

**UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX  
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**Positive Psychology  
Third Year Option: C8892  
Level 6, 15 Credits  
Spring Term 2016-17**

**Module Convenor: Peter Harris**  
Tutor: Peter Harris  
Tutor: Alex Stell



**NOTE: Most of the questions you need answers to about this module are in this document. Please read it fully and carefully before the first class.**

NOTE: This document concerns the structure and content of the module. If you have questions about procedures, please consult the School of Psychology Office in Pev1 2A13 or via [psychology@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:psychology@sussex.ac.uk)

## MODULE INFORMATION & REQUIREMENTS

### Positive Psychology

Positive psychology explores the psychology of strength and virtue, with a focus on positive subjective experience (such as happiness and optimism), positive individual traits (such as the capacity for love), and the positive institutions that “move individuals toward better citizenship” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Positive psychology emerged as a movement towards the end of the 20th Century. It began as a deliberate attempt to counterbalance what its protagonists perceived was a distortion in the field arising from prevailing concerns in psychology with pathology and dysfunction. Their mission was to “rebalance” the field.

This is a module *about* positive psychology, rather than a module *in* positive psychology. That is, in this module we will explore topics from the field of positive psychology and do so with a critical eye. In particular, we will be concerned with *evidence*. As a tutor, I do not advocate or promote positive psychology – I am open-minded about it. Instead, my aim is to examine the evidence for the claims made about it. In a single module we cannot undertake a comprehensive review of the area – our choice of topics will naturally be selective – but as a student on the module you should, through your studies, acquire an informed understanding of the principal strengths and weaknesses of this area of psychology.

Each week the module consists of a 2 hour class session plus an exercise or two to undertake after the class. The taught session will be in two parts: (1) an introduction to the week’s subject – in the form of a lecture of variable length – followed by (2) an associated workshop/seminar involving either reading and evaluating a pre-assigned research paper or undertaking set of class exercises. The workshop and associated exercises are designed to explore in a more experiential way some of the concepts and issues that arise from the material each week.

Each week, therefore, there will be work for you to do outside the class:

- **Exercises for you to do arising from the class.** You will be encouraged to complete these exercises and to report back on your experiences in a subsequent class. A brief *critical reflection* of up to 1000 words based on a portfolio of these exercises will form part (20%) of the module assessment.
- **Reading (essential + additional) for the next class.** (See the section on “reading and thinking about Positive Psychology” in this handbook.)

**Warning:** Each exercise is voluntary; however, the exercises are likely to encourage you to self-reflect and it is possible that you may find that challenging or uncomfortable. Furthermore, on occasion we will discuss in class how the exercises went. This means that if you wish to contribute to those discussions you will need to be reasonably comfortable with self-disclosure in public. It is very important that you think about whether you are prepared to participate in such exercises and discussions. If not, this module may not be for you.

To get a sense of what may be involved, I recommend you read *Chapter 2 Learning about positive psychology: Not a spectator sport* in Peterson (2006) (which is a textbook that features heavily in the reading list; copies are available in the library). Peterson also lists exercises at the end of each of his chapters and several of these will be ones we will use on the module. The full reference for the Peterson book is:

Peterson, C. (2006). *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press. ISBN #: 9780195188332

You could also have a look at various online positive psychology sites to see the exercises available there. You will find some Web sites suggested below, but there are many others on the Internet. Make sure you choose sites that are scientifically credible.

## Module overview

This is the fifth year that this module has run. Below is an outline of the module planned for this year. The module consists of 6 topics:

Topic 1 Introduction

Topic 2 Positive emotion

Topic 3 Positive thinking

Topic 4 Positive self

Topic 5 Positive relationships

Topic 6 Positive health

Most topics span 2 weeks. Within each topic we typically consider two or more related subjects (e.g., within topic 2, one week we may consider optimism, the next week mindfulness).

### **Topic 1 Introduction: What is positive psychology?**

We will start with an introduction to positive psychology (plus an overview of the module content, administration and assessment).

### **Topic 2 Positive emotion**

Not surprisingly, many positive psychology theorists and researchers focus on the role that positive feelings and emotions play in our lives. We will cover a subset of these, especially happiness and well-being, and discuss the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, which is one of the major theoretical perspectives in positive psychology.

### **Topic 3 Positive thinking**

Positive cognition is core to positive psychology. Approaches that emphasise the role of cognition are many and varied and (of course) cross the artificial divide between the different topics. In the sessions we will cover issues such as optimism and hope and also discuss mindfulness which, while not positive in itself, has been widely employed in interventions designed to bring about positive outcomes.

### **Topic 4 Positive self**

Naturally, both positive feelings and thoughts implicate the self, and there are so many topics in psychology prefaced by “self-” that relate to positive psychology, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-compassion and self-affirmation. Within the field of positive psychology, an important strand of research and thinking has focussed on qualities such as character strengths, values, abilities, interests and accomplishments. We will discuss various aspects of research into self-affirmation and self-compassion.

### **Topic 5 Positive relationships**

As social animals, much of our lives is spent thinking about, feeling towards and otherwise responding to other people. Positive psychology recognises the central role such experiences play in our lives, with a focus on love, kindness, compassion, gratitude, forgiveness and the consequences of positive attachments. We will consider, in particular, love and kindness.

### **Topic 6 Positive health**

From the start, researchers and theorists in positive psychology have focussed on the benefits that being positive may bring. As well as the role of positivity in repairing damage, attention has been paid to the preventive effects of positivity for health and well-being. This has led to the growth of an area termed “positive health” and we will discuss that.

### **Things to bear in mind when studying**

Some topics will be relevant to more than one category. For example, love is both a positive emotion and relevant to a consideration of how we relate to others; many themes that crop up in emotional and cognitive approaches will be relevant to the self.

This is an *active* module in the sense that you will benefit most if you participate actively in class discussions and exercises and in relevant exercises outside the class. This can be a demanding module in terms of both intellectual and personal work. It is not a module in which it is a good idea to just passively sit back and absorb without participation. (Is it ever?)

The most important resource for this module is its Study Direct site. You should find yourself accessing this frequently, at least several times per week. You will find there this document and other important details about the module, copies of the past seen-exam papers and feedback on the exam questions and critical reflection exercises, the slides for the forthcoming lecture, and recordings of classes once they have been made. There you can read or share a comment on the forum and also access the reading list.

**Assessment:** is by coursework –Portfolio (critical reflection), (20%) and Seen exam (80%).

## **Reading and thinking about Positive Psychology**

There is an online reading list. Each week the Study Direct site will have links to the relevant section of the reading list. You can also access the reading list from the bottom of the module's Study Direct page (under *library links*). For each topic you will find one or two pieces of *essential reading* plus some suggested *additional reading*.

Try to access and look over the relevant *essential reading before* each week's class, even if you do not read it in depth at that stage. This may help you to orient yourself to the material you hear about in the class and to understand it better.

When you decide you want to study a particular aspect of a topic (e.g., optimism), then read the *essential* material in some depth. If you are studying the topic in preparation for the seen examination, look at relevant questions from previous papers and the associated feedback – this will give you clues to the issues you need to study (read about, think about, discuss with others). Once you have done this, think about what else you should read on the topic to help you address these issues. Do not simply rely on the essential reading: good answers will be expected to show evidence of relevant study and understanding that goes beyond the core material (the material I covered in the first part of the class + the essential reading). To help you find suitable other things to read, you can use the references in the essential reading, look at the material I have put in additional reading and their references sections, conduct your own searches for relevant papers (e.g., using google scholar), and use relevant Web sites to locate papers (see below). Peterson (2006) also has lists of things to read at the end of each chapter, although this will miss some more recent material.

Everything on the reading list should be available either electronically or in paper form in the library. If you cannot locate it, ask in the library for assistance. If it is still impossible to locate, let me know.

**Bear in mind that you are expected to study independently for at least 10.5 hours on this 15 credit module in addition to attending classes (see *the small print section* at the rear of this handout).**

### **Critical evaluation of evidence or “how to be a wise consumer of psychological research”**

In this module you will be required to critically evaluate evidence. I will talk most weeks about this. The following link may help you too. It describes “how to be a wise consumer of psychological research”:

One of the key strengths you need to acquire as a psychology student, let alone as a student of positive psychology, is the ability to provide evidence for your assertions in your essays and thinking. In the module we will address the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various types of evidence that is available in positive psychology. A recurrent criticism I have made in previous years about essays on the seen exam is about weaknesses in the use of evidence: that the essays have insufficient evidence or do not use it effectively or do not recognise the relative strengths and weaknesses of certain forms of evidence when they interpret it.

### **Textbooks**

There is no longer an essential textbook for this module (few seemed to buy it) but it may help you to know that when I first designed the module, I built it using the books by Peterson (2006) (which was the original recommended text for the module) and by Lopez and Snyder (2011) (which I did not expect anyone to buy, but to obtain from the library); these remain important, as you will see from the online reading list. As I say, Peterson (2006) was originally the recommended text for this module; as its title suggests, it provides a useful primer and it should still give you a useful place to start your reading, despite now being some 10 years or so old. Lopez and Snyder (2011) can also be useful as a place to start your additional reading: it is an edited collection of brief chapters that provides an overview of many of the topics we will cover. These chapters may represent useful sources to structure your own additional reading and provide useful references for you to begin that reading.

Peterson, C. (2006). *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press. ISBN #: 9780195188332

Lopez, S. J., & Snyder, C. R. (Eds.) (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780199862160 (paperback)

Over the years other books have become available that seem to me to be potentially interesting and useful. Some of the chapters from these now feature on the reading list. These include the following:

Moneta, G. B. (2014). *Positive Psychology: A Critical Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 9780230242937

Snyder, C.R., Lopez, S.J., & Pedrotti, J.T. (2015) *Positive Psychology*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed). Sage. ISBN 9781412990629 (paperback)

Bolt, M., & Dunn, D. S. (2016). *Pursuing Human Strengths: A Positive Psychology Guide*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed). Worth Publishers. ISBN: 978-1-319-00448-4

Also worth checking out is a little book by Peterson that he produced shortly before his death and which brings together many of the little pieces he wrote for *Psychology Today*. As ever with Peterson, it is engagingly written and thought provoking:

Peterson, C. (2012). *Pursuing the Good Life: 100 Reflections on Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780199916351

### **Other places to look for material:**

There have been special issues of journals devoted to positive psychology. Here are some examples:

*American Psychologist* (January, 2000) (March, 2001)

*Review of General Psychology* (March, 2005)

*Time Magazine* (January 17, 2005)

There is also a journal (*The Journal of Positive Psychology*) dedicated to the topic and another (*The Journal of Happiness Studies*) that deals with one of its core topics.

### **Reading list**

The list is under constant development, so you should visit it frequently to sample the most recent version. Make sure you consult the most up to date version.

**Bear in mind that in December and the early weeks of January this reading list refers to the previous year's module and may not yet reflect the updated module content.**

## Web sites

In addition to articles and books, for a topic like positive psychology there are, of course, numerous Web sites available online. These are many and varied. Some provide useful resources, such as relevant TED talks, others are maintained by people whose stance may depart from the scientific, critical orientation required by the module, so you should exercise judgment when using the Internet as a resource.

Many authors and researchers maintain Web sites describing their research and these can be useful resources for materials (including copies of their research papers). Where appropriate I introduce the lecture with a list of names of authors who have made substantial contributions to that topic. It can be useful to look at their web sites. Peterson (2006) also contains a (slightly dated) listing of relevant Web sites at the end of each chapter. The following sites belong to the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) and to Positive Psychology organisations in the US and UK. They contain useful resources and links:

<http://www.ippanetwork.org/>  
<http://www.positivepsychology.org/>  
<http://positivepsychology.org.uk/>

If you come across a site (or book or article or a TED talk or any other resource) that you think it would be useful for us to know about too, please do tell us about it. Use the form on Study Direct.

### Study Direct

For each class I will upload the lecture slides before the class as soon as they are ready. After the class I will upload the recording of the lecture once it becomes available and any updated slides. You will find on the site other material of use to you as the module progresses. You should find yourself accessing this site regularly.

### Forum

On the Positive Psychology study direct site there is a forum for you to introduce and discuss topics. Use it! It is there to enable you all to share ideas, thoughts, raise issues, seek answers to questions, and anything else besides that is relevant to the module.

### Assessment

Assessment is by coursework - Portfolio (critical reflection), 20% and Seen exam (80%). You can find details of what is required for the critical reflection and the deadline on the Positive Psychology study direct site. There you will also find past copies of the seen exam paper and detailed feedback on the answers. This year's seen exam will be available towards the end of the module.

### Preparation for the seen exam

In the latter part of the module I will arrange some drop-in sessions for us to discuss the seen exam and to help you prepare for it.

## **Assessment information**

Assessments deadlines and methods of submission can be found on your assessment timetable via Sussex Direct.

Information on the following can be found at the link below:

- Submitting your work
- Missing a deadline
- Late penalties
- Exceptional circumstances
- Exams
- Help with managing your studies and competing your work
- Assessment Criteria

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/internal/students/examinationsandassessment>

## **Attendance, Absence and Engagement**

You are expected to be 'in attendance' at the University for the full duration of the published term dates for your course of study. That means you should be regularly attending lectures, seminars, labs etc. and committing time to your studies to be in a position to comply with academic and administrative expectations.

## **Module Contact Information**

Convenor: Professor Peter Harris  
Location: Pevensey 1, 2B10  
Telephone: 67 8342  
E-mail: p.r.harris@sussex.ac.uk

Student Feedback sessions: See Sussex Direct

Two hours each week. You may use these student feedback sessions (without appointment) to discuss or ask about anything module-related and I will answer as best I can.



## Module Structure, Aims and Objectives

### Aims and objectives

*Knowledge & Understanding:* The module aims to enable you to acquire an informed understanding of the principal strengths and weaknesses of positive psychology.

*Skills:* The module aims to help you be able to:

- summarise relevant positive psychological research literature and theoretical debates in a clear and focused manner;
- demonstrate the ability to understand and analyse published research reports and to critically evaluate competing accounts of positive psychological processes;
- practice your communication skills through participation in workshops and discussion groups;
- acquire first-hand experience of positive psychology in action through active participation in relevant positive psychology exercises.

### Module Learning Outcomes

By the end of the module, a successful student should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the historical background and conceptual basis of positive psychology
- Communicate relevant positive psychology concepts and findings clearly
- Adopt a critical stance when evaluating evidence for claims about positive psychology in general and about the topics taught on the module in particular
- Synthesise the available empirical evidence to develop and advance arguments and viewpoints relevant to the topic

## The Small Print Section

### Teaching and Learning

*The syllabus details for the module are available via links on the Psychology teaching web pages and Sussex Direct.*

#### Classes

To avoid disruption to the majority, please try to arrive at least 5 minutes before the start time of the lecture (see lecture attendance etiquette in Psychology module handbook).

It is **CRUCIAL** for you to understand that formal examination on this module will be based on material covered in the classes **and** your “essential reading” for each week. It is also important for you to understand that lectures will **NOT** attempt to ‘cover’ all such material (and nor will workshops). That is, classes are not intended to provide an alternative to you learning the material in your essential reading. Any attempt to rely solely on learning material presented in classes will severely restrict your ability to do well during formal assessment of this module. Classes are intended to fulfil functions other than repeating or précising material covered in the essential readings.

Lectures on this module are intended to perform several functions. First, they will provide another ‘channel’ of communication, allowing you to hear as well as read about (selected) material relevant to the module.

A second function of the lectures is to allow you to review material you have learned so far. If you have already done the essential reading associated with the lecture, ask yourself how well the lecturer has covered that material.

A third function of the lectures is to illustrate the nature of a critical approach to students. The lecturer will sometimes simply explain material. At other times, however, the lecturer will criticise the material in some way. University education is about learning how to constructively criticise as well as simply absorb information. Evaluate your lecturer’s criticisms. Are they simply personal prejudices (e.g., “I don’t like this”) and, if so, are they presented as such? Or are reasons given for criticisms made (e.g., “I don’t like this because...)?

You should note that all the study skills advice in existence suggests that straightforward ‘absorption’ of material (i.e., reading, listening, rote-learning and memorising) should take up about 20% of learning time. The other 80% should come from ‘interrogating’ that information (e.g., looking for links, attempting to summarise and synthesise, looking for strengths and weaknesses and possible improvements, applying to different areas, etc.).

#### Workshops.

Workshops for this module will last for up to one ‘teaching hour’ and will occur weekly. They will take place within the 2 hour session allocated to this class each week.

Workshops on this module are intended to perform several functions. First, they allow students to review material covered in prior lectures and associated essential reading. All students **must** do at least the essential reading before the class.

A second function of the workshops is ‘interrogate’ at least some of the material covered in the lectures and associated essential reading. This will be done by use of particular exercises you will learn about on a week-by-week basis. Again, students **must** have done the essential reading and workshop quality will improve to the extent that each student has gone beyond this in areas of particular interest to them.

Third, workshops will be used to provide students with the means of developing oral and listening skills that will unarguably be of tremendous benefit to them throughout their university career and beyond. Through the exchange of ideas and perspectives, you will develop a deeper understanding of the issues covered in the module. This crucial function of workshops also provides a uniquely active way of learning that is not possible in lectures or by private study

Fourth, workshops allow students a chance to get to know each other and to discuss material of mutual interest and relevance in a supportive social setting. Learning at university is not and should not be a competitive exercise. Your learning will benefit to the extent that you share your insights and problems with others and support and encourage them to do the same with you. This will often lead to collaborative learning opportunities *outside* formal teaching contexts.

### **Independent study**

The difference between studying at university and study you may have done previously is that at university the emphasis is on you finding out things for yourself. Just as fitness clubs attempt to foster and facilitate (but cannot impose) fitness, universities attempt to foster and facilitate (but cannot impose) academic excellence. Results will (and can only) come as a direct result of *you* making appropriate use of the facilities at your disposal. Lectures, seminars and the like are there to support and guide your independent learning – they are not there to “pass information from tutors’ heads to students’ notebooks without passing through the brains of either.” Not everything you will need or want to know will be covered in the lectures, seminars or essential readings. You need to become familiar with the material you are guided towards, but you also need to learn to ‘manipulate’ that material: apply it to new domains, compare and contrast across topics, synthesise it, evaluate it, consider its relevance to issues of interest to you, supplement it, etc. This can only be done by being interested and working hard because you want to. As we shall learn below, an exclusive focus on passing exams will *undermine* that motivation and will make you perform less well as a result. Thus, study because you want to learn and stop when you have answers to your own satisfaction for the questions you care about. Finally, note that independent study is study you engage in outside of formal contact hours with faculty – it does not have to be solitary (see under ‘seminars’ above).