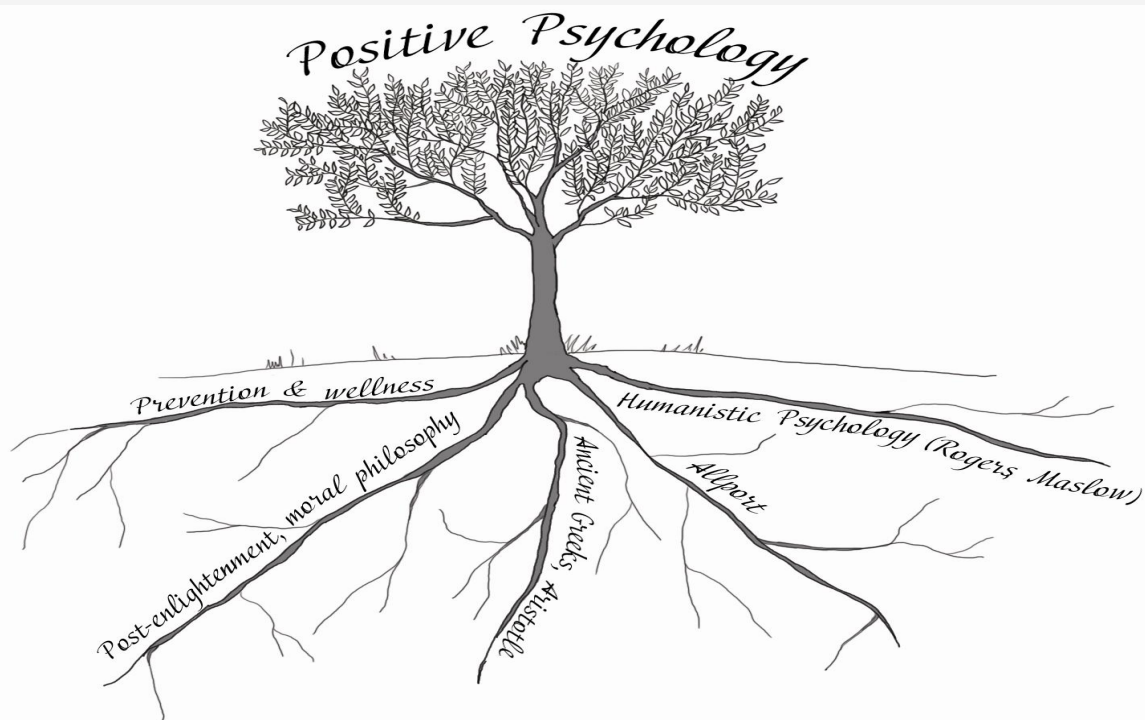




Start page

Positive Psychology: A mere remarketing of traditional topics?

A recurrent criticism of Positive Psychology is that it has simply repackaged and revived familiar, traditional psychological concepts. In this section, we will investigate this claim.



Introduction

PosPsy as the newest branch of Psychology has not been without **controversy** in the scientific community. Critics have highlighted the fact that many concepts can, at least in part, also be studied in its traditional form. Does this mean that Pospsy is a mere **re-vamp aimed at gaining attention** by both the scientific as well as wider community? Or is this new discipline simply **standing on the shoulder of giants** and legitimately building on what has come before us?

We have picked **five concepts** of positive psychology and have **assessed** to what extent these are a novel contribution, a useful reworking of older topics or a simple rebranding. Click yourself through each concept and find out!

Flow

Gratitude

Mindfulness

Optimism

Strengths

Questioning the Question

Questioning the scientific novelty of the concepts advocated in Positive Psychology certainly provides a **useful critical viewpoint**; see good articles by **Lazarus (2004)** and **Sheldon & King (2001)** for a general overview.

However, we should think about why it is that this criticism of "rebranding" is raised in the first place. Implicit to this debate is a **false dichotomy** of Positive Psychology versus "real" Psychology and certainly the movement itself has been regarded by some with little esteem or serious interest.

To refute these critics, we need to think of **Positive Psychology as a larger intellectual movement** towards studying human development and well-being and how to live a life "above zero". The individual topics discussed within this area might be re-workings or developments of traditional topic, but we need to look at the larger picture to see why this is the case.

In defining itself, Positive Psychology has frequently presented itself as departing from traditional psychology, as Baumgardner and Crothers (2009) explain. This has led to the perception that PosPsy sees itself as entirely new. But **Professor Peterson** emphasises that "the **value** of positive psychology is to **complement and extend the problem-focused psychology**". Arguably, the researchers have introduced new concepts and terminology yet few concepts are claimed to be entirely ground-breaking. It is rather that **PosPsy discusses them in a new light with different aims**. **Seligman** 's (2002) goal was not to create yet another specialised research area for Psychology, but to **balance the entire field**.

The success of this endeavour has yet to be assessed, but creating false dichotomies only reveals a lack of understanding of what Positive Psychology is about. On the other hand, **rigorous scientific scrutiny is needed** to prevent drifting into the "**saccharine terrorism**" of self-help gurus.

Conclusion

Overall, the five key concepts discussed showed **some links to traditional topics** of Western Psychology (attention and cognitive and attribution styles) or in fact Asian philosophy (mindfulness and flow) and discuss them in terms of **clinical applications and personal development**.

Flow is concluded to be a **novel and important concept**. Csikszentmihalyi did not remarket elder tradition, however Flow could easily be mistaken as a mere rebranding because it overlaps and can be related to other already existing psychological theories such as **Optimal arousal** , **motivation** , **reinforcement** and **attention**. Flow can explain how these concepts might *feel like* when they are experienced.

Gratitude is concluded as an **traditional phenomenon** that already consist for centuries in difference cultures, but is new in sciences like positive psychology. This is based on the fact that gratitude is seen as a way of life in many different cultures, but there is never conduct real research to gratitude as a scientific concept.

Mindfulness as an ancient Buddhist form of conciousness training is a concept **fairly new** to Psychology and PosPsy in particular. It produces great results in clinical applications in stress and depression and is a cost-free and accessible method of enhancing everyday well-being.

Optimism is concluded as being a **useful reworking** of older topics. This is due to the idea originally being taken from attribution style work, however positive psychology has contributed extensively to this topic making it more well known and completing research which is extremely beneficial to health psychology.

Strengths is concluded a **useful reworking** of a traditional topic, at the very least; it is certainly not *just* a re-branding of traditional topics. Historically, discussions concerning the importance of strength have been rooted in theory alone. Positive Psychology has provided a new medium for research which has resulted in the creation of classification systems and empirical measures of strengths, as well as attempts to effectively apply the approach to a number of clinical and non-clinical settings.

Is Flow intrinsic motivation?

Is Flow intrinsic motivation?

Intrinsic motivation partially explains Flow, which is a concept developed by Maslow (1968)³ . The concept identified that people do not necessarily work for external rewards, but find the work alone very rewarding. Maslow argued that humans have an intrinsic motivation of self-actualization. This motivation causes people to challenge their potentialities and seek their motivations by seeking out various experiences and activities which often end up being enjoyable (Stacks 1991)⁴. Maslow indeed identified the conditions necessary for a human to reach self-actualization and enjoyment of intrinsic reward, stating that one can not be hungry and must be secure. Nevertheless Maslow did not make it clear how this reward felt (M.C, 1988). Intrinsic motivation was also investigated before M.C by Richard deCharms who found that schoolchildren who felt intrinsic motivation towards schoolwork enjoyed it more than students who were motivated by external rewards.

While investigation of intrinsic motivation offer some explanation of flow most of the studies were conducted in an experimental laboratory focusing on human behavior. They did not question the subjective experience during such a behavior, as MC has done by investigating a natural occurring context.

A Brief History of the Strengths Approach

A Brief History of the Strengths Approach

The “strengths approach” emphasises the idea that we should focus on our strengths rather than our weaknesses or deficits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Despite its increasing popularity under the Positive Psychology bracket, it is certainly not a new idea, having been shaped by a number of authors over the years. For instance, similarities can be seen between the strengths approach and the humanistic branch of psychology, particularly in the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow who believed that positive psychological well-being is the product of an encouraging environment and the individual's desire to develop their strengths and fulfil their potential, and that people should use their strengths to encourage others. Furthermore Maria Montessori investigated the links between children's success and the strength approach, and believed that children could find fulfilment in their lives by working to their strengths.

Application

Application: How to feel happy by means of gratitude?

Not duty is more urgent than that of returning thanks - Saint Ambrose

Write a 'gratitude letter', a kind of thank- you note to someone in your lives. Because studies provided evidence that 'gratitude letters' provide a long- lasting mood boosts to the writer. After this exercise you feel happier. If you only looking for a short- term mood boosts just say thanks sometimes. Get started and you will find more and more things to be grateful for (Emmons & Charles, 2000)

Do you want to check how grateful you are? Go to the following page:

<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/gratitudequestionnaire6.pdf> and answer the 6 questions. How did you do? Just add up your points. The higher your score, the more grateful you are.

Application Exercise

Applications: an exercise to try... Seligman (2002) has improved upon Ellis' (1977) ABC cognitive technique designed as a self help tool to **try and foster more optimistic cognitive styles**. The individual goes through the steps, writing their personal experiences and reflecting at each stage.

Adverse experiences

Beliefs about the adverse event

Consequences of the pessimistic beliefs

Dispute current beliefs

Energised and optimistic about the adversities

To try it out yourself...

Back to **Optimism**

Application of the Strengths Approach

Application of the Strengths Approach

Social Work

The popularisation of the strengths approach in Positive Psychology has been particularly beneficial in the social work setting.

An understanding of ones strengths is an important developmental stage. Particularly, studies have shown that

the development of strengths is important for social, cognitive, behavioural and moral capabilities in youths (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Therefore, an adaptation of the VIA, the VIA-Youth has been developed to help youths identify and understand their “signature strengths”, in the hope that it may allow them to fulfil their potential.



The strengths approach has also become popular in field of psychotherapy, particularly in substance abuse therapy, as it focuses on the formation of new behaviours (developing ideas for new behaviours and interests instead of getting drunk) rather than on simply getting rid of old unwanted behaviours (Just stop drinking!).

Clinical

The application of the strengths approach to a clinical setting is still in it's early days. However, one therapy in particular has become increasingly popular; Strength-Centred Therapy. Stength-Centred Therapy focuses on the individual's subjective views about their own general wellbeing and pathology, rather than focusing on the therapist's assessment. In doing so, the individual and the practitioner can work together to allow the individual to develop new meanings and understandings of their life, helping them to view things more positively. Being relatively new it is as yet unclear how effective this therapy will be. It is however an interesting area for future research, in the hope that it may be turn out to be highly beneficial.

For further information regarding the specific details of Strength-Centred Therapy, see [Wong \(2006\)](#).

Educational

The strengths approach may also be beneficial in an educational setting. Currently, education focuses solely on academic measures of achievement. However, a number of researchers have suggested that academic failure may have a significant negative impact on an individual's motivation to fulfil their potential and achieve their desired career goals. It has been suggested the by applying the strengths approach, by helping young people to identify and apply strengths out with their academic strengths, may allow people to display and develop a wider range of skills sought by employers and society in general (Hirschorn, 2011).

Attention

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Conclusion

Conclusion

Although the Strengths Approach has been discussed by several authors prior to the founding of Positive Psychology, it is clear that Positive Psychology has contributed a great amount to the Strength's Approach. Positive Psychology research has led to the creation of classification systems and measures for strengths and developed ways that strengths can be used to benefit individuals in a number of settings. The accuracy, usefulness and validity of these systems are not yet known, as research is still in it's early days. However, it can be concluded that the strengths approach is certainly not *just* a re-branding of traditional topics; it should be considered at the very least as a **useful reworking** of a traditional topic.

Does Positive Psychology Contribute Anything New to the Strengths Approach?

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Outwith Positive Psychology, discussions concerning the strengths approach have been largely theoretical. However, recent efforts to popularise the strengths approach under the umbrella of Positive Psychology, have resulted in an influx of research, with attempts now being made to empirically measure strengths and explore how the theory can be applied effectively in a number of settings.

Flow



Is Flow just remarketing older traditions?

The following paragraphs give you an overview of the psychological concepts that can be seen as relevant to the Flow concept. We ask: Could Flow just be motivation, focus of attention, optimal arousal, a stream of positive reinforcement or a westernized way of describing a state reached through Buddhist meditation? Before these questions are answered the first section gives a brief description about what Flow is.

What is Flow?

Six factors of Flow

Is Flow intrinsic motivation?

Is Flow focused attention?

Is Flow optimal arousal?

Is Flow positive reinforcement?

Is Flow just Zen?

Remarketing: Yes or No?

Interesting Links

< [Return to Topic Overview](#)

Flow was introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (M.C.) in the 60s. M.C. observed painters and sculptors being fully immersed into their art making without any extrinsic rewards, i.e. they were neither getting recognized or paid. At that time such immersion was explained by the term "sublimation" which was a culturally acceptable form of expressing unacceptable impulses. M.C, however, was not convinced by this explanation and thought the artists experienced too much joy for it to be an expression of some undefined need. M.C. started interviewing artists that experienced full immersion. During the interviews he identified a state of mind he named flow. Flow could be felt during an engaging conversation, reading a fascinating novel, simply being at work, or performing some other pleasant habitual activity such as browsing the Internet.

Six factors encompass the experience of Flow, all should be experienced at the same time. (1.) Intense and focused concentration on the present moment. (2.) Merging of action and awareness. (3.) A loss of reflective self-consciousness. (4.) A sense of personal control over the situation (5.) A distortion of temporal experiences. (6.) Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding.

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While investigation of intrinsic motivation offer some explanation of flow most of the studies were conducted in an experimental laboratory focusing on human behavior. They did not question the subjective experience during such a behavior, as MC has done by investigating a natural occurring context.

Is Flow focused Attention?

From description of flow it is clear that the person in flow is deeply engaged and concentrated. Concentration is connected with attention, as well as it is connected with intrinsic motivation. So could Flow just describe the focus of our attention on one specific task? When explaining flow, M.C. refers to the fact that our attention or cognitive capacity constantly makes tradeoffs about what we should focus on. This is because our cognitive resources for attention are limited. All our cognitive resources are focused on one specific idea during Flow. This eliminates conflict and competition of thoughts. Thus, we loose track of time and do not enter other thoughts that usually preoccupy our minds and decrease our well being. William James described already in 1890 the desirable state of focused attention "Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state (...).

However from thereon researchers focused investigations of attention as a cognitive process of selective concentration in the context of education and cognitive neuroscience.

It seems that M.C. was the first to point specifically to the joyful aspect of focusing ones attention. Not asking how, why and when but how it feels as a phenomenon from the psychological perspective.

Is Flow optimal Arousal?

The Yerkes-Dodson law presents the relationship between arousal and performance. The law that was established in 1908, states that moderate physiological and mental arousal lead to optimal performance. Arousal beyond the optimal point however leads to stress, and arousal beneath the optimal point lead to boredom. Both boredom and stress demolish performance levels (Yerkes 1908). It can be postulated that feeling flow is experiencing optimal arousal. These two concepts are likely interrelated and explain the positive aspect of Flow. We argue however that M.C. does not remarket this very old law, despite the obvious parallel. M.C. applied the relationship between boredom and stress however proposes a reasonable cause to it as well. To maintain Flow, M.C. argues that one must experience a balance between perceived challenge and own ability or capacity to deal with the challenge. If challenge is too great we experience anxiety, if the skill is too great, relative to the challenge we experience boredom.

M.C. does not remarket the finding of optimal arousal but by presenting Flow ads some insight in the empirical relationship of the Yerkes-Dodson law.

Is Flow a stream of positive reinforcement?

Some researchers investigating the application of flow onto an education setting identify that flow theory contains principles also used when designing instructions from a behaviorist perspective (Schneider, 2001). Optimal level of difficulty and receiving fast feedback to keep flow going has parallels with positive reinforcement where behavior is followed by a reward which further leads to increasing the frequency of that behavior. Although Flow has been mainly argued to be about intrinsic reward, the moment it is applied to the psychology of work or psychology of learning it is difficult to distinguish whether flow achieved, is based on intrinsic or extrinsic motivational factors. For example: A surgeon might experience Flow during an operation he performs on average once a week. It is hard to establish whether Flow is due to a deep enthusiasm for the task or due to money, fame or patients improved health. The latter are reactions caused by the operation, which might have taken the role as a reinforcement for these positive consequences.

Although Behaviorist ideas can be identified in Flow and M.C. descriptions of Flow, it can be argued, if so, that he was the first to give an account of conceptualizing the experience of potential constant positive reinforcement.

Is Flow like Zen?

Flow is focusing ones attention. Focused attention is the essence of meditation and religious practice. The focus of Flow is argued by M.C to fully absorb ones attention leading to a feeling of loss of self and becoming at one and thereby finding a meaning. "Zen" in mandarin means "full absorption" and emphasizes the attainment of enlightenment and direct insight reached by meditation. Meditation has the goal to calm the monkey mind, which is a metaphor for the diffuse attention we experience in everyday life, i.e thinking about many things at once

(Nakamura & M.C, 2009). When M.C. investigated the flow experience, which is a state he describes as effortless concentration, studies confirmed that people from various cultures reported to experience a flow during meditative and religious practice. This lead M.C. to conclude that flow is a universal human trait, where our brain finds the experiences of complete involvement and intense concentration as a highly rewarding and evolutionary beneficial state (Nakamura & M.C, 2009).

Due to the existence and extensive descriptions of a state similar to flow deriving from Buddhism and Taoism, M.C. was not the first to conceptualize flow. However it can be argued that he was the first in attempting to define the state of mind from a western and psychological perspective. Today M.C. identifies Zen Buddhism and Mindfulness as a direct path to reach effortless attention,i.e. flow. Nevertheless he emphasizes an indirect path to reach flow also. People who love their job which absorbs them deeply and they find interesting will cause flow without the effort that meditation requires.

With the emphasis of the indirect path, M.C adds a novel contribution to the presence of "flow" as described by Zen.

Although the parallels between Zen and Flow are remarkable, it is argued that M.C. has not rebranded Zen, but identified its omnipresence as a human trait and formulated the concept as it is experienced by the western world.

Remarketing: Yes or No?

Flow has been critiqued for being a western concept which is too goal directed to establish a panhuman trait. Further some argue it is too mystical and is not appropriate to study within the social sciences (M.C, 1988). Also, M.C has well explained how flow feels but not so much how it can be achieved.

These critiques might be worthy of consideration however from the five sections above we conclude that

...flow is not an area of positive psychology that is simply remarketing elder traditions. Flow is indeed identifiable in theories like arousal, Zen and attention and can be used to give these theories a more complete explanation. Overall, Flow is however a novel an important concept that has enabled beneficial application to positive psychology.

Interesting Links :

[Interview with Csikszentmihalyi](#)

[The Paradox in Flow Research](#)

[History and Critical evaluation of Flow](#)

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Further Reading

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History of the Strengths Approach

- DeCarvalho, R. J. (1991). The founders of humanistic psychology.
- Froh (2004) The History of Positive Psychology: Truth Be Told

VIA Classification System:

- Linley al (2007). Character strengths in the United Kingdom. (provides a good introduction and general

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Clinical Application:

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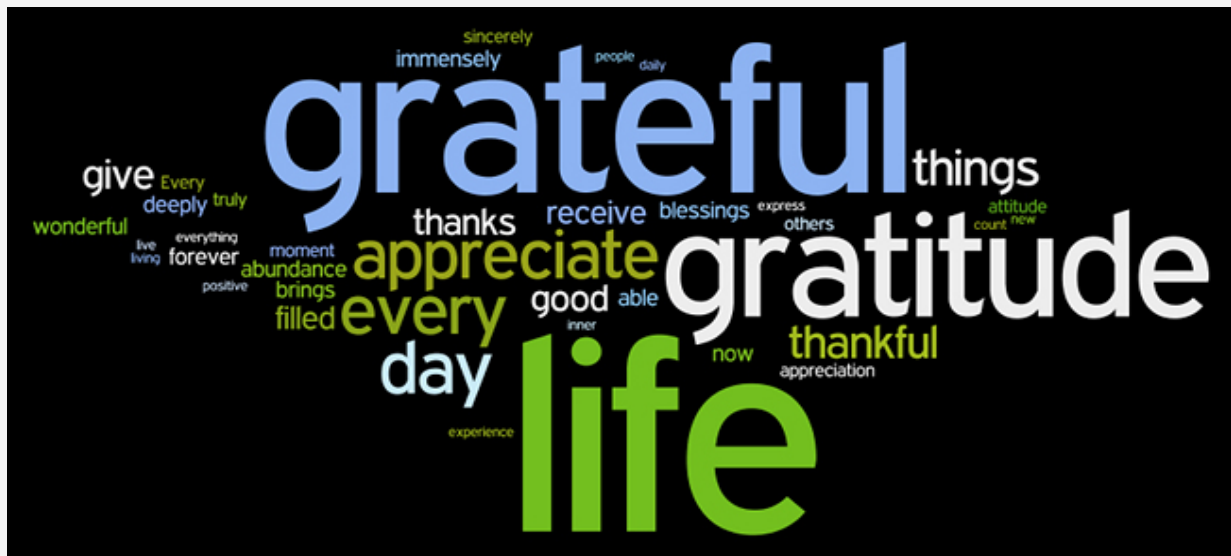
Social Care:

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Strengths and the Workplace:

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Gratitude



It is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

What is gratitude

New phenomenon or old religious tradition?

Old or new?

Application

Read more

(Reference)

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What is gratitude?

Gratitude is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. All has to do with kindness, generousness, gift, and the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing (Pruyser, 1976). As a psychological state, gratitude is a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life.

Gratitude a new phenomenon or is it just old religious traditions?

The systematic study of gratitude within psychology only began around the year 2000, possibly. With the advent

of the positive psychology movement, gratitude has become a mainstream focus of psychological research. Martin Seligman has said that "As a professor, I don't like this, but the cerebral virtues — curiosity, love of learning — are less strongly tied to happiness than interpersonal virtues like kindness, gratitude and capacity for love. So gratitude is an important aspect in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Is gratitude old or new?

Positive psychology is potentially a very influential movement. It has attracted a great deal of interest and received a lot of positive press, but has scarcely been critically assessed by psychologists or other. Gratitude is part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world. The roots of gratitude can be seen in many of the world's religious traditions. Across culture and time spans, experiences and expressions of gratitude have been treated as both basic and desirable aspect of human personality and social life.

From Cicero to Buddha, many philosophers and spiritual teachers have celebrated gratitude for centuries. For example the Buddha suggested that thankfulness is a core aspect of the noble person (Emmons & Schelton, 2002). The world's major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hindu, prize gratitude as a morally beneficial emotional state that encourages reciprocal kindness. Pastors, priests, parents and grandparents have long extolled the virtues of gratitude, but until recently, scholars have largely ignored it as a subject of scientific inquiry. Besides that gratitude is still admired today. A small sampling of recent quotes reveals the power and potential of this virtue. "Whatever you are in search of—peace of mind, prosperity, health, love—it is waiting for you if only you are willing to receive it with an open and grateful heart," writes Sarah Breathnach in the Simple Abundance Journal of Gratitude (Rye et al., 2000).

So gratitude as an phenomenon consist already for centuries, but it is new in sciences like positive psychology.

Application; How to feel happy by means of gratitude?

Not duty is more urgent than that of returning thanks - Saint Ambrose

Write a 'gratitude letter', a kind of thank-you note to someone in your lives. Because studies provided evidence that 'gratitude letters' provide a long-lasting mood boosts to the writer. After this exercise you feel happier. If you only looking for a short-term mood boosts just say thanks sometimes. Get started and you will find more and more things to be grateful for (Emmons, 2004)

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Do you want to read more?

About gratitude and the power of thank you:

You can find on the internet a lot of books or articles. A suggestion to read is; 'Thank You Power: Making the Science of Gratitude Work for You by Deborah Norville.

About the role of religion and spirituality in positive psychology:

Rye, M. S., Wade, N. G., Fleri, A. M., & Kidwell, Julia E. M.(2013). The role of religion and spirituality in positive psychology interventions. *Handbook of psychology*, 2, 481-508.

Finished reading about Gratitude? How about reading about [Flow](#), [Mindfulness](#), [Optimism](#) or [Strengths](#)

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Introduction

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(created by [Nina KUTYLOWSKI](#) on Tuesday, 29 January 2013, 10:59 PM)

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Due to the existence and extensive descriptions of a state similar to flow deriving from Buddhism and Taoism, M.C. was not the first to conceptualize flow. However it can be argued that he was the first in attempting to define the state of mind from a western and psychological perspective. Today M.C. identifies Zen Buddhism and Mindfulness as a direct path to reach effortless attention,i.e. flow. Nevertheless he emphasizes an indirect path to reach flow also. People who love their job which absorbs them deeply and they find interesting will cause flow without the effort that meditation requires.

With the emphasis of the indirect path, M.C adds a novel contribution to the presence of "flow" as described by Zen.

Although the parallels between Zen and Flow are remarkable, it is argued that M.C. has not rebranded Zen, but identified its omnipresence as a human trait and formulated the concept as it is experienced by the western world.

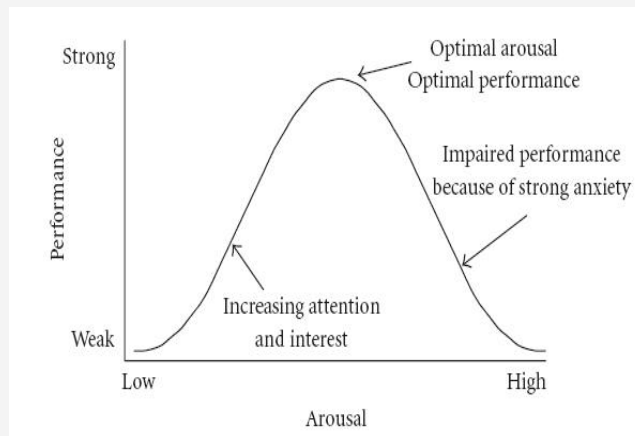
Is Flow optimal arousal?

Is Flow optimal Arousal?

The Yerkes-Dodson law presents the relationship between arousal and performance. The law that was established in 1908, states that moderate physiological and mental arousal lead to optimal performance. Arousal beyond the optimal point however leads to stress, and arousal beneath the optimal point lead to boredom. Both boredom and stress demolish performance levels. Please see figure 1 (Yerkes 1908). It can be postulated that feeling flow is experiencing optimal arousal. These two concepts are likely interrelated and explain the positive aspect of Flow. We argue however that M.C. does not remarket this very old law, despite the obvious parallel. M.C. applied the relationship between boredom and stress however proposes a reasonable cause to it as well. To maintain Flow, M.C. argues that one must experience a balance between perceived challenge and own ability or capacity to deal with the challenge (See figure 2). If challenge is too great we experience anxiety, if the skill is too great, relative to the challenge we experience boredom.

M.C. does not remarket the finding of optimal arousal but by presenting Flow ads some insight in the empirical relationship of the Yerkes-Dodson law

1)



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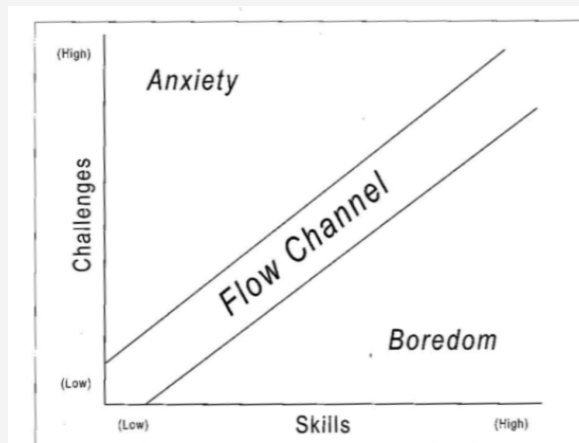


Figure 24.1 How the complexity of consciousness increases as a result of flow experiences.
Note: From *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience* (p. 74), by M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, New York: Harper & Row. Copyright 1990 by Harper & Row. Adapted with permission.

Is Flow positive reinforcement?

Is Flow a stream of positive reinforcement?

Some researchers investigating the application of flow onto an education setting identify that flow theory contains principles also used when designing instructions from a behaviorist perspective (Schneider, 2001)⁷. Optimal level of difficulty and receiving fast feedback to keep flow going has parallels with positive reinforcement where behavior is followed by a reward which further leads to increasing the frequency of that behavior. Although Flow has been mainly argued to be about intrinsic reward, the moment it is applied to the psychology of work or

psychology of learning it is difficult to distinguish whether flow achieved, is based on intrinsic or extrinsic motivational factors. For example: A surgeon might experience Flow during an operation he performs on average once a week. It is hard to establish whether Flow is due to a deep enthusiasm for the task or due to money, fame or patients improved health. The latter are reactions caused by the operation, which might have taken the role as a reinforcement for these positive consequences.

Although Behaviorist ideas can be identified in Flow and M.C. descriptions of Flow, it can be argued, if so, that he was the first to give an account of conceptualizing the experience of potential constant positive reinforcement

Is Optimism just Attribution Style?

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Attribution style has been investigated by social psychologists long before positive psychology, looking into how individuals perceive events and how they explain the reasons for it occurring (Jones & Davis, 1965). Work into attribution has focused on the pessimistic end, and theorists have worked extensively into 'learned helplessness' (Maier & Seligman, 1976). Lots of work on patients with depression was completed, as despair and negative attitudes and attributions are key in this mental illness. Work here found that patients with depression attributed negative events to internal, stable and global causes (Peterson et al, 1982). This means that they would generalise the cause of one negative event to the rest of their life, blaming themselves and believing that the same cause will occur for each event they face. Optimism is on the other end of this spectrum in attribution. Optimists refer to adverse events as external, unstable and specific, so if something went wrong they would limit it to that one event, blame it on a cause outwith their control and believe it to be a one-off.

Positive psychologists refer to optimism rather than attribution style, however they are one in the same and the optimism research within positive psychology has been taken from previous attribution style research and twisted so that only the positive element- optimism- is focused on. Thus **in this instance optimism has been rebranded by focusing in on the positive element to attribution style and ignoring the negative aspects.** Lazarus (2003), states that this ignorance of the negative aspects is an inherent misgiving in "positive" psychology generally. He believes both are needed to get a complete balance, and in the case of optimism, pessimism is needed to get a more realistic view of the world.

Even though optimism as a topic has been taken from traditional areas. Research into optimism, especially optimism and health, is imperative. The **publicity positive psychology has given optimism is extremely useful in health psychology** and has led to vast amounts of interest and research (Carver et al, 2010). So this area of psychology has been a useful reworking of older topics, and has given it a boost in research and raising its profile around the world.

Back to [Optimism](#)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by everyday demands? Do you often worry about the future and ruminate about the past? Do you do routine behaviours without noticing them? Then it's about time you became a bit more mindful of the present moment!

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The History of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is very much an old, if not to say ancient concept which originates from Buddhist teachings on meditation more than **2500 years old**. The very simple idea is that through **full awareness** and perception of the **present moment** one can achieve a **peaceful and calm state of mind** leading to Buddhist enlightenment.

Even though it is a concept well known across **Asian spiritual tradition**, mindfulness only entered **Western Psychology in the late seventies**. Harvard professor **Ellen Langer** is the Western "mother of mindfulness" and introduced the topic into mainstream psychology. **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, now an eminent figure in the field, was the first to create a systematic intervention programme that uses mindfulness as a tool for **stress reduction** and **increased mental well-being**.

Why PosPsy is interested in Mindfulness

It is exactly the **beneficial effects** of the meditation practise that triggered the interest of PosPsy researchers into mindfulness. As a **low-cost, side-effect free therapy**, the techniques and ideas of mindfulness can enhance our well-being and improve psychological stress resilience.

Converging evidence shows that mindfulness improves mental well-being and the ability to cope physically and emotional with stress, pain and illness). Moreover, it **increases your happiness, positive affect and self-esteem** (Shapiro et al., 2002). **Research** has just revealed that this form of consciousness even leads to **gray matter density changes** in regions linked to emotion regulation and perspective taking!

Is mindfulness just Attention?

In a sense yes, because all meditation techniques rely heavily on **focusing your attention**, eg. onto your breath. However, the method goes beyond simple focus, Shapiro and colleagues point out (2002): mindfulness is an encompassing state of mind that requires seven ways of thinking which together create the true benefit of the practise. Being non-judgemental and patient in your thoughts are examples of this. The idea is to **cultivate a form of consciousness** that pervades your life, not just being able to concentrate on an external stimulus.

Is it just a form of Self-Regulation?

Mindfulness is a form of self-regulation practise in which we learn to **control our mental processes** though focused awareness of the present moment. However, unlike in self-regulation, there is **no explicit behavioural goal that is to be achieved**. Mindfulness teachers advise that there is not even a goal in the mindfulness practise itself, which is expressed in the concept of "non-striving". This means that whilst being mindful, you should not think about pre-conceived ideas of what should happen during or as a result of your practise. **The goal is the present moment**.

If you are keen to read a paper on this topic make it the one by **Walsh and Shapiro (2006)** which discusses how the traditional meditation practices can enrich a range of central psychological topics.

Of course, there are also **Practical Applications** of mindfulness for you to try!

Here is a list of the (sources).

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Motivation

Is Flow intrinsic motivation?

Intrinsic motivation partially explains Flow, which is a concept developed by Maslow (1968)³. The concept identified that people do not necessarily work for external rewards, but find the work alone very rewarding. Maslow argued that humans have an intrinsic motivation of self-actualization. This motivation causes people to challenge their potentialities and seek their motivations by seeking out various experiences and activities which often end up being enjoyable (Stacks 1991)⁴. Maslow indeed identified the conditions necessary for a human to reach self-actualization and enjoyment of intrinsic reward, stating that one can not be hungry and must be secure. Nevertheless Maslow did not make it clear how this reward felt (M.C, 1988). Intrinsic motivation was also investigated before M.C by Richard deCharms who found that schoolchildren who felt intrinsic motivation towards schoolwork enjoyed it more than students who were motivated by external rewards.

New or Old

New Psychology or Traditional Psychology Rebranded?

Optimism has become a goldmine for research in recent years, and Positive Psychology founder Martin Seligman has completed a flurry of research in this area, and it has been pinned as one of the main components of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

However should optimism truly be labeled under the new found positive psychology movement or is it just old psychology rebranded?

Seligman has come under harsh criticism for the entire movement of positive psychology as it may not be a 'new' movement after all. A lot of the central themes converge with that of Humanistic Psychology (Froh, 2004) and

Seligman infuriates humanistic theorists even more by disregarding the involvement of humanistic psychology as part of the positive movement (Taylor, 2001). The area of optimism is no different; **yes Seligman and colleagues have completed extensive research in this area, and contributed immensely to optimism and health** (Carver et al, 2010). It has been found that optimistic people are more likely to have better physical wellbeing (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1992), more likely to live longer (Giltay et al 2004) and have better immune systems (Segerstrom, 2005). **However it can be argued that optimism and it's research emerged through cognitive and social psychology and Seligman and other 'Positive Psychologists' have latched on and evolved this work by rebranding it into the positive movement.**

Back to [Optimism](#)

New phenomenon or old religious tradition?

The systematic study of gratitude within psychology only began around the year 2000, possibly. With the advent of the positive psychology movement, gratitude has become a mainstream focus of psychological research. Martin Seligman has said that "As a professor, I don't like this, but the cerebral virtues — curiosity, love of learning — are less strongly tied to happiness than interpersonal virtues like kindness, gratitude and capacity for love. So gratitude is an important aspect in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Old or new?

Is gratitude old or new?

Positive psychology is potentially a very influential movement. It has attracted a great deal of interest and received a lot of positive press, but has scarcely been critically assessed by psychologists or other. Gratitude is part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world. The roots of gratitude can be seen in many of the world's religious traditions. Across culture and time spans, experiences and expressions of gratitude have been treated as both basic and desirable aspect of human personality and social life.

From Cicero to Buddha, many philosophers and spiritual teachers have celebrated gratitude for centuries. For example the Buddha suggested that thankfulness is a core aspect of the noble person (Emmons & Schelton, 2002). The world's major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hindu, prize gratitude as a morally beneficial emotional state that encourages reciprocal kindness. Pastors, priests, parents and grandparents have long extolled the virtues of gratitude, but until recently, scholars have largely ignored it as a subject of scientific inquiry., besides that gratitude is still admired today. A small sampling of recent quotes reveals the power and potential of this virtue. "Whatever you are in search of-peace of mind, prosperity, health, love-it is waiting for you if only you are willing to receive it with an open and grateful heart," writes Sarah Breathnach in the Simple Abundance Journal of Gratitude (Rye et al., 2013).

Optimal arousal

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Optimism

What is Optimism

New or Old

Is Optimism just Attribution Style?

Topic in a Nutshell

Application Exercise

Want to Read more?

< [Return to Topic Overview](#)

What is Optimism? A future that's expectant and bright...



Optimism is not a new phenomenon, it is a **cognitive style** which has been discussed extensively by many psychologists and goes back to work completed by Freud (1928), who argued it was a popular way of thinking if somewhat illusionary, due to the denial of reality from seeing the world through rose tinted glasses. Optimism isn't a concept drawn upon only from psychologists either, anthropologist Lionel Tiger (1979) gave the most widely used definition "**a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future--one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his[or her] advantage, or for his [or her] pleasure**" (Peterson, 2000).

So optimism is a **cognitive characteristic which fosters a positive mentality towards the expectations of future events** (Peterson, 2000). It can be seen on a continuum with pessimism, the opposite cognitive effect, whereby the individual's interpretation of their own future looks bleak and miserable (Shulman, 1999).

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Only want to read one article?

Carver et al, (2010) review into Optimism research is an easy and extremely informative read.

Carver, C., S., Scheier, M., F., & Segerstrom, S., C. (2010). Optimism. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 879-889.

Applications: an exercise to try...

Seligman (2002) has improved upon Ellis' (1977) ABC cognitive technique designed as a self help tool to **try and foster more optimistic cognitive styles**. The individual goes through the steps, writing their personal experiences and reflecting at each stage.

Adverse experiences

Beliefs about the adverse event

Consequences of the pessimistic beliefs

Dispute current beliefs

Energised and optimistic about the adversities

To try it out yourself...

http://www.elsevierdirect.com/companions/9780123745170/Chapter%204/Chapter_4_Worksheet_4.13.pdf

Further Articles of Interest:

Peterson, C. (2000) The Future of Optimism. *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 44-55

Foregard, M., J., C., Seligman, M., E., P. (2012). Seeing the glass half full: A review of the causes and consequences of optimism. *Pratiques Psychologiques*, 18, 107-120

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Taylor, E. (2001). Positive Psychologist and Humanistic Psychology: A Reply to Seligman. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 41, 13-29.

Finished reading about Optimism? How about reading about [Flow](#), [Mindfulness](#), [Gratitude](#) or [Strengths](#)

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Positive reinforcement

Is Flow a stream of positive reinforcement?

Some researchers investigating the application of flow onto an education setting identify that flow theory contains principles also used when designing instructions from a behaviorist perspective (Schneider, 2001)⁷. Optimal level of difficulty and receiving fast feedback to keep flow going has parallels with positive reinforcement where behavior is followed by a reward which further leads to increasing the frequency of that behavior. Although Flow has been mainly argued to be about intrinsic reward, the moment it is applied to the psychology of work or psychology of learning it is difficult to distinguish whether flow achieved, is based on intrinsic or extrinsic motivational factors. For example: A surgeon might experience Flow during an operation he performs on average once a week. It is hard to establish whether Flow is due to a deep enthusiasm for the task or due to money, fame or patients improved health. The latter are reactions caused by the operation, which might have taken the role as a reinforcement for these positive consequences.

Although Behaviorist ideas can be identified in Flow and M.C. descriptions of Flow, it can be argued, if so, that he was the first to give an account of conceptualizing the experience of potential constant positive reinforcement.

Practical Applications

Practical Application

If the underlying idea and promises of mindfulness meditation appeal to you why not try it out for yourself? There are a variety of resources available:

Drop-in meditation classes in the Westend of Glasgow are held every Tuesday at 8.15 pm in Woodlands. More info here <http://www.mindfulnessstoday.co.uk>.

The library also holds a very useful and accessible book on mindfulness-based stress reduction- perfect for those pressure by the demands of fourth year and the life changes after leaving university. You can borrow it from the self-help section on level 3, book record Self Help 115. Other good introductions are the titles Library Level 3 Self Help 119 and 128.

There are a variety of very good youtube videos available that can guide you through a meditation. Watch Dr Kabat-Zinn introduce the method

And interest in the meditation practise has reached the world leaders. Watch a BBC report on mindful leading [here](#).

Questioning the Question

Questioning the scientific novelty of the concepts advocated in Positive Psychology certainly provides a useful critical viewpoint, see good articles by Lazarus (2004). However, we should think about why it is that this criticism is raised. Implicit to this debate is a false dichotomy of Positive Psychology versus "real" Psychology and certainly the movement itself has been regarded by some with little esteem or serious interest.

To refute these critics, we need to think of Positive Psychology as a larger intellectual movement towards studying human development and well-being and how to live a life "above zero". The individual topics discussed within this area might be re-workings or developments of traditional topic, but we need to look at the larger picture to see why this is the case.

In defining itself, Positive Psychology has frequently presented itself as departing from traditional psychology, as Baumgardner and Crothers (2009) explain. This has led to the perception that Positive Psychology sees itself as entirely new. But **Professor Peterson** emphasises that "the value of positive psychology is to complement and extend the problem-focused psychology". Arguably, the researchers have introduced new concepts and terminology yet few concepts are claimed to be entirely ground-breaking. It is rather that PosPsy discusses them in a new light with different aims. **Seligman's** (2002) goal was not to create yet another specialised research area for Psychology, but to balance the entire field.

The success of this endeavour has yet to be assessed, but creating false dichotomies only reveals a lack of understanding of what Positive Psychology is about. On the other hand, rigorous scientific scrutiny is needed to prevent drifting into the "**saccharine terrorism**" of self-help gurus.

Read more

Do you want to read more?

About gratitude and the power of thank you:

You can find on the internet a lot of books or articles. A suggestion to read is; 'Thank You Power: Making the Science of Gratitude Work for You by Deborah Norville.

About the role of religion and spirituality in positive psychology:

Rye, M. S., Wade, N. G., Fleri, A. M., & Kidwell, Julia E. M.(2013). The role of religion and

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Remarketing: Yes or No?

Remarketing: Yes or No ?

Flow has been critiqued for being a western concept which is too goal directed to establish a panhuman trait. Further some argue it is too mystical and is not appropriate to study within the social sciences (M.C, 1988). Also, M.C has well explained how flow feels but not so much how it can be achieved.

These critiques are worthy of consideration however asking whether Flow is mere rebranding, based on the the five sections presented we conclude that

....flow is not an area of positive psychology that is simply remarketing elder traditions. Flow is indeed identifiable in theories like **Optimal arousal, **Zen**, **motivation**, (reinforcement) and **attention** and can be used to give these theories a more complete explanation. Overall, Flow is however a novel an important concept that has enabled beneficial application to positive psychology.**

Six factors of Flow

Six factors encompass the experience of Flow, all should be experienced at the same time.

1. Intense and focused concentration on the present moment.
2. Merging of action and awareness.
3. A loss of reflective self-consciousness
4. A sense of personal control over the situation
5. A distortion of temporal experiences.
6. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding.

Could Flow just be rebranding of an older tradition? Pick the one you think Flow is mostly similar to and see for yourself: **Attention** or **Zen** or **Motivation** or **Optimal arousal** or **Positive reinforcement**.

Six factors of Flow Is Flow intrinsic motivation?

Six factors encompass the experience of Flow, all should be experienced at the same time.

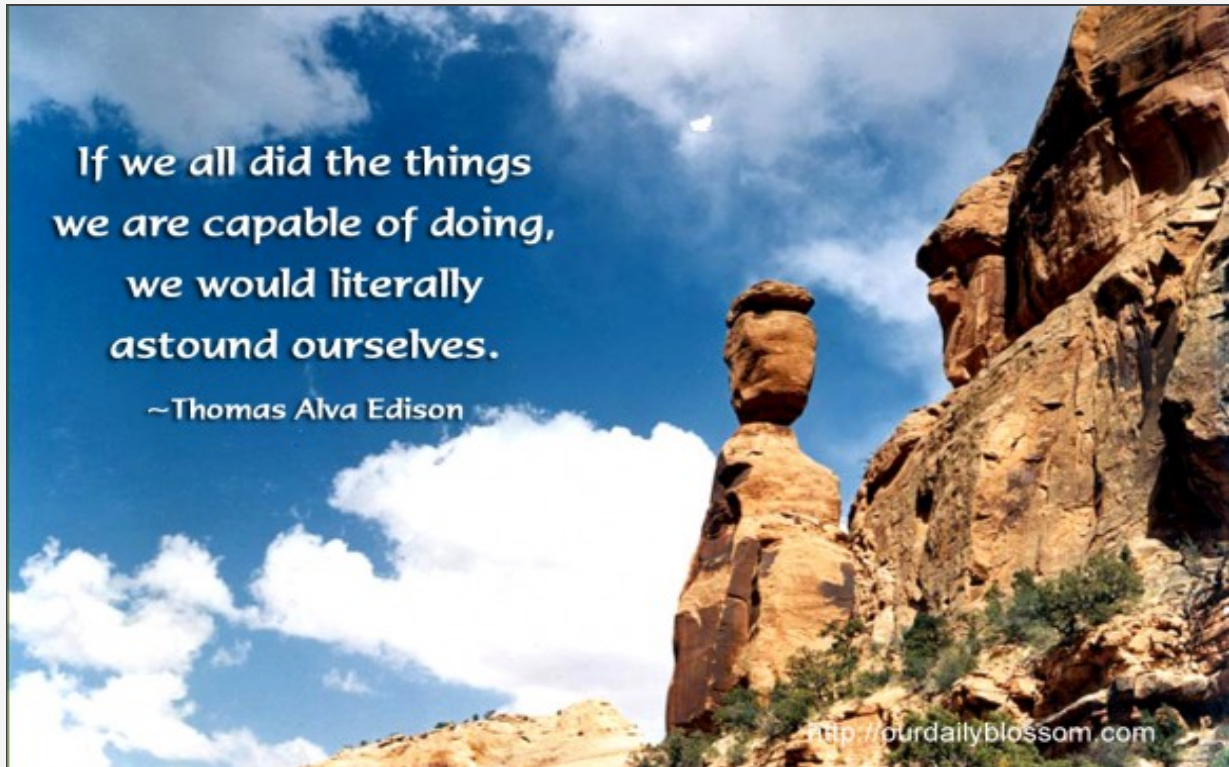
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2. Merging of action and awareness.
3. A loss of reflective self-consciousness.
4. A sense of personal control over the situation
5. A distortion of temporal experiences.
6. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding

So is Flow just rebranding of old traditions? Click on the theory you think Flow might be closely associated and make up your own mind !

(Zen meditation) or **Optimal Arousal** or **Attention** or **Positive Reinforcement** or (Intrinsic Motivation)

Strengths

The Strengths Approach – Just rebranding of a traditional topic?



[A Brief History of the Strengths Approach](#)

[Does Positive Psychology Contribute Anything New to the Strengths Approach?](#)

[The Empirical Measurement of Strengths](#)

[Application of the Strengths Approach](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Interested in Further Reading?](#)

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[A Brief History of the Strengths Approach](#)

An understanding of one's strengths is an important developmental stage. Particularly, studies have shown that the development of strengths is important for social, cognitive, behavioural and moral capabilities in youths (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Therefore, an adaptation of the VIA, the VIA-Youth has been developed to help youths identify and understand their "signature strengths", in the hope that it may allow them to fulfil their potential.



The strengths approach has also become popular in the field of psychotherapy, particularly in substance abuse therapy, as it focuses on the formation of new behaviours (developing ideas for new behaviours and interests instead of getting drunk) rather than on simply getting rid of old unwanted behaviours (Just stop drinking!).

Clinical

The application of the strengths approach to a clinical setting is still in its early days. However, one therapy in particular has become increasingly popular; Strength-Centred Therapy. Strength-Centred Therapy focuses on the individual's subjective views about their own general wellbeing and pathology, rather than focusing on the therapist's assessment. In doing so, the individual and the practitioner can work together to allow the individual to develop new meanings and understandings of their life, helping them to view things more positively. Being relatively new it is as yet unclear how effective this therapy will be. It is however an interesting area for future research, in the hope that it may be turned out to be highly beneficial.

For further information regarding the specific details of Strength-Centred Therapy, see [Wong \(2006\)](#).

Educational

The strengths approach may also be beneficial in an educational setting. Currently, education focuses solely on academic measures of achievement. However, a number of researchers have suggested that academic failure may have a significant negative impact on an individual's motivation to fulfil their potential and achieve their desired career goals (Park & Peterson, 2006; Ma et al, 2008; Lounsbury et al, 2009). It has been suggested that by applying the strengths approach, by helping young people to identify and apply strengths out with their academic strengths, may allow people to display and develop a wider range of skills sought by employers and society in general (Hirschorn, 2011).

Conclusion

Although it has been discussed by several authors prior to the founding of Positive Psychology, it is clear that Positive Psychology has contributed a great amount to the Strength's Approach. Positive Psychology research has led to the creation of classification systems and measures for strengths and developed ways that strengths can be used to benefit individuals in a number of settings. The accuracy, usefulness and validity of these systems are not yet known, as research is still in its early days. However, it can be concluded that the strengths approach is certainly not *just* a re-branding of traditional topics; it should be considered at the very least as a **useful reworking** of a traditional topic.

Interested in Further Reading?

History of the Strengths Approach

- [Froh \(2004\) The History of Positive Psychology: Truth Be Told](#)

VIA Classification System:

- [Linley et al \(2007\). Character strengths in the United Kingdom.](#) (provides a good introduction and general overview of the system)

Clinical Application:

- [Sousa, L., Ribeiro, C. & Rodrigues, S. \(2006\). Intervention with multi-problem poor clients: towards a strengths-focused perspective.](#)

Social Care:

- [Wolin, S. J. and Wolin, S. , \(1993 \). The resilient self: How survivors of troubled families rise above adversity.](#)

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The Empirical Measurement of Strengths

The Empirical Measurement of Strengths



By far the most commonly used tool for measuring strengths is the Values-In-Action (VIA) Signature Strengths Questionnaire. Created by Peterson & Seligman (2004), the VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire is a self-report questionnaire containing 240 items which measure 24 character strengths, across 6 domains (or virtues) including courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence and wisdom. The questionnaire takes between 30-40 minutes to complete on average and ranks an individual's strengths from 1 to 24, giving feedback on the individual's greatest strengths but not their lesser strengths. The top 5 strengths are considered the individuals "signature strengths". The VIA is supported by a number of studies and has been shown to be valid across cultures (Park et al. 2006). However, Macdonald et al (2008) and Aspinwall & Staudinger (2003) have expressed concerns regarding the systems validity and construction.

For further information regarding the support and criticisms of the VIA, as well as an insight into how the VIA system can be applied see [Proctor, Maltby and Linley \(2011\) - Strengths Use as a Predictor of Well-Being and Health-Related Quality of Life](#). This paper found that individuals who use their strengths report greater subjective well-being, and that this is related to both mental and physical health.

The full VIA questionnaire is also available online free of charge for anyone interested in discovering their signature strengths: <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/>

For information regarding any other measures of strengths your first stop should be the website of the Positive Psychology Centre which lists a number of



Topic in a Nutshell

Only want to read one article?

Carver et al, (2010) review into Optimism research is an easy and extremely informative read.

Carver, C., S., Scheier, M., F., & Segerstrom, S., C. (2010). Optimism. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 879-889.

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Want to Read more?

Further Articles of Interest:

Peterson, C. (2000) The Future of Optimism. *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 44-55

Foregard, M., J., C., Seligman, M., E., P. (2012). Seeing the glass half full: A review of the causes and consequences of optimism. *Pratiques Psychologiques*, 18, 107-120

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Finished Reading about Optimism? How about read into [Flow](#), [Mindfulness](#), [Gratitude](#) or [Strengths](#)

What is Flow?

Flow was introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (M.C.) in the 60s. M.C. observed painters and sculptors being fully immersed into their art making without any extrinsic rewards, i.e. they were neither getting recognized or paid. At that time such immersion was explained by the term "sublimation" which was a culturally acceptable form of expressing unacceptable impulses¹. M.C., however, was not convinced by this explanation and thought the artists experienced too much joy for it to be an expression of some undefined need. M.C. started interviewing artists that experienced full immersion. During the interviews he identified a state of mind he named flow. Flow could be felt during an engaging conversation, reading a fascinating novel, simply being at work, or performing some other pleasant habitual activity such as browsing the Internet.

Check out what Flow should feel like: (Six factors of Flow).

What is gratitude

Gratitude is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. All has to do with kindness, generousness, gift, and the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing (Pruyser, 1976). As a psychological state, gratitude is a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life.

What is Optimism

What is Optimism? A future that's expectant and bright...

Optimism is not a new phenomenon, it is a **cognitive style** which has been discussed extensively by many psychologists and goes back to work completed by Freud (1928), who argued it was a popular way of thinking if somewhat illusionary, due to the denial of reality from seeing the world through rose tinted glasses. Optimism isn't a concept drawn upon only from psychologists either, anthropologist Lionel Tiger (1979) gave the most widely used definition "**a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future--one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his[or her] advantage, or for his [or her] pleasure**" (**Peterson, 2000**).

So optimism is a **cognitive characteristic which fosters a positive mentality towards the expectations of**



future events (Peterson, 2000). It can be seen on a continuum with pessimism, the opposite cognitive effect, whereby the individual's interpretation of their own future looks bleak and miserable (Shulman, 1999).

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Zen

Is Flow like Zen?

Flow is focusing ones attention. Focused attention is the essence of meditation and religious practice. The focus of Flow is argued by M.C. to fully absorb ones attention leading to a feeling of loss of self and becoming at one and thereby finding a meaning. "Zen" in mandarin means "full absorption" and emphasizes the attainment of enlightenment and direct insight reached by meditation. Meditation has the goal to calm the monkey mind, which is a metaphor for the diffuse attention we experience in everyday life, i.e thinking about many things at once (Nakamura & M.C, 2009)⁸. When M.C. investigated the flow experience, which is a state he describes as effortless concentration, studies confirmed that people from various cultures reported to experience a flow during meditative and religious practice. This lead M.C. to conclude that flow is a universal human trait, where our brain finds the experiences of complete involvement and intense concentration as a highly rewarding and evolutionary beneficial state (Nakamura & M.C, 2009).

Due to the existence and extensive descriptions of a state similar to flow deriving from Buddhism and Taoism, M.C. was not the first to conceptualize flow. However it can be argued that he was the first in attempting to define the state of mind from a western and psychological perspective. Today M.C. identifies Zen Buddhism and Mindfulness as a direct path to reach effortless attention,i.e. flow. Nevertheless he emphasizes an indirect path to reach flow also. People who love their job which absorbs them deeply and they find interesting will cause flow without the effort that meditation requires.

With the emphasis of the indirect path, M.C adds a novel contribution to the presence of "flow" as described by Zen.

Although the parallels between Zen and Flow are remarkable, it is argued that M.C. has not rebranded Zen, but identified its omnipresence as a human trait and formulated the concept as it is experienced by the western world.

