

## **IAEVG Annual Conference 2018 - Sweden**

### **Positive psychology and career counselling**

Dr Peter J. Robertson, Associate Professor, Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland, UK.

[p.robertson@napier.ac.uk](mailto:p.robertson@napier.ac.uk)

Conference theme 1: A need for change in delivery and/or access to career guidance and counselling

Language: English

#### **Abstract**

Positive psychology has been an influential movement within psychology in the early years of the twenty-first century. This paper seeks to provide a critical and balanced assessment of the contribution to career counselling of this perspective, based on a review of the literature (published as Robertson, 2017). Positive psychology is associated with a number of useful concepts including 'eudaimonia', 'flow', the 'broaden and build' theory, 'character strengths', and 'calling'. These give fresh insights into career development that can enrich practice. Positive psychology helps to reframe our understanding of the outcomes of career counselling, by focusing attention on what a 'good life' means. In doing so, it potentially helps to unify the goals of career counselling and personal counselling. It provides an empirical basis for some elements of practice. However, the application of approaches derived from positive psychology to career counselling is problematic if practice is individualistic in outlook, and thus neglects the socio-economic and institutional contexts in which careers are experienced and interventions take place. Furthermore, enthusiastic claims for its efficacy may sometimes go beyond a safe interpretation of the evidence base.

**Keywords:** Positive psychology; well-being; career counselling; career education.

**Introduction:** Positive psychology is best understood as a contemporary movement in psychology that is a reaction against the discipline's historic preoccupation with pathology and dysfunction (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Its analysis of the emotion of happiness and its antecedents has had widespread appeal and extended its reach beyond academia into the self-help literature. Positive psychology's focus on what is right with people, rather than what

is wrong with them, makes it an appropriate perspective for non-clinical applications, including coaching psychology and career counselling.

This paper draws primarily on the authors' attempt to provide a balanced critique of the influence of positive psychology in career development (Robertson 2017). It also draws on Robertson's (2013) discussion of the well-being outcomes of career guidance, and Robertson's (2015) exploration of the relationship between positive psychology, career counselling and counselling psychology.

**Objective:** To critically evaluate the contribution of positive psychology to career guidance.

**Methods:** A thematic literature review was conducted.

**Findings:** Positive psychology typically adopts traditional empirical research methods of scientific psychology. It draws on the pre-existing evidence base across the entire discipline of psychology, and in recent years has Examples of relevant insights include:

- The concept of 'eudaimonia' which equates well-being with meaningful activity.
- The notion of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) which describes positive consequences of the state of being completely absorbed in an activity. This points to the central importance of interests in career choice.
- The 'broaden and build' theory of Frederickson (2005) which identifies positive emotional states as a precursor to pro-active and playful exploratory behaviour. With promoting research and exploration a common goal of career interventions, this points to ways of preparing the mindset of the client.
- The classification of character strengths was developed as a positive contrast to the use of diagnostic categorisation in psychiatry. The creation of psychometric assessment tools to measure strengths (e.g. Peterson & Seligman, 2004) has direct application in career counselling.
- The adoption by positive psychology coaches (e.g. Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007) of the notion of a career 'calling' (e.g. Dik, Duffy & Eldridge, 2009) relates to their recognition of the importance of meaningful work to psychological well-being.

Positive psychology polarises opinions and it attracts many critics (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2009; Fineman, 2006) who have highlighted a number of concerns. Firstly, it can be seen as evangelical in its promotion of a culturally specific (North American) vision of a 'good life'. Positive psychologists seek to address this through cross-cultural studies. Secondly, its

implication that negative emotions must be avoided, neglects the necessary healthy function that they serve in a balanced person. More recent developments in positive psychology have responded by actively seeking to integrate negative feelings into their models. Thirdly, it is individualistic in focus, and as a result is apolitical, neglecting wider socio-economic contextual factors that underpin injustice and inequality. This concern has some relevance to the employment domain.

In its applications to workplace settings via ‘positive organisational scholarship’, worker happiness and high productivity are often assumed to go hand in hand, but this assumption may not be safe. Power imbalances or conflicts of interests between employees and employers may be neglected. The intentional adoption by management of positive psychology techniques to monitor and modify worker emotion with a view to promoting productivity are potentially problematic. Similarly, the adoption by the UK Government of positive psychology as a rationale for the use of psychological interventions as a component in active labour market programmes for unemployed adults has been criticised as potentially intrusive or coercive.

Some authors have explored the potential for applications of positive psychology to career counselling practice and highlighted innovative techniques it might contribute (e.g. Jacobsen, 2010; Yates, 2013). Positive psychology has an extensive empirical evidence base which is one of its key attractions. However, this review of the evidence base suggests most claims made for its application in career counselling were based on extrapolation from other fields; the evidence for its effectiveness specifically in career development is currently modest.

**Conclusions:** Positive psychology contributes to innovative practice in career guidance as it is a rich source of ideas for helping techniques. Positive psychology can enrich a technically eclectic approach to career development. It can also contribute to a useful discussion of the wider role of work and career in promoting public health and well-being. It has two drawbacks however. Firstly, its individualistic focus neglects the socio-economic and power relations in the contexts within which it is practiced. Secondly, the enthusiasm of its advocates has at times out-paced its evidence base. So it provides a useful perspective, but it is not well placed to provide a comprehensive and integrative foundation for the practice of career counselling.

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