

APPLYING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO CAREER COACHING AND COUNSELING

A Review of the Literature

John E. Long, ED.S., BCC, MCS

July 2015

Applying Positive Psychology to Career Coaching and Counseling

Over the past fifteen years, a new subfield of Psychology has emerged: Positive Psychology (PPsy). And, while much has been written in both the popular media and well-established research journals on integrating PPSy into life experiences, very few researchers have studied PPSy within the context of career coaching and counseling.

In examining the existing literature surrounding the merging of these two fields, the question arises: can the delivery of career coaching and counseling services be enhanced through applied PPSy?

Much of the existing literature on this topic is primarily focused on viewing career coaching and counseling through the prism of PPSy. Many of the authors cite PPSy studies as the basis for the tools they have chosen and use PPSy methods to allow clients to determine their best and most meaningful career paths. While the authors and researchers cited may vary on their choice of PPSy techniques, all are proponents of using PPSy to cultivate happiness, and all encourage its use in career coaching and counseling.

Benefits of Utilizing PPSy for career coaching and counseling:

Using PPSy within career coaching and counseling can confer many benefits on a student or client. Happy people have higher job satisfaction, are more cooperative in interactions with coworkers, look for more ways to help others, and receive more social support. In addition, people with a positive mindset are less likely to be absent or exhibit other withdrawal behaviors (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005, as cited in Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 111). Positive emotions are also associated with curiosity, leading to new opportunities for clients (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004 as cited in Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 110). Positive emotions can even confer an advantage during interviews. One study has shown that happier interviewees are

more likely to receive a second interview (Burger and Caldwell, 2000, as cited in Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 107).

Positivity can also translate into many advantages in a job setting. Positive employees are more likely to have jobs with a wider range of responsibilities, and to describe their work as more meaningful and more autonomous (Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994, as cited in Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 103). For instance, business students with high positive affect demonstrated better interpersonal skills, a skill associated with successful managers (Staw & Barsade, 1993, as cited in Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 104). Being happy within a group setting can also positively affect a group's functioning and negotiations. Employees must often interact with others, and being positive in that interaction can help; more beneficial solutions for both parties are found with positivity (Carnevale and Isen 1986 as cited in Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 109).

By using PPsy, clients can apply their strengths to focus on specific areas instead of trying to be "well-rounded", which in turn will foster innovation and engagement. For instance, Gallup, where the strengths-based leadership model is used, retains employees who are six times more engaged. The company also has higher job satisfaction and lower job turnover (Lueneburger, 2009).

Another benefit to a client from using PPsy methods during a job search is a lowered level of anxiety. A study in Taiwan revealed that after students undertook a course based on PPsy techniques and spirituality, students experienced less anxiety around career choice options. The course covered PPsy and spirituality, including resilience training, stories of positive thinking, applying PPsy to emotions, time management, and life decisions (Peng, 2015, p. 78). The study's authors believe that giving purpose and meaning to life is one of the most important factors towards career choice, and that allowing students to learn how to express their purpose was helpful in reducing anxiety (Peng, 2015, p. 76). However, the study was limited by a lack of

a control group, whereby research subjects were measured only against their own levels of anxiety, pre- and post- course.

PPsy also encourages adaptability and openness to possibility, both of which are important in a search for an optimal career. PPsy frames positive possibilities for clients' careers, as opposed to a job search which is focused on obstacles, concerns, or resumé techniques (Zikic & Franklin, 2010, pp. 180-184). Clients can manage their own way forward instead of using external shaping to determine their career path. Indeed, when using PPsy methods, a client might even choose to stay in their current career, enriching their lives through more meaningful relationships, volunteering, or travel (Seligman et al., 2006, as cited in Zikic & Franklin, 2010, p. 187).

A client may begin to see new opportunities, even attracting "beneficial unplanned events" (Krumboltz, 2009, as cited in Zikic & Franklin, 2010, p. 186). The job search may become a series of synchronous events, instead of a slog through posted jobs. Zikic and Franklin's process begins with asking clients to watch for clues in their lives regarding their career goals, essentially allowing for the openness and curiosity that a PPsy approach supports. The second step in the process is to take inspired action. Then, clients can be guided to welcome opportunities, further encouraging the synchronicity of attracted but unplanned opportunities (Zikic & Franklin, 2010, p. 186).

Helping people find meaning in careers:

For career coaches and counselors, fulfillment and meaning are important loci of focus for a client's chosen vocation. A recent study by Hirschi in Switzerland emphasizes, placing importance on eudaimonic well-being in the vocational context. Using the model of Orientations to Happiness (OTH) proposed by Peterson et al. Park (Peterson & Ruch, 2009, as cited in Hirschi, 2011) as his basis, Hirschi hypothesized that an orientation towards meaning would predict vocational identity achievement, and more specifically, that "an orientation to meaning,

engagement, and pleasure would predict identity achievement to different degrees in descending order” (Hirschi, 2011, p. 3).

The researchers used both commitment and exploration as markers for vocational achievement (Marcia, 1980, as cited in Hirschi, 2011). Vocational identity achievement was correlated with an orientation towards meaning (instead of merely towards pleasure or engagement), even over and above specific personality types or socio-demographic variables (though engagement, too, correlated with high vocational identity achievement). Hirschi concluded that “these specific ways to happiness are meaningful constructs in relation to career development which go beyond more basic personal variables” (2011, p. 7). A quest for fulfillment would therefore be of most benefit in a student’s job search.

Robertson’s recent journal article also highlights eudaimonia as important to career guidance (2013). He argues that though a coaching session is not a counseling session, emotional support can be of help in a career guidance setting and allow clients to find meaning in the job search. By empowering clients and providing them with more control, a sense of agency is created in the client. Clients then feel encouraged to set more constructive goals and to focus on the future (Robertson, 2013). Though career guidance and its impact on well-being have not been thoroughly researched enough, when a person undertakes meaningful and productive work, well-being also benefits, either directly or indirectly. Coaches and counselors can guide clients to eudaimonia by helping clients to find new directions in engaged careers or learning (Robertson, 2013). Finding greater meaning in either current careers, areas of study, or future endeavors can be an important way for coaches and counselors to approach PPsy within a vocational context.

PPsy techniques and interventions for career counseling:

Many PPsy interventions for general well-being can also be used in the career development setting. In a recent article, Brooks indicates that career counseling can be improved with PPsy interventions, and specifically, that by directing students towards a work orientation or

calling, higher life satisfaction can be achieved (Wrzeniewski as cited in Brooks, 2011). Job crafting, the process by which a student or client can allow certain elements of the job to be focused upon and others not quite as much, is one technique to guide this calling, making the job more of a match for strengths and interests. For example, by using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) with students, creating workshops focused on work orientation and job crafting for both current students and alumni, career counselors can positively influence a student's outlook on life and job search (Brooks, 2011, p.34).

Brooks also recommends the appreciative inquiry (AI) technique developed by David Cooperrider in her practical guide to counseling college students. Action-focused and forward moving, AI, at its core, is a system of asking questions in order to arrive at a student's best self. Also important is that AI is focused on solutions, thus helping student (and coach) avoid getting mired in a current situation or problem. Using a process of the 4D's (discover, dream, design, and destiny) allows students to discover their ideal life, and these positive future images can help students in the job search (Brooks, 2013).

AI centers on asking questions, and like other PPSy interventions, moves a student away from negativity and into a possibility-focused mindset. Brooks suggests the following as some of the key questions for use in career counseling and guidance:

- What is the evidence for your interpretation of the story?
- What are alternative ways to view your story?
- What are the implications of choosing a different interpretation?

For coaches and counselors at the college level, an inquiry method may be of benefit.

Little research has been conducted using PPSy within a career counseling perspective in K-12 education settings. However Parardise and Ironside argue that PPSy can be used just as effectively in this population, and not only for self-esteem based behavior issues, etc. Much career counseling in this population has historically focused on matching traits with jobs, instead

of using new research of strengths-finding and other PPsy interventions. They suggest that for early grades, using play techniques to simulate work experiences, along with discussions of self-concept, can foster well-being and joy around a future career. In addition, on career days, counselors (and teachers) can ask about the positive feelings and emotions that the presenter finds in their current role. It's also important to emphasize how work can be of value to the individual and offer value to others. A counselor or coach might also have discussions or group exercises in which students can talk about their unique strengths and how those might be useful in facing everyday life or a future career (Paradise & Ironside, 2005).

For older children, additional focus on strengths is recommended. At this age, students can also be introduced to service opportunities, the premise being that doing good for others is important to overall fulfillment. Interviewing individuals can be another important perspective for middle-schoolers and teens, making sure to emphasize the positive aspects of career pursuits. (Paradise & Ironside, 2005).

For professionals who counsel entrepreneurs, managers, and executives, guiding the careers of employees within clients' organizations may be as important as steering their own careers. One method of doing this is for the client to foster a sense of positivity in their own organization. For instance, encouraging stronger bonds among employees will not only help employees feel more respect for each other, but will also allow the company to thrive and grow. As Coplan explains, in addition to the "fight or flight" response, our brains also developed a "stay and create" chemical. As bonds are created within teams and organizations, this "happy" chemical is released, and resilience and open mindedness can result (Frederickson as cited in Coplan, 2009).

Nurturing appreciation within the client's organization is also an important skill for coaches to teach. Using Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry techniques, an employee can glean meaning and fulfillment in any job. This can be done by asking employees to find meaningful

aspects of a job, and to voice these aloud. When all voices are included in the discussion, the goals and mission of the company are strengthened (Cooperrider as cited in Coplan, 2009).

Recrafting is another important tool in the coach and counselor's toolkit. Jacobsen writes of how to use PPsy to help a client alter a current position for the better, either through realignment of the actual role, or by taking on tasks that focus more on their unique strengths and phasing out tasks that do not. A client could also look for opportunities with other teams or relationships in order to use their skills. Similarly, there is a method of reframing the purpose behind a client's work. Allowing the client to recognize greater meaning in their current role can be of great benefit (Jacobsen, 2010, p. 7). Of course, no discussion of PPsy tools would be complete without a mention of gratitude exercises; these are perhaps the most researched of all PPsy interventions. Showing gratitude through writing, journaling, and expression has been shown to boost optimism, life satisfaction, and overall health (Jacobsen, 2010, p. 12).

Jacobsen also encourages coaches and counselors to have clients and students take the VIA-IS. The findings of the strengths survey (or the other methods mentioned) can not only be used by clients in their daily work and relationships, helping them to find new ways to interact, but also for assessing a new job or career. If a client first considers how they will be able to use their strengths in the new position, they will be better able to assess if this may be a meaningful and fulfilling opportunity (Jacobsen, 2010, p. 7).

Miller, Ciccocioppo, and Flessati also recommend using the feedback gathered from the VIA-IS to coach from a strengths perspective. With this tool, strengths can be readily assessed, and clients taught how to strengthen certain attributes, as well as how to use distinct strengths in various situations. Besides taking the VIA-IS, clients may also use more informal strategies to determine strengths, like soliciting feedback from trusted family members and friends, or examining compliments for trends (Miller, Ciccocioppo, & Flessati, 2013, p. 2).

A PPsy approach will help clients to see their true purpose in setting goals for success: the core of the need is happiness and fulfillment. When goals align with values, then more meaning can be derived from life (Miller, Ciccocioppo, & Flessati, 2013, p. 1). Coaches can focus on personal value and life satisfaction; a state of employment is now no longer the only goal, but also to have a meaningful life through fulfilling employment (Peterson, C., 2006, as cited in Miller, Ciccocioppo, & Flessati, 2013, p. 1). Put another way, “modern career counseling is more about life design than job choice” (Savickas et al., 2009, as cited in Miller, Ciccocioppo, & Flessati, 2013, p. 1). By encouraging hope and optimism in clients, the career search can be framed in terms of identity, and not just by the requirements of their next job (Miller, Ciccocioppo, & Flessati, 2013, p. 1).

Intrinsic goal-setting is another important PPsy tool for coaches and counselors. In order to give true purpose to a client’s goals, intrinsic goal setting is preferred with a PPsy coaching practice. For instance, if a client has a goal focused on power, like “make sure that I am seen as right”, then this may actually work against their purpose. A coach can work with a client in a non-judgmental way in order to encourage more intrinsic types of goals. Small and realistic goals, aligned with a client’s purpose and within a client’s area of control, are the best types of goals that coaches can encourage (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007, pp. 67-68). Even within the areas of happiness goals, a client can be encouraged to see happiness realistically: it is not large spikes in joy that sustain a feeling of well-being, but instead, small changes can make life more pleasant (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007, p. 15).

Approaches to PPsy delivery;

Different methods of using PPsy within career development settings can be valid. However according to Sharp, it is best to induce a positive mindset in clients before attempting goal-setting. Without this, even if a client does achieve a goal, happiness may not ensue. The “tyranny of when” phenomenon describes how a person may always put off happiness until that

next goal is achieved, as in “when I have this thing, or have achieved this goal, then I’ll be happy”. Without first achieving positivity with a client, frustration and other negative emotions may still guide the goal-setting process (Sharp, 2011).

Happiness and positivity should be the first and primary goals of career guidance, according to Sharp’s “primacy of positivity”. Energy and motivation will result and encourage helpful and constructive behaviors. This will also help clients to achieve their goals more effectively. In addition, “wonders of positive emotions can be experienced before, during and after success, rather than (as we often imagine) just after” (Sharp, 2011, p. 43). Coaches should focus on positive experiences within a client’s life and quickly identify a client’s strengths. Making clients feel special, letting them know that every aspect of coaching will be a positive one, and using positive reinforcement for goals of any size, are also important (Sharp, 2011).

Another approach to the delivery of PPsy methods is matching the empirical data with a client’s needs. Chance argues that evidence based coaching is the best model in which to effectively deliver PPsy to students and clients. Career development practitioners must specifically seek out the empirical data behind the delivery of coaching and counseling and use it to make choices in service to the client (Stober, Wildflower & Drake, 2006 as cited in Chance, 2008, pp. 35-40).

While evidence based coaching is open to any methods with empirical evidence as support, two methods stand out: the Personal Psychology Constructs theory developed by George Kelly (PCP) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Both center on the concept that reality is constructed by the emotions surrounding an event, not necessarily the event itself. Using either method, a new personal reality can be constructed by a client with the practitioner’s guidance. Specifically with CBT, a client reexamines a viewpoint of an event, and can use new methods of problem-solving to handle the emotional circumstances of the event. Targeted and focused, CBT may appeal to clients for its simplicity (Ducharme, 2004 as cited in Chance, 2008,

pp. 35-45). Increasing self-awareness of a client's thoughts, and allowing them to effectively coach themselves, should be the primary aims of CBT in a coaching situation (Neenan & Palmer, 2001 as cited in Chance, 2008, pp. 47). With regards to career counseling and coaching, CBT can help to reframe earlier aspects of a job search in a more positive light, and allow a client to see the thoughts and emotions distorting that reality.

Dissemination of Positive Psychology:

Once coaches and counselors have decided that positive psychology's tenants make sense for use in practice, disseminating interventions or information to a larger audience may be problematic. Schueller and Parks argue in a recent article that both traditional and non-traditional approaches, including classes, new technology, and books, can and should be used to disseminate information (2014, p. 145). Savoring, cultivating gratitude, and pursuing hope and meaning can all be used in a classroom or self-help setting. Increasing hope for the future and teaching better goal setting are also encouraged, specifically a technique from Snyder for "pathways thinking": allowing a client or student to visualize various paths or ways in which a goal can be met (Snyder, 2002 as cited in Schueller & Parks, 2014, p. 145).

College courses can be another area for dissemination. One method is to guide students to select a personal, meaningful, and measurable goal to be completed by the course's end. This is considered self-help, as are giving students books. In one study, students were given one of either two books, the second being positive psychology's "The How of Happiness". At the end of study, the students given the PPsy book had higher levels of life satisfaction as compared to the group who was given a book on CBT principles for depression (Schueller & Parks, 2014, pp. 145-150).

Schueller and Parks note that it can be problematic to promote PPsy to a larger audience due to a lack of motivation and engagement. It cannot be expected that all members of a cohort will choose to finish the book or course (especially if online). However one insight as to how to

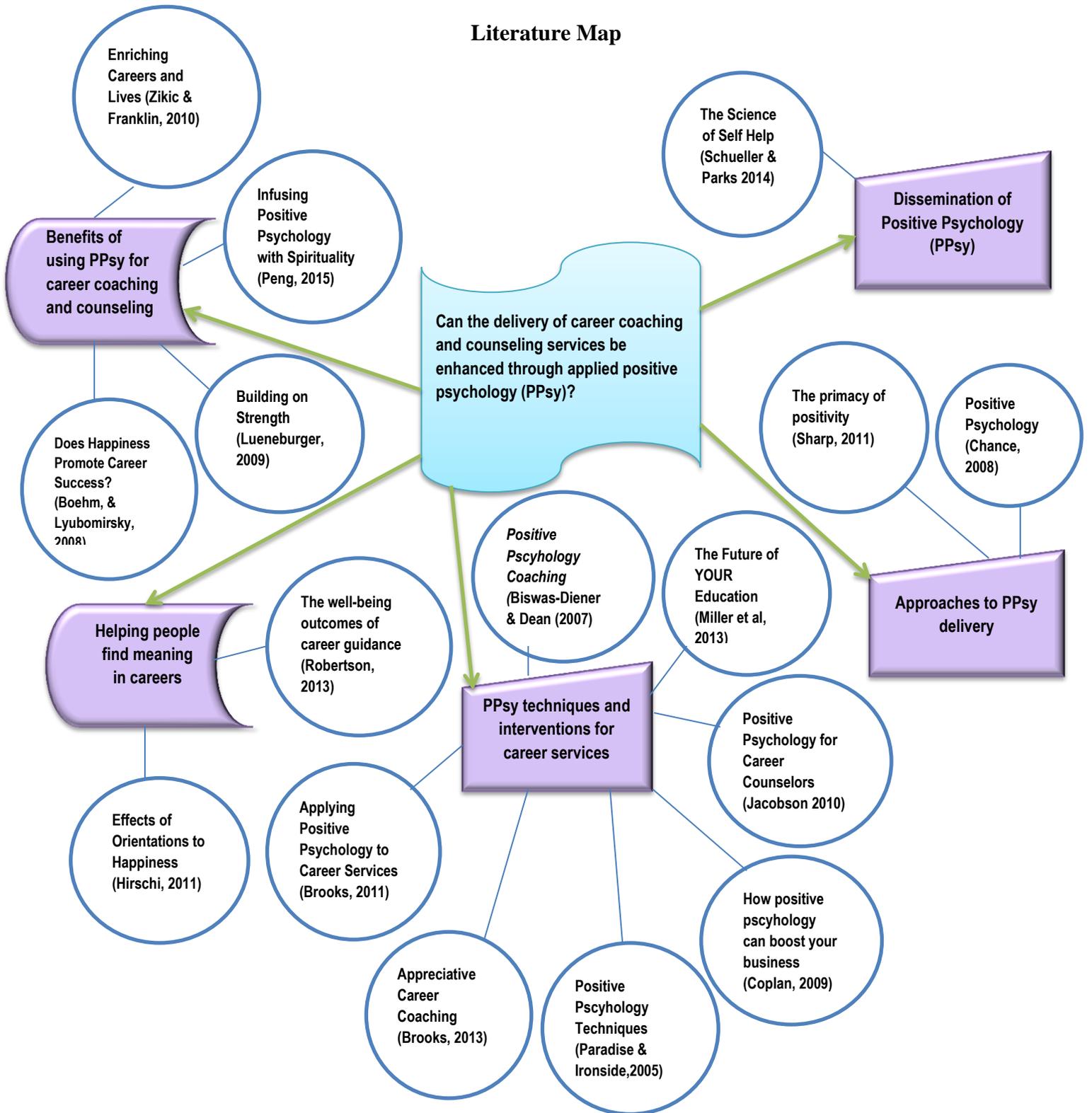
best motivate a larger audience comes from the Fogg Behavior Model: suggesting only small, simple changes each week, for instance only journaling one instance of gratitude per day initially. Including variety in the implementation of interventions is also suggested. One of the matters most in need of additional research for PPsy is how to apply a more nuanced, person-activity fit to a large population (Schueller & Parks, 2014). Despite the concerns of applying PPsy to a larger population, coaches and counselors may wish to provide the messages of PPsy to as many people as possible, and will search for ways to do so.

On the Horizon

I am anxious to review new works on the horizon from Jolanta Burke, a Ph.D. researcher at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, and a member of the International Positive Psychology Association. Burke has focused her research, in part, on the use of positive psychology by guidance counselors and school counselors (Jolanta Burke, 2015). Burke has two new works, pending publication, which should offer promising content for career practitioners. The first is the article, *GRIT: Applying Positive Psychology Research in Career Advising*, with Professor C. McGukin. The second is a book she co-authored with colleagues C. McGukin and D. Kilmartin entitled *Positive Guidance: Applying Positive Psychology in School, Guidance and Career Counselling*. These works are scheduled for publication this year.

In conclusion, using PPsy within the realm of career development can be seen not only as an enhancement to current coaching and counseling techniques, but as a truly necessary component. Helping clients to derive greater meaning from their chosen work can enhance the degree to which they experience happiness, health and success. Whether by using strengths, gratitude, or other PPsy interventions, a coach or counselor can feel confident that encouraging a positive mindset and the building blocks of life satisfaction and well-being can be incredibly beneficial to the student or client.

Literature Map



References

- Biswas-Diener, R., & Dean, B. (2007). *Positive Psychology Coaching: Putting the Science of Happiness to Work for Your Clients*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. .
- Boehm, J. K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). Does Happiness Promote Career Success? *Journal of Career Assessment*, 16(1), 101-117.
- Brooks, K. (2011, September). Applying Positive Psychology to Career Services. *NACE Journal*, 29-36.
- Brooks, K. (2013, March). Appreciative Career Coaching: A Practical and Positive Approach for College Students. *NACE Journal*, 24-30.
- Chance, K. S. (2008). Positive Psychology: A Scholar-Practitioner Approach to Evidence-Based Coaching. *University of Pennsylvania*, 1-80.
- Coplan, J. H. (2009, February 12). *How positive psychology can boost your business*. Retrieved from Bloomberg: <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/stories/2009-02-12/how-positive-psychology-can-boost-your-business>
- Hirschi, A. (2011). Effects of Orientations to Happiness on Vocational Identity Achievement. *Career Development Quarterly*, 59(4), 367-378.
- Jacobsen, M. (2010, Spring). Positive Psychology for Career Counselors. *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, 1-19.
- Lueneburger, A. (2009, December). Building on Strength: The Impact of Strength-Based Coaching on Career and Business Success. *Choice Magazine*.
- Miller, J., Ciccocioppo, A.-L., & Flessati, S. (2013). The Future of YOUR Education: Using Positive Psychology for Career Planning. *International Conference: The Future of Education*, (pp. 1-4).
- Paradise, L. V., & Ironside, D. R. (2005, September). Positive Psychology Techniques for K-12 Career Counseling. *NCDA Career Convergence*. Retrieved from https://www.ncda.org/aws/NCDA/pt/sd/news_article/5091/_PARENT/CC_layout_details/false.

- Peng, H. (2015). Infusing Positive Psychology with Spirituality in a Strength-Based Group Career Counseling to Evaluate College Students' State Anxiety. *International Journal of Psychological Studies* 7(1), 75-84.
- Robertson, P. J. (2013). The well-being outcomes of career guidance. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 41(3), 254-266.
- Schueller, S. M., & Parks, A. C. (2014). The Science of Self Help: Translating Positive Psychology Research Into Increased Individual Happiness. *European Psychologist*, 19(2), 145-155.
- Sharp, T. (2011). The primacy of positivity - applications in a coaching context. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice*, 4(1), 42-49, DOI: [10.1080/17521882.2010.550897](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2010.550897)
- Zikic, J., & Franklin, M. (2010). Enriching Careers and Lives: Introducing a Positive, Holistic, and Narrative Career Counseling Method That Bridges Theory and Practice. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 47(4), 180-189.