depth dives into empirical research.

We've taken great care to craft a book that addresses the needs of both these groups. Scholarly yet accessible, scientifically minded yet practical, in-depth yet covering a broad array of topics, and detailed yet appropriate for uninitiated readers, this is the kind of book we want for our own students. Emphasizing the scientific method, this textbook demonstrates the importance of going beyond gut-level understandings

of happiness to a more detailed study of what contributes to the good life. Students not only learn about positive psychology in the abstract but also are exposed to the fascinating research that supports its findings. Moreover, they begin to use insights from the field to better themselves academically, professionally, and personally.

Key Features

Chapters contain the basics expected in any competent textbook: an introduction to the area of research, basic definitions of important concepts, and summaries of touchstone scientific studies. In addition, each chapter integrates features and content designed to stimulate the curiosity and enthusiasm of student readers. These include the following:

- “*Why Does Positive Psychology Matter?*” Positive psychology has immediate implications for being happier, living a fuller life, accomplishing one’s goals, and building better relationships. Indeed, these real-world implications are what initially attracted many researchers to the field. Throughout the text, we take great care to relate research findings to the realities of students’ lives. While never compromising scientific rigor, each chapter is designed to answer the question that, in our experience, many students are silently asking: so what?
- “*Practice Positive Psychology.*” A valuable goal for any positive psychology course is for students to gain insights into their own personal strengths, virtues, and assets and then use these insights to improve themselves. To systematically encourage this practice, at the conclusion of each chapter, we provide exercises that have been empirically demonstrated to nurture the strengths covered in that section of the book.
- “*Culture and Positive Psychology.*” Given the clarion call for increased research on understudied populations over the past two decades, a growing body of research addresses the confluence of culture and positive psychological functioning. In addition to threading the topics of culture and diversity into the text whenever and wherever research is available, we dedicate a section in each chapter specifically to exploring the topic at hand through a cultural lens. Often this entails highlighting ways in which existing research may be methodologically biased toward certain groups and exploring what future research is needed to remedy such issues.
- “*Are You Sure about That?*” Fundamentally, this is a book about science. As such, it is essential that issues of measurement and method are well covered. Most textbooks check this box by including a single chapter addressing standard methodological issues. In our experience, however, this isn’t an optimal strategy. Students often dread this chapter, which they encounter in almost identical form in course after course. In contrast, we believe that the best way to teach students about the process of doing good science is in context. As such, in addition to

including research basics in Chapter 2 (“Common Misunderstandings of Positive Psychology”), we integrate sidebar text boxes on methodological issues throughout the book. These boxes are designed to help students understand more deeply the research in particular domains and to guide them to question what they think they already know.

- *“Next Steps in Positive Psychology.”* In addition to a faithful account of current theory, research, and application, each chapter contains a section exploring the growing edge of positive psychology. In the past two decades, positive psychology has experienced an enormous growth spurt. New hypotheses are being tested and theories developed every day. Each chapter will capture this excitement by bringing students into the continued musings of the field.
- *Instructor’s Materials.* One of the difficulties in teaching positive psychology, in our experience, is that few textbooks include supplemental materials for instructors. They often are left to develop slides, test questions, in-class activities, and exercises for outside of class without prompts or starting points. Requiring each instructor to begin all course materials from scratch is an ineffective use of resources. As such, along with this book, instructors will have access to supplemental materials, including PowerPoint lecture slides, a test bank of multiple-choice questions, and an instructor manual with chapter summaries, pedagogical tips, and suggestions for class activities and exercises. In addition to the practice exercises included in each chapter, these supplemental materials will be available for all instructors who assign the book for their courses.

Organization and Coverage

The study of positive psychology requires an understanding of broad, overarching themes as well as more narrow families of constructs; thus, we have grouped chapters thematically. We begin the book with a discussion of where positive psychology is situated in the landscape of psychological science. In Chapter 1, we introduce the field of positive psychology and argue that an understanding of human strengths and “the good life” is necessary to a well-rounded understanding of human psychology. In Chapter 2, we tackle some of the most common misconceptions of positive psychology, including the notion that it is mere common sense, ignores problems, or is an unnecessary luxury we cannot afford. We introduce a holistic conceptualization of positive psychology in which we discuss the necessity of experiencing both positive and negative emotions, behaviors, and contexts in order to fully develop. In the context of disabusing students of misconceptions, we also discuss methodology and measurement, setting the stage for the research-oriented boxes that appear in later chapters. Additionally, as noted above, we take on the notion that positive psychology is new. Positive psychology has developed a sturdy base of scientific findings, and it is important to give students the tools to distinguish between solid evidence and potentially misleading pop-psychology exhortations.

In the second section, we cover positive feelings and experiences. In Chapter 3, we begin with an overview of positive affective states, exploring the ways these intersect with well-being and perceptions of life satisfaction. We introduce the literature linking positive emotional states with desirable outcomes such as longevity, successful employment, and harmonious relationships. Additionally, we cover the role of money in positive affect. In Chapter 4, we review the literature relevant to transcendent states and experiences, including meaning, religiosity, and spirituality. Finally, in Chapter 5, we discuss the ways in which a present-moment focus (including mindfulness, savoring, and flow) is associated with beneficial outcomes such as better emotion regulation, connection with others, and well-being.

The third section consists of an exploration of the literatures on achievement and personal goals. In Chapter 6, we discuss talent and giftedness, including an examination of prodigies and “natural talent,” in addition to how people develop talent over time. In Chapter 7, we cover positive future expectancies, exploring constructs like hope and optimism (including learned optimism), as well as the ways these constructs are relevant to successful goal achievement.

This discussion of achievement leads naturally into the fourth section of the book, addressing the personal strengths and psychological assets that increase positive life outcomes. Chapter 8 explores both the historical development of research on character strengths and values and the ever-expanding current literature in these areas. This chapter provides scaffolding for students to identify their own character strengths and better understand how to use these strengths in their daily lives. In Chapter 9, we follow the path of positive psychology into older adulthood and explore the successful aging literature. Among other important issues, we examine predictors of successful aging, ways to optimize older adulthood, and the research on wisdom.

Positive psychology researchers agree that the good life is populated with meaningful interpersonal connections. Thus, in the fifth section, we devote three chapters to the processes that contribute to successful and satisfying relationships. In Chapter 10, we cover friendships, romantic relationships, and parent–child relationships, and we examine the research linking various characteristics of these relationships with well-being. In Chapter 11, we discuss perspective-taking and introduce the ways in which empathy, forgiveness, and gratitude for others are related to life satisfaction and positive emotions. In Chapter 12, we take a deeper look at prosocial behavior, reviewing work relevant to altruism, volunteering, and adopting compassionate goals.

In the last section of the book, we turn our attention to applied positive psychology. In Chapter 13, we cover positive psychology in the work world. In addition to studies related to flourishing in one’s career, we present business models incorporating positive psychology principles. Finally, in Chapter 14, we discuss positive psychology interventions, reviewing the efficacy and effectiveness of these interventions both for increasing well-being and as treatments for psychopathology.

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