Beautiful Thinking in Action:

Positive Psychology, Psychodrama, and Positive Psychotherapy

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Like three strands of a braided vine, positive psychology, psychodrama, and positive psychotherapy have been woven together since their beginnings. Having separate yet connected roots, their combined effect offers evidence-based interventions for improving communities, organizations, and relationships. The foundation of evidence-based positive interventions, and broad interest in these topics, has now provided a platform from which this braided vine can flourish. This article shows the historical roots of these movements and how they intersect, overlap, and mutually inform each other.

KEYWORDS: Positive psychology; psychodrama; positive psychotherapy; role playing; character strengths.

> A truly therapeutic procedure can have no less of an objective than the whole of mankind.
>
> — J. L. Moreno

HISTORY OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY, PSYCHODRAMA, AND POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY

Eunoia (pronounced u-noy-ah) is a rarely used term. Aristotle first used it to refer to the benevolent feelings that form the basis for the ethical foundation of human life. It comes from a Greek word meaning "well mind" or "beautiful thinking." But it is also a nearly forgotten medical term referring to a state of normal mental health (Eunoia, n.d.). *Normal* mental health.

Why is the term rarely used? One possibility is that the history of psychology has traditionally been focused on correction. Normal, positive feelings like love, gratitude, and hope were deemed too difficult to study or

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understand, so the focus remained on pathology and correction. "Normal" was simply free from suffering, and feeling good was a temporary, transient state too fleeting to be researched and understood.

But not being depressed isn't the same as being happy. We can't learn what makes people maintain their weight by investigating obesity or why children succeed in school by studying dropouts. The rich area of research that has been initiated by positive psychology has already changed the way we think about sustainably feeling good. Perhaps it is time for those of us who care for the well-being of others to define what eunoia looks like and what contributes to "beautiful thinking."

I believe psychodrama and action methods through roleplaying are uniquely positioned to play a central role in this new era of well-being. Roleplaying and psychodrama have a long-standing connection to this effort that reaches back to the very beginning of scientific investigation of eunoia.

The history of positive psychology, positive psychotherapy (PPT), and psychodrama have been integrated for nearly 50 years. There are multiple overlapping intersection points, and three of these will be outlined to highlight these inflections. There are certainly many other influential connections, yet these three will give the reader an illustration of the reciprocal influences.

The history of the positive psychology movement shows the influence of its two founders, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Seligman's work has had tremendous effect on the use of positive interventions, while Csikszentmihalyi's impact is on the psychology of optimal functioning.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HISTORY OF EVIDENCE-BASED POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

About 50 years ago, psychologists began developing evidence-based theories and practices about happiness that are now gaining momentum. From the human potential movement of the 1960s through the current proliferation of professional societies and discipline-specific journals and degree-granting programs, there has been a greater push for research on the effectiveness of positive interventions. In the nearly 20 years since positive psychology was labeled and formally initiated, a plethora of research from every corner of the world has been published in peer-reviewed journals.

Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, made his 1998 presidential term a clear platform for the development of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which constitutes one of the most comprehensive evidence-based perspectives available on positive psychology (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011; Seligman, 1992, 2002, 2011; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Through his contributions, Seligman—often referred to as the father of positive psychology—promotes a science that gives well-being a prominent position. His goal is not to usurp the work of psychologists and psychology, but rather to add to the ever-increasing knowledge of human behavior. Seligman's work has been crucial in sparking a movement.

Seligman was influenced by and has built on the work of many pioneers who have come before him, and the contributions of some of his predecessors are particularly worth noting. Specifically, the work of humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow—both of whom also served as presidents of the American Psychological Association—stand out. Rogers and Maslow positioned psychology at the center of a major transition in society and became part of what was known as the human potential movement. At a time when the theories of Freud (1977) and Skinner (1972)—psychoanalysis and behaviorism, respectively—dominated the academic and clinical literature, Rogers and Maslow made a push for a more positive approach to individual therapy and to conceptualizations of human nature. Rogers's "client-centered therapy" (1951) helped psychology move away from the medical model and a disease orientation by promoting that psychologists refer to the people they work with as "clients" rather than "patients." Maslow (1954, 1968) theorized that people have a hierarchy of needs, and argued that as more basic needs (food, shelter) are satisfied, there is a natural tendency to move toward full personal potential, which he called self-actualization. These two approaches reflected a departure from the psychoanalytic and behavioral models and were major influences on the culture. One important shortcoming of this "third way" proposed by Maslow and Rogers, however, is that although the human potential movement drew a very wide range of thinkers and followers, very few of them carried out evidence-based research on these emerging ideas. As a result, the humanistic theories did not have a substantial empirical base (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, this link to add the best elements from positive psychology research to humanistic principles is being made, as is shown by the current work on self-actualization by Scott Barry Kaufman (2018).

Despite this shortcoming, the work of Rogers and Maslow opened the way for other psychologists to develop alternatives to psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck are two of these psychologists. Both Ellis and Beck were trained in psychoanalysis, but found those methods to be unsatisfactory for many of their clients, particularly those struggling with depression. Ellis (1962) wrote about the ways humans think about situations and how our beliefs change as a result. He proposed the A-B-C model, designed to help understand beliefs that occur in response to life events and the resulting consequences. In this model, A = "Activating event," the thing that causes us to respond; B = "Beliefs" about the causes of the event; and C = "Consequences," emotional and behavioral results of these beliefs. There usually are direct connections between beliefs and consequences and there often are patterns in how these connections occur. The A-B-C model is important in the history of positive interventions because it made beliefs a subject for scientific study. Beck (Beck, 1967; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961; Braff & Beck, 1974), the father of cognitive behavior therapy, also was interested in beliefs. He noticed depressed patients had automatic thoughts about themselves, the world around them, and the future. By identifying these situational automatic thoughts and challenging patients to think differently, Beck could demonstrate that a person's core beliefs and consequent feelings could change. The interested

reader is directed to a wonderfully articulated workbook integrating cognitive behavior therapy with psychodramatic theory and practice by Tom Treadwell and his colleagues (Treadwell, Dartnell, Travaglini, Staats, & Devinney, 2016).

Seligman's research on helplessness built directly on the work of Ellis and Beck. Behaviorism had argued that in each situation the opportunity to gain a reinforcer or avoid an unpleasant stimulus would predict the organism's behavior. But in Seligman's research, an organism exposed to a helpless situation that it cannot control creates a perceived absence of control over the outcome in another situation. Seligman termed this "learned helplessness." Through a series of experiments (Seligman, 1975; Seligman & Maier, 1967), he demonstrated that dogs that were shocked without an opportunity to escape the pain gave up, failing to take advantage of subsequent opportunities of earning a desired reinforcer. The work of Ellis and Beck flew in the face of psychoanalysis and behaviorism and helped shift therapeutic approaches toward helping clients gain control of their own lives by taking control of their beliefs. In a similar way, the results of Seligman's experiments challenged the existing mechanics of behaviorism and allowed for a connection to be made between the dogs who had no control and depressed clients. Seligman hypothesized that a perceived inability to control the outcome of a condition or situation can activate a sense of helplessness, which in turn can lead to depression. This was revolutionary and led to Seligman writing the trade book: *Learned Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death*, which changed the way psychologists around the world began treating depression.

Not all the dogs became helpless, however, and this needed to be understood. Some of the dogs (about one third) that were studied did not become helpless and overcame the learning of the original experiment, finding ways out of the situation. The dogs' behavior provided speculation about how humans might overcome helplessness. One possibility was to understand how people explained what had happened to them. This was dubbed "attributional style" or "explanatory style." Attributional reformulation (an explanatory style of the situation) was created to account for people's optimistic or pessimistic reaction styles to difficult situations. Seligman had capitalized on Ellis's and Beck's work with his own experiments and demonstrated that people could choose how they think. This was revolutionary. He then began to focus on explanatory style and our ability to change it. Demonstrating that individuals with a pessimistic style could learn to be optimistic, he made the transition from understanding the mechanics of helplessness to teaching people how to be optimistic (Peterson, 2000). He eventually published another groundbreaking book, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (Seligman, 1992), which deepened the public's understanding of explanatory style. In this work, he skillfully outlined the patterns through which people could become optimistic. He demonstrated more positive and optimistic ways people could think, primarily by studying people with high levels of optimism, including successful insurance salespeople.

Seligman showed that successful people's thinking patterns and behaviors could be taught. Optimistic people have a specific thought pattern when it

comes to bad events because they view negative events as temporary hurdles, see these bad events as isolated occurrences, and believe that with effort and skill the bad events' effects can be dealt with and overcome. Optimistic thinkers largely are more immune to depression and have better physical health and greater, more sustainable achievement. The pessimist, in direct contrast, will respond to setbacks by experiencing a sense of helplessness. Pessimists believe negative events are permanent and compromise everything they do; they believe they bear sole responsibility for the event's occurrence. As simple as it sounds, this was a huge boost for positive psychology. Prior to this, psychologists were battling thoughts as givens instead of variables. Seligman's work on optimism helped establish a theoretical and empirical base for his positive psychology platform as president of the American Psychological Association in 1998 (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). He suggested that psychology include a model of building strengths—promoting mental health, rather than only treating mental illness.

The publication of *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) was designed to offer a compendium of what is right and virtuous in human beings and was created in direct contrast to balance out the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*'s (2000) list of what is wrong.

The development of a character strength survey by the VIA Institute on Character (viacharacter.org) allowed people to learn their strengths and begin using their top ones in new and different ways to develop them. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) research classified character strengths and virtues into 24 categories organizing them into six types. The character strength survey based on this research has radically changed how character strength is understood and used around the world (Niemiec, 2013). The six virtues followed by their 24 character strengths are as follows:

1. Wisdom and Knowledge: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, innovation
2. Courage: bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, zest
3. Humanity: love, kindness, social intelligence
4. Justice: citizenship, fairness, leadership
5. Temperance: forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence, self-control
6. Transcendence: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

Understanding character strengths and being able to use your own and spot them in others has been central to advances in business, education, and psychotherapy. Flückiger and Grosse Holtforth (2008) developed a procedure—resource priming—where facilitators of psychotherapy take 10 minutes before their sessions to focus on the strengths of their individual clients. The result is that the priming leads to resource activation whereby participants focus on the positive perspective of their behavior, which in turn leads to better progress in therapy as measured by greater reduction in symptoms and higher levels of well-

being. Below a technique developed by the author known as the *Strength Atom* will be discussed as a way to employ these strengths psychodramatically.

In the same timeline as Seligman's *Learned Helplessness*, another researcher (Fordyce, 1977) had pioneered a series of happiness interventions, such as increasing socialization, becoming more active, and deepening one's relationships. He found students trained in a variety of 14 different approaches demonstrated fewer symptoms of depression and were, in general, happier than a control group. Deci and Ryan (1985), along with a few others (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1976/1990; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Fordyce, 1977, 1983) moved the theoretical into the empirical, substantively ushering positive psychology to its current position. Evidence-based interventions demonstrating effective changes toward increased well-being and flourishing are now the standard (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Indeed, the fact that we have this current focus in positive psychology is a direct outgrowth of more than two decades of empirically validated treatments and research studies. Positive and transcendent experiences are now investigated with rigorous scientific methods and robust results.

While Seligman was unraveling the dynamics of depression, another researcher, Csikszentmihalyi, published *Flow*: *The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1976/1990). It was groundbreaking on many levels because it was considering a very different type of human experience. It offered up an experience that many people could relate to, but did not fully understand. Perhaps it could be said that Csikszentmihalyi did for flow what Freud (1977) did for dreams: He identified and analyzed something most people experienced, but that no one had yet studied. Csikszentmihalyi brought a powerful, positive, and mysterious experience closer to our understanding. When flow happens, external or internal demands cannot be reached. A person has entered an altered state of consciousness and the usual rules of engagement with one's surroundings have changed drastically.

Flow has been in the global consciousness since it was released more than 40 years ago. Back then it was revolutionary—shocking, even—both to label a universal experience and to identify its features. But now "flow" is woven into our popular language and culture. We have heard about it, read about it, and want it in our lives.

In his own words, Csikszentmihalyi said that flow is

> . . . being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved and you're using your skills to the utmost. (1976/1990, p. 1)

At a presentation at the European Positive Psychology Conference (EPPC) in Moscow (June 26, 2012), Csikszentmihalyi added a nuance to this definition. He spoke of flow as a more transcendent experience as it begins: "You are at this blessed moment when this feeling is about to come." In his book, Csikszentmihalyi (1976/1990) identified some specific features of the experience

of flow. Flow tends to occur, he argued, when the following statements hold true:

- The event is freely chosen.
- The goal is clear.
- There is a high degree of focus.
- A loss of self-consciousness occurs by engaging in the action.
- Time is distorted.
- Feedback on performance is immediate and concrete.
- There is a sense of control in the situation or activity.
- The challenge is high, but there is balance between ability and the task.
- Bodily needs are less noticed.
- There is effortlessness in the activity because it is intrinsically rewarding.

It is the balance between the challenge and our skill that keeps us engaged in flow. When the balance is off, we experience the other end of the spectrum: boredom or anxiety. Flow is a very enjoyable experience marked by a sense of timelessness and engagement, and something about the experience makes us want more of it. Once we have experienced a flow moment in our lives, we usually crave it again. It certainly makes intuitive sense that we would want to repeat such an enjoyable experience. But this craving may also be one of the most important features of positive psychology since it shows that positive emotional experiences can initiate an upward spiral (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Such an upward spiral can counteract depression's downward pull. Even more important, this may be the essence of what makes positive changes sustainable (Fredrickson, 2001).

Just as Seligman's work has inspired ongoing research, so has Csikszentmihalyi's. The flow experience was initially described as an individual phenomenon. Walker (2010)[1] suggested that well-being may exist on a continuum, finding that when comparing solitary versus coactive or interactive social flow, the two social conditions were more enjoyable, with interactive social flow being the most pleasing. Coactive social flow occurs when we are part of a group doing something, from watching TV with friends to participating in a foot race. *Interactive social flow* is enhanced through social interdependence. This occurs when we are part of a collectively competent group where there is complementary participation and a surrender of the self to the group. People participating in this have surrendered the self and acquired a collective sense of purpose and meaning, such as might happen on a successful athletic team.

Many of the indicators for social flow are like the well-known attributes experienced in solitary flow, but with some interesting additions. There is emotional communication throughout the group as members are participating—an emotional broadcast and resonance within the group and external observers. Members feel joy, elation, and enthusiasm throughout the group

[1] A version of the material in this section has been discussed in a blog written by the author: http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2010/06/21/shall-we-flow/

performance. Finally, rituals are put in place to institutionalize social flow. The participants want to find ways to make it happen again. In other words, doing things together is better than doing things alone.

The two important works we have examined from Seligman (1975) and Csikszentmihalyi (1976/1990), which were published within a year of each other, together created a paradigm shift in understanding human nature. By delineating the conditions under which depression can be alleviated and flow can be activated, psychology charted a new, albeit tentative, direction—the science behind well-being and human flourishing. These pioneers initiated a research platform for positive psychology that continues to thrive today. For Seligman, using Ellis's A-B-C model and Beck's cognitive therapy helped him shift from learned helplessness to learned optimism. The publication of these trade books (*Helplessness: On Depression, Development and Death* [1975] and *Learned Optimism* [1992]) took the science of psychology out into the public arena. While the research for both landmark works was stellar, the description of it in a more accessible form inspired people to change. Seligman's work on optimism has served as a foundation for positive interventions, residing at the core of the Penn Resiliency Program for the prevention of depression (Seligman et al., 2009), and finding its way into education (Reivich, Gillham, Chaplin, & Seligman, 2005) and the military (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011).

Moreno's contribution with the history of positive psychology is multilayered. To begin with, it turns out there are direct links to PPT and the development of Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow*.

As noted above, Csikszentmihalyi identified the experience of flow as a balance between boredom and anxiety. People find themselves fully engaged in an activity that is challenging, but not impossible, and rewarding to their skill set (Csikszentmihalyi, 1976/1990). This integral balance between challenge and skill is "flow," the state during which we experience the greatest productivity and joy in our work. This state is said to be autotelic as it has value in and of itself. A careful read of Csikszentmihalyi's original work reveals a remarkable likeness to Moreno's theory of spontaneity (Moreno, 1955). For Moreno, spontaneity is inversely related to anxiety, where the greater the anxiety, the less spontaneous our behavior. This is the essence of Csikszentmihalyi's flow. Too much anxiety would keep one from achieving the state of flow, and too little would not allow for engagement. In writing about spontaneity, Moreno (1955) offered a highly similar description. In his own words and italics, he revealed: "An 'adequate' response is '*appropriateness, competency,* and *skill*' in dealing with the situation, however small or great the challenge of its novelty" (p. 109). This concept appears in print 20 years before Csikszentmihalyi's classic description of flow.

At the previously mentioned Moscow conference, I had the opportunity to speak to Csikszentmihalyi personally about how close his theory of flow and Moreno's theory of spontaneity were, and if he was familiar with it (Csikszentmihalyi, personal communication, June 26, 2012). Not only did he explain that he was familiar, but also offered an intriguing detail—that David Kipper, a friend and colleague of his in Chicago, had read and helped with the manuscript. At that time, Kipper was the leading researcher and scholar in

psychodrama and spontaneity, as well as a practicing clinician. He said that Kipper's contributions were accounted for in the acknowledgements of the original publication of the book. This fact places Moreno's thinking at the inception of the positive psychology movement in the United States. But, as will be discussed below, it also seems Moreno's influence had already been established in 1968 in a movement in Germany promoting PPT.

But the link between flow and spontaneity runs deeper than sharing elements of a defined state. Each has a direct connection to character development. For Moreno, spontaneity enhances one's character as a byproduct of interpersonal relationship. For Csikszentmihalyi, the use of one's top character strengths provides a prescriptive path for activating flow. What is likely true is that flow and spontaneity states are bidirectional with character development. Optimum use of character strengths strengthen the experience of flow—and spontaneous flow states influence character. In fact, some new theoretical positioning on character strength lends support to this notion.

In a compelling article by Seligman (2015) referring to the unfinished masterwork of his deceased friend and colleague Chris Peterson, Seligman revealed a comprehensive extrapolation of how character strengths may be more than just a way to activate flow states. Their overuse, underuse, or absence may be the reason why flow and interpersonal relationships suffer. This, according to Seligman, may be a more direct understanding of mental illness. Recent research has demonstrated that when thwarted character strengths generated what is called "positive psychopathology" (Freidlin, Littman-Ovadia, & Niemiec, 2017; Littman-Ovadia & Freidlin, 2018).

THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF PPT

In 1968 Nossrat Peseschkian, a psychiatrist working in Germany, proposed "positive psychotherapy" as a theory and collection of interventions that promoted well-being. Heavily influenced by the humanistic movement, Peseschkian took a positive notion of human nature (Cope, 2014). Inspired by personal encounters with prominent psychotherapist and psychiatrists, such as Viktor Frankl, Jacob L. Moreno, Heinrich Meng, the teachings of Bahá'í Faith, and transcultural observations in more than 20 cultures, Peseschkian began searching for a combined method that was both integrative and culturally sensitive. This humanistic, psychodynamic therapy was built on a positive conception of human nature, which includes a holistic approach to well-being containing spiritual aspirations and influences (Cope, 2014). This early version of PPT (as there is a newer one that will be discussed below) was built on the principles of hope, moderation as a portrayal of social identity, and consultation.

The principle of hope is a worldview founded on the idea that every person is good by nature (European Association for Psychotherapy, 2011). In addition, every person is endowed with different capabilities and potential. Each person is seen as having the major virtues of love and knowledge, and through these virtues various interventions are used to motivate the process of healing. The

major goal of the therapeutic process is balance, helping the client to actualize his or her abilities.

The second principle is that of moderation, as a representation of social identity. The encouragement is to develop all areas equally, with the distribution of energy to be balanced when tending to the body, work, relationships, and the future (Peseschkian, 2012).

The final principle of Peseschkian's PPT is consultation. This is the essence of the therapeutic process and employs a five-stage process. In this manner, the client is led to address his conflicts based on the symptoms. But the interventions here are framed in nonpathological ways, and the examples drawn from daily life situations or what Peseschkian referred to as "micro-traumas" of daily living (Peseschkian, 2012; Peseschkian & Tritt, 1998).

This five-stage process involves observation, taking inventory, situational encouragement, verbalization, and broadening of goals. During the observation phase, the client is taught to see his or her problems more precisely. The taking inventory phase emphasizes the distinctions between *I*, *you*, and *we* in discerning and understanding what happens during daily life encounters. The essence of situational encouragement is to then look at the history of how conflicts had been successfully resolved. Finally, the expansion of goals places the emphasis on a future perspective (Peseschkian & Tritt, 1998).

This version of PPT is a culturally sensitive method (Peseschkian Foundation, 2016). The premise being that each person is impacted by the cultural environment where he or she developed, influenced by the family they are born into, and altered by the individuals they've encountered along the way. Yet the underpinning of the goals of PPT is transcultural, meaning that goals and interventions are universally human. The tools of the therapist involve using words of wisdom, humor, storytelling, and introducing moments of surprise through the session.

Peseschkian's pioneering effort of PPT was directly influenced by his thinking. As anyone who has watched Moreno himself, or the original films of Moreno's work in session (*Moreno Movies: 4-Video Series*, n.d.), or witnessed a trained psychodramatist work, the director's words of wisdom, humor, storytelling, and introducing moments of surprise through the session are often elements woven into the tapestry of the process. (The interested reader is directed to Tomasulo and Pawelski, 2012, on the role of stories play in psychodrama, research, and positive interventions and Paul Zak's work [Future of Storytelling, 2013] where he articulated the biochemical changes that take place during an engaging story.)

The psychodramatic theory and methods are aligned with these five stages, where enactment of the situation becomes the vehicle for both observation and inventory taking. During this process, there are typically verbalizations from the client about what the issue is and how things could be improved, or enacted instances of when the conflicts in the past have been worked through successfully. The natural resolutions come from a correction of the dynamics either through reenactment and/or broadening of goals for the future. Psychodramatists might argue that the psychodramatic method is an

amplification or action-oriented form of Peseschkian's model of PPT, but the point here is not to argue effectiveness or efficiency, but rather to cast light on the shared concepts and elements being employed.

MARTIN SELIGMAN'S INFLUENCE ON PPT

Growing out of his work at the University of Pennsylvania, Seligman began focusing on the use of positive intervention in a psychotherapy environment and began showing very promising effectiveness (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). Tayyab Rashid, a former fellow of Seligman's, has furthered the research base of this form of PPT separate and apart from Peseschkian's work (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Rashid & Seligman, 2018). The use of positive interventions in a structured way engages clients in activities and events that use the activation of positive emotions as a foundation for change.

This version of PPT is based on three assumptions that are like Peseschkian's but have some important differences derived from the research on positive interventions. First, clients inherently desire growth, fulfillment, and happiness, not just the avoidance of depression and anxiety. Second, positive resources such as strengths are just as real as symptoms and disorders. Finally, effective therapeutic relationships can be formed through conversation and use of positive resources, not just thorough analysis of weaknesses and deficits (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009; Seligman et al., 2006). Their work on PPT has recently been manualized for wider distribution and application by clinicians (Rashid & Seligman, 2018; Slade, Brownell, Rashid, & Schrank, 2016).

Consider one of the studies in PPT conducted in a group therapy format (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009). Forty mild-to-moderately depressed University of Pennsylvania students were divided into a treatment group and a nontreatment group. The treatment condition consisted of two groups of eight to 11 participants seen for 6 weeks for 2-hour sessions. Each session was half a discussion of the exercise assigned from the previous week and half an introduction to the new exercise. The participants carried out homework assignments and reported back each week on their progress. The first week, participants were asked to take the VIA survey (mentioned above) and use their top five strengths more often in their day-to-day lives. Week two involved the participants writing down three good things that had happened during the day and why they thought they had occurred. The third week, participants were asked to write a brief essay on what they want to be remembered for the most—a biography of having lived a satisfying life. The next session involved composing a letter of gratitude to someone they may never have thanked adequately, and then reading that letter to the person, personally or by phone.

During the fifth session, the members were asked to respond very positively and enthusiastically each day to good news received by someone else (known as Capitalization with Active Constructive Responding; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). The final session involved savoring daily events in their lives that they normally did not take the time to enjoy, and journaling how the experience differed from their normally rushed occurrences. Time was also spent

during this last session on tailoring the exercises for the participant's use following the end of the study.

Each intervention: The use of five top strengths from the character strength survey, three good things that happened and why, a written biography of having had a satisfying life, a letter of gratitude, and enthusiastically responding to someone else's good news are all well-known and established positive interventions, as is the savoring and planning for future exercises following the end of the study. When used in this weekly series format, the results were notable.[2]

As one might expect, the group PPT participants did better than the no-treatment group on assessments of depression and satisfaction with life. But there is a powerful finding beyond this positive change. The gains made by the PPT groups were *maintained with no other intervention by the researchers* throughout a 1-year follow-up, while the baseline levels of depression for the nontreatment group remained unchanged.

Six sessions and 12 hours, *with no booster sessions during the year*. This is very unusual in the study of depression and highlights how the use of these exercises involved self-maintaining features that served the participants beyond the intervention. As will be noted below, the results from PPT as put forth by Seligman and Rashid have a very promising future. This is where psychodrama may have its greatest potentiality—to take the existing positive interventions and convert them into action modalities. This is a largely untapped opportunity for psychodramatists, yet there is research to show the effectiveness of the method (Kipper & Ritchie, 2003; Yazdekhasti, Syed, & Arizi, 2013; Nikzadeh & Soudani, 2016)

There is also an overlap between positive psychology and psychodrama as a number of clinicians and trainers have reported using the assessment of character strengths during training and clinical sessions to help participants become aware of, deepen their understanding, and find ways to use and spot the strengths of others. Using the assessments developed in positive psychology and interventions in PPT offer a plethora of evidence-informed tools for psychodramatists to apply to their training and clinical practice.

The "*Strengths Atom*" is one such tool developed by the author that has been used for the past several years as a multilevel vehicle to help individuals and groups understand how embedded strengths exist in their lives. It is simple in design and often has the advantage of having clients see themselves in relation to their strengths through a new lens. Although not an evidence-based intervention, it provides practitioners with an exploratory technique, which may provide engaging ways to discuss the use of strengths in a client's life. The primary goal of the exercise is to discuss top strengths at a nuanced level through self-reflection. There is also a renewed appreciation for emotional agility for these strengths at different times in their lives, and often a consideration for modification and expansion of their use in the future.

[2] A version of the material in this section has been discussed in a blog written by the author: https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/01/27/moving-from-whats-wrong-to-whats-strong-introducing-positive-psychotherapy-ppt/

Figure 1. Example of a Strengths Atom.

THE TECHNIQUE

After taking the VIA-IS the client is asked to represent themselves on a blank sheet of paper with a circle, and then to place their top five strengths in relative size, distance, and direction from that symbol. They then write the name or letter of each strength in each of the surrounding circles.

Figure 1 is an example of how each of the client's strengths, **A**ppreciation of beauty, **B**ravery, **C**reativity, **G**ratitude, and **H**onesty, have been represented. This graphic representation allows the client to see her strengths, discuss them, and explain what caused their placement on the Strengths Atom. As an example, the relative symmetry and proximity of the other strengths compared to the arrangement of "A" (Appreciation of beauty and excellence) is an opportunity for discussion. Although it was a top strength, it was placed furthest away. In discussing its use, she related stories of how others sometimes criticized her for her emphasis on things needing to be arranged just so—but felt this inner need to make her environment clean and beautiful. She placed it further away because it is a necessity, but also at times, a drawback. This reflection allowed us to talk over the "golden mean" use of strengths. This concept, originally descending from Aristotle, speaks to the optimal use of character strengths in the degree, combination, and use in a given situation (Niemiec, 2013).

In a group setting the strength atom may be used in action. The protagonist chooses members of the group to roleplay the various strengths. In

the above example a member of the group would stand in the space facing the protagonist designated by the strength atom on the paper. To illustrate, Honesty would be standing in front, Bravery to her left, Gratitude on her right, with Creativity and Appreciation of beauty and excellence behind.

Placing the members of the group around the protagonist, the protagonist then reverses roles with the other members of the group representing her strengths and creates a one-line sentence related to her strengths. As an example, the protagonist reverses roles with the person representing Gratitude, each standing in the other's spot. Once in the role of her Gratitude strength she would offer a statement such as: "I am your gratitude. I am closest to you because I help you appreciate the people in your life that mean so much to you." The protagonist then returns to her role and the individual playing Gratitude would return to theirs and deliver the line back to the protagonist.

After each strength is given a line, the protagonist can then listen, accept, modify, or open a dialogue with the strengths. Following the roleplay these brief vignettes allow for members to discuss their relationship to their strengths and how these may have differed over time.

In summary, the recent publication of Niemiec's *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners* (2017) allows for the widespread availability of a rich cache of applied interventions, which help deepen understanding of the benefits of employing character strengths in one's life. The Strengths Atom may serve as an additional technique available for helping clients self-disclose in a safe and yet engaging way; however, further investigation of its effectiveness is necessary.

For interested readers other examples of using psychodrama for the specific integration of positive interventions please see Tomasulo (2014) for a discussion of the Virtual Gratitude Visit, Tomasulo and Szucs (2016) for discussion on using psychodrama and drama therapy for individuals with intellectual disability, and Szucs, Schau, Muscara, and Tomasulo (2019) for amplifying character strengths using video feedback of enactments. Of these, the Virtual Gratitude Visit (an expression of gratitude by the protagonist to an empty chair with a role reversal) has recently received recognition by International Positive Psychology Association winning the Avant-Garde Clinical Intervention award

THE HOPE CIRCUIT

> . . . the original theory got it backward.
>
> —Steve Maier and Martin Seligman

Before looking to the future of the rich collaborative possibilities between positive psychology, psychodrama, and PPT, it is helpful to revisit one of the key pieces of research upon which positive psychology grew.

The latest research by Maier and Seligman (2016) revisited the original work on learned helplessness. This body of investigation is the research

foundation that generated the inquiry leading to learned optimism—and the eventual development of the field of positive psychology. Back then, now more than 50 years ago, their research showed that once animals learned nothing they did mattered, they stopped trying to escape—even when escape was possible. Maier and Seligman have now concluded their original hypothesis—that animals could learn that their actions do not affect outcomes—was incorrect.

Through a series of intricate studies, Maier and Seligman have demonstrated the original conclusion was opposite of what they now hold to be true. By investigating the neural circuitry that regulates our fight/flight and fear/anxiety responses, it was discovered that both escapable and inescapable shocks activate the dorsal raphe nucleus (DRN). Further, they found that when the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), a part of the brain associated with risk processing, detects that shocks are escapable, it inhibits the DRN and turns off the effects of the shock. Passivity, giving up, is now understood to be a default reaction to extended aversive events. Nothing was "learned" about helplessness. What is learned is the possibility of control. In their own words: "Rather, passivity is an unlearned, default response to extended aversive events. Animals overcome this passivity by learning control, and the expectation of control mediates future responses to aversive events."

The circuit created between the DRN and vmPFC has been identified by Maier and Seligman as the *hope circuit*, noting that hope is likely the best defense against helplessness.

The is where psychodrama may find its greatest contribution. The method has been untangling the ravages of trauma (Dayton, 2015), deepening the powers of sociodrama (Sternberg & Garcia, 2000), or exploring future possibilities (Baim, Burmeister & Maciel, 2013), by helping clients negotiate through a labyrinth of obstacles and awakenings. Arguably, psychodrama and roleplaying may offer the most number and longest standing methodologies to activate and cultivate hope with the least amount of research to support its efforts.

More research on the techniques they are creatively using. Historically, this has been the greatest stumbling block in more widespread use and understanding of psychodramatic methods. While there have been some notable efforts (Shahar, Bar-Kalifa, & Alon, 2017), the next phase of our growth as a community needs to be aligning ourselves with the demand for evidence-based practices. Not to do so, not to show the effectiveness of what we are doing, will hide our light under a bushel—and our contributions have too much potential to let this happen.

Moreno's influence was woven into the tapestry of the positive psychology and PPT movements right from the beginning. Psychodrama continues to have a unique opportunity to cultivate hope through strength-based practices, while bringing a degree of creativity to these movements that may otherwise go unrealized. Because of this, eunoia, and striving toward more beautiful thinking, is within our grasp. In full circle, the theory and methods of psychodrama have initiated and are now poised to advance the most powerful, dynamic development in the history of psychology. Perhaps the words of T.S. Eliot best

describe our challenge and the legacy of our journey as psychodramatists: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

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