

Reconstructing Rogers: A New Look at an Old Approach

A review of



Positive Therapy: A Meta-Theory for Positive Psychological Practice
by Stephen Joseph and P. Alex Linley
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In recent years, positive psychology has grown from a timely call to round out psychology's purview into a multifaceted movement with broad momentum and crossover appeal (see Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Nonetheless, certain concerns have been raised regarding positive psychology. Although misplaced concern that positive psychology intends us all to forget about psychopathology and suffering is perhaps the most commonly leveled charge, two possible shortcomings have stood out for me. First, it has been noted that preventative and therapeutic applications in positive psychology have lagged behind the basic science of cataloguing and illuminating the nature of human psychological strengths (Lopez et al., 2006). Although one might argue that the movement has made some rather significant overtures toward applications considering its youth, nevertheless, basic science is the more populated branch of positive psychology. Second, it has also been accused of rewrapping old ideas and already accessible science in shiny, modern trappings, rather than constituting a true advance for the field (Lazarus, 2003). In my reading of *Positive Therapy: A Meta-Theory for Positive Psychological Practice*, by Stephen Joseph and P. Alex Linley, I will confess that my initial impressions were that in attempting to meet the first criticism, it had laid itself bare to the second. *Positive Therapy* attempts a codification of something we might recognize as a positive-psychology-driven therapy, and the deep reliance on and numerous similarities to decades of theoretical and therapeutic lore, particularly within counseling psychology, is inescapably highlighted. In this case, the relevant lore is Carl Rogers's writings on person- or client-centered therapy.

One of the central aims of *Positive Therapy* is to rehabilitate Rogers for a new generation of psychologists, who are presumably better disposed than previous ones to his view of human nature. *Positive Therapy* is an argument that human nature is fundamentally good. This is in contrast to the view held by medical model approaches, which, we are told, assume that human nature is fundamentally bad. The authors excerpt an evocative passage of Rogers's writing in their efforts to accurately represent his views, which they argue have been oversimplified and made to play a straw man for adherents to the medical model. In this passage, Rogers writes about watching some "palmlike seaweed" get flattened by heavy surf, then spring back again

after the wave had passed. This resilience exemplified to Rogers the self-actualizing tendency toward growth presumably found in all life forms, most notably among human life forms. I like the palmlike seaweed metaphor for a lot of reasons; it is aquatic and soothing, and I expect that if I had witnessed the scene, I might have been struck by similar thoughts. However, as I was reading *Positive Therapy*, I could not avoid the realization that, given the capability, any palmlike seaweed would gut me like a fish if it thought I was trying to uproot it. It is there to survive, regardless of whether you think that under ideal conditions an individual specimen of palmlike seaweed, or humanity, is busy trying to improve itself; the dichotomy of good-nature–bad-nature seems to miss the point and risks spawning its own straw men, straw women, and straw weeds. This digression notwithstanding, the assumption that, given a number of necessary conditions, humans will be led by their inner nature to grow and seek personal actualization is the foundation on which Rogers's therapy and *Positive Therapy* are built.

I was struck with the thought that the relationship of *Positive Therapy* to Carl Rogers is somewhat like the relationship of Bosworth to Samuel Johnson. It is really one man's life we are reading about, but the storytellers leave their own mark to a certain degree. I would venture to say that most therapists-in-training will find most of the material covered in *Positive Therapy* to be familiar and somewhat old hat. This is to the credit of Rogers's enduring influence. Yet, like other active researchers whose work is aligned with the tenets of positive psychology, Joseph and Linley are receptive to Rogers's ideas, and they draw numerous parallels between them and positive psychology research. (Kasser & Sheldon, 2006, offer another example of the pertinence of Rogerian and humanistic ideas to such developments in psychology.) I think that those from non-Rogerian or humanistic orientations might come away with a heightened appreciation for such ideas, and to this degree the book may be successful.

I will confess to being somewhat disappointed, however, by the uneven consideration given to kindred therapeutic approaches. When I think about existing “positive psychology therapies,” I am struck by the epistemological overlap with solution-focused therapies. As *Positive Therapy* stipulates, positive psychology therapy is about how one does therapy, and positive therapists crucially need to have a positive view of human nature and focus on individual strengths, with the added dimension of being open to empirical scrutiny. To my understanding, solution-focused therapies share these same qualities. Frankly, I would consider solution-focused therapies to be more closely related than Rogerian approaches to the aims of a positive-psychology–driven therapy, given their shared emphasis on validated interventions, and I was eagerly anticipating some consideration of this concordance. After reading roughly four pages surprisingly devoted to transactional analysis, I came to two brief paragraphs outlining some similarities, qualified by some concern that solution-focused therapies might be too directive. Twice as much space was given to a poster presentation of a package of therapeutic interventions based on Seligman's (2002) writings in *Authentic Happiness*. Well, no one owes me the book of my dreams. However, as much as positive psychology's relative disinterest in decades of growth-oriented counseling psychology research strikes me as somewhat unbalanced, so too does the relatively short shrift given to modern strengths-based therapeutic approaches in favor of *Positive Therapy*'s somewhat lengthy paraphrasing of Rogers's work.

That being said, the openness with which the authors readily acknowledge their debt to Rogers is both refreshing and purposeful. This business of positive psychology and positive therapy should

be rooted in venerable and vetted knowledge, because it has at its core a desire to investigate health and flourishing with cutting-edge scientific rigor. Science is incremental. We learn by pushing what we know one or two steps farther, not by making up laws and postulates from whole cloth. I am confident that therapeutic approaches could be devised that bear no resemblance to existing science, but how would anyone begin to test or evaluate it? Joseph and Linley provide some reasonable extensions of Rogers's ideas, most noticeably with regard to their perspective on people's tendency to perceive growth in the face of adversity. They also include some nifty exercises I think might work with clients. Aside from these modest contributions, the effort to develop good therapeutic innovations from the positive psychology research is a potentially important aim, and Joseph and Linley have commendably begun to tackle this task. Because of these considerations, *Positive Therapy* might make for valuable reading for those who are otherwise unfamiliar with Rogers's orientation.

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