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# Conceptual framework for a positive psychology coaching practice

Jolanta Burke

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*The complementary nature of positive psychology and coaching psychology has long been recognised by both researchers and practitioners. The last decade saw a tenfold increase of articles relating to positive psychology coaching and even more literature attempting to apply some of the findings from positive psychology in a coaching practice. However, despite the interest and the complexity of both fields, there is a lack of systematic approach to this new practice. The current paper introduces the Conceptual Framework for Positive Psychology Coaching Practice, the aim of which is to offer advice to both practitioners and researchers of the elements necessary to exist, in order to practise positive psychology coaching, as well as inform the policy and curriculum of programmes teaching positive psychology coaching in third level education.*

**Keywords:** Positive Psychology, Coaching Psychology, Positive Psychology Coaching, Positive Psychology Coaching Model, Strengths, Positive Psychology Interventions.

**P**OSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY is a scientific study of optimal human functioning (Linley et al., 2006). Coaching psychology, in comparison, is a professional development process grounded in psychological theories, the aim of which is to help individuals or groups improve their effectiveness and performance (Vandaveer et al., 2016). The complementary nature of both scientific fields has long been recognised and promoted by researchers and practitioners (e.g. Biswas-Diener, 2010; Kauffman & Linley, 2007; Seligman, 2007). However, the current literature lacks a systematic approach to a positive psychology coaching practice.

Positive Psychology Coaching (PPC) is defined as an application of positive psychology in coaching approaches (Oades & Passmore, 2014). To date, many attempts have been made to implement some of the scientific findings from the mainstream and second-wave positive psychology in coaching (cf. Cilliers, 2011; Sims, 2017). Nevertheless, most of them rely on implementing singular components of positive psychology, such as a strength-based model of coaching (Elston & Boniwell, 2011; Linley, Biswas-Diener &

Trenier, 2011; Oades, Crowe & Nguyen, 2009; Roche & Hefferon, 2013), or encouraging the use of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) (Passmore & Oades, 2015, 2016) and positive psychology measures (Susing, Green & Grant, 2011), as well as applying some of the positive psychology theories to the coaching practice (Foster & Lloyd, 2007). Thus, they lack a coherent application of positive psychology in coaching.

Passmore and Oades (2014) offered a model of PPC practice according to which PPC is rooted in four positive psychological theories: strengths theory (Proctor et al., 2011), broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2009), self-determination theory (Spence & Oades, 2011), and well-being theory (Seligman, 2011). However, given the growing interest in positive psychology coaching practice, as well as the complexity of the field, a need for a more comprehensive approach for coaching practice is required. Thus, the current paper introduces the Conceptual Framework for Positive Psychology Coaching Practice.

The framework was created with practitioners in mind. It offers coaches a systematic approach to practicing positive psychology

in their coaching practice. Furthermore, it provides educational institutions with a tool to developing coaches' knowledge and skills to inform their positive psychology practice. Finally, it aids as a quality assessment for practising PPC, thus serves as a tool for ensuring ethical and well-informed application of positive psychology in coaching.

### **Conceptual framework for positive psychology coaching practice**

According to the framework, Positive Psychology Coaching is an integrated approach to practising coaching, which is embedded in the strong foundations of the theory and research in positive psychology, and the application of strength-based models of coaching, as well as evidence-based practices that lead to clients' optimal human functioning. Therefore, the model of the Conceptual Framework for Positive Psychology Coaching Practice (Figure 1) consists of six elements: 1. Knowledge, 2. Strength-based models, 3. Positive diagnosis, 4. Optimal-functioning goals, 5. Positive psychology interventions, 6. Positive measures. It is proposed that each one of the elements ought to exist in order for a fully integrated PPC practice to occur. Each one of the elements will be examined separately, and the consequences of any of the missing components will be discussed.

#### ***Knowledge***

In order to practise PPC, an in-depth knowledge is required in both fields of positive psychology and coaching psychology. Coach education is argued to be a prerequisite for coaching practice (Laske, 2006; Yi-Ling & McDowall, 2014), with certain tiers of membership within some coaching organisations restricted to those who completed a minimum number of study and practise hours (e.g. Association for Coaching, International Coach Federation), yet there are no such educational requirements for practising PPC.

By 2013, over 18,000 academic journal papers were published in the area of positive psychology (Rusk & Waters, 2013).

The themes included such areas as well-being, positive emotions, flow, relationships, strengths, positive traits, forgiveness, gratitude, virtues, self-determination, motivation, fairness, creativity, resilience, hope, self-efficacy, perceived control, coping, spirituality or meaningful life (Hart & Sasso, 2011; Lopez, 2009). Many of the topics in positive psychology have been thoroughly researched, offering practitioners a considerable knowledge base. Therefore, picking a theory or intervention to apply it with a client, without considering the larger body of knowledge, represents a narrow, incomplete and possibly haphazard approach to PPC practice.

Furthermore, positive psychology education has a power to evoke a lasting change in people's perceptions, their thinking, feeling and behaviour (Norris, 2015; Russo-Netzer & Ben-Shahar, 2011). Educational programmes, such as Certificates, Diplomas and Master's in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology, can enable practitioners to familiarise themselves with the related themes and apply them in their practice. Without such knowledge, coaches' awareness of their clients' traits and positive-psychology-related processes may be limited.

Awareness is the precondition for an ultimate change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992). In-depth positive psychology knowledge and subsequently gained awareness allows practitioners to notice temporary or stable characteristics about their clients (e.g. optimism, hopefulness, grit), identify the helpfulness of their emotional states and take appropriate action, such as asking relevant questions or offering interventions that can help them in their coaching process. Without such knowledge, these elements may be left undetected and the PPC practice might not reach the peak of its potential. Therefore, being a PPC practitioner involves acquiring knowledge of positive psychology, so that coaches become more perceptive about their clients' positive traits and the positive-psychology-informed processes.

### ***Strength-based model***

There are many models used in coaching, such as GROW/REGROW (Grant, 2011), Solution-Focused Brief Coaching (Iveson, George & Ratner, 2012) or Motivational Interviewing (Passmore, 2011). However, whilst they guide clients through a process of discovery, leading to a successful outcome, the journey they propose is not inherently focused on their strengths.

On an individual level, positive psychology is a study of positive individual traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), ordinary human strengths and virtues (Sheldon & King, 2001), and how they can be used to achieve optimal human functioning. It is also the main theme of all positive psychology themes in academic papers published to date (Hart & Sasso, 2011). Therefore, an integral part of the PPC process is a focus on human strengths, and ways in which they can be applied to reach clients' their ultimate goals.

In an experimental study, using a strength-based approach in a career coaching practice not only improved the clients' likelihood of achieving goals by 20 per cent, but also enhanced their evaluation of their coaching experience, with many spontaneously mentioning the positive effect that coaching sessions had on them; whereas those who practised a non-strength based approach had a lower success rate in achieving their goals and did not evaluate their coach as positively (Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbul & Benjamin, 2014). In another study with almost 10, 000 participants, those who frequently used their strengths were 18 times more likely to be flourishing, than those who did not (Hone et al. (2015). Therefore, the strength-based approach is not only an integral part of the positive psychological practice, but there are also merits in using it in order to improve goal-achievement and optimal human functioning.

One of the strength-based models that can be applied in PPC is strength-based career counselling (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2014). It was developed as an amalgamation

of strength-centred therapy (Wong, 2006), strength-based counselling (Smith, 2006), as well as VIA classification of strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A controlled, experimental study indicated that in a group undergoing strength-based coaching, 20 per cent more participants achieved their career goals than in the control group, which used a traditional, non-strength-based model.

Another strength-based approach that can be applied in PPC is the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), which involves four stages: (1) discovery, (2) dreaming, (3) design, (4) delivery. The model re-focuses clients' attention from the solution of problems, to how strengths can be used to achieve their desired goals.

Both models are strength-based, therefore they can be used in PPC. However, more research is required to create specific evidence-based models of coaching that incorporate not only a strength-based approach, but other aspects of the PPC framework.

### ***Positive diagnosis***

Human beings pay more attention to the negative than positive, and they are not only negatively biased, but their negative experiences have a bigger impact on them than positive events (Baumeister et al., 2001). The reasons for this bias can be explained by the evolutionary and developmental value of negativity (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). On the one hand, negativity bias allows individuals to notice, take action, and adapt faster to changed circumstances; on the other hand, it provides them with the motivation to grow. Both adaptation and growth are a fundamental part of a coaching process (Stelter, 2014). Therefore, coaches' negative bias can exist and thrive during the coaching process, making the focus on positive more challenging.

Positive diagnosis is an ability to identify and use information that relates to clients' peak performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010). In other words, it is an assessment, or a diagnosis of what is going well for them, what

resources they have, what behaviours they display, or what habits they have already developed to achieve their goals. In order to carry out a positive diagnosis, a coach needs to have the knowledge about what helps individuals realise their potential. Such diagnosis may include the propensity for using their strengths (Linley et al., 2010), the level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; deHaan et al., 2016), or their intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Positive diagnosis is proposed as part of the process of PPC practice.

The effect of the positive diagnosis is reflected in the benefits of positive reinforcement (Skinner, 1938). In education, the application of positive reinforcement helps individuals identify helpful behaviours and encourage them to consciously repeat them (Burden, 2003). Similarly, in a coaching environment, positive diagnosis allows coaches to see what is already working for their clients and encourage them to continue the helpful behaviours, whilst at the same time changing less helpful habits.

An example of a benefit of carrying out a positive diagnosis comes from research on posttraumatic growth (PTG), which is a perceived positive change that occurs to most people after a traumatic event (Calhaun & Tedeschi, 2006; Joseph, 2011). Noticing such change, as well as seeing the benefits of that change, reduces levels of distress, enhances individuals' physical and psychological wellbeing and boosts their immune systems (Affleck et al., 1987; Bower et al., 1998; Tennen & Affleck, 2002). In the same vein, positive diagnosis – in the process of PPC – may serve as a positive reinforcement of helpful behaviours.

### ***Optimal-functioning goals***

Goals are an integral part of a coaching process (e.g. Jinks & Dexter, 2012), with evidence suggesting the discussion of goals makes individuals more likely to commit to them (Lyubomirsky, 2007). At the same time, the type of goals that individuals set up, and the way in which they monitor them, has a significant impact on their success.

Optimal-functioning goals are goals that aim to tap into the optimal human functioning. For example, in a landmark study (Mauss et al., 2011), researchers manipulated participants' value of happiness and found that seeking it out reduced individuals' levels of happiness. Therefore, setting up goals that aim to boost happiness, may in fact decrease it, thus reducing clients' optimal functioning.

On the other hand, in order for goals to improve well-being and enhance optimal human functioning, they need to be intrinsic, authentic, approach-oriented, harmonious, flexible, appropriate, and the most effective ones are activity goals, such as joining a group or a community (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Thus, the knowledge of the latest developments in positive psychology research, such as the science of optimal human functioning, may assist coaches to help clients set up goals that help them reach their optimum human functioning.

### ***Positive psychology interventions***

Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) are activities that enhance positive affect, cognitions and behaviours (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). In order for an intervention to be deemed a PPI, it needs to build a positive variable, such as optimism, provide empirical evidence and demonstrate a positive outcome (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). According to Duckworth, Steen and Seligman (2005), there are at least 100 PPIs (Duckworth, Steen & Seligman, 2005). However, if the criteria presented above were to be applied to them, the number of rigorously tested interventions would be significantly reduced, as amongst them are some interventions that have been well-established, and others that are only emerging as potential interventions (Parks & Schueller, 2014).

One of the most researched PPIs is gratitude, which derives from firstly, affirming the good things in one's life, and secondly, from a realisation that the good things partially stem from outside of individuals (Lamas et al., 2014). Gratitude interven-

tions range from noting down five things for which clients are grateful (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), writing down *three good things* and explaining why they went well (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006), through to writing a letter of gratitude (Watkins et al., 2003), or an essay about what individuals are grateful for (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Therefore, there are many versions of some of the PPIs showing various positive outcomes.

Passmore and Oades (2016a) explored the concept of applying gratitude in coaching and urged coaches to offer their clients various gratitude activities to choose from. However, their paper was not based on an experiment, but rather a recommendation to coaches. The same applies to other PPIs used in a coaching practice, which are often presented as a theory rather than an experiment demonstrating evidence for their effectiveness in a coaching context. Whilst potentially PPIs can be applied in coaching, more research is required to identify the mechanism of this application, as well as the impact of using PPIs in coaching and, vice versa, how coaching can aid the use of PPIs.

In order to practise Positive Psychology Coaching, PPIs need to be applied as required. In some cases, they may serve as a tool to help clients enhance their positive affect (e.g. Bryant & Veroff, 2007). In other cases, they may function as a tool serving a positive purpose, such as helping clients experience forgiveness (e.g. Worthington & Cowden, 2017), practise the virtue of patience (Schnitker, 2012), or create an image of the best possible self (King, 2001). PPIs have been created to enhance aspects of human functioning, which is also the aim of Positive Psychology Coaching Practice, thus need to be applied therein.

### **Positive measures**

Positive psychology research provides practitioners with tools to examine and measure positive traits and subjective experiences. These measures range from the assessment

of optimism, hope, locus of control, strengths (such as creativity, courage or forgiveness), through to an array of flourishing and well-being scales (Hone et al., 2014; Lopez & Snyder, 2003).

Susing, Green and Grant (2011) encourage coaches to use measures such as the Authenticity Scale. They argue that such use may aid in developing evidence-based coaching, but also help clients create an awareness about some aspects of themselves with which they are less familiar. Using various measures during a coaching practice may also act as a starting point for a discussion with a client, or serve as a tool for a positive diagnosis. Alternatively, they may be used before and after a series of coaching sessions, as a measure for clients' enhancement of positive aspects of the self.

In order to practise PPC, positive psychology measures need to be used. There are various measures helping clients identify negative aspects and subjective experiences, such as anxiety or depression (e.g. Beck et al., 1961; Hamilton, 1959). However, what they measure is the absence of illness, not the presence of positive traits and subjective experiences. Therefore, it is crucial that the appropriate positive psychology measures are applied.

### **The six elements working in tandem**

The six elements of the Conceptual Framework for Positive Psychology Coaching Practice work in tandem with each other. Any absent element may deem positive psychology not fully integrated into a coaching practice. For example, the lack of extensive knowledge in positive psychology and coaching psychology can make practitioners imperceptive to many obvious psychological processes that occur during coaching practice. Similarly, not using *Strength-based models* in a coaching practice does not refocus clients' attention on their strengths and how to apply and develop them, which is one of the pillars of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Therefore, not

applying strength-based models makes coaching practice a non-positive psychology approach.

The same applies to the other elements of the framework. When Positive diagnosis is missing, the coach may naturally focus on the negative aspects of clients' attitudes and behaviours, thus become preoccupied with fixing these aspects of their lives (Seligman et al., 2005), instead of focusing on what is already working and how to nurture it further.

Furthermore, when the goals with which coaches work are not the Optimal-functioning goals, they may prevent clients from experiencing their best possible selves. In these situations, no matter what positive psychology tools coaches attempt to use, their efforts may not be very effective in enhancing clients' functioning. Therefore, it is important that the practitioner has the knowledge of such goals and is able to apply them accordingly.

When *Positive Psychology Interventions* are not embedded into coaching practice, the optimal ways of enhancing clients' functioning is not applied. For example, many of the PPIs enhance positive affect, which fosters clear-headed, open-minded and flexible thinking and problem-solving (Isen, 2001); therefore, using PPIs may assist clients in brainstorming a way forward. When a coach does not have an understanding on how to use PPIs to aid the achievement of their goals, they may slow down clients' process towards experiencing optimal functioning.

Finally, *Positive measures* allow both practitioners and clients to assess their development throughout the coaching process. Apart from clients' personal goals, such as living a healthier life, becoming an effective leader, or being offered a job/course of their choice, Positive Psychology Coaching Practice takes clients on an additional journey of optimising their human capabilities. Therefore, a measurement of some aspects of psychological functioning, which is also important to a client, is essential. This may include the ability to use strengths

more frequently (Govindji & Linley, 2007), become more authentic (Wood et al., 2008), or enhance their well-being (Keyes, 2002). Without the existence of *Positive measures*, clients may not be aware of, or may be unable to articulate, the process that has taken place inside them. Therefore, this element of the framework is a crucial component of their positive change.

Taking all into consideration, each one of the elements of the framework needs to exist in order to exercise an integrated Positive Psychology and Coaching Practice. With any of the elements missing, the practice will be possible, however not maximised to its full potential.

### **What is *not* a PPC practice?**

The conceptual framework for PPC is the first comprehensive approach to mapping out the scope of PPC practice. It is a starting point for a discussion and an educational model for teaching PPC. However, apart from identifying the framework for PPC, it is also important to clarify what PPC is not.

PPC practice is not about focusing solely on the positive and ignoring the negative. Some of the positive outcomes, for example, authenticity, come from undergoing trauma, negative emotions and distress (Joseph, 2016). Therefore, negative experiences may help, not hinder, individuals and should not be avoided or disregarded by coaches. Coaching can act as a tool for helping clients manoeuvre through negativity in order to experience an ultimate positive outcome.

It is not about the tyranny of positive thinking. Approximately 30 per cent of the population are defensive pessimists who may become anxious when they are not allowed to think negatively (Norem, 2001). Therefore, refocusing them on their strengths and positives without considering weaknesses and negatives may prove ineffective and anxiety-provoking for them. This is why caution should be exercised when using a PPC approach with some clients, who might prefer an integrative approach of PPC with other models.

Instead, the proposed Conceptual Framework for a Positive Psychology Coaching practice is about a responsible approach to strength-based coaching, underpinned by extensive positive psychology knowledge and applying positive-psychology-informed tools to help clients reach their optimal human functioning and achieve their goals, regardless of their goals referring to well-being, physical health, romantic relationships,

friendships, career or enhancing overall quality of life. Most of the objectives clients want to meet can be underpinned by PPC practice. What matters is not the goal the client sets, rather the process coaches use to help their clients get there.

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