Positive Criminology and Positive Psychology

Jeremy Olson1

Abstract
Welcome to our Special Issue on Positive Criminology and Positive Psychology. It is our hope that this issue will help generate critical reflection about American criminal justice policy and the possibility of moving the system towards a happier and more prosocial perspective. To begin, this editorial introduction briefly frames positive criminology and positive psychology for the readers, and then reviews the content of the special issue.

Keywords
positive criminology, positive psychology, satisfaction with life, well-being

During his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Seligman (1999) lamented research indicating that cases of serious depression had increased 10-fold in four decades and voiced his concern that it was now commonly manifesting as early as the teen years. Seligman hinted at his dismay that increases in depression were despite increased prosperity, technological advances, and greater access to education. To Seligman, it was clear that Psychology’s long-standing efforts to promote mental healing in people who were suffering some form of dysfunction simply was not working as well as expected.

Arguably, because of its reliance on rehabilitative therapies from psychology, juvenile justice was experiencing its own sense of failed interventions (Carmichael et al., 2005; Spencer & Jones-Walker, 2004). Recidivism rates after juvenile interventions were consistently around 50% (Abrams et al., 2008; Unruh et al., 2009). While one-half recidivism appears high, these juvenile recidivism rates are generally lower than adult recidivism after incarceration. The latter have been reported between 44% after...
1 year post-release and 83% after 9 years post-release (Alper et al., 2018). One notable difference in philosophical approaches between adult and juvenile justice is that juvenile justice has traditionally been focused on rehabilitation while adult justice has been focused on deterrence and retribution. In short, juvenile justice sought to fix what ailed delinquents while adult justice sought to punish offenders. Regardless of approach and like psychology, both juvenile and adult justice systems were consistently failing to keep people from (re)experiencing deviance. To some leaders in both psychology and criminology, it was time for a change.

In response to the lack of success in psychology, Seligman (1999) called for a new perspective in psychology; one based in human strengths that would reorient psychology to understanding and fostering preventive psychological health. He called this new approach *positive psychology*. Seligman (1999) saw his positive psychology as a way not only to prevent serious mental health disorders but also “. . . to create, as a direct effect, an understanding and a scientifically informed practice of the pursuit of the best things in life and of family and civic virtue” (p. 562). Spurred in part by Seligman’s call and in part by their own work in criminology, Ronel and Elisha (2011) issued a call for a new perspective of *positive criminology*. To their minds, positive criminology would “. . . focus on the encounter with significant forces and effects that are experienced positively and that distance the individual from deviance and crime” (Ronel & Elisha, 2011, p. 307). In effect, the two new positives, that is psychology and criminology, sought to shift disciplinary perspectives away from solely investigating and controlling the causes, correlates, and treatments of deviance and toward understanding and improving what it takes to develop and maintain human strengths, social capital, and happiness.

Research into the two positives has begun to support the propositions that human strengths, social capital, and happiness are associated with prosocial behaviors. For instance, higher perceptions of satisfaction with life, which is a component of overall happiness, have been associated with resilience, asset building, work performance, and problem-solving (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Park et al., 2004; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Resilience, in turn, has been linked to lower reports of criminal deviance (Buonanno et al., 2009; Burt et al., 2017). Satisfaction with life has also been linked to abstinence, recovery, and remission from substance use (Donohue et al., 2003; Laudet et al., 2009; Maccagnan et al., 2020) and with lower reports of crime engagement (MacDonald et al., 2005; Olson et al., 2020; Valois et al., 2001, 2006). Still, much work remains for the two positives.

The hope of this Special Issue on Positive Criminology and Positive Psychology is to spur some of that remaining work. While the two positives are too comprehensive to cover in any one special issue, we have included five articles that we think will help to weave a positive thread through criminology and through criminal justice policy. We begin with a comparing and contrasting of positive criminology and positive psychology by the authors who originally proposed *positive criminology*. In their discussion, Elisha and Ronel (This issue) hint that, together, the two positives work to secure human thriving and optimal functioning such that people can make non-deviant choices in situations where they would have sought crime in the past. The authors then provide an overview of current research and settings where positive criminology has
shown a positive impact on behaviors by allowing people to learn from their past successes and their past failures.

Shifting to a positive criminological perspective requires more than academic, researcher, and practitioner attention. Because the public has large safety and financial stakes in our success, public support will be necessary for real long-term changes. Thus, we move next to the perspective-taking and perspective-getting work of Harney (This issue). Here, Harney provides some evidence for changes in opinion about incarceration when the public hears how incarcerated people describe their lives inside (perspective-getting). Harney’s findings also suggest that people may be more committed to taking action to effect changes in incarceration policies when they consider how they might feel in situations similar to those described by incarcerated people (perspective-taking). In essence, it seems that both hearing and feeling incarceration experiences could help move the public away from punishment and toward positive responses to crime.

Our third article (Abdel-Salam et al., This issue) explores the perceptions of people incarcerated in therapeutic communities (TCs) toward the corrections officers with whom they interact and live. Findings of this qualitative work suggest that improving correctional officers’ knowledge of substance recovery and their awareness of their own interpersonal interactions with those in TCs could increase the effectiveness of TCs. Perhaps Harney’s (This issue) work on perspective-taking and perspective-getting could help inform such positive changes in TCs?

Our fourth article (Laskov et al., This issue) highlights qualitative findings from an undergraduate mentoring program in prison. Among other things, the findings suggest such programs might be helpful in shifting incarcerated people’s sense of trust in others, helping them build tolerances to frustration, and bringing awareness of how their behaviors impact(ed) others. As hoped by the two positives, these additional capabilities and new perceptions might lead to different decisions when the mentees find themselves in situations where they previously chose to offend.

Rounding out the special issue, Olson et al. (This issue) offer an idea for incorporating positive psychology and positive criminology into the practices of restorative justice by framing the harms people perpetrate onto each other as affronts to happiness. The authors propose that doing so could open people’s awareness and understanding of harms, create a different pathway to building the social capital needed to repair and transform old harms into new strengths, and overcome individual and agency obstacles to the success of interventions.

In all, we hope the articles within this special issue inspire those who learn, live, teach, work, research, or make policies in the fields touched by positive criminology and positive psychology. If those people consider and amplify ways to build human growth and improve people’s well-being into their own work, we may be better able to prevent and intervene in psychological and criminal deviance. We believe that amplifying growth and well-being would be positive for everyone.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Jeremy Olson https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8501-7714

References
Abdel-Salam, S., Antonio, M. E., Bratina, M. P., & Kilmer, A. (This issue). Rapport and relationship building in a therapeutic community: Examining the dynamic between correctional officers and incarcerated persons. Criminal Justice Policy Review, 34(1) 43–64.

Abrams, L. S., Shannon, S. K. S., & Sangalang, C. (2008). Transition services for incarcerated youth: A mixed methods evaluation study. Children and Youth Services Review, 30, 522–535.

Alper, M., Durose, M. R., & Markman, J. (2018). Recidivism of prisoners released. 2018 update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-year follow-up period (2005-2014). Bureau of Justice Statistics. http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6266

Buonanno, P., Montolio, D., & Vanin, P. (2009). Does social capital reduce crime? The Journal of Law & Economics, 52(1), 145–170.

Burt, C. H., Lei, M. K., & Simons, R. L. (2017). Racial discrimination, racial socialization, and crime. Social Problems, 64(3), 414–438. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw036

Carmichael, S., Gover, A. R., Koons-Witt, B., & Inabnit, B. (2005). The successful completion of probation and parole among female offenders. Women & Criminal Justice, 17(1), 75–97. https://doi.org/10.1300/J012v17n01_04

Donohue, B., Teichner, G., Azrin, N., Weintraub, N., Crum, T. A., Murphy, L., & Silver, N. C. (2003). Initial reliability and validity of the Life Satisfaction Scale for Problem Youth in a sample of drug abusing and conduct disordered youth. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 12(4), 453–464.

Elisha, E., & Ronel, N. (This issue). Positive psychology and positive criminology: Similarities and differences. Criminal Justice Policy Review.

Fredrickson, B. L., & Joiner, T. (2002). Positive emotions trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being. Psychological Science, 13(2), 172–175.

Harney, J. (This issue). The power of empathy: Experimental evidence of the impact of perspective-focused interventions on support for prison reform. Criminal Justice Policy Review.

Laskov, R., Timor, U., & Golan, E. (This issue). Student mentors of incarcerated persons: Contribution of a mentoring program for incarcerated persons. Criminal Justice Policy Review.

Laudet, A. B., Becker, J. B., & White, W. L. (2009). Don’t wanna go through that madness no more: Quality of life satisfaction as predictor of sustained remission from illicit drug misuse. Substance Use & Misuse, 44, 227–252.

Maccagnan, A., Taylor, T., & White, M. P. (2020). Valuing the relationship between drug and alcohol use and life satisfaction: Findings from the crime survey for England and Wales. Journal of Happiness Studies, 21, 877–898. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00110-0

MacDonald, J. M., Piquero, A. R., Valois, R. F., & Zullig, K. J. (2005). The relationship between life satisfactions, risk-taking behaviors, and youth violence. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20(11), 1495–1518.
Olson, J., Martin, R. L., & Connell, N. M. (2020). Satisfaction with life and crime: Testing the link. *Journal of Psychology, Crime, and Law, 27*(7), 631–655. https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2020.1849692

Olson, J., Sarver, R. S., & Killian, B. (This issue). Seeing the harm to happiness: Integrating satisfaction with life into restorative practices. *Criminal Justice Policy Review.* https://doi.org/10.1177/08874034221115337

Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 23*(5), 603–619.

Ronel, N., & Elisha, E. (2011). A different perspective: Introducing positive criminology. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 55*(2), 305–325.

Seligman, M. E. P. (1999). The president’s address (in the annual report). *American Psychologist, 54*(8), 559–562.

Spencer, M. B., & Jones-Walker, C. (2004). Interventions and services offered to former juvenile offenders reentering their communities: An analysis of program effectiveness. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 2*(1), 88–97.

Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 86*(2), 320–333.

Unruh, D. K., Gau, J. M., & Waintrup, M. G. (2009). An exploration of factors reducing recidivism rates of formerly incarcerated youth with disabilities participating in a re-entry intervention. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 18*, 284–293. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-008-9228-8

Valois, R. F., Paxton, R. J., Zullig, K. J., & Huebner, E. S. (2006). Life satisfaction and violent behaviors among middle school students. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 15*(6), 695–707.

Valois, R. F., Zullig, K. J., Drane, J. W., & Huebner, E. S. (2001). Relationship between life satisfaction and violent behaviors among adolescents. *American Journal of Health Behavior, 25*(4), 353–366.

**Author Biography**

**Jeremy Olson,** He has been studying the philosophies of restorative justice and happiness for about 30 years. Over that time, I have taught, developed, implemented, facilitated, and evaluated several policies and programs based in these ideas. Their potential continues to fascinate me.