

Pedagogies of Happiness:

What and How Self-Help, Positive Psychology, and Positive Education Teach about Well-Being

By

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Abstract

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Adviser: Carrie Hintz

*Pedagogies of Happiness: What and How Self-Help, Positive Psychology, and Positive Education Teach about Well-Being* introduces humanities scholars to the rapidly expanding discipline of positive psychology, and argues that literary scholars, cultural theorists, rhetoricians, and educators must learn about and play a role in shaping the important political and social consequences of positive psychology's research on subjective well-being. The project first explores key rhetorical sites of the self-help genre and positive psychology discipline, and parses their pedagogy, potentiality, promises, and problems. While these movements claim to benefit not only individuals but also society, they are based on a number of unacknowledged—and often overlapping—values that suggest otherwise: they are individualistic, instrumentalized, decontextualized, non-dialogic, non-reflexive, politically conservative, and remedial. Therefore, self-help and positive psychology's versions of happiness, well-being, and flourishing preserve and serve the status quo.

After highlighting these problems, *Pedagogies of Happiness* explores how research into subjective well-being is used to effect crucial policy decisions that affect teaching as well as student learning conditions. The second half of the project presents current efforts to create educational curricula that teach and institutionalize well-being and complicates the assumptions,

values, and goals behind so-called “positive education.” The final chapter synthesizes the project’s various critiques by tracing how self-help and positive psychology rhetoric and pedagogy merge powerfully in a specific positive education initiative: Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF), a mandatory United States Army program for building resiliency, psychological fitness, and well-being in soldiers. Drawing on composition and rhetoric, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and utopian theory, *Pedagogies of Happiness* concludes by sketching pedagogical alternatives to positive education’s contradictory and conservative curricula, and inserts a utopian critique, arguing that future discussions need to consider not only individual resiliency but also social justice.

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## Introduction

### The High Stakes of Happiness: Why Well-Being Matters

Happiness is, much like utopia, an often abstract, ambiguous, and misunderstood concept; it is, as leading positive psychologist Martin Seligman asserts, a “promiscuously overused word” (*Authentic Happiness* 15). Labeling as an “unalienable right” (“Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”) what many people consider an elusive ideal, the founding fathers of the United States laid the groundwork for Americans’ unrelenting search for happiness. As contemporary American society has become increasingly obsessed with achieving happiness, this “transcendent good” (Amy Lowell) has been commodified and marketed to eager consumers in various ways: innumerable how-to books and self-help materials, career consultants to maximize potential and satisfaction in the workplace, personality profiles to improve friendships, online dating sites to increase marital success, happiness questionnaires, uppers, downers, mood stabilizers, Disneyworld, Hollywood happy endings. But perhaps the most significant shift is the scientification and institutionalization of happiness in the discipline of positive psychology since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the resulting pedagogies and policies of happiness that has arisen in response.

*Pedagogies of Happiness: What and How Self-Help, Positive Psychology, and Positive Education Teach about Well-Being* introduces humanities scholars to the overarching issues at stake in positive psychology, an emerging discipline based primarily in the sciences and social sciences that researches happiness, well-being, and flourishing. Literary scholars, cultural theorists, rhetoricians, educators, and public intellectuals must learn about and shape the powerful political and social consequences of the new research on subjective well-being. After

evaluating the values, rhetoric, pedagogy, and applications of well-being in popular culture (self-help), positive psychology, and policy, this project demonstrates how these discourses emphasize individual resiliency at the expense of collective, radical hope. In this project, I am particularly interested in how research on subjective well-being is used to effect crucial policy decisions that impact our teaching as well as our students' learning conditions. My final chapters first explore current efforts to create educational curricula that teach well-being and then complicate the assumptions, values, and goals behind this "positive education." Drawing on my background in composition and rhetoric, critical pedagogy, and utopian studies, I sketch pedagogical alternatives to what I consider to be non-reflexive, conservative, and individualistic curricula. In doing so, I insert a utopian critique, arguing that future discussions of happiness need to account for not only subjective well-being but also social justice.

The everyday horizon of happiness in popular culture is dominated by the rhetoric of self-help (self-improvement). I therefore begin this project with a discussion of self-help materials because they represent, for many people, a familiar site of encounter with pedagogies of happiness. Self-help teaches its readers a great deal about the culture industry, and the types of ideologies circulating in popular discourse. Although the genre's purported aims are to help people improve and progress, in offering individuals particular visions of happiness and the good life, self-help presents key problems that consequently preserve the status quo and limit possibility.

Self-help practitioners and materials have recently been in conversation with the science and scholarship of positive psychology. Positive psychology is a fully-fledged discipline, one that has already entered its second wave and offers revised theories of well-being that now contemplate "flourishing" as a goal rather than mere pleasure. Positive psychology advocates are

increasingly pragmatic and focused on the application of their research to various fields, as evidenced by the use of subjective well-being research in conjunction with economics, business, law, policy, education, neuroscience, genetics, and evolutionary psychology.

Although self-help and positive psychology often try to separate themselves from each other, they merge in powerful ways. They both privilege a certain model of “flourishing,” and in doing so, they establish standards for what type of happiness people should seek and how they should relate to this happiness. The convergence of self-help and positive psychology is particularly pronounced in positive education, of which Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (a positive education initiative developed for the United States Army). By problematizing these discourses, I enact Freire’s pedagogy of “reading the word and the world,” something crucially absent from positive education’s current focus on the individual in isolation.

In this dissertation, I discuss self-help, positive psychology, happiness, well-being, and flourishing. The contours of these discourses will become clearer in the following chapters, but a few words are in order here about their connections and uses. The terms “happiness,” “well-being,” and “flourishing” are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation. However, nuanced distinctions among the terms exist (such as the distinction between happiness and well-being that Seligman makes in his revised theory in *Flourish*), and when this clarity is necessary for my larger argument, I will make this distinction and clarify its relevance in my discussion.

As I work to understand how these terms are being used in the constant stream of publications on the subject, I find myself returning to certain key assumptions, ideas and texts. One such example is the utopian impulse, a desire for progress and possibility. Utopian theory fundamentally maintains that people, societies, circumstances, and environments can be remade for the better, and it seeks to educate people’s desires for these “better” things. In this way,

utopias are fundamentally connected to educational, design, and pedagogical concerns. The questions of how to educate desire, how to achieve such transformation, what methods should be employed, and even what terms such as “better” and “progress” signify are open to debate. Although utopia is not always explicitly discussed in this dissertation, it informs all of my arguments and positions here. The utopian impulse, the notion of possibility and hope rather than happiness, underlies all my readings of the self-help, positive psychology, and positive education discourses and it is always, even when not acknowledged, in conversation with them.

Similar to utopian theory, the movements that comprise the core of this study—self-help, positive psychology, and positive education—seek to increase human flourishing and to create the good life (though they do so not by imagining happy societies but by focusing instead on individual happiness). What well-being is, what values are important, and what progress means also remain unsettled in these movements, but advocates nonetheless proceed as if the answers are clear and then try to build policy based on this misguided notion of consensus.

The contested meanings of the terms “happiness,” “well-being,” and “flourishing” lead me to another core premise of this dissertation: nothing—rhetoric, happiness, pedagogy, utopia—is ideologically neutral. Therefore, two of my primary aims in this project are to parse out the values behind these concepts and to pay attention to what is not said or given air time, to what is shrouded by the dominant discourse. For example, *Brave New World* is an oft-cited dystopian novel about happiness, and readers often focus on its portrayal of well-being: its hedonism, short-cuts to pleasure through soma, and use of social conditioning to control the population. However, instead of highlighting what this book’s vision of happiness *does* value, we can turn the question around and ask what it *does not* value: it does not allow for individuality, for authentic expression, for knowledge of history, for the establishment of meaningful

relationships. In this project I ask the same question about self-help, positive psychology, and positive education, and in this way, I make visible what layers of culture, rhetoric, pedagogy, and ideology tends to obscure.

At times, it may seem as though I am overly critical in my analysis and assessment, as though I explore self-help and positive psychology merely to critique and dismiss them. This sense of dismissal may seem particularly tangible in the first two chapters, since they include a great deal of critique in establishing and exploring the movements' core problems. I do not aim to be reductive here, but rather to complicate the conversation. These initial critiques are necessary, not in order to dismiss the movements but so that we can later engage them, especially with respect to their implications for education. Many critics dismiss (or accept) the movements wholesale, but their vicious attacks or glorious praise serve only to keep the movements at arm's length. I work in the first half of this project to break the two movements down so that, in the second half, we can understand their applications with a more nuanced perspective.<sup>1</sup>

In moving towards this nuanced perspective, I employ the methodologies of cultural studies and discourse analysis, treating these movements as well as the concepts of “happiness” and “hope” as rhetorical devices that circulate in and shape our world. Throughout the dissertation, I am in dialogue with Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), a text whose insights are critical to my assessment of happiness and inform the entire project. Ahmed discusses the “happiness turn” (2-7) and considers happiness as both performative and normative. She explains, “The science of happiness could be described as performative: by finding happiness in certain places, it generates those places as being good, as being what should

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis will prove useful when, in chapter 4, I turn to a positive education initiative, Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF). In this program, self-help and positive psychology discourses and pedagogies merge, and the critical work I have done in earlier chapters will help to make sense of this contradictory union.

be promoted *as* goods” (6). Therefore, one of Ahmed’s primary aims in the book is to illustrate “the unhappy effects of happiness” (2):

The question that guides this book is thus not so much ‘what is happiness?’ but rather ‘what does happiness do?’ [ . . . ] I am interested in how happiness is associated with some life choices and not others, how happiness is imagined as being what follows being a certain kind of being. The history of happiness can be thought of as a history of associations. In wishing for happiness we wish to be associated with happiness, which means to be associated with its associations. The very promise that happiness is what you get for having the right associations might be how we are directed toward certain things” (2).

Ahmed explains how we must pay attention not necessarily to happiness itself but to things *contingent* to happiness, as they hold crucial keys for an understanding of what gets valued and why. *The Promise of Happiness* has been invaluable in my developing a nuanced understanding of the types of possibilities the concept of “happiness” enables as well as the types of possibilities it tends to disqualify or preclude. Instead of asking the traditional questions about happiness, such as what it is and how to maximize it, Ahmed shifts her gaze to the types of being that it enables. This seemingly small shift—from the “what” to the “how”—opens up a rich conversation about what gets excluded in current discussions of well-being.

One of the ways in which this project differs from Ahmed’s is my serious and sustained attention to the current research into and application of well-being. Ahmed does briefly discuss positive psychology in her Introduction (7-12), and her analysis there is characteristically illuminating. In response to the scientific assessment of happiness, she states, “What is at stake here is a belief that we can know ‘in advance’ what will improve people’s lives. Making people

happier is taken up as a sign of improvement. The very ‘thing’ we aim to achieve is the ‘thing’ that will get us there” (8). She also points to the instrumentalizing tendency in positive psychology (a claim I also make and extend to self-help): “We make ourselves happy, as an acquisition of capital that allows us to be or to do this or that, or even to get this or that” (10). While Ahmed’s theorization of happiness and unhappiness is critical to interrogating happiness and understanding the work it performs, there needs to be more engagement of the most visible generators of this rhetoric and these values. Self-help, positive psychology, and positive education together create and endorse descriptions of and prescriptions for happiness and well-being that are quickly forming a unified front, a standardized, monolithic discourse that limits possibility. These movements are *high stakes*. They matter, immensely, particularly because research on subjective well-being is being institutionalized *prior* to conversations about its assumptions, values, goals, and consequences.

Like Ahmed, I “attend to how happiness is spoken, lived, practiced” (15), in relation to these movements. I find her notion of the “happiness archive” in particular a particularly rich idea to which I consistently respond in both my scholarship and my teaching.<sup>2</sup> This dissertation is, in some ways, my happiness (and unhappiness) archive. It brings together the various discourses on happiness and tries to re-think them in relation to one another. This juxtaposition helps to point out new problems and possibilities that might otherwise remain hidden. As Ahmed explains, “Where we find happiness teaches us what we value rather than simply what is of value” (13).

Lauren Berlant, in her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), is in conversation with Ahmed, and also with the horizon of possibility (which I am labeling as aligned with the utopian impulse).

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<sup>2</sup> This dissertation’s conclusion discusses how I bring the “happiness archive” into my classrooms and to my students.

Berlant's framework clarifies how a desired object actually might prevent the attainment of happiness. For Berlant, an object functions as cruel optimism "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). In her view,

optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming (2).

This attention to transformation and how happiness, hope, or optimism might function conservatively, are key issues to which I return continually in this project. However, Berlant takes up these important questions surrounding happiness, flourishing, and optimism without engaging positive psychology (unlike Ahmed, she does not mention it at all in her study).

Many key critics of happiness and affect do not engage with either self-help or positive psychology, but I argue that we must place these discourses and theoretical frameworks in conversation with one another as well as with the utopian impulse.<sup>3</sup> In *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1987), utopian theorist Tom Moylan discusses the radical potential of utopia. He states, "Produced through the fantasizing powers of the imagination, utopia opposes the affirmative culture maintained by dominant ideology. Utopia negates the contradictions in a social system by forging visions of what is not yet realized either in theory or practice. In generating such figures of hope, utopia contributes to the open space of

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<sup>3</sup> Berlant only mentions utopian tendencies in passing, while Ahmed devotes an entire chapter to it (Chapter 5, Happy Futures). In this chapter, she explores the utopian impulse as well as optimism/pessimism and hope/anxiety.

opposition” (1-2).

In uncovering what the movements’ rhetoric reveals about the values of self-help and positive psychology, I identify a number of core problems that serve to close this “space of opposition.” These movements are non-dialogic, glorifying the individual at the expense of the social. They prescribe optimism, positive thinking, and resiliency instead of radical hope focused on large-scale transformation and social justice. Therefore, they reproduce the status quo instead of encourage new possibilities. Furthermore, they are instrumentalized, decontextualized, remedial and politically conservative. Finally, they are non-reflexive, applying their problematic ideology wholesale to various fields without active interrogation of whether their methods and goals are desirable in the first place.

My analysis highlights not only the performative and normative aspects of happiness, but also its pedagogical function. I stress how these genres are didactic, with “experts” (whether self-help authors or positive psychologists, or, increasingly, a mix of the two) who instruct their readers to first learn and then apply specific skills to make changes at the individual level. Since these skills are portrayed as being ideologically neutral (a stance I challenge throughout the project), they are deemed easily transferrable from one context to the next. Even though both self-help and positive psychology position themselves as building on strengths rather than dwelling on deficits, I argue that they remain forms of personal remediation according to pre-determined standards and, as such, are inherently conservative.

At the center of this dissertation is an extended exploration of pedagogy in a more explicit sense: the field of positive education, or the application of positive psychology research to schools and classrooms. I explore current efforts to create educational curricula centered on developing well-being and contextualize these efforts within the debates and power struggles of

education, critical pedagogy, and composition.

As there is no book-length project that actively interrogates the relationship between the core ideas of well-being as espoused by positive psychology and the institutionalization and application of them to education, my dissertation fills a necessary gap in the existing scholarship. There are earlier books in education, dealing with general notions of resiliency, happiness, and well-being in educational contexts. However, they don't tackle positive psychology. Even the major books in affect theory (such as Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, discussed above) deal only with the positive psychology movement peripherally, if at all. This dissertation is therefore the first sustained conversation about the positive psychology and self-help movements and their consequences for pedagogy.

This is not a "how-to" book nor is it one that prescribes a particular action, though at times I may resist certain tendencies of the movements and gesture towards what I believe are more productive trajectories. What I do advocate for is attention to the rhetorical and pedagogical functions and consequences of happiness. I feel strongly that we need to start asking different questions about not only representations of happiness and pedagogy, but also what is at stake in these representations. And there is, in fact, much at stake. A large part of what I aim to do in this project is step back to disentangle various parts of the conversations surrounding happiness. Of course, research into well-being, the good life, and resiliency has been occurring for quite some time now, but the swiftness with which positive psychology is being accepted, applied, and institutionalized is astonishing, and perhaps a bit alarming.

As I will highlight later in the dissertation, positive psychology advocates do have grandiose plans for helping people to flourish; and yet, these plans leave out many critical aspects of social well-being. Others have pointed to the question of what positive psychology

and other discourses of happiness overlook. Ahmed points out how dominant versions of happiness devalue the “killjoy,” the bearer of unhappiness. Others critics have shown how positive psychology posits and privileges a certain type of personality, that of the self-reliant, cheerful, resilient extravert. These are all valid critiques, and important ones; to them I will add the utopian impulse, possibility, and a radical vision of hope.

Both the rhetoric and pedagogy of self-help and positive psychology narrow expression, potential, and possibility. We therefore need to problematize these movements, and not take them as a given. These two discourses need to be in dialogue with each other, as well as with other viewpoints, perspectives, and notions of possibility. In just little over a decade, positive psychology has become a major player in the academy, policy, and the public’s conceptions of happiness. While this dissertation does not always (or even often) agree with the discipline’s premises and trajectory, it does acknowledge the discipline’s powerful influence.

Therefore, this project seeks to identify other stakes and involve other stakeholders in these important conversations about the happy self and the good life. There has been a proliferation of publications and publicity concerning happiness. Ahmed, among many others, has noted this clear “happiness turn” (2-7). I neither intend nor desire to rehash conversations that have already occurred, though some background is necessary to sketch the current state of happiness studies for readers. As someone who has been immersed in and consumed by (as well as an avid consumer of) these discourses for half a decade now, I must remember that while these movements and questions and conversation occupy me on a daily basis, many people are not aware of the discipline or its recent developments.

Therefore, my aims in this project are to introduce the movements to a wider audience, bridge divergent discourses, and begin a conversation about new areas of research in both human

flourishing and pedagogy. I do not intend to ridicule or minimize the movements or to prescribe solutions; rather, I seek to understand the movements. My hope is that this project will allow the boundaries of the conversation to widen and encourage more interdisciplinary collaboration, both within positive psychology and the humanities. By examining what these discourses make possible and what types of possibility they preclude, it becomes clear how uniform the discourse is becoming and what types of conversations are not occurring.

As a result of my participation in various discourse communities—such as utopian studies, composition and rhetoric, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and digital humanities—not normally engaged with positive psychology and self-help, I offer a unique vantage point and ask questions strikingly absent from the current conversations and debates into well-being. Some of these questions are explored at length in the body of the dissertation, and others are only hinted at, resurfacing for a brief cameo in the conclusion as thoughts to be explored for further projects. Some questions, in fact, cannot be asked until these initial ones have been answered. It is my hope that this project can add fresh perspectives to these conversations, and perhaps start new ones.

There have been many discussions and manifestos recently about the crisis in the humanities and the irrelevance of the work we in the humanities do in an increasingly corporatized and militarized world. This dissertation is not merely a response to this crisis, though I do believe that those working within the humanities can bring important perspectives and critiques to the current dialogue on well-being. Certainly, a sustained focus on what factors contribute to a happy self and a good life is a worthwhile pursuit. Especially in an increasingly depressing and depressed world, any attempts to increase human flourishing should not be minimized. My aim here is to uncover the redemptive aspects of pedagogies of happiness, ones

that align the current questions of self-help, positive psychology, and positive education more squarely with the utopian impulse, possibility, and social justice. I advocate using praxis, situated knowledge, and happiness as “limit acts” (in the Freirian sense) that work against the perceived hopelessness or inherent obstacles in a situation instead of promoting contentment with the status quo. Transformative pedagogies of happiness must also incorporate an emphasis on the imagination, play, failure, hope, flexibility, dynamism, and dialogism that would allow not just for individual “flourishing” but also for collective futurity.

In working to consider these transformative pedagogies of happiness, I don’t pretend to have all of the answers, or even all of the questions, especially since research is occurring rapidly even as I write these words, and the state of knowledge in the discipline continues to evolve. The point of this dissertation is to broaden the conversation, to bridge discourses and disciplinary gaps, to raise questions—many many questions—and to gesture towards some answers and provide some useful critiques. Therefore, the various sections I describe below are intended to be snapshots of particular sites of activity in the happiness industry, not the final word on the subject.

This project’s opening chapter, “The Happiness Industry: Parsing the Promises and Problems of Self-Help,” explores representations of happiness in popular culture and showcases its dominant tropes and core problems. I perform a close-reading of key examples of the self-help genre: texts focused on increasing individual happiness: Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* series (2006 to the present), Gretchen Rubin’s *The Happiness Project* series (2011 to the present), and Tal Ben-Shahar’s *Happier* series (2007 to the present). In dialogue with Barbara Ehrenreich’s critique of “the cult of cheerfulness” in *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (2010), Sara Ahmed’s framework of happiness as both performative and normative, and

self-help scholarship by Rimke, McGee, Illouz, Salerno, and Dolby, I challenge how these self-help sensations promote solutions based on personal effort and positive thinking.<sup>4</sup> These primary texts are also contextualized within the larger “culture industry” of happiness, maintained in part by pop icon Oprah Winfrey’s glorification of the self-help genre.

My second chapter, “Happiness Studies: Positive Psychology, Politics, and Policy,” introduces readers to the central texts, figures, and debates of positive psychology. I demonstrate how the scientific research into well-being, while ostensibly positioning itself as hard science distinct from self-help and “pop psychology,” actually works hand-in-hand with the self-help texts investigated in the previous chapter to form a monolithic version of happiness and the good life. Positive psychology appeals to the rigors and infallibility of science by applying quantitative reasoning to qualitative experiences (such as Seligman’s “happiness” formula:  $H=S+C+V$ )<sup>5</sup> and posits subjective well-being as an important intervention in policy. I pay particular attention to the notion of happiness as a public good, engaging the ways in which the positive psychology research community is attempting to effect changes in society based on its findings.

After surveying and critiquing key texts and discourses in chapters 1 and 2, I move to an extended exploration of a particular application of positive psychology: well-being in education. My third chapter, “Positive Education: Teaching about and for Well-Being,” therefore represents a turning point in the dissertation. Building on the insights of my previous chapters, this chapter moves the project from a discussion of the theory, research, and publications to a look at their application. After outlining the details of positive education for readers, I put positive education in conversation with composition, highlighting the centrality of composition and writing to the

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<sup>4</sup> Byrne’s claim that “thoughts become things” (the “secret”) is a prime example of this problematic way of viewing one’s place in and effect on the world.

<sup>5</sup> H is happiness; S is the set level (determined by genetics); C are uncontrollable circumstances; V are variables under a person’s control.

self-improvement, positive psychology, and positive education agendas, a phenomenon not usually explicitly acknowledged in the scholarship. I also use critical pedagogy as a lens through which to radicalize positive education's curricula.

My fourth and final chapter, “‘Drafting’ Happiness: The Rhetoric of Resiliency in the United States Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program,” synthesizes the various strands of the previous three chapters by illustrating how self-help and positive psychology rhetoric and pedagogy merge powerfully in a specific positive education initiative. This initiative is Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF), a mandatory training program for the United States Army that seeks to build resiliency, psychology fitness, and well-being in soldiers. I conclude the chapter with a close reading of CSF's Facebook presence and illustrate the problems associated with its contradictory messages of individual resilience and social well-being.

The project's conclusion, “Growing the Happiness Archive: Transformative Pedagogies of Happiness,” moves from leveling critiques to envisioning alternatives. I begin with a reflection on my own pedagogy in relation to the utopian impulse and happiness. I then revisit my revisioning of positive education in light of Ahmed's happiness archive, composition, critical pedagogy, and the utopian impulse. By putting self-help, well-being, and positive education into conversation with utopia, I illustrate how hope and possibility offer a more productive lens than optimism and happiness through which to view flourishing.

## Chapter 1

## The Happiness Industry: Parsing the Promises and Problems of Self-Help

*Oprah: Your book has changed so many lives already. It sold over 2 million copies. Tell us about it.*

*Rhonda Byrne: Yes, it's been amazing Oprah. And I really want to stress that anyone can turn their life around. Just look at me. I'm not a doctor or a scientist. I don't like science or even understand it. All I am is a normal person who claims we control the universe with our thoughts.*

*Oprah: And people ... it works! I control the universe with my mind all the time! Just yesterday, I woke up and thought, I want to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on a hot air balloon. I put it out to the universe, my assistant made a call, and the next thing you know I am floating over the Sears Tower with peanut butter stuck to the roof of my mouth ... the secret!!!*

The above dialogue is the opening of a sketch from the March 17, 2007 episode of *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, a weekly popular sketch comedy show. The sketch presents a segment of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in which Oprah Winfrey (played by Maya Rudolph) hosts Rhonda Byrne (played by Amy Poehler), executive producer and author of the self-help film and book, *The Secret* (2006). Additional guests on this rendition of *Oprah* include *SNL* guest star Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Pamela Headley (a jilted wife whose husband has left her for a younger woman and who is encouraged to use positive thinking to repair her marriage and, when that doesn't work, to believe that she and her husband “are back together” even though that is not the case in reality) and Kenan Thompson as Olessi Oneweeja (a refugee from the Darfur region of Sudan who is told that *his* negative thinking, rather than the region's civil war, is the cause of his and his people's affliction). Taking the logic of *The Secret* to its extremes, this sketch parodies the book's internal inconsistencies and problematic values.

While *The Secret* Oprah sketch on *SNL* is a parody and obvious exaggeration, when

viewers laugh, they are laughing at something real behind the comedy. In laying bare the illogical (and borderline absurd) claims of this “how-to” bestseller, this parody previews a number of the points I will argue in this chapter about the promises, problems, and potential of the self-help genre (points that also apply to the positive psychology research and its applications discussed in future chapters). As is clear from the excerpt quoted above, many of the claims of self-help authors and texts start to unravel under close scrutiny.

First, “Rhonda Byrne’s” (Poehler’s) statement above points to the fraught relationship that self-help often holds in relation to science, expertise, and authority. By highlighting that Byrne not only is *not* an educated and licensed professional but also doesn’t even “like or understand” science, *SNL* illustrates one of the critiques leveled against the self-help genre: the flimsy claims and overstated promises by ordinary people who dupe readers (on scant evidence) into believing their methods will work.<sup>1</sup>

Second, “Oprah’s” (Rudolph’s) personal testimony of *The Secret’s* efficacy illustrates the gaps in logic between the methods of self-help advice and their probability of success. *The Secret* claims that positive thoughts alone lead to the gratification of one’s desires. This framework denies the role of privilege and the necessity of external resources that must be present in order to bring positive thoughts to fruition. In asserting that she merely “thought” about eating her sandwich high in the sky and then this wish came true, “Oprah” elides the monetary assets and powerful pull necessary to make such an extraordinary thing happen. Her quick aside (“my

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<sup>1</sup> As I shall demonstrate later in this chapter, this parody is a fairly accurate portrayal of how Byrne presents her claims in *The Secret* and its various offshoots. In these texts, she downplays knowledge of the process by which “things” manifest and chooses instead to focus on these “things”’ magical appearance and transmutation. Her method attributes this miraculous transformation to a mystical power at work in the universe, a power that individuals who learn the “secret” (by buying Byrne’s products) can harness to achieve everlasting wealth and happiness. Here, the fulfillment of desire is equated with acquiring material possessions.

assistant made a call”) is the necessary action required to make her desires a reality, since “put[ting] it out to the universe” alone is not going to make this fantasy happen. “Oprah’s” unacknowledged message here is not that “thoughts become things” (the purported “secret”) but that thoughts *plus* a great deal of economic and social capital become things.

The misleading promise of mere unaided thought as the means to limitless gratification is only half of *The Secret’s* problematic ideology. The flip side of this shortcut to unbridled gain is, if the *presence* of positive thinking is a surefire means of success, then the *absence* of positive thinking (or worse, negative thinking) is the cause of failure. According to Byrne, the right type of thinking always delivers the object of one’s desires and this positive thinking is squarely within an individual’s power and capacity. Therefore, if one’s desires do not manifest, the individual is the only one at fault. The pedagogy of *The Secret*, while it appears to focus primarily on acquiring things, is actually premised on deficit and remediation. The implicit logic runs as follows: individuals lack things; they lack these things because they lack the right thoughts and way of thinking; this lack can be remediated by purchasing, reading, and applying Byrne’s advice, which is her recommended, one-size-fits-all method for acquiring whatever one desires. This reasoning is made clear later in the *SNL* skit when Olessi Oneweeja is video conferenced into the conversation:

Oprah: *Joining us now via satellite from the Darfur region of Sudan is Olessi Oneweeja. Olessi, how are you?*

Olessi: *Well, you know, bad.*

Oprah: *Well, let’s, let’s talk about this Olessi. Why do you think things are going badly?*

Olessi: *Well, as you may or may not know, this region is four years into a brutal*

*conflict, which has claimed over 200,000 lives. The UN has refused to classify the conflict as a genocide, and while there is a current ceasefire, I don't think anyone thinks it's permanent.*

Byrne: *Umm, very negative. It's really negative.*

Oprah: *Very negative. Very negative. Secret!* [Oprah starts these comments in the middle of Byrne's first "very negative" above, and the two women overlap, talking over each other]

Byrne: *Olessi, I know this is hard for you to hear, but your outlook is what's hurting you.*

Olessi: *No, I think it's the Janjaweed.*<sup>2</sup>

Byrne: *No, it's you!*

Oprah: *Olessi, did you get the copy of The Secret we sent?*

Olessi: *Yes.*

Oprah: *And, did you read it?*

Olessi: *No.*

Byrne: *Why not?*

Olessi: *Because I ate it.*

Oprah: *Well, digest every word!*

Olessi is informed that it is not the complex and horrific political, social, and material situation in which he finds himself, but rather his negative thinking that is the problem. After admitting that he "ate" the self-help book that was sent to him, he is merely dismissed. While he is still forced

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<sup>2</sup> "Janjaweed" refers to gunman in Darfur (and surrounding areas). This retort demonstrates Olessi's commitment to examining the larger context (the "brutal conflict") of his current state, a context both Byrne and Oprah devalue.

to be a consumer of the genre (in that he literally “consumes” the book), his dumbfounded gaze in response to Oprah and Byrne’s comments demonstrate that he perceives both these women and *The Secret* to be wholly irrelevant to his current plight.<sup>3</sup>

I will return to a more detailed exploration of the problems arising from *The Secret*’s ideology later in this chapter. Before doing so, I will first sketch a picture of the pervasiveness of self-help and its attendant rhetorics of improvement, progress, the good life, and happiness in American popular culture. It is not possible to analyze the genre fully without addressing the cultural matrix that houses it. The self-help genre is accessible, popular, and far-reaching, and it teaches us about the culture industry and the ideologies circulating in our everyday lives. While self-help does not always directly promise “happiness,” it does suggest an avenue towards the good life, self-improvement, greater well-being, and satisfaction for individuals. I will show how, since the notion of the individual “self” is culturally constructed, self help’s task of identifying and recovering an “authentic” self is misleading.

I will then revisit the genre’s core problems, paying particular attention to how self-help preserves and serves the status quo and limits possibility. This work is done implicitly rather than explicitly: the self-help discourse functions similarly to the way happiness does in Ahmed’s framework of happiness as “performative.” I argue that self-help is also pedagogical both

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<sup>3</sup> Olessi is presumably so famished that eating the book seemed the appropriate response. Its nutritional value is likely to be greater for him than its so-called wisdom, especially since self-help books written for an entirely different context have no relevance for his current situation. In *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (2005), Steve Salerno explains how a self-help reader (in the *SNL* example above, Olessi) is often labeled “negative” after doubting the value of positive thoughts and affirmation prescribed by what he terms SHAM (Self-Help and Actualization Movements). Salerno writes, “And how, exactly, will this wonderful transformation happen? What is the mechanism, the link between their self-talk and the course their lives may take? [. . .] Never mind! Those are the questions SHAM artists teach you never to ask, because to even entertain such doubts reveals a negative attitude, and lord knows you can’t achieve *anything* in this life without your positive mental attitude” (18).

explicitly and implicitly. The explicit pedagogy consists of the how-to nature of much of the genre: the expert advice, the guides, the workbooks, the preachy instructions. These aspects privilege product (content), outcomes, standardized expectations and learning goals, assessment, and remediation. The implicit pedagogy is the cultural, ideological, and rhetorical work self-help performs in more subtle, nuanced ways, orienting its readers towards being certain types of people. In this project I am less concerned with self-help's efficacy (if it does what it promises in the snippets of praise on the book covers)<sup>4</sup> and more interested in how the genre accomplishes what it *doesn't* set out to do (or what it doesn't acknowledge it is doing). What claims is the genre not making? How do these claims set the horizons of possibility for both the good/happy person and the good and happy life?

The second half of this chapter shifts to a close reading of three sets of recent, popular self-help texts: Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* franchise, Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project* materials, and Tal Ben-Shahar's *Happier* series.<sup>5</sup> These texts serve to illustrate not only the promises and problems of self-help but also its pedagogical function as outlined above. I conclude with a nod towards chapter 2 on positive psychology. Using Tal Ben-Shahar's approach (in his *Happier* series) of bridging the two ostensibly disparate discourses, I transition to an in-depth look at the positive psychology movement as an extension and "repurposing" (Salerno 6) of the self-help genre.

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, as I introduce and explore positive psychology in chapter 2, my goal is less about the discipline's empirical validity or efficacy and more about its values, rhetoric, and pedagogy.

<sup>5</sup> This cross-section is not, nor is it intended to be, a representative sample of the entire self-help genre. I have chosen these authors and texts for their widespread popularity and appeal, their ever-expanding series, their recent publications, and their intersection (or lack thereof) with positive psychology (the primary focus of this dissertation).

## Self-Help in American Popular Culture

As I discussed at the opening of this chapter, the insightful and incisive *SNL* comedy sketch parodies both the massively popular self-help book *The Secret* and the Oprah show (as a platform for this book and other pop culture sensations like it).<sup>6</sup> *SNL* is no stranger to sketches mocking the power of positive thinking: consider its long-running sketch *Daily Affirmations*, which presents writer, actor, and comedian (and later United States Senator of Minnesota) Al Franken as Stuart Smalley, member of numerous twelve-step programs, who sits before a mirror and repeats, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.”<sup>7</sup> Positive thinking has become a cultural meme in part due to its popularization and promotion (either by praise or parody) in the media on high profile platforms such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *SNL*.

Oprah Winfrey did, in fact, host Rhonda Byrne on her show multiple times to discuss *The Secret*, and followed-up with conversation and promotion on her popular website. Even after there was widespread criticism of the book, Oprah maintained her support of it.<sup>8</sup> It is unwise to ignore the cultural work that self-help discourses such as *The Secret* perform in the popular imaginary, or the role that figures such as Oprah play in their rise to prominence. Pop culture gurus such as Oprah help to reify, reward, and disseminate these visions of happiness and self-help much more widely than would otherwise be possible. This is evidenced by Oprah’s promotion not only of Rhonda Byrne and her “secret” but also of many other self-help and pop

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<sup>6</sup> The *SNL* sketch aired in 2007, and since that time, the “2 million copies” that Oprah boasts about *The Secret* selling has soared to 20 million print copies (remaining a *New York Times* bestseller for years) in 47 languages along with a variety of products that will be detailed later in this chapter.

<sup>7</sup> This sketch produced spin-offs, including a novel, an audio book, and a film.

<sup>8</sup> Oprah’s connection to *The Secret* is discussed in Kathryn Lofton’s *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (2011), 42-45. Byrne and Oprah’s connections to New Thought and “pedagogy” (Oprah’s aim to “teach,” 45) are discussed, highlighting the interrelatedness of these discourses.

culture icons, including Eckhart Tolle [author of *The Power of Now* (1999) and sequels *Stillness Speaks* (2003) and *A New Earth* (2005), this last text one of Oprah’s Book Club picks], The Dalai Lama [author of *The Art of Happiness* (1998) and sequel *The Arts of Happiness in a Troubled World* (2009)], and Deepak Chopra [prolific author of self-help books, including *The Ultimate Happiness Prescription: 7 Keys to Joy and Enlightenment* (2009)].

“[T]he American love affair with self-help” (Salerno 7) has been noted by many observers, and the ethos of self-help is deeply ingrained in the American cultural mindset. Dominated by the rhetoric of happiness, progress, and individual improvement (the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality), the self-help genre can often be reductive, a series of simple steps that one must perform diligently to attain greater well-being. The mandates to constantly improve oneself, make progress, and move towards some pre-ordained telos (the happy self) are reinforced in novelty books such as Barbara Ann Kipfer’s book, *14,000 Things to Be Happy About* (1990) and its “Revised and Updated” edition (2007) and popular cultural characters such as *SNL*’s Stuart Smalley (discussed above). Books such as *Well-Being for Dummies* (2010) give readers the impression that happiness is yet another skill to be learned, another tool for one to put in one’s tool kit. This particular text is a prime example of the genre’s instrumentalization, pedagogy, and reliance on remediation. If one can be a “dummy” when it comes to well-being, there must be a certain set of skills (a canon of well-being tools) that one can learn and apply to become more proficient in this area.<sup>9</sup> I want to pose the following questions, however, about this piecemeal method of achieving happiness. If one accumulates enough feel-good moments, can these short-term gratifications lead to lasting and fulfilling happiness? And perhaps more importantly, if each individual were to become happy in this way,

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<sup>9</sup> As I will discuss in chapters 2-4, positive psychology and positive education both aim to identify and teach these well-being tools and skills.

would it lead to a larger and sustainable social happiness?<sup>10</sup>

Happiness is increasingly conceptualized as occupying space and place, as suggested by publications such as Eric Weiner's *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World* (2008). Perhaps even more striking is the travel guide mega-corporation *Lonely Planet's* recent book, *Happy: Secrets to Happiness from Cultures of the World* (2011), which suggests that happiness is a destination that can be sought out and then toured (if one can't achieve lasting happiness, then at least one can visit it temporarily). There is also much research aimed at measuring the happiest (and unhappiest) countries in the world.<sup>11</sup> These examples all reveal a spatial turn in happiness, and furthers the prominence of the rhetoric of happiness and well-being in American's cultural imaginary and ideology.

Self-help is also a full-fledged industry, deeply embedded in the mandates and cultural logic of capitalism, consumerism, and materialism. Often, self-help gurus create franchises, or businesses built around reworking their material in different contexts. As an industry, self-help produces exorbitant profits by selling its books, products, and authors (as motivational speakers, life coaches, therapists, pop psychologists) as commercialized commodities. Moreover, a great deal of self-help is aimed at helping individual workers succeed in business, function well on the job, or acquire more money or material possessions. In encouraging personal growth and

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<sup>10</sup> Social happiness does not seem to be a pressing concern of the genre, which is somewhat expected, given that it is *self-help*.

<sup>11</sup> Much of this research comes out of the science of happiness, as promoted by positive psychology (the subject of my next chapter) and the related field of happiness studies.

relationships as functional and transactional, this “emotional capitalism” (Illouz 60)<sup>12</sup> trumps other values such as struggle and challenge, community and critique, and solidarity and justice. Self-help also often suggests that the way to well-being is the endless improvement of the material circumstances of the individual in isolation.

Much has been written about how self-help is a large business and money-making industry, how it feeds its audience’s unrealistic hopes and expectations, and how its focus is narrow and inward. These are important critiques, and I will review their main points of contention below. However, the genre is massively popular not just because it (perhaps insincerely) promises the public what it wants to hear but also because the people who buy self-help materials and experiences have genuine desire for increased happiness, progress, and well-being. Although I am aware that it is not possible to definitively separate out these twin motivations, I want to underscore the sincere desires for self-improvement, for a better individual self, and for the good life. In exploring these desires, my primary concern here is, what do these books teach us? What are their values? What version of the good life, of happiness, do they offer readers, and how do they interpolate or encourage people to change themselves to be more aligned with this version? In short, what is their pedagogy?

Both popular culture advice for happiness and self-help are often dismissed as low-brow, quack remedies for the masses, but I argue they are important, as rhetoric and as pedagogy. The point requires emphasis: *pop culture and self-help matter*. Even though these discourses are pervasive, they operate in a surprisingly low-profile manner. Since they have become

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<sup>12</sup> In *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (2008), Eva Illouz explains how she uses this term: “In emotional capitalism emotion and economic discourses mutually shape one another so that affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior, and emotional life, especially that of the middle classes, follows the logic of economic relations and exchange (see chapter 4). Market-based cultural repertoires shape and inform interpersonal and emotional relationships” (60).

commonplace, they form a comfortable (and therefore inconspicuous) backdrop to our everyday experience. As Steve Salerno explains in *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (2005), most people don't take SHAM's (Self-help and Actualization Movement) consequences seriously, considering the movement benign at best and ridiculous at worst. Salerno writes, "To describe SHAM as a waste of time and money vastly underestimates its collateral damage. To date, the industry has escaped intense scrutiny because even those who doubt its effectiveness regard self-help as a silly but benign pursuit, an innocuous vice that plays to the Jerry Springer set, and even then is taken to heart by only a small number of perpetual victims and defenseless dupes" (2-3). He also emphasizes the public's general nonchalance towards the industry: "That is, in fact, SHAM's stealth weapon, the sinister secret of its success: Everyone underestimates it. You may think Dr. Phil is the greatest thing since sliced bread, or you may chortle at his braggadocio and sagebrush sagacity. But almost no one *worries* about Dr. Phil. Like the rest of SHAM, he slips under the radar" (3).

Heidi Marie Rimke, in "Governing Citizens Through Self-Help Literature" (2000) argues in a similar vein, and points to the controlling work that the genre performs: "The rise of self-help psychology should not be dismissed as a transitory cultural fad. It should be seen as a complementary correlative of practices and techniques based on 'governmentality', [*sic*] a particularly modern mode of role" (71). Although people's encounters with happiness and well-being are often deeply personal and individual, critics argue that self-help plays an important role as well in the social control of populations. This controlling function is masked by self-help's pedagogical focus: the individual, authentic self.

Self-help authors and texts play off the desire to let one's "authentic" self shine through. Many of these texts posit this notion of the authentic self, either as something that already exists

a priori and which the self-help reader must re/uncover or as a telos (the pre-determined end goal) that one must work towards achieving. The idea of this authentic (and bounded, isolated) self, however, has been challenged on many fronts by theories of the social construction of identity, including attacks on the notion of the self-contained body and self by affect theory (including the transmission and networked nature of affect), feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism, posthumanism and theories of the cyborg.

Self-help attempts to help people achieve increased happiness and well-being in a value-neutral way. However, Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010)—a text presented already in my Introduction and which will be returned to throughout the project—demonstrates how “[h]appiness shapes what coheres as a world” (2) and “how happiness *participates* in making things good” (13) [emphasis in original]. In this way, happiness is not just something “out there” that we have to find (as the instrumentalist view would have us believe) but rather something that is constantly being created and in turn creating us. Like Ahmed, Heidi Marie Rimke demonstrates how “self-help literature illustrates one of the ways in which discourse creates, invents or makes up people and their characters” (69). In this way, self-help (and the happiness it promises to deliver) is a circular and self-perpetuating discourse. This discourse is also pedagogical and remedial, as it is based upon pre-determined standards for behavior and ways of being offered by so-called experts’ (self-help authors). As Rimke explains, “But while the advice dicta and techniques in self-help books appear to assist in the discovery of the ‘real’ self, what actually occurs is an artificial discursive and extra-discursive construction of the self. The idea of knowing oneself entails a kind of self-fashioning based upon expert convictions of what is ‘best’ to know” (70). Instead of allowing for exploration, self-help actually functions to standardize readers and limit possibilities for different interpretations of happiness and well-being.

In *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (2000), Eva Illouz also shows how self-help assists in creating horizons of experience and expectations for those who read it.

While advice literature does not have a straightforward impact on its readers, its importance in providing a vocabulary for the self and in guiding the perception of one's social relations has been insufficiently acknowledged. Much of contemporary cultural material comes to us in the form of advice, admonition, and how-to recipes, and given that in many social sites the modern self is self-made—drawing from cultural repertoires to take a course of action—advice literature is likely to have played an important role in shaping the public vocabularies through which the self understands itself (53).

In providing these “public vocabularies,” self-help becomes pedagogical, initiating readers into its discourse community. Echoing Ahmed's labeling happiness as performative, Illouz here also demonstrates how self-help is performative. Illouz writes, “A discourse will become performative, that is, carry its own capacity to name and transform reality, when the bearer of the discourse is a representative of the ‘symbolic capital’ accumulated by the group that he or she represents” (56). In “nam[ing] and transform[ing] reality,” self-help constructs a vision of happiness that is both promising and problematic.

### Self-Help: Promises & Problems

Though self-help promises readers solutions, I argue that the self-help genre provides a series of fundamental (and often overlapping) problems. To begin, the genre is individualistic, caught up with notions of the American Dream, upward mobility, rugged individualism, and the

pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality. As such, it is non-dialogic, focused on the self not only as the primary site of improvement and change but also as the sole impetus and agency for that change. Therefore, self-help does not engage with the world and external circumstances.

This non-dialogic and inward-focused approach presents a paradox: the genre becomes simultaneously apolitical *and* conservative. On the one hand, it is apolitical as a result of bracketing larger socioeconomic and political spheres. On the other hand, by claiming to operate outside of external circumstances and positing the individual as the locus of agency, it indirectly suggests a political view. This political view is conservative and serves to maintain society's status quo, even if it does help the individual to progress towards happiness and well-being.

What is meant by “progress,” “happiness,” and “well-being” is debatable, and how these terms are defined has important consequences. The conflation of their many possible meanings and ideological commitments creates a tension between the individual and the social that is particularly problematic.<sup>13</sup> As Rimke states, “self-help ‘expertise’ serves to undermine collective formations and the essential interdependencies of selves. By proclaiming what types of self-change are deemed ‘healthy’ and ‘best’, [*sic*] the self-help experts themselves are providing social, not psychological, rules of conduct. Yet their rules fetishize and glorify the liberalized and psychologized ‘individual’” (70).

In *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (2007), Micki McGee notes the changing connotation of the term “self-help,” which includes a decisive shift from collective action to an individualized improvement project. She states, “In less than thirty years, “self-help—once synonymous with mutual aid—has come to be understood not only as distinct from collective action but actually its opposite” (19). McGee believes that, although the radical

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<sup>13</sup> As I shall demonstrate in chapters 2-4, this tension resurfaces in critical ways in positive psychology and its applications.

transformative power of self-help is currently held back by inertia, its outcome is not so much fated as apolitical. She argues that “although the idea of individual self-determination remains a potent political force, the version of self-invention offered in the preponderance of self-help literature typically maintain the status quo. On the other hand, the ideas that self-improvement literature is premised on—self-determination and self-fulfillment—continue to hold political possibilities that might be tapped for a progressive, even a radical, agenda” (24).

McGee labels one of the primary obstacles to this empowerment and progressive politics the “belabored self.” She demonstrates “how the promise of self-help can lead workers into a new sort of enslavement: into a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly belabored” (12) and further claims that those who subscribe to self-help are “caught in a cycle of seeking individual solutions to problems that are social, economic, and political in origin” (177). As an alternative, she suggests that people should instead “focus collectively on eliminating the vast social and economic inequities that have rendered us such a ready market for this literature” (177).

While self-help may, to varying degrees, acknowledge that external circumstances condition what is or is not possible at any given moment, the genre seeks to empower its readers at the individual level, suggesting that with enough hard work, change of any magnitude is possible. This claim has at its core the fundamental belief of the self-help (and positive psychology) movement that one can change one’s experience by one’s reaction to circumstances and events. It is useful to acknowledge that a great deal of how we choose to respond to events, interactions, and circumstances determines our mood and therefore assists in creating or precluding new opportunities. However, an exclusive focus on an individual’s mindset is dangerous because it brackets not only economic factors but also larger social issues over which

she may not have direct control. This single-minded focus ushers in a series of related problems: in addition to causing people to feel guilty about their efficacy and badly about themselves, it does not allow for the type of critical consciousness necessary to create change of broader scope.

While improving the self can be a worthwhile pursuit in certain contexts, self-help's over-reliance on the individual can serve to distract from real, structural problems underlying American and global society. This method of ignoring social problems and focusing on the individual—so much a part of America's legacy—exploits the American biases of individualism, endless progress, and upward mobility and serves the necessities of capitalism and consumerism. In doing so, it ignores the social construction of identity and systemic concerns in favor of a short-term, self-centered view of subjective well-being that reduces happiness to an apolitical, endless, individualistic present. As Rimke highlights, this genre “render[s] social relations of power invisible and non-negotiable” and “counsels subjects to sculpt a meaningful life without addressing or questioning the horizon of social relations and the contexts of social power” (65). Instead of serving as outlets for potential change, “[p]ractices of self-help are thus connected to the management and government of populations” (72) and reify the status quo. Self-help perpetuates the belief that individuals are solely responsible for their own well-being, and if they fail to achieve happiness, they have no one to blame but themselves.

Businesses and corporations frequently employ positive thinking (and self-help experts) in the service of making workers more efficient, productive, motivated, and manageable. These “happy” (well-adjusted) workers will then gladly take more personal responsibility for their work and thus attribute their successes—and, perhaps more importantly, their failures—to their own efforts and capabilities. Like Ahmed, Rimke, and McGee, Barbara Ehrenreich also critiques the rampant positive thinking she sees as taking over Americans' mindset. In her book *Bright-Sided:*

*How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (2009), Ehrenreich argues against the “cult of cheerfulness,” showing its roots in American religious history, ties to prosperity gospels, and widespread application in current business practices.<sup>14</sup> She explains the vicious cycle self-help perpetuates: “If optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure. The flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility” (8). For her efforts at demonstrating these links and explaining how positive thinking ultimately serves to reconcile people to the status quo, she even earns a section at the end of leading positive psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman’s book, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (2011), as “Barbara ‘I Hate Hope’ Ehrenreich” (201-4).<sup>15</sup> In its requirement that (and encouragement of) workers to constantly improve themselves, self-help serves the imperatives and aims of capitalism. Again, Illouz terms this process “emotional capitalism,” the way emotions and self-help are caught up in economic systems, terms, logic, and capital.

In addition to preserving the status quo, positive thinking and self-help offer instrumentalized and decontextualized advice as means to an end, valuing products over process. In this way, the genre functions instrumentally,<sup>16</sup> often privileging short-cuts and unreflective action (or perhaps even non-action, in some cases). Self-help attempts to provide skills and tools that can work for any number of people, from any number of backgrounds, in any number of situations, and therefore also offers decontextualized advice. Even though it prides itself on its

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<sup>14</sup> *Bright-Sided* is published with a trade press and therefore likely reaches a much larger audience than some of the other critiques mentioned above, which were published in academic journals or scholarly presses.

<sup>15</sup> *Bright-Sided* will be returned to in the following chapter for its specific critique of the positive psychology movement.

<sup>16</sup> This recent self-help title showcases this instrumental tendency: Jim Kukral’s *How To Catch Happy: A Guide To Reeling In The Biggest Fish Of All* (2011).

versatility and applicability to a variety of people and circumstances, self-help texts (and the genre as a whole) have a particular vision of what people *should* be like, of the standards they *should* uphold, the ends they *should* work towards, and the lives they *should* live. In this way, making “progress” and becoming “better” and more “positive” carry particular connotations that are not normally explicitly acknowledged by the genre’s proponents.

Though these standards and expectations are often subtle and implicit, they nonetheless are present and condition what is desirable and possible. Individuals who do not meet these standards are marked as lacking or deficient in some way. Self-help then becomes a form of remediation, of a means of assessing and then teaching people to become the type of people who possess the type of characteristics and skills that a capitalistic society values. As McGee explains, “The literature of self-improvement defines its readers as insufficient, as lacking some essential feature of adequacy—be it beauty, health, wealth, employment options, sexual partners, marital happiness, or specialized technical knowledge—and then offers itself as the solution” (18). Self-help’s reliance on myths of personal blame and responsibility (with its strong ties to the glorified “American Dream”) functions not to empower people, as advertised, but to fix, manage, and discipline them.

### Self-Help Pedagogy

Salerno labels self-help “a phenomenon where American consumers invested so much capital in every sense of the word—financial, intellectual, spiritual, temporal—based on so little proof of efficacy” and which gives “spotty, if not nonexistent, returns” (2). Why do Americans keep reading this literature then? In answer to his question, “What has American gotten in return for its \$8.56 billion investment?” (11), Salerno writes, “in any meaningful sense, there is almost

no evidence—at all—for the utility of self-help, either in theory or in practice. There’s only one group of people who can prove benefit from the books: the authors themselves” (12). Here Salerno is assessing “utility” from a perspective of outcomes, of measurable gains, and is overlooking the rhetorical and pedagogical functions of the genre.

In spite of all the problems of the genre outlined above and the critiques leveled against it by scholars such as Salerno, Rimke, McGee, and Illouz, folklorist Sandra K. Dolby argues for a more positive interpretation: viewing the educative role and value of self-help books. Since her exploration and reasoning are premised on appreciation, belief, and affirmation of the texts, they diverge from many of the other more critical comments on the genre. In *Self-Help Books: Why Americans Keep Reading Them* (2005), Dolby maintains that the genre plays an important role in the self-education of the American people who read it:

I am, above all, prepared to see the writers and the readers of self-help books as sincere and intelligent people who participate in the formation and articulation of an American worldview. Writing and reading self-help books is part of that process, and the books at the center of that process need to be taken seriously rather than simply dismissed as modern-day “snake-oil” remedies. My aim is to examine those books carefully and fairly, using the tools of folkloristics, my academic discipline (ix).

She does not view self-help readers as people who are easily duped or not smart enough to make their own choices and decisions. While she readily admits that the self-help genre may parrot back knowledge already circulating in American traditions, Dolby believes that self-help audiences are not merely consumers but also producers of their own meaning and value from these texts. She states, “Perhaps more crassly than do scholarly philosophers and theologians,

each self-help author conspires to sell us wisdom—in most instances, wisdom we already own as part of our collective American heritage. I do not believe that readers are being led by the nose nor that their response to self-help literature is a kind of cultural determinism by which they acquiesce to a dominant ideology” (xi).

Dolby affords the self-help reader a much greater sense of agency than critics of the genre such as Rimke and Salerno typically do. Instead of viewing these readers as being forced trite and recycled cultural messages, Dolby highlights the *active* reading and learning process the genre encourages. She explains: “We might say that readers of popular nonfiction create their own curricula and course designs and independently integrate the various readings into cumulative ‘projects’ that address the problems that motivated their reading in the first place. What they come to ‘know,’ then, is what they themselves accept as true from what they have read. They construct their own learning—at least on the subject of their project—through the process of self-directed reading. Readers of self-help books are *active* learners” (26).<sup>17</sup> Her reading of the genre, in contrast to attacking the money-making strategies of “repurposing” (Salerno 6) and “ancillaries” (Salerno 11) as others do, is redemptive and highlights the role of self-education.

In reclaiming the value of the genre, Dolby participates in highlighting not the content of self-help (which is often and easily mocked on a number of levels) but rather the process of how readers use this content for their own projects. Dolby thus provides an answer to the “utility” value of Salerno’s question above. She states, “But the books we are considering here—books of popular non-fiction—are intended to educate the reader. Readers buy them not for their entertainment value but rather for their utility in various self-initiated programs of self-

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<sup>17</sup> This notion of learning is important for my discussion of positive education in chapters 3-4.

education” (24-5).

As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, psychologist and well-known self-help author Tal Ben-Shahar taught widely publicized and well-attended courses on happiness at Harvard University popularized the pedagogical nature of self-help, positive psychology, and happiness. In the next chapter, I will introduce positive psychology and explore how its values, assumptions, rhetoric, and pedagogy are both aligned with and divergent from those of self-help. Regardless of whether the self-help genre is believed to do important or dangerous cultural work, there is consensus that this widespread and distinctly American phenomenon does *do* work and therefore should be taken seriously. We are constantly subjected to self-help promises, potential, and pedagogy, and from them we learn (consciously or not) how to be certain types of subjects. I will now turn to the texts themselves to see their pedagogy in action.

#### Reading Byrne’s *The Secret*

A prominent example of self-help’s placing responsibility squarely on the individual and bracketing larger socio-economic issues is Rhonda Byrne’s massively popular and ever-expanding series of *The Secret* books. In this section, I will perform a close reading of *The Secret* franchise to illustrate how the problems outlined earlier in this chapter function in these self-help texts. After briefly providing an overview of this self-help sensation, I look closely at its content and key messages to parse its core values, promises, problems, and pedagogy. I then turn to *The Secret*’s form, noting its complicated relationships to other sources, texts, and experts. In doing

so, I showcase its habit of repurposing already existing content to produce socially constructed rhetoric and pedagogy.<sup>18</sup>

Byrne works relentlessly to brand and trademark her self-help business (she has a company, TS Production LLC). As of this writing (Summer 2012), her trilogy of main books—*The Secret* (2006), *The Secret: The Power* (2011), *The Magic* (2012)—is accompanied by a number of what Salerno terms “ancillaries” (11): the original film version of *The Secret* (2006), which preceded the book’s publication and the film’s new “extended” edition (2006); *The Secret Soundtrack* (2006), an audio version of the film; *The Secret Gratitude Book* (2007), a journal with brief instructions at the beginning to record what one is grateful for (and instructions on how to do this recording), and which consists mostly of lined empty pages with brief inspirational sayings at the bottom;<sup>19</sup> *The Secret Daily Teachings* (2008), a compilation of 365 inspirational messages (sometimes mixed with quotations) that form a calendar whose pages can be ripped off; *The Secret to Teen Power* (2009) by Paul Harrington (producer of *The Secret* film), a book that translates the message of *The Secret* for a different demographic (in this case, the youth market); *The Secret Daily Teachings* iPhone application, which sells for \$4.99 in the iTunes App Store and is a mobile version of the printed text of the same name listed above; an

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<sup>18</sup> The analysis that I perform in this section will set the stage for my reading of positive psychology in the next chapter. Though their methods and ideology are ostensibly different, positive psychology and self-help share many values, rhetorical, and pedagogical functions.

<sup>19</sup> Keeping a gratitude journal is one of the mainstays of both self-help and positive psychology advice.

audio version of Wallace Wattles' *The Science of Getting Rich*;<sup>20</sup> audio versions of many of Byrne's other products; and Byrne's website, the portal to everything The Secret.<sup>21</sup>

The inaugural book,<sup>22</sup> *The Secret* (2006), is translated into dozens of languages and is a *New York Times* bestseller. In it, Byrne introduces the dominant message of her series, the "law of attraction," the eponymous "secret": "*Your thoughts become things*" (25) [emphasis in original]. The law of attraction posits that it is completely within an individual's power to create his or her own circumstances merely by using the power of one's mind. As such, it elides the contributions of larger social forces in creating reality. Rimke's argument provides a useful way to complicate the assumptions and values behind Byrne's texts. Rimke claims that self-help texts "assume that 'power' is an independent 'thing' internally located and available for possession" and that self-help texts posit "the individual as the sole ontological pivot of experience" (64). This characterization of self-help texts aids in analyzing the narcissistic and decontextualized exhortations of *The Secret* and its various manifestations.

In addition to reifying individual control and power over circumstances, Byrne introduces the problematic and unrealistic promise of limitless possibility. The guarantee of complete

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<sup>20</sup> Later in this section I discuss how Byrne appropriates Wattles' book as a "source text" for the profit of her own (*The Secret*) franchise.

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the *SNL* sketch that opens this chapter, there is a short book that parodies the teachings of *The Secret*: Hilarity Ensues' *No Secret: A Parody of The Secret by Rhonda Byrne* (2007). This publication points to the ways in which both Byrne and her "secret" have become a cultural meme, worthy of both attention and parody.

<sup>22</sup> Byrne's *The Secret* project was actually conceived of, and released as, a film first. Even more strikingly than the book, *The Secret* film elides effort, shows the argument's reliance on and connections to the New Thought and New Age movements, and promotes the prosperity gospel. Its scenes portray "miraculous" transformations such as a woman staring into a jewelry store window gazing longingly at a necklace and then, as if by magic, the necklace appears around her neck. The book version (2006) was published after the film was released, and is an exact replica of the film. This word-for-word translation further suggests the Byrne's decontextualized approach, as she does not take into account the necessity of adapting the script to another medium.

satisfaction of one's desires through the methods of *The Secret* is a constant refrain for readers: "There isn't a single thing that you cannot do with this knowledge. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, The Secret can give you whatever you want" (Foreword xi); "Now you are learning The Secret, and with this knowledge, you can change everything" (9); "*If you see it in your mind, you're going to hold it in your hand.*" (Bob Proctor, contributing author to *The Secret* 9) [emphasis in original]. As these excerpts demonstrate, *The Secret* advocates a one-to-one correspondence between thought and thing. It further claims that this one technique of using the individual mind is powerful and flexible enough to transform every aspect of external reality, in every situation.

This promise of endless growth and unbridled acquisition may be enticing to people who are looking to improve (or even overhaul) their lives quickly, painlessly, and completely, but *The Secret's* reliance on shortcuts adds yet another problem on top of the solipsism and universality. Byrne takes pride in this method, announcing, "I have shared all of the easy paths, tips, and shortcuts that I have learned so that you can live the life of your dreams" (xii). For those people who are overtaxed, with little time and energy, this approach may prove appealing. Although it involves a course of thinking, it does not require (and even discourages) planning, action, and effort. In taking this approach, it goes against Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), mindfulness techniques, and positive psychology (scientific areas that have achieved, or at least claimed to have achieved, proven results). This proposed path to self-improvement is reminiscent of get-rich-quick schemes, chain letters, and even voodoo.

In *The Principle of Hope* (1954) utopian theorist Ernst Bloch discusses the reliance on shortcuts rather than work as the difference between wishing and wanting. He states, "But here wishing, no matter how strong it is, is distinguished from actual 'wanting' by its passive nature

which is still related to longing. In wishing there is not yet any element of work or activity, whereas all wanting is wanting to do” (46). Additionally, “Wishing can be undecided, despite the definite imagined goal to which it eagerly looks forward; conversely, wanting is necessarily active progress towards this goal, it goes outwards, has to measure itself exclusively against things given as real” (47).

Taking Byrne’s methods at face value also leads to the concept of remediation. Since it “works every time” and the universe never fails, then the assumption and consequence are that if things don’t happen the way you desire, it is *you* who are to blame: the intensity, continuity, and quality of your thinking must be wrong. In short, it is the individual’s fault (all success and failure is personal), and Byrne’s system is set up in such a way that the individual—and even societies, in some cases—has to then bear the burden of guilt (and feelings of inadequacy) in not excelling at a system never designed to work in the first place.

This quick-fix notion also may lead to unreflective, unintended, or unwanted consequences in its positing of all desires as equally valuable in and equally attainable. It also doesn’t teach important skills such as prioritizing, delaying gratification, long-term planning, and sacrifice or compromise. I am not in a position to advocate for which values should be prioritized, nor do I have an interest in doing so in this project. What I do believe is essential, however, and which is missing from Byrne’s framework, is a built-in method of reflection about the types of choices one makes and the rationale behind them.

*The Secret* consistently presents and reinforces the notion that one’s individual desires should constitute the sole content of “thoughts” and that one’s positive thinking can then manifest these desires into existence. As such, the universe does not evaluate or judge the content of those thoughts from a moral, ethical, or prioritizing standpoint: “The law responds to

your thoughts, no matter what they may be” (7). This exclusive focus on the individual’s desires *regardless* of their content can be dangerous. It does not encourage individuals to be self-reflexive and to consider the implications of their desires. In her Introduction to *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Ahmed discusses this problem of knowing oneself in relation to views about happiness: “The science of happiness thus relies on a very specific model of subjectivity, where one knows how one feels, and where the distinction between good and bad feelings is secure, forming the basis of subjective as well as social well-being. Cultural studies, as well as psychoanalysis, may have an important role to play in these debates by offering alternative theories of emotion that are *not* based on a subject that is fully present to itself, on a subject that always knows how it feels (see Terada 2001)” (6). It is difficult enough for one person to know their own desires (given the cultural construction of the self and of emotion as discussed above). An individual may have, within him or herself, conflicting desires and thoughts.

Moreover, different people’s thoughts may contradict with one another, so the ability to navigate happiness and desires in social networks is even more challenging. *The Secret’s* exhortation to focus only on what “you” want at any given moment ignores the interdependence of people and presumes a life lived in isolation and an eternal present. In practice, the consequences of such thinking become readily apparent. Byrne states, “You are the most powerful magnet in the Universe!” (7). But what about all of the other individual magnets? What happens when people’s thoughts are in conflict with one another, when their desires are mutually exclusive? Byrne’s advice does not counsel readers for these situations or to consider the larger collective of which that individual is a part. Consequently, it ignores the importance of compromise and mutual respect in building and sustaining meaningful social bonds.

This self-centered mandate to focus exclusively on one’s own desires without addressing

the larger horizon of structural issues doesn't acknowledge that relationships must be negotiated, that sacrifices must be made, and that there is a limit to what one can change in one's personal life and the world. I do not advocate for complacency in the face of undesirable circumstances, resignation to mediocrity, or reconciliation to the status quo. Change and transformation are often necessary, and they are a healthy component of life. However, Byrne's instructions bracket reflection, action, and effort, and as such, they remain in the realm of mere fantasy, of Bloch's "wishing."

*The Secret's* flagrant inattention to systemic issues is most explicitly (and frighteningly) demonstrated in the text's brief discussion of mass horrors. In Byrne's words: "Often when people first hear this part of the Secret they recall events in history where masses of lives were lost, and they find it incomprehensible that so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the event. It doesn't necessarily mean they thought of that exact event, but the frequency of their thoughts matched the frequency of the event" (28). When applied to a devastating historical event such as the Holocaust or a natural disaster such as an earthquake, Byrne's illogical framework implies that, even though the victims may not have consciously wished the genocide or destruction upon themselves, their negative energy was somehow aligned with the destruction that occurred. As the *SNL* sketch at the opening of this chapter illustrates so clearly with Olessi's plight, individuals are often blamed simply because they happen to be the victims of unfair, unjust, and uncontrollable external circumstances.

The first iterations of Byrne's bestselling hit, *The Secret* film and book (2006) focus solely on illustrating the concept and use of this "law of attraction," which claims that a person's thoughts manifest external circumstances. *The Secret: The Power* (2010) is a sequel that

introduces the idea of “love” to the framework, and which essentially equates the law of attraction with love. In this way, love supplants thoughts as the sole positive force for bringing good things into one’s life. Although the attention to love could serve to extend the focus outside of the individual, *The Power* only considers love in a utilitarian way, exploiting it in order to manifest one’s desires. The latest addition to the series, *The Magic* (2012), adds yet another potentially promising idea—gratitude—to the mix.<sup>23</sup> However, as with the book’s predecessors,<sup>24</sup> Byrne instrumentalizes what could otherwise serve as a selfless and community-building emotion. In her advice, one should feel and practice gratitude because gratitude is a shortcut to achieving whatever one wants personally to achieve.

Even when “love” and “gratitude” are introduced, they are appropriated in the interests of furthering one’s sole purpose of gaining additional possessions and satisfying personal desires. This instrumentalization and individualism reifies the care of the individual at the expense of care for or consideration of others. As Rimke argues, “The sociopolitical mandates of self-help texts are clear: to be a responsible citizen means to be responsible for oneself, not others. Concerned citizens are thus urged to develop a new form of social responsibility, one that is not socially oriented at all, but, rather, is one that produces a hyper-individuality for which an inherent, responsible relationality with others is actively discouraged and pathologized” (66). Byrne, with *The Secret* and its progeny, has been widely successful in creating a profitable business enterprise based on this denial of “social responsibility,” though the efficacy of her method leaves much to be desired. I am less interested in the efficacy of her methodology (even though it is obviously deeply flawed) and more concerned with the types of desires and

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<sup>23</sup> As noted above, Byrne did sell a “gratitude journal” years before, however, so in some ways *The Magic* becomes a supplement to that prior product.

<sup>24</sup> And indeed, *The Secret* is like the sphinx, rising again and again out of the ashes to live on in a new body.

possibilities it encourages.

The law of attraction claims to offer a foolproof system that works every time, for every one. “If you can think about what you want in your mind, and make that your dominant thought, you *will* bring it into your life” (9). This exhortation to “think about what you want” pre-supposes that one actually *knows* what one wants, but there is no mention in the framework as to the *process* by which this manifestation occurs<sup>25</sup> (as I discuss later in this chapter, Gretchen Rubin’s *The Happiness Project* stands in stark contrast to *The Secret* in this respect, and those two texts demonstrate how widely individual approaches to increasing well-being can vary within the genre). According to Byrne’s premise, people may even be unconsciously attracting thoughts to themselves because they are not aware of what they actually prioritize or want.<sup>26</sup> Of course, this assumes that her reasoning is valid and not, as I maintain, riddled with internal inconsistencies that lead to disillusionment and disappointment.

*The Secret* draws on visualizing strategies, meditation, and the role of attitude in shaping people’s beliefs and actions; as such, it has kernels of good advice and proven practices taken to unrealistic extremes. As Ehrenreich explains,

The metaphysics found in the coaching industry and books like *The Secret* bears an unmistakable resemblance to traditional folk forms of magic, in particular “sympathetic magic,” which operates on the principle that like attracts like. A fetish or talisman—or, in the case of “black magic,” something like a pinpricked voodoo doll—is thought to bring about some desired outcome. In the case of positive thinking, the positive thought, or mental image of the desired outcome,

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<sup>25</sup> The books provide some pseudo-scientific explanation, but there is no room for individual effort and action in the process by which thoughts change into things.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Gilbert’s *Stumbling on Happiness* (2006) makes the argument that individuals are notoriously bad at anticipating what will make their future selves happy.

serves as a kind of internal fetish to hold in your mind (63).

It is not just the “internal fetish” that is troubling, but the text’s upholding of financial gain as the primary means towards happiness (though its emphasis on material gain is not surprising given that much of the self-help discourse relates to money, material goods, and/or the business realm). As will be discussed in detail below, Byrne herself cites a riches-focused text as the inspiration for her secret, and many of the “experts” that she defers to in *The Secret* have their roots in entrepreneurial activities. Ehrenreich traces the connection between positive thinking in America and the prosperity gospels, and shows how often what people desire to attract to themselves (and what they are coached in trying to attract) remains at the monetary level. This message is particularly problematic because it is continuously disproven by the research on well-being. Scientific inquiries into happiness have repeatedly found that, above a certain threshold, material gains alone do not play an important factor in increasing happiness.<sup>27</sup> *The Secret*, however, chooses not to engage this research, however.

The text’s advocacy of unrestricted gain is further problematized by its positing “the secret” as an equal opportunity miracle and a leveler of playing fields. This move ignores the place of privilege and social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital in making some people more likely than others to achieve their goals and increase their wealth. Bob Proctor, one of the key “luminaries” of *The Secret*, states: “*Why do you think that 1 percent of the population earns around 96 percent of all the money that’s being earned? Do you think that’s an accident? It’s designed that way. They understand something. They understand The Secret, and now you are being introduced to The Secret*” (6). Proctor’s dangerous and misleading claim here not only

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, those below this threshold have decreased levels of happiness compared to their more well-off counterparts. There does need to be a certain level of money available to a person in order to provide for necessities, a basic standard of living, and some comfort.

suggests that socio-economic inequality is part of the universe's conscious design but also stresses that the solution to poverty (or "lack" of any kind, whether that is loneliness, unhappiness, underperformance on the job) is entirely within one's control if only one learns and practices "the secret."

In "Oprah's 'Secret' Could Be Your Downfall," Courtney Martin warns, "idealism is not all the fast-talking "experts" behind *The Secret* are dishing out. They are also articulating a dangerous message about conspicuous consumption and distracting people from crippling systemic problems." This bracketing of larger social issues is dangerous if taken seriously. Martin continues, "This point of view neglects the effects of government policy, class, race, gender, geography, and a host of other systemic influences on the kind of wealth -- and life -- one is able to create. It is the good ol' American Dream delusion super-sized into ridiculousness."

What does work (but only for her popularity and profits) in *The Secret*, is Byrne's adoption of and facility in self-help's "repurposing" strategy (Salerno 6). Byrne succeeds in branding her version of happiness in a particular way, and then simply takes that core idea and applies it to various ideas. A close look at the "Content" sections from *The Secret* and *The Power* shows how she repurposes her own content. She begins with a basic premise (such as "the secret" or "the power") and then merely applies it to various domains in a decontextualized manner. In *The Secret*, the final six chapters are entitled, The Secret to Money, The Secret to Relationships, The Secret to Health, The Secret to the World, The Secret to You, and The Secret to Life. Similarly, in *The Power*, the final five chapters are entitled, The Power and Money, The

Power and Relationships, The Power and Health, The Power and You, and The Power of Life.<sup>28</sup>

*The Magic* continues this pattern, as this third book of the series is in essence a straightforward “how to” text, a 28-day guide and workbook for forming new habits of gratitude and applying them to one’s daily life. The end-goal here, as with Byrne’s other texts, is to acquire whatever one desires without effort. Byrne’s texts therefore illustrate another particular feature of the self-help genre: following up widely successful books with only slightly modified products in order to make additional profit by rebranding the same ideas in different ways. In addition to the same premise, the language of Byrne’s follow-up products echoes that of *The Secret*. Byrne appears to reuse a template for her publications: recycling the same ideas and only filling in the blanks with slightly altered words. Consider the following statement “No matter who you are, no matter where you are, no matter what your current circumstances, the magic of gratitude will change your entire life!” (*The Magic* 15). There is no rethinking or revisions of her core assumptions. Here, there is gratitude, but it is still instrumentalized: “Any areas that are not abundant and wonderful are due to a lack of gratitude” (4).

Even in this third book, after love and gratitude are introduced, there is still emphasis on instant transformation, as if some miraculous, mystical alchemy is going to give you whatever you wish. “You may not see reindeer fly,<sup>29</sup> but you *will* see the things you’ve always wanted appearing before your eyes, and you will see the things you’ve dreamed of for so long suddenly happening.<sup>30</sup> You will never know exactly how everything weaved together for your dreams to come true, because magic works in the invisible realm - and that’s the most thrilling part!” (*The*

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<sup>28</sup> Since the complementary chapter to “The Secret to the World” is missing in the second book, one can only assume that there is no method for “The Power and the World.”

<sup>29</sup> One might wonder, only half-jokingly, what would happen if what one has always wanted *is* to “see reindeer fly”?

<sup>30</sup> The future indicative “will” is often italicized in Byrne’s writings, seemingly to reinforce the non-negotiable, foolproof nature of the system she describes.

*Magic 2*). Byrne continues to espouse a mystical transformation of one's life, focusing exclusively on ends, without knowledge of (or even interest in) the means of achieving those ends: "You can be as specific and detailed as you like, but remember your job is simply to list what you want, not how you're going to get what you want. The 'how' will be done *for* you when gratitude works its magic (25). Byrne removes the knowledge of process, the agency to take action, and the control over transformation. In fact, she claims that the ignorance of these things is desirable and an important part of getting desired results. In this sense, she is relying on pure faith in the universal law rather than helping people to learn how to effectively evaluate or intervene in their own circumstances. She does not provide the skills necessary to do this, so her pedagogy is lacking any real substance.<sup>31</sup>

*The Secret* materials position themselves in relation to expert knowledge, authority, and other sources in distinct ways. They, like other self-help texts, base their claims in expert, professional knowledge and/or personal revelation. The first paragraph of the Foreword to *The Secret* states: "A year ago, my life had collapsed around me. I'd worked myself into exhaustion, my father died suddenly, and my relationships with my work colleagues and loved ones were in turmoil. Little did I know at the time, out of my greatest despair was to come the greatest gift" (ix). In addition to providing her own lived experience as the impetus for uncovering "the secret," she reveals the complex interplay of texts in which she (and others) produce meaning. *The Power* begins (much like *The Secret*) with the confession of personal tragedy. We learn in a footnote to this second book (released nearly half a decade after the initial film and book

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<sup>31</sup> This reliance on faith takes a decidedly religious and spiritual tone in *The Magic*. In this most recent text, Byrne adds religiosity to her previously secular "secret" and law of attraction material. She cites the Holy Scriptures, and the Koran, and other religions throughout. In this way, she is perhaps responding to a book that is written in response to her "law of attraction" and that brings God into the equation [Ed Gungor's *There is More to The Secret: An Examination of Rhonda Byrne's Bestselling Book The Secret* (2007)].

versions of *The Secret*) that there is a primary “source text” to which Byrne attributes her life-changing experience and on which she grounds her arguments and advice.<sup>32</sup> Byrne relates the anecdote: “My daughter handed me a one-hundred-year-old book, and during the ninety minutes it took me to read the book, my entire life changed. I understood how everything had happened in my life, and I immediately knew what to do to change every circumstance into what I wanted” (ix). Byrne claims that there is one text that, after she randomly discovered and read in one and a half hours, transformed every aspect of her existence. Her relating this experience constructs readers’ expectations for *her* self-help text. The assumption is that after reading Byrne’s book/s (perhaps in a similarly short time span), her readers’ lives will be miraculously changed as well. This is a bold promise with a questionable premise, especially since her source text focuses exclusively on how to get more money.

Byrne’s use of this “source” establishes ownership not just over her own qualitative experiences but also over another self-help text. This old book, as we learn in a footnote, is Wallace Wattles’ *The Science of Getting Rich*. Byrne explains in this footnote, “The book is available as a free download on The Secret website, [www.theseecret.tv](http://www.theseecret.tv)” (ix). However, she is not only providing readers knowledge of and access to this source text; she is also appropriating it for her own profit. When you download the book from her website, the bottom of the title page of the PDF (portable document format) file prominently displays The Secret logo. Then, on the following page, you learn (and are warned) of the following:

“The Science of Getting Rich” written by Wallace D. Wattles was first published in 1910 by Elizabeth Towne Publishing New York. The original text is now in public domain. However, this free e-book edition is not in public domain. It

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<sup>32</sup> *The Secret* does mention this text in passing, but all readers learn about it, in Byrne’s words, is the following: it is “a hundred-year-old book, given to me by my daughter Hayley” (ix).

cannot be shared, distributed or reproduced in whole or in part. If you would like to share this e-book with others please direct them to our website [www.theseecret.tv](http://www.theseecret.tv) where a legitimate copy can be downloaded for free.

Even though Wattles' text is in the public domain, Byrne has made *her version* of it (which simply means with her logo and preface) proprietary and an advertisement for her own self-help books and franchise.<sup>33</sup>

Byrne continues her appropriation of this text on page three, which is labeled “**Copy as preface page for e-book of “The Science of Getting Rich.”**” Below I reproduce the entire page in order to illustrate the complex ways in which Byrne is simultaneously both a producer and consumer of self-help material. This preface page also demonstrates how this multifaceted relationship affects her own (*The Secret*) publications that she makes available to her readers.

*A note from Rhonda Byrne, creator and executive producer of ‘The Secret’.*

Less than two years ago, at a time in my life when I was facing challenges from every direction – business, relationships, family, you name it – I stumbled across this book. Or, to be more accurate, IT stumbled across me! I can honestly say that, since that first night when a tattered printed transcript found its way to me (thanks to one of my daughters), my life has never been the same. Once you read it yourself, you will understand why. And “why” was the question I had been asking myself. Why are there people who seem to attract unlimited wealth into their lives, while others, equally as capable or talented or worthy, suffer from poverty

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<sup>33</sup> Byrne also offers an audio version of the book, *The Secret Presents: The Science of Getting Rich* (2007). This audiobook is narrated by Dr. Denis Waitley (producer of the 6-CD program *The Psychology of Winning*) and has an introduction by both Byrne and Waitley. It sells for \$19.95 on Amazon .

and lack? As you'll discover when you work your way through this wonderful little book, it has nothing to do with education, status, talent, environment, intellectual ability, physical prowess, or geography. Wallace Wattles explains, in simple, straightforward language, how ANYONE, regardless of their background or circumstances, can attract wealth into their lives.

The opening sentence of Chapter 1 of this timeless little masterpiece says it all:

***“Whatever may be said in praise of poverty, the fact remains that it is not possible to live a really complete or successful life unless one is rich.”***

And once I had read it and internalized its simple knowledge, my own life immediately turned around. My television production business started to go from strength to strength. My income levels soared prodigiously. Relationships miraculously healed and marvelous new ones came pouring in from all directions. This is a common experience for people who discover this miracle book. And it will for you too, once you learn and apply its down-to-earth, uncomplicated precepts.

This book is the key to prosperity you have longed for. It will change your life. Be aware, as you read it, that it was written almost 100 years ago. Some of the language is a little dated (or “quaint”) and you'll need to come to it with an open mind and heart. Remember, though, you are about to discover an exciting new

reality. You are about to learn the fundamental principles of wealth creation and life success. Stay with it. As Wallace himself says, trust and believe. Whatever you want in life is right there waiting for you. With this book, it is right in your hands.

Enjoy!

*Rhonda Byrne*

Byrne promotes this “miracle book” wholesale, only finding it necessary to caution readers about its “quaint” language.<sup>34</sup> Byrne advertises what she believes to be timeless truths by summarizing and updating Wattles’ text linguistically (as if she were merely providing a translation and updating the language) without consideration for the very different historical and material realities of the early 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the time periods in which these two authors write. This appropriation and translation is a prime example of “*repurposing*,” which is integral to the self-help genre and the publishing industries that support it (Salerno 6).

In addition to being in conversation with Wattles’ century old text about getting rich,<sup>35</sup> Byrne’s texts are consciously collaborative and co-authored projects, providing readers with a collage of voices and viewpoints. *The Secret’s* list of co-authors (under the first chapter, “The Secret Revealed”) includes: a “philosopher, author, and personal coach,” “metaphysician, marketing specialist, and author”; “entrepreneur and moneymaking expert”; “philosopher, chiropractor, healer, and personal transformation specialist”; “psychologist and trainer in the

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<sup>34</sup> Therefore, her use of this text is more aligned with mere “translation” than substantive revision. It is similar to the way Harrison is just “translating” Byrne’s *The Secret* book for teens in his *The Secret to Teen Power* by providing more “hip” and relatable language.

<sup>35</sup> She does not, however, acknowledge Wattles’ text directly by name in *The Secret* (2006).

field of mind potential”; “visionary and founder of agape international spiritual center”; “author, teacher, life coach, and motivational speaker” (1-3). As even a cursory glance at their titles suggests, these “experts” are often self-styled and grounded in corporate and/or economic interests. This is a technique that Salerno points out is a common feature of SHAM: “made-up specialties that require no particular licensing yet *sound* credible, thus duping unsuspecting patrons by the millions” (15). Byrne uses these “specialists” to further her own claims (which, as I’ve pointed out above, are really Wattles’ claims). The “Biographies” (185-198) section at the end of *The Secret* further highlights the professional and ideological affiliations of the sources that Byrne draws on to make her argument and presentation. She not only includes the living authors but also the biographies of the historical figures from whom she quotes heavily. *The Secret* does not offer something new but rather presents (or re-presents) the wisdom of the ages back to its readers. Mixed in with these the living “experts” advice and information are quotes from famous people of the past (taken out of context), for support.

In this hodgepodge of authors and texts, however, there are some notable absences. Surprisingly, given that their release corresponds to the momentum of the positive psychology movement (the subject of this dissertation’s next chapter), *The Secret* books do not draw on the existing (and exponentially growing) body of scientific inquiry into the nature and maximization of subjective well-being. Instead, Byrne chooses to ground her authority in centuries old (and sometimes even millennia old) texts and thinkers, including New Thought, a movement from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>36</sup> This choice contributes to the “secret’s” uncovering and mystical nature, and helps to give the impression of magical powers at work in the universe that people can tap into at will.

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<sup>36</sup> The New Thought influence is discussed “*The Secret*” section in *Oprah: Gospel of An Icon* (42-45).

### Reading Rubin's *The Happiness Project*

Another best-selling self-help and pop culture sensation is Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project : Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun* (2009). Similar to Byrne, Rubin has a strong public relations campaign and a large community following, due not only to this popular book but also her share of "ancillaries" (Salerno 11). These include her version of the gratitude journal, this time with a five-year plan, *The Happiness Project One-Sentence Journal: A Five-Year Record* (2011), a 2012 page-a-day calendar, a website for the book (including a blog and resources),<sup>37</sup> The Happiness Project Toolbox,<sup>38</sup> a "daily happiness" e-mail newsletter, and Facebook page.<sup>39</sup> In the usual fashion for self-help gurus and the genre, Rubin is also publishing a sequel to *The Happiness Project*. This next book, *Happier at Home: Kiss More, Jump More, Abandon a Project, Read Samuel Johnson, and My Other Experiments in the Practice of Everyday Life*, is available for pre-order and slotted to be released September 4, 2012. Rubin recently (July 11, 2012) publicized on her Facebook page a sample chapter ("January: Time") from this forthcoming book, a chapter publicly available for preview on Scribd.<sup>40</sup>

Similar to other self-help publications, Rubin begins *The Happiness Project* with the story of her conversion, her narrative of coming to happiness. She relates it as follows:

One April day, on a morning just like every other morning, I had a sudden realization: I was in danger of wasting my life. As I stared out the rain-spattered window of a city bus, I saw that the years were slipping by. "What do I want from

<sup>37</sup> <http://happiness-project.com/>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.happinessprojecttoolbox.com/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/GretchenRubin>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.scribd.com/doc/99613546/Happier-at-Home-by-Gretchen-Rubin-Excerpt>

my life, anyway?" I asked myself. "Well . . . I want to be *happy*." But I had never thought about what made me happy or how I might be happier. [. . .] All these thoughts flooded my mind, and as I sat on that crowded bus, I grasped two things: I wasn't as happy as I could be, and my life wasn't going to change unless I made it change. In that single moment, with that realization, I decided to dedicate a year to trying to be happier (1-3).

In contrast to Byrne's narrative techniques and ideological commitments, in *The Happiness Project* Rubin presents a much more pragmatic, personalized approach to flourishing. Instead of offering her readers a one-size-fits all universal approach to achieving well-being, she takes pains to foreground the particular context of her own search for and approach to happiness. Her number one mantra is "Be Gretchen," a consistent and clear reminder that one's own search for happiness must stem from individual inclinations. Rubin shows attentiveness to how local contexts affect what is desirable and possible in any given situation: "Of course, because it's the story of *my* happiness project, it reflects my particular situation, values, and interests" (xvii). She therefore comes up with her Twelve Commandments, the first of which is "Be Gretchen" (10-11); her "Secrets of Adulthood," which are derived from her life experience (11); and "The Happiness Project Manifesto," her compilation of inspiration sayings (297).

Rubin also does not present easy shortcuts for the reader, suggesting that the path to happiness is paved with effort and action. In fact, she treats her happiness project as an organizational mission, setting up resolutions and a toolkit as a means of achieving her goals. According to Rubin, "A 'happiness project' is an approach to changing your life. First is the preparation stage, when you identify what brings you joy, satisfaction, engagement, and also what brings you guilt, anger, boredom, and remorse. Second is the making of resolutions, when

you identify the concrete actions that will boost your happiness. Then comes the interesting part: keeping your resolutions” (xvii). In preparing for and identifying her resolutions, Rubin must decide what is important to her and then find productive ways to effectively achieve these goals.

Rubin’s pathway to happiness is guided not only by her own personal inclinations and desires but also by a comprehensive literature review on happiness. This review includes wisdom of the ages (the views on happiness by ancient philosophers) as well as the latest scientific research in positive psychology. After she makes the decision to become happier, she prepares for it by arming herself with all of this knowledge: “I couldn’t just jump into this happiness project. I had to lot to learn before I was ready for my year to begin.” She did “heavy reading” in order to best plan “how to set up [her] experiment” (3-4). As I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the idea of an “authentic” and “true” self is problematized by critics of the self-help genre. Rimke’s point that “knowing oneself entails a kind of self-fashioning based upon expert convictions of what is ‘best’ to know” (70) is especially relevant in *The Happiness Project*.

Rubin constantly places herself, her choices, and her search for happiness in dialogue with expert views on the subject. In this way, she is involved in one of “the various programs of self-education” that self-help texts make possible (Dolby 25). In familiarizing herself with the knowledge about well-being and reflectively assessing her own needs, wants, and priorities, Rubin already presents a vastly different approach to and premise than the one-size-fits all approach that characterize *The Secret* books. Rubin makes an important intervention that Byrne lacks, then, by suggesting that self-knowledge and effort is required in order to achieve (and not simply receive) happiness.

A look at Rubin and Byrne’s views on similar topics will serve to illustrate some of their key differences, in terms of how they view happiness, how they interact with their sources and

outside knowledge, and their ultimate values. A comparison of these two authors' chapters on "money" highlights their divergent approaches. Byrne advocates acquiring more money (with little effort), treating monetary gain as an unquestionable and unconditional good *in and of itself*, whereas Rubin, drawing on the current scientific research into happiness, shows awareness of money's contribution to happiness and instead suggests that money can be used to purchase experiences and strengthen relationships.

In Chapter 7 ("July: Buy Some Happiness"), Rubin presents her thoughts about and resolution for using money in the interests of increased well-being. She begins with a literature review of prevailing opinions about the role of money on happiness (165-7), demonstrating that she is fully aware of the most up-to-date research on the subject. Rubin concludes, "Money alone can't buy happiness." However, she comes to the following realization:

But, as a follow-up, I asked myself, "Can money *help* buy happiness?" The answer: yes, used wisely, it can. Whether rich or poor, people make choices about how they spend money, and those choices can boost happiness or undermine it. It's a mistake to assume that money will affect everyone the same way. No statistical average could say how a particular *individual* would be affected by money—depending on that individual's circumstances and temperament (168).

Rubin determines three things that affect how an individual relates to money, and how it does or does not contribute to one's happiness. She explains, "*It depends on what kind of person you are,*" "*It depends on how you spend your money,*" and "*It depends on how much money you have relative to the people around you and relative to your own experience*" (168-9) [emphasis in original]. Therefore, Rubin suggests that you can splurge, modestly (170-179) that you should buy necessities (179-183), spend out (183-6), which means to not be stingy, and "give something

up” (186-193). She focuses more on how buying things can increase your positive experiences, rather than simply prioritizing the accumulation of more “things.” As Rubin claims, “The happiness that people get from buying stuff isn’t attributable only to consumerist indulgence” (174).

In contrast, Byrne treats money in an instrumental and materialistic manner. In *The Secret*, in a chapter entitled, “The Secret to Money,” Byrne states:

The only reason any person does not have enough money is because they are *blocking* money from coming to them with their thoughts. Every negative thought, feeling, or emotion is *blocking* your good from coming to you, and that includes money. It is not that the money is being kept from you by the Universe, because all the money you require exists right now in the invisible. If you do not have enough, it is because you are stopping the flow of money coming to you, and you are doing that with your thoughts. You must tip the balance of your thoughts from lack-of-money to more-than-enough money. Think more thoughts of abundance than of lack, and you have tipped that balance (99).

Byrne once again brackets systemic, external factors that may contribute to one’s economic reality, repeating that it is merely one’s attitude that ushers in (or blocks) a person from having more money.

Furthermore, Byrne’s practical suggestions, yet again, are merely constant doses of positive thinking and visualization without reflection or effort. Here is an example of the importance of affirmations and positive thinking in her methodology. Byrne states:

If the words “I can’t afford it!” have passed your lips, your power to change that is *now*. Change it with, “I can afford that! I can buy that!” Say it over and over.

Become like a parrot. For the next thirty days, make it your intention that you are going to look at everything you like and say to yourself, “I can afford that. I can buy that.” As you see your dream car drive past, say, “I can afford that.” “As you see clothes you love, as you think about a great vacation, say, “I can afford that.” As you do this you will begin to shift yourself and you will begin to *feel* better about money. You will begin to convince yourself that you can afford those things, and as you do, the pictures of your life will change (102-3).<sup>41</sup>

It should be noted, of course, that Rubin is writing from a point of privilege, already enjoying much of the good life, so she is well-positioned to increase her already existing happiness. She has the benefits of a good education (including a law degree), a loving husband and family, an apartment on the Upper East Side of New York City, sufficient money already, a job (writing) she chose out of love and that has turned into a successful career, and the leisure to devote significant time, energy, and resources to her own flourishing. She also has the luxury to take a year off to both research and implement happiness: this “project” is her full-time job, and as it is also doubling as material for her book. Although she wants others to begin their own happiness projects and offers a number of resources to help them implement these projects, many of her readers will not likely have the time and advantages that Rubin has to commit to such

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<sup>41</sup> Here is one example Byrne provides in terms of visualization:

Jack’s [Canfield, author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and contributor to *The Secret*] wonderful story inspired The Secret Team to create a blank check available as a free download on The Secret website, [www.theseecret.tv](http://www.theseecret.tv). The blank check is for you, and it is from the Bank of the Universe. You fill in your name, the amount, and details, and place it in a prominent place where you will see it every day. When you look at the check, feel the feelings of having that money now. Imagine spending that money, all the things you will buy and the things you will do. Feel how wonderful that is! Know it is yours, because when you ask, it is. We have received hundreds of stories from people who have brought huge sums of money to them using The Secret check. It’s a fun game that works! (98-99).

large-scale happiness interventions.

Rubin offers a much more balanced and practical approach than Byrne in helping readers to achieve their goals. *The Happiness Project* ends with a section entitled “Your Happiness Project,” a reading group guide (online there is also a spiritual version of this reading group guide, one marketed to religious groups), and tips for improving yourself in various areas: “Nine tips to stick to a schedule of regular exercise,” “Seven tips for being a more light-hearted parent,” “Nine tips for getting your sweetheart to do more chores—without nagging,” “Seven tips for coping with the fact that you don’t remember a person’s name,” “Seven tips for getting an energy boost in the next 10 minutes,” “Seven tips for how money can buy you happiness,” “Nine tips for keeping your resolutions,” and “Seven tips for making someone like you.” Rubin also has a “Get Started” section on her website,<sup>42</sup> with toolkits including resolution charts and a Happiness Project Group Starter-Kit.

Even though she provides resources and pedagogical materials to help readers initiate their own happiness projects, and even though Rubin provides many correctives to the flaws in *The Secret* framework, one key problem still remains. The way Rubin treats “possibility” prevents her happiness project from having radical power. Everything about *The Happiness Project* (and its various “ancillaries”) suggests that happiness can be increased by following charts and resolutions, by setting goals and sticking to them, by researching and applying the scientific insights into happiness. Rubin claims that one can look to what one already has and improve upon this situation (or at least one’s satisfaction with this situation) with enough expenditure of effort. However, following her guidelines becomes a slippery slope. While her mantra, “Be Gretchen,” is refreshing in many ways (because it accepts who she is and doesn’t

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<sup>42</sup> <http://happiness-project.com/get-started/get-started/>

aim to have the endless cycle of remaking oneself that many of self-help readers find themselves caught in), it is troubling in its sole-reliance on the self as it already *is*. This limiting of possibility is very clear in Rubin's many materials, resources, and pedagogical outlooks. They are instrumental and remedial in many senses, and they reify the power of the individual to operate in a utilitarian and pragmatic manner.

### Reading Ben-Shahar's *Happier*

As a brief conclusion to this chapter and in preparation for a discussion of positive psychology in the following chapter, I now turn to Tal Ben-Shahar's crossover self-help/positive psychology *Happier* series [*Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment* (2007), *Being Happy: You Don't Have to Be Perfect to Lead a Richer, Happier Life* (2009),<sup>43</sup> and *Happier: Even Happier: A Gratitude Journal for Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment* (2010)]. In *Happier*, the first book of the series and a *New York Times* bestseller, Ben-Shahar states that happiness is "the ultimate currency, the end toward which all other ends lead" (viii).

Simply from briefly reviewing this book's jacket, readers learn important information about Ben-Shahar's understanding and pedagogy of happiness. Even the book's title communicates two important points about the book's approach. The first is that happiness can be taught: if readers can learn ("Learn the Secrets"), then these secrets (which lead to happiness) must be teachable. This belief in and commitment to the teaching of happiness has important implications for positive psychology and positive education, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this dissertation. Additionally, while Ben-Shahar suggests that there are "secrets" that one can learn, they are a far cry from the secrets of Byrne's infamous texts. Ben-Shahar's

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<sup>43</sup> This book was originally published under the title, *The Pursuit of Perfect*.

title indicates that temporality is important and that individuals need “joy” in the everyday moments in conjunction with a longer sense of meaning (“lasting fulfillment”) throughout life. The book jacket also conveys the endorsement of the founder of positive psychology, Martin E. P. Seligman. Seligman’s testimonials on the front and back covers, along with the “Ph.D.” after Shahar’s name as the author, attempt to lend an air of credibility and scientific legitimacy to Ben-Shahar’s claims.

This appeal to science would seem to place Ben-Shahar’s book in an antithetical relationship to the self-help genre, as positive psychologists take great pains to distinguish their discipline from so-called “pop” psychology (I will discuss this point in detail in chapter 2). However, Ben-Shahar consciously chooses to connect these two discourses together in his books and his teaching.<sup>44</sup> He explains, “As I see it, the role of positive psychology is to bridge the ivory tower and Main Street, the rigor of academe and the fun of the self-help movement. That, too, is the purpose of this book” (x-xi).<sup>45</sup>

In bridging these discourses, Ben-Shahar, like Rubin, employs an explicitly pedagogical stance. The blurb on the back flap of the book jacket announces this intent: “Think of *Happier* as your own personal workbook. As you read each chapter’s illuminating discussion on happiness and incorporate its simple exercises into your daily routine, you will see every aspect of your life with new eyes and a new sense of purpose.” Ben-Shahar also provides direct statements about how he envisions his book to function. He writes, “This book is intended to help you understand the nature of happiness; more than that, it is intended to help you become happier. But merely

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<sup>44</sup> The pedagogical nature of the positive psychology reached immense popularity by Tal Ben-Shahar’s widely publicized and well-attended course on happiness at Harvard University,

<sup>45</sup> Tal Ben-Shahar has a website, as well, called “Bringing Happiness to Life” (<http://www.talbenshahar.com/>). On the homepage of that site, he repeats this notion of “bridg[ing] the ivory tower and Main Street”, a slogan that has become a branding and selling point for him.

reading this book (or any other book for that matter) is unlikely to make that happen. I do not believe that there are shortcuts to meaningful change, and if this book is to have a real impact on your life, you have to treat it as a workbook. The work has to comprise both reflection and action” (xii).<sup>46</sup> In fact, Ben-Shahar does publish a follow-up to *Happier: the gratitude journal Even Happier*.<sup>47</sup> This new book is set up as a workbook: there are 52 weeks that function as short chapters (each with brief commentary about that week’s subject and then writing exercises for practice) along with an Introduction at the beginning and “Daily Reminders” at the end. This workbook derives directly from Ben-Shahar’s teaching in the classroom. In the Introduction, he relates this fact: “I have often been asked by my students as well as by others who have read my books to collate the exercise that I present in my classes and writings. So here they are, in *Even Happier*” (xi).

Ben-Shahar’s pedagogy and positioning of self-help and positive psychology as mutual reinforcing each other remain crucial to the arguments I make going forward in this project. If we accept the problems and critiques that I lay out in this chapter on self-help and we agree (with Ben-Shahar) that positive psychology has a large overlap with the self-help genre, then we acknowledge, at least to some degree, that positive psychology shares in these problems and critiques. And indeed, as the following chapter will show, positive psychology does share in self-help’s problems, a fact that has important implications for positive psychology’s applications. I will return to Ben-Shahar’s pedagogy and texts in chapter 3, within the context of positive education. For now, let us turn to a closer look at the positive psychology movement itself.

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<sup>46</sup> I will discuss Ben-Shahar’s methods of “reflection and action” (and the role of writing in achieving it) in chapter 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ironically, Ben-Shahar—a famous psychologist—explains that he started keeping gratitude journals because of Oprah’s suggestion to do so. *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon* (43) relates Oprah’s claim that she promoted gratitude journals even before *The Secret*.

## Chapter 2

### Happiness Studies: Positive Psychology, Politics, and Policy

The promises and advice of self-help materials aimed at increasing happiness now often claim support from the science and scholarship of the rapidly expanding discipline of positive psychology. Positive psychology began in 1998 with Martin Seligman—professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and director of its Positive Psychology Center, and then president of the American Psychological Association (APA)—and his decision to emphasize strengths and positive growth rather than to continue what he claims to have been psychology’s long-standing focus on deficits and remediation. Seligman and other positive psychology advocates and leaders repeatedly position this shift as revolutionary, though, as I discuss later in this chapter, critics of positive psychology locate the movement within an already established research tradition.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter begins by introducing readers to positive psychology’s subject matter, methodology, and aims. This overview will likely prove especially useful for scholars working in the humanities, as the research into well-being—while informed by historical and philosophical aspects of happiness—is primarily occurring within the social sciences and remain relatively unknown to many humanities scholars. After highlighting the field’s origins, global expansion, and various applications, I examine positive psychology’s rhetoric, as seen in the field’s key texts. To this end, I examine at special issues of academic journals on positive psychology, including the January 2000 special issue of *American Psychologist* that introduced positive

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<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether positive psychology truly began as a new perspective in 1998 with Seligman’s exhortation to other psychologists to focus on positive aspects of existence, one thing is undeniable: since 1998, positive psychology has received a disproportionately large share of media attention and funding resources, allowing it to expand exponentially within a short timeframe.

psychology to the academic world (as well as the follow-up section of the same journal in March 2001), the Winter 2001 special issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in response to the *American Psychologist* January 2000 publication, the October 2008 special issue of *Theory and Psychology* that offers challenges and critiques of the field, and two special issues of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* on happiness and the good life (March 2007) and happiness, ethics, and politics (June 2010). These journals comprise an important site of inquiry into positive psychology's "discursive and political labor" (Yen 76). Additionally, I look at relevant publications and projects of Seligman, the "founder" of positive psychology, and the discipline's most publicly visible advocate and figurehead. As the driving force behind the discipline's astonishing rise to prominence, his versions of positive psychology's missions, methodology, and status are of primary importance in understanding the field's rhetorical and pedagogical functions. I explore his two books on the subject, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Benefit* (2002) and *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (2011), along with his website, Authentic Happiness, which is "intended as a public service" (*Flourish* 37).

In this extended examination of the rhetoric of the movement, I pay close attention to how positive psychology presents itself to its supporters in the profession, the academy, and the public sphere. Many members of the psychology community have expressed (and continue to express) reservations about and critiques of positive psychology's history, current state, and future trajectory. I illustrate how leading positive psychologists respond (or fail to respond) to this criticism. Through these responses, positive psychologists communicate explicit and implicit messages about their understanding of positive psychology, the field's definition of well-being, and its promotion of applied practices and policy. In performing this rhetorical and discursive

analysis, I demonstrate how these messages are often at odds with one another and identify unstated assumptions, values, and consequences of positive psychology's mission to build well-being. Positive psychology privileges accessibility, practicality, and applicability, and the discipline's methodology and research are indeed being applied quickly to many other disciplines and initiatives. Therefore, it is crucial to parse out and discuss the discipline's unacknowledged goals and values.

As I will demonstrate, one explicit feature of positive psychology's rhetoric is its repeated claims of scientific grounding and empirical validity. Positive psychology builds its reputation as an objective, rigorous, and reliable means of increasing well-being. A related claim is that positive psychology is nonpartisan: merely descriptive, not prescriptive. Positive psychologists claim that positive psychology simply unearths scientific "truths" about well-being without making evaluative assessments of the value of these truths. In doing so, these advocates fail to address how this search for and promotion of a purported "truth" actually posit a set of values. I make a necessary intervention, therefore, by illustrating how positive psychology is not ideologically neutral. I emphasize that there must be values underlying the field and work to identify what these values are.

As mentioned above, positive psychologists take great pains—in what could be termed alternately defensiveness, overcompensation, or aggression—to repeatedly assert that positive psychology is grounded in science. In doing so, positive psychology attempts to distinguish itself from both another branch of psychology, humanistic psychology, as well as the pop culture manifestations of self-help and pop psychology. However, as I will demonstrate, positive psychology has strong ties with the very movements from which it actively works to distance itself. As humanistic psychologists are quick to remind positive psychologists, positive

psychology did not miraculously and spontaneously develop out of thin air, fully formed, like Athena from Zeus's head. Rather, positive psychology emerged from a longstanding and rigorous research tradition on positivity, strengths, and well-being. Furthermore, as I argue, positive psychology has much in common with the self-help genre. Positive psychology texts are often indexed as self-help titles, positive psychology authors—including leaders of the field, such as Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (who is famous for his conceptualization of “flow”)—are often considered important and influential self-help authors,<sup>2</sup> and some leading positive psychologists actively work to bring these two fields together by making their research publicly accessible and useable via the self-help platform.<sup>3</sup>

More importantly, in addition to sharing some of these outward characteristics with self-help, positive psychology replicates many of self-help's (often unstated) ideological commitments, assumptions, and inconsistencies. These problems, as outlined in the previous chapter, are individualism, instrumentalism, decontextualization, non-dialogism, non-reflexivity, remediation, unacknowledged political conservatism, and preservation of the status quo. Positive psychology, while claiming an interest in developing positive communities and institutions, primarily focuses on helping individuals to flourish; even the field's recent focus on positive relationships is instrumentalized to enhance the individual self's level of well-being. This highly individualistic tendency stems in large part from positive psychology's American-centric cultural bias as well as the discipline's reliance on scientific and empirical methods (and the attendant ideals of objectivity and description).

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<sup>2</sup> Dolby presents self-help genre classification that includes Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi as examples of writers who write and publish self-help texts in the *academic study subtype* of the essay form of the genre (44-7).

<sup>3</sup> A prime case in point, as discussed at the end of chapter 1, is Tal Ben-Shahar's use of his positive psychology background and training, university-level courses, and popular book series to bridge self-help and positive psychology audiences and discourses.

Positive psychology is focused on the individual at the expense of the social, yet it is also non-dialogic in other respects. By focusing solely on strengths and positive character traits, it overlooks the important interplay of positive and negative emotions, experiences, and attributes that together form a more holistic picture of human flourishing and the good life. Furthermore, positive psychology prides itself on its universal appeal, claiming to help anyone flourish. While this flexibility does allow its content and methodology to be adapted for and applied to a variety of circumstances and disciplines, positive psychology's decontextualized techniques and one-size-fits all approach fail to account for the specific needs and challenges of local contexts. Unlike much of self-help, positive psychology advice tends not to privilege shortcuts and unreflective action, and it thus offers a potentially useful corrective to some of self-help's most troubling flaws.<sup>4</sup> Positive psychology does, however, promote certain character strengths and elements of well-being in an unstated "standard" of flourishing. By unmasking this standard, I demonstrate that positive psychology is remedial even though it claims precisely the opposite orientation.

To these problems, I add a further one, particularly consequential in matters of application and policy: positive psychology's conflation of correlation and causation. For example, positive psychology notes that married couples and people who are more religious tend to self-report higher levels of happiness. As a result, these findings might be used to imply that these things (marriage and religiosity) lead to happiness and are therefore good, positive, and desirable. Sara Ahmed's theorization of happiness in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) continues to be useful for highlighting how certain objects and ideas become "happy" by association. This problem of equating correlation and causation is an important consideration in positive

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<sup>4</sup> As I argue, however, *as a discipline* positive psychology remains unreflective in terms of its own values and ideology.

psychology's application to policy, as it might determine what gets valued and then incentivized and maximized. This logical fallacy grows out of positive psychology's application of quantitative methods to qualitative experiences as well as its attempts to treat a value-laden subject in a value-free manner. The problem is further complicated because measures of subjective well-being are primarily based on self-reporting of individuals' satisfaction of circumstances and emotions as they are, a method that tends to reify and acclimate individuals to the status quo rather than inspiring its change.

Indeed, perhaps the most complex and troubling aspect of positive psychology's programmatic rhetoric is its conceptualization of its own politics. Leading positive psychologists reinforce the assumption—pervasive in positive psychology thinking and rhetoric and also widely held in the self-help genre—that maximizing well-being is desirable. Therefore, they position well-being as a desirable product without acknowledging the values inherent in the process toward it. Even though positive psychologists' assertions of descriptive, objective, empirical science obscure the values behind the field, Seligman does state that positive psychology has politics. He maintains that this politics is one of ends (well-being) and not means, and is therefore not prescriptive. In other words, positive psychology promotes well-being as *the* worthwhile telos, but it allows for multiple avenues of access to this end goal.

What this politics does not take into account, however, is that happiness, well-being, and flourishing—by themselves—are abstract concepts, mere signifiers, and that they will remain so regardless of positive psychologists' attempts to subject these notions to study and quantitative analysis. Additionally, as happiness, well-being, and flourishing are abstract concepts, people do not universally agree on what these terms signify. Since there is no consensus about the content of these signifiers, the “end” of well-being to which Seligman points is neither defined nor

meaningful. In labeling something that is undefined, uncertain, and debatable as positive, positive psychology sidesteps the challenging but essential work of engaging with context and in nuanced discussions necessary for a fuller understanding of happiness, well-being, and flourishing's multiple and fluid connotations. Though the discipline may claim otherwise, it is difficult to deny that positive psychology is a "moral and philosophical enterprise," not just "an essentially empirical one" (Slife and Richardson 699). Positive psychology is also "as much an economic endeavor as it is an intellectual one" (Taylor 26) and "the product of a discursive and political labor" (Yen 76).

After exposing the various problems and assumptions, values, and ideology associated with positive psychology's rhetoric, I emphasize the field's pedagogical function, its power of teaching. This chapter's brief concluding remarks demonstrate *what* positive psychology is teaching. (*How* it teaches—its pedagogical methods—intentionally or otherwise, is the subject of my next chapter on positive education.) Positive psychology teaches us to be certain types of people in pursuit of the good life without consideration that the notion of the "good" is not morally universal or self-evident. Positive psychology's ideal of the positive, happy individual in pursuit of the good life is inextricably bound to the discipline's ideological assumptions, biases, and cultural contexts (in particular, American individualism). In instrumental fashion, the pedagogy of positive psychology teaches us to be individualistic and to focus on others (both people and things) primarily as a means of aiding our own attempts at flourishing. This standard of the good life does not represent a timeless truth but instead a particular interpretation of what is valuable and desirable, an interpretation that the correlation/causation fallacy influences greatly. Positive psychology's unacknowledged ideals, standards, and expectations of the good

life produce a pedagogy caught up in remediation, one that prescribes strengths and well-being as the ultimate solution to a variety of underlying—perhaps even structural—problems.

Positive psychology further teaches us that the status quo is acceptable, and that one should adjust one's reactions to circumstances rather than work to actively transform the circumstances themselves. By focusing on strengths and positive emotions, positive psychology minimizes negative emotions that might prove productive for growth and social transformation. It also tends to skew the ideal in terms of contentment, rather than possibility, a practice that limits the utopian impulse. Before turning to specific examples of positive psychology application and pedagogy in the next two chapters—positive education in chapter 3 and the United States Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program in chapter 4—I will conclude this chapter with some questions that arise when promoting pedagogies of happiness.

#### Positive Psychology: Background & Overview

In this section I provide a brief overview of positive psychology, highlighting its beginnings, revisions, worldwide expansion, and widespread application. Happiness has been the subject of philosophy since ancient times, and there have been some previous attempts (such as utilitarianism and Jeremy Bentham's felicific calculus) to think mathematically about well-being.<sup>5</sup> More recently, there has been a fast-growing trend to make happiness, traditionally viewed as a qualitative and subjective emotion, yield to quantitative, objective analysis: positive

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<sup>5</sup> This desire for quantifying well-being has also been the subject of dystopian fiction. One notable example Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1921 classic novel, *We*, in which the One State prides itself on having achieved "mathematically infallible happiness" (1). This "mathematically infallible happiness" includes the eradication of most irrationality (though the  $\sqrt{-1}$  stubbornly persists), regulation of citizens' actions by strict scheduling (the Table of Hours), managing sexual encounters and passion through a central system, and an innovative operation to excise the Imagination from dissenting or recalcitrant individuals.

psychology and the related (and often overlapping) field of happiness studies. Positive psychology is an American-centric field, largely based around former American Psychological Association (APA) president Martin E. P. Seligman and his work done out of the University of Pennsylvania. As he is the founder of positive psychology and arguably its most publicly and academically recognizable advocate, much of the discussion that follows in this chapter and the dissertation's later chapters reflect Seligman's prominent position.<sup>6</sup> Happiness studies involves a more international—though Western-Europe focused—association of researchers centered on leading happiness studies scholar Ruut Veenhoven and his work (as founding editor of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* and director of the *World Database of Happiness*<sup>7</sup>) out of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Though much of the research into well-being revolves around an American conception of positive psychology, the scientific study of happiness and increased interest in planning for and maximizing well-being are truly global phenomena.

Seligman's APA presidential address in 1998 launched positive psychology. Not long after this time (January 2000), the field was formally introduced to the scholarly community in a special issue—edited by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi—of *American Psychologist*, the APA's flagship journal. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's introductory article to this special issue, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," serves as a common reference point for many future conversations and critiques of the field, so it will be helpful to review its main points, claims, and rhetoric briefly here. In this Introduction, the authors assert the new focus on positive psychology as the clear answer to "America's historical choice" about the direction the country in which

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<sup>6</sup> Seligman is the creator and disseminator of much of positive psychology's rhetorical and cultural production, so he has come to stand in, almost metonymically, for positive psychology itself. Consequently, he also—perhaps somewhat unfairly—is the subject of many of the field's challenges and attacks.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/>

should direct its future efforts (5). In their characterization, positive psychology will lead the United States away from individualism, selfishness, and inequality. The opening paragraph of the article reads as follows:

Entering a new millennium, Americans face a historical choice. Left alone on the pinnacle of economic and political leadership, the United States can continue to increase its material wealth while ignoring the human needs of its people and those of the planet. Such a course is likely to lead to increasing selfishness, to alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair (5).

In this narrative, positive psychology becomes a way of heading off an apocalyptic future. Interestingly, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi suggest that positive psychology will be an antidote to “selfishness” and inequality, whereas many of the critiques of the field suggests that the discipline actual fuels this things.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi consider positive psychology as an intervention that will help individuals to flourish. They articulate the necessity for “a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive” (5). In doing so, they point to positive psychology’s practice of identifying and nurturing people’s strengths instead of fixing, as psychology traditionally has done, what it is wrong with individuals. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi write, “our message is to remind our field that psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, or damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is much larger. It is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play” (7). This attention to strengths, or positive traits, has come to be *the*

defining feature of the field and, as such, is echoed in practically every expression of positive psychology.

This article also clarifies and defines a key term for positive psychology, “subjective well-being.”<sup>8</sup> According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi. “Subjective well-being refers to what people think and how they feel about their lives—to the cognitive and affective conclusions they reach when they evaluate their existence. In practice, subjective well-being is a more scientific-sounding term for what people usually mean by happiness” (9). They also highlight how this new field can be applied to other situations, has “practical applications” (8), offers “uplifting practical examples” (8), and is “eminently practical” (9).

In his book, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (2002), Seligman expands on this introductory article’s claims. He identifies three components of happiness: positive emotion, meaning, and engagement (this last component is, for all intents and purposes, practically synonymous with Csikszentmihalyi’s conceptualization of “flow”). He also introduces the Happiness Formula,  $H = S + C + V$ , in which  $H$  = happiness;  $S$  = set level of happiness, determined through genetic factors;  $C$  = circumstances over which an individual has no control;  $V$  = aspects of one’s life that can be voluntarily controlled (45-61). Seligman devotes an entire chapter of this book to a discussion of strengths and the Values-in-Action (VIA) Strengths Survey that identifies an individual’s

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<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted, throughout this dissertation I use the terms subjective well-being, well-being, happiness, and flourishing synonymously. There will be times, however, when I clarify necessary shades of meaning. For example, as I will explain later in this chapter, there is often a distinction made by researchers between “happiness” (commonly associated with pleasure and hedonism) and “well-being” and “flourishing” (concepts frequently treated as analogous to Aristotle’s notion of the good life: eudaimonia). In fact, the differing connotations of these terms is mirrored in Seligman’s shifting theories: “authentic happiness” in his 2002 publication *Authentic Happiness* is revised to his framework of well-being in *Flourishing* almost a decade later (2011).

strongest characteristics out of group of 24 strengths (134-161). By doing so, he reinforces the discipline's core mission of assessing and nurturing individuals' positive traits.<sup>9</sup>

Positive psychology has already entered what might be termed its second wave, with much of its original content significantly revised and updated. Seligman's early disciplinary text, *Authentic Happiness*, has been supplanted by his recently released (and, according to him, much re-thought and revised) *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (2011). In *Flourish*, Seligman offers a re-thought version of the ideas he publicized with *Authentic Happiness*. He claims now to offer a "radical rethinking of what positivity and flourishing are" (9) [emphasis in original] by moving from life-satisfaction (happiness) to flourishing (well-being). He tries to clarify this revision and identify what exactly has changed from the old version to this new one by explaining, "[w]ell-being is a construct, and happiness is a thing" (14). His new theory emphasizes flourishing and well-being rather than the previous narrow vision of happiness, which he admits was really a "happiology" (*Flourish* 14).<sup>10</sup> In addition to the previous components of happiness (positive emotion, engagement, and meaning), Seligman adds two additional ones: positive relationships and accomplishment. These five categories make up the elements of well-being, or, in short: PERMA.<sup>11</sup> PERMA's final element,

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<sup>9</sup> Seligman and Christopher Peterson later published a more detailed account of strengths: *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (2004). This text will be important for the next chapter's discussion of how these strengths factor into (and condition what is possible for) a positive education curriculum.

<sup>10</sup> In this way, Seligman seems to be responding to some critiques of his limited original theory, yet the additions and the definitive emphasis on application in *Flourish* should still give us pause.

<sup>11</sup> PERMA is an acronym: **P**ositive emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, **A**ccomplishment.

accomplishment, lends itself to a sense of mastery and contributes to the redefined focus on education, the main subject of *Flourish*.<sup>12</sup>

Positive psychology has made great strides in institutionalizing the discipline in academic contexts and professional organizations. The International Positive Psychology Association<sup>13</sup> was founded in 2007, and numerous positive psychology organizations have been formed as part of it (most recently, the Canadian Positive Psychology Association<sup>14</sup>). In little over a decade, three peer-reviewed journals have been introduced that focus on both the theory and practice of positive psychology and happiness studies: *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2000), *Journal of Positive Psychology* (2006), and *International Journal of Happiness and Development* (2012). As mentioned above, there is also Veenhoven's *World Database of Happiness*, which is a comprehensive bibliography and directory of publications, resources, and researchers related to the disciplines.

Although positive psychology, similarly to the self-help genre, exhibits a dominant cultural American bias, the discipline is proving enormously influential on the worldwide scene. Positive psychology is increasingly pragmatic and focused on the application of its research to various domains, as evidenced by the widespread use of subjective well-being for planning and policy in economics, business, law, politics, education, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology. In the fields of economics, politics, and policy, there have been numerous attempts to move beyond mere consideration of material wealth and commodities (as exemplified in the Gross National Product and Gross Domestic Product) and to re-imagine prosperity in terms of

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<sup>12</sup> Positive psychology's application in education, or positive education, is the subject of this dissertation's next chapter.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ippanetwork.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.positivepsychologycanada.com/>

factors that contribute to a more holistic vision of well-being. The Happy Planet Index<sup>15</sup> attempts to reconceptualize how and what researchers measure and value at the national level. It identifies national levels of well-being in conversation with environmental sustainability by considering three factors: life expectancy, experienced well-being, and ecological footprint. In doing so, it demonstrates attentiveness to well-being as more than just the sum of individuals' positive emotions.

Advocates for applying well-being research to socio-economic issues have made major strides towards enshrining positive psychology findings in policy and politics. In fact, the United Nations recently (June 2012) passed a resolution declaring March 20<sup>th</sup>—in coordination with the spring equinox—as International Happiness Day.<sup>16</sup> The nation of Bhutan has had Gross National Happiness<sup>17</sup> legislation and initiatives in place since the 1970s, and it recently (April 2, 2012) convened a United Nations “Happiness Summit” (“Happiness and Well-Being: Developing a New Economic Paradigm”).<sup>18</sup>

Education is another area on which positive psychologists have focused a great deal of attention. In fact, the development of positive education and its initiatives now comprise a major subset of positive psychology's practical work. The second half of my dissertation offers an

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/>

<sup>16</sup> The celebration of “International Happiness Day” started in Portugal in 2008 and has been celebrated annually on July 10<sup>th</sup>. People sometimes turn this day into a yellow smiley-faced holiday. For example, the San Francisco branch celebrated the popularized tradition of International Happiness Day on July 10, 2012 by giving out “free hugs,” as stated on a Facebook group page (of uncertain origin) that came into being (“Joined Facebook”) on June 9, 2012: <https://www.facebook.com/InternationalHappinessDayMarch20th>

The desire for thinking past superficial conceptions of happiness (that either merely glorify positive affect or are single-mindedly focused on economic prosperity) and incorporating social and environmental well-being, health, and wealth into the equation is a fascinating and potentially transformative development.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.2apr.gov.bt/>

extended discussion and analysis of this activity. Chapter 3 provides an overview and critique of positive education. Chapter 4 zooms in to examine a specific example of positive education, Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF), or the application of resiliency training and psychological fitness curriculum to the United States military. My Conclusion provides examples of my own classroom pedagogy and sketches possible directions and possibilities for dialogue with the interdisciplinary fields of utopian studies, composition/writing studies, and new media/digital humanities.

### Positive Psychology: Rhetoric and Pedagogy

In this section I turn to an examination of the rhetoric of positive psychology, paying attention to how the discipline presents itself to the public. In looking at this presentation, I parse out the (often unstated) values associated with it. I stress that these are not mere semantic or theoretical qualms: the way the discipline is being talked about matters. On the contrary, this attention to its rhetoric and unacknowledged values is an essential intervention, one necessary because positive psychology fails to take into account the potential problems and the consequences of its own methodology and assumptions. In spite of these problems, positive psychology is moving forward at a rapid pace with application and policy initiatives that have far-reaching implications. Below, I review criticisms of positive psychology coming from within psychology to provide a clear picture of how the discipline positions itself in relation to its home discipline.

Advocates of positive psychology repeatedly emphasize that the field is grounded in science and empirical validity. The preface to *Flourish* makes this stance clear. In it, Seligman states, “I am a research scientist, and a conservative one at that. The appeal of what I write

comes from the fact that it is grounded in careful science: statistical tests, validated questionnaires, thoroughly researched exercises, and large representative samples” (1).<sup>19</sup> Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi also make the claim of positive psychology’s scientific rigor in their Introductory article to the January 2000 *American Psychology* special issue. They write, “And in this quest for what is best, positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, faith, self-deception, fads, or hand waving; it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to understand in all its complexity” (7). This key moment of defining the purview of the movement as firmly within science also serves to disparage self-help, an overlapping point to be discussed below. Positive psychology uses this grounding as proof that it is distinct from (and corrective of) some of the flaws and weaknesses of humanistic psychology, pop psychology, and self-help.

Positive psychology also claims that it is descriptive and not prescriptive, merely offering readers research and the “truth” about well-being. In *Flourish*, Seligman makes this claim that

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<sup>19</sup> Critics have pointed out that positive psychology has more complicated ties than just scientific ones. As Eugene Taylor argues, “Seligman appeals to science but relies on public support through the prestige of his position in the APA and at the University of Pennsylvania. Positive psychology is as much an economic endeavor as it is an intellectual one” (26).

Additionally, in *Bright-Sided* Ehrenreich takes punches at Seligman for his questionable use of science as well as positive psychology’s connections to self-help, prosperity gospels, and corporate profit motives, and he returns the favor in *Flourish* by attacking her inadequate use of research and killing of hope. It is not my intention here to rehearse this debate, although it is important debate, with high stakes that go well beyond the question of optimism in health that is the specific point of contention.

What interests me here are not the minute details of the research debate but rather the rhetoric that shapes this debate, that defines what is good, and that limits the horizon of possibility. Seligman’s knee-jerk appeal back to scientific superiority and “truth” when considering Ehrenreich’s comments precludes the possibility of true engagement with her substantive critique of what she sees as the conservative and problematic tendencies of positive psychology. In responding in this non-receptive manner, Seligman certainly does not model the active constructive responding technique he and other positive psychologists espouse as crucial for trust and authentic relationships. This non-reflexive and defensive response also precludes a broadening of perspectives and viewpoints, and the sustained dialogue necessary for the productive growth of the discipline.

positive psychology should be in the business of description, not prescription (22).<sup>20</sup> In doing so, he appeals to the objectivity traditionally considered as part and parcel of rigorous science. Aligning its subject matter and methodology with scientific facts and inquiry helps positive psychology to appear objective and in search of ideologically neutral, timeless truths that can be discovered.<sup>21</sup> Instead, however, positive psychology actually posits a set of values and then, at least implicitly, promotes these values. By not engaging with this fact, positive psychologists hide behind the presumed objectivity of science and shirk their duties as researchers and scholars to interrogate the values associated with the objects of their investigations as well as their relationship to these objects.<sup>22</sup>

Even members of positive psychology's home discipline, psychology, point to the reductive and unhelpful nature of positive psychology's stance that it can be based on pure objectivity and therefore remain neutral. Psychology historian Eugene Taylor demonstrates this problem in his article, "Positive Psychology and Humanistic Psychology: A Reply to Seligman."

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<sup>20</sup> This alleged merely descriptive (non-prescriptive) stance has caused such criticism in the psychology community that whole special issues are devoted (at least in part) to a challenging of this basic premise. In their introductory article to the October 2008 special issue of *Theory & Psychology* on positive psychology, the editors illustrate this challenge: "Positive psychology, under the prompting of Seligman, maintains that it is possible to pursue psychology as a kind of descriptive or objective science that avoids prescriptive recommendations. *All of the articles in the special issue challenge this contention*" (Christopher, Richardson, and Slife 558).

<sup>21</sup> Ironically, this appeal to universal scientific principles is similar to *The Secret's* glorification of the timeliness and infallible "the law of attraction."

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich devotes a chapter in *Bright-Sided* to positive psychology ("Psychology: The Science of Happiness"). In this sixth chapter, she labels Seligman's Happiness Formula "one of the most irritatingly pseudoscientific assertions in his book" (156), one which provides "a veneer of science" (158). This claim of scientific rigor, as I have already demonstrated, is often leveled at the self-help genre. Ehrenreich views Seligman as one of the many members of the "cult of cheerfulness" (51) that she discusses in relation to pop culture, healthcare, religion, and business. I would add that what is more problematic than this "veneer of science" or "cult of cheerfulness" is the veneer of "good," associated with it. I am more concerned in this project with what consequences arise from positive psychology's cloaking its subject matter in an uninterrogated positive connotation, an *a priori* aura of happy.

He maintains “the present definition of positive psychology also reflects a naive misunderstanding of rather detailed arguments with regard to the epistemology of the scientific method” (23). He further claims that, “Reductionistic epistemology may be required to launch a science, but in its mature phase, all sciences, even the most exact ones, must confront the underlying philosophical issues of the fundamental relation of the subject to the object. Seligman’s theories about positive psychology contain no such reflexive elements as yet, so the theory must be judged as still being in its infant stages” (24).

Positive psychologists’ problematic claims of scientific rigor and empirical validity are their primary means of distinguishing the discipline from self-help and the field of humanistic psychology.<sup>23</sup> In the debut of positive psychology, that oft-cited opening article to the January 2000 special issue on positive psychology in *American Psychologist* (January 2000), Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi explicitly attempt this distancing. They state, “Unfortunately, humanistic psychology did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base, and it spawned myriad therapeutic self-help movements” (7). Even more than a decade after the establishment of positive psychology and bolstered by significant funding, following, and support, leading positive psychologists still feel the need to explicitly remind their readers of this distinction. At the beginning of *Flourish*, Seligman deploys this distancing rhetorical move: “In contrast to pop

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<sup>23</sup> Humanistic psychology is a branch of psychology (at its peak in the 1960s) devoted to self-actualization, human flourishing, and peak experiences. As such, it relies on qualitative as well as quantitative measures and does not position itself as a “hard science” in the way that positive psychology attempts to do for itself.

psychology and the bulk of self-improvement, my writings are believable because of the underlying science” (3).<sup>24</sup>

Even though they may not be consciously doing so, positive psychologists often employ many of the generic conventions of self-help. The two anecdotal stories that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi relate in their opening article (and which are repeated elsewhere) demonstrate this point. For Seligman, the entry point (or “conversion”) into positive psychology is an interaction with his five-year-old daughter in his garden;<sup>25</sup> for Csikszentmihalyi, it is the devastating effects of World War II on Europe and the people he knew to be once successful.<sup>26</sup> This sharing of personal experiences mimics self-help authors’ inclusion of personal narratives

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, Seligman often makes claims that places his work squarely *within* self-help discourse. Consider the opening sentence of *Flourish*: “This book will help you flourish” (1). As this promise makes clear, Seligman’s intent in this book is to help readers achieve well-being. Since he explicitly sets out to help individual *selves* flourish, this book *is* self-help.

<sup>25</sup> Seligman describes his epiphany as the following:

[. . .] I have to confess that even though I write books about children, I’m really not all that good with children. I am goal oriented and time urgent, and when I’m weeding in the garden, I’m actually trying to get the weeding done. Nikki, however, was throwing weeds into the air, singing, and dancing around. I yelled at her. She walked away, then came back and said,

“Daddy, I want to talk to you.”

“Yes, Nikki?”

“Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From the time I was three to the time I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. When I turned five, I decided not to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch.” [. . .] (5-6).

<sup>26</sup> Csikszentmihalyi narrates his realization as follows:

As a child, I witnessed the dissolution of the smug world in which I had been comfortably ensconced. I noticed with surprise how many of the adults I had known as successful and self-confident become helpless and dispirited once the war removed their social supports. Without jobs, money, or status, they were reduced to empty shells. Yet there were a few who kept their integrity and purpose despite the surrounding chaos. Their serenity was a beacon that kept others from losing hope. And these were not the men and women one would have expected to emerge unscathed: They were not necessarily the most respected, better educated, or more skilled individuals. This experience set me thinking: What sources of strength were these people drawing on? [. . .] (6-7).

and life-changing epiphanies often are used to justify the need for and wisdom of the advice in the books they write.<sup>27</sup> This technique squarely places the academic within the personal, placing the authority and rationale for the emergence of a new scientific discipline as much within the realm of lived experience and embodied knowledge as it does within scientific process or necessity. There is nothing inherently wrong with this use of lived experience or personal insight (it is natural that one's professional and personal lives and academic and individual commitments bleed into each other), but Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's foregrounding these anecdotes in this article seems to contradict positive psychology's desire for legitimacy as rigorous *science* and belie their claims of distance from the self-help genre<sup>28</sup>

Despite positive psychology's overall bent towards separating itself from self-help, there are researchers and authors who choose to mix the two. As we saw at the end of the last chapter, some positive psychologists actively promote positive psychology research to a self-help audience. Tal Ben-Shahar, who is a positive psychologist, functions as a public intellectual and consciously works to bridge the two movements, and to make positive psychology accessible to a wider, public audience. Moreover, the two genres have a great deal of overlap in their readership, and positive psychology texts are often classified under the self-help heading. Still, other positive psychologists fight hard to deny this crossover appeal and substance. They make the case, as discussed above, for distinctness from self-help by preempting the connection with the claim to scientific methods.

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<sup>27</sup> Two examples, mentioned in chapter 1, are the beginning sections of *The Secret* series and of *The Happiness Project* in which, respectively, Byrne relates her encounter with personal tragedy that miraculously brought "the secret" to her and Rubin takes stock of her life and makes the decision to actively pursue additional happiness.

<sup>28</sup> There is even a sense of a religious calling in terms of positive psychology, which further serves to weaken the discipline's claim to pure science. Seligman writes, "Positive Psychology called to me just as the burning bush called to Moses" (75).

In trying to separate itself from self-help, positive psychology also denies ties to humanistic psychology, a discipline it claims is not grounded in rigorous science and which gave rise to self-help.<sup>29</sup> Shortly after the January 2000 *American Psychologist* special issue, the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* published its own special issue (Winter 2001) in response to this “so-called positive psychology” (Greening 4; Taylor 14). In it, humanistic psychologists express concern about positive psychology’s isolationist approach and encourage positive psychology to be in conversation with humanistic psychology research and researchers. By denying its historical roots in humanistic psychology, positive psychology remains decontextualized within its own field and misses an important opportunity for dialogue about what makes human lives flourish. When presented with alternative perspectives, outside input, or

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<sup>29</sup> Humanistic psychologists point out that positive psychology attributes unfair traditions to their work and excludes its rich and important academic research tradition. Taylor explains humanistic psychology’s difference from other related offshoots: “Humanistic psychology, actually an academic movement in psychology, is quite distinct in several important ways from the psychotherapeutic counterculture, which has tended to be more closely associated with a foster child of the humanistic movement called transpersonal psychology” (22). Greening, the issue’s editor, further highlights positive psychology’s rebuff of humanistic psychology’s input: “However, it soon became apparent that he [Seligman] was making no connections with and giving no credit to humanistic psychology. It was as if the field did not exist, in spite of a four-decade history, countless publications, and a Division of Humanistic Psychology within APA itself. His subsequent article in *American Psychologist* did little to remedy this omission, and linked humanistic psychology dismissively with crystals and the human potential movement” (4).

It is ironic that, in *Flourish*, Seligman concludes that in *Bright-Sided*, “Ehrenreich failed to address the full range of the scientific literature” (201) when discussed positive psychology’s claims. He continues, relating how Ehrenreich consulted him as she was writing her book, and how he gave her “an extensive bibliography and articles” (202). He claims she “cherry-picks her way through some of the research” (202); “Cherry-picking is in the abstract one of the minor forms of intellectual dishonesty, but in matters of life and death, cherry-picking to dismiss the value of optimism and hope for women with cancer is, in my opinion, dangerous journalistic malpractice” (203). This attack about not reviewing the relevant literature in one’s area of inquiry is exactly the same critique made against Seligman by other psychologists about his overlooking humanistic psychology and its research history. One might wonder if Seligman considers his dismissal of the history of humanistic psychology to be “one of the minor forms of intellectual dishonesty.”

substantive critiques, positive psychology chooses to simply ignore or defensively attack these potentially helpful contributions to its own work on the nature of well-being and the best ways to increase it. Therefore, it loses potential allies in the quest for what makes life worth living. It also, by holding various critiques at arm's length, refuses to consider what the consequences and stakes of its own assumptions and biases may be.

Humanistic psychologists are clear that a fuller account of the two disciplines' overlap is necessary. Greening explains this desire to bring the two branches of psychology into alliance and conversation in his initial "Commentary" to the publication. "I hope some liaison between humanistic psychology and positive psychology can help produce more such research. This special issue is an important start in a collaboration between these two closely related fields" (5). In his lead-off article, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," Grant Jewell Rich, who proposed the idea for the special issue, echoes this desire to forge connections (past, present, and future) between the two fields. He states, "This special issue aims to recenter the discourse in positive psychology in such a way that the movement recognizes the current and historical importance of humanistic psychology" (9). This is necessary because "[l]ittle is gained from insularity" (Rich 10).

Taylor views positive psychology's overlooking of humanistic psychology traditions to be an important aspect of positive psychology's underlying worldview and ideological commitments. He argues this overlooking is indicative of a "more pervasive" issue, "an epistemological difference of such proportions" (17) that different branches of psychology are not really discussing the same things anymore. Rich speaks to the limitations of quantitative methods to capture qualitative experiences and claims that "[s]uch an approach seems somewhat limited when one examines many of the phenomena of interest to positive psychologists" (9).

One of the major consequences, as I will show in the next sections, of positive psychology's inattentiveness to qualitative experiences is that it preempts the field's attention to underlying values and assumptions.

Now that I've demonstrated how positive psychology's claims of pure scientific objectivity and mere description are unfounded and that there are values at play in the field, I turn to an examination of what these values are. Positive psychology, even as it tries to keep self-help at arm's length, shares in its problems. The problems that I identified in the previous chapter show up in positive psychology as well: individualism, instrumentalization, decontextualization, non-dialogism, remediation, non-reflexivity, unacknowledged political conservatism, and preservation of the status quo. Additionally, positive psychology conflates correlation and causality, a strategy that holds serious consequences when positive psychology is applied to policy.

While there has been a great deal published on positive psychology, from both critics and proponents, the majority of the discussion has centered on the content and methodology of the discipline rather than its ideology. Although many of positive psychology's values remain under the radar, there are scholars who work to critically analyze and problematize the discipline's rhetoric, values, and ideology. One such critical stance is the "Thinking through Positive Psychology" special issue of the journal *Theory & Psychology* (October 2008). In their Introduction to this special issue, the editors John Chambers Christopher, Frank C. Richardson, and Brent D. Slife indicate the issue's purpose as follows: "to uncover, articulate, and critically assess the key conceptual and moral underpinnings of this movement" (556), "raise challenging questions about the current program of positive psychology and to suggest modified conceptual underpinnings for any such enterprise" (556) and "to examine more closely the philosophical

foundations and ethical thrust of this influential new movement” (556). In the issue’s concluding article, “Problematic Ontological Underpinnings of Positive Psychology,” Slife and Richardson assert, “the problems of positive psychology are deeply rooted” (699),

Another useful analysis of the discipline occurs in Jeffrey Yen’s article, “Authorizing Happiness: Rhetorical Demarcation of Science and Society in Historical Narratives of Positive Psychology” (2010) in the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*. This article focuses on positive psychology’s rhetoric and its consequences through an examination of the discipline’s narratives about itself in relation to other branches of science. Yen also illustrates how positive psychology attempts to position its distinct characteristics and methodology as essential for society. He stresses that the rhetoric of positive psychology has significant consequences. Yen contextualizes positive psychology’s “increasingly cultural power” (70) through these historical narratives of the field. He treats “this discourse as a form of social, cultural, and political history” (70) and highlights the discipline’s “high stakes” and “ideological dimension” (69).<sup>30</sup>

Now that I’ve established the importance of examining positive psychology’s cultural work, I turn to the problems it shares with self-help. As in self-help, one of positive psychology’s most glaring features is its focus on the individual at the expense of the social. The values that emerge in PERMA as well as the explication and application of a focus on strengths and

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<sup>30</sup> Yen comes to three conclusions about positive psychology’s rhetorical strategies that echo the points I made in the previous section about the field’s overreliance on scientific legitimacy. He states, “I argue that the rhetorical styles in narratives of positive psychology (1) tread a very narrow line between the requirements of scientific or expert jargon, and popular discourse; (2) position positive psychology as simultaneously rooted in ancient philosophical sensibilities and yet eminently relevant to contemporary concerns; and in a similar vein, (3) construct positive psychology as both revolutionary, and yet at the same time, moderate and scientifically conservative” (70).

reproduce self-help's reification of the power of the individual as the site of improvement, the locus of change, and the power to overcome adversity.

This pronounced problem of privileging individual subjectivity is striking given positive psychology's purported emphasis on the social. For example, in their introductory January 2000 *American Psychologist* article, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi emphasize the purported social-mindedness of positive psychology. In speaking of the articles in the special issue, they explain, "[t]he third thread that runs through these contributions is the recognition that people and experiences are embedded in a social context. Thus, a positive psychology needs to take positive communities and positive institutions into account"; "In fact, to a degree that is exceedingly rare in psychological literature, every one of these contributions looks at behavior in its ecologically valid social setting" (8).

Seligman's revised theory of well-being does add the importance of positive relationships to the equation. This inclusion of positive relationships—along with another element, meaning—at least partially acknowledges that individuals are part of a larger collective, and that this larger collective is meaningful. However, it seems that this sense of the social is still instrumentalized within this updated framework. The social only becomes useful as a way of promoting individual flourishing. Additionally, three of the five elements of well-being still highlight the individual self: emotion, engagement, and accomplishment.

Yen deconstructs positive psychology's claim of social-mindedness and demonstrates the individual focus behind the discipline's assertion that it is socially helpful and oriented. Yen shows, through his rhetorical analysis, how, in at least some of its representations, positive psychology presents itself as coming to the aid of the America's national interests in a time of threat. He argues, however, that things are not as straightforward as they might appear on the

surface: “This happy society is not, however, predicated on the pursuit of social justice and social change, but on the production of happy individuals, each exercising his or her own free will for the purposes of self-actualization. As such, these narratives blissfully ignore the numerous ethical traditions and critical social movements in which self-fulfillment is neither an end in itself, nor a particularly useful means to an ethically desirable end” (72).

As I showed in chapter 1, the self is culturally constructed; other people, external circumstances, and even the self-help and positive psychology discourses take part in shaping the self. Therefore, there is no such thing as an isolated self to which we can return or appeal in our formulations of well-being. Slife and Richardson emphasize that “the ‘self arises within conversation’” and “the self is part of a scene of locus of dialogue among various commitments, identifications, and points of view about what is the overall good or right kind of life for humans” (709). They demonstrate how thinking of the self as contained and independent presents ethical consequences: “When we abstract individuals out of such moral and cultural entanglements, it becomes difficult to make full sense of thick ethical concepts, even if they continue to play an important role in our lives. The only way left to explain or justify such moral values seems to be not as attitudes or actions essential to being a person, but as *instruments or means* to the end of reaching some set of goods, results, or payoffs” (707). Instead of the abstracted, inward-focused, and individualistic-seeking perspective that they see as typical of positive psychology, Slife and Richardson offer up reverence and humility (710) as interventions, attitudes that allow for a multiplicity of perspectives and voices in the co-construction of meanings and values.

Slife and Richardson show how positive psychologists typically fail to acknowledge this labor of the cultural construction of the self. They write:

This kind of instrumental justification of ethical ideals is a morally serious approach that intends to advance individual autonomy and well-being while preserving a moral focus needed for sustaining our sincere commitment to advancing human welfare. However, in our view, it just will not work. Procuring such results or satisfactions is simply not what we mean by many of our core commitments in their original context. These commitments represent components of what we or our community take to be the good or right life, even if adhering to them entails considerable effort, sacrifice, or dis-ease” (708).

This focus on the individual and the instrumentalizing nature of positive psychology is also the subject of the *Theory & Psychology* (October 2008) special issue introduced above. In their introductory article, editors Christopher, Richardson, and Slife make these problems central to their critiques:

One main theme that runs through these critiques is that positive psychology fails to take into account fully its own cultural context. It tends to argue for and recommend ethical values and mental health ideals that reflect the one-side individualism of American society with its stress on personal autonomy and individually-defined fulfillment. Even when it incorporates values and virtues from other moral or spiritual outlooks, it tends to present them as valuable mainly because they serve as means to such individual ends, an instrumental rationale that itself reflects the biases—some would say unduly calculating and individualistic ones—of our culture. Positive psychology overly hastily and somewhat naïvely universalizes its particular cultural preferences and ideals as good for or applicable to all human communities (557).

Here the editors place positive psychology's dominant message of individualism squarely within an American worldview.

Additionally, the twin problems of individualism and instrumentalization powerfully combine in positive psychology. These problems are even more pronounced when well-being or emotional satisfaction are treated as desirable but ideologically neutral ends. Slife and Richardson state,

We submit that their emphasis on pleasurable outcomes (e.g., Seligman's quote above) does not make sense of their *own* dedication to the advancement of human welfare. This dedication is not so much pure emotional satisfaction as it is a commitment to an instrumental and individualist vision of the good life.

Unfortunately, these commitments are not fully acknowledged in positive psychology. If they reflected more on their own cultural context instead of relying so heavily on an abstractionist ontology and presumably decontextualized principles of human functioning, they might notice the extent to which they uncritically perpetuate a questionable status quo (713).

This excerpt showcases how positive psychology actually takes a politically conservative stance without realizing it.

Other problems positive psychology shares with self-help are a one-size-fits all approach and decontextualization. Positive psychology suffers from a blind spot in its own methodology: the ability to situate itself within its particular ideological, cultural, and social commitments and biases and to imagine alternative contexts. Positive psychology's methodology and framework are decontextualized, and so are the "tools" that it promotes to others for achieving well-being. For example, common positive psychology exercises such as gratitude journals and lists of "three

things that went well” are focused solely on the individual regardless of context or social embeddedness.

Yen shows how the discipline adopts a chameleon nature, changing its stories in accordance with the current political and social climate in order to stay relevant. In Yen’s view, positive psychology can be (and has been) alternately “the science of American self-actualization” and “the science of American security” (72). While Yen performs this analysis to show how positive psychology’s shifting rhetoric keeps the discipline relevant and increases its popularity in the academy and the public, I am more interested in how this rhetoric might be marshaled in the future to support and legitimize certain initiatives and agendas (such as the military’s agenda, as discussed in chapter 4). Positive psychology’s decontextualization enables the discipline (and happiness and well-being, by extension) to support and justify incredibly different positions (sometimes even polar opposites).

This decontextualization also prevents positive psychology from being dialogic. This omission on the part of positive psychologists to engage with the research findings of their own discipline (discussed above) is indicative of a larger problem of being non-dialogic. Positive psychology does not put itself into conversation with anything else other than its own ideas of the happy individual and the good life. Furthermore, it does not consider the interplay of good and bad emotions, traits, and behaviors, choosing instead to focus solely on the positive aspects. Barbara Held, in “The Negative Side of Positive Psychology” (2004) identifies this non-dialogism as positive psychology’s “dominant, separatist message” (10) and “the movement’s nondialectical dominant Message” (20). In this article in *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Held points to many of the contradictions in what she identifies as the “dominant Message” of the positive psychology movement. Slife and Richardson offer an alternative to positive

psychology's decontextualization, instrumentalization, individualism, and insularity. They recommend "*praxis*" (714) and an awareness of context and situatedness. As I will discuss in the following chapter on positive education, praxis is an integral part of critical pedagogy and of quality education, one that encourages growth and possibility rather than predetermined standards.

Although most of the attention (especially in the media) towards positive psychology has been favorable and praises the discipline's focus on strengths and methods for achieving happiness, I argue that positive psychology actually is a form of remediation, much like self-help is. Held also claims that this responsibility on the individual to fix him/herself and to get better and be positive can be dangerous in terms of setting in place an unattainable and undesirable norm (Ehrenreich makes a similar critique in *Bright-Sided*). Held explains,

The tyranny of the positive attitude lies in its adding insult to injury: If people feel bad about life's many difficulties and they cannot manage to transcend their pain no matter how hard they try (to learn optimism), they could end up feeling even worse; they could feel guilty or defective for not having the right (positive) attitude, in addition to whatever was ailing them in the first place. This is a possible unintended consequence of trumpeting positivity, whether in popular or professional circles (see Held, 2001, 2002a, pp. 969, 986-987) (12).

An additional problem beyond the ones also exhibited by the self-help genre is positive psychology's dangerous conflation of causation and correlation. Ahmed provides a useful corrective here, in helping to demonstrate how affect transfers among individuals and objects. She demonstrates how certain things are designated as "happy objects," and how certain things become good by association. By then making the leap to identify those things as bringing

happiness (rather than just reflecting it), positive psychology suggests these things might be worth maximizing (because they maximize happiness). In this respect, positive psychology sets up certain ideals, standards, expectations, and biases about what is good and desirable.

Following positive psychology “epistemological difference” from other viewpoints (Taylor 17) leads to uncovering the field’s unexplored assumptions. Taylor shows the internal inconsistencies in positive psychology’s position: “Seligman is injecting a value judgment into an allegedly value-free system, a theoretical contradiction that will not be without pragmatic consequences” (25-6). I will highlight in the politics and policy section below what these consequences are. Hiding behind an ideologically neutral position does little to serve the population positive psychology claims to improve with its research agenda. Positive psychology must recognize that it contains values, its methodology and content are not ideologically neutral, and that the field (and its object of study) is situated within a complex interplay of signifiers.

As discussed above, positive psychology has implicit, unacknowledged values and ideology. These values and ideology enable it to teach (i.e., it has implicit pedagogical functions). Without explicitly advocating for a particular type of person in pursuit of a particular type of the good life, positive psychology’s content, methodology, and definitions do gesture toward a particular worldview. Since positive psychology does not acknowledge its own ideological commitments and culturally specific situatedness, the field tends to uncritically promote certain ways of being. This promotion ties into the correlation and causation problem because positive psychology, in its measures built on self-reporting, has found that certain types of activities or ways of being correlated with higher levels of happiness or satisfaction. Positive psychology also teaches us that the status quo is acceptable, and that our reactions should adjust

to circumstances, or that we should maximize happiness where it is already found rather than perhaps looking for it in places where it is not found and promoting alternatives.

Positive psychology focuses almost exclusively on strengths and positive emotions, and this minimizing of negative emotions reduces possibility for growth and social transformation. In emphasizing the dual aspects of positive feeling (the pleasurable or affective component of well-being) and satisfaction (the evaluative or cognitive component), positive psychology misses a range of other emotions and attitudes that have the potential to move individuals beyond contentment. Finally, positive psychology's worldview is dominated by American notions of individualism and therefore does not consider other important conceptualizations or frameworks in which the individual self might interact with and be interdependent on others.

Now that I have illustrated positive psychology's conservative ideology, values, and rhetoric, I show how and why this ideology might cause problems when positive psychology is applied to various disciplines or institutionalized into policy. Yen argues that "what we take to be the issues or subject matter of positive psychology is by no means natural or self-evident; that within its historical narrative, what appears to us to be what psychologists should have been studying all along, is the product of a discursive and political labor" (76). Below I take a closer look at the political labor that positive psychology performs.

In my exploration of potential consequences of positive psychology's politics, Ahmed's interpretive lens in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) is useful for tracing how "happiness" is inextricably bound to ideological commitments and political implications. In asking, right from the beginning of her study, not merely *what happiness is* but "what does happiness do?" (2), Ahmed brackets the question of content or subject matter, and instead positions herself at a different site of inquiry. This re-positioning is an essential first move if we are to understand the

performative (and in my argument, pedagogical) work of the concepts of happiness and well-being. Ahmed wants to “consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable” (11) and to investigate “not only what makes happiness good but how happiness *participates* in making things good” (13). An extension of this line of inquiry, one that I work to answer in this section, is how does *positive psychology* participate not just in describing what is desirable but also in *making* certain things desirable.

Yen suggests that positive psychology participates in making things good. He discusses how

the establishment of a new psychological field of study is partially achieved through the discursive construction of the necessity of that field; that is, the programmatic description and “translation” of societal preoccupations and concerns into the language and terms of the new field. Such description does more than outline problems and issues that were always there to be described—they actively “make visible” or problematize new aspects of life for which the new field is the solution of choice (69).

This is similar to the ways in which self-help discourse helps to create the individuals it purports to help (as discussed in chapter 1).

What positive psychology does not always consider (or at least publicly discuss) is that happiness, well-being, and flourishing are abstract concepts. Therefore, a necessary first step is to look at how various terms get defined. What does it mean to be a happy individual? To achieve well-being? To flourish? To be labeled as or having these things is not a neutral designation. Even though positive psychology tries to break the concepts down into discrete and quantifiable elements (such the “construct” of PERMA, which consists of five separate

elements), each of these elements remains amorphous and contested. These amorphous terms are problematic because they are not fixed to any one particular meaning. Therefore, different people conceptualize and use the terms differently, so they cannot be sure that their versions resonate with other people, or that other people will even find their conceptualizations meaningful, desirable, or comprehensible.

Critics have pointed out how the connotations and denotations that positive psychology applies to its research create problems. Taylor explains: “an examination of the context in which the term *positive* is employed by the “positive” psychologists suggests that it has a definitely restricted meaning” (15). As Taylor demonstrates, in positive psychology, “positive” means positivism, positive reinforcement, or the dualism of positive and negative (15-17). In discussing the use of “positive” as the “somewhat naively dualistic of anything negative” (16), Taylor emphasizes the lack of any consensus about meaning that I pointed to above:

the point to be made here is that positive in the most general sense has no externally verifiable objective standard. Either it means whatever anyone defines as the opposite of negative, which makes it a relative term because what is positive for one could be negative for another, or it only means how it is defined by those who presume to have the greatest control over how it is defined—“We will tell all of you what it means.” A controlling elite, who has been chosen and certified by each other, is therefore established, whose standards all others must adopt whether they like it or not. This is particularly true if significant research funds, conference presentations, publishing venues, and teaching positions are at stake, as they are in the case of Seligman’s version of positive psychology. This

position clearly states that there is no positive psychology except that which is established through reductionistic quantitative analysis (17-18).

Here Taylor adds to the problem of definition one of hierarchy and control, suggesting that positive psychology is gaining a monopoly on settings these terms' definitions and limiting alternatives. And it does, in fact, seem as if positive psychology is contributing to a monolithic discourse about well-being.

Even though well-being is an abstract concept and its meaning is not universally agreed upon, Seligman wants to measure it and build policy from these measurements. He states, "Policy itself follows from what is measured, and if all that is measured is money, all policy will be about getting more money. If well-being is also measured, policy will change to increase well-being" (227). If well-being is to be measured because it is a desirable end, but we have not yet clarified or achieved consensus about what that end is, the problems associated with creating policy around it become abundantly clear. Well-being is not good simply because one chooses to arbitrarily affix the label "positive" to it.

Seligman does acknowledge (and even promote) the fact that positive psychology has a politics, but he insists that it is not a politics of means, but of ends: the end in this case is well-being. Since I have already problematized the notion of well-being as an "end" and shown how, in and of itself, it is an empty signifier, the claim above becomes meaningless. In the conclusion of *Flourish*, Seligman explains,

There is a politics behind positive psychology. It is not a politics of left versus right, however. Left and right are the politics of means—empowering the state versus empowering the individual—but, stripped to essentials, they both advocate similar ends: more material prosperity, more wealth. Positive psychology is a

politics that advocates no particular means but rather an end. That end is not wealth or conquest but well-being (221).

It is difficult to unpack what Seligman actually means by this claim. He skirts the issue here, saying that the discipline looks at “ends” without actually ever interrogating whether those ends are desirable in the first place. Rather, the claim reductively assumes that the end *should* be well-being, and it further assumes that everyone is in agreement about *how* positive psychology is defined (or what we assume to be its definition based on the values I identified earlier in this chapter).

It is this “end” about which I and other critics would like there to be conversation. Ahmed’s decoupling of the implied equation between happiness as the sole good in life is useful here. She writes,

The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us. It would thus mean the freedom to cause unhappiness by acts of deviation.

I am not suggesting that our aim is to cause unhappiness. It is not that unhappiness becomes our telos: rather, if we no longer presume that happiness is our telos, unhappiness would register as more than what gets in the way. When we are no longer sure of what gets in the way, then “the way” itself becomes a question. The freedom to be unhappy might provide the basis for a new political ontology, which, in not taking happiness as an agreed endpoint for human action, would be able to ask about the point of action. We might act politically because we do not agree about the ends of action (195-6).

Labeling the ultimate end as well-being, as positive psychology does, privileges certain ways of being, and certain types of being. What does it mean that one must *claim* the right to be unhappy? Has happiness become so ingrained as a “good” that one must, of necessity, aggressively adopt the opposite stance?<sup>31</sup>

The positive psychology project depends upon the assumption that well-being is both desirable and teachable. We have already seen the problems that are caught up in trying to state what we desire. Positive psychology assumes that well-being is not a fixed thing that we inherit, but that we can nurture it, cultivate it, and even shape it into policy or curriculum. Seligman claims that his website, Authentic Happiness, is a “public service” (37). Additionally, Seligman announces his PERMA 51 goal at the end of *Flourish*, saying that by 2015 his goal is to have 51% of the population flourishing. This activist stance stands in stark contrast to the repeated claim by positive psychologists that their work is not prescriptive, but rather merely descriptive. This appears to be part of a larger aim of spreading the positive psychology gospel. Rich expresses this concern as well: “I have serious reservations about a positive psychology that

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<sup>31</sup> This necessity of adopting the “freedom to be unhappy” is reminiscent of John the Savage’s similar claim in Aldous Huxley’s dystopian classic, *Brave New World* (1932). Consider the following conversation between John the Savage and Mustapha Mond (Resident World Controller of Western Europe) in the novel’s penultimate chapter:

“But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

“In fact,” said Mustapha Mond, “you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“All right then,” said the Savage defiantly, “I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.” There was a long silence.

“I claim them all,” said the Savage at last.

Mustapha Mond shrugged his shoulders. “You’re welcome,” he said (215).

offers a single prescription for the ‘good life.’ Such a prescription will undoubtedly reflect the morals, values, and religious beliefs of the person and the society that write the prescription” (12).

Slife and Richardson note that this reductive stance is based on an abstractionist approach, and they offer an insightful critique and intervention to the field. They claim that many of the problems that I have described above (and which were taken up, to some degree, in the journal’s special issue that they are concluding) “stem from an unexamined philosophical premise—its ontology” (700). The authors first explain abstractionism and relationality (700-705) and show how these different methodological approaches lead to very different worldviews and value systems in positive psychology. They claim that positive psychology, in upholding the “abstractive outlook in psychology” (705), is therefore conservative and flawed in terms of its disciplinary methodology. They explain, “a few of the moral and political ramifications of such an abstractionist approach” (707), which hinge on definition and promotion of the good life. Their explanation is as follows: “Because the self-contained self is the maker and chooser of meanings and values in this view, it seems likely that most positive psychologists presuppose some version of what the political philosopher Michael Sandel (1996) calls ‘minimalist liberalism’ (p. 17). This version of individualism assumes that everyone can define the good life for themselves so long as they do not interfere with the right of others to do the same” (707).

Seligman tries to break out of this individualistic trap, but he does so by referring back to the validity and infallibility of empiricism. Seligman writes, “Happiness and life satisfaction are one element of well-being and are useful subjective measures, but well-being cannot exist just in your own head. Public policy aimed only at subjective well-being is vulnerable to the *Brave New World* caricature in which the government promotes happiness simply by drugging the

population with a euphoriant called ‘soma.’” Therefore, in addition to positive emotion and positive assessment of one’s life, Seligman adds the other elements of PERMA, claiming they contribute some objectivity. He explains, “Just as we choose how to live by plural criteria, and not just to maximize happiness, truly useful measures of well-being for public policy will need to be a dashboard of both subjective and objective measures of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, good relationships, and positive accomplishment” (*Flourish* 26).

The methodology of measuring well-being both subjectively and objectively conflates qualitative and quantitative techniques, relying on people’s self-reporting of their happiness or satisfaction. Ahmed raises an important question about the values in happiness studies methodology and whether there can really be objective measures. She states:

Happiness research is primarily based on self-reporting: studies measure how happy people say they are, presuming that if people say they are happy, they are happy. This model both presumes the transparency of self-feeling (that we can say and know how we feel), as well as the unmotivated and uncomplicated nature of self-reporting. If happiness is already understood to be what you want to have, then to be asked how happy you are is not to be asked a neutral question. It is not just that people are being asked to evaluate their life situations but that they are being asked to evaluate their life situations through categories that are value laden (5).

Ahmed’s theoretical framework, alternative perspective, and questions offer a fruitful opportunity for healthy debate about the (implicit) aims of positive psychology. However, positive psychology is not her primary concern, and the few pages that she devotes to the field (7-12) do not do justice to this discipline’s powerful worldwide influence. Ehrenreich in *Bright-*

*Sided* devotes more attention to positive psychology, and she also concludes that it has a conservative agenda. Ehrenreich states, “the real conservatism of positive psychology lies in its attachment to the status quo, with all its inequalities and abuses of power. Positive psychologists’ tests of happiness and well-being, for example, rest heavily on measures of personal contentment with things as they are” (170). Ahmed and Ehrenreich’s concern about the self-reporting technique of assessment in positive psychology is, in my estimation, a *key* problem.

Since positive psychology has so many problems, inconsistencies, and methodological weaknesses, we must make an important distinction between whether the discipline *has* politics in and of itself and whether this research should be *applied* to politics. These are two very different questions, and the latter must be answered thoroughly (and first), since it has important consequences for the former. Derek Bok’s *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being* (2010) and the special issues of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* on happiness and the good life (March 2007) and also the one on happiness, ethics, and politics (June 2010) explore these issues. Similarly, the special issue of *Theory & Psychology* includes an article on “virtue ethics” that explores the promotion of the idea of decontextualized character strengths and virtues within the context of moral philosophy.<sup>32</sup> Yen’s article on boundary work also helps to clarify some of the problems here.

Rich also expresses similar concerns about the relationship of positive psychology research to policy. He ends his introductory article with mediations on the notion of the “good

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<sup>32</sup> In *Flourish*, Seligman also tackles ethics. He states, “Ethics and what we care about are not by any means the same thing. [ . . . ] Ethics are the rules you apply to get what you care about. What you care about—your values—is more basic than ethics. There is no philosophical discipline concerned with what we care about, and there is just the same gap in psychology” (*Flourish* 229). Therefore, he argues not for courses in ethics (as in his example of students at Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania) but for training in “positive business,” courses that teach PERMA and are “aimed at broadening what MBAs care about” (*Flourish* 231). Seligman here shows that positive business courses, or positive education, *do* teach values.

life” and how that is dependent on the viewpoint (and values) of the one who describes it. He cautions, “one suspects that the definition of the ‘good society’ will vary with the background of the scholar doing the research: Will the ‘good society of the atheist be the same as the “good society” of the believer? If the ‘good life’ is to be studied and perhaps even prescribed, then who will define it? A hundred or so academic psychologists and therapists?” (11).

A further claim, which I will explore in detail in chapter 3, is that well-being is not only desirable but also teachable. Seligman claims, “If positive psychology aims to build well-being on the planet, well-being must be buildable. That sounds trivial, but it is not” (*Flourish* 31). This building is necessary because “positive mental health is not just the absence of mental illness” but rather a “presence: the presence of positive emotion, the presence of engagement, the presence of meaning, the presence of good relationships, and the presence of accomplishment.” Seligman is interested in how to create the conditions for the “presence of flourishing” (*Flourish* 183).

Both this pedagogy and the politics of positive psychology are inherently conservative, in the sense that they do not actively encourage radical possibility and transformation. While it is useful to identify and nurture the strengths that we already have, to reflect on past experiences and create a positive meaning for them, and to derive satisfaction and pleasure from our activities, these techniques might merely serve a remedial function and help us to become more complacent with “what is.” Of course, *what might be* has to grow out of *what is*, unless one

believes in the necessity of an apocalyptic break (something I am neither advocate for nor believe in, even from a theoretical standpoint).<sup>33</sup>

Seligman and other positive psychology advocates are missing the point and not engaging in the dialogue that is already occurring on a number of fronts, as we have seen above. This dialogue addresses many of the gaps in positive psychology, ranging through a variety of areas and raising a number of concerns. The critiques realize the importance of positive psychology's mission, but they demand that more critical thinking, reflection, and alternative viewpoints and methodologies enter the debates. Additionally, while there are numerous historical and philosophical studies of happiness, there is scant discussion of this field or its application in the humanities.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, I argue that positive psychology needs to open up its disciplinary boundaries, not just to other branches of psychology but to other branches of knowledge. In short, it needs to become interdisciplinary. Instead of the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP)<sup>35</sup> graduates applying their knowledge to other fields, they can instead engage in a dialogue with these other fields. In this way, a more nuanced and reflective way of

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<sup>33</sup> In his co-authored January 2000 field-setting article, Csikszentmihalyi does show a more nuanced position. Consider statements such as: "I was looking for a scientific approach to human behavior, but I never dreamed that this could yield a value-free understanding" and "Ever since, I have struggled to reconcile the twin imperatives that a science of human beings should include: to understand what *is* and what *could be*" (7). This notion of what "could be" suggests a greater degree of possibility, of the utopian impulse, than we see elsewhere in positive psychology writings. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi seems to suggest the need for the merging of subjectivity and objectivity in scientific inquiry.

<sup>34</sup> A notable exception is Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), a book that has received much attention from those working in affect theory, feminism, queer studies, critical race studies, and cultural studies. This study, however, only considers positive psychology and its many applications in passing, as its focus is more on the "killjoy" and the desire and right to be unhappy.

<sup>35</sup> MAPP is a Masters program at the University of Pennsylvania that teaches professionals positive psychology research so that they can bring these insights back to their various fields. I will discuss this program and its consequences in more detail in chapter 3.

well-being can emerge, one more sensitive to the varying needs of the population as a whole and the ways in which “flourishing” might be re/imagined.

Since positive psychology has unstated values that I’ve now demonstrated, it is clear that it, as a field, is *teaching*. Pushing this rhetorical and cultural power further, here I add a pedagogical function, a notion strikingly absent from most discussions of the field. Even as there is much research into and promotion of “positive education” (or the application of positive psychology research to curricula and educational policy), the science itself purports to be neutral. It is this valueless conception of positive psychology that I want to challenge going forward by exploring the ways that positive psychology is pedagogical. Given the implicit values promoted by positive psychology and its pedagogical function, here are some questions that warrant consideration as we look at specific positive education examples in the next two chapters. What and how does positive education teach? What is missing from its curricula? When might dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction and strengths be productive? What does positive psychology teach us about possibility, about the importance of imagining alternatives to the status quo?

In this chapter, I looked at *what* positive psychology is teaching through its rhetoric and unacknowledged values. *How* it teaches—its pedagogical methods—are the subject of two next chapters. Now, I turn to the practice of pedagogy in positive psychology, or positive education. Chapter 3 looks at one application of positive psychology research and idea (positive education) and Chapter 4 is an in-depth exploration of one example of this application (the United States Army’s use of a positive psychology curriculum for its Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program).

## Chapter 3

### Teaching Happiness: The Pedagogy of Positive Education

After having spent chapters 1 and 2 exploring key texts, discourses, and rhetoric in the overlapping genres of self-help and positive psychology, I now turn to a discussion of one particular application of positive psychology: positive education. Positive education brings positive psychology research and practices to classrooms, schools, and other educational contexts. Until this point, I have demonstrated how the concepts of “happiness” and “well-being,” in their promotion and by self-help and positive psychology, have implicit pedagogical functions. This chapter represents a turning point in this dissertation: from here forward I engage with positive education, a practice explicitly, and self-consciously, pedagogical.<sup>1</sup>

The recent “happiness turn” (Ahmed 2-7) applies the insights and findings of positive psychology to education. Although positive education has been applied in a wide variety of educational contexts, current research and publications largely focus on positive education’s use in traditional school and classroom settings. I spend this chapter discussing these traditional applications, and devote the next chapter to examining, in-depth, positive education’s use in a non-traditional educational setting: training soldiers in the United States Army for resilience and psychological fitness. The centrality of education in the positive psychology agenda has widespread implications for scholars and teachers concerned with pedagogy. Additionally, the

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<sup>1</sup> Positive education is an offshoot of positive psychology, and, as such, the two movements have considerable overlap in both theory and practice. I treat them in separate chapters, however, to illustrate how the problems of positive psychology extend to and manifest themselves in one of its applications.

Furthermore, despite its explicit pedagogical function, there *is* still unacknowledged (implicit) teaching happening in positive education. Highlighting this implicit teaching—and putting it in conversation with the explicit pedagogical aims—is part of this and the next chapters’ aim.

widespread enthusiasm for aligning well-being and education has significant and far-reaching policy consequences.

I begin by providing a brief history of positive education as well as an overview of its current state. Many scholars, educators, and practitioners may be unfamiliar with this emerging discipline because much of positive education's research and applications have come into existence only in the past few years. I note key players in the growth and promotion of positive education—such as the University of Pennsylvania's Masters of Applied Positive Psychology program (MAPP)—and review the debates and discussions surrounding the development of the field. I then familiarize readers with the primary features and assumptions of positive education, examining its fundamental tenets and practices.

As a direct application of positive psychology research, positive education uses many of the same research techniques, premises, and exercises as positive psychology. Its goal is primarily to help students, teachers, and school communities increase their level of “flourishing.” Positive education's core curriculum is based on the elements of well-being as outlined in PERMA, Values in Action (VIA) Signature Strengths questionnaire, and the individual positive psychology exercises presented in the positive psychology and crossover self-help texts discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Many of the new developments in positive education have their roots in the MAPP program, co-directed by Seligman. Since MAPP was created to teach positive psychology to students, it is a positive education endeavor that comes straight from the source of positive psychology research and promotion. Therefore, when positive education students (MAPP graduates) apply MAPP curriculum to further educational contexts, there is not much change and innovation in the curriculum. For that reason, positive education (both in MAPP and its offshoots) suffers some of the same problems of positive psychology and the self-help genre

(as outlined in the previous two chapters). Positive education remains individualistic, decontextualized, non-dialogic, and in service of the status quo. Additionally, positive education shares with positive psychology the problem of definition: the lack of clarity and consensus about what the terms “well-being,” “flourishing,” and “happiness” actually mean (and therefore what researchers and educators mean when they use these terms). This ambiguity causes confusion about what ideology, values, and notions of the good life positive education teaches and assesses.

Moving positive psychology out of the theoretical realm and operationalizing it in education also causes new and distinct problems. Therefore, in exploring current efforts to create educational curricula centered on developing well-being, I contextualize these efforts not only within the debates of positive psychology, but also in terms of educational issues more generally. In education, the clear definition of terms and values is particularly important to the development of curriculum and specific learning goals, outcomes, and methods of assessment. Another new consideration is whether the teaching of well-being—which is inextricably bound to values and morality—has a place in secular contexts, such as public schools. Just as positive psychology claims to be descriptive and ideologically neutral, so too do the positive education curricula. However, school, pedagogy, curriculum, and subject matter are not neutral subjects. Positive education attempts to skirt its own political and ethical implications by focusing on individual strengths, student-centered learning, and experiential curriculum without consideration of the larger context in which learning and schooling take place.

I accept well-being as a potentially desirable goal, but I maintain that social justice

should be part of any conversation about the methods and aims of happiness.<sup>2</sup> One of the most promising aspects of this emerging field is that positive education affords an opportunity to revisit the crucial questions of what the purpose of education is and how we can align our pedagogy and learning goals with our methods of outcomes and assessment. However, by already assuming that well-being is the only or primary goal (its “politics,” as Seligman claims), we preempt the useful and necessary conversation about other educational aims.

Therefore, while acknowledging the benefits of helping students learn skills for increased well-being, I complicate the assumptions, values, and goals behind positive education, posing the following crucial (but, as of yet, unasked) questions: Is happiness a desired educational aim and outcome? Is happiness teachable? If so, what would productive pedagogy about/for happiness look like? What are its aims and goals? Should advocating for and designing well-being curricula be in conversation with other educational initiatives and requirements, such as high-stakes testing, performance pay for teachers, outcomes assessment, government and administrative mandates and, if so, why is this dialogue not occurring? How do we ensure these curricula do not become proprietary (like so much of instructional technology and other cutting edge interventions)? How is positive education a form of remediation? A normalized/ing discourse? In whose interest are these curricula?<sup>3</sup>

In tackling these large questions, I engage with Brazilian radical educator Paulo Freire’s

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<sup>2</sup> I realize the controversial nature of the claim, especially at the K-12 level (as opposed to higher education). While there are many thinkers who maintain that education should remain detached from political concerns (such as Stanley Fish, whose views I will discuss later in this chapter), there are others who work to bring social justice issues into the classroom. One notable example at the K-12 level is *Rethinking Schools*.

<sup>3</sup> I want to stress that the thoughts I offer in response to these questions later in the chapter are only preliminary. Positive education, like positive psychology, is a rapidly expanding field with new developments unfolding even as I write these words. With that in mind, I maintain that now is a time not to take rigid positions but to pose questions, problematize, and broaden the conversation. That is my aim here, and throughout this dissertation.

claims in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (and elsewhere) and demonstrate how—in its current application—positive education runs the risk of becoming another form of “banking education,” filling students with positive affect (i.e., making them personally happy so they can be socially useful), providing tools for achieving PERMA, and “serv[ing] the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (73).<sup>4</sup> While positive education posits both the malleability and teachability of well-being, it does so—much like self-help and positive psychology—by bracketing the economy, ideology, and politics. This bracketing is particularly striking given positive psychology’s explicit activist stance (such as PERMA 51). Positive education therefore fails to facilitate social reform, mitigate inequality, or intervene in the material conditions of students’ existence. It also does not assist teachers and students in achieving “conscientization” (critical consciousness), humanization, dialogism, or “reading the word and the world” (Freire).<sup>5</sup> While of course schools should provide students with academic knowledge, socialization skills, and opportunities for individual exploration and growth, they should also scaffold their curricula by placing these things in a larger social context.

While increasing well-being may be a useful aim in certain forms and contexts, most currently available materials on positive education are practical guides and how-to manuals (self-help for teachers, coaches, and administration), written as if the desirability and benefits of

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<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to suggest that positive psychologists or positive educators are literally or consciously involved in the business of oppressing people. However, the movements’ stated intention of intervening in social problems (coupled with its desire to remain descriptive and value-free) fails, perhaps unintentionally and unconsciously, to contribute to any meaningful transformation in social inequality or problems. It may even serve to perpetuate them by claiming to intervene without effectively doing so.

<sup>5</sup> “Reading the word and the world” is an idea introduced by Freire that advocates for critical literacy, one that places students reading and analysis of texts in conversation with real-world issues. It is the subject of the book he co-authored with Donaldo P. Macedo: *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World* (1987). I will discuss this strategy, along with the other goals mentioned, later in this chapter.

positive education and individual flourishing are self-evident, unassailable, and therefore require no interrogation. In addition, positive education's core curriculum is centered on positive psychology's Values in Action (VIA) Signature Strengths Questionnaire for Adults and the somewhat abbreviated Signature Strengths Survey for Children, which rank character strengths for individuals. Although advocates of the movement cite student-centered learning (reminiscent of John Dewey's constructivist approach) and collaboration, I argue that the preoccupation with the individual in positive education obscures broader social issues, like economic, racial, and gender inequality. Positive education, in some manifestations, incorporates some crucial parts of good pedagogy, including student-centered learning and accommodating and valuing diverse learning styles. However, positive education lacks an equally important pedagogical objective: helping students to view themselves as part of a broader community rather than just individuals with individual needs and individual strengths. Just as high-stakes testing may be fundamentally flawed because of its inherent (and perhaps unavoidable) biases, so, too, does positive education seem to privilege a certain type of outcome: in this case, predictable and manageable well-being literacy on an individual level.

This chapter intervenes by first introducing ethical and political dimensions to contemporary debates about positive education and then sketching a few preliminary alternatives for how we might transform positive education's pedagogy to allow for the authentic dialogue and collaboration necessary for a fuller account of human flourishing, one that includes attention to inequality and social reform. In particular, I discuss how critical pedagogy methods might achieve these goals. I also point to the centrality of writing exercises and composition to the positive education agenda, a focus unacknowledged in the current scholarship that may prove fruitful for the field. Furthermore, I show how the possibility of renewed attention to pedagogy

in the emerging field of positive education provides an opportunity to improve learning outcomes.

I believe that positive education will be of particular interest to humanities scholars, especially because our disciplinary training, experiences, background, and practices make us well-positioned to broaden the boundaries of this conversation. Furthermore, adding our voice to these debates will confirm we are still necessary, that the work we perform is still relevant and crucial. Although the value of this critical work is, to me (and many other academics), self-evident, the current anti-intellectual climate and budgetary constraints demand that we increasingly defend our profession and articulate the practical (and theoretical) value of the work we do in higher education. Here, in the emerging field of positive education, we have an opportunity to show how and why the public, our students, and positive psychology need us.

#### Positive Education: Background

While, until recently, there was little published on the direct connection between education and well-being,<sup>6</sup> there has been a decisive shift in this trend. With positive psychology's exponential growth and its stated goals of accessibility, practicality, and applicability, questions of teaching happiness and well-being have come to the forefront. The June 2009 *Oxford Review of Education* special issue on well-being in schools explores recent attempts to shape educational policy through well-being curricula in the United Kingdom. In his introductory article to the issue, "Well-being in schools: empirical measure, or politician's dream?" John Coleman contextualizes the push to include well-being in schools within a series of United Kingdom policies, legislation and initiatives. The question of whether (and if so how)

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<sup>6</sup> Two notable exceptions are Robin Barrow's *Happiness and Schooling* (1980) and Nel Noddings' *Happiness and Education* (2004).

schools should teach well-being is an enormous issue, and is a striking departure from previous ways of approaching education. Coleman states, “the creation of a duty on schools, enshrined in legislation, to promote the well-being of pupils does undoubtedly represent a major shift in educational policy” (286). John White’s 2011 study, *Exploring Well-being in Schools: A Guide to Making Children’s Lives More Fulfilling*, claims that “making well-being central to the school’s life” is “an immensely rich” idea (2). He highlights the interest of policy and application that I pointed to in chapter 2, noting “the extraordinary upsurge of interest there has been since the millennium in well-being as a social and educational ideal” (3).

Positive psychologists and educators are converging in a shared interest in what they label positive education. In *Flourish* (2011), Seligman identifies positive education as a mandatory development and aim:

I want a revolution in world education. All young people need to learn workplace skills, which has been the subject matter of the education system in place for two hundred years. In addition, we can now teach the skills of well-being—of how to have more positive emotion, more meaning, better relationships, and more positive accomplishment. Schools at every level should teach these skills, and the next five chapters revolve around this idea (63).

Similarly, in *Teaching Happiness and Well-Being in Schools: Learning to Ride Elephants* (2009), Ian Morris, whose work involves bringing positive psychology to schools in the United Kingdom, claims that well-being should be the central outcome of educational curricula: “Whilst few in the teaching profession would disagree with the premise that the improvement of well-being should be a function of education, I think that we should go further than that and argue that well-being should be the *primary* function of education and that all schools should be geared to

the maximization of the flourishing of the students and staff that comprise them” (23) [emphasis in original].

Much of positive education content and methodology is drawn directly from positive psychology. Positive educators work to bring greater well-being to schools, focusing on PERMA, resiliency, psychological fitness, and individual strengths. Seligman’s revised theory of well-being seems particularly suited for educational contexts, with his inclusion of “accomplishment” as one of the core elements of well-being (the “A” in Seligman’s PERMA). Accomplishment, with its sense of mastery, aligns itself well with questions of education, learning, and teaching.

Many proponents of the positive education movement are graduates of the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) degree program at the University of Pennsylvania (another positive education initiative). In this program (which meets on weekends to allow students to bring their work back to their professional lives) students learn the basic scientific research on positive psychology and then apply it to their own fields. Since there is a strong correspondence between the research content and methodology as well as the values, rhetoric, and pedagogy of positive psychology and positive education, many of the same problems and critiques that applied to positive psychology as discussed in chapter 2 apply here (as do the associated problems of self-help from chapter 1.<sup>7</sup>

MAPP has helped to make positive education one of the most influential arms of the positive psychology agenda. The guest editor of the recent *Journal of Positive Psychology* special issue on positive psychology in higher education, Acacia C. Parks, has strong ties to

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, as Seligman relates to his readers in *Flourish*, one of his MAPP students, Angela Duckworth, greatly influenced his understanding of “accomplishment” or mastery (and his decision to ultimately enshrine it in significance in his PERMA).

MAPP program and Seligman. She describes herself in her opening editorial as a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center (directed by Seligman) who "witnessed firsthand the birth and development of the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology program" (429). She details the enormous impact that positive psychology has had, above all, on higher education, claiming that its inroads there is the greatest aspect of its flourishing:

In no area of application has positive psychology flourished more, however, than in higher education. More departments than ever are offering courses in positive psychology, and demand for these courses is consistently high. Graduate programs offering concentrations in positive psychology have appeared both at the masters and doctoral level. Educational institutions have expressed interests in using principles of positive psychology to inform institutional structure, faculty development, and pedagogy. Positive psychology has been taught and applied in higher education for almost as long as it has existed as a field, and yet, with few exceptions, there is little in the way of published literature that brings all of these developments together (429).

This special issue is a useful starting point for bringing positive educators together and talking about research, methods, and pedagogy.

This conversation is crucial because positive psychology is already being applied to educational contexts across the world. Some of the more notable instances of positive education, as noted by Seligman in *Flourish*, are MAPP<sup>8</sup> (already discussed above), the United States Army

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/lps/graduate/mapp>

Comprehensive Solider Fitness program (the subject of my next chapter),<sup>9</sup> grants from the United States Department of Education, the Penn Resiliency Program, the Australian Geelong Grammar School system, and the United Kingdom’s various attempts to teach well-being in schools. Perhaps the most high profile case of teaching positive psychology is the now-famous course on happiness taught by Tal Ben-Shahar (author of the *Happiness Series* discussed in the previous chapters) at Harvard University, a course that at its height drew almost a thousand students. It is difficult to separate the growing trends of teaching “about” happiness – such as Ben-Shahar’s course—with schools/educators teaching students “how” to gain well-being in their classrooms. In fact, there is much crossover, as positive education courses in higher education incorporate practice as well as theory, citing the experiential nature of the course content. This positive education revolution is happening at the K-12, undergraduates, and graduate levels.

Positive education takes place within classrooms and schools, but the field’s insights also reach a broader audience through positive education and positive psychology publications, such as Ben-Shahar’s *Happier* series and Seligman’s *Authentic Happiness* and *Flourish* (chapter 2 is devoted to “positive psychology exercises that work”). Additionally, Seligman’s website *Authentic Happiness*—which he considers a “public service” (*Flourish* 37)—is a similar mix of information and instruction, containing both research materials, questionnaires (used to collect and aggregate research data for positive psychologists), and guides. This website, used in this way, also has pedagogical value, and functions as positive education for the masses.

Along with these practices and crossover self-help texts have come a number of other publications about positive education, including Rich E. Gilman, Scott Huebner, and Michael J.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://csf.army.mil/>

Furlong's *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* (2009), John Peter White's *Exploring Well-Being in Schools: A Guide to Making Children's Lives more Fulfilling* (2011), and John M. Yeager, Sherri Fisher, and David N. Shearon's *SMART Strengths: Building Character, Resilience and Relationships in You* (2011).<sup>10</sup> Additionally, as mentioned above, there have been two special journal issues on positive education: the June 2009 special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* on well-being in schools and the November 2011 special issue of *The Journal of Positive Psychology* on positive psychology in higher education. These publications range from guides for teachers and parents for implementing positive education in their schools and homes and more critical attempts to theorize and grapple with some of the issues at stake in the movement (meta-commentary). Before looking at what some of these issues are, let us look at some of the key features of positive education.

#### Positive Education: Overview

One of the core beliefs behind the desire to teach positive psychology is that doing so can have a tangible and beneficial impact on individuals, communities, institutions, and society. Seligman makes this goal explicit in *Flourish*.<sup>11</sup> However, there is also a much more grandiose goal to this book and positive psychology more generally, which according to Seligman is “the long mission for positive psychology.” This mission? PERMA 51: “By the year 2051, 51 percent of the people of the world will be flourishing” (240).<sup>12</sup> This mission relies on the importance of teaching well-being, and this mission “will be aided by positive education, in which teachers

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, these publications include Seligman and Morris' books, mentioned above.

<sup>11</sup> This ambitious goal assumes that well-being is teachable. Seligman explains this premise in *Flourish*: “If positive psychology aims to build well-being on the planet, well-being must be buildable. This sounds trivial, but it is not” (31).

<sup>12</sup> One wonders how Seligman decided on this number. It seems relatively conservative (why not aim for 99% of the human population to flourish?).

embed the principles of well-being into what they teach, and the depression and anxiety of their students drop and their students' happiness rises" (240). Exactly how positive education aims to achieve this large level of well-being through schooling is the focus of this section.

While there is much energy and enthusiasm about the development of positive education, there are few examples of actual curricula published and in circulation.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in this section, I aim to provide an overview of the general concepts and applications of positive education. In the next chapter, a concrete example of curriculum and application—the U.S. Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program—will be examined, as there has been more information made publicly available on the particulars of that training initiative.

As explained earlier, the positive education curriculum is positive psychology research applied to educational contexts. As such, it is centered around the core ideas and findings of positive psychology, such as the five elements of well-being (Seligman's PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) and a focus on building individuals strengths aligned with the Values in Action (VIA) Signature Strengths Survey.<sup>14</sup> It appears that the lofty goal of PERMA 51 will occur on the micro level, through changing individual students. Seligman offers some activities and assignments for boosting individual happiness in *Flourish*, in a chapter entitled "Creating Your Happiness: Positive Psychology

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<sup>13</sup> Ian Morris's *Teaching Happiness and Well-Being in Schools* is largely filled with basic, general discussion. In this book, Morris spends the majority of his writing providing overviews of the concepts and components of happiness and well-being with only brief follow-ups of how they can be used in the classroom. Background and theory is necessary, but readers don't leave this publication with a clear sense of how these ideas can be effectively integrated into curricula.

<sup>14</sup> Positive education also includes a focus on mindfulness (Morris, Chapter 10), showing some of the potential learning benefits such as greater attention span and improved learning process and outcomes (187). In *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide For Anyone Who Teaches Anything*, Deborah Schoeberlein (with Suki Sheth) place the practice of mindfulness at the heart of effective pedagogy. These educators advocate for meditation in the classroom and a focus on the present moment (as a means of not letting emotions and hasty, unreflective actions take over).

Exercises That Work,” Seligman offers readers individual exercises to increase individual well-being such as a gratitude visit (30-1), what-went-well/three blessing exercise (32-4), and the signature strengths exercise (38-40). These exercises are consistently seen in both positive psychology and positive education. John M. Yeager, Sherri W. Fisher, and David Shearon, all MAPP graduates and leaders in the field of positive education, echo this notion of change at the individual level.

Yeager, Fisher, and Shearon view themselves as pioneers in the field, “blazing new paths for others to follow” and initiating a “positive education revolution” (xvi). They coauthored the recently published text, *SMART Strengths: A Parent-Teacher-Coach Guide to Building Character, Resilience, and Relationships in Youth* (2011). They claim that their “book is the new gold standard in the field of positive education,” “a must-have resource not only because it carefully lays out the genesis of Positive Education, but also because it is a step-by-step guide to cultivating buy-in at any school and patiently nurturing the change, one person at a time, until the environment has become contagiously positive” (xvi).

Much of the justification for bringing well-being to schools is that education is in crisis. Yeager, Fisher, and Shearon use this as a rationale for why positive education is necessary. They explain, “[s]chools today face unprecedented challenges. More of the same, even done more efficiently and effectively, will not meet this challenge. Schools are called to create more human success at levels never before achieved. To meet this high and noble challenge, they will need the assistance of what Positive Psychology has discovered about strengths, resilience, and relationships” (22). Although schooling is traditionally thought to provide academic competencies, these co-authors argue that for students to succeed, “intellectual resources will not be enough; they will also need substantial resources of optimism, collaboration, creativity,

emotional intelligence, motivation, and relational skills” (22).

While there is great emphasis on helping students to flourish, positive education also identifies teachers as an important part of this process. Yeager, Fisher, and Shearon write, “[i]t demonstrates how to change a school system, one person at a time, so that it’s not just about bringing positive education; it’s also about maximizing the strengths of the adults who interact with them in every environment that fosters character” (xvi). This renewed focus on the educator as a source of well-being is a potentially useful intervention that positive education makes. This form of teaching training could serve to emphasize the connections between teachers’ working conditions and students’ learning conditions, both of which involve well-being.<sup>15</sup>

The attention to building supportive environments and communities, encouraging students to grow, and viewing education and learning as a process is important. In a White Paper on Positive Education put out by Flourishing Schools (a consulting company connected with Yeager, Fisher, and Shearon),<sup>16</sup> these admirable goals are highlighted: “Success today, for students and educators, requires clear eyed optimism, deep wells of emotional energy and motivation, springy resilience, sturdy hope, strong relationships, clearly understood values, refined purpose, and challenging, motivating goals.”<sup>17</sup> However, positive education does not articulate a clear vision for meeting these goals in conversation with larger social contexts. In reaffirming its value and necessity, positive education—like positive psychology—refers back to empiricism and science. The authors make clear that “The list above is not ‘soft.’ Researchers have developed validated measures and empirical evidence for each item” (3). Here, they inject

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<sup>15</sup> However, as presented in their book *SMART Strengths*, these relationships sometimes seem driven by hierarchy. The authors highlight relationships “between educators, between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents” (10). What about relationships between relationships between students (outside of their interactions with teachers)?

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.flourishingschools.org/>

<sup>17</sup> The list is actually formatted in bullet points in the document.

the rigor and supremacy of scientific methods that I discussed in chapter 2, and in doing so employ one of positive psychology's touchstone rhetorical strategies.

Yeager, Fisher, and Shearon identify the “three core areas” with which they work to help schools: strengths, resilience (in chapter 4 we see this concept being put in to action at an unprecedented level in the CSF United States Army program), and relationships (“White Paper” 8-11). One of the primary areas of focus for positive education is determining and then nurturing individual strengths. For their brand of positive education, they build curriculum around the 24 character strengths used in the Values in Action (VIA) Signature Survey and the VIA-Youth (created by Peterson and Nansook Park) and the 34 themes of strengths-at-work from the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* (36-41).

Alistair Smith's (with Sir John Jones and Joanna Reid) *Winning the H Factor: The Secrets of Happy Schools* (2010) approaches the question of well-being in schools from a similar belief that happiness and well-being are both desirable and teachable. The authors make this belief explicit: “Our premise is that there is sufficient research around what constitutes individual happiness, the extent to which it can be developed and the benefits of a happier workforce for us to pull it together in a model that means something for schools” (68). This publication focuses on individual resilience as well, but its primary intervention is moving beyond the individual to focusing on institutional and organizational culture. In the co-authors' words: “Our interventions are to build, broaden and balance” (71). They state, “Society *does* matter. Being connected is important. Having a sense of belonging is vital for well-being and mental health” (3). And that “our own personal happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom we are connected” (5). In doing so, Smith places a great deal of emphasis on relationships, not only between people working, teaching, or learning in schools but also beyond the schools' walls. He repeats, “[w]e

come back to our point that society matters – communities matter. And schools should be at the very centre of their communities” (22).

Moreover, Smith emphasizes (rather than hiding or converting them into hard scientific tools) the necessary “soft skills” (26 and elsewhere) required for psychological capital, such as emotional and communicative skills. He believes that acquisition of these soft skills will increase academic performance, as students’ engagement with school material and learning will increase if they have greater levels of well-being (28).

### Positive Education Critiques and Challenges

In the previous two chapters I identified and discussed many of the problems of self-help and positive psychology. As an application of positive psychology, positive education has the potential to replicate those problems if it does not reflect on its values, rhetoric, and pedagogy. In looking at Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) in chapter 4, I will demonstrate how many of these problems surface in practice. In this section, however, I shed new light on those problems and offer productive alternatives by placing positive education in conversation with composition studies and critical pedagogy. Viewing positive education through these lenses offers fresh perspectives on how bringing a well-being agenda into the classroom might create new opportunities and limit others. Before I move on to this discussion, however, I’d like to briefly pause and introduce a larger debate about the values and functions of education.

In his controversial book, *Save the World On Your Own Time* (2008) humanities professor and public intellectual Stanley Fish explicitly argues against the academy as a democratic political space where faculty mold students into humane, moral beings and/or

productive citizens.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Fish maintains that faculty should restrict themselves to the “pedagogical task - the aim of passing on knowledge and conferring skills” (13). This stance is problematic for a number of reasons. First, knowledge is an evolving and contested entity. Second, in certain disciplines such as composition and positive education, the content of these “skills” is not uniform or decided. Third, curricula (its requirements, content, uses, funding) are inherently connected to larger institutional and social and political issues, so compartmentalizing them ignores these fundamental links.

Fish writes of “academic” goals and duties as the only appropriate tasks of faculty, as if these can be distinctly separated from larger political, social, and ethical concerns. He claims that faculty should be active in determining curriculum (20) but also that they should not have a political agenda, as if promoting courses—such as queer theory, ethnic studies, or positive psychology—does not necessarily belie a certain political bent. In his view, if faculty bring their values and political commitments to their teaching and research, they are “unprofessional” (24) and unfairly “hi-jack[ing] the academic enterprise” (81) for their personal motives. For Fish, “[a]cademic commitments and partisan commitments are independent variables” (151), and they should be kept distinct at all costs. He believes that the academy should be “unconcerned with the public yield of its activities” and instead should aim to “put at the center of its operations the asking of questions for their own sake” (153-4).

For Fish, this arrangement is “logical,” but only because he fails to acknowledge that the university does not operate in isolation, in an ivory tower. Fish’s limited view of what the university is and what its faculty should do doesn’t allow for the connection of intellectual

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<sup>18</sup> Fish is one of a number of conservative critics who make similar claims. Another prominent example is David Horowitz, who founded Students for Academic Freedom, a group meant to keep “left” agendas out of the university.

engagement, and it decouples teaching and student learning conditions from social justice. Faculty who do make these connections, according to Fish, “abandon the responsibilities that belong to them by contract in order to take up responsibilities that belong properly to others,” and in doing so, “they will be practicing without a license and in all likelihood doing a bad job at a job they shouldn't be doing at all” (14).

Many theorists and practitioners have countered Fish's stance that educators should remain neutral as they perform their academic tasks. These thinkers claim it is not possible to separate education from values, ideology, and politics. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argues that educators' ignorance of the political nature of their vocation or their unwillingness to engage with it in meaningful ways is deeply problematic. In his estimation, education is an institution that serves dominant interests and that helps to maintain their hegemony: “the School today [is] as ‘natural’, indispensable-useful and even beneficial for our contemporaries as the Church was ‘natural’, indispensable and generous for our ancestors a few centuries ago” [*sic*]. Regardless of what the nature of the ideology is, there is always one present, especially in education: “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (695).

In Althusser's argument, the school system is an ideologically generated/generating institution that has the power to control both students and teachers. This control may be indoctrination into passivity and subordination to dominant classes and institutions, or it could inspire a life-long consumerism that will then ensure the status quo (whose interests require that goods, knowledge, and even people are subject to monetization when they are productive and are doomed to obsolescence and discard when they cease to be of value to the market). In the case of positive education, indoctrination might nurture individual strengths and well-being and

acclimate students to less-than-desirable circumstances without instilling the concomitant drive to change those circumstances.

As these opposing viewpoints illustrate, there are vastly differing opinions about education's values, functions, and goals. Education remains a highly contested issue, one with important and often unresolved concerns: What is the goal of schooling? Should it provide students with real-world learning or teach them more intangible skills such as critical thinking or flourishing? Should education expose students to broader viewpoints and mold them into civically and socially minded citizens? What is the role of the teaching? Of curriculum requirements? Of job-training?

These questions of content, pedagogy, and aims apply to any educational endeavor, and positive education is no exception. These concerns inform a central argument in Nel Noddings' study, *Happiness and Education* (2004). She states at the beginning of her book: "*Aims-talk* - the continual dialogue and reflection on aims - is essential to the thoughtful practice of education" (4), and repeats this conviction throughout: "[w]hat I am arguing for is an ongoing, serious examination of everything we do in schools. Is the aim worthwhile? Are the goals logically derived from defensible aims? Are our pedagogical methods likely to promote the goals and aims? How do our routines stack up under this sort of evaluation?" (258). These questions must also be asked about positive education. To what aims does positive education contribute? What aims does it undermine? In answering these questions, positive educators must consider that neither what they teach (well-being) nor their way of teaching it is ideologically neutral.

It is important that positive educators remain vigilant to outside pressures and forces, and that these teachers ground their pedagogies in situated knowledge and politically-aware positions. All education is politically fraught and, as I have demonstrated in chapter 2, positive

psychology is particularly politically charged (promoting value-laden prescriptions for flourishing and the good life under the guise of descriptive science). Therefore, education and positive psychology together form a combination that is anything but neutral. Positive psychology and positive education are particularly problematic because their advocates proclaim an activist stance, asserting their mission is to help the world (and their students) to flourish. And yet, their content and methodology do not engage the steps necessary for that change to occur. The remainder of this dissertation initiates a conversation about the values behind positive education.

Positive education, just like its parent positive psychology, aims to retain a neutral stance among all these concerns, asserting simply that well-being is desirable. Positive education's purported neutrality is especially problematic because the movement, if it did not insist on neutrality, could potentially play a role in overhauling the educational system and introducing broader socio-economic and political questions.<sup>19</sup> It could assist a revolutionary shift in both perspective and policy. It could be used to counteract thinkers who advocate preserving the academy as an entity unto itself, and maintain that both curriculum and pedagogy in education should be ideologically neutral and disconnected from active participation in larger economic, social, and political concerns.

Unfortunately, positive psychologists and positive educators, along with Fish, appear somewhat naïve in insisting that an educational system can (and should) operate in its own sphere without being influenced by the outside world (or influencing it in return), in thinking "truth is a pre-eminent *academic* value" (38), in attempting to separate all curricular content

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<sup>19</sup> Positive education does aim to increase students and teachers' happiness, well-being, meaning, trust, and relationships. However, its focus is at the individual level. These aims could pave the way for social consciousness, but as they stand right now, it falls short of this goal.

from “political or ideological attention” (15), and in trying to subject all inquiry and ideas to “academicizing,” a process which “*detach[es] it from the context of its real world urgency*” (27). Positive education, in true Fish fashion, falls into the trap of attempting to operate outside of the system, a danger against which Althusser cautioned us: “those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denial* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, ‘I am ideological.’” Therefore, all educators need reflexive moments about the values they (consciously or not) promote.<sup>20</sup>

Positive education practitioners laud the field, but largely fail to engage in important self-reflection and critique. Critics have raised crucial questions about the definition of well-being, the problematic bracketing of social context, and whether—and if so, how—well-being should be taught. However, these questions are not always on the radar of positive psychologists keen on teaching the discipline. There is a sense among positive education practitioners that positive education is miracle-working. In a section of *Flourish* describing MAPP (Chapter 4—Teaching Well-Being: The Magic of MAPP), Seligman demonstrates this belief:

Even though I have taught at the university, grade school, and high school levels, the most extraordinary of all my experiences has occurred in only the last ten years in teaching positive psychology. And it is not just me: others teaching positive psychology around the world relay similar stories of wonder. By

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<sup>20</sup> Dewey warns, “an educational philosophy which professes to be based on the idea of freedom may become as dogmatic as ever was the traditional education which is reacted against. For any theory and set of practices is dogmatic which is not based on critical examination of its own underlying principles” (22). Of course, there is a difference between educators reflectively and critically choosing and presenting material to student and teachers, in evangelical fashion, merely treating the classroom as a soapbox from which they can brainwash their captive audience. Positive education does not explicitly introduce values and ideology into its practice, but this neutral stance is a choice as well, one that is just as political as foregrounding their ideology.

narrating these, I am trying to come to grips with why it is so extraordinary and also why run-of-the-mill teaching so often fails. What follows is about the MAPP program, the master of applied positive psychology, and reveals why its ingredients are “magic.” These magical components include: First, the *content* is challenging, informative, and uplifting. Second, positive psychology is *personally and professionally transformative*. The third ingredient is that positive psychology is a *calling* (64).

This excerpt demonstrates how the primary and most oft-cited explanation for the widely popular and successful field of positive education is its “content.” Seligman and others positive educators claim that the subject matter (*what* teachers teach) is a crucial component of the field’s “magic” and that it may serve as a corrective to ineffective “run-of-the-mill teaching.”

I worry that happiness and well-being may be seen as panaceas that will automatically revitalize a failing education system and engage students just because they are relevant, accessible, experiential, and desirable. It may be true that positive education appeals to both teachers and students because it has intimate connections with their desires and life experiences. These characteristics can aid the learning process and should not be dismissed. However, any consideration of positive education must take into account not just subject matter but broader pedagogical goals as well. Teachers must resist the urge to simply make well-being curriculum available to (or required for) students, choosing instead to actively interrogate the ways in which this positive education facilitates their own or others’ agendas in the classroom. Well-being, if it is determined to be worthy of inclusion in the curriculum, is merely one of a number of desirable educational aims and outcomes.

There can be effective education and good teaching with well-being and positive

psychology as subject matter, just as there can be effective education and good teaching with any subject matter. On the flip side, there can be ineffective education and bad teaching with any subject matter. Therefore, the emphasis should be less on the “positive” and more on the education. As stated above, teaching about/for well-being does not guarantee enhanced learning possibilities. In fact, without proper reflection on what the subject matter is and how it might be used to facilitate learning, positive education may have negative consequences. While well-being may contribute to the educational process, it cannot simply take the place of pedagogy.

Positive education’s sustained, uncritical attention to its subject matter glosses over positive psychology’s fundamental definition problem that I introduced in the previous chapter. In raising some of the challenges and critiques of applying positive psychology findings to schools, Coleman claims that well-being is “a concept fulfilling a number of functions in the educational context” (284-5); therefore, its plural functions and meanings lead to difficulty when attempting to set learning goals, and outcomes and assessment. Similar to Coleman, White also identifies positive education’s problem of definition. He states that the meaning of well-being “remains murky” (2), and this lack of clarity makes the path towards policy ever more complicated. White is further attuned to local context, claiming, “we can’t ignore the society we live in” (2) when designing or implementing well-being curricula.

The “murky” nature of well-being poses a challenge to its use as content in school curricula. Content and course material play a crucial role in pedagogy. As education reformer John Dewey asks in *Experience and Education*, “What is the place and meaning of subject-matter and of organization *within* experience? How does subject-matter function?” (20). Similarly, in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, radical educator Paulo Freire acknowledges the importance of context in developing pedagogy. He writes, “Incapable of autonomous

projects, they seek to transplant from other cultures solutions to their problems. But since these borrowed solutions are neither generated by a critical analysis of the context itself, nor adequately adapted to the context, they prove inoperative and unfruitful” (10).

I worry that positive education will continue to position itself—just like positive psychology does—as ideologically neutral. In doing so, positive education might encounter similar challenges as another discipline whose content is traditionally positioned as neutral: composition (especially freshman year composition). Perhaps the most significant reason why the composition curriculum is so often and easily appropriated for other interests is that its content—much like that of positive education—is amorphous and contested. The choice and presentation of content, therefore, becomes especially critical in the composition classroom, where instructors are often considered to be in the service industry because they teach generic “skills” (readily transferable from one discipline and context to the next) rather than specific content such as physics formulas or the history of the American Revolution. Since they are mistakenly viewed as neutral, these skills can then be both decontextualized and instrumentalized (as I previously demonstrated, characteristics of self-help and positive psychology). Positive education aims to teach one-size-fits-all skills that are universally usable, and therefore might share in similar challenges as composition.

In addition to being labeled neutral, composition has faced the misguided belief that, since writing teachers are treated as merely passing on skills to their students, composition courses are content-less. This notion of a content-free curriculum, with its attendant assumption of neutrality, is problematic precisely because it denies the ideological nature of all subject matter and all education. Quite often, college freshman composition is the one course (or course sequence) required of all incoming undergraduate students. Consequently, faculty across the

disciplines expect that students will “learn how to write” correctly, thoughtfully, and sophisticatedly in just the span of a few months. These faculty also often hold the unrealistic assumption that basic composition courses will provide students with ample opportunity and guidance to learn how to write appropriately for *their* specific disciplines, as if composition teachers should (or “could,” which is unlikely given that most compositionists are trained to write within the conventions of the literary field or communications) teach students to write a good lab report or a competent case study.<sup>21</sup>

All educators struggle with competing priorities: trying to give students the “know-how” and tools that they will need to succeed in the future in academic contexts and in their chosen careers, and allowing them to creatively and freely explore and express new ideas. Educators must also grapple with teaching to tests, if there are tests to which they must teach (and there increasingly are) while simultaneously nurturing creativity. Unfortunately, freshman composition is often treated as the place where students get “corrected” and “trained” to produce successful academic writing across a variety of contexts. Faculty (composition and otherwise) often only grade students on their rigid adherence to stylistic and mechanical (formal) conventions of Standard English, and they don’t hesitate to fail students for the slightest deviation from this standard. This practice makes composition a form of remediation. Similarly, positive education might be used to “correct” students who do not display standard norms of well-being or psychological fitness.

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<sup>21</sup> These assumptions and expectations are unreasonable and impractical. The “Writing across the Curriculum” (WAC) and “Writing in the Disciplines” (WID) initiatives undertaken at many colleges are attempts to more effectively and successfully integrate writing and composition into a variety of courses throughout the student undergraduate experience. This integration could potentially occur with well-being and positive psychology curriculum as well, though as I will demonstrate later in the chapter, there are obstacles to this happening at the current time.

Therefore, another lesson that positive education might learn from composition is how writing courses and composition curriculum have been viewed as remedial. Often, basic writing courses become the devalued site of remediation for incoming students who are deemed underprepared for college-level work. As I discussed in the previous two chapters, both self-help and positive psychology function remedially. Some positive education advocates do call for, when possible, an entire cultural shift within schools rather than a piecemeal effect, so this mainstreaming might help to take away some of the stigma of remediation. However, though these movements focus on strengths, positive psychology and positive education advance specific ideas about how students should act and behave in accordance with those strengths.

Therefore, I argue that positive education (as with composition and all education) must negotiate these two valid needs of preparing students academically to succeed in the world the way it is (the status quo) and providing them with opportunities to develop a critical stance towards this very same world in the hopes of one day changing it. Currently, positive education does not achieve a healthy balance, and is instead considerably skewed toward the former goal. It is too decontextualized, instrumentalized, and remedial to actively and constructively participate in transformative change.

In her historical study *Composition in the University*, Sharon Crowley asserts that as a whole, “first-year composition has been remarkably vulnerable to ideologies and practices that originate elsewhere than in its classroom” (6), serving the needs of others instead of its own agendas and priorities. She further views freshman composition as being the site where students entering the university are domesticated and acculturated to academic existence and adjusted to its norms. Crowley claims that the writing classroom is “the institutional site wherein student subjectivity is to be monitored and disciplined. [. . .]. The course is meant to shape students to

behave, think, write, and speak as students rather than as the people they are, people who have differing histories and traditions and languages and ideologies” (8-9). Will well-being display the same problem? Will positive education curricula function to acclimate students to a certain model of well-being? Positive education may help students to communicate more effectively, form trusting relationships, and increase academic engagement. However, if it does not also model and build a critical stance toward the world, it only serves to make students “better” as defined by positive psychology’s normative ideal of well-being and flourishing.

Similarly, in *Discipline and Punish*, social theorist Michel Foucault demonstrates the ways in which both space and time are micro-managed in education (with structured seating arrangements, required examinations, individual student records) to ensure the circulation of discourses operating to enforce discipline and surveillance of students in schools. Might the VIA Signature Strengths Survey (and related curriculum) be a method to surveil students,<sup>22</sup> so that strengths (and yes, weaknesses) become a means of classifying people and of remediation? VIA makes students’ psychological fitness easily quantifiable and thus subject to judgment, normalization, and discipline. Positive education might be used to further the “discipline” of students as docile individuals who are constantly judged and normalized, in this instance, in terms of their well-being.

### Composing Happiness: The Centrality of Writing to Positive Education

The questions and critiques I raise in the sections above are not meant to denounce positive education’s desire to improve schools, learning, and curriculum by helping students and educators to learn and teach well-being. I am not against happiness or in favor of denying people

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<sup>22</sup> In chapter 4, I will discuss the way that data-collection is used, through an online platform, to surveil soldiers in the United States Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program.

opportunities to learn and practice methods for achieving well-being. What does concern me, however, is how positive education's primary focus on well-being as subject matter and praise of it as *the* ultimate end (of the good life) obscures other questions, possibilities, and approaches.

If we take a closer look at how positive psychologists describe the revolutionary nature of teaching happiness, we find that even though they highlight content and the transformative nature of the subject, they are actually pointing towards pedagogy (the process of teaching that content). This interest in and attention to pedagogy is not always explicitly acknowledged or highlighted in the scholarship on positive psychology or positive education, yet it remains one of the most promising aspects of the movements. What follows in this section is an attempt to sketch positive education's natural affinity for the scholarship of teaching and learning. In illustrating this affinity, I demonstrate how composition pedagogy in particular provides a productive addition to the positive education repertoire.

Just because a discipline places itself under the aegis of education does not mean that it is necessarily focused on pedagogy, training teachers, providing professional development, and valuing teacher, staff, and student relationships and collaboration. There are plenty of modes of education (such as the "banking style" I will describe in the following section on critical pedagogy) in which the primary function and goal is the transmission of facts and knowledge. The heartening news is that positive education is beginning to pay attention to pedagogy, even if it does not always explicitly call it that. Just as we saw (in chapter 2) positive psychology distancing itself from the strengths of humanistic psychology and not taking advantage of or acknowledging its roots in that tradition, here positive psychology and positive education do not fully acknowledge the importance of pedagogy in their work.

A closer look at the rhetoric of positive education suggests that, in addition to *what* you

teach, *how* you teach matters. Unfortunately, this valuing of pedagogy is not explicitly acknowledged by some positive psychologists, who instead choose to attribute their newfound gratification with teaching and their students' miraculous engagement in learning to the purported new and groundbreaking content of positive psychology. Seligman's 2004 article "Can Happiness Be Taught?" presents his experience of teaching a positive psychology course to undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>23</sup> In this article—written for the generalist journal *Dædalus* and for an interdisciplinary audience—Seligman shifts from exclusive reference to the scientific merits of positive psychology to a distinct consideration of its role in teaching and learning.<sup>24</sup>

Seligman (here and elsewhere) attributes a large part of positive psychology's appeal in education to the experiential nature of its *content*. In this article, Seligman claims that his positive psychology course "differs, however, in an important way" from other courses that he has taught (for four decades). He attributes this difference to the fact that "there is real-world homework exercise to do and write up every week." He further explains that, in essence, he assigns and expects a good amount of writing from his students. He notes: "[t]he workload is heavy: two essays per week, one on the extensive readings and the other on homework exercises" (81). The inclusion of a number of writing assignments in his course and the decision to have students engage in, reflect on, and enact the material rather than simply memorize and parrot back its content is admirable. In fact, what Seligman describes is reminiscent of what one might find in a composition class, writing workshop, or writing studio. We—here I am speaking as a long time teacher of writing—regularly teach and ask students to *enact* skills, not just to

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<sup>23</sup> This article was written before MAPP existed or positive education as a field was formally launched.

<sup>24</sup> When positive psychology is *not* repeatedly emphasizing its scientific rigor and defending its own necessity and inevitability, it offers more promise and potential.

absorb them. We engage in *praxis*, or both theory and practice (another claim of positive psychology).<sup>25</sup> Seligman reports high engagement and “mature intellectual performance” (86) from students in his positive psychology course. He attributes this marked improvement to the *content* rather than the method of teaching when he says, “All in all, teaching *this subject* has been the most gratifying teaching I have done in my forty years as an instructor” (86) [emphasis added].

I’d like to offer an alternative reading of this situation. Maybe students are learning differently in this positive psychology course and are responding differently (to the teacher, the material, and the course) because they are being *taught* differently. Seligman’s other examples from this article suggest that his reported success in this course may be more about pedagogy than content. As an example, he states, “[t]he course begins with personal introductions that are not perfunctory” (81). This practice of introductions at the beginning of the semester is a crucial aspect of building community and of creating a space within the classroom that is friendly, encouraging, and safe. He includes himself in the introductions as well, making the effective move of having a teacher participate in the sharing aspect of a class. In educational settings, there is always a built-in hierarchy and power dynamic that privileges the teacher. Therefore, a teacher’s active participation in the activities of the class helps to mitigate this unequal situation; this participation levels the playing field somewhat by the teacher asking students to be

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<sup>25</sup> I do understand that enactment of material may be more challenging in certain disciplines than it is in others; having students regularly experiment with writing and practice its conventions and potential may be a more natural fit in a discipline such as English than disciplines such as psychology or the hard sciences. This is an inevitable and unavoidable disciplinary challenge, just as English teachers often encounter greater time commitments in responding to student writing rather than simply grading multiple choice exams more popular in other disciplines. There are, however, ways of adjusting one’s pedagogy to make learning more experiential, more student-centered, and more engaging regardless of disciplinary-specific challenges, and I applaud positive psychology and positive education’s attempts in that direction.

vulnerable and to open themselves up to the class with assurance of a reciprocal openness on the part of the teacher. Seligman introduces himself to his class by relating the now (in)famous encounter with his young daughter that is also the origin story of positive psychology (as related in chapter 2).<sup>26</sup>

Seligman places emphasis on the importance of students (and teacher) listening to one another—as well as sharing—in class (81). This technique also reflects the ethos of the writing classroom. Furthermore, Seligman’s shift from an emphasis on lecturing *at* to listening *to* echoes precisely what notable composition scholar and teacher Peter Elbow calls playing the “believing game” instead of doubting all the time. In his chapter, “The Believing Game and How to Make Conflicting Opinions More Fruitful,” Elbow explains the doubting and believing games as follows:

The doubting game represents the kind of thinking most widely honored and taught. It’s the disciplined practice of trying to be as skeptical and analytic as possible with every idea we encounter. By doubting well, we can discover hidden contradictions, bad reasoning, or other weaknesses in ideas that look true or attractive. We scrutinize with the tool of doubt. [. . .] The believing game is the mirror image of the doubting game or critical thinking. It’s the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them, but actually trying to believe them. We can use the tool of believing to

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<sup>26</sup> This taking part in the introductions is a good first step of creating community, though one might question if merely *repeating* a stock story that students can read in one of Seligman’s *many* publications amounts to a personal revelation of lived experience. This story, in this instance, seems somewhat formulaic, and therefore may not serve as a powerful introduction and instance of sharing to his students.

scrutinize not for flaws but to find hidden virtues in ideas that are unfashionable or repellent. Often we cannot see what's good in someone else's idea (or in our own!) till [*sic*] we work at believing it. When an idea goes against current assumptions and beliefs---or seems alien, weird, dangerous---or if it's poorly formulated---we often cannot see any merit in it (16).

Elbow's notion of the "believing game" has much overlap with positive psychology's prime directive of identifying and nurturing individual strengths rather than weaknesses. Consider Seligman's statement, affirming this point: "The listening skills taught in traditional clinical psychology center around detecting hidden, underlying troubles, but here I encourage the opposite: listening for underlying positive motivations, strengths, and virtues" (81).

This echoing of Peter Elbow's sound pedagogy helps to showcase how not only the *content* of positive education (the scientific validity, the shift of focus from weaknesses to strengths) but also the *way* the content is being taught contributes to (at least perceived) higher levels of learning and engagement. Positive psychologists are finally realizing what everyone who thinks and cares about the scholarship of teaching and learning already knows: that pedagogy matters, that the student-teacher relationship matters, that writing and reflection matter. In fact, the title of this article might be more aptly entitled not "Can happiness be taught?" but "What is a better way to teach *anything*?"

The redeeming factor that I see in positive education *could* be its potential focus on pedagogy. Anything that attunes teachers (especially star researchers whose primary focus is traditionally in the lab with abstract experiments rather than in classrooms with students) more to

pedagogy is wonderful.<sup>27</sup> Positive psychologists can learn much from those working within the humanities, who regularly think about pedagogy. Seligman himself hints at the expansion of positive education beyond positive psychology in particular or psychology more generally. The concluding paragraph of his article hints at what I term a *happiness-across-the-curriculum* initiative, in which well-being “skills” can be packaged up and moved from one disciplinary context to the next. Seligman states:

Teaching about the Good Life is by no means the unique province of a psychology course. Indeed, if the pursuit of eudaimonia can be taught to psychology students steeped in a century of victimology and shallow hedonics, think how easily this lesson might be taught to students who have previously encountered the better examples of well-led lives found in the humanities. A stance, moreover, that gives the best in life equal footing with the worst, that is as concerned with flourishing as with surviving, that is as interested in building as in repairing, should find a comfortable home in any discipline. In the end, I believe that we learn more when lighting candles than when cursing the darkness” (86-7).

While I appreciate the desire to spread the wealth of what he considers to be a transformative educational situation, Seligman suggests an unequal balance between skills, content, and pedagogy. Moreover, he overlooks the importance of context-specific pedagogy, and instead treats well-being as if it were just a template that can then be rolled out to any other context.<sup>28</sup>

There is another well-known context in which a universally desirable and academically

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<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter on Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, this sound pedagogy is not always occurring in positive education initiatives.

<sup>28</sup> This problem will be shown in full relief in the next chapter on Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, in which an educational resiliency program for school adolescents was translated—almost wholesale—to a military context.

essential skill makes it way beyond its home discipline to other fields. Advocates of writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) have been making the case for a long time that writing matters, no matter the context, and that writing should not just be taught in composition courses. These advocates argue that good lesson planning, curriculum design, revision, scaffolding assignments, and recursivity are crucial aspects of good pedagogy. If positive psychology curriculum is to be included in other disciplines, it must be significantly revised for that new context.

Although it has become commonplace in positive psychology research and publications to mention the importance of activities that are centered on writing, the important presence (and potential transformative) power of “composing” in happiness pedagogies is under-acknowledged and underdeveloped. Therefore, in the remainder of this section, I highlight the centrality of “writing” to the self-improvement, positive psychology, and positive education agendas and offer preliminary thoughts about how its inclusion in positive education can be reconceptualized for purposes other than individual happiness. To this end, positive education should make more use of writing in its curricula as well as utilizing the writing it does already have in more critical and reflexive ways.

A primary example of composing in positive psychology curriculum is the reflective writing centered on the VIA Signature Strengths Survey and its results and uses, but there are other core compositional components as well: recording and reflecting on mindful moments, keeping gratitude journals, diary writing, writing letters to others, constructing intentions and motivational sayings. When these exercises are discussed in the literature, they are typically treated instrumentally: activities the writer can do to bring more well-being to her/himself. In short, they focus more on the writer and the product s/he produces than the writing as process.

The writing is seen more as a tool to produce happy content, or pleasurable affect, for the self rather than a means of new knowledge production.<sup>29</sup>

Tal Ben-Shahar's *Happier* series is a wonderful example of the parallels (and potential crossovers) between the self-help and positive psychology genres and composition pedagogy.<sup>30</sup> His books are replete with exploratory writing exercises that help the writer not just to get happier but to learn more about her/himself. In what Ben-Shahar labels "Time-Ins," he encourages what is basically known in the composition and pedagogy worlds as "freewriting." In discussing journaling, Ben-Shahar encourages readers to keep writing as a means of discovery rather than correctness. In the series follow-up workbook, *Even Happier: A Gratitude Journal for Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment* (2010), Ben-Shahar aids readers in "ReflAction" (xi), which essentially is praxis, or theory and practice. Writing provides a central role in this process. Ben-Shahar provides guided, but fairly open-ended, prompts that are exploratory, and encourages readers to write for their eyes only (though they are allowed to share this writing with others if they wish). He advises, "Do not worry about grammar or spelling—just write" (27) and "Whatever you write, as you are writing, it is for your eyes only. If, after writing, you decide to share what you wrote with someone who is close to you, you can, of course, do so, but it is important that you not feel inhibited while doing the exercise. The more you open up, the more benefit you will derive" (28). In addition to encouraging individuals to continue the process of

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<sup>29</sup> Seligman and others regularly discuss these exercises, and there have been studies about their effectiveness as well. Two examples are from the *Journal of Happiness Studies*: Jen-Ho Chang, Chin-Lan Huang, and Yi-Cheng Lin's "The Psychological Displacement Paradigm in Diary-Writing (PDPD) and its Psychological Benefits" (2012) and Steven M. Toepfer, Kelly Cichy, and Patti Peters' "Letters of Gratitude: Further Evidence for Author Benefits" (2011).

<sup>30</sup> Since he emphasizes pedagogy to such an extent, it is no surprise that Ben-Shahar is famously known as the Harvard professor who teaches "happiness" courses that hundreds upon hundreds of students sign up for and attend each semester.

writing, he also introduces notions of revision and recursivity by asking his readers and students to return to this writing. He instructs: “Revisit the entire exercise periodically” (28). In fact, it is Ben-Shahar’s emphasis on the process, his encouragement of “free association” (xi) and “generative knowledge” (xii) that is most similar to composition pedagogy. Ben-Shahar’s approach is very much aligned with (in fact, strikingly similar to) Elbow’s discussion and advocacy of the technique of freewriting in books such as *Writing without Teachers* and *Writing With Power*.

How might the potential overlap between these two practices of composition and positive education—both with an interest in pedagogy and a desire to be integrated into other aspects of the curriculum—be used? What do we make of this connection? I do not juxtapose them here in order to state the superiority of composition pedagogy, though I do think positive psychology and positive education (along with numerous other disciplines) could learn from it. My goal, much like the humanistic psychologists discussed in the previous chapter, is inclusion of perspectives, increased dialogue, and a broadening of discourses. What *more* does the positive psychology curriculum offer than the “accessibility” of the content? How might positive education help students to imagine new possibilities through writing? It is true, of course, as the old saying goes, “write what you know.” But you also write to know what you don’t know, to come to know what you don’t know already. You write not only to practice or rehearse, but also to grow and to get out of your comfort zone.

As someone who specializes in Composition & Rhetoric, I am highly attuned to and appreciative of the ways in which writing facilitates knowledge, to how writing *is* knowing. These exercises could be repurposed, turned away from a formulaic, inward looking agenda and leveraged towards a curriculum that instead encourages revision, recursiveness, writing the self,

desire, play, and failure. I insist on a critical, questioning hope that produces alternative forms and futures rather than conservative, self-satisfying techniques that merely reinforce and reproduce the status quo. We must teach not only to change the individual but also to change the world, a provocation that will be discussed more fully in this project's conclusion, which puts positive education, positive psychology, and self-help more directly in conversation with the utopian impulse. I am delighted to see more writing being integrated into positive psychology curriculum, and I assume many of my colleagues will applaud this new focus too. I welcome the start of a rich and productive conversation moving forward about the roles of writing and pedagogy in positive education and beyond.

### Positive Education and Critical Pedagogy

Before moving on to the next chapter for a detailed analysis of one positive education initiative (Comprehensive Soldier Fitness), I here briefly place positive education in dialogue with critical pedagogy. This pairing will highlight potential pitfalls of positive education as well as possible solutions for bridging its individual focus with social consciousness and radicalizing its content and pedagogy. I provide alternate methodologies (what Foucault terms “subjugated knowledge”) to positive education by first exploring the normalizing and disciplinary aspects of skills-based education (whether vocational or focused on well-being) and then sketching a more radical and utopian intervention into educational policy. I reject “the invention and scripting of selves - citizens who are psychologically ‘healthy’ inasmuch as they are governable, predictable, calculable, classifiable, self-conscious, responsible, self-regulating and self-determined” (Rimke 63) in favor of Freire’s notion of “praxis” as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51); for him, “[s]olidarity [. . .] is a radical posture” (49).

Unlike Fish, other theorists and educators, such as Brazilian radical educator Paulo Freire, acknowledge that there are systemic, interconnected problems affecting education. These educators therefore do not pretend that it is possible or desirable to conduct business within an ivory tower, as if the academy could ever somehow operate outside of these conditions, as if it could possibly exist in its own little utopian enclave. There is no aspect of higher education that is safe from commodification, appropriation, and exploitation; even “theory, even in its more abstract forms, is [not] removed from the messy relations of power, ideology, politics, and public life” (Giroux 57).

I now turn to a consideration of Freire’s views on and methods of education in order to imagine how positive education might be put in conversation with a more socially aware perspective. Freire believes that education should participate in the process of humanization. In his opening sentences of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he states that dehumanization is “a concrete historical fact” but “*not* a given destiny but the result of an unjust order” (44). Furthermore, “[. . .] as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility” (43). Freire points to the need to completely uproot and transform the causes of oppression in order to truly achieve humanization and liberation. Otherwise, a dehumanizing condition will still exist, “[. . .] because the context of the peasant’s situation, that is, oppression, remains unchanged” (46).

Freire is writing out of a specific cultural context (illiterate peasants in Brazil, taught outside of a traditional school setting), but other radical educators, such as Jean Anyon, echo this point for an American schooling context. Anyon intensifies this point in *Radical Possibilities*, through her constant refrain that educational reform by itself will not produce long-lasting results of success and freedom from poverty because the context of the urban youth’s economic and

social lives will remain unchanged. With these caveats in mind, is “humanization” viable, right here, right now? How might positive education take part in that process?

Unfortunately, much of education today is in the “deficit” style of learning, in which teachers simply “fill” passive (and lacking) students with the “right” information and skills. The banking style of education is pervasive in education today, especially with a climate of high stakes testing. Standardized tests have right answers and wrong answers, with nothing between. There are mathematical strategies for succeeding on these tests, vocabulary to be memorized, rules to be mastered, and techniques to be applied. Students become “standardized,” and if they are lucky enough to have the resources “deposited” in them that will enable them to understand the inner-workings of the test and then ultimately to score big on it and attend an elite school, they are given the edge in the job market. In some ways, positive education might become a type of “banking style” of education that Freire condemns throughout his writing.

Radical educators such as Freire actively try to resist and counteract these indoctrinating tendencies of curriculum and education. Freire urges teachers to be ever-conscious of the ideological dimensions of choosing subject matter: “For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition – bits of information to be deposited in the students – but rather the organized, systematized, and developed ‘re-presentation’ to individuals of the things about which they want to know more” (93). Dewey was also committed to transforming the classroom into a place where “active” and participatory learning could take place, and where students could learn through experience how to become critical and competent citizens of the world. Positive education does, at least partially, engage in participatory learning, but it does not balance the focus on individual character strengths with social concerns.

Freire wants to aid students in the ultimate goal of “conscientization,” a consciousness-raising that will enable them to more critically intervene in the material conditions of their existence. This pedagogy stands in stark contrast to Fish’s laissez-faire attitude that, while not denying *any* “connection at all between the successful practice of ethical, social, and political virtues and the courses of instruction listed in the college catalogue,” nevertheless still maintains that “these are contingent effects, and as contingent effects they cannot be designed and shouldn’t be aimed at” (13).

For Freire, “praxis” is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 51), and is the necessary condition for “humanization.” Teachers must reflect on how they can alter their pedagogy to become more effective, critical teachers in the future. How can knowledge and information (whatever the subject matter, whether positive psychology, composition, or anything else) become “useful knowledge” for teachers and students? Many view the traditional classrooms and formal schooling contexts as “limit-situations” that do not allow for possibilities for innovation, experiential learning, play, and experimentation. Instead, we should encourage new perspectives and a hope for “limit acts” that will explore “untested feasibility” within education.

Of course, it is unhelpful and unproductive to just notice obstacles without suggesting possible solutions for overcoming them. Freire realized the need for “denunciation” and “annunciation” as necessary, helpful, and utopian. Furthermore, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he articulates that “[. . .] denunciation is impossible with a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action” (87). Many opportunities exist around us as untested feasibility, and with students we can work to develop and create “limit acts” that will not only inaugurate “conscientization” but will also help make tangible improvements in their education

and in our world. It remains to be seen if positive education will be one of them.

In helping students to achieve conscientization, positive education could provide additional material to students for discussion and dialogue. This would ensure that their individual traits and strengths are scaffolded and part of, in Vygotsky's framework, the "zone of proximal development." Specifically, chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* could be given to students as a reading that leads to discussion about the type of education that most students have probably grown up with and the way that we (as "teacher-student" and "students-teachers") can work together to implement a new type of curriculum and pedagogy in our classroom. In his introduction to Freire and Macedo's text, *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World* (1987), Henry A. Giroux writes, "In addition, a radically reconstituted view of literacy would need to do more than illuminate the scope and nature of the meaning of illiteracy. It would also be essential to develop a programmatic discourse for literacy as part of a political project and pedagogical practice that provides a language of hope and transformation for those struggling in the present for a better future" (4). This would serve to counterbalance positive education's focus on the individual as the primary site of improvement and locus of change.

In fact, one of the tools that many of the thinkers advocate is the use of "contradictions" to stimulate critical thinking. Freire's presentation in chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* of how students may be led to action by realizing the contradictions between their current ("oppressed") existence and the existence they want to have as free, "humanized" people is similar to Anyon's method in *Radical Possibilities* about utilizing the contradictions inherent in a situation to produce activism and social movements.

In attempting to enact critical pedagogy in a positive education context, critical educators can present a Freirean framework to problematize the content of positive education. Particularly

relevant and helpful for this activity are Ira Shor's books (*Empowering Education* and *When Students Have Power*) and their use of Freire's ideas in stretching the "generative theme" further into topical and academic themes. In chapter 2 of *When Students have Power*, Shor articulates the positive (and important) role that a teacher plays in helping students to become more critical in their thinking about the world in which they live. Shor explains, "In the critical pedagogy I have been defining here and elsewhere, teachers don't stop being authorities or academic experts, but they deploy their power and knowledge as *democratic authorities* who question the status quo and negotiate the curriculum rather than as authoritarian educators who unilaterally make the rules and lecture on preset subject matter" (56). Like Anyon and at times like Freire himself (in particular in his Eleventh Letter in *Letters to Cristina*), Shor insists on constant attention to the particular material, economic, political, and social conditions of his students and how non-academic factors affect students' educational experience and their (quantitative and qualitative) academic output. Together, teachers and students can explore these contradictions and work to understand that almost anything (even within a "limit situation") can be made into "useful knowledge" if it is presented in a critical manner, dialogic manner. These ideas (not dogmatically, but practically, contextually, and meaningfully) could be used in a contemporary context of positive education.

Studying contradictions and discussing additional readings in positive education would assist students in moving from content that is in their everyday experience (for example, their reflection on their strengths, which is a "generative theme") to a broader social and intellectual understanding of the issues at work in society (Shor's "topical" and "academic" themes). In this way, positive education will both equip students to succeed within the educational system and to question, challenge, and hopefully move beyond, that very system.

Positive education at times encourages students to practice reflection on their own lives (consider Ben-Shahar's "ReflAction"), but well-being curriculum should be put in conversation with other methodologies. Furthermore, while positive education holds promise, I worry that it serves to bandage over some problems without focusing on their underlying structural causes. Therefore, positive education neglects—at least in its current incarnations—a more socially minded perspective and a social conscience. Although it considers "hope" to be one of its 24 strengths, it leaves out a sense of optimism about not just an individual's own future, but of the world's.

It is important for positive psychologists and educators to consider how a focus on well-being expands (and in some way limits) possibilities. Educators must try to break out of systems of authority and uneven (hierarchical) distributions of power. How is it possible for positive education to democratize the educational process at the same time as enhancing student learning and well-being? Critical educators want to engage their students in the educational process, create connection and relevancy between subject material and their own lives, and emphasize collaboration and active, experiential learning. Positive education seems as if it could achieve some of these goals, especially those based on accessible, experiential, and relevant subject matter. However, though positive educators have created a framework for teaching and then discussing individual strengths with students, they must extend their focus beyond the individual to larger social problems (such as issues of race, gender, class, and sustainability) to consider human beings' relationships to the environments in which they live. How can positive education problem-pose the contradiction of individual flourishing within an unjust and deeply flawed world?

In an ideal world, education might be the great equalizer, a gateway to equal opportunity, unlimited access; a space where students from all backgrounds and all abilities come together and engage in critical thinking; a place for the acquisition, transformation, and application of knowledge. Well-being could have a useful place in this ideal system. However, as is becoming painfully clear, amidst economic recessions and education systems that are underperforming and that increasingly value corporate interests over academic freedom and student enrichment, outcomes assessment instead of the development of effective pedagogy and community-building, the question of what “education” is and what it is supposed to “do” is highly contested.

In *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic-Complex* (2007), critical educator Henry Giroux points to the necessity of educators fighting for the social good:

[A]cademics will have to assume their responsibility as citizen-scholars, take crucial positions, and relate their work to larger social issues. Against the encroaching forces of militarization, corporatism, and ideological intolerance, educators have the difficult task of matching their sense of engaged scholarship with a meaningful and critical pedagogy, one that enables students to engage in debate and dialogue about pressing social problems and to believe not only that civic life matters but that they can make a difference in shaping it (5).

Theorists like Giroux do not deny the reality of the corporate university; they do not deny the demands of the market as it currently exists. However, they still maintain a strong desire (and urgent necessity) for “imagining different futures and politics as a form of intervention into public life” (104), and “a responsibility ... [to] enabl[e] students to learn how to read the political and pedagogical forces that shape their lives not as consumers but as critically engaged citizens”

(73). In this way, nonchalant resignation is replaced by a proactive and politically-engaged agenda.

I argue that positive psychology and, by extension, positive education comprise one of these “political and pedagogical forces that shape our life.” Their focus on the individual and commitment to an unproblematized notion of a valueless, universal well-being ignores their own ideology. Therefore, in order to effect a radical change on the prevailing model of positive education, its ideological foundations must be challenged. Paul Lauter agrees that in order to truly change the system, one must confront not just practices but also “the set of mind, the informing ideology, or perhaps what Pierre Bourdieu called the *habitus* that shapes people's ways of thinking and that underlies particular policies” (74).

It is no secret that higher education, whatever its lofty goals and intangible, humanistic ideals, is inextricably bound to socioeconomic status, corporate interests, and the reproduction of inequality. The competing priorities of sound pedagogy and education and the ever-increasing pressures of corporate interests and profit motives are becoming all the time more conflated in a climate that values profit and productivity over quality and human practices. In addition to economic ramifications, the modern university has related ethical consequences. Critical pedagogy theories and practices provide a useful counterbalance to some of what is happening in positive psychology and positive education by offering a vision and framework for how education can (and, in the estimation of critical educators) should intervene in the material and social realities of students’ lives. In the following chapter, I will discuss how one positive education curriculum engages with reality within the context of the military.

## Chapter 4

### “Drafting” Happiness: The Rhetoric of Resiliency in the United States Army

#### Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program

This chapter examines the rhetorical and pedagogical functions of the United States Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program. CSF is a repurposing of positive psychology research for a training initiative aimed at increasing various aspects of well-being in soldiers, their families, and DA (Department of Army) civilians. CSF is a positive psychology curriculum aimed at decreasing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and suicide, and increasing resiliency, psychological fitness, and strength in five areas: physical, emotional, social, family, and spiritual.<sup>1</sup> As such, it is a prime (not to mention well-funded and controversial) example of the increasing tendency to apply and institutionalize positive psychology that I noted in chapter 2. Furthermore, CSF is a program centered on assessing and teaching well-being that places training at the core of its mission. As such, CSF is also a concrete example of the emerging field of positive education I discussed in chapter 3.

What makes CSF a particularly important site of inquiry is that it is “a hugely consequential national issue” (Quick 645). The program affects individual soldiers, their families, and DA civilians as well as the international community impacted (directly or indirectly) by United States military actions. Additionally, CSF leaders, developers, and advocates have repeatedly announced a clear intention to roll out the program to other military

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<sup>1</sup> The Army has a long-standing curriculum in place for physical fitness. While training the body is an essential part of the vision for a comprehensively fit soldier, physical fitness is not directly a part of the CSF curriculum.

branches<sup>2</sup> and to model future civilian programs on CSF, so both the stakes and the stakeholders go far beyond the soldiers for whom CSF is currently mandatory.

Furthermore, CSF's rhetoric and pedagogy straddle (often unsuccessfully and unconsciously) self-help and positive psychology discourses. As such, they showcase the competing tensions of individual improvement and social justice, apolitical progress and politically engaged action, and descriptive reporting and prescriptive advice that I identified in earlier chapters. CSF shares in self-help and positive psychology's mission of increasing flourishing by equipping our nation's soldiers with decontextualized tools and strategies for coping with war without appropriately considering their relevance to the realities of life in (or post) combat. Our soldiers deserve all of the resources that we can give them, and indeed, our nation should equip them with not only material and financial resources but also psychological and emotional support. However, this does not mean that we should endorse a curriculum that does not fully engage with the unique challenges of developing well-being within a militarized lifestyle.

CSF assumes that the lives of those in the military and their families can be improved by building psychological fitness and resiliency, yet it fails to grapple with the appropriateness, necessity, or realities of war itself. By positioning combat and other traumatic encounters as manageable (to some extent) if one holds the "right" attitude and bulks up on resiliency prior to deployment, CSF places an enormous burden on individual responsibility for actions over which individuals may not have much control. Moreover, although CSF attempts to broaden its purview beyond the individual to the social (at the level of the unit, Army culture more broadly, family

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<sup>2</sup> As of this writing (Summer 2012), the military has already rolled out a Global Assessment Test (GAT) for Airmen (Air Force) as well as a Sailor Tracker, Airman Tracker, and Marine Tracker (versions for the Navy, Air Force, and Marines of the Army Soldier Fitness Tracker).

relationships, and even United States relations abroad), it ultimately falls into the same trap as the self-help movement and positive psychology agendas: promoting individualism at the expense of the collective.

Similar to my claim in previous chapters that the rhetoric of happiness/well-being/flourishing/positivity performs important ideological and cultural work, I will argue in this chapter that rhetorical and discursive spaces are the primary sites of struggle over the CSF program. The war over what form CSF will take and whether it is praised or attacked is not taking place on a traditional battlefield but rather in publications, press releases, and the media. Therefore, after a brief introduction to the key components and aims of CSF, I turn my attention to a close reading of three key sites of CSF rhetoric: the official materials published by Army leaders and psychology researchers involved in creating the program as well as the critiques these texts have provoked, CSF's pedagogical content and methodology, and CSF's multimodal, public-facing Facebook presence.

After familiarizing readers with the basics of the CSF program ("Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: An Overview"), the next section of this chapter ("Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Rhetoric") examines the January 2011 special issue of *American Psychologist* [the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association (APA)] on CSF, guest edited by Martin E.P. Seligman (prominent positive psychologist, University of Pennsylvania) and Michael D. Matthews (researcher in military psychology, United States Military Academy at West Point), along with the responses to this CSF special issue in the October 2011 "Comments" section of the same journal. This special issue offers readers thirteen articles (many of them co-authored by prominent positive psychologists and Army leaders or researchers) introducing CSF to the broader psychology community and providing an overview of CSF's key features and goals. In

addition to outlining the primary intentions and components of CSF, this special issue acknowledges some limitations of CSF's current state, suggests possible directions for future improvement and research, and claims to provide "an opportunity to widen the aperture for discussion" (Casey 1).<sup>3</sup> This special issue clearly demonstrates the alignment between this Army initiative and the positive psychology community.

I continue to apply Ahmed's framework of happiness as performative as I trace the ways in which the rhetoric of psychological fitness, resiliency, and well-being circulates in and constrains the horizon of experiences for CSF "students" (soldiers, their families, and DA civilians). I outline not only the official party line of CSF and its developers, teachers, and advocates but also read between the lines to reveal what is not being said, what questions are not being asked, what consequences might follow from such a program if it continues its current course (both of action and curriculum) unchecked. Since CSF draws heavily on both the language and emotional pulls of patriotism (how can one argue against supporting our troops and defending freedom?), self-help (how can one argue against bettering oneself?), and positive psychology (how can one argue against happiness?), its discourse makes alternative viewpoints undesirable and is weighted heavily against challenge to the program. This narrowing of possibility leads to one of CSF's most troubling implications: it reifies the status quo, offering the underlying (though implicit) and problematic assumption that "persistent conflict" (Casey 1) is inevitable, and therefore our efforts on a broader policy level should be to triage its effects (even if that triage is labeled "preventive") rather than to address the root causes of these conflicts in the first place.

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<sup>3</sup> All authors of these documents are people either intimately involved in the project or positive psychologists who clearly have an investment in promoting CSF's work (some even being compensated for their involvement in the program). Therefore, the special issue reads more like uniform promotion of CSF (and a narrowing of its discourse) rather than an invitation to critical discussion. This absence of alternative viewpoints was noted in the Comments (Oct. 2011) in response to the special issue.

Surprisingly, given the fact that it is an explicitly educational endeavor, one major aspect of the program that has received minimal attention is its pedagogy. In the second section of this chapter (Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Pedagogy), I turn my attention to CSF's curriculum, this under-theorized component of CSF: its content (what it teaches), methodology (how it teaches what it teaches), and its teachers and students (who teaches and who is taught). As I argued in Chapter 3, choosing what content to teach and how to teach it not a neutral act, and CSF's curriculum and pedagogy are no exception.

As I have done in the previous chapters, I continue to stress how the popular and scientific genres of self-help and positive psychology (that merge here in CSF) are pedagogical, with "experts" instructing their readers to first learn and then apply specific skills to make changes at the individual level. These techniques are mistakenly seen as ideologically neutral and therefore seamlessly transferrable from one context to the next.<sup>4</sup> Positioning itself as value-neutral decontextualized, and offering a skills-based approach and practical guidance, CSF does not acknowledge its own standards and morals. However, we can unearth its underlying assumptions and values through what it measures and teaches.

An examination of CSF's learning objectives and assessment efforts reveals that CSF posits and then privileges a *particular* type of psychological fitness. Therefore, even though CSF, in the style of positive psychology and positive education, positions itself as building on strengths and encouraging growth rather than dwelling on deficits, I argue that it remains a form of remediation according to pre-determined standards and, as such, is inherently conservative. I

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<sup>4</sup> As I will discuss later in this chapter, CSF's origins (with minimal modification) in the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) (<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/prpsum.htm>) demonstrate this problem. PRP is an intervention aimed at civilian adolescent depressives, a context vastly different from that of Army soldiers. Consequently, one would expect their pedagogies to also vastly differ and not overlap to the extent that they do.

demonstrate this point with a discussion of CSF's highly controversial Spiritual Fitness module.

Since it is necessary to determine who needs remediating and in what areas, CSF's educational model is deeply invested in assessment and data collection. While the Army claims that it collects and maintains records in order to track progress, evaluate the program's efficacy, and enable future research, I offer a different reading of these efforts. Drawing on Foucault's framework of the disciplinary and normalizing functions of assessment (and also echoing Rimke's claim about how self-help contributes to the management of populations), I sketch an alternative interpretation—one that challenges CSF's innocuous rationale—of the Army's record-keeping and plans for the data it aggregates.

After looking at CSF's defining features, rhetoric, and pedagogy, I analyze how CSF presents itself to and communicates with the public. In the final section of this chapter I perform a close reading of CSF's official Facebook page to illustrate how CSF and its social media presence and persona embody (and confuse) the self-help and positive psychology genres as well as ignore the program's larger context. The majority of the content and discussion of CSF brackets socio-economic, political, and military realities, but the Facebook page goes further: it is a striking example of free-floating, decontextualized self-help advice aimed at empowering the individual rather than laying the ground-work for socially transformative action. Consequently, the space for alternative viewpoints is even more limited here, as CSF's Facebook postings offering self-help suggestions distract users from the serious issues involved in CSF and the Army's acceptance of "persistent conflict" as the default. I argue that the CSF Facebook page serves simultaneously as an extension of the program's branding efforts and as a way to diffuse concerns and anxieties about lives spent preparing for (and sometimes fighting in) combat.

In much the same way that I parse values from self-help materials in chapter 1 and positive

psychology publications in chapter 2, here I treat CSF's Facebook page as a "text" that contains important clues about the program's ethics and worldview. The conflation of a variety of discourses that are often at odds with one another (army and warrior ethos, positive psychology, self-help) proves difficult to navigate. As a gesture towards alternative pedagogy, in this dissertation's conclusion I offer a composition classroom activity and assignment sequence that uses the CSF Facebook site to foster critical thinking and active participation in the larger debates about well-being, and, in Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo's phrase, to "read the word the world."<sup>5</sup>

### Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Overview

CSF offers a curriculum that assesses soldiers' fitness in four of its five designated areas (emotional, social, family, and spiritual) using the Global Assessment Tool (GAT), a mandatory online questionnaire and entry point to the program. The questionnaire is brief (it takes approximately fifteen minutes to complete), and feedback on one's performance is immediate. This feedback includes suggestions for individualized training modules based on the soldiers' needs and priorities (as determined by their GAT scores). CSF's entire educational initiative is centered on the Master Resilience Training (MRT) that teaches Army leaders positive psychology curriculum. MRT teaches positive psychology research and skills (content) as well as *how* to teach these content (pedagogy) to soldiers at the unit level.

In the inaugural article of the January 2011 *American Psychologist* special issue, "Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: A Vision for Psychological Resilience in the U.S. Army," General George W. Casey, Jr. (former U.S. Army Chief of Staff) describes the program as

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<sup>5</sup> See chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of this critical pedagogy technique.

follows: “The Army’s CSF program is an integrated, proactive approach to developing psychological resilience in our soldiers, in their family members, and in the Army’s civilian workforce” (1). Casey also addresses why CSF is necessary at this moment, providing the rationale, “we are operating in an era of persistent conflict” (1) and “[o]ur soldiers are now engaged in extended operations of an indefinite duration and unprecedented complexity” (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 4).<sup>6</sup>

To deal with the adverse effects of this “persistent conflict,” Seligman was cont[r]acted to create a pilot program based on his work in the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP). This program, CSF, aims to help soldiers become more resilient and achieve post-traumatic growth rather than post-traumatic stress. To this end, considerable intellectual and financial resources were invested in the program, with materials developed by leading positive psychologists and ~\$125 million of federal money devoted to its development and implementation (Casey 3). CSF was launched in October, 2009, and the program is now mandatory for all incoming soldiers (and available to their families and DA civilians).

#### Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Rhetoric

The January 2011 special issue of *American Psychologist* on Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF), introduced above, illustrates the strong ties between the discipline of psychology and CSF. In the issue’s concluding article, “Comprehensive Soldier Fitness and the Future of Psychology,” co-authors Seligman and Raymond D. Fowler (psychologist, University of California, San Diego) highlight the alliance between psychology and the military. They write,

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<sup>6</sup> This characterization of ongoing war efforts is eerily similar to how war is described in George Orwell’s 1949 classic dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this text, the major transnational powers (Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia) are engaged in a continual, never-ending battle that is used to justify scarcity measures, increased surveillance, and antisocial tendencies.

“Federal support through the military helped to build psychology into a major scientific discipline and profession and APA into the largest doctoral-level scientific society in the world. There are now approximately 3,000 psychologists in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and over 1,500 serving in the military” (84).

In a section at the end of this article simply titled “Objections,” Seligman and Fowler purportedly acknowledge and address some of potential (and, in their estimation, possibly real) objections to CSF. However, in a similar vein as above, they ultimately resort to reaffirming psychology’s commitment to serving our country’s military interests instead of critically engaging with the justified critiques made by their peers:

The task of the military is to provide the capability of defending the nation from threat. Revulsion toward war is understandable, but it is not the military that sets the nation’s policies on war and peace. The military carries out the policies that emerge from our democratic form of government. Withholding professional and scientific support for the people who provide the nation’s defense is, we believe, simply wrong. Psychologists are as diverse in their views as any other group of citizens, but the American Psychological Association has, for six decades, been solid in its support on behalf of the men and women who serve in our armed forces (85).

At first glance, this response seems balanced. It is indeed the mission of the military to train in preparation of defending our country’s interests at home and abroad. It is also true that the military does the bidding of the government, and therefore the military is not wholly responsible for undesirable policies. However, it is also somewhat manipulative to assert that, because the APA has in the past been supportive of the Army, it should now offer unquestioning and

unwavering support as well.

The concluding paragraph of the article (and thus the special issue) goes one step further in entangling positive psychology and the military, claiming psychology and psychologists to be key factors in winning wars and defeating “evil” political and religious parties. Seligman and Fowler explain:

Three ideologies have arisen in the past century that have sought to overthrow democracy by force: fascism, communism, and jihadist Islam. It should be noted that without a strong military and the will to use force responsibly in self-defense, our victories would not have happened, and defense against current and future threats would be impossible. Psychology materially aided in the defeat of the first two threats, and in doing so it carved out its identity. We are proud to aid our military in defending and protecting our nation right now, and we will be proud to help our soldiers and their families into the peace that will follow (86).

When reading this article, one gets the sense that this partnership is teleological, so APA and the military’s collaboration on CSF becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and not open to debate or negotiation. In this way, CSF functions by further merging the (already) intertwined interests and investments of each group as well as making their partnership to teach psychological resilience in CSF (and future endeavors) appear self-evident.

It is difficult to understand how scientific inquiry and debate can thrive when psychologists are asked to support a program that has pre-determined core principles. And yet, this unquestioning allegiance is precisely what is requested of researchers when positive psychologists attempt to enlist their support for CSF. Seligman explicitly references the call to serve, stating that the purpose of the special issue is partially “to encourage psychologists to

come to the aid of our government” (647). In doing so, he enacts a civilian form of recruitment using spiritual overtones that should give us pause:<sup>7</sup> the epigraph to the final section of his concluding article presents an excerpt from the Bible and likens positive psychology’s mission of serving the Army and the government to a holy calling.<sup>8</sup>

Seligman’s claim that CSF is necessary for our society at this particular moment in history is reminiscent of Jeffrey Yen’s argument (presented in chapter 2) about how positive psychology as a discipline justifies and promotes its own importance and relevance. When positive psychology emerged as a fully formed discipline in at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its research findings were promoted as appropriate for a nation at the pinnacle of peace and prosperity. Little over a decade later (as the post 9/11 culture of fear and the wars on terror drag on, at least in spirit), positive psychology is now being touted as essential for the military in a time of “persistent conflict.” No matter what circumstances arise, positive psychology seems capable of adapting itself to fit them.

CSF is therefore an example of how positive psychology misrepresents itself as merely descriptive, ideologically-neutral, and appropriate for use in any context (and transferrable among contexts). CSF advocates state in this special issue that “the Army’s embracing of psychology as the best approach to deal with this problem [of making soldiers psychologically fit] highlights the relevance of contemporary psychological science to social issues at the macro level” (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 8). In simply making the claim, without space for debate, that positive psychology is “needed” to deal with major social issues, CSF’s advocates

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<sup>7</sup> Seligman’s referencing Holy Scripture here reinforces concerns critics have expressed about the supposedly non-religious nature of CSF’s spiritual component. I will present and discuss these critiques later in this chapter.

<sup>8</sup> *Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?  
And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”*

—Isaiah 6:8

gloss over *whether* positive psychology is appropriate for use within the military and imply that the only issue requiring further consideration is *how* positive psychology can best be applied in the military context.

Paul B. Lester, Sharon McBride (both from the Department of the Army Headquarters), Paul D. Bliese, and Amy B. Adler's (researchers from the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research) jointly written article, "Bringing Science to Bear: An Empirical Assessment of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program," appeals to the rigors of science in justifying CSF.<sup>9</sup> According to these co-authors, CSF "likely represents the largest deliberate psychological intervention in history and signals the U.S. Army's attempt to bring science to bear on a complex problem" (77). However, the deliberateness of this program is the deliberateness of only a few experts. In his Comment, "Missing: Critical and Skeptical Perspectives on Comprehensive Soldier Fitness," James Campbell Quick (University of Texas at Arlington) notes the absence of questioning and doubting as well as analysis and judgment (the role of the critic and skeptic, respectively) in CSF and its presentation in the January 2011 *American Psychologist* special issue. Especially since CSF is "a hugely consequential national issue" (645), Quick concludes with the warning that "APA and the *American Psychologist* need to stay grounded in science, not sell infomercials" (645). What CSF is selling is, in a dramatic shift from both psychology's and military's approaches in the past, is a purported focus on strengths: "As described, assessment during World War I focused on *abilities*, and assessment during World War II focused on *attitudes*. The CSF program focuses on *assets* [. . .]" (Peterson, Park, and Castro 13).

The identification and description of these "assets" in the *American Psychologist* CSF special issue (January 2011) further serves to strengthen the alliance between and overlap of

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<sup>9</sup> As I demonstrated in chapter 2, positive psychology consistently appeals to science to ground its legitimacy, usefulness, and desirability in a variety of contexts.

Army and positive psychology communities and principles. CSF advocates claim that both “the Army’s seven core values (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage) correspond to character strengths postulated by Peterson and Seligman (2004)” and that “the Army is a positive institution as designed by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in the sense that it actively promotes the overall welfare of its soldiers through extensive formalized programs aimed at improving and enriching the lives and those of their families” (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 5).

The decision to label the Army a “positive institution” raises a number of important questions. How can a discipline describe itself in a value-laden manner (by affixing the modifier “positive” to it) while still purporting to remain ideologically neutral and non-prescriptive? Is it not a value judgment (and not merely description) to label any institution “positive”? What values does positive psychology support if it considers the Army “positive”? Is it only the methodology that is important (the fact that the “extensive formalized programs” exist) and not the objectives and mission of the Army as a whole? These questions are not mere quibbles; in fact, these problems are the core tensions I identified in chapter 2, and they should be answered (or at the very least, considered) before future applications of positive psychology research are initiated.

Identifying the overlap between the core values of the Army and the core values of positive psychology paves the way for the rhetoric of patriotism and national security that advocates of CSF use to describe and promote the program. The concluding paragraphs of both articles that bookend the *American Psychologist* CSF special issue present America’s safety and democracy as inextricably bound to the deployment and success of CSF. This connection is clear: “CSF is designed to do just that—to better prepare our Army community to help protect

America in a complex and uncertain future” (Casey 3). The set-up of this narrative makes it incredibly difficult to argue against (or within) CSF, unless one wants to be viewed as a traitor to one’s country and the people who serve it. The point is circular: it is their duty, as positive psychologists, to support the government and further the development of CSF, and it is our duty, as Americans, to support our nation’s troops and by extension CSF (and by further extension the positive psychologists who developed the program).

The rhetoric of CSF proponents largely glosses over the underlying and problematic assumptions that war is both inevitable and acceptable. In doing so, CSF supporters participate in maintaining (whether actively by outspoken support or passively by not challenging it) the status quo. There are few acknowledgments by these advocates that the “persistent conflict” itself may be the root cause of the problems soldiers face, rather than the soldiers’ levels of individual resiliency.<sup>10</sup> John Dyckman adds his voice to this critique in his comment, “Exposing the Glosses in Seligman and Fowler’s (2011) Straw-Man Arguments.” Dyckman states that in their concluding article, these authors “ignored the obvious fact that the best way to prevent posttraumatic stress disorder is to avoid trauma in the first place. They neglected to consider that fighting unnecessary wars would be a good place to start” (644). Dyckman poses further ethical questions, asking, “When, if ever, is it justified to help someone feel good about killing someone else?” and “Do we really want to develop an army that kills without compunction or remorse?” (644).

CSF’s ethical and moral grounding is controversial among other members of the psychology community as well. Sean Phipps, in “Positive Psychology and War: An Oxymoron”

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<sup>10</sup> One notable exception in the special issue is the following comment in the “Assessment for the U.S. Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Progress” article: “Psychological problems [. . .] may be exacerbated or even created by features of military life” (Peterson, Park, and Castro 10).

brings this concern to the forefront, stating that in the CSF *American Psychologist* special issue “a cast of luminaries in the field pontificated on how their particular specialties could be brought to bear on this problem, all blindly accepting the premise that this interminable warfare is unavoidable” (641).<sup>11</sup> Phipps argues that there are other ways for the discipline to aid soldiers, but that these avenues are not explored in CSF or in the journal issue (nor is this exploration encouraged or invited):

Not one of the authors in this special issue discussed applying positive psychology principles to the reduction of conflict between nations, to the prevention of war, or to the promotion of peace. How about a positive psychology that questions the wisdom of leaders who tell us that the use of force is unavoidable, and seeks instead to help them find alternative, peaceful solutions? This was an entire issue about secondary prevention with not a word about primary prevention. If we begin by accepting unending war as a fact of life, then the only thing left is to produce the fittest soldiers to make sure that we win (641).

By not accepting the inevitability of war, Phipps redirects the conversation and pauses to ask a crucial question that seems to be lacking from official debates on CSF: “Should we?” (641). His answer is a resounding no, and he concludes by maintaining that “[a] true positive psychology should be primarily addressed to eradicating the disease of war, not to supporting those who fight it” (642). Although CSF claims to be preventative, Phipps shows that it is merely palliative.

In addition to noting the “highly irregular” and “obviously worrisome considering the

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<sup>11</sup> In response to Phipps’ challenge, Seligman states that he doesn’t “blindly accept” ongoing warfare and that he is “not in a position to evaluate if persistent warfare in the near future is likely, but it is certainly possible. As a possibility, the Army must be prepared for it, and CSF is an evidence-based way of preparing our soldiers to meet such a possibility” (646).

stakes” nature of the untested CSF program, in their Comment (in the October 2011 issue of *American Psychologist*), “The Dark Side of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness,” Roy Eidelson, Mark Pilisuk, and Stephen Soldz also broach the larger, existential questions that soldiers in combat inevitably face. They caution, “Missing from CSF is a component devoted to helping soldiers grapple with the profound ethical dilemmas involved in their duties, including killing in furtherance of state policy” (643). These authors also highlight another key aspect of CSF, one associated with American exceptionalism. They wonder about the role non-American interests and lives play in the decision to build soldiers’ combat effectiveness through CSF: “But in this calculation, how much weight was given to the tragic numbers of civilian casualties in Iraq (minimally estimated in the hundreds of thousands) and Afghanistan? Has ‘do no harm,’ the fundamental principle underlying psychology’s ethics, become ‘do no harm to Americans, unless it serves the interests of the state’?” (643).

Seligman, with a sweep of his hand, dismisses this critique (among others), stating that these commenters “disapprove of American foreign policy, and especially those commenters would have us withhold psychological knowledge on those grounds. Would they, on those grounds, also withhold their professional skills from individual American soldiers who came to them for treatment?” (646). This is an unfair response that oversimplifies the issue, creates a false dichotomy, and dismisses colleagues’ genuine concerns about global welfare. Seligman is setting up a case that is reductively black-and-white: either you fully support CSF and psychology’s support of the Army or you let our soldiers devolve by withholding treatment. By concluding his response with a feeling of personal debt and gratitude towards America for being a haven for his ancestors running from Nazi persecution, and using this as a guide and rationale for his own commitment to serving the Army that serves our country, Seligman shows his

inability or unwillingness to engage with his commenters and their just critiques on a fair, ethical, and unbiased level.

What this amounts to is rhetorical manipulation. Using Seligman's faulty logic, to be against CSF (and by association, positive psychology) is to be against winning wars as well as ideological battles (the triumph of "good," "freedom" and "democracy" abroad), against helping our soldiers who are sacrificing their lives for us, against our nation, against the greater good, and, of course, against what is "positive." By continually conflating various issues, the rhetoric of positive psychology generally (and of CSF more specifically) make it both difficult and unpopular to raise a critique.<sup>12</sup> What is the alternative to supporting CSF? To be against war? To stop the military from training its people to prepare our country? To abandon our soldiers? CSF leaders and advocates in this special issue position their readers (psychologists who double as American citizens) as complicit and implicated first with guilt trips (about "supporting our troops") and next with patriotism and threats of terrorism (CSF will keep us safe).

We need to broaden the discourse and to allow a larger spectrum of stakeholders to participate in the debates surrounding CSF specifically and well-being research and application more broadly. We also need to position the solutions to structural problems (of which CSF is one example) alongside a thorough and objective analysis of the roots of those problems rather than just bandaging over their symptoms (even if this bandaging is billed as "preventative"). To its credit, CSF's ambitious pedagogical mission (and one of its primary objectives) is to move beyond simply changing individuals to revising the Army culture at large. Casey is quite direct about this aim: "To be clear, CSF will serve as a catalyst for changing the Army culture—from a

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<sup>12</sup> This is similar to when, in a legislature, bills or resolutions get lumped together, and a controversial item gets packaged together with something non-controversial and urgent. In this manner, one is not in a position to vote against the non-controversial, necessary legislation, so as a result, the whole package passes and becomes policy.

culture in which behavioral health was once stigmatized to a culture in which psychological fitness is recognized as every bit as important as physical fitness” (2).

### Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Pedagogy

*Master resilience training involving many thousands of NCOs as teachers and 1.1 million soldiers as students is one of the largest-scale psychological interventions ever undertaken.*

-Reivich and Seligman 33

In addition to rationale and rhetoric, the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) *American Psychologist* special issue foregrounds the program’s focus on education. As discussed above, CSF’s pedagogical mission is ambitious, aimed at both changing individuals and the Army culture at large. CSF is a multi-tiered curriculum with the mandatory Global Tools Assessment (GAT) as the entry point for all “students.” The GAT is an online self-evaluative questionnaire that all soldiers must complete (the GAT is now available to take, on a voluntary basis, for soldiers’ family members, and DA civilians). This brief questionnaire relies on self-reporting and is designed to be finished in a short period of time and to then provide immediate, individualized feedback for each user. Although Army leaders will be able to see who completed the GAT and who did not (again, it is now a mandatory component of Army life), the nature of the results are allegedly anonymous and confidential (more on this issue below).

After completing the GAT, “soldiers are offered a menu of appropriate self-development opportunities” (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 7), subsequent individual online training modules tailored to particular needs in the four of the five pillars of CSF: emotional, social, family, and spiritual. Finally, CSF includes Master Resilience Training (MRT), the training component in which Army leaders are taught CSF curriculum (both its content and how to teach

it to others). After completing MRT, those Army leaders—now certified MRTs—return and teach positive psychology curriculum to soldiers at the unit level. Those Army leaders who undergo MRT receive in-depth training from leading positive psychologists, and then they become “teachers” who go back to their individual units and carry out the teaching in practice.

CSF is explicitly and consciously an educational initiative. As such, it presumes that its content (and psychological well-being more generally) is teachable and desirable.<sup>13</sup> When planning the program, developers realized that in order to increase emotional resilience and fitness, “[t]raining and practice will be key” (Algoe and Fredrickson 38). In considering whether happiness/well-being/flourishing can be taught, Karen Reivich and Seligman claim in their article, “Master Resilience Training in the U.S. Army,” that “research has demonstrated that there are many aspects of resilience that are teachable” (25).

Moreover, Army leaders and program developers consciously decided to implement CSF as a training program instead of a medical initiative. As explained in the special issue’s concluding article, “The Surgeon General of the Army, Lieutenant General Eric Schoomaker, suggested constructively to General Casey that the program should not be part of his Medical Corps. Moving it from medicine to education and training would help remove any stigma and be much more in line with a universal training purpose” (Seligman and Fowler 84). This calculated decision to squarely label and approach CSF as an educational mission applies not just to attacking an insidious stigma about soldiers seeking psychological help but also paved the model for CSF’s pedagogy: “General Casey said that this model fits the Army’s training process well: The teachers of the Army are the drill sergeants, and they would become the teachers of resilience and positive psychology” (Seligman and Fowler 84). Additionally, there is a chain

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<sup>13</sup> For an extended discussion of the rationale behind the aims of positive education, refer to my previous chapter.

effect to this model, as Karen J. Reivich (University of Pennsylvania), Seligman, and Sharon McBride (Headquarters, Department of the Army) explain in their article, “Master Resilience Training in the U.S. Army”: “The research on PRP [Penn Resiliency Program] has also demonstrated that teachers who are trained in the PRP can, in turn, teach PRP skills effectively” (26).

MRT pedagogy sessions are modeled after Seligman’s previous work with the Penn Resiliency Program. Reivich, Seligman, and McBride explain how the MRT teaches content but also teaches pedagogy. They state, “Since the NCOs will teach their soldiers these skills, this course also teaches the fundamentals of how to teach these skills to others” (25). MRTs are therefore a complex mix of both teachers and students. In fact, in the span of less than two weeks, they transition from one group to the other: “The PRP has used the five-day ‘learn it and live it’ plus the three-day ‘deepen understanding and teach it’ structure in their educational programs for the past several years” (27).

In his opening article to the special issue, Casey states that “the program uses several teaching strategies—didactically in the classroom and also via the Web—in order to reach the entire Army community, while also catering to a variety of learning styles” (1). By acknowledging the need for both multiple teaching and learning possibilities, Casey points to CSF’s attention to diversity and a variety of student needs. Additionally, he demonstrates sensitivity to the fact that educating soldiers in the realm of psychological fitness will be a challenging task: “we are starting not with a blank slate but rather with the challenge of having the preponderance of our force influenced in some way—both positively and negatively—by the effects of sustained, protracted conflict” (2). My analysis of the APA special issue’s rhetoric above has highlighted many of the mixed messages and doublespeak at play in CSF. Now I trace

how attempting to build curricula for teaching resilience in both individual and social domains complicates this rhetoric.

The rhetoric of the CSF program's attempt to change Army culture reveals contradictions that arise from its attempt to achieve the dual aims of promoting individual fulfillment and social change in the military, goals that are not always aligned. Positive education, especially within an institution as large as the Army, must be focused not just on individual soldiers but also on the Army community as a whole (and at the unit level). In their article, "Social Resilience: The Value of Social Fitness With an Application to the Military," Cacioppo, Reis, and Zautra (Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago, University of Rochester, and Arizona State University, respectively) highlight the importance of networks, relationships, and social support for the development of individual flourishing. This is an important step forward, though, as I will demonstrate below, one that ultimately ends up reinforcing the Soldier's Creed and therefore subsuming individual flourishing and agency under the powerful unifying identity and mission of the Army. "Although many resilience-enhancing qualities reside within individuals, it is valuable to recognize that they are effective primarily when mutual and reciprocal, and when social tasks and situations encourage their expression" (45). Since "happiness truly is a collective phenomenon" and "emotional fitness training will only be complete and provide optimal results if the training extends beyond consideration of the self" (39), social fitness and networks are important parts of the psychologically healthy and flourishing soldier.

Research into social resilience stresses how these networks can be designed and created. Cacioppo, Reis, and Zautra explain, "Social resilience depends on more than the personal attributes of interacting persons. The architecture of social situations is also important, [. . .]" (45). This attention to designing productive environments is critical, and also a key component of

utopian thinking. We need to create the conditions for good behavior and action rather than placing sole responsibility for achieving well-being and flourishing on the individual. CSF claims sincere commitment to social priorities: “the ‘social’ in social resilience widens the angle of the researcher’s lens from a focus on individual capacities to the examination of ways to build more adaptive social ecologies for people, groups, organizations, and communities” (46). The authors also state that the Army is attempting to “getting beyond survivorship and individual advancement, and including camaraderie and good stewardship (Hames, 2009)” (48).

This consideration of issues beyond the confines of the individual self is one of the most promising aspects of CSF. Whereas only one of five of Seligman’s five pillars of well-being<sup>14</sup> (positive relationships) is directly about the importance of social networks, three of the five areas of “fitness” in CSF explicitly reference and engage with either the community (whether at the “family” or “social” levels) or with the self in conversation with something greater than itself and/or some larger meaning and sense of purpose (the “spiritual” level). The emphasis on including the supportive and strengthening power of family intimacy and communication is a step in the right direction, and two articles in this special issue address this aspect of resiliency and fitness. In “The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program: Family Skills Component,” John Gottman, Julie Gottman, and Atkins (researchers from the Relationship Research Institute and Gottman Relationship Institute) point to the ways that new mobile and internet technologies make possible a type of sustained communication between soldiers’ and their loved ones back home that was unthinkable in previous wars. Due to this increased opportunity for contact with his family, “the soldier continually feels in the immediate presence of the partner in the combat

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<sup>14</sup> As set forth in chapter 1 of Seligman’s *Flourish* (and discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation), PERMA is an acronym for these elements: **P**ositive emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, **A**ccomplishment.

theater while at the same time impacted by the separation.” The “two totally different subjective realities” these couples face contribute additional tension and complications for already stressed relationships. “Combat, therefore, is in part responsible for creating an equally combative and ineffective communication style with the stateside partner” (53). The authors explain that the experience of war and separation from loved ones are taxing circumstances, so strengthening family skills is a necessity. The acknowledgement that both external circumstances and interactions with other people have some degree of influence on a person’s psychological well-being (and that it is not just the quality of one’s thoughts or resilience that determines mental health and overall flourishing) is a step in the right direction.

Social awareness (49) is a laudable goal, but it remains unclear how one is to reconcile it with having to aggressively compartmentalize and adopt the “them vs. us” attitude necessary to participate actively and constructively (according to the Army standards) in combat. It seems, in some ways, that the social fitness component of CSF is an irrational curriculum riddled with internal inconsistencies. On the one hand, CSF attempts to create more psychologically fit soldiers who can engage in combat effectively and repeatedly;<sup>15</sup> additionally, CSF aims to reduce the costs associated with PTSD and other psychological consequences of veterans returning from active duty. On the other hand, CSF claims to help individuals flourish and to increase soldiers’ levels of well-being. This pedagogy is contradictory, training soldiers to learn certain skills and then testing them and applying it to an entirely different context (for which those skills do not prepare them). It seems that CSF is *not* actually equipped to produce more flourishing individuals and better global citizens; instead, it is suited to create better American soldiers

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<sup>15</sup> I fully understand that the Army’s mission is to train soldiers and to prepare them for the threat of war, and that CSF on some level equip those soldiers with the skills necessary in case war is declared.

flourishing in the context of an Army whose mission these soldiers carry out more effectively because of CSF. In “Shock Without Awe,” Joachim I. Krueger (Brown University) shows how CSF relies on the assumption that “the interests of the group (Army) and the individual (soldier) are compatible: a win-win scenario,” but in actuality, there are quite different, and competing interests. The role of the psychologist is traditionally to help individuals but here, “[t]he client of the comprehensive fitness psychologists is the Army, not the individual soldier” (642). This is an important distinction to be made, and without it the message of CSF is confusing and convoluted. If there is some other motive (besides psychological fitness) driving CSF, then this intent should be clearly stated, however much it may make the entire program less palatable both to the public and its “students.”

Upon closer examination therefore, it appears that, while CSF gestures towards social relationships, its requirement of “continuous self-development” (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 6) resembles the self-help genre and therefore is subject to similar critiques. Additionally, as will be discussed in detail in a later section of this chapter (Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Facebook), CSF’s official Facebook page is steeped in self-help advice that posits the individual as the locus for change. CSF’s Facebook presence, then, is a crucial resource because, when juxtaposed to the official discourse of CSF (as represented in this special issue of *American Psychologist* and other publicity materials), it lays bare and allows us to problem-pose the competing (and often overlapping) rhetorics of self-help, positive psychology, and the military.

It is not just CSF’s contradictory rhetoric, ideology, and values that present problems; CSF’s social fitness pedagogy seems inadequate and ill-equipped to make substantive improvement in the social fitness of the soldiers it aims to treat. According to Cacioppo, Reis,

and Zautra, there is merely one hour (comprised of four 15-minute modules) devoted to increasing social awareness. How is this limited timeframe going to instill a sense of sociality in soldiers? Can online and virtual training replace the F2F (face-to-face) human interaction needed to strengthen social capital and develop a greater sense of community? In the “Limitations” section at the end of their contribution to the special issue, the authors themselves acknowledge both of these constraints: “First, these modules provide information about social emotions, skills, and interactions, but the educational and computerized nature of the program precludes implementation of real-life social interactions in the modules” (49). Additionally, “social resilience is a multilevel construct, but the educational, computer-based program into which these modules fit targets only the individual level of organization—the individual soldier,” and thus, “[i]nterventions at the group level would also be worthwhile” (50).

“Target[ing] only the individual” is problematic for other reasons as well. One of the claims repeatedly voiced in support of CSF is that the program will reduce the stigma for soldiers seeking psychological treatment for mental distress. Ironically, however, CSF might actually *increase* the stigma; if all soldiers receive this preventative education, then those who still “fail”—to cope in some way or achieve adequate levels of resiliency—will be viewed as even *more* at fault, even *more* problematic. These soldiers will no longer be labeled as simply unable to deal with the realities of war; they will now be *unteachable* as well.

Furthermore, the very fact that there are modules to increase soldiers’ fitness in various capacities suggests an absence of some sort. If there are skills or attitudes that are demonstrably (according to the GAT) lacking, intervention and remediation are necessary. Using remediation as a lens through which to view the CSF curriculum helps to parse out the values behind these standards. I have already demonstrated above how certain values—individualism and

instrumentalism (making soldiers better warriors, not necessarily happier people)—surface within CSF. A closer look at the content of and debates around the highly controversial Spiritual Fitness component of CSF will serve to illustrate the problems of remediation, unassumed values, and internal inconsistencies that in relation to self-help, positive psychology, and positive education.

In their article, “Building Spiritual Fitness in the Army: An Innovative Approach to a Vital Aspect of Human Development,” Kenneth I. Pargament (Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University) and Patrick J. Sweeney (Department of Behavioral Sciences & Leadership, United States Military Academy at West Point) treat spiritual fitness as aiding CSF in “its premier task of instilling an indomitable spirit and resilience in members of the organization as they face the challenges of carrying out their duties and living day to day” (59). This task is meant to bolster the Warrior Ethos and Soldier’s Creed (59). Pargament and Sweeney immediately clarify their use of the terms “spirit,” “spirituality,” and “spiritual fitness,” knowing that critics will likely raise objections on religious grounds. Thus, the authors attempt to make their definitions value-neutral and secular:

Here, we are speaking about spirit, spirituality, and spiritual fitness in the human rather than theological sense. The spiritual fitness component of the CSF program is not based on a particular stance or position on the ontological truth or validity of philosophical, nonreligious, or religious frameworks of belief and practice. Department of Defense leaders are not in a privileged position to answer ontological questions about God’s existence or the truth of religious claims. However, they can facilitate the search for truth, self-knowledge, purpose, and direction in life as group members define it. In this project, we define *spirit* as the

essential core of the individual, the deepest part of the self, and one's evolving human essence (58).

Though they claim that it is not “appropriate or ethical to impose a particular spiritual world view on soldiers,” they do believe instead that it is possible to (along with William James) “evaluate human spiritual fitness on the basis of how well it works, that is, pragmatic criteria” (59). It seems that developers of and advocates for CSF curriculum are walking a very fine line here: Isn't a pragmatic criterion assuming some sort of good and value about what is helpful, efficient, and responsible?<sup>16</sup> Pargament and Sweeney offer some thoughts on how spirituality may function practically. They state, “The human spirit may play a particularly important role in motivating people to behave in a moral and ethical manner when social pressures push them to behave counter to their values and beliefs” (60). What difference does ontological truth value matter if CSF is only going to reward and instill those values regardless of that fact? CSF attempts to have to have it both ways: its supporters claim that the program does not evaluate the “truth” values of spirituality but they do require and privilege certain values by first assessing them with the GAT and then teaching them with CSF's subsequent remedial training modules.

A closer look at the content and pedagogy of the “CSF Human Spirit Education Program” highlights how the Army precariously straddles that fine line of being prescriptive about faith and religion without ostensibly taking any stance in that regard. This curriculum consists of “three tiers of education modules” that are “computer delivered and interactive,” and which seem scaffolded to facilitate a move from self-awareness to social awareness (62). Much of the “content” of this curriculum is other soldiers' lived (qualitative) experience rather than direct

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<sup>16</sup> I am aware that one can nitpick about almost anything in this way (playing devil's advocate), but I maintain that in this context (especially given the large-scale initiative and America's legal mandate of separation of church and state), these objections *matter*.

instructions on how to live and engage in a spiritual process or quest. In this way, this curriculum can state that it merely offers up a variety of stories (with which students then “engage”) rather than drilling in or preaching religious or spiritual values.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to this contradictory stance, there is a further complication. Tier 3 of CSF’s spiritual component strives for “[b]uilding awareness of the human spirit of others” and “is designed to help soldiers build a deeper connection with other people and the world” (63). Encouraging tolerance of diversity and viewpoints and instilling reverence for our common humanity are certainly admirable and worthwhile goals. However, aren’t these pedagogical aims fundamentally at odds with a soldier’s mission, which may involve being sent abroad to protect America’s freedoms and way of life at the expense of foreigners? Might the exigencies of war even require this same soldier to take these other people’s lives? How could or should this soldier reconcile what he has learned in Tier 3 of CSF with this possibility or, in many cases, this reality? CSF advocates do not answer (or even entertain) these concerns, but these questions, and many, many more, must be asked about CSF’s pedagogical and ideological commitments.

Even though they seem to fall on deaf ears, there are questions being asked about CSF,

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<sup>17</sup> Pargament and Sweeney offer up the following examples of this content. In Tier 1 (“Building awareness of the self and the human spirit”), “[e]ach module starts with a soldier’s compelling and impactful story and uses this story to facilitate reflection on his or her human spirit. [. . .] After this story, interactive pages help individuals craft their own eulogy” (62). [ex.?

Tier 2 (“Building awareness of resources to cultivate the human spirit”) works by “[d]rawing on the personal stories and experiences of soldiers as well as research findings, the module describes spiritual struggles as a ‘fork in the road’ that leads to growth and resilience on the one side or to problems on the other.” Additionally, “Illustrative rituals are presented of soldiers transitioning from one role to another, connecting with loved ones, and coping with stress. Military personnel are then encouraged to create their own rituals.” Furthermore, “Military personnel listen to examples of spiritually supportive activities that have proven valuable to fellow soldiers.” (62-3).

For Tier 3 (“Building awareness of the human spirit of others”), a part still under development, “[s]oldiers will be introduced to people from diverse backgrounds and walks of life and will be encouraged to find commonality in their experiences” (63).

and many of these critiques respond to the program's spiritual fitness components. In fact, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) sent (on December 30, 2010) a cease and desist letter to the Army because "MRFF has reviewed the SFT and GAT and has determined that soldiers who do not fit a certain religious faith profile cannot candidly answer the questions without receiving substandard scores and without being required to participate in remedial activities" (1).<sup>18</sup> Finding that "[t]he spirituality components of the SFT and GAT, and certain CSF Program Modules, violate the First Amendment to the Constitution," the MRFF calls for these components to be terminated. According to the MRFF, parts of CSF "unconstitutionally promote religion over non-religion" (2) and "amount to coercive religious instruction" (2).

This Spiritual remediation is particularly relevant in the context of the previous chapter's discussion of how positive education sets up, teaches, and assesses unacknowledged and ideologically fraught standards of achievement. MRFF finds that "the test inherently praises those who are deeply religious and finds those who are not deficient" (4).<sup>19</sup> This critique raises serious issues about assessment and what it is CSF is actually trying to evaluate. A further example of this remediation is CSF's free "Goals Setting" iPhone application, released on June 7, 2011 and listed in the iTunes Store category "Education." The application's description

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<sup>18</sup> The cease and desist letter supports its claim of forced remediation as follows:

The purpose of the SFT and GAT, though couched in general and vague language, is to strengthen a soldier's religious conviction. Soldiers who hold deep religious convictions routinely pass the spirituality component of this test while atheists and nonthesists do not. The Army cannot avoid the conclusion that this test is an unconstitutional endorsement of religion by simply substituting the word "spiritual" for "religious." The content of the examination and remedial materials make evident that the test favors religious soldiers over non-religious soldiers (3).

<sup>19</sup> MRFF labels this assessment not only as remedial but also as having real consequences for as a barrier toward service in the Army. The letter argues, "The Army is using religion as a screen to determine which soldiers it will allow to serve the country and which it will bar from doing so. Such religious testing is expressly forbidden by the Religious Test Clause of Article VI and is therefore unconstitutional. *See id.*" (6).

reprises the notion of “persistent conflict” and merges military and civilian interests (to be discussed in greater detail at the end of this section): “While our Army remains engaged in this era of persistent conflict, it is more important than ever to maintain balance in our lives. Building resiliency into life’s daily routine will assure balance and make you a better leader, parent, and citizen.” The description also appeals to the rigors and legitimacy of science, placing its rhetoric squarely within traditional positive psychology discourse. It encourages “Resiliency combined with effective Goal Setting” as “proven, scientific methods that will enable you to overcome the adversities that find their way into your life.”

One of the commenters on this application gave the program a low one star rating, conspicuously negative among its other glowing reviews.<sup>20</sup> This comment, labeled “Atheists are ‘spiritually unfit’” (October 27, 2011), is worth reproducing at length here for the ways in which it echoes other complaints that have been made against CSF’s “spiritual fitness” component. Moreover, this comment showcases how CSF curriculum in general embraces a certain *type* of positivity, psychological fitness, and flourishing, one in accordance with what the Army considers valuable and desirable. The commenter, “Overlord Six” writes:

. . . at least, that’s what GAT will tell you if you’re an atheist and you answer the survey honestly. But let’s generously assume that CSF does not automatically equate atheism to unfitness -- my question would then be this: Where can I find “spiritual fitness” resources that consistent [*sic*] with my atheism, so that I can attempt to comply with GAT’s suggestion that I improve the spiritual aspect of my overall mental/emotional fitness? I assume you’re developing a CSF for

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<sup>20</sup> As of this writing (Summer 2012), there were 12 ratings with an average of 4 stars: 8 5-star ratings, 1 4-stars, 2 3-stars, and 1 1-star. There were five customer reviews, all of which—except for the one discussed here—are mostly (or wholly) supportive and enthusiastic.

Atheists App, and can't wait to learn when it'll be released.

“Overlord Six’s” mix of sarcasm and insider perspective (as someone who has taken the GAT, he clearly is in or has connections with the Army) offers an insightful critique about CSF’s remedial and assessment agendas.

This dissertation has explored how assessment may belie its ulterior motives and may contribute not only to remediation and the “banking” style of education but also to surveillance and management. The claim that “no soldier will be left behind” (Peterson, Park, and Castro 13) is eerily reminiscent of George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind Act,” a program that aimed for accountability and standards and that sounded promising on paper but turned out to be a nightmare in practice. In their article, “The Soldier Fitness Tracker: Global Delivery of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness,” Fravell (TechWerks LLC), Nasser (MD Informatics), and Cornum explain the data aggregation and management capabilities of CSF:

The Soldier Fitness Tracker (SFT) application was conceived with the goal of providing an unparalleled information technology platform to support the Chief of Staff of the Army’s vision for achieving Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF). The challenge of rapidly transitioning the CSF program from concept to reality required the creation of a robust information technology system with global research that was scalable to millions of users. The SFT was designed to provide an agile delivery mechanism for the Global Assessment Tool (GAT) as well as a powerful data collection and reporting capability. It was build to measure, track, and assess the comprehensive fitness of all U.S. Army soldiers: Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserves (73).

The Army Knowledge Online (AKO) is the entry point for SFT, “With over 2 million users and

350,000 unique daily logins, AKO handles 80% of the Army's daily e-mail and is the single entry point for information sharing and file management (Gray, 2008)" (74-75). The amount of data that the Army regularly compiles (on demographics, physical fitness, financial data, health records, etc.) is astonishing. The authors explain the need to go further though, since "[i]n order to provide a true picture of comprehensive fitness, the SFT requires interfaces with several authoritative systems" (75); this interfacing serves a specific purpose: "the goal is for the Army to be able to track long-term consequential outcomes from the CSF program across a range of life domains" (75). The authors mention the ability to generate further reports according to "[e]merging needs" (75). What might these needs be? What will they enable the Army to do with the data? Informed consent, protection and privacy seem to be missing from the system's "Terms of Use / Terms of Service," which instead suggest that soldiers might fear that their "results" are not really anonymous since they are linked to their AKO account and therefore subject to seizure and interpretation at any time.

CSF advocates announce that "all training will be documented within the Army's Digital Training Management System (DTMS)" (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 7). This documentation forms a core component of CSF, and it is one of the most proud accomplishments of the initiatives. Seligman and Fowler, in their co-authored article that concludes the special issue, tout The Soldier Fitness Tracker as an enormous step forward, a "powerful platform [that] creates an unprecedented, hypermassive database in which psychological variables, medical variables, and performance variables are merged" (84). They also label it a soon-to-be "national treasure for psychological and medical research" (85), though its description closely echoes Foucault's theorization record keeping as a tool for disciplining, normalizing, and individualizing people.

In fact, two entire articles in the special issue are devoted to CSF's recording and classification of data. In the first, "Assessment for the U.S. Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program: The Global Assessment Tool," Christopher Peterson (University of Michigan), Nansook Park (University of Michigan), and Carl A. Castro (U.S. Army Medical Research and Material Command) assert, "Assessment is the linchpin of the CSF program" (11). Lester et. all further relate, "The Department of the Army's Headquarters tracks a massive amount of data, and we hope to tap into several data sources to provide yet another point of triangulation in determining CSF efficacy" (80). These authors discuss how "marrying GAT data to incident rates" (80) will help to pinpoint at-risk and flourishing populations. This claim begs the question: after this pinpointing, what happens next? Once at-risk individuals and groups have been identified, how will this knowledge be used? What and whose ends will this aggregated data serve?

Fravell, Nasser, and Cornum also gesture at an application of this database beyond military contexts. They claim, "The agile design behind the SFT provides a flexible framework that could be easily adapted to support similar initiatives in the academic and commercial environments" (76). It is not conspiracy theory or idle catastrophizing to imagine future implications. The developers and advocates for CSF have been forthright about the Army and psychology's symbiotic relationship. Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman state, "The military may provide a natural home for positive psychology" (5). There is also development of undergraduate curriculum centered on CSF, plans that assure the program will receive continued research attention, funding, publicity. Lester et al make this intention explicit: "Here, we hope to plant the seed for a future crop of military psychologists and researchers."

CSF advocates have been equally explicit (and enthusiastic) about their future plans for

rollout and application beyond the confines of the military branches. Seligman and Fowler assert, “The use of resilience training and positive psychology in the Army is consciously intended as a model for civilian use” (85). In the concluding sentence of their article, Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman make a similar claim: “We believe that the CSF program may ultimately be a model for psychological fitness in other large organizations” (8). Peterson, Park, and Castro elaborate:

History teaches us that assessment developed in the military does not just stay in the military. [. . .] There is every reason to believe that CSF-like programs and GAT-like assessment would be useful to other large groups and organizations such as schools, businesses, police and fire departments, hospitals, community mental health centers, and the link--any and all settings where doing well is recognized, celebrated, and encouraged (Peterson & Park, 2003). [. . .] The CSF program and the GAT may provide common language, goals, intervention strategies, and measures. What we will eventually learn from this project may someday help us provide population-based assessment and programs that will promote the health and well-being of all people (16).<sup>21</sup>

The ambitious nature and rollout to other national (civilian) institutions is made clear here. The first area CSF programs might find use is health, which according to the article is “perversely incentivized” at the civilian level, with 3/4 of the spending on treatment rather than prevention. According to the Seligman and Fowler, medicine in the army is “rationally incentivized” by

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<sup>21</sup> As Tedeschi (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) and McNally (Harvard University) point out in their article in the special issue, “Can We Facilitate Posttraumatic Growth in Combat Veterans,” “[i]n developing these interventions, we must also keep in mind that there are differences between some civilian traumas and combat experiences.” This is one brief moment of caution and awareness of context in an otherwise eager, unreflexive push to translate decontextualized curricula to a variety of settings in which they may have no relevance or success (just as the PRP was translated, without much alternation, into CSF).

focusing on prevention first. Readers are informed that this Army method “could be a model for civilian medicine (84).

Seligman and Fowler also explicitly link the Army’s CSF program and previous positive education research and initiatives. They write:

Positive education claims that teaching young people the skills of emotional fitness along with teaching the traditional goals of education will enable youth to perform better at school and to perform better in the workplace. And, more important, perhaps these young people will enjoy lives that have more positive emotion, engagement, and meaning and better relationships. All of these claims will be directly tested prospectively in the CSF program: The resilience training and the fitness courses are almost exact parallels of the courses we use in positive education (Seligman et. al., 2009) (85).

They then speculate about CSF’s possible use for civilian public schools in the future: “He [General Casey] further hoped that a successful demonstration of the effects of resilience training in soldiers and their families would provide a model for the civilian education of young people” (84).

The two final sentences of Park’s article, “Military Children and Families: Strengths and Challenges During Peace and War” provide a coda to the problematic assumptions and discourse running throughout this special issue. These assumptions conflate not only psychologists and the APA, but also all Americans with our military interests, and in doing so posit this partnership as unassailably desirable. Park writes, “Building and sustaining healthy, resilient, and thriving military children and families will bring benefits not just to them but ultimately to all Americans. The military *is* the American family” (71). Do all Americans welcome this shared identity with

the military? Where is the space for dissent, for alternative viewpoints? This tension between the individual and the social (at the heart of self-help discourse and positive psychology) will be discussed in detail in the final section on CSF's Facebook presence below.

What is most interesting to me as a composition & rhetoric scholar is not the scientific legitimacy of the program and its verifiable effect in longitudinal studies (although I am invested in those reports as well and follow them closely as they are released) but rather that rhetoric of the CSF. Its contradictory rhetoric extends the problematic nature of both self-help and positive psychology (as discussed in this dissertation's first two chapters) and points to the central issues at stake. What is contested are the core terms of the discourse, how they are (or might be) defined, appropriated, distributed, received. In short, CSF is a battle not so much over soldiers' lives and minds but over discourse.

### Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Facebook

In this section, I perform a close reading of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program's presence on the massively popular social networking site Facebook.<sup>22</sup> While studies (however few) do exist that examine the rhetoric of positive psychology publications, self-help books, or CSF materials, I argue we must extend our notion of "text" and "publication" to the realm of social media. Indeed, the CSF Facebook site is a particularly rich site of inquiry for exploring the rhetoric of CSF and how the program is presenting itself to a mainstream, civilian audience.

The defining and attention-orienting focus of the program's Facebook page for a visitor

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<sup>22</sup> According to its timeline, CSF "joined Facebook" on January 13, 2010.

to the site is the CSF cover photo (see Image 1, below).<sup>23</sup> This striking image portrays a group of seven soldiers, dressed in army fatigues, combat boots, dark glasses, and cradling machine guns. The dark glasses hide the soldiers' eyes from view, cloaking them in anonymity and mystery. Most of the soldiers' expressions are serious, although one of the soldiers (third in from the left) is smiling and his teeth are showing. This flash of happiness and levity in an otherwise bleak and violent image is a particularly disturbing focus, so out of place, and more indicative of a photo shoot (which clearly this is) pose than an accurate portrayal of soldiers dressed for combat and standing in what appears to be a (makeshift) desert.

The color scheme of the rest of the "set" is neutral and grim, with sandy ground interspersed by sparse patches of grass here and there. What seems unaccountably out-of-place (aside from that one soldier's haunting smile), however, is the gesturing towards domesticity, the little "houses" placed around the perimeter of the sand, backdrops with chairs settled in front. On the far right, there appears to be some type of domicile, with a door visible that might lead inside (to where, we wonder?). However, upon closer inspection, this, along with the rest of the similar shapes around the edges of the image, is just a façade, merely a superficial prop.

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<sup>23</sup> The cover photo is a relatively recent addition to the Facebook scene, and is one of the major changes in the switch to the "timeline" view of individual profiles or group (organization, business, etc.) pages. It is meant to be a type of "branding" for the page/group.

On Facebook, the "timeline" is analogous to the old "wall" (the "wall" still exists for those Facebook users who haven't switched to the new timeline view yet). It is the area where messages, stories, links, photos, and other content are posted. It can be thought of as the main page for the individual or group (in this case, CSF).



Image 1: Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Facebook Page Cover Photo (uncropped image)

The backdrop to the photo is even more jarring, with a pitch black sky punctuated by lightening bolts in fiery orange cascading across it. The CSF logo is layered behind the soldiers. This logo shows the Army’s star logo repurposed, with the five pillars of CSF—Physical, Social, Emotional, Spiritual, Family—as its points; the program’s title (Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, here in all capital letters for emphasis) above the star; the CSF motto, “Strong Minds Strong Bodies” below the star; and the silhouette of a soldier (dressed for combat) to the left of the star.<sup>24</sup> The words “Social Resilience” appear in large text at the bottom of the cover photo, appearing prominently. However, in the cropped version of the cover photo, these words are cut

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<sup>24</sup> This CSF logo (with slight modification) serves as the CSF Facebook page’s profile picture as well (see Image 2 below).

out, so the emphasis is mostly on the soldiers and the CSF logo (see Image 2 below).<sup>25</sup>

This cover photo is yet another site of contradiction regarding the notion of social resiliency. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the January 2011 special issue on CSF of *American Psychologist* describes social fitness as helping soldiers to learn and practice an active constructive communication style, nurture social awareness, and build and maintain social networks. Yet in this cover photo, although the soldiers are grouped together, they are not looking at or interacting with one another, and aside from the likely scenario that they are all part of the same unit, there doesn't seem to be any strong social ties among them.

This cover photo was published previously as a regular photo to the Facebook Wall on May 29, 2010.<sup>26</sup> It had the following caption:

Social Resilience:

Some animals like the water buffalo finds most of it's [*sic*] protection in numbers.

When threatened, they stand together as a herd and charge their enemies.

Likewise, for over 235 years Soldiers from many races, creeds, colors, religions, national origins and backgrounds have herded together in a great display of Social Resilience to protect our freedoms. As you enjoy Memorial Day, remember those who herded to protect your freedoms and payed [*sic*] the ultimate sacrifice.

The references to threat, charging enemies, protection, and soldiers' risking their lives for defending our freedom point once again to the appeals to patriotism. They also demonstrate how

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<sup>25</sup> The cropped (cover) photo is the main image users see on CSF's timeline. If users then click on the photo, they are taken to a separate screen that displays the full (uncropped) image.

<sup>26</sup> At the time of this photo's original posting, cover photos did not exist (they are a feature of Facebook's recent timeline organizational and aesthetic overhaul). CSF's cover photo was updated on February 29, 2012.

the concept of social resilience plays out in practice. At least in terms of how it is being used in CSF, social resilience is decidedly different from its discussion in positive psychology curriculum.



Image 2: Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Facebook Page: cover photo (cropped), profile picture (cropped), and page information and statistics. [screenshot from 8/14/12]

Taken as a whole, the photo sends a clear message of military strength, physical prowess, and weapons violence (the machine guns), a message all the more noteworthy since Facebook terms and conditions prohibit Facebook Cover Photos from containing “Calls to action” (though the brief examples Facebook provides to illustrate this prohibition are mundane and consumer-based: “Get it now” or “Tell your friends”). I argue that CSF’s Cover Photo can be termed, in a

real and lethal way, a call to action. The nature of this “call,” however, is debatable, and the contradictory rhetoric of the CSF’s Facebook Cover Photo only represents the tip of the iceberg.

The majority of the CSF Facebook page posts are “calls to action” that are seemingly benign and pragmatic, oriented towards individual improvement much like the self-help genre. In fact, as visitors to CSF’s timeline browse through the CSF posts, they will be overwhelmed by the dominant self-help discourse. Below I offer a sampling of CSF Facebook posts in order to convey the content, tone, and mood that characterize many of them.<sup>27</sup>

You Are What You Think

The quality of our thoughts is responsible for how we feel and behave.  
[June 21, 2012]

The twists and turns are just part of life, so get used to them!

You may not be able to predict or plan for them, but you can always decide what to make those events indicate. Choose helpful meanings.

~Karen McCreadie~

[March 20, 2012]

Nutritious Food + Sleep + Physical Activity = Energy

It’s that simple!

[March 14, 2012]

Want to be happy? Then you have to give up everything that makes you unhappy.  
[March 3, 2012]

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<sup>27</sup> The dates provided in brackets are not part of the content of the posts. They are my additions to identify when the posts are made. However, all posts are time stamped on Facebook.

“WHEN YOU CHANGE THE WAY YOU LOOK AT THINGS, THE THINGS YOU LOOK AT CHANGE.”

—WAYNE DYER

[January 20, 2012]

Reflective thinking is a catalyst for building resilience. To think reflectively, ask yourself... “Why did I take that action and what can I learn from it?”

[January 20, 2012]

Thoughts! It’s our thoughts that determine our feelings and our actions. It’s all about thoughts. We need to learn how to dissect out our thoughts since this is the place where we can make a positive change.

[May 3, 2010]

As the posts above demonstrate, the CSF timeline is steeped in self-help rhetoric. In fact, some of CSF’s posts are direct quotes from self-help authors, such as Wayne Dyer and Karen McCreadie. The inclusion of these popular and well-known authors in this positive education space further strengthens the connection between the self-help genre, positive psychology, and CSF’s notion of resilience and psychological fitness. Much of the language and advice (“You Are What You Think,” “WHEN YOU CHANGE THE WAY YOU LOOK AT THINGS, THE THINGS YOU LOOK AT CHANGE”) directly echo Byrne’s claims in *The Secret* texts that an individual’s thoughts are the primary site of agency for manifesting both change and one’s desires.<sup>28</sup> The presence of these posts is striking considering that CSF is a positive psychology application and positive psychology (as I demonstrated in chapter 2) often attempts to vehemently distance itself from the self-help genre.

While some of the posts do reference more scientifically grounded (cognitive behavioral) techniques for dealing with thought (encouraging reflection on actions and reframing

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<sup>28</sup> Wayne Dyer, a prolific self-help author and motivational speaker, also has connections to the New Thought movement from which Byrne draws heavily in her philosophy.

experiences to learn from them), they still posit the individual (and especially the power of the individual's mind) as the sole site of change. Echoing a point I made in chapter 1, this self-help discourse "counsels subjects to sculpt a meaningful life without addressing or questioning the horizon of social relations and the contexts of social power" (Rimke 65).

This self-help rhetoric is particularly troubling given that it is embedded in the larger contexts of CSF, the United States Army, and the United States military more generally. The juxtaposition of the cover photo and the timeline posts provides a clear example of the mismatched bedfellows these two discourses make.<sup>29</sup> It is unclear how (or why) visitors to CSF's Facebook timeline (and soldiers undergoing CSF) are expected to reconcile a troop of soldiers preparing to enter combat with decontextualized posts making practical suggestions such as create a comprehensive list for "Smart Grocery Shopping" (June 4, 2012), relieve tension with packaging materials ["Don't laugh but studies have shown that bursting the bubbles on bubble wrap works really well to melt away pent up nervous energy and release muscle tension." (May 7, 2012)], eat a colorful variety of healthful vegetables (from a longer post, "The Colors of Health" on March 30, 2012), and "Eat Soup for Weight Loss" (A Shared Link, from Livestrong, August 27, 2011). These posts read more like something seen on an Oprah show or read in a

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<sup>29</sup> Again, one is reminded of Orwell, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Newspeak: "War is Peace." This slogan encapsulates "doublethink," which is explained in the novel as follows:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget, whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself – that was the ultimate subtlety; consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink. (Chapter 3, p. 32)

women's magazine rather than communications from the official page of an institution actively engaged in training soldiers for the threat of war.

Focusing on positive thinking, savoring pleasant moments, practicing gratitude, and learning how to accept and adapt to unfortunate circumstances are important techniques. While there is nothing wrong with encouraging people to make changes at the individual level or providing resources and motivation for doing so, there needs to be more explicitness and transparency about how these various aspects of CSF rhetoric are (or should be) integrated. Otherwise, these individual tips remain divorced from the material realities of Army life and stand in stark contrast to the prominence of "social resilience" on CSF's Facebook cover photo. These tips also serve to distract soldiers from larger issues and questions that surely arise in the course of active duty (issues and questions that I explored in the "Rhetoric" section above). The internal inconsistencies that I have pointed to in the CSF Facebook page's visual and verbal rhetoric also rehearse the larger issues at stake in debates and conversations about positive psychology and the self-help genres and offer competing messages about the desirability, methods, and benefits of building and teaching subjective well-being.

Facebook serves to build online communities, and positive psychology also serves to build flourishing communities (we have already seen, earlier in this chapter, that the Army is labeled a "positive institution"). A number of important questions arise from CSF's presence on Facebook: What kind of community, of virtual space, is CSF creating through this social media

platform?<sup>30</sup> How is CSF interfacing with not only its own members and supporters but also the general public? Who is the target audience here? Is it the Army soldiers, their families, or DA civilians participating in CSF (so that this site is supplemental to that curriculum)? Is it the population at large (such that this page exists as a standalone entry point to the initiative)? What does it mean for a user to “like” this page, or any group page on Facebook or another social media site (as of this writing, 8/14/12, the page has 4897 “likes”—see Image 2 above)?<sup>31</sup> Does the act of “liking” mean that a user approves of its overall mission? Its content? Its pedagogy? Does it proxy as consent, such that users who “like” the Facebook CSF page are supportive of CSF, which by default is the U.S. Army?

In addition to the official CSF posts (that include “likes” from various Facebook users, “shared” Facebook posts from other users, links from outside sites, and self-help authors whom they quote), other texts and authors exist on the site (see Image 3 below). If a user posts directly to the page or comments on a post, s/he is publicly inserting her or his voice into a national conversation. Due to the hyperlinked and interactive nature of this social media site (and Web 2.0 applications more generally) as well the ability of Facebook users to “tag” CSF (its Facebook

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<sup>30</sup> There is also a Facebook page for the FT Hood Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Training Center that opened in 2009 (though this Center “Joined Facebook on June 2, 2011). According to the “About” Section on this Facebook page, “The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Training Facility develops resoluteness in the Fort Hood Community through educational and holistic Mind, Body, and Spirit programs in order to promote resiliency and overall comprehensive fitness.” This FT Hood CSF Training Center page is much more typical of an organization’s Facebook page: it provides information about its events, programs, and schedules. In this way, this site’s communication style is functional and transactional, conveying information to its visitors (and advertising for itself).

<sup>31</sup> Facebook also provides the ability to “like” individual posts (updates, links, photos) and individual comments on posts (so the level of affirmation or consent can be quite nuanced).

page/presence) in a post,<sup>32</sup> CSF is pulled into other conversations with potentially broader horizons. The page’s capability of creating these polyvocal, multimedia texts could provide a wider platform for dissenting views and alternative interpretations of CSF.

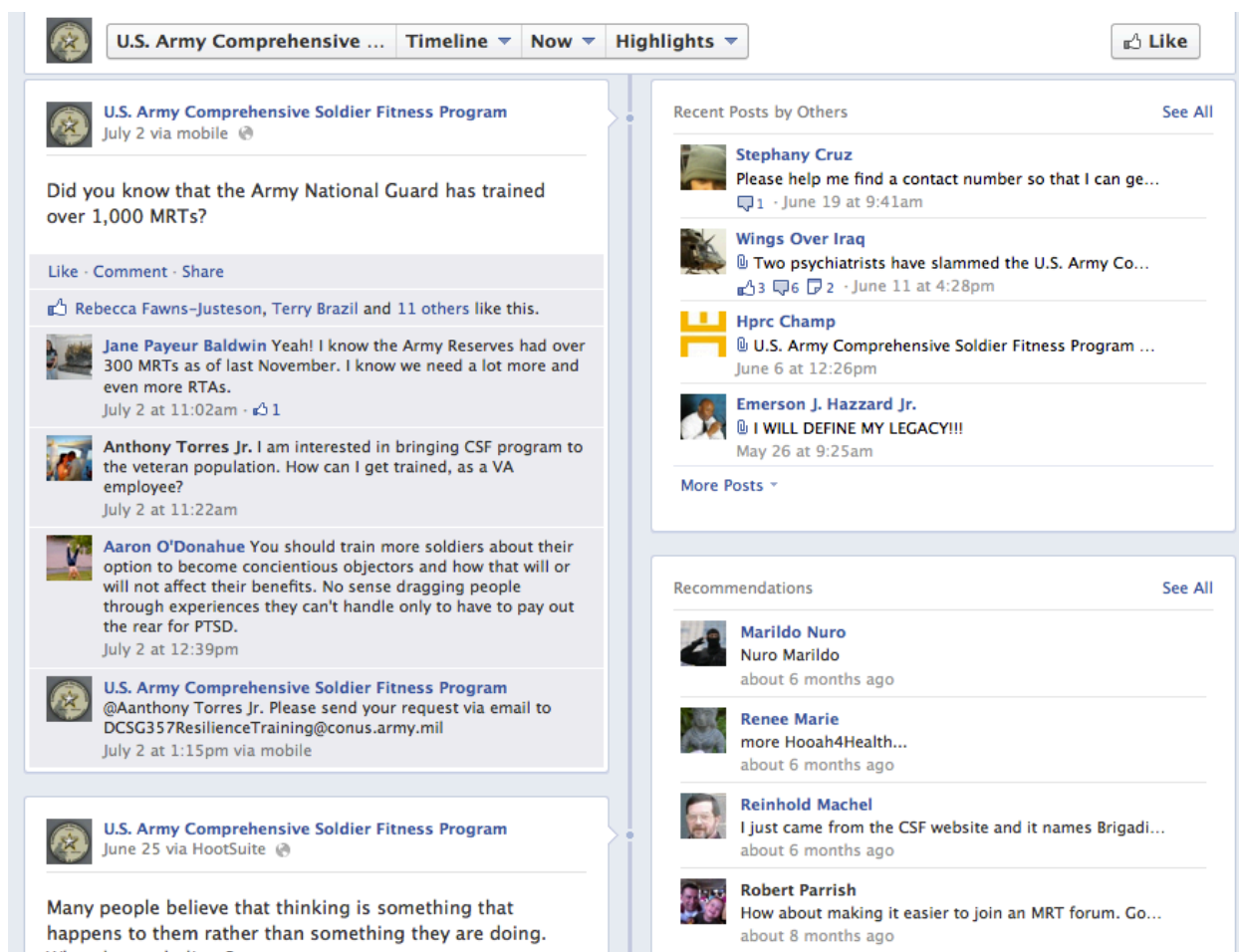


Image 3: Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Timeline (examples of “likes,” comments, posts by CSF and other users, and recommendations) [screenshot from 7/9/12]

However, while these viewpoints might be expressed (in the sense that they are posted

<sup>32</sup> To “tag” someone means to explicitly link the posted content to that person, and if they are a Facebook user then the content will also appear on their individual timeline as well in their (and other people’s) news feeds.

and then allowed to remain visible on the CSF page), people who raise questions don't always get much airtime because their posts don't receive much attention. For example, in response to a post on July 2, 2012 by CSF about the large number of people being trained in resiliency ("Did you know that the Army National Guard has trained over 1,000 MRTs?"), a commenter<sup>33</sup> responded in the following way: "You should train more soldiers about their option to become conscientious [*sic*] objectors and how that will or will not affect their benefits. No sense dragging people through experiences they can't handle only to have to pay out the rear for PTSD." This comment was left visible but received no follow-up (it was not acknowledged, "liked," or engaged, which in social media circles means oblivion). However, CSF did respond to another comment and validate it in the same thread, one that displays enthusiasm for the program and interest in extending CSF to veterans (see Image 3 above).

This digital, networked space and site of contradictory rhetoric deserves more attention, and we should teach ourselves and our students the tools and methods needed to interpret these new, complex texts. I argue that we, as humanities (and especially literature and composition and rhetoric) scholars, must begin to take notice of these "texts" and sites of discourse. We must also participate in their debates, especially since this research is now being used to determine policy decisions that affect teachers' as well as students' learning conditions. If happiness is positive, and this happiness (or positive psychology, resilience, optimism, psychological fitness) is now associated (at least in theory) with the United States Army, does this then give military actions

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<sup>33</sup> CSF's timeline is a public Facebook page, so anyone can view its content without needing to be logged in or even a Facebook member. Therefore, any of these users and content (posts, photos, comments, etc.) can be easily tracked down. For the purposes of this project, however, I have decided to keep the names of commenters anonymous within my writing as it is the viewpoints they represent rather than their particular identities that I am analyzing here. Even so, some of the screenshots included of the chapter may display identifying information that is already publicly available.

and policy an aura of “goodness” and “happiness” as well? If so, what are the implications of setting up this equivalency? These are crucial questions that must be asked around the CSF program and its Facebook page, which is not *just* another page on just another social media site. Instead, it is a locus of complex ideological struggle, of pedagogy, of another war, this one on our own soil, in terms of what we value and how we choose to live up to those values.

## Conclusion

### Growing the “Happiness Archive”: Transformative Pedagogies of Possibility

*But it matters, how we assemble things, how we put things together.  
Our archives are assembled out of encounters,  
taking form as a memory trace of where we have been.*

-Ahmed 19

My first encounter with positive psychology’s vision of happiness began in the classroom, in conversation with the utopian impulse, so it is only fitting that I conclude this pedagogies project with a discussion of these two subjects. Teaching college composition courses thematically created around dystopias semester after semester, I worked with students to consider the utopian impulse (and its shadowy counterpart, the dystopian tendency) critically, to analyze works of utopian and dystopian literature, and to find moments in American culture (especially related to consumerism and commodification) that show the contours of dystopia. These courses were fun, the students were engaged, and the discussions were good. And then, everything changed. One semester, a student came up to me at the end of class and said (the intervening years have made this a tentative paraphrase, but the spirit, to this day, remains with me), “dystopias are so depressing ... can’t we read and learn about anything good, anything happy?”

My first instinct—not surprisingly, given my cynical nature was, no. No, we cannot, for a number of reasons, beyond my own pessimism and critical eye. Pedagogically, teaching utopias, especially to college freshman and in general education curriculum, is just not as interesting as teaching dystopias. Utopias have notoriously bland narratives, flat characters, and reek of didacticism, often with a stranger in a strange land (or strange time) miraculously appearing and

passively guided around by a “utopia” native, who acts as a tour guide and answers questions in a straight-forward (and often just plain dull) Socratic dialogue. Dystopias focus much more on the subjectivity of their protagonists and incorporate more engaging plots. At the time, I also felt—I still feel—myself drawn to dystopias not for their perfection, but for their potential, to the glimpses of resistance in otherwise bleak, standardized, and oppressed worlds, to watching characters gain revolutionary consciousness, to the possibility, not of happiness, but of hope.

After I got home I started to consider my student’s question more seriously, to really engage this desire for happiness, not knowing at the time that this one question would literally transform my life, my scholarship, and my teaching. At the time (circa 2007), the emerging discipline of positive psychology was gaining momentum, receiving much publicity, growing in popularity, and publishing a large number of texts on the subject. I delved into the movement, reading the studies, taking the questionnaires (such as the VIA Signature Strengths Survey I discussed in earlier chapters), exploring Seligman’s *Authentic Happiness* website. To my dismay (though not surprise), I scored high on the pessimism and maximization scales.<sup>1</sup> I learned a lot about myself, my tendencies, and my way of responding to my current situation, of my relationship to the past and the future, real or imagined.

When I taught my first incarnations of a course dealing with happiness and positive psychology half a decade ago, most of my attention was dedicated to critiquing the movement. In doing so, these courses resembled my previous ones on dystopia in which my students and I would spend the majority of class time exploring the “bad life,” in critiquing other people’s seemingly superficial versions of happiness. My first encounters with happiness pedagogy

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<sup>1</sup> In his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why Less is More* (2004), Barry Schwartz describes the difference between “maximizers” and “satisficers.” The former personality types belong to people who tend to be indecisive overthinking perfectionists, those who have difficulty making decisions in the first place and then are never really happy with the choices they have made.

therefore involved my holding positive psychology at arm's length, in much the way I fault others for not engaging the research now. I relate this story here to demonstrate that I understand the impulse to not engage, to merely dismiss, because it is safer and simpler.

In keeping positive psychology and the science of happiness at arm's length, I instrumentalized them as merely additional lenses through which to view dystopias. But dystopias, much like happiness, also tell us about our own lives, our own commitments, our own desires. We can use them to parse out the values that are *not* explicitly and didactically stated the way they are in the guided tour we find in utopias. Readers have to *work* to understand the ideology behind their stories.<sup>2</sup>

What is the ideology behind my *personal* story? Positive psychology wisdom labels me a wholehearted pessimist even as I firmly believe in the utopian impulse, in endless possibility, and in some ways harbor optimism beyond what one might think is rationally acceptable or desirable. For years I struggled to reconcile these contradictions, to find out which side of the coin represented me more accurately. Finally, I decided, instead of either/or, a straightforward utopian/dystopia binary, the only way forward is to place the two discourses into serious, *engaged* dialogue.

In opening this dialogue, I learned that not just this one student but also others, many

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<sup>2</sup> In helping to uncover these values, I present my students with a utopia/dystopia framework, which also can be used to understand the values at play in positive psychology visions of happiness. The following is a sampling of the questions this framework asks students to consider while reading these texts:

What "values" are emphasized in the society? How is "happiness" defined in the work? What is the status of "progress" (science/technology) within the society? How is "stability" defined? What is sacrificed in order to achieve it? How is "freedom" treated? Are there forms of "soma" that are available/encouraged and which help members of the society to escape the real world around them? [Remember that "soma" can come in many forms besides pills: television, virtual worlds, sex, entertainment, etc.]

others, were anxious to discuss and search for happiness and “the good life.” What constitutes the good life is, after all, a central question in utopian studies, though surprisingly, there are few explicit discussions of happiness in its literature or theory. Although there is an innate affinity between happiness and utopia, it only intermittently treated seriously (as at the end of Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness*, in Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope*, or Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*), but more often than not ridiculed and caricatured in terms of soma-induced inauthentic happiness or unrealistic idealism. Similarly, in positive psychology, there is little discussion of utopia, likely because it is not scientific or empirical, because contentment is simpler to measure than desire, because hope is messier than happiness, because perspective is easier to manage than possibility.

I find myself returning, again and again, to what the good life is, and whether or not it can be constructed, created, designed ... whether we can plan curricula for happiness. While its object of study compels me, I have always felt a nagging sensation that *something* wasn’t quite right about the direction and presentation of positive psychology research.

Despite their similarities, there is an antagonist relationship between the pursuit of individual happiness (as seen in self-help and positive psychology) and utopian imaginings of the collective good. Utopian visions are intimately tied to questions about the nature of happiness: the efficiency of utilitarianism (“the greatest good for the greatest number”), the in/authenticity of “false happiness” (soma-induced bliss of *Brave New World*), the commodification of desire (the advertisement-laden landscape of *feed*). While endless possibility and the alterability of human nature are cornerstones of utopian thinking [consider O’Brien’s famous claim, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “man is infinitely malleable”], Seligman and other leading positive psychologists suggest limits to an individual’s subjective well-being: they argue for a “happiness

formula,” in which ~50% of an individual’s “happiness” level is fixed, pre-determined by his/her genetic make-up.

Positive psychology’s sustained inquiry into subjective well-being and its subjecting happiness to the rigors of “scientific research” prompts significant questions about the relationship between utopia and happiness. Does the claimed biological barrier imposed by the “happiness formula” (along with the insistence on “acceptance” of what is) limit “progress”? Does the intense focus on individual contentment along with the mandate to embrace the “present” moment so often found in self-help mega-hits such as Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* locate contemporary versions of happiness outside of traditional utopian desiring (often viewed as both collective and future-oriented)? If proliferation of options and consumer choices is correlated with depression and the paralyzing effects of “maximization” (such as Barry Schwartz argues in *The Paradox of Choice*), what are the implications for “free will”? What is the status of “hope,” the all-important driving desire of a radically different future, of Bloch’s *novum*, the “not-yet,” in these frameworks? And with the intense focus on the improvement of the individual, how does happiness extend beyond that one person, how does one go from self-actualization to social justice?

I argue any serious consideration of these questions requires a shifting of core values away from happiness, optimism, positive thinking, and resiliency toward critical pedagogy, radical hope, and humanization. When hope is mentioned in the context of positive psychology and positive education, it is with an aim of subduing it and managing it scientifically. Seligman explains, “Hope has largely been the province of television preachers, politicians, and hucksters. The concept of learned optimism brings hope into the laboratory, where scientists can dissect it in order to understand how it works” (*Authentic Happiness* 92). In stark contrast to this docile

view of optimism and hope, utopian Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch in his trilogy *The Principle of Hope* (1938-1947) rejects “false optimism” (199), the “banal, automatic progress-optimism per se which is only a reprise of contemplative quietism,” and which “disguises the future as past, because it regards the future as something which has long since been decided and thus concluded” (198) with “true” or “*militant optimism*,” which includes “the *concretely and utopianly comprehended correlated in real possibility*” and is “decided through work and concretely mediated action” (199).

Other disciplines, such as queer studies, composition, and pedagogy, have adopted traces of the utopian in order to radicalize their work. Compositionist Paula Mathieu, in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005) builds on Bloch’s framework [“Hope is what mediates between the insufficient present and an imagined but better future” (19)] as does queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) [hope as “both a critical affect and a methodology” (4)]. Using hope—rather than happiness—as pedagogical strategy directs education towards substantive change and a more just society. The utopian function of hope informs a pedagogy based on nurturing (in Bloch’s words) the “Not-Yet-Become,” one that stands in stark contrast to self-help, positive psychology, and positive education, movements that build from what already *is*. By putting self-help, well-being, and positive education into conversation with hope rather than happiness, a different perspective emerges, one of the horizon.

In chapter 3, I indicated how composing and critical pedagogy might serve to revolutionize positive education. These strategies might be used, not to increase one’s happiness, but to critically *engage* it in the interests of possibility. Compositionists are favorably positioned, with our training in writing, rhetorical analysis, and pedagogy, to participate in conversations

about positive education and to shape the powerful political and social consequences of the new research on subjective well-being. In the spirit of participation, I conclude here by offering up my own pedagogy, a freshman composition course that is thematically centered on critically engaging with representations of “happiness” in the world. This engagement introduces ethical and political dimensions to contemporary debates about well-being. This project draws on Ahmed’s idea in *The Promise of Happiness* of conducting an ethnography of happiness and keeping a “happiness archive,” which is “a set of ideas, thoughts, narratives, images, impressions about what is happiness” (Ahmed 15). All semester long, students and I contribute to our class “happiness archive.”

The goal of this ongoing class project is, through low-stakes writing and student-generated content (the students come up with the examples themselves, often taking photos of ads they see on the subway, etc.), to critically interrogate the rhetoric and “performance” of happiness in everyday life. This ongoing, multimedia, networked blogging is also a scaffolded assignment, introducing students (and allowing them to rehearse) in a low-stakes setting many of the skills needed for writing in formal academic settings (such as making claims, supporting these claims with evidence, attribution/citing sources).

This project allows students (in Freire’s phrase) to practice “reading the word and the world”, and draws on and legitimizes the various literacies a diverse student body may bring to the academy. Approximately halfway into the semester, this low-stakes writing leads directly into a formal essay on visual analysis (and also upcoming presentations for their research projects, for which they will need to create multimedia texts and presentations). At this point, students have each already done multiple posts in the “happiness archive” (and we have been working—both in-class and online—to revise and strengthen this work).

This segment of the course also represents a shift from more individual definitions and representations of happiness to collective considerations and social happiness. In this way, my course builds from personal narratives of happiness to a critical engagement with institutionalized well-being, and helps students to transition from passive consumers of information to informed participants in the important and ongoing public debate about well-being. I position my analysis of CSF's Facebook page (discussed at the end of chapter 4) as an entry in my "happiness archive." I want to interrogate, with my students "not only what makes happiness good but how happiness *participates in making* things good" (13). In this way, together we problem-pose CSF, and look at its contradictions and relevance in students' lives.

Since the day my student raised a question in class about my curriculum choices, I have imagined and reimagined my own pedagogy in response to the twin desires of happiness and utopia, adding entries upon entries to my own "happiness archive." Through our work together in these "happiness archives," my students and I view the self-help, positive psychology, and positive education discourses from a different angle. More importantly, we learn to ask the questions that are not currently on the table, to pay attention to the crucial dialogue that does not yet exist, the conversation this dissertation will hopefully ignite.

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