

Teaching tools for positive psychology: A comparison of available textbooks

Grant J. Rich*

Department of Social Sciences, University of Alaska Southeast, Juneau 99801, AK, USA

(Received 10 January 2011; final version received 28 April 2011)

This article analyzes and compares available textbooks in positive psychology. In addition to describing six major standard textbooks, supplemental materials are also discussed, including special issues of professional journals devoted to the topic, specialized sole-authored and edited books on core subtopics in positive psychology, and strengths-focused books from related fields, such as anthropology, business, social work, history, and philosophy. Available supplements for existing textbooks, such as test banks and Powerpoint presentations, are also discussed.

Keywords: teaching; education; positive psychology; assessment

Introduction

Positive psychology grew from a ‘gleam in the eyes of three people in the Yucatán during the first week in January 1998 to a scientific movement’, wrote past president of the American Psychological Association, Martin E.P. Seligman (2002, p. 265). With fellow Akumal sojourners, including senior scholars such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Ray Fowler, Seligman has helped build the movement from this foundation. Indicative of the field’s success are the appearance of the present journal – the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, research funding and national and international professional conferences specific to positive psychology, numerous encyclopedias (e.g., Lopez, 2009) and handbooks (e.g., Lopez & Snyder, 2009) on the subject, a veritable cottage industry of popular books tailored to the general reader on related topics (e.g., Weiner, 2008), and so on.

With the excitement surrounding the emerging field, came the desire among university professors to share this knowledge with students in seminars specifically devoted to positive psychology. Lacking course materials such as textbooks on positive psychology, early courses on the topic typically relied upon utilizing special issues or sections of academic journals devoted to the topic (e.g., Rich, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & King, 2001) or selected relevant journal articles. Other options included adoption of texts by psychologists ‘doing positive psychology’ before the term became widely used by the present movement in the late 1990s. For instance, *Flow* by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), *Learned Optimism* by Seligman (1991), or *Health and*

Optimism by Peterson and Bossio (1991), all represented work of leading positive-psychologists-to-be that could form a component of a broader survey course in positive psychology (Rich, 2002). By 2002, *Authentic Happiness* by Martin E.P. Seligman was published. Subtitled ‘Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment,’ this well-written book targeted the general reader, included numerous high quality self-assessment activities, sold like a best-selling pop psychology book, yet was firmly grounded in psychological science. It made a helpful and convenient substitute for a yet to be written, dedicated academic positive psychology textbook.

Finally, in 2004, the first positive psychology textbooks were published. Carr (2004) of University College Dublin published *Positive Psychology* and the late Bolt (2004) of Calvin College published *Pursuing Human Strengths: A Positive Psychology Guide*. Other textbooks soon followed: Compton (2005) offered *Introduction to Positive Psychology* and Peterson (2006) wrote *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. The year 2007 saw the publication of the first edition of *Positive Psychology* by Snyder and Lopez (2007) and *Positive Psychology*, published in 2009, by Baumgardner and Crothers (2009), both of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire round out the list of available positive psychology texts. Thus, in less than a decade since Martin Seligman and other leaders met in Akumal, half a dozen positive psychology textbooks have become available (Table 1). While the market size is clearly smaller than that of Introduction to Psychology courses, or service courses such as

*Email: optimalex@aol.com

Table 1. Comparison of available positive psychology textbooks.

Title	Author	Year	Number of pages	Number of chapters	Supplements	Planned revision?	Test bank	Instructor Powerpoint
<i>Positive Psychology</i>	Baumgardner and Crothers	2009	338	12	Instructor's manual w/exercises, discussion questions, and multiple choice questions	Not yet	Y	Y
<i>Pursuing Human Strengths: A Positive Psychology Guide</i>	Bolt	2004	216	9	None, but chapters include many exercises and self-assessments	Author passed away in 2009; publisher may plan revised edition with another author	N	N
<i>Positive Psychology</i>	Carr	2004	388	9	None, but chapters include self-assessments and chapter ends include personal development and research questions as well as resource lists	Revised 2nd edition for 2011; currently in press	N	N
<i>Introduction to Positive Psychology</i>	Compton	2005	276	12	None, but chapter ends include resource lists and personal exploration activities	2nd edition in progress for 2012 (w/Edward Hoffman)	N	N
<i>A Primer in Positive Psychology</i>	Peterson	2006	386	12	None, but chapter ends include exercises and resource lists	Not yet	N	N
<i>Positive Psychology (2nd edition)</i>	Snyder, Lopez, and Pedrotti	2011	588	18	Instructor's website and chapters include personal mini-experiments and life enhancement strategies	2011 is most recent edition	Y	Y

Lifespan Development, psychologists teaching positive psychology should be pleased that they now have a range of quality texts from which to select. This article aims to offer a comparison of these textbooks, as well as their supplements, and other texts which may be helpful for those engaged in the teaching of positive psychology.

A comparison of core positive psychology textbooks

Perhaps the first question a prospective instructor of a positive psychology seminar has concerning textbooks is 'are they all the same?'. The quick answer to that is 'yes and no'. The six positive psychology books currently available that aim at serving as a core classroom textbook each cover a number of topics relevant to the field, yet the textbooks vary significantly in length and depth and in the specific content areas covered. In addition, only two of the six textbooks currently have supplements, such as instructor Powerpoint presentations and test banks, available. In brief, it is not that one book excels and the others fail, it is that each book has a set of strengths that make it more appropriate for some settings than others.

Briefer textbooks well-suited to serve as a supplement

Bolt's (2004) *Pursuing Human Strengths: A Positive Psychology Guide* and Compton's (2005) *Introduction to Positive Psychology* are the briefest texts available, at 216 and 276 pages, respectively. Bolt's book included the following nine chapters: love, empathy, self-control, wisdom, commitment, happiness, self-respect, hope, and friendship. The chapters presented are well-written surveys of the expected literature. The notable absence of chapters related to positive institutions, one pillar of positive psychology, can be remedied with extra readings as desired. Compton's book has 12 chapters on the following topics: introduction; emotions and motivation; subjective well-being; leisure, optimal and peak experiences; wellness, health psychology and positive coping; excellence, aesthetics, creativity, and genius; positive mental health; interventions for enhanced well-being; religion, spirituality, and well-being; work, community, culture, and well-being; and a look toward the future of positive psychology. Both books seem somewhat short to serve as the sole text at most colleges and universities, and the brevity means that certain topics were excluded. For instance, both the Bolt text and the Compton text are missing chapter length treatments of character strengths and virtues, resilience, culture, and goals (for further comparison of textbook content, see Table 2). Most instructors will wish to supplement these texts with further books or journal articles, unless

student preparation levels or an unusual term length indicate otherwise. Notably, Bolt's text was originally envisioned to be utilized itself as a supplement for other psychology courses, in particular, as a supplemental reading for introduction to psychology courses. It could serve ably in that role, and the book includes numerous activities, exercises, and self-assessments that could aid in encouraging student engagement in large introductory psychology courses and in correcting for the historical negative focus of psychology. Sadly, Martin Bolt passed away in 2009 and the future of the textbook is unclear at present, although it is possible that a new author may revise and update this textbook at some time in the future. William Compton is currently at work on a revised edition of his 2005 textbook and has added co-author Edward Hoffman of Yeshiva University in New York City. Hoffman brings a background in clinical psychology, especially humanistic psychology, as he is an editor for the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and author of a biography of Maslow (Hoffman, 1999). This edition is scheduled for publication in early 2012. While neither of these textbooks currently has supplements available, such as a test bank or instructor Powerpoint presentations, both textbooks do offer numerous exercises, personal exploration activities, and self-assessments, many of which seem promising for actual classroom use.

In-depth textbooks

Peterson's (2006) *A Primer in Positive Psychology* and Baumgardner and Crothers's (2009) *Positive Psychology* seem closer to what many instructors are accustomed to in terms of classroom textbooks. At 386 and 338 pages, respectively, these two textbooks are significantly longer than the Bolt and Compton offerings, yet still run shorter than the 650 to 750 or so pages common among introduction to psychology textbooks. Thus, once again, instructors may need to search for supplemental readings, such as journal articles, edited books, or special topics books. An early proponent of positive psychology, Peterson is well-positioned to make an important contribution with his textbook, and indeed his well-written accessible book accurately describes positive psychological research (including much of his own seminal work, e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) at a level that many teachers of psychology will find is truly helpful for students entering the field. The Peterson textbook includes the following 12 chapters: What is positive psychology?; learning about positive psychology: not a spectator sport; pleasure and positive experience; happiness; positive thinking; character strengths; values; interests, abilities, and accomplishments; wellness; positive interpersonal relationships; enabling

Table 2. Comparison of the chapter content of available positive psychology textbooks.

	<i>Positive Psychology</i> Baumgardner and Crothers (2009)	<i>Pursuing Human Strengths</i> Bolt (2004)	<i>Positive Psychology</i> Carr (2004)	<i>Introduction to Positive Psychology</i> Compton (2005)	<i>A Primer in Positive Psychology</i> Peterson (2006)	<i>Positive Psychology</i> (2nd Edition) Snyder et al. (2011)
Chapter Content						
Introduction	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Happiness	Y	Y	Y	Y (ch. 3)	Y	Y (ch. 6)
Self-control	Y	Y	N	N (but see pp. 48-49; 121)	N	N
Relationships	Y	Y (ch. 1; ch. 9)	Y	Y	Y (ch. 10)	Y (ch. 12)
Positive emotions/traits	Y	Y (ch. 2 empathy)	Y (also ch. 2, ch. 4, and ch. 7)	Y (ch. 2; ch. 8)	Y (ch. 3 pleasure/positive experience)	Y (ch. 6 and others)
Character strengths/virtues	Y	N	N (but see pp. 51-3, 73-74, 182-184)	N (but see pp. 172-173; 181)	Y	Y (ch. 3)
Resilience	Y	N	N (but see pp. 188-189; 270-271; 300)	N (but see pp. 151-153; 187-188)	N	N (but see ch. 5, esp. pp. 91-100)
Hope/optimism	N (but see pp. 193-204)	Y (ch. 8)	Y	Y (ch. 6)	Y (ch. 5 positive thinking)	Y (ch. 8)
Culture	N (but see ch. 6 money, happiness, and culture)	N	N	N	N (but index cites relevant pages throughout text)	Y (ch. 2 and ch. 4)
Wisdom	N (but see pp. 213-220)	Y (ch. 4)	Y (ch. 5)	N (but see pp. 155-158)	N	Y (ch. 9 wisdom and courage)
Goals	Y	N (but see ch. 5)	N (but see pp. 314-315)	N	N (but index cites term numerous times)	N (but see pp. 396-397)
Conclusion	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y

institutions; and the future of positive psychology. Each chapter ends with numerous student exercises and resource lists including books, articles, web sites, films, and even songs that relate to each chapter. Some professors may wish to utilize these lists to enhance their seminars with discussion starters such as playing brief film clips or songs from these lists at the beginnings of class. There is ample humor in the book as well. A major strength of the text is that its author, as a major player in the field, has insured that important positive psychology topics that have been ignored or neglected by some other authors are included here. Such topics include positive institutions and human accomplishments, such as creativity.

The Baumgardner and Crothers book covers some expected ground, but also some relatively unique topics for a positive psychology textbook. This content may encourage some professors to select this particular text and discourage others. The 12 chapters include: what is positive psychology?; the meaning and measure of happiness, positive emotions and well-being; resilience; happiness and the facts of life; money, happiness, and culture; personal goals; self-regulation and self-control; positive traits; virtue and strengths of character; close relationships and well-being; and a summary chapter, life above zero. The inclusion of chapters on personal goals and on self-regulation and self-control is unique among the positive psychology textbooks. One strength of the Baumgardner and Crothers textbook is the availability of an instructor's manual with exercises, discussion questions, and multiple choice questions. In addition to the test bank, there is also a Powerpoint presentation set available for instructors.

The two most recently published positive psychology texts are also the most extensive. Snyder et al.'s (2011) *Positive Psychology* runs to 588 pages, while the revised edition of Alan Carr's *Positive Psychology* (the first edition ran to 388 pages) is currently in press and scheduled for 2011 publication. Both of these textbooks seem in general to be written at a somewhat higher level than the other four books, in terms of scientific and academic rigor and demands on the reader. Carr, the director of the doctoral training program in clinical psychology at University College Dublin, is the only positive psychology textbook author writing in English who resides outside the US. Perhaps his unique position explains the frequent citation of scholars both within and beyond the US. As psychology becomes increasingly internationalized, Carr's inclusion of scholarship from across the globe is a special strength. The nine chapters of his book include chapters on happiness; flow; hope and optimism; emotional intelligence; giftedness, creativity, and wisdom; positive traits and motives; the positive self; positive relationships; and positive change. Like a number of positive psychology textbooks, there is not a stand-alone chapter on topics relating to positive

institutions (such as schools and workplaces), although some of the literature surveyed obviously touches on these issues. There are no supplements for the Carr textbook (such as a test bank or instructor Powerpoints), but chapters include self-assessments, personal development and research questions, and resource lists, including (in separate lists) academic and self-help readings, as well as references for measures for use in research. Such resources are bound to be helpful for students considering term papers or even beginning research projects.

The Snyder et al. (2011) textbook *Positive Psychology* is unique in that it is the first positive psychology textbook to become available in a revised edition. Since the writing of the first edition, published in 2007, C.R. Snyder has passed away and a new co-author, Jennifer Pedrotti (see her article in this special issue) of California Polytechnic State University has been added. The coverage of this nearly 600-page textbook is obviously more detailed and extensive than many of the other positive psychology textbooks. For instance, this textbook runs nearly three times the length of the Bolt text. The 18 chapters include: an introductory chapter; Eastern and Western perspectives; classification and measures of strengths and positive outcomes; developing strengths and living well in a cultural context; living well at every stage of life; positive affect, positive emotions, happiness, and well-being; emotion-focused coping, emotional intelligence, socioemotional selectivity theory; self-efficacy, optimism, and hope; mindfulness, flow, and spirituality; empathy, altruism, gratitude, and forgiveness; attachment, love, and relationships; balanced conceptualizations of mental health and behavior; interceding to prevent the bad and enhance the good; positive schooling; good work; building better communities; and a concluding summary chapter. One of the real strengths of this textbook, beyond its ample proportions are its coverage of a number of neglected fields of positive psychology. Instructors wishing chapter length treatments of positive institutions such as schools and work would be strongly encouraged to review this book. Another major strength of this textbook is that it stands virtually alone in terms of its cross-cultural and cross-national coverage. Several entire thought provoking chapters focus specifically on this critical dimension. Students will be appropriately challenged to consider what assumptions about well-being, happiness, and other states and traits positive psychologists make when they fail to consider the issues across the globe. The revised edition of the textbook expanded and improved what was already a considerable strength in this regard.

The Snyder, Lopez, and Pedrotti book comes with an instructor's website and chapters include ample personal mini-experiments, integrated case studies, and life enhancement strategies. Ample graphics and

photos, as well as text boxes which offer interesting sidebars greatly enhance the readability of the text. In addition, the textbook supplements include instructor Powerpoints and a high quality test bank.

As a final note, international readers may be interested to learn that a number of the core positive psychology textbooks discussed in this section have been published in languages other than English. Peterson's (2006) book is available in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. The Baumgardner and Crothers textbook (2009) has been published in Korean. Carr's (2004) book is now available in Polish, German, Chinese, and Spanish.

In sum, positive psychology instructors should be excited that, only a decade after its founding, there are now six solid core positive psychology textbooks from which to choose. Each of these textbooks has its own strengths, though in general one could argue that virtually all of the books could provide more coverage about positive institutions (such as families, schools, work, and religion), about cognitive strengths (such as creativity), and especially about cross-cultural and cross-national factors. One choice for instructors who wish to enhance the cross-cultural component of their positive psychology seminar may be to add *Culture and Well-Being*, Diener (2009), an affordable collection of mostly previously published articles on the topic, by Diener and colleagues. Suitable for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, the collection could also serve the added purpose of exposing students to original research. Another notable fact about the current crop of positive psychology core textbooks is that only two of the six books come with formal supplements, such as instructor Powerpoints and test banks, a potentially significant factor for some professors considering an unfamiliar or new course preparation.

Supplemental readings

Special issues of journals

Some instructors may choose to expand their positive psychology seminar readings through the use of special journal issues devoted to the topic. Depending upon the preparation level of the students, such an arrangement may work well, as a number of the special issues tend to focus on conceptual and theoretical reviews and literature surveys, rather than single experiments or research requiring knowledge of advanced statistics or methods. Among these special issues are *American Psychologist*, 55(1) (2000), *American Psychologist*, 56(3) (2001), *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 41(1) (2001), *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32(1) (2003), *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2) (2005), and *Theory & Psychology*, 18(5) (2008). Often these individual back issues are available from publishers at reduced cost and

may be purchased individually or in classroom size volumes.

Activities: film resource

One exciting option for a supplement to a positive psychology textbook is *Positive Psychology at the Movies: Using Films to Build Virtues and Character Strengths* (Wedding & Niemiec, 2008). Here, the authors lead the readers through the six virtues and 24 strengths identified by positive psychology leaders Seligman, Peterson, and colleagues, describing one relevant key film in detail, and summarizing many other worthy films. For instance, Paul Rusesabagina in the film *Hotel Rwanda* is described as an exemplar of courage (p. 58), while *Gandhi* is discussed as an exemplar of leadership (p. 152). Notably, the authors describe numerous international films appropriate for each book section. The authors include helpful sidebars describing practical applications, such as relating the films to events in one's own life. A number of helpful appendices allow readers to delve more deeply into cinema, with ample suggestions in list form of films that may serve as exemplars of character strengths. Another appendix lists stimulating questions for classroom, therapy, and movie group discussions. Professors who teach positive psychology will much appreciate appendix C which lists a number of brief film clips (including the times and scene descriptions) appropriate for classroom use. The book may also be used as a core text for a course specifically focusing upon positive psychology and film. Indeed, the authors include a sample syllabus of just such a course. At any rate, all prospective instructors of positive psychology will want to be familiar with this book.

Conclusion

Just over a decade ago, positive psychology was formally founded. Since that time, the field has grown dramatically, with its own journal, conferences, and funding. Instructors quickly became interested in sharing this emerging and rapidly expanding field with their students. Initially, professors were forced to assemble seminars in *ad hoc* haphazard fashion, with materials from a range of sources. Now, as positive psychology enters its second decade, the field has matured. With six core positive psychology textbooks to choose from, several of which are in revised editions, and a veritable plethora of supplemental special journal issues and related books, the question is not, 'when will a positive psychology textbook become available?', but 'do I have to pick just one?'

References

- Baumgardner, S.R., & Crothers, M.K. (2009). *Positive psychology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bolt, M. (2004). *Pursuing human strengths: A positive psychology guide*. New York, NY: Worth.
- Carr, A. (2004). *Positive psychology: The science of happiness and human strengths*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Compton, W.C. (2005). *Introduction to positive psychology*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Diener, E. (2009). *Culture and well-being: The collected works of Ed Diener*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Hoffman, E. (1999). *The right to be human: A biography of Abraham Maslow*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Lopez, S.J. (Ed.). (2009). *The encyclopedia of positive psychology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lopez, S.J., & Snyder, C.R. (Eds.). (2009). *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Peterson, C. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Peterson, C., & Bossio, L.M. (1991). *Health and optimism*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rich, G. (Ed.). (2001). Positive psychology [Special issue]. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 41*, 4–153.
- Rich, G. (2002). *Positive psychology*. Poster session presented at the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP), St. Petersburg Beach, FL.
- Seligman, M.E.P. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Seligman, M.E.P. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Seligman, M.E.P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist, 55*, 5–14.
- Sheldon, K.M., & King, L. (2001). Why positive psychology is necessary. *American Psychologist, 56*, 216–217.
- Snyder, C.R., & Lopez, S.J. (2007). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical exploration of human strengths*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Snyder, C.R., Lopez, S.J., & Pedrotti, J.T. (2011). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wedding, D., & Niemiec, R.M. (2008). *Positive psychology at the movies: Using films to build virtues and character strengths*. Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe.
- Weiner, E. (2008). *The geography of bliss*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.

Copyright of Journal of Positive Psychology is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.