

Foreword

My foray into positive psychology began in early 2000, when I answered a phone call from Martin Seligman. “What do you want to do with the rest of your life?” he asked. Momentarily surprised, I thought that—finally—I was going to hear a marriage proposal! But that did not seem plausible, so I asked about him about his family. All was well, he said, so I waited for the rest of the conversation. Seligman asked if I would be willing to relocate from the University of Michigan to the University of Pennsylvania and spend a few years working with him on a new initiative in positive psychology: describing, classifying, and measuring important strengths of character. I thought for a few seconds and then replied “Let’s make it happen.”

Impulsive decisions can be terrible ones, but this particular one was the best decision of my professional life. Working in the field of positive psychology indeed appears to be how I will spend the rest of my days. What I am doing is pleasurable, engaging, *and* meaningful—the hat trick of happiness.

Our project was supported by the Mayerson Foundation in Cincinnati, which created a nonprofit organization named the Values in Action (VIA) Institute. As the years have gone by, “VIA” has crept into common use with positive psychology circles. It refers of course to the Institute that continues to support and disseminate the work. It refers to the Institute’s website (www.viastrengths.org). It refers to the classification that Seligman and I created of 24 widely valued positive traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). VIA also refers to various assessment devices created by Nansook Park and me to measure the strengths in the classification: self-report surveys, interviews, informant reports, and content analysis schemes (Park & Peterson, 2006). To date, almost 1,000,000 people worldwide have completed our on-line VIA self-report surveys, usually in English but also in Spanish, Chinese, and German.

Although an explicitly labeled positive psychology is but a decade old, it has matured enough to attract criticisms, among them the charge that positive psychology is nothing new. To be sure, the interests and goals of positive psychology long predated its christening, and a number of topics with sustained research lineages are now mainstays of this new field: e.g., giftedness, life satisfaction, and optimism. So is there really anything new here? I think so. “Positive psychology” is both novel and valuable as an umbrella term, an overarching perspective that allows previously separate lines of work within psychology to be seen as interrelated. “Positive psychology” is also novel and valuable as a psychological lens on topics that are central to the good life about which psychology often has had too little to say.

Positive Psychology at the Movies by Ryan Niemiec and Danny Wedding is a wonderful example of how positive psychology affords ways to make sense of movies that show what is best about people. Millions of us watch and rewatch movies, share and discuss them with our friends and family members, and feel inspired by their characters and their stories.

I am flattered that Niemiec and Wedding found our VIA classification useful enough to structure their book, and I will be sure in the future to cite *Positive Psychology at the Movies* as compelling validity evidence for the classification and more generally for the perspective of positive psychology.

This is a good and smart book, but I trust that its authors will forgive me if I say that you should *not* read it in one or even a few sittings. That would be like reading a cookbook from cover to cover while never venturing into your kitchen. Rather, read a bit, and then stop and see some of the movies they discuss, familiar and unfamiliar. Use their insights to enrich your understanding and enjoyment, not only of the movies but of yourself.

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