



# Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Alex Linley

Interview by  
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**Alex Linley** is the Founding Director of the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) in the UK. He is recognised internationally as a leading expert on positive psychology, and works as an organisational consultant applying strengths in organisations. Alex has written, co-written, or edited more than 150 research papers and book chapters, and seven books around the topic of positive psychology.

## **In general terms, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?**

One of the features of positive psychology is its inherent focus on the positive. By that I don't mean that it will ignore the negative, but it will pay attention to more of the positive things than has traditionally been looked at. I think that's fundamentally important because there used to be a view that if we understood the bad, then, by taking away the bad, we would actually create the good, and I don't believe that that is always the case at all. It's far more important if we want to promote the good and the positive, that we can understand the good and the positive.

## **What are some things that positive psychology has achieved to date?**

Far and away positive psychology's biggest achievement is to have put a positive perspective firmly into psychology. Before positive psychology, psychology had been hugely focused on the negative side of things. Psychology could have been regarded as quite a depressing discipline. Since the advent of positive psychology anyone who is interested in the positive side of things has found a home. I think by virtue of that the single massive achievement of positive psychology is that it has legitimized the study of what's right with people, and to then create new applications and interventions based on that knowledge that move people into positive territory, rather than just away from negative territory.

## **Do you think positive psychology has achieved things outside of psychology?**

Without doubt! The positive turn in psychology has also legitimized a wider interest in things like happiness and wellbeing, as great examples. And we can see evidence for shifts in considering those in both social policy here in Britain, and in economics in relation to what some economists recommend that we look at (which is also supported by more of the shift towards behavioural economics). More widely, things like Martin Seligman's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme in the United States are superb examples of how you can take some



of the principles of positive psychology and apply those in a way that makes a real and lasting difference to people's lives.

**What are some of the most valid criticisms of positive psychology?**

First, in the early days there was a very valid criticism that positive psychology had largely ignored some of the 'positive approaches' that had gone before. It was quite dismissive of Humanistic Psychology. That has now changed. Second, also in the early days there was a perception, although I don't think this was a reality, that positive psychology was more focused on the positive, and therefore didn't want anything to do with the negative, and therefore it would do the same things as traditional psychology had done, by just looking at one end of the spectrum. As that criticism was made, there was any number of people who came out and said that actually our view of positive psychology is that it incorporates the negative as well. But it is probably more oriented towards the positive side. A third observation is that there is, and this is not specific to positive psychology at all, this tension between the speed at which people seek to move towards application, and the speed at which the basic research can move. There has been a view in some parts of positive psychology that applications are moving too quickly. On the other hand, there are hundreds of thousands of people working in practice who are out there trying things out and trying to do things that will make a difference, and who simply won't wait for the research to catch up with what they need to know. And it was ever thus. The two, as much as possible, need to inform each other; but we need to recognise that there are very different trajectories and very different agendas that research and practice can be working towards.

**What area of positive psychology do you still find most difficult or challenging?**

There is still loads and loads that we don't know, and still loads to be discovered about strengths, and the applications of strengths. I find that a hugely interesting and intriguing area, and obviously it's an area where I work a lot myself. The move into neuroscience, looking at the neuroscience side of things, is an area that is outside of my traditional expertise, so that's something that I need to work hard to understand; but it's great to have that angle looking at things as well.

**Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology, particularly around strengths?**

My work on strengths started way back, around ten years ago or so now. Obviously I was involved in positive psychology from pretty early on, and I looked at the way that the field was developing; and in very broad terms, there was the work that had been done in happiness and wellbeing, and the work that had been done, or was starting to be done, in strengths. I thought, actually there are loads of people working in happiness and wellbeing, and a lot fewer people working on strengths; and yet, I see strengths as being one of the key ways in which we can achieve happiness and wellbeing. And it was one of the areas that seemed to have loads of potential for application. So I started off really trying to think about and understand what strengths were, and I wrote some early papers, probably five or six years ago now, with tentative definitions of how we could think about strengths. One of the things that came through from that early work was that the energy requirement of strengths was absolutely integral, and while it was implicit in some of the work that had been done so far, nobody had really put it as a hallmark of their theory, so that was something we set out to do. And then around about the same time we started working in practice, and I started working with the

British insurance company Norwich Union, which is now known as Aviva, and found that we got very effective results working with them to recruit people according to the strengths that they had, using a strengths-based interview methodology that we developed. Since then our research work and applied work has developed hand in hand. Often we will develop ideas that we use to inform our work in practice around things like assessment and development and performance management, but from the ideas that we developed and try out in practice, we then develop the questions that we want to look at more rigorously or more empirically. The sorts of things that we are looking at now are to design studies about how strengths help you to achieve your goals, but we are also looking at some of the fundamental strengths. For example, we are designing a study where we look at the role of authenticity and mindfulness and organismic valuing and those sorts of concepts in relation to strengths. And then, of course, there are all of the continual validation studies and things that we do with Realise2 as well.

**Is there any new knowledge or studies around strengths that you would like to highlight that are particularly interesting?**

We have recently done some work on ‘strengthspotting’, and developed the Strengthspotting Scale, and from that validated the Strengthspotting Scale against Realise2, to look at whether strengthspotters may have a particular strengths profile. It turns out that there are a range of characteristics that seem to define strengthspotting, and those tend to be things around the motivation to identify strengths, the situations in which you do so, the frequency with which you do it, and then, crucially, what you do with that knowledge. So we started to investigate that to see if we could help people to develop their ability to identify strengths in others in natural contexts. In addition to that, we validated that scale against Realise2, and showed that Connector, Enabler and Feedback were the key strengths that predicted strengthspotting capability across all the five strengthspotting domains.

**What’s one aspiration you have for the field of positive psychology?**

My biggest aspiration for positive psychology is that it continues to grow, but that it continues to grow in a way that influences applications and policy. The basic research needs to continue at pace, with real opportunity for positive psychologists to move into areas where positive psychology can make a sustainable, significant, and lasting impact on people’s lives for the better. I think where that is most likely to happen, sadly, is not from any individual research study; where it will come from is from a building of the body of data and that knowledge and then critically when that data and knowledge is translated into practice. Whether it’s the work we do with big organisations, which has the potential to impact the lives of thousands of people, or the way that we inform the development of social policy, or whether it’s projects like the Comprehensive Solider Fitness programme that Martin Seligman has developed with the US Army, things like that really help positive psychology to step up to the plate and go above and beyond just being a basic academic discipline to something which is realising its potential to catalyse a positive difference in the world. And that would be my big aspiration for positive psychology – that it continues to do that.

**Which discipline do you think positive psychology can learn from most moving forward?**

My gut instinct is economics. Rightly or wrongly, the economists have had the measure of policy for many, many, years, and economic terms have shaped much of what goes on in the policy arena. But there are huge opportunities for the melding of psychology and economics.

We are already seeing this in things like behavioural economics, where economists are recognising that people are not the logical rational actors that we were always assumed to be by economic models, and instead we make irrational emotional choices based on a whole variety of different factors. For many years that was ignored by economics, and psychologists mocked them for the models being so wrong. But now positive psychology and economics are coming together a bit more and starting to say, 'Well, what can we take from psychology that can be applied in economic models that can then help us to better predict how people will behave and respond in different situations?'. Once we have that model, we will be able to shape policy and shape interventions in a way that are much more going with the grain of what people will naturally do. There is huge opportunity there, and I think it's appropriate at this point to acknowledge the work of Daniel Kahneman, who was one of the key people who led the development of the behavioural economics field.

### **What's the new hot topic for positive psychology in the coming five years?**

Well that's the million dollar question! I would guess it's going to be something to do with one of two things. It could be neuroscience-based. There are going to be some key validations or insights that come from understanding brain functioning. That's important, because as soon as you can start to talk about things at the level of the brain, people start to take you seriously and think this must be true. So it's a good way of getting through the door and getting people's attention. But now to the second topic, which has huge potential. I went to see Martin Seligman speak at the Houses of Parliament, in July [2011], and one of the things that he said he was working on was to develop algorithms with people like Facebook and Google to be able to map the prevalence of happiness-related words in our lexicon, in the things that people put in emails, in Facebook postings, in linked-in postings, that sort of thing. So harvesting the potential for real-time data collection and data analysis using the new social technologies that are available, and combining that with a solid underpinning of psychological theory could really take us into domains we have not even imagined before now.

### **Who do you look up to in the field, either as practitioners or academics?**

Without question number one on that list has to be Martin Seligman for everything that he has done to develop and promote the field. But more than that, the thing that he has done that I've never seen any psychologist do, is the way that he has been able to take positive psychology and use it and apply it and lead it in such a way that it has impact, that it makes a difference. So he's had a huge impact on the development of social policy in the UK, but also in other countries, as in the Comprehensive Solider Fitness programme that I mentioned before. But a whole raft of things like that really helps him to stand out in my mind as someone I admire enormously. Second on that list would be Barbara Frederickson, for the massive developments that she has made in our understanding of positive emotion. Her theory, the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions, is one of the stand-out theories in positive psychology. The third person would be Chris Peterson for his knowledge, but also his character and personality, the way that he brings positive psychology alive for people and makes it real. I look at a lot of his books and blog entries and postings to see where he's really done that. Another person, finally, would be Mike Csikszentmihalyi, simply for his erudition and scholarship. I don't think there is anyone in positive psychology who knows more about more different fields of study and the history of thought and philosophy and all those sorts of things than Mike, so I think he's quite an incredible character.

**What's one piece of advice for aspiring positive psychology researchers or practitioners?**

That would be different for each. For a researcher, my advice would be to find an area that you are fundamentally excited by and interested in, so that it will maintain your interest and enthusiasm as you work on it. You could also be strategic with that and find an area where you think there is not yet a lot that has been done, but you think the area is likely to grow in profile and significance, and you can grow with it. That is certainly something that I was able to do by being involved with positive psychology from the beginning. I think for a practitioner, my advice would be to use your best judgement in the way that you work. It's easy to get bound up with best practice, which is all about what has been done before. But that really blows out of the water any opportunity for innovation, if we only stick at what has been done before. So I'm a big advocate of using what we call best judgement: understand the literature, know the research and the findings, but be prepared to take all of that and say, moving beyond what is already known, this is my judgement as to what would be the best thing to do in this situation. And that's how we have driven a lot of the innovation and a lot of the development in our methodologies for assessment, development, and performance management—around strengths. They have come through understanding the field, and then being prepared to make the adaptation and apply that in a practical way—even though there won't be a specific study that says that this will be the result. We do a lot of research in practice as it might be called, rather than research that will always end up being published in academic journals.

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