

Introduction

Academic handbooks are strange beasts. (For one thing, of all book formats, they are about the least amenable to being picked up with one hand!) The arrival of *The Handbook of Field X* usually indicates that Field X has reached a certain level of maturity. The scholars of Field X take a break from empirical research to repackage their recent work, including theoretical ideas, into authoritative chapters. It's a time for taking stock and seeing how Field X is progressing. Perhaps some trends that have been emerging in various corners of the literature, or the First International Conference on Field X, will become apparent in the new handbook, as related ideas finally come into close physical proximity to each other. Graduate students are assigned the handbook as mandatory course reading, and generally discover that few things are more soporific than trying to read an entire volume of this type from cover to cover.

The *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology* is a little different. First, and most obviously, there is arguably no field called “critical positive psychology” at present. Indeed, when one of us mentioned to a colleague that we were thinking of putting this book together, he replied, “Critical positive psychology? Isn't that an oxymoron?” Positive psychology (PP) is generally perceived by its detractors as being anything but critical; a glance at the Twitter feed of the attendees at any positive psychology conference suggests that many of the field's supporters prefer to concentrate on its more optimistic, upbeat aspects. Second, our chapters combine a wide variety of topics, writing styles, and authors, including several non-academics and many others from fields outside mainstream psychology. Third, while we would be delighted for every Master in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) student to be assigned this book for their course, our aim is a little broader. We want this to be the fifth or sixth book that people pick up when learning about positive psychology, not the first; so we assume that our readers already have a solid

understanding of the basics of positive psychology, and are looking to explore beyond the confines of the typical MAPP syllabus. Finally, we wanted this book to be readable. As a result, the chapters are written in a wide variety of styles, with formal academic prose sometimes taking a back seat—reflecting the fact that many of our chapters are explicitly *not* written from a “neutral” scientific viewpoint. We have encouraged our authors to be themselves and use their own voices as far as possible. For example, we have refrained, as far as possible, from rephrasing the idioms of non-native speakers into the standard mid-Atlantic forms of academic English which often deaden even the most original ideas.

This volume is addressed to advanced graduate students in positive psychology, such as those in the second half of a MAPP programme. It will also be of interest to other scholars who may come into contact with positive psychology in the course of their work. Additionally, we expect this book to be relevant to people who are interested in applying positive psychology in practice and wish to go a little deeper into the subject matter before committing themselves, whether by deciding to train as a practitioner or by committing private or public resources to positive psychology projects in government, business, or the community.

When we set out to put this book together, we were unsure as to which direction our authors would take in interpreting our minimal guidance, which essentially consisted of telling them the book’s title, asking them to take a constructive attitude as far as possible (we did not want simply to compile a list of complaints about positive psychology), and letting them propose their ideas. Pleasingly, we found that, in roughly equal proportions, some offered direct critiques of mainstream positive psychology with interesting alternative views, while others melded critical perspectives from other parts of psychology and the social sciences with the ideas of PP, and a third group wrote accounts of applying PP in the often messy environment of the real world. Consequently, the book is divided into three sections.

In the first of these, “Critical Perspectives on Positive Psychology,” our chapter authors examine and challenge a number of aspects of contemporary positive psychology. The second section, “Doing Positive Psychology Critically,” brings together a collection of chapters that show how positive traits and psychological well-being can be enhanced in socially responsible ways. Finally, the third section, “Applied Perspectives,” contains a series of essays by authors from a variety of backgrounds whose academic research, life experiences, or both, illustrate the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of positive psychology in practice. Of course, these divisions are somewhat arbitrary; some authors whose main focus is on critiquing the science of positive psychology do so because of its practical limitations (for example, when implementing specific interventions) or its failure to take into account cultural or other differences between groups, and some whose aim is to describe novel applications of PP also discuss limitations of its current positioning as a science. Nevertheless, we hope that at least a loose degree of coherence is discernable within the sections.

Each section has its own introduction, which describes the chapters within the section in turn. We also have three “wild-card” chapters that did not fit easily into the other sections. Right at the start, in Chapter 1, Piers Worth and Matthew Smith set the scene for the rest of the book by describing how critical psychology and positive psychology can complement and learn from each other, despite their apparent contradictions. In a sense, this chapter is a micro-summary of the whole purpose of the book. Between the first and second sections, in Chapter 13, Liz Gulliford and Kristján Kristjánsson provide a playful, yet thought-provoking, interlude in the form of an imagined dialogue between a number of historical philosophers who discuss how positive psychology appears from their perspective. The dialogue is—perhaps inevitably—led by Aristotle, but his colleagues from very different eras succeed in showing that they, too, have something to teach us about the meaning of PP. Finally,

between the second and third sections of the book, Tod Sloan and Marisol Garcia (Chapter 25) explore, via another dialogue (this time between the authors themselves), the importance of including old-fashioned—“hedonistic” rather than “hedonic”, perhaps—pleasure on the sometimes rather earnest road to social justice. They argue that it is possible to do this without necessarily endorsing mindless consumerism or acting in ways that reduce the well-being of others.

This book is the result of more than two years of effort by over a hundred people besides the editors. We must mention the chapter authors, our reviewers, Russell George and Liz Rankin at Routledge, and all of our colleagues and friends who encouraged us in our efforts to break a few moulds with this book. We look forward to hearing how we may have changed some minds, sharpened some reasoning, or inspired some changes.

Nick Brown, Strasbourg, France

Tim Lomas, Oxford, England

Francisco Jose Eiroa-Orosa, Barcelona, Spain

April 2017

Funding

Francisco José Eiroa-Orosa has received funding from the European Union’s Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon 2020 (2014–2020) under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No 654808.