

Ongoing Professionalization of Positive Psychology

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Foreword to Llewellyn Ellardus Van Zyl & Sebastiaan Rothmann Sr. (Editors)

Positive Psychological Intervention Design and Protocols for Multi-Cultural Contexts

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Acquiring life skills has always been part of human life. We are consciously choosing animals that must learn how to find a way of life that fits us, and we are social animals who must learn how to deal with our fellow men. Such life skill learning is part of our informal daily socialization and experience in practices, but over the course of societal modernization, it became increasingly systematized and professionalized.

An early step in this development has been the emergence of professional moral advisors, typically priests and philosophers, who often used stories about exemplary saints and heroes as didactical tools. Another step has been the development of educational institutions, such as schools and military academies, in which nowadays we spend about a quarter of our lives. Contemporary modern societies provide a varied assortment of specialized professional skill trainings, such as in the business sector trainings in leadership and time management and in the private sector trainings in marital behaviour and self-understanding. Though starting from practical wisdom, these life skill courses have become increasingly driven by theoretical inspiration and empirical effect research.

Positive psychology is a latecomer in this development. The movement emerged around the year 2000, drawing on various existing theories and training practices, taken from humanistic psychology in particular. One of the promises of positive psychology was to provide a better scientific basis for these training practices. A science of positive psychology has developed since and now includes university courses, research associations, conferences and scientific journals. Yet, positive psychology is still less professionalized than clinical psychology. Evidence for the effectiveness of many positive psychology interventions is still weak and information on what works for whom often lacking. This backlog has arisen for several reasons, one of which is financial. There is typically more money available for relieving mental misery than for testing ways to foster optimal functioning. Since healthcare systems mostly do not pay for positive psychological interventions, there is little incentive for them to invest in research on the effect of these treatments and in the education of coaches and trainers. The profession consists largely of small business practitioners and is unable to generate much research. A substantive reason for the research backlog could be that the object of positive psychological interventions is typically less clear than most syndromes treated by clinical psychologists, anxiety and depression in particular. The reasons behind sub-optimal functioning are often less easy to identify and tailored interventions hence more difficult.

In this context, this book provides several steps to further the professionalization of positive

psychology. It will not be the last book on intervention designs in positive psychology, but it is an indispensable start.

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