

Putting Positive Psychology Into Play
A review of

Positive Psychology: Exploring the Best in People

by Shane Lopez (Ed.)

Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008.

Volume 1. Discovering Human Strengths
216 pp. ISBN 978-0-275-99351-1

Volume 2. Capitalizing on Emotional Experiences
183 pp. ISBN 978-0-275-99352-8

Volume 3. Growing in the Face of Adversity
180 pp. ISBN 978-0-275-99353-5

Volume 4. Pursuing Human Flourishing
230 pp. ISBN 978-0-275-99354-2

ISBN 978-0-275-99350-4. \$400.00, set



Reviewed by

[Michael F. Steger](#)

Surely it has not escaped many people’s notice that there is this thing out there called *positive psychology*. From its first articulation (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), through the establishment of a dedicated journal (*Journal of Positive Psychology*), and on to the publication of the present multivolume book set, *Positive Psychology: Exploring the Best in People*, positive psychology’s ideals and moniker have flourished, to say the least. This incredible success brings with it, in my opinion, three primary risks that are relevant to the set of books I’m reviewing here.

First, there is the risk of quackery. The ideas advocated by the scientists associated with positive psychology are pretty straightforward, appealing, and catchy. In a media-driven world that seems to value passion more than prowess and the blizzard white of bleached teeth more than the spongy gray of meticulous brains, there is always an open door for snake-oil salesmen and saleswomen to peddle their positive-psychology crib notes. My nightmare here first came true when I noticed that a book about gratitude written by the host of a celebrity gossip television show found its way onto the *New York Times* bestseller list, whereas a book written by the acknowledged expert on the topic, Robert Emmons (2007), did not.

The second risk I perceive is the risk of overapplication. Positive psychology was founded on a call for rigorous scientific inquiry into the dimensions of human excellence. Because of this, it should not become a brand-name seal of approval for “happy” candles, bath salts, and golfing accessories. My nightmare here is a bookshelf stocked to the ceiling with titles like *Positive Psychology for the Parent’s Soul*, *Positive Psychology for the Billboard Hanger’s Soul*, *Positive Psychology for the Old-Time Mountain Prospector’s Soul*, and so on. It would be a different story if some such book series promised inspiration; the promise of positive psychology, though, is the science.

Finally, there is a risk that the intellectual marketplace may become overcrowded by books and articles regurgitating the same well-mashed cud. My nightmare here looks like a cross between Disney’s

“Sorcerer’s Apprentice” and an *Introduction to Psychology* textbook fair—a sea of identical books multiplying uncontrollably, threatening a biblical (albeit upbeat) deluge.

So, I approach each new entry into the positive psychology canon with these three worries in the back of my mind. The underlying question for me is whether this series makes a new, important, science-based contribution to our study of human excellence.

First, is this series of books an exercise in bait-and-switch quackery? This concern is immediately laid to rest by the editor’s presence. Shane Lopez has been at the forefront of the positive psychology movement and has been responsible (along with the late C. R. Snyder) for compiling two of the most comprehensive existing volumes on positive psychology, the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (2003) and the *Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology* (2009). As with these previous efforts (and the forthcoming second edition of the *Handbook*), Lopez has enlisted a range of experts to tackle the contents of the book. There is variability in the amount and quality of the evidence provided in each chapter, but overall there is relatively uniform adherence to following the data.

Second, has the positive psychology umbrella been stretched to cover phenomena too far afield? The question of whether the positive psychology label appropriately or inappropriately adorns the selection of topics included in this series is, ultimately, a matter of opinion. I would argue that, for the most part, the chapters cover the traditional core of positive psychology: positive emotions, positive traits, and positive institutions.

Volume 1, *Discovering Human Strengths*, covers topics such as positive traits, wisdom, courage, optimism, and personal agency. Volume 2, *Capitalizing on Emotional Experiences*, covers the Nun study (Danner, Snowden, & Friesen’s famous 2001 article showing that nuns who expressed more positive emotions as initiates lived longer 50-plus years later), gratitude, emotional intelligence, and positive emotions. Volume 3, *Growing in the Face of Adversity*, covers forgiveness and provides some much-needed links between positive psychology and negative experiences, which I will discuss more in a following paragraph. Volume 4, *Pursuing Human Flourishing*, covers some familiar topics such as durable happiness, money and happiness, and positive therapy, and also provides some welcome surprises. For the most part, the selections included in this series represent a reasonable balance between pointing out the familiar and expected landmarks and drawing attention to some surprising new avenues.

Finally, is this series simply throwing a generic, interchangeable title to the marketplace? The series was created with the intent of bringing to life the research that undergirds positive psychology, with an emphasis on real-world implications. This is a different emphasis from that of previous edited books about positive psychology, and it is reflected in the organization of each chapter. Most chapters begin with a personal or topical vignette, and each chapter concludes with a set of “personal mini-experiments” designed to help readers foster the strength discussed in the body of the chapter. Some chapters include additional potential applications in the main text. To my eye, some of these applications seem more likely to help people than do others.

One of my favorite chapters, “Romantic Conflict and Its Resolution” by Tammy Zacchilli, Susan Hendrick, and Clyde Hendrick (in Volume 3), provides an example of both the truly helpful and the hopefully harmless. In the text itself, readers are given some excellent, tangible advice about the mind-set, setting, and behaviors most likely to facilitate successful conflict resolution between embattled romantic partners. On the other hand, one of the personal mini-experiments—which I am thinking was perhaps inspired by research showing the benefits of positive emotions on problem solving (see Kok, Catalino, and

Fredrickson's chapter in Volume 2)—suggests planning for conflict by preparing a small gift or promise of some desirable (in your partner's eyes) action you might do and then surprising your partner with your little boon as a conflict arises. This probably says more about me than about the authors, but I can't help myself from imagining that slightly demonic chuckling accompanied the penning of the final sentence of this mini-experiment: "See what happens" (p. 65).

In addition to the focus on applicability of positive psychology research to readers' everyday lives, several of the chapters either remedy oversights of previous compendia or forge interesting new directions. The most pervasive remedy is the integration of the negative into the rosy world of the positive. Volume 3, and also a chapter in Volume 1 by Erin Sparks and Roy Baumeister ("If Bad Is Stronger Than Good, Why Focus on Human Strength?"), importantly place research on the positive within the context of the entire spectrum of human experience.

Early objections to positive psychology argued that there was no need for such a movement because the research was already being conducted and warned against turning the field into a launching ground for deliriously smiling happiologists. This series is among the first substantial efforts to provide an example of how emphasizing human strengths still yields value, even when considered (I would argue, *especially* when considered) against the backdrop of human maladies. Several chapters also forge new directions, such as Albert Bandura's contribution, which builds on his recent article (Bandura, 2006) to argue for "An Agentic Perspective on Positive Psychology."

To return to my guiding question, does this series make a new, important, science-based contribution to our study of human excellence? I believe it does. The compilation of chapters by big names and new names, ably assembled by the editor, provides some new perspectives for seasoned scholars of human excellence, as well as an excellent entry point for people new to positive psychology and for those looking for applications to help put positive psychology into play.

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