

Geographies of brain culture

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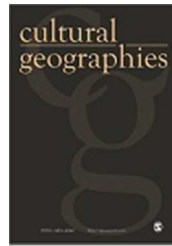
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Geographies of Brain Culture. Optimism and Optimisation in Workplace Training Programmes

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Keywords:	positive psychology, behaviour change, neuroscience, organisational management, emotional labour
Abstract:	<p>This paper outlines the strategic alignment of modes of emotional and psychological governance characteristic of 'brain culture' with intensified forms of workplace performance management within specifically neoliberal organisational cultures. We introduce the recent emergence of positive psychology-based workplace training programmes in the UK human resources field as a new empirical site for the study of cultural geographies of education. Such programmes promote a culture of optimism and optimal functioning, focussing on the cultivation of positive emotions amongst individual workers and in workplace cultures. This emphasis on wellbeing sits somewhat uncomfortably in the context of the global financial crisis, the UK's recent recession and the diminishing role of the UK state in the provision of welfare, but is wholly concurrent with the neoliberal promotion of 'lifelong learning' and the spread of individualised practices of performance management in UK workplaces. The paper draws on in-depth interviews with trainers and practitioners who variously use positive psychology, mindfulness training and strengths-based competencies in workplaces in the UK, and outlines their connection to the development of positive psychology as a new academic discipline in the USA. In outlining the importance of context for understanding changing workplace cultures and worker subjectivities, a cultural geography analysis of rapid advancements in psychological knowledge provides a useful new perspective on the links between neoliberalism, behavioural change and brain culture.</p>

Geographies of Brain Culture: Optimism and Optimisation in Workplace Training Programmes

Submitted to Cultural Geographies special issue on 'Cultural Geographies of Education' (Eds: Sarah Mills and Peter Kraftl)

Abstract

This paper outlines the strategic alignment of modes of emotional and psychological governance characteristic of 'brain culture' with intensified forms of workplace performance management within specifically neoliberal organisational cultures. We introduce the recent emergence of positive psychology-based workplace training programmes in the UK human resources field as a new empirical site for the study of cultural geographies of education. Such programmes promote a culture of optimism and optimal functioning, focussing on the cultivation of positive emotions amongst individual workers and in workplace cultures. This emphasis on wellbeing sits somewhat uncomfortably in the context of the global financial crisis, the UK's recent recession and the diminishing role of the UK state in the provision of welfare, but is wholly concurrent with the neoliberal promotion of 'lifelong learning' and the spread of individualised practices of performance management in UK workplaces. The paper draws on in-depth interviews with trainers and practitioners who variously use positive psychology, mindfulness training and strengths-based competencies in workplaces in the UK, and outlines their connection to the development of positive psychology as a new academic discipline in the USA. In outlining the importance of context for understanding changing workplace cultures and worker subjectivities, a cultural geography analysis of rapid advancements in psychological knowledge provides a useful new perspective on the links between neoliberalism, behavioural change and brain culture.

Keywords: positive psychology; behaviour change; neuroscience; organisations; emotional labour

Introduction

Optimism and optimisation have become the watch words of the relatively new scientific discipline of positive psychology. These emotional tropes are increasingly evident in the everyday experiences of workplace cultures, including 'workplace wellbeing' provision, worker training programmes and performance management techniques. In this paper, we consider how these notions are part of a wider 'brain culture' in which knowledges, images and representations of the brain, mind and behaviour are prioritised in the justification of human action and decision-making¹. By outlining both the formalised scientific endeavours and the everyday emotional labour involved in achieving optimism and optimisation in the workplace, we demonstrate the governmental and economic logics implicated in the designation and cultivation of positive affects within workplace cultures. We argue that an emphasis on cultural-economic *context* is essential for understanding how specific

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3 manifestations of psychological knowledge are adopted as explanations of the self and of behaviour
4 in specific spaces and times.
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6 The geographies of education has developed into an empirically wide-ranging field which embraces
7 'outward-looking' approaches extending beyond a concern for children and young people and
8 towards analysis of knowledge economies². It engages with diverse spaces of informal and
9 alternative learning³, and examines the invocation of pedagogical forms of governance across
10 multiple social and political sectors including media spaces, policing, immigration, welfare practice,
11 and community activism⁴. However, there is not to our knowledge any existing geographical analysis
12 of the workplace as a space of education and of workers as learners. Whilst disciplines such as
13 educational studies, human resource management, organisational studies and the economics of
14 human capital have long established research on adult skills, training, worker education, and
15 policies, practices and discourses of 'lifelong learning'⁵, geographical research on these phenomena
16 is fairly sparse, and is often focused on training, vocational and skills programmes for the
17 unemployed⁶. We therefore propose an investigation of the specific educational endeavours of
18 workplace training programmes and the pedagogical rationalities of workplace wellbeing and
19 organisational management as an important new focus for the geographical study of education.
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26 A synthesis of emotional geographies and cultural-economic labour geographies allows us to offer
27 new insight into workplace cultures as hitherto overlooked spaces of education. Such spaces are
28 arguably as important as schools as significant sites for the production of citizen-subjectivity and of
29 economically- and emotionally-imbued social relations. Clearly an analysis of the cultivation of
30 emotions such as optimism and 'work on the self' in the name of optimisation implies that
31 emotional and psychological governance matters in the spaces of work. Moving beyond this simple
32 assertion, however, it is our concern here to understand emotion "in terms of its socio-*spatial*
33 mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states"⁷. By building
34 on emotional geographers' contention that emotions are located both in the body and in place, that
35 emotions exist as products of social relationships, and that there are high political stakes associated
36 with the representation of emotions, we investigate workplace training programmes as specific sites
37 of emotional and psychological governance in the context of Anglo-American neoliberalism.
38 Interrogating the explicit management of workers' emotions and the emotional health of an
39 organisational culture, we argue that such programmes are crucial to understanding the cultural
40 geographies of the workplace within 'soft' capitalist societies. Managers are not only now charged
41 with the surveillance of workers' time, and with fostering specific spatial arrangements conducive to
42 a more productive/creative workplace, but they must also work to shape the psychological resilience
43 and emotional wellbeing of their workers whilst continually improving their own emotional
44 intelligence and wellbeing. Positive psychology has thus emerged as a means by which to re-
45 educate the worker as what might be termed a 'neurocitizen'; a readily employable worker who is
46 skilled in the management of their and others' emotions, is committed to the pursuit of self-
47 optimisation, and is responsible for their own psychological governance⁸. In this sense, positive
48 psychology workplace training programmes mobilise pedagogical mechanisms – fostering learning
49 about one's own mind – in the broad pursuit of behavioural change. The worker's intimate and
50 personal attributes, strengths and commitments are to be aligned with that of the company and by
51 extension, the economy.
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5 The cultural-economic context of 'soft' neoliberal capitalism does not simply provide a backdrop in
6 which workplace training programmes based on positive psychology have thrived. Rather, new
7 forms of emotional and psychological governance in the workplace have relied on the emergence of
8 a brain culture which provides the scientific grounds and practical mechanisms for the promotion of
9 individualised lifelong learning and performance management. The shaping of worker subjectivities
10 as flexibilized human capital resources, and as competitors within a precarious and constantly
11 changing employment context are well-documented facets of a neoliberal focus on employability (as
12 distinct from a Keynesian commitment to employment). The ratcheting up of happiness economics
13 and workplace wellbeing programmes is concurrent with a shift from welfare to workfare and a
14 significant decline in formal union representation amongst workers since the 1980s⁹. In this context,
15 the job-seeking citizen and the worker have, for many, been responsibilized and abandoned by the
16 state and their labour power eroded¹⁰. Employers too are increasingly demanding workers with 'go-
17 getting' attitudes, aptitudes, competencies and skills. This emphasis on personality, on positive
18 emotion and positive affects mark a new and troubling shift away from the collectivism of state
19 welfare and towards the personalisation of wellbeing.
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26 However, the emotional mechanisms and potential consequences of producing such subjectivities
27 are not well understood. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild's account of the incorporation of feelings into
28 everyday working practices and the commercialisation of intimate private life is one important
29 reference point for geographers investigating the workplace as a distinctive space in which 'the
30 cultural' and 'the economic' intersect within the context of late capitalist service economies¹¹. Her
31 work narrates how workers are charged with creating particular workplace atmospheres, deploying
32 their emotional labour in the service of the company's profitability. The consequence of this
33 emotional self-management is that workers become alienated from their own sense of self. Cultural-
34 economic geographers such as Linda McDowell¹² have, like Hochschild, examined the emotional and
35 embodied labour required by working life within a contemporary service and knowledge economy.
36 This has the particular effect of producing highly gendered workplace cultures in which emotional
37 intelligence finds new status, whilst at the very same time being devalued as a naturalised feminine
38 trait. Bodily intimacy, appearance, age, weight, height and manners have become key assets for the
39 employable worker in this context¹³. This work re-orientates us geographically to focus on the micro-
40 scale of workplace settings and organisational cultures as crucial for understanding the everyday
41 realisation and consequences of global economic change.
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49 Workplace training programmes such as those based on positive psychology offer an important
50 perspective on how organisational management approaches aim to cultivate positive emotions
51 amongst workers and within workplace cultures. They provide us with a hitherto underexplored site
52 in which educational imperatives based on brain culture are put in the service of a neoliberal
53 emphasis on performance management. In so doing, such training sets out to produce worker
54 subjectivities which must internalise an emotional commitment to optimism and optimisation. The
55 paper is split into two main sections. In the first we review the emergence of positive psychology as
56 a new field of practice and outline some of the key tenets of workplace based training and education
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3 programmes available across the UK. Here we trace the US routes of positive psychology as a way of
4 investigating how such knowledges and practices ‘travel’, highlighting the centrality of geographical
5 *context* to our analysis. In the second section we interrogate the convergence of wellbeing and
6 optimal performance in workplace training within the contemporary UK economic context, before
7 drawing some conclusions about practices of emotional and psychological governance in workplace
8 settings. The paper is based on in-depth interviews with 20 (7 female and 13 male) practitioners of
9 positive psychology, strengths-based approaches and mindfulness who are involved in delivering
10 workplace based training programmes in the UK, with some practitioners delivering such
11 programmes world-wide¹⁴. The interviews were complemented by a web-based survey of
12 contemporary providers of workplace training programmes and documentary analysis of 27 positive
13 psychology texts. The data was analysed using in vivo coding including the following meta-themes:
14 body and emotion; character strengths; control/autonomy; disciplinary developments; economic
15 context; wellbeing, happiness and welfare; workplace culture. The research was undertaken
16 between May-August 2013.
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23 **Learning optimism from the USA**

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25 Positive psychology has become an influential approach to organisational management in several
26 global companies. Training courses and consultancies offering education for frontline workers,
27 workplace managers and human resource specialists have become increasingly commonplace since
28 the late 1990s. By the start of the twenty-first century techniques used to improve the happiness
29 and wellbeing of employees had penetrated the heart of American business (Ehrenreich, 2009) and
30 were fast spreading to the UK and Europe. Positive psychology at work is used for two main reasons.
31 Firstly, to improve the mental attitude of employees making them more positive and ultimately
32 more productive. Depression-related absenteeism from work has been estimated by Gallup to be
33 costing the US economy over \$23 billion a year¹⁵, and in a survey conducted by the Confederation of
34 British Industry (CBI)/Pfizer, it was said to cost the UK economy over £14 billion per year, with
35 mental health conditions being the main cause of absence from work¹⁶. Meanwhile, the concept of
36 ‘presenteeism’ has come to the fore since the global financial crisis of 2008, referring to workers
37 coming to work despite their ill-health, often through fear of redundancy¹⁷. Secondly, positive
38 psychology is used in different ways by supervisors and leaders to change organisational cultures to
39 try to reduce reproachful styles of management and instead encourage better performance through
40 creativity, productivity and strong engagement with other employees, customers and the company.
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48 Positive psychology at work has become an umbrella term which describes several inter-related (and
49 sometimes contested) approaches to changing workplace cultures through cultivating the emotional
50 wellbeing, states and dispositions of workers and workplaces (table 1). In this paper we consider the
51 ways in which the workplace training sector is re-educating workers using techniques, courses and
52 pedagogies nested under the umbrella term of positive psychology and why certain approaches hold
53 sway with business managers particularly in the endeavour of cultivating new worker subjectivities.
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Table 1: Approaches to positive psychology at work

Psychometric testing	surveys which aim to identify and measure a person's attributes or psychological traits, sometimes used in recruitment
Strength-based assessments	a type of psychometric test which aims to identify a person's core strengths
Neurolinguistic programming (NLP)	an approach derived from psychology, counselling and hypnotherapy which aims to manipulate situations, relationships and interactions through body language and framing to achieve specific goals
Appreciative Inquiry (AI)	a 'positive change methodology' which aims to identify an organisations' success, release positive potential, imagine positive futures ¹⁸
'Flow'	immersing oneself optimally in an experience ¹⁹
Mindfulness practice	a form of meditation derived from Buddhism which aims to help people focus their conscious attention on the present, brought into western practice largely by John Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School ²⁰

For critics such as US author, Barbara Ehrenreich, it is no coincidence that positive psychology has developed in the specific geographical context of the US during the 1980s, on the back of a wave of 'positive thinking' and motivational speaking predominant in the US corporate sphere²¹. She argues that the 1980s push towards downsizing challenged rational management techniques as businesses began to restructure and reorganise. Traditional management techniques were being undermined by the demands of shareholders, rapid economic and technological change, and advancements in communication. Managers needed innovative ways to get the most out of their workforce. Practitioners of positive psychology have also argued that the global financial crisis has meant that business managers have to do more with less. For some, this is an opportunity to make workplaces more ethical and more sustainable²², and for others, it is a business opportunity for workplace training providers:

"I know a lot of organisations got to the point where they had cut as much as they could cut without permanently damaging the organisation, they couldn't ask any more of their people and yet they needed to, so they started to look at what they could put back into their people to rebuild them. That in tandem with the faddish interest in positive psychology and happiness at work and wellbeing and mindfulness has caused people to think that 'oh there might be something in this, if we look after our employees better maybe they will perform better'. That combination of things has driven positive psychology in business."

Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.

These geographical and contextual factors have been important in providing the business conditions in which positive psychology workplace training programmes have thrived. In some cases workplace training in positive psychology was seen (by managers and some trainers) as an easy route to improved workplace performance i.e. "if you are in a positive state of mind at work you will do a better job" (*practitioner in positive psychology and advisor on happiness at work, interviewed 20/05/13*). Alongside this has been a set of academic developments which are regarded as key

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3 reference points for the recent establishment of positive psychology as a distinct discipline. Positive
4 psychologists often mark this point with the pioneering work of US psychologist Martin Seligman,
5 whose books, *Learned Optimism*, *Authentic Happiness*, and more recently, *Flourish*, have been both
6 popular and important sources for a rapidly expanding discipline²³. In about 1999, it is said that
7 Seligman started up the first network of positive psychologists, and his “charisma and organizational
8 skills” are said to be important factors in the success of this network²⁴. Seligman became the
9 president of the American Psychological Society in 1998, marking the acceptance of positive
10 psychology within the mainstream discipline. Meetings were held in Philadelphia, Washington DC,
11 Lincoln, Lawrence, Columbia, Grand Cayman and Akumal²⁵. At its root was Seligman’s²⁶ assertion
12 that psychology had for too long told a “half-baked” story about the human mind; its focus on
13 trauma, disorder and pathology and its ‘fix it’ mentality had been at the expense of developing any
14 substantive knowledge about positive traits, emotions, states of mind and aspects of character
15 which could be said to be strengths or virtues. These positive elements could help people to achieve
16 not only mental health, but to thrive and flourish; to live the good life, to live well and to achieve
17 *authentic* happiness. This rounded approach has been particularly attractive in human resource
18 management and workplace training initiatives which have concentrated their efforts primarily on
19 how to create positive or virtuous workplace cultures, and on how to improve workers’ personal
20 strengths²⁷.
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28 For some proponents of positive psychology, Seligman and other prominent US-based figures such
29 as Don Clifton (who developed the Clifton strengths psychometric test), and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
30 (who advanced the concept of ‘flow’) and Rick Snyder (who worked on *hope*) revived a longer
31 tradition of humanistic psychology which can be dated back to the work of Abraham Maslow. As
32 early as 1954 Maslow commented that psychology had for too long been concerned only with the
33 ‘dark side’ of humanity²⁸. That said, there have been a series of high-profile debates between
34 humanistic and positive psychologists since Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi²⁹ dismissed humanistic
35 psychology as a non-scientific venture associated with the narcissistic industry of ‘self-help’³⁰. Given
36 the positioning (one assumes by the publishers) of many of Seligman’s books as ‘how to’ self-help
37 books, with subtitles such as “How to change your mind and your life” (*Learned Optimism*), “Using
38 the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment” (*Authentic Happiness*),
39 and “A new understanding of happiness and well-being – and how to achieve them” (*Flourish*), this
40 criticism stands out as particularly unfortunate. The core concepts and topics for positive psychology
41 are wide-ranging: including but not limited to: happiness; flow; hope; optimism; emotional
42 intelligence; engagement; giftedness; creativity; wisdom; meaning; positive affects; positive
43 emotion; positive traits; positive self; positive relationships; positive change; motivation; character
44 strengths; subjective-wellbeing; courage; virtues; accomplishment; savouring; resilience; gratitude;
45 mindfulness; mindsets; and love. There is also a role for nutrition and physical exercise suggesting
46 that a healthy body is integrated with character virtues and positive mental states. But the
47 establishment of positive psychology as a named discipline is recent; it is a young discipline which is
48 self-consciously searching for acceptance as a serious field of academic enquiry.
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3 Since those initial meetings from Philadelphia to Akumal, masters programmes in positive
4 psychology have been one of predominant ways in which the discipline has been established, with
5 'MAPP' courses (Masters in Applied Positive Psychology) available at several institutions³¹. New
6 academic journals and several textbooks have been published³². Several of our interviewees have
7 graduated from one of the MAPP courses in recent years. One of our interviewees recalls the rapid
8 emergence of positive psychology recounting how it arrived in the UK in around 2001 after sessions
9 on positive psychology were organised by students at the British Psychological Society (BPS) annual
10 conference at which Martin Seligman spoke:
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14 "Martin Seligman was very lucky to launch it from a big enough platform at that point to
15 attract a lot of interest, so I would say in the beginning it was a movement. And then it
16 transformed [...] into much more of a discipline due to the large amount of scholarly work in
17 the area and publications that brought everything together."
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20 *Senior Lecturer in Positive Psychology, interviewed 21/08/13.*

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22 But it was not universally welcomed within mainstream psychology, and scholars in this field had to
23 deal with a degree of hostility: "I remember sometime in 2001/2002 mentioning it in the BPS, the
24 very senior levels [that I] do positive psychology and literally having a reaction that people laugh at
25 my face" (*Senior Lecturer in Positive Psychology, interviewed 21/08/13*). In the face of such criticism,
26 it is not uncommon for a textbook in positive psychology to begin with an assertion of its scientific
27 credentials, or an assertion of what it is not (positive thinking, pseudo-science, 'mumbo-jumbo', self-
28 help). There is still very much a sense that the 'case for' positive psychology is still being made³³. In
29 the Foreword to the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, a vast and pioneering compendium of
30 work in positive psychology, the series editor, Peter Nathan writes that:
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34 "[p]ositive psychology is psychology – psychology is science – and science requires checking
35 theories against evidence. Accordingly, positive psychology is not to be confused with
36 untested self-help, footless affirmation, or secular religion no matter how good these make
37 us feel. Positive psychology is neither a recycled version of the power of positive thinking nor
38 a sequel to *The Secret*³⁴".
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44 It is not our intention in this paper to cast aspersions on the scientific merits of positive psychology,
45 but rather – in the spirit of other histories and sociologies of science – it is to show how its
46 'scientificness' has been of major appeal in the application of positive psychology in workplace
47 training programmes adopted in business. As one practitioner pointed out:

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49 "Businesses are very faddish, they always like the latest thing, especially if it has come from
50 academia and it sounds quite scientific, especially if it is to do with the brain and especially if
51 they think it is something that will help the business perform better."
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54 *Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.*

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3 Some techniques that fall under the umbrella of positive psychology, and are offered in the
4 repertoire of many positive psychology trainers, are increasingly popular with businesses not only
5 because of their 'scientificness' but also their media attention. Mindfulness is a good example of this
6 and its emerging scientific validity has received considerable positive attention from UK media, as
7 the Director of this training consultancy demonstrates:
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10 It [mindfulness] is emerging as more popular [than the other aspects of positive psychology
11 I teach] and I think a lot of that is because it has been in the press and there is so much
12 science behind it. A lot of the stuff I do is very basic brain science, so about working with
13 your brain instead of against it.
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16 *Strategic Learning Specialist, Director of mindfulness and positive psychology training*
17 *consultancy, interviewed 9/7/13.*
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19 In light of the appeal that the scientific prowess of positive psychology appears to have amongst
20 business it is of interest that so many positive psychology publications draw attention to its scientific
21 methods, paraphernalia, communities and rigour. Sarah Lewis, managing director of organizational
22 consultancy, *Appreciating Change* puts it as follows:
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25 “[p]ositive psychology is further distinguished from positive thinking by the fact that it has
26 ‘body of knowledge’ structures such as collegiate bodies, university departments, professors
27 and rigorous accredited academic courses...it has all the paraphernalia of scientific discourse
28 with peer-reviewed journals and academic conferences. Its practitioners apply to respected
29 scientific bodies for research grants. Assertions made as fact can be checked, verified or
30 refuted by others³⁵.”
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33 The application of positive psychology to workplace environments and the incentive for a growing
34 industry of trainers to sell the benefits of these techniques increases the capacity for conducting
35 research into the impact of positive psychology on workplace performance indicators such as stress
36 levels, absenteeism, presenteeism, workplace engagement and productivity.
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39 Other practitioners are more critical of the field of positive psychology and warn that its commercial,
40 workplace based applications can sometimes over-ride its scientific rigour,
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42 “I mean, you do get a lot of people in positive psychology who are, dare I say it, just talk a
43 load of old mumbo jumbo you know, are still going down the route of positive affirmations
44 and stuff like that, you know, the old positive thinking nonsense or talking about abundance
45 and, you know, the book ‘The Secret’?”
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48 *Provider of strengths-based workplace training and member of International Positive*
49 *Psychology Association, interviewed 18/07/13.*
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53 It is therefore exceedingly important to some practitioners of positive psychology in workplace
54 training, not least to be able to sell their approach to businesses, that their pedagogical approach is
55 based on providing scientifically validated methods for creating positive workers and positive
56 workplace cultures. In this sense, they are not to be mistaken for practitioners of earlier ‘fads’ to hit
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3 the business world, such as Neurolinguistic Programming, which as one of our interviewees
4 highlighted, in his view 'stole' selective observations from counselling, hypnotherapy and psychology
5 in order to essentially manipulate people into behaving in particular ways in the workplace. Neither
6 are they simply evangelists of 'positive thinking' – just being hopeful will not magic good outcomes
7 into existence. They do not avoid discussions of negativity³⁶. Nor do they dismiss pessimism – which
8 has an important role in helping to provide an accurate perception of reality, and is crucial in many
9 job roles such as treasurer, financial and business administrator, safety engineer and risk assessors³⁷.
10 Positive psychologists have been working hard to avoid associations with positive thinking. Their
11 claim is to deal in the 'science of optimism'; not just to look on the bright side of life.
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17 Indeed, optimism has been an important concept in positive psychology. Building on his earlier
18 (highly controversial) research with Richard Solomon on learned helplessness in the 1960s, Seligman
19 and Steve Maier went on to argue that as well as reward and punishment, *expectation* had an
20 impact on animal behaviour (in this case in dogs) and could create the conditions for '*learned*
21 *optimism*'. Seligman went on to test his theory of learned optimism in the workplace Seligman went
22 on to test his theory in the workplace – with life insurance salespeople, who he found to be more
23 successful in sales when they had been recruited for their optimism; they learned to deal with
24 rejection better³⁸. Ehrenreich also found that large drug companies saw the potential of optimism
25 in business, beginning active recruitment drives targeting college cheerleaders who were seen to be
26 inherently enthusiastic and positive able to achieve high sales targets³⁹. Optimism for positive
27 psychologists is a "state of explanation" rather than a state of mind. It refers to how we explain the
28 causes of events to ourselves and is said to have positive benefits not only in terms of workplace
29 performance, but with respect to our mental and physical health, our resilience and life
30 satisfaction⁴⁰. For psychologists of positive emotions such as Michael Cohn and Barbara Fredrickson,
31 it is this quality of *explanation* which makes something like optimism worth researching as an
32 emotion with real effects. It is something more than a mood or a sensation; it involves "an appraisal
33 of the situation". Their "broaden-and-build-theory" has been used in workplace settings because it
34 confers that experiencing positive emotions can both *broaden* a person's sense of actions/choices
35 available to them, and can *build* personal resources (social bonds, attachments, intellectual and
36 cognitive skills, creativity and improved brain development)⁴¹. But not only can positive emotion
37 improve performance in the workplace, it can make you less racist, more open to 'the other', less
38 stressed, and more psychologically resilient to negative situations. As such, they have set out to
39 provide scientific evidence of the real physical and psychological benefits of positive emotions
40 through experimental studies. Through an 8 week 'loving-kindness meditation' intervention based
41 on mindfulness practice, participants in the research were said to show "increases in a number of
42 personal resources, including physical wellness, agency for achieving important goals, ability to savor
43 positive experiences, and quality of close relationships"⁴². Their research aims to demonstrate the
44 role of positive emotions in "humanity's toolbox for growth", and to understand the appropriate
45 balance, or "critical ratios of positivity to negativity"⁴³.
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56 In many ways, as several of our interviewees admitted, the development of positive psychology as a
57 science and as a set of practices has pulled the discipline itself in different directions. The time lags
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3 of academic publishing, it was pointed out, simply do not suit the business decision-making context.
4 While the 'scientificness' of positive psychology is clearly attractive to organisational managers,
5 there is no time to wait for research trials, the development of testable hypotheses and repeated
6 and validated experimental results. So trainers working in organisational contexts have amended
7 and adapted positive psychology research in order to develop their own workable training
8 programmes to meet business needs:
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11 "we are unusual in the fact that we ourselves have been critics of positive psychology
12 because we have developed our own strength assessment and development tool [...which]
13 includes weaknesses as one of the elements of feedback. When we launched that we got
14 loads of criticism from colleagues in positive psychology asking how we could include
15 weaknesses in a strengths tool. The answer is simple – our clients and organisations, and
16 real people in the real world were telling us that strengths are great but I also need to know
17 what is going to trip me up and it needs to be balanced and realistic."
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21 *Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.*
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23 Nevertheless, the science of optimism is a linchpin for the positive psychology workplace training
24 provider which is regularly used in the specific development of leadership skills in workplace
25 settings, as one practitioner remarked:
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27 "...you can sort of talk to [workers] about the power of positive emotion and if you've got a
28 problem to solve, the best thing you can possibly do is get your team laughing and then tell
29 them about, you know, and then solve the problem. If you try and do it from a position of
30 doom and gloom and this is all terrible, the brain can't do it, you know, it's kind of, pretty
31 obvious stuff really. And again that's Barbara Fredrickson's work so you're linking it back to
32 science."
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36 *Former business HR manager and current positive psychology consultant, interviewed,*
37 *17/07/13.*
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39 The development of leadership strengths here is linked with the biophysical capacities of the brain.
40 The brain *requires* positive emotion in order to fulfil a successful leadership role. Whilst as we have
41 already noted, it has been US based psychologists who have developed the testable precepts of
42 positive emotion, optimism and strengths-based approaches, their findings and implications have
43 been adopted in global businesses across many sectors, as well as in the public sector. Our
44 interviewees had provided consultations for businesses such as BMW in the UK, Germany and China,
45 L'Oreal in France, large pharmaceutical, design, utilities companies, private and public schools, the
46 NHS, UK local authorities, universities and regional police departments, though many did not want
47 to reveal the names of the companies they had worked for. However, one of the biggest markets for
48 positive psychology training was from other trainers who wanted to start their own business and
49 become qualified in teaching positive psychology. Indeed, training trainers appeared to be an
50 industry in itself.
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54 So how did positive psychology 'go global' at such a rapid pace? Partly, this is due to the highly
55 regarded leadership style and lecture tours of Martin Seligman, but it is perhaps their adoption by
56 global management consulting companies which has secured their widespread reach. Global
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3 consultants, McKinsey and Company, as one of our interviewees noted, have embraced a range of
4 positive psychology approaches including: “strengths, authenticity, resilience, it’s all in there, energy,
5 mindfulness, the whole lot” (*former business HR manager and current positive psychology*
6 *consultant, interviewed, 17/07/13*). Their specific term for their approach is ‘centred leadership’ and
7 boasts “organizational development, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, positive psychology, and
8 leadership; workshops with hundreds of clients to test our ideas; and global surveys” as its academic
9 knowledge base⁴⁴. Like many other strengths approaches to organisational management, they
10 narrowed down the capacities of the excellent leader to just a handful of sometimes general,
11 sometimes specific attributes: “finding meaning in work, converting emotions such as fear or stress
12 into opportunity, leveraging connections and community, acting in the face of risk, and sustaining
13 the energy that is the life force of change”⁴⁵. Another global consulting company, Gallup, provide a
14 psychometric test which was developed by renowned psychologist, Don Clifton, who was given a
15 Presidential Commendation as the “Father of Strengths-Based Psychology” by the American
16 Psychological Association in 2002⁴⁶. The Gallup/Clifton Strengths Finder is a 35 minute timed online
17 questionnaire which will rank your 34 strengths for only \$9.99⁴⁷. This report is then used by
18 workplace coaches and training providers to cater their training to your top strengths. Gallup also
19 sell training kits for coaches, and their own coaches currently provide training in coaching in the
20 global business hubs of London, Washington, Singapore and Sydney.
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28 But these strength based psychometric tests have not been an unreserved global success. They
29 recently made headlines when the UK government’s Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) began piloting
30 strengths personality survey in order to assess job-seekers allowance benefit claimants’ character
31 strengths. The survey was originally designed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman at the
32 VIA (Values in Action) Institute on Character, Cincinnati, USA. Claimants who refused to take the test
33 were threatened with benefits sanctions/withdrawal⁴⁸, and the Department for Work and Pensions
34 and BIT were criticised by both the press and VIA Institute itself for using a shortened, un-validated
35 version of the survey⁴⁹. As Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park report, the VIA strengths
36 classification which sought to identify “the qualities of a person worthy of moral praise” was
37 constructed by listing the character strengths/virtues of historical and contemporary figures ranging
38 from Benjamin Franklin, to John Templeton (a stock investor and philanthropist whose Templeton
39 Foundation has funded research projects, large research centres and distinguished prizes in Positive
40 Psychology), and even fictional personalities such as the Klingons from US TV series *Star Trek*. They
41 also did content analysis of greetings cards, car bumper stickers, personal ads, songs, graffiti, tarot
42 cards, Pokémon and Harry Potter characters. Finally, they made a list of virtues mentioned in the
43 world’s major religious and philosophical texts, and eventually narrowed these down to 24 universal
44 positive traits⁵⁰.
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52 Lest we be sceptical about whether it is possible in this manner to identify universal character traits
53 within a world of cultural, political, social, ideological and religious diversity, Peterson and Park have
54 undertaken internet based research, using the survey with 111,676 respondents in 54 different
55 nations and all 50 US states, finding that:
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3 “in almost all nations, from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, the most commonly endorsed
4 strengths were kindness, fairness, authenticity, gratitude, and open-mindedness, and the
5 lesser strengths included prudence, modesty, and self-regulation....we speculate that our
6 results revealed something about universal human nature and/or the character
7 requirements minimally needed for a viable society⁵¹”
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12 This is certainly not a modest endeavour, therefore, and they make no secret of their ambitions to
13 understand the very purpose of life, as Peterson and Park explain: “Our project supports the premise
14 of positive psychology that attention to good character sheds light on what makes life worth living.
15 As Aristotle (2000) proposed long ago, happiness is the purpose of life, and living in accordance with
16 one’s virtues is how to achieve happiness⁵². Together, the bold claims of the science of optimism,
17 the physiology of positive emotions and the universality of character strengths provide workplace
18 training providers with a varied toolkit for working on and working up people’s optimism in the
19 workplace, and crucially, for helping people to functional optimally. It is to this virtue of optimisation
20 that we now turn.
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24 25 26 **From providing welfare to optimising wellbeing** 27

28 As noted in the introduction to this paper, the relative decline in welfare provision in countries such
29 as the UK and USA has been mirrored by the rise of optimism and optimal functioning as key
30 competencies in the workplace. One positive psychology consultant describes how these pivotal
31 terms have become central to the operation of business:
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34 “So I talk about, you know, feeling good and functioning well and that’s quite a helpful
35 discussion to have with businesses because it’s about, you know, this isn’t just about helping
36 people feel better and feel happy all the time, it’s also about how they function in the
37 world”
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39 *Former business HR manager and current positive psychology consultant, interviewed*
40 *17/07/13.*
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45 “Feeling good and functioning well” is the kind of bite-size promise that works well in the workplace
46 training industry, where consultants must by the very nature of their business provide their clients
47 with tangible results. At the very least they should give the hope of positive organisational change,
48 and at most, the achievement of personal transformation. This transformation involves capitalising
49 on one’s strengths, cultivating positive emotional traits and functioning optimally. It is a form of
50 behaviour change which like Seligman’s pioneering experiments, ironically takes issue with a
51 behaviouralist approach to psychology, challenging their ‘transactional’ model of action in which
52 behavioural change is conditioned by reward and punishment. As one of our interviewees described,
53 shifting from a transactional to transformational theory of behavioural motivation has important
54 commercial benefits which are presumably of particular appeal in times of economic stagnation or
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3 recession. Here the interviewee refers to popular business author, Daniel Pink's work on intrinsic
4 forms of motivation:
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6 "Now transformational relationships or what Dan Pink would call Motivation 2.0, offers a really
7 interesting promise, which is people will work the hardest not for money, not for reward, not for
8 pay, not for punishment but for pleasure, for satisfaction. Now you've got to imagine how
9 enormously appealing that is to a company."
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11 *Director of a Business Development company, interviewed 21/7/13.*
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16 Indeed, many trainers relied on bite-sized promises or slogans which they taught leaders on these
17 courses to help them tune in to the emotional motivations of their workforce in order to get the
18 most out of them, for example; "you can squeeze adequacy out of anybody but you can only
19 motivate people to success" (*practitioner in positive psychology and advisor on happiness at work,*
20 *interviewed 20/05/13*). In addition to the aforementioned positive psychology training, centred
21 leadership, mindfulness and strengths surveys, the practice of *appreciation* has developed in
22 parallel as an important means of getting the best out of people in the workplace context. Again, it
23 may seem fairly obvious that being nice to workers and praising people's efforts might pay dividends
24 in terms of their continued commitment and their general satisfaction at work, but workplace
25 training providers have established a new approach to business management called 'Appreciative
26 Inquiry', based on the ideas of David Cooperrider, a business consultant, speaker and management
27 scholar at Case Western Reserve University, USA. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to
28 organisational change which regards organisations not as problems to be solved but as "high
29 commitment work systems" in which a focus on optimising workers' commitments, passions,
30 success stories and strengths can engender more organic organisational change. For Cooperrider, the
31 traditional management approach of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)
32 focusses too much on the negative. Instead, Cooperrider has developed SOAR, "the systematic study
33 of signature strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results"⁵³. Optimisation here means doing
34 away with weakness and threats and being more optimistic about people's capacity to create,
35 innovate, enliven and aspire for a better workplace culture. Optimism is also tied in with
36 optimisation because, as one practitioner of AI told us, there is a sense in which organisational
37 change is perpetual, and therefore organisations must always strive to be better:
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44 "it's continuous change, it's always there, and if you had that definition then I think it really
45 strengthens the need for any of the positive stuff, because the only way to keep moving is
46 constant change is to continuously build on what you do well."
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49 *Director of strength-based organisational development company providing Solutions Focus and*
50 *Appreciative Inquiry, interviewed 21/7/13.*
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54 Optimisation is not only a major goal at the level of the organisation but also an important learning
55 outcome at a more personal level; workers must strive to be the best they can be. But it is not
56 simply that they should be the best worker in a competitive organisation, but they should be the
57 best *person* that they can be. In recognising and evaluating their strengths, and thus their
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3 ‘weaknesses’ found lower down on the strengths scale, they should work on themselves in order to
4 fulfil their maximum potential. Many of the trainers and positive psychology providers we
5 interviewed talked about the importance of addressing the ‘whole person’ in the course of their
6 training, not just the worker. It was also clear that some of the trainers had internalised these
7 principles in explaining their own character, strengths and working lives. One managing director of a
8 strengths-based workplace training provider recalled how she had tried to overcome her perceived
9 weakness in communication for some important training work in Miami, despite the fact that she
10 didn’t enjoy this aspect of her work at that time:
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16 “Right, now, because it’s a skill I learned and this takes me back to my Carnegie days, right,
17 where I could do all of these things, but I didn’t actually enjoy it, right? So I got myself
18 coached, I got myself a personal coach and everything so I could do the best job possible
19 when I went to Miami. Now the reason I took that approach, even subconsciously, is my
20 No.1 strength is maximizer, so of course I would want to do the best, I would never settle for
21 anything that wasn’t top, so even though I didn’t want to do it, I was going to give it my best
22 shot, does that make sense?”
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25 *Managing director of a strengths-based workplace training provider, interviewed 02/8/13.*
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29 As she rationalises the situation, it was her strength as a maximizer that enabled her to work on
30 herself to improve her communication skills to enable her to ‘do the best job possible’. This
31 narrative of optimisation has become a familiar refrain for many social theorists who are seeking to
32 explain the implications of psychological and psychiatric sciences for governance and citizenship.
33 Particular attention has been paid to understanding the development of a ‘science of happiness’, for
34 instance – and to outlining the integration of a self-optimising therapeutic culture with neoliberal
35 forms of governance⁵⁴. In this regard, positive psychology in workplaces can be seen as just one
36 aspect of a broader pedagogic turn within advanced liberal societies in which the perpetual re-
37 education of the entrepreneurial self is deemed essential⁵⁵. But it is not enough to develop a sense
38 of adaptability and flexibility in terms of the skills and capacities required for a working life based on
39 re-skilling as opposed to a life-long career. Rather, it is now crucial to develop the psychological
40 resilience to cope emotionally, and the character strengths to consistently out-perform yourself in
41 an uncertain work environment.
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48 The focus on happiness, psychological resilience, character development and training in positive
49 emotions is now evident in several spheres beyond the workplace (for instance in military training,
50 schools, adult mental health settings and economic policy). Whilst people may be biologically limited
51 in terms of their ‘set range’ of happiness, according to Seligman, *authentic happiness* is under your
52 voluntary control; it is educable, and it is therefore your responsibility to optimise⁵⁶. Positive
53 psychology workplace training providers can be seen as just one set of actors mobilised in what has
54 become an internationalised programme of behavioural change involving no less than the re-
55 invention of the human subject. This neurocitizen is morally deficient but at the same time capable –
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3 with the right education and the cultivation of a better 'explanatory style' (i.e. an optimistic one) of
4 learned greatness. If these sound like grand claims, it is because the claims of positive psychology
5 are couched very much in these transformational terms. But if the effects of a shift towards
6 happiness in workplace cultures and other contexts are to be taken seriously, then a set of political
7 concerns arise which must be given due consideration. The dark side of happiness has been subject
8 to critique by psychologists and social/cultural theorists alike⁵⁷. Psychologist, Barabara Held has
9 argued that positive psychology is characterised by a "tyranny of the positive attitude" which has its
10 roots not in scientific experiment but in American popular culture⁵⁸. She suggests that this can have
11 obvious negative side-effects; that of blaming individuals for their own unhappiness. Moreover, she
12 calls into question some of the main scientific tenets of positive psychology, which she finds to be
13 wanting in terms of their grip on reality. She argues that Seligman's methods for countering
14 pessimism rely on the cultivation of what he himself terms "positive illusions" for avoiding
15 depression, improving health and increasing achievements⁵⁹.

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22 Whilst Held's focus is on the internal validity of some of the core arguments of positive psychology,
23 particularly the place of optimism bias, others have sought to problematize happiness and positive
24 psychology as a movement which shapes new citizen-subjectivities and reframes the logic of
25 government. Sam Binkley has argued that happiness itself has become an object of governance – it
26 has been rendered governable through a new set of techniques aimed at "the optimization,
27 coordination and integration of human behaviors"⁶⁰. For Binkley this poses a problem for
28 governmentality theorists who have not yet adequately considered the non-rational realm of
29 emotional governance. The integration of happiness with economic policy (in Layard's promotion of
30 the index of Gross National Happiness Index⁶¹) is one sense in which the optimisation of optimism is
31 rendered a national policy goal. In the same terms, positive psychology in workplace training can be
32 seen as an everyday manifestation of this overall ambition – that is, in the optimisation of the
33 psychologically resilient, adaptive and optimistic worker in uncertain economic times. Binkley's
34 observation of positive psychology's disassociation of the psyche from social relations has particular
35 resonance for geographers seeking to better understand the situated nature of (workplace)
36 subjectivity⁶². It provides a corrective to positive psychology's dismissal of the role of context in
37 determining authentic happiness; its account of globally universal character strengths is one
38 testament to this. Positive psychology prioritizes the individual over cultural-economic context. So
39 whilst a limited set of certain 'life circumstances' such as being married, religious or living in a
40 democratic country may have a positive impact on your happiness, it is through developing a *sense*
41 *of personal control* over the conditions in which one lives that will help people to avoid learned
42 helplessness and to instead re-educate their optimism and improve their health, wellbeing, life
43 satisfaction and longevity; to escape their contexts⁶³. It is not through changing those
44 circumstances, nor through social change nor political conflict that one can achieve happiness, but
45 through changing the individual self. Curiously though, it is precisely *because of* the growth of
46 market individualism and the simultaneous decline of family, nation and God, that positive
47 psychology is said to be needed⁶⁴. Seligman contends that a belief system which values the
48 'maximal self' has come at the expense of a common purpose⁶⁵. This is curious in the sense that it is
49 through the highly individualistic project of self-optimisation that positive psychology is said to reap
50 benefit, not least in the aforementioned approaches based on maximizing character strengths to
51 foster more effective workplace identities.

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5 It is by 'feeling good and functioning well', particularly in the workplace, that one can fulfil one's own
6 potential within a free market in which continued employment is increasingly precarious. In this
7 scenario, externally imposed controls such as a too restrictive and weakness-focussed workplace
8 culture, an entrepreneur-stifling business environment or a dependency-creating welfare state are
9 an impediment to the personal well-being that comes from developing a personal mastery over your
10 cognitive habits and your emotional states. Happiness therefore lies in your sense of agency and
11 freedom to escape your social situation through learned exercises and training programmes which
12 only work if you put in the emotional labour to be adequately optimistic.
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20 **3. Conclusion: emotional work cultures**

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22 In this paper, we have argued that workplace training programmes have become an important
23 pedagogic site for re-education of 'neurocitizens'; in this case, workers who have developed
24 psychological self-mastery such that they can manage their own emotional states in ways which are
25 both optimistic and optimising. Workers' conceptions of personal transformation and growth
26 become closely aligned with the goals of their organisation, company and the wider economy. These
27 conceptions are intentionally shaped by the science and practice of positive psychology courses,
28 training and coaching. We began by outlining the perceived need for such emotional labour within a
29 recession-state service and knowledge economy in which the narratives of absentee and
30 presenteeism have come to the fore. This global economic situation has provided the circumstances
31 in which positive psychology can, excuse the pun, flourish. For whilst as we have shown, positive
32 psychology has been self-consciously mapping out its disciplinary identity as assuredly scientific, it is
33 this very scientificness which has provided positive psychology workplace providers and consultants
34 with their unique selling points both in the commercial sector and in an increasingly commercialising
35 public sector (the commissioning of the VIA Institute in UK welfare being just one case in point).
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43 We have outlined how despite efforts to distinguish positive psychology from self-help and the
44 intangible 'magic' of positive thinking, the goal of universal optimism remains a core current running
45 through positive psychology training in workplace settings, whether they take a psychometric
46 strengths approach, a whole institutional appreciative inquiry approach or a holistic mindfulness
47 approach. In a global business environment in which perpetual change is the only certainty, the
48 attributes of motivation, maximization, emotional self-management, and personal growth have
49 become key attributes of the employable and effective worker. And this sense of optimisation
50 enrols the emotional self of the whole person into the workplace culture in ways which as
51 Hochschild argued, can be wholeheartedly alienating.
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56 What we have also suggested here is that a geographical understanding of workplace culture can
57 offer an original insight into the role of particular versions of psychological knowledge in reframing
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3 citizenship and governance in three principal ways. First, educational geographies can be
4 productively extended into new sites of empirical study such as workplaces. Secondly, we have
5 made visible the interwoven spatialities of emotions, social relationships at work and attempts to
6 govern worker subjectivities *through* the emotions. And thirdly, we have offered insights into the
7 embodied and emotional performances of economic subject positions within specific workplace
8 cultures. But the broader claim we make here is that a geographically context-sensitive approach to
9 workplace training programmes sheds new light on the confluence between brain culture and its
10 neoliberal economic context, contributing to emerging geographical analyses of ‘neoliberalism’⁶⁶.
11 We do not take contemporary emotional and psychological forms of governance for granted but
12 rather investigate the uses to which they are put and the ways in which reflexive actors
13 conceptualise their role as emotional managers within organisational settings. In this instance, it is
14 positive psychology and its several manifestations which for workplace training providers has
15 become the *de rigeur* explanation of human identity – valued not just in terms of human resource
16 management and organisational change but in terms of the personal resources that such knowledge
17 can bring to the personal life of the trainees and trainers alike. Both the literal and figurative
18 ‘movement’ of positive psychology from the US academic context to the UK field of workplace
19 practice marks a geographically specific rather than universal cultural transfer which imports the
20 long running cultural undercurrent of the American Dream into the UK workplace environment. At
21 times this is quite explicit, for instance in the case of Appreciative Inquiry, which includes the specific
22 notion of the dream phase in its toolkit for organisational change and decision making: “[d]reaming
23 creates a beacon or incentive in the landscape of future possibilities”⁶⁷. Certainly dreaming is not
24 restricted to American culture, but as Thornton has elaborated, the distinctly American rhetoric of
25 the possible accomplishment of “personal and self-perfection” in partnership with the frontier
26 mythology of “the solitary individual battling the forces of nature [here, the emotional brain] to
27 acquire freedom and mastery over the environment” are both powerful forces in explaining the
28 salience of brain culture in US popular culture⁶⁸.
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38 In rendering scientific the ancient wisdoms of mindfulness, everyday manners of showing gratitude
39 and appreciation, or the apparently ‘flakey’ techniques of positive visualisation, the discipline of
40 positive psychology has set out – and in many ways succeeded – to achieve truth status for the
41 science of optimism and optimisation. But in replacing the pseudoscience of positive thinking with
42 the neuroscience of positive emotion, positive psychology has the effect of taking the culturally
43 specific person out of her geographical context. By examining the specific development of positive
44 psychology in workplace training in context as we have done here, we have tried to re-place the
45 geographically situated subject, and to demonstrate not only the emotional labour but the practical
46 leg-work that has gone into re-producing this increasingly wide-spread manifestation of brain
47 culture.
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52
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55

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Geographies of Brain Culture: Cultures of Optimism and Optimisation in Workplace Training Programmes

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Abstract

This paper outlines the strategic alignment of modes of emotional and psychological governance characteristic of 'brain culture' with intensified forms of workplace performance management within specifically neoliberal organisational cultures. Workplace cultures have long been an important site for the geographical study of both the everyday experiences and constitutive performances of global economic change, including the emotional labour which goes into the (re)production of advanced capitalism. This paper examines We introduce the recent emergence of positive psychology-based workplace training programmes in the UK human resources field as a new empirical site for the study of cultural geographies of education. Such programmes promote a culture of optimism and optimal functioning, focussing on the cultivation of positive emotions amongst individual workers and in workplace cultures. This emphasis on wellbeing sits somewhat uncomfortably in the context of the global financial crisis, the UK's recent recession and the diminishing role of the UK state in the provision of welfare, but is wholly concurrent with the neoliberal promotion of 'lifelong learning' and the spread of individualised practices of performance management in UK workplaces. The paper draws on in-depth interviews with trainers and practitioners who variously use positive psychology, mindfulness training and strengths-based competencies in workplaces in the UK, and explores-outlines their connection to the development of positive psychology as a new academic discipline in the USA. In outlining the importance of context for understanding changing workplace cultures and worker subjectivities, a cultural geography analysis of rapid advancements in psychological knowledge provides a useful new perspective on the links between neoliberalism, behavioural change and brain culture. The paper argues that such training programmes signify an extension of strategies of psychological governance characteristic of what has been termed 'brain culture'.

Keywords: positive psychology; behaviour change; neuroscience; organisations; emotional labour

Introduction

Optimism and optimisation have become the watch words of the relatively new scientific discipline of positive psychology. These emotional tropes are increasingly evident in the everyday experiences of workplace cultures, including 'workplace wellbeing' provision, worker training programmes and performance management techniques. In this paper, we consider how these notions are part of a wider 'brain culture' in which knowledges, images and representations of the brain, mind and behaviour are prioritised in the justification of human action and decision-making¹. By outlining both the formalised scientific endeavours and the everyday emotional labour involved in achieving

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3 optimism and optimisation in the workplace, we demonstrate the governmental and economic
4 logics implicated in the designation and cultivation of positive affects within workplace cultures. We
5 argue that an emphasis on cultural-economic context is essential for understanding how specific
6 manifestations of psychological knowledge are adopted as explanations of the self and of behaviour
7 in specific spaces and times.
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12 The geographies of education has developed into an empirically wide-ranging field which embraces
13 'outward-looking' approaches extending beyond a concern for children and young people and
14 towards analysis of knowledge economies². It engages with diverse spaces of informal and
15 alternative learning³, and examines the invocation of pedagogical forms of governance across
16 multiple social and political sectors including media spaces, policing, immigration, welfare practice,
17 and community activism⁴. However, there is not to our knowledge any existing geographical analysis
18 of the workplace as a space of education and of workers as learners. Whilst disciplines such as
19 educational studies, human resource management, organisational studies and the economics of
20 human capital have long established research on adult skills, training, worker education, and
21 policies, practices and discourses of 'lifelong learning'⁵, geographical research on these phenomena
22 is fairly sparse, and is often focused on training, vocational and skills programmes for the
23 unemployed⁶. We therefore propose an investigation of the specific educational endeavours of
24 workplace training programmes and the pedagogical rationalities of workplace wellbeing and
25 organisational management as an important new focus for the geographical study of education.
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32 A synthesis of emotional geographies and cultural-economic labour geographies allows us to offer
33 new insight into workplace cultures as hitherto overlooked spaces of education. Such spaces are
34 arguably as important as schools as significant sites for the production of citizen-subjectivity and of
35 economically- and emotionally-imbued social relations. Clearly an analysis of the cultivation of
36 emotions such as optimism and 'work on the self' in the name of optimisation implies that
37 emotional and psychological governance matters in the spaces of work. Moving beyond this simple
38 assertion, however, it is our concern here to understand emotion "in terms of its socio-spatial
39 mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states"⁷. By building
40 on emotional geographers' contention that emotions are located both in the body and in place, that
41 emotions exist as products of social relationships, and that there are high political stakes associated
42 with the representation of emotions, we investigate workplace training programmes as specific sites
43 of emotional and psychological governance in the context of Anglo-American neoliberalism.
44 Interrogating the explicit management of workers' emotions and the emotional health of an
45 organisational culture, we argue that ~~such programmes become important~~are crucial to
46 understanding the cultural geographies of the workplace within 'soft' capitalist societies. Managers
47 are not only now charged with the surveillance of workers' time, and with fostering specific spatial
48 arrangements conducive to a more productive/creative workplace, but they must also work to shape
49 the psychological resilience and emotional wellbeing of their workers whilst continually improving
50 their own emotional intelligence and wellbeing. Positive psychology has emerged as a means by
51 which to re-educate the ~~worker~~; to re-invent the worker as what might be termed a 'neurocitizen';
52 a readily employable worker who is skilled in the management of their and others' emotions, is
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committed to the pursuit of self-optimisation, and is responsible for their own psychological governance⁸. In this sense, positive psychology workplace training programmes mobilise pedagogical mechanisms – fostering learning about one’s own mind – in the broad pursuit of behavioural change. The worker’s intimate and personal attributes, strengths and commitments are to be aligned with that of the company and by extension, the economy.

The cultural-economic context of ‘soft’ neoliberal capitalism does not simply provide a backdrop in which workplace training programmes based on positive psychology have thrived. Rather, new forms of emotional and psychological governance in the workplace have relied on the emergence of a brain culture which provides the scientific grounds and practical mechanisms for the promotion of individualised lifelong learning and performance management. The shaping of worker subjectivities as flexibilized human capital resources, and as competitors within a precarious and constantly changing employment context are well-documented facets of a neoliberal focus on employability (as distinct from a Keynesian commitment to employment). The ratcheting up of happiness economics and workplace wellbeing programmes is concurrent with a shift from welfare to workfare and a significant decline in formal union representation amongst workers. Geographers and social policy scholars have powerfully narrated the gradual shift from welfare to workfare since the 1980s⁹. In this context, the ~~and the~~ responsibilisation and abandonment that this has entailed for the job-seeking citizen and non-citizen ~~the worker have, for many, been responsibilized and abandoned by the state and their labour power eroded¹⁰. who must now be held culpable for their own ‘work readiness’ or employability whilst the safety-net of state welfare continues to be eroded (Levitas, 2012; Wiggan, 2012).~~ Employers too are increasingly demanding workers with ‘go-getting’ attitudes, aptitudes, competencies and skills. But the ~~This~~ emphasis on personality, on positive emotion and positive affects mark a new and troubling shift away from the collectivism of state welfare and towards the personalisation of wellbeing. ~~For the Behavioural Insights Team, the psychometric test appears to provide a subtle nudge for job seekers to optimise their job seeking potential. For critics, it is not lack of optimism and optimal functioning that cause unemployment, but a lack of jobs. For those who happen to be geographically situated in places of surplus employment or who are geographically mobile and able to find work,~~

However the emotional mechanisms and potential consequences of producing such subjectivities are not well understood. “[E]motional labour...calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality” (Hochschild, 1983 [2003]: 7). Sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s ~~influential~~ account of the incorporation of feelings into everyday working practices and the commercialisation of intimate private life is an ~~one~~ important reference point for geographers investigating the workplace as a distinctive space in which ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’ intersect within the context of late capitalist service economies¹¹. Her ethnographic and interview research with Delta airlines’ flight attendants, and the company’s bill and debt collectors demonstrated the range and intensity of feelings used in personal contact between workers and consumers in order to manage or modify the emotional state of the encounter. ~~Her work narrates the economic shift towards service sector employment during the 1980s in which the personal attributes of the worker as service provider, relationship manager and~~

customer-facing company representative became paramount in paid work. Whether the smiles, attentiveness and deference of the flight attendants, or the tactics of aggression, distrust and coercion used by the debt collectors, these how workers are charged with creating particular workplace atmospheres. They deploy ing their emotional labour in the service of the company's profitability, and in The consequence of this emotional self-management is that workers become alienated from their own sense of self.

Hochschild argues that the demands on women in the service economy have particular consequences for the gendering of workplace cultures, as women are seen to carry some natural capacity for emotional intelligence, skilled emotional expression and the emotional management of social situations (1983 [2003]: 20). Linda McDowell's work has developed further analysis of the power inequalities between feminised and masculinised forms of emotional labour, relating to masculinist workplace cultures and the feminised emotional labour of care work. In *Capital Culture* (1997), she dissected the everyday and embodied performances of workers in the City of London's banking sector, showing how the cultural representations and daily actions of City workers marginalised women and feminine behaviours. Her contention was not that men were not invested in emotional labour. Indeed the young 'princes' of the banking industry were seen not only as quick-minded, natural mathematicians, but also ruthless and aggressive: "there seems to be an incredible need to bite everybody's head off and knock them out of the way and trample on their heads" (McDowell and Court, 1997; p737). At the other end of the income scale, Cultural-economic geographers such as Linda McDowell's¹² have, like Hochschild, examined how the emotional and embodied labour required by working life within a contemporary service and knowledge economy has the particular effect of producing highly gendered workplace cultures in which emotional intelligence finds new status, whilst at the very same time being devalued as a naturalised feminine trait. *Working Bodies* (2009) examined the emotional and embodied labour involved in contemporary care and service work. Just as for Hochschild, it is the 'co-presence' of the producer/worker and consumer which makes emotional management and embodied propriety so important to the contemporary economic transaction. As such, bodily intimacy, appearance, age, weight, height and manners have become key assets for the employable worker in this context¹³. (see also Crang, 1994 on the character of interpersonal labour in service employment). The work of cultural-economic geographers thus affirms a methodological commitment to understanding the role of the body in becoming 'appropriate' employees in the service sector and knowledge economies. Moreover, this work recognises there-orient us geographically to focus on the relatively-micro-scale of workplace settings and organisational cultures as crucial for understanding the everyday realisation and consequences of global economic change.

Workplace training programmes such as those based on positive psychology offer an important insight-perspective onto how specific approaches to organisational management approaches focus on the aim to cultivate-cultivation of positive emotions amongst workers and within workplace cultures. They provide us with a hitherto underexplored site in which educational imperatives based on brain culture are put in the service of a neoliberal emphasis on performance management. In so doing, such training sets out to produce worker subjectivities which must internalise an emotional

commitment to optimism and optimisation. Whilst cultural-economic geographies of workplace culture have focussed primarily on the gendered body, or on specific kinds of tacit knowledges, this paper brings these focal points together in an investigation of the cultivation of positive mental and embodied states, and the elevated status of the brain in workplace training programmes. (Sustained discussion of gendered identities is notably absent from the positive psychology literature.) In seeking to explicitly manage workers' emotions, such programmes become important to understanding the cultural geographies of the workplace within 'soft' capitalist societies. Managers are not only now charged with the surveillance of workers' time, and with fostering specific spatial arrangements conducive to a more productive/creative workplace, but they must also work to shape the psychological resilience and emotional wellbeing of their workers whilst continually improving their own emotional intelligence and wellbeing. Positive psychology has emerged as a means by which to re-educate the worker, to re-invent the worker as what might be termed a 'neurocitizen', a readily employable worker who is skilled in the management of their and others' emotions, is committed to the pursuit of self-optimisation, and is responsible for their own psychological governance. In this sense, positive psychology workplace training programmes mobilise pedagogical mechanisms—fostering learning about one's own mind—in the broad pursuit of behavioural change. The worker's intimate and personal attributes, strengths and commitments are to be aligned with that of the company and by extension, the economy.

Optimism and optimisation have become the watch words of the relatively new discipline of positive psychology. The paper considers how these notions are bound up with a wider 'brain culture' in which knowledges, representations about the brain, mind and behaviour are increasingly valued in the justification of human action and decision-making (Thornton, 2011). The paper is split into two main sections. In the first we review the emergence of positive psychology as a new field of practice and outline some of the key tenets of workplace based training and education programmes available across the UK. Here we ~~also~~ trace the US routes of positive psychology as a way of investigating how such knowledges and practices 'travel', highlighting the centrality of geographical context to our analysis. In the second section we interrogate the focus on wellbeing in light of the increasing withdrawal of welfare provision in the contemporary convergence of wellbeing and optimal performance in workplace training within the contemporary UK economic context, before drawing some conclusions about practices of emotional and psychological governance in workplace settings. The paper is based on in-depth interviews with 240 (7 female and 13 male) practitioners of positive psychology, strengths-based approaches and mindfulness who are involved in delivering workplace based training programmes in the UK, with some practitioners delivering such programmes world-wide¹⁴. The interviews were complemented by a web-based survey of contemporary providers of workplace training programmes and documentary analysis of 27 positive psychology texts. The interviews were undertaken between May-August 2013. The data was analysed using in vivo coding including the following meta-themes: body and emotion; character strengths; control/autonomy; disciplinary developments; economic context; wellbeing, happiness and welfare; workplace culture. The research was undertaken between May-August 2013.

Learning optimism from the USA

Positive psychology has become an influential approach to organisational management in several global companies. Training courses and consultancies offering education for frontline workers, workplace managers and human resource specialists have become increasingly commonplace since the late 1990s. By the start of the twenty-first century techniques used to improve the happiness and wellbeing of employees had penetrated the heart of American business (Ehrenreich, 2009) and ~~was-were~~ fast spreading to the UK and Europe. Positive psychology at work is used for two main reasons. Firstly, to improve the mental attitude of employees making them more positive and ultimately more productive. Depression-related absenteeism from work has been estimated by Gallup to be costing the US economy over \$23 billion a year¹⁵, and in a survey conducted by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI)/Pfizer, it was said to cost the UK economy over £14 billion per year, with mental health conditions being the main cause of absence from work¹⁶. Meanwhile, the concept of 'presenteeism' has come to the fore since the global financial crisis of 2008, referring to workers coming to work despite their ill-health, often through fear of redundancy¹⁷. ~~The Work Foundation's 2010 report on 'Sickness Presence in the Workplace' found that higher levels of sickness presence were associated with lower manager performance, reduced psychological wellbeing and higher levels of sickness absence¹⁸. But presenteeism has also been used to describe employees who procrastinate and carryout personal tasks at work¹⁹ or who attend work but are not really working.~~ Secondly, positive psychology is used in different ways by supervisors and leaders to change organisational cultures to try to reduce reproachful styles of management and instead encourage better performance through creativity, productivity and strong engagement with other employees, customers and the company.

Positive psychology at work has become an umbrella term which describes several inter-related (and sometimes contested) approaches to changing workplace cultures through cultivating the emotional wellbeing, states and dispositions of workers and workplaces (table 1). ~~In this paper we consider the ways in which the workplace training sector is re-educating workers using techniques, courses and pedagogies nested under the umbrella term of positive psychology and why certain approaches hold sway with business managers particularly in the endeavour of cultivating new worker subjectivities. These approaches include:~~

Table 1: Approaches to positive psychology at work

<u>Psychometric testing</u>	<u>surveys which aim to identify and measure a person's attributes or psychological traits, sometimes used in recruitment</u>
<u>Strength-based assessments</u>	<u>a type of psychometric test which aims to identify a person's core strengths</u>
<u>Neurolinguistic programming (NLP)</u>	<u>an approach derived from psychology, counselling and hypnotherapy which aims to manipulate situations, relationships and interactions through body language and framing to achieve specific goals</u>
<u>Appreciative Inquiry (AI)</u>	<u>a 'positive change methodology' which aims to identify an organisations' success, release positive potential, imagine positive futures²⁰</u>
<u>'Flow'</u>	<u>immersing oneself optimally in an experience²¹</u>
<u>Mindfulness practice</u>	<u>a form of meditation derived from Buddhism which aims to help people focus their conscious attention on the present, brought into</u>

western practice largely by John Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School²²

psychometric testing (surveys which aim to identify and measure a person's attributes or psychological traits, sometimes used in recruitment); strength-based assessments (a type of psychometric test which aims to identify a person's core strengths); neurolinguistic programming (NLP) (an approach derived from psychology, counselling and hypnotherapy which aims to manipulate situations, relationships and interactions through body language and framing to achieve specific goals); Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (a 'positive change methodology' which aims to identify an organisations' success, release positive potential, imagine positive futures²³); 'flow' (which refers to immersing oneself optimally in an experience²⁴); and mindfulness practice (a form of meditation derived from Buddhism which aims to help people focus their conscious attention on the present, brought into western practice largely by John Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School²⁵).

Part of our concern in this paper is to understand why it is that certain approaches nested under this umbrella term hold sway with business managers where others fail to gain traction. It is our intention to show how particular accounts of the human psyche win favour within the workplace training sector. We examine the stated rationales for the development and successes of positive psychology and trace its evolution from a 'movement' to an academic discipline in its specific cultural and economic context. We consider the way in which the academic science and business practice of positive psychology both intersect and pull the positive psychology project in different directions. And we provide a detailed account of the centrality of optimism within positive psychology's recent and longer history.

For critics such as US author, Barbara Ehrenreich, it is no coincidence that positive psychology has developed in the specific geographical context of the US during the 1980s, economic context on the back of a wave of 'positive thinking' and motivational speaking predominant in the 1980s the US corporate sphere²⁶. She argues that the 1980s push towards downsizing challenged rational management techniques as businesses began to restructure and reorganise. Traditional management techniques were being undermined by the demands of shareholders, rapid economic and technological change, and advancements in communication. Managers needed innovative ways to get the most out of their workforce. Practitioners of positive psychology have also argued that the global financial crisis has meant that business managers have to do more with less. For some, this is an opportunity to make workplaces more ethical and more sustainable²⁷, and for others, it is a business opportunity for workplace training providers:

"I know a lot of organisations got to the point where they had cut as much as they could cut without permanently damaging the organisation, they couldn't ask any more of their people and yet they needed to, so they started to look at what they could put back into their people to rebuild them. That in tandem with the faddish interest in positive psychology and happiness at work and wellbeing and mindfulness has caused people to think that 'oh there might be something in this, if we look after our employees better maybe they will perform better'. That combination of things has driven positive psychology in business."

Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.

These geographical and contextual factors have been important in providing the business conditions in which positive psychology workplace training programmes have thrived. In some cases workplace training in positive psychology was seen (by managers and some trainers) as an easy route to improved workplace performance i.e. “if you are in a positive state of mind at work you will do a better job” (*practitioner in positive psychology and advisor on happiness at work, interviewed 20/05/13*). Alongside this has been a set of academic developments which are regarded as key reference points for the recent establishment of positive psychology as a distinct discipline. Positive psychologists often mark this point with the pioneering work of US psychologist Martin Seligman, whose books, *Learned Optimism*, *Authentic Happiness*, and more recently, *Flourish*, have been both popular and important sources for a rapidly expanding discipline²⁸. In about 1999, it is said that Seligman started up the first network of positive psychologists, and his “charisma and organizational skills” are said to be important factors in the success of this network²⁹. Seligman became the president of the American Psychological Society in 1998, marking the acceptance of positive psychology within the mainstream discipline. Meetings were held in Philadelphia, Washington DC, Lincoln, Lawrence, Columbia, Grand Cayman and Akumal³⁰. At its root was Seligman’s³¹ assertion that psychology had for too long told a “half-baked” story about the human mind; its focus on trauma, disorder and pathology and its ‘fix it’ mentality had been at the expense of developing any substantive knowledge about positive traits, emotions, states of mind and aspects of character which could be said to be strengths or virtues. These positive elements could help people to achieve not only mental health, but to thrive and flourish; to live the good life, to live well and to achieve *authentic* happiness. This rounded approach has been particularly attractive in human resource management and workplace training initiatives which have concentrated their efforts primarily on how to create positive or virtuous workplace cultures, and on how to improve workers’ personal strengths³².

For some proponents of positive psychology, Seligman and other prominent US-based figures such as Don Clifton (who developed the Clifton strengths psychometric test), and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (who advanced the concept of ‘flow’) and Rick Snyder (who worked on *hope*) revived a longer tradition of humanistic psychology which can be dated back to the work of Abraham Maslow. As early as 1954 Maslow commented that psychology had for too long been concerned only with the ‘dark side’ of humanity³³. That said, there have been a series of high-profile debates between humanistic and positive psychologists since Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi³⁴ dismissed humanistic psychology as a non-scientific venture associated with the narcissistic industry of ‘self-help’³⁵. ~~(see Held, 2004 for a full account)~~ Given the positioning (one assumes by the publishers) of many of Seligman’s books as ‘how to’ self-help books, with subtitles such as “How to change your mind and your life” (*Learned Optimism*), “Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment” (*Authentic Happiness*), and “A new understanding of happiness and well-being – and how to achieve them” (*Flourish*), this criticism stands out as particularly unfortunate. The core concepts and topics for positive psychology are wide-ranging: including but not limited to: happiness; flow; hope; optimism; emotional intelligence; engagement; giftedness; creativity; wisdom; meaning; positive affects; positive emotion; positive traits; positive self; positive relationships; positive change; motivation; character strengths; subjective-wellbeing; courage;

virtues; accomplishment; savouring; resilience; gratitude; mindfulness; mindsets; and love. There is also a role for nutrition and physical exercise suggesting that a healthy body is integrated with character virtues and positive mental states. But the establishment of positive psychology as a named discipline is recent; it is a young discipline which is self-consciously searching for acceptance as a serious field of academic enquiry.

Since those initial meetings from Philadelphia to Akumal, masters programmes in positive psychology have been one of predominant ways in which the discipline has been established, with 'MAPP' courses (Masters in Applied Positive Psychology) available at several institutions³⁶. ~~in Penn State University, academic home to Seligman since 2005/6, in the University of East London since 2007 and at Buckinghamshire New University in High Wycombe, UK. In Australia, the University of Sydney also has a coaching and psychology unit through which they teach people in the application of positive psychology coaching aimed at individuals, education and business. And the Melbourne Graduate School of Education has also recently launched a research centre on positive psychology.~~ New academic journals and several textbooks have been published³⁷. Several of our interviewees have graduated from one of the MAPP courses in recent years. One of our interviewees recalls the rapid emergence of positive psychology recounting how it arrived in the UK in around 2001 after sessions on positive psychology were organised by students at the British Psychological Society (BPS) annual conference at which Martin Seligman spoke:

"Martin Seligman was very lucky to launch it from a big enough platform at that point to attract a lot of interest, so I would say in the beginning it was a movement. And then it transformed [...] into much more of a discipline due to the large amount of scholarly work in the area and publications that brought everything together."

Senior Lecturer in Positive Psychology, interviewed 21/08/13.

But it was not universally welcomed within mainstream psychology, and scholars in this field had to deal with a degree of hostility: "I remember sometime in 2001/2002 mentioning it in the BPS, the very senior levels [that I] do positive psychology and literally having a reaction that people laugh at my face" (*Senior Lecturer in Positive Psychology, interviewed 21/08/13*). In the face of such criticism, it is not uncommon for a textbook in positive psychology to begin with an assertion of its scientific credentials, or an assertion of what it is not (positive thinking, pseudo-science, 'mumbo-jumbo', self-help). There is still very much a sense that the 'case for' positive psychology is still being made³⁸. In the Foreword to the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, a vast and pioneering compendium of work in positive psychology, the series editor, Peter Nathan writes that:

"[p]ositive psychology is psychology – psychology is science – and science requires checking theories against evidence. Accordingly, positive psychology is not to be confused with untested self-help, footless affirmation, or secular religion no matter how good these make us feel. Positive psychology is neither a recycled version of the power of positive thinking nor a sequel to *The Secret*³⁹".

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3 It is not our intention in this paper to cast aspersions on the scientific merits of positive psychology,
4 but rather ~~– in the spirit of other histories and sociologies of science – it is~~ to show how its
5 ‘scientificness’ has been of major appeal in the application of positive psychology in workplace
6 training programmes adopted in business. As one practitioner pointed out:
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9 “Businesses are very faddish, they always like the latest thing, especially if it has come from
10 academia and it sounds quite scientific, especially if it is to do with the brain and especially if
11 they think it is something that will help the business perform better.”
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14 *Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.*
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18 Some techniques that fall under the umbrella of positive psychology, and are offered in the
19 repertoire of many positive psychology trainers, are increasingly popular with businesses not only
20 because of their ‘scientificness’ but also their media attention. Mindfulness is a good example of this
21 and its emerging scientific validity has received considerable positive attention from UK media, as
22 the Director of this training consultancy demonstrates:
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25 It [mindfulness] is emerging as more popular [than the other aspects of positive psychology
26 I teach] and I think a lot of that is because it has been in the press and there is so much
27 science behind it. A lot of the stuff I do is very basic brain science, so about working with
28 your brain instead of against it.
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31 *Strategic Learning Specialist, Director of mindfulness and positive psychology training*
32 *consultancy, interviewed 9/7/13.*
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34 In light of the appeal that the scientific prowess of positive psychology appears to have amongst
35 business it is of interest that so many positive psychology publications draw attention to its scientific
36 methods, paraphernalia, communities and rigour. Sarah Lewis, managing director of organizational
37 consultancy, *Appreciating Change* puts it as follows:
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40 “[p]ositive psychology is further distinguished from positive thinking by the fact that it has
41 ‘body of knowledge’ structures such as collegiate bodies, university departments, professors
42 and rigorous accredited academic courses...it has all the paraphernalia of scientific discourse
43 with peer-reviewed journals and academic conferences. Its practitioners apply to respected
44 scientific bodies for research grants. Assertions made as fact can be checked, verified or
45 refuted by others⁴⁰.”
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48 ~~In addition, organisations such as The Mindfulness Exchange (TME) – a spin-off from the Oxford~~
49 ~~Mindfulness Centre, which focuses exclusively on mindfulness in the workplace – are “trying to get~~
50 ~~studies done to show that there are outcomes [from mindfulness] with measures that are relevant~~
51 ~~to the workplace” (co-founder of the TME, interviewed 25/5/13).~~ The application of positive
52 psychology to workplace environments and the incentive for a growing industry of trainers to sell
53 the benefits of these techniques increases the capacity for conducting research into the impact of
54 positive psychology on workplace performance indicators such as stress levels, absenteeism,
55 presenteeism, workplace engagement and productivity.
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Other practitioners are more critical of the field of positive psychology and warn that its commercial, workplace based applications can sometimes over-ride its scientific rigour,

“I mean, you do get a lot of people in positive psychology who are, dare I say it, just talk a load of old mumbo jumbo you know, are still going down the route of positive affirmations and stuff like that, you know, the old positive thinking nonsense or talking about abundance and, you know, the book ‘The Secret’?”

Provider of strengths-based workplace training and member of International Positive Psychology Association, interviewed 18/07/13.

It is therefore exceedingly important to some practitioners of positive psychology in workplace training, not least to be able to sell their approach to businesses, that ~~the~~their pedagogical approach is based on ~~are~~ providing scientifically validated methods for creating positive workers and positive workplace cultures. In this sense, they are not to be mistaken for practitioners of earlier ‘fads’ to hit the business world, such as Neurolinguistic Programming, which as one of our interviewees highlighted, in his view ‘stole’ selective observations from counselling, hypnotherapy and psychology in order to essentially manipulate people into behaving in particular ways in the workplace. Neither are they simply evangelists of ‘positive thinking’ – just being hopeful will not magic good outcomes into existence. They do not avoid discussions of negativity⁴¹. Nor do they dismiss pessimism – which has an important role in helping to provide an accurate perception of reality, and is crucial in many job roles such as treasurer, financial and business administrator, safety engineer and risk assessors⁴². Positive psychologists have been working hard to avoid associations with positive thinking. Their claim is to deal in the ‘science of optimism’; not just to look on the bright side of life.⁴

~~Optimism is thus clearly a pivotal concept in positive psychology. Seligman’s *Learned Optimism* is indeed a hopeful account of optimism itself. His research showed that optimism was a skill which could be learned rather than an innate personality trait. These insights stemmed from Seligman’s first research job in the lab of Richard Solomon at the University of Pennsylvania, where controversial tests with dogs were being carried out during the 1960s. The dogs were being given electric shocks within their enclosures, to condition them in a Pavlovian sense. Then the dogs were given the option of escaping the enclosure, but by then they had learned that nothing they did would stop the shocks, and they didn’t bother trying to escape, even though they could have jumped the barrier – these dogs displayed what he described as ‘learned helplessness’. Despite his reported repulsion at the notion of animal experimentation, Seligman surmised that such experimental methods were the only way to provide objective results. Their experiments, Seligman attests, served as a significant challenge to the behaviourist orthodoxy characteristic of 1960s psychology – he and his colleague Steve Maier had proved that reward and punishment were not the only determinants of behaviour, but that the *expectation* of the dogs had an impact on whether they tried to escape or not. Seligman and Maier went on to ‘teach’ the dogs that they could overcome this helplessness. Firstly they dragged the dogs out of the enclosures until they would do so themselves, and secondly they spent time teaching the dogs that they could respond to the shocks.~~

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3 This was said to give them a positive outlook which would change their behaviour and encourage
4 them to try to escape subsequent shocks.
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8 Indeed, optimism has been an important concept in positive psychology. Building on his earlier
9 (highly controversial) research with Richard Solomon on learned helplessness in the 1960s, Seligman
10 and Steve Maier went on to argue that as well as reward and punishment, expectation had an
11 impact on animal behaviour (in this case in dogs) and could create the conditions for 'learned
12 optimism'. Seligman went on to test his theory in the workplace – with life insurance salespeople,
13 who he found to be more successful in ~~terms of~~ sales when they had been recruited for their
14 optimism; they learned to deal with rejection better⁴³. Ehrenreich also found that large drug
15 companies saw the potential of optimism in business, beginning active recruitment drives targeting
16 college cheerleaders who were seen to be inherently enthusiastic and positive able to achieve high
17 sales targets⁴⁴. Optimism for positive psychologists is a “state of explanation” rather than a state of
18 mind. It refers to how we explain the causes of events to ourselves and is said to have positive
19 benefits not only in terms of workplace performance, but with respect to our mental and physical
20 health, our resilience and life satisfaction⁴⁵. For psychologists of positive emotions such as Michael
21 Cohn and Barbara Fredrickson, it is this quality of *explanation* which makes something like optimism
22 worth researching as an emotion with real effects. It is something more than a mood or a sensation;
23 it involves “an appraisal of the situation”. Their “broaden-and-build-theory” has been used in
24 workplace settings because it confers that experiencing positive emotions can both *broaden* a
25 person’s sense of actions/choices available to them, and can *build* personal resources (social bonds,
26 attachments, intellectual and cognitive skills, creativity and improved brain development)⁴⁶. But not
27 only can positive emotion improve performance in the workplace, ~~but~~ it can make you less racist,
28 more open to ‘the other’, less stressed, and more psychologically resilient to negative situations. As
29 such, they have set out to provide scientific evidence of the real physical, ~~physiological~~ and
30 psychological benefits of positive emotions through experimental studies. Through an 8 week
31 ‘loving-kindness meditation’ intervention based on mindfulness practice, participants in the
32 research were said to show “increases in a number of personal resources, including physical
33 wellness, agency for achieving important goals, ability to savor positive experiences, and quality of
34 close relationships”⁴⁷. Their research aims to demonstrate the role of positive emotions in
35 “humanity’s toolbox for growth”, and to understand the appropriate balance, or “critical ratios of
36 positivity to negativity”⁴⁸.
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47 In many ways, as several of our interviewees admitted, the development of positive psychology as a
48 science and as a set of practices has pulled the discipline itself in different directions. The time lags
49 of academic publishing, it was pointed out, simply do not suit the business decision-making context.
50 While the ‘scientificness’ of positive psychology is clearly attractive to organisational managers,
51 there is no time to wait for research trials, the development of testable hypotheses and repeated
52 and validated experimental results. So trainers working in organisational contexts have amended
53 and adapted positive psychology research in order to develop their own workable training
54 programmes to meet business needs:
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3 “we are unusual in the fact that we ourselves have been critics of positive psychology
4 because we have developed our own strength assessment and development tool [...which]
5 includes weaknesses as one of the elements of feedback. When we launched that we got
6 loads of criticism from colleagues in positive psychology asking how we could include
7 weaknesses in a strengths tool. The answer is simple – our clients and organisations, and
8 real people in the real world were telling us that strengths are great but I also need to know
9 what is going to trip me up and it needs to be balanced and realistic.”

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12 *Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.*

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14 Nevertheless, the science of optimism is a linchpin for the positive psychology workplace training
15 provider which is regularly used in the specific development of leadership skills in workplace
16 settings, as one practitioner remarked:

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19 “...you can sort of talk to [workers] about the power of positive emotion and if you’ve got a
20 problem to solve, the best thing you can possibly do is get your team laughing and then tell
21 them about, you know, and then solve the problem. If you try and do it from a position of
22 doom and gloom and this is all terrible, the brain can’t do it, you know, it’s kind of, pretty
23 obvious stuff really. And again that’s Barbara Fredrickson’s work so you’re linking it back to
24 science.”

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27 *Former business HR manager and current positive psychology consultant, interviewed,*
28 *17/07/13.*

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31 | The development of leadership strengths here is linked ~~here~~ with the biophysical capacities of the
32 brain. The brain *requires* positive emotion in order to fulfil a successful leadership role. Whilst as we
33 have already noted, it has been US based psychologists who have developed the testable precepts of
34 positive emotion, optimism and strengths-based approaches, their findings and implications have
35 been adopted in global businesses across many sectors, as well as in the public sector. Our
36 interviewees had provided consultations for businesses such as BMW in the UK, Germany and China,
37 L’Oreal in France, large pharmaceutical, design, utilities companies, private and public schools, the
38 NHS, UK local authorities, universities and regional police departments, though many did not want
39 to reveal the names of the companies they had worked for. However, one of the biggest markets for
40 positive psychology training was from other trainers who wanted to start their own business and
41 become qualified in teaching positive psychology. Indeed, training trainers appeared to be an
42 industry in itself.

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46 So how did positive psychology ‘go global’ at such a rapid pace? Partly, this is due to the highly
47 regarded leadership style and lecture tours of Martin Seligman, but it is perhaps their adoption by
48 global management consulting companies which has secured their widespread reach. Global
49 consultants, McKinsey and Company, as one of our interviewees noted, have embraced a range of
50 positive psychology approaches including: “strengths, authenticity, resilience, it’s all in there, energy,
51 mindfulness, the whole lot” (*former business HR manager and current positive psychology*
52 *consultant, interviewed, 17/07/13*). Their specific term for their approach is ‘centred leadership’ and
53 boasts “organizational development, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, positive psychology, and
54 leadership; workshops with hundreds of clients to test our ideas; and global surveys” as its academic
55 knowledge base⁴⁹. Like many other strengths approaches to organisational management, they
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3 narrowed down the capacities of the excellent leader to just a handful of sometimes general,
4 sometimes specific attributes: “finding meaning in work, converting emotions such as fear or stress
5 into opportunity, leveraging connections and community, acting in the face of risk, and sustaining
6 the energy that is the life force of change”⁵⁰ (ibid.). Another global consulting company, Gallup,
7 provide a psychometric test which was developed by renowned psychologist, Don Clifton, who was
8 given a Presidential Commendation as the “Father of Strengths-Based Psychology” by the American
9 Psychological Association in 2002⁵¹. The Gallup/Clifton Strengths Finder is a 35 minute timed online
10 questionnaire which will rank your 34 strengths for only \$9.99⁵². This report is then used by
11 workplace coaches and training providers to cater their training to your top strengths. Gallup also
12 sell training kits for coaches, and their own coaches currently provide training in coaching in [the](#)
13 [global business hubs of](#) London, Washington, ~~Omaha~~, Singapore and Sydney.
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20 But these strength based psychometric tests have not been an unreserved global success. They
21 recently made headlines when the UK government’s Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) began piloting
22 strengths personality survey in order to assess job-seekers allowance benefit claimants’ character
23 strengths. The survey was originally designed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman at the
24 VIA (Values in Action) Institute on Character, Cincinnati, USA. Claimants who refused to take the test
25 were threatened with benefits sanctions/withdrawal⁵³, and the Department for Work and Pensions
26 and BIT were criticised by both the press and VIA Institute itself for using a shortened, un-validated
27 version of the survey⁵⁴. As Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park report, the VIA strengths
28 classification which sought to identify “the qualities of a person worthy of moral praise” was
29 constructed by listing the character strengths/virtues of historical and contemporary figures ranging
30 from Benjamin Franklin, to John Templeton (a stock investor and philanthropist whose Templeton
31 Foundation has funded research projects, large research centres and distinguished prizes in Positive
32 Psychology), and even fictional personalities such as the Klingons from US TV series *Star Trek*. They
33 also did content analysis of greetings cards, car bumper stickers, personal ads, songs, graffiti, tarot
34 cards, Pokémon and Harry Potter characters. Finally, they made a list of virtues mentioned in the
35 world’s major religious and philosophical texts, and eventually narrowed these down to 24 universal
36 positive traits⁵⁵.
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51 Lest we be sceptical about whether it is possible in this manner to identify universal character traits
52 within a world of cultural, political, social, ideological and religious diversity, Peterson and Park have
53 undertaken internet based research, using the survey with 111,676 respondents in 54 different
54 nations and all 50 US states, finding that:
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“in almost all nations, from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, the most commonly endorsed
strengths were kindness, fairness, authenticity, gratitude, and open-mindedness, and the
lesser strengths included prudence, modesty, and self-regulation....we speculate that our
results revealed something about universal human nature and/or the character
requirements minimally needed for a viable society⁵⁶”

This is certainly not a modest endeavour, therefore, and they make no secret of their ambitions to understand the very purpose of life, as Peterson and Park explain: “Our project supports the premise of positive psychology that attention to good character sheds light on what makes life worth living. As Aristotle (2000) proposed long ago, happiness is the purpose of life, and living in accordance with one’s virtues is how to achieve happiness”⁵⁷. Together, the bold claims of the science of optimism, the physiology of positive emotions and the universality of character strengths provide workplace training providers with a varied toolkit for working on and working up people’s optimism in the workplace, and crucially, for helping people to function optimally. It is to this virtue of optimisation that we now turn.

From providing welfare to optimising wellbeing

~~One lesson that can be drawn from the debacle of the JobCentrePlus’ use of the VIA survey with benefits claimants is that the UK Government’s ‘behaviour change agenda’ (see Jones *et al.*, 2013 for a description of the genesis of this agenda) is expanding its repertoire of behavioural insights. The knowledge base on which they have traditionally drawn has been based in behavioural economics and social psychology, but this incident implies that the state and non-state agencies (since the Behavioural Insights Team once at the centre of the Cabinet Office has now become a spin-out company) have been experimenting with this new branch of positive psychology, much like the workplace training providers examined here. Geographers and social policy scholars have powerfully narrated the gradual shift from welfare to workfare since the 1980s (MacLeavy, 2007; Peck, 2001; Sunley *et al.*, 2011), and the responsabilisation and abandonment that this has entailed for the job-seeking citizen and non-citizen (Clarke, 2005; Wills *et al.*, 2010) who must now be held culpable for their own ‘work readiness’ or employability whilst the safety-net of state welfare continues to be eroded (Levitas, 2012; Wiggan, 2012). Employers too are increasingly demanding workers with ‘go-getting’ attitudes, aptitudes, competencies and skills. But the emphasis on personality, on positive emotion and positive affects mark a new and troubling shift away from the collectivism of state welfare and towards the personalisation of wellbeing. For the Behavioural Insights Team, the psychometric test appears to provide a subtle nudge for job seekers to optimise their job-seeking potential. For critics, it is not lack of optimism and optimal functioning that cause unemployment, but a lack of jobs. For those who happen to be geographically situated in places of surplus employment or who are geographically mobile and able to find work, ~~as noted in the introduction to this paper, the relative decline in welfare provision in countries such as the UK and USA has been mirrored by the rise of~~ optimism and optimal functioning ~~as become~~ key competencies in the workplace. ~~as one~~ One positive psychology consultant describes how these pivotal terms have become central to the operation of business:~~

“So I talk about, you know, feeling good and functioning well and that’s quite a helpful discussion to have with businesses because it’s about, you know, this isn’t just about helping people feel better and feel happy all the time, it’s also about how they function in the world”

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3 *Former business HR manager and current positive psychology consultant, interviewed*
4 *17/07/13.*
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8 “Feeling good and functioning well” is the kind of bite-size promise that works well in the workplace
9 training industry, where consultants must by the very nature of their business provide their clients
10 with tangible results. At the very least they should give the hope of positive organisational change,
11 and at most, the achievement of personal transformation. This transformation involves capitalising
12 on one’s strengths, cultivating positive emotional traits and functioning optimally. It is a form of
13 behaviour change which like Seligman’s pioneering experiments, ironically takes issue with a
14 behaviourist approach to psychology, challenging their ‘transactional’ model of action in which
15 behavioural change is conditioned by reward and punishment. As one of our interviewees described,
16 shifting from a transactional to transformational theory of behavioural motivation has important
17 commercial benefits which are presumably of particular appeal in times of economic stagnation or
18 recession. Here the interviewee refers to popular business author, Daniel Pink’s work on intrinsic
19 forms of motivation:
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24 “Now transformational relationships or what Dan Pink would call Motivation 2.0, offers a really
25 interesting promise, which is people will work the hardest not for money, not for reward, not for
26 pay, not for punishment but for pleasure, for satisfaction. Now you’ve got to imagine how
27 enormously appealing that is to a company.”
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30 *Director of a Business Development company-, interviewed 21/7/13.*
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34 Indeed, many trainers relied on bite-sized promises or slogans which they taught leaders on these
35 courses to help them tune in to the emotional motivations of their workforce in order to get the
36 most out of them, for example; “you can squeeze adequacy out of anybody but you can only
37 motivate people to success” (*practitioner in positive psychology and advisor on happiness at work,*
38 *interviewed 20/05/13*). In addition to the aforementioned positive psychology training, centred
39 leadership, mindfulness and strengths surveys, the practice of *appreciation* has developed in
40 parallel as an important means of getting the best out of people in the workplace context. Again, it
41 may seem fairly obvious that being nice to workers and praising people’s efforts might pay dividends
42 in terms of their continued commitment and their general satisfaction at work, but workplace
43 training providers have established a new approach to business management called ‘Appreciative
44 Inquiry’, based on the ideas of David Cooperrider, a business consultant, speaker and management
45 scholar at Case Western Reserve University, USA. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to
46 organisational change which regards organisations not as problems to be solved but as “high
47 commitment work systems” in which a focus on optimising workers’ commitments, passions,
48 success stories and strengths can engender more organic organisational change. For [Cooperrider,](#)
49 [the AI, the](#) traditional [management approach of](#) Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
50 (SWOT) focusses too much on the negative. Instead, Cooperrider has developed SOAR, “the
51 systematic study of signature strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results”⁵⁸. Optimisation here
52 means doing away with weakness and threats and being more optimistic about people’s capacity to
53 create, innovate, enliven and aspire for a better workplace culture. Optimism is also tied in with
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3 optimisation because, as one practitioner of AI told us, there is a sense in which organisational
4 change is perpetual, and therefore organisations must always strive to be better:
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7 “it’s continuous change, it’s always there, and if you had that definition then I think it really
8 strengthens the need for any of the positive stuff, because the only way to keep moving is
9 constant change is to continuously build on what you do well.”
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12 *Director of strength-based organisational development company providing Solutions Focus and*
13 *Appreciative Inquiry, interviewed 21/7/13.*
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16 Optimisation is not only a major goal at the level of the organisation but also [an important learning](#)
17 [outcome](#) at a more personal level; workers must strive to be the best they can be. But it is not
18 simply that they should be the best worker in a competitive organisation, but they should be the
19 best *person* that they can be. In recognising and evaluating their strengths, and thus their
20 ‘weaknesses’ found lower down on the strengths scale, they should work on themselves in order to
21 fulfil their maximum potential. Many of the trainers and positive psychology providers we
22 interviewed talked about the importance of addressing the ‘whole person’ in the course of their
23 training, not just the worker. It was also clear that some of the trainers had internalised these
24 principles in explaining their own character, strengths and working lives. One managing director of a
25 strengths-based workplace training provider recalled how she had tried to overcome her perceived
26 weakness in communication for some important training work in Miami, despite the fact that she
27 didn’t enjoy this aspect of her work at that time:
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34 “Right, now, because it’s a skill I learned and this takes me back to my Carnegie days, right,
35 where I could do all of these things, but I didn’t actually enjoy it, right? So I got myself
36 coached, I got myself a personal coach and everything so I could do the best job possible
37 when I went to Miami. Now the reason I took that approach, even subconsciously, is my
38 No.1 strength is maximizer, so of course I would want to do the best, I would never settle for
39 anything that wasn’t top, so even though I didn’t want to do it, I was going to give it my best
40 shot, does that make sense?”
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44 *Managing director of a strengths-based workplace training provider, interviewed 02/8/13.*
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48 As she rationalises the situation, it was her strength as a maximizer that enabled her to work on
49 herself to improve her communication skills to enable her to ‘do the best job possible’. This
50 narrative of optimisation has become a familiar refrain for many social theorists who are seeking to
51 explain the implications of psychological and psychiatric sciences for governance and citizenship.
52 Particular attention has been paid to understanding the development of a ‘science of happiness’, for
53 instance – and to outlining the integration of a self-optimising therapeutic culture with neoliberal
54 forms of governance⁵⁹. In this regard, positive psychology in workplaces can be seen as just one
55 aspect of a broader pedagogic turn within advanced liberal societies in which the perpetual-re-
56 education of the entrepreneurial self is deemed essential⁶⁰. But it is not enough to develop a sense
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of adaptability and flexibility in terms of the skills and capacities required for a working life based on re-skilling as opposed to a life-long career. Rather, it is now crucial to develop the psychological resilience to cope emotionally, and the character strengths to consistently out-perform yourself in an uncertain work environment.

The focus on happiness, psychological resilience, character development and training in positive emotions is now evident in several spheres beyond the workplace (for instance in military training, schools, adult mental health settings and economic policy). Seligman's own Penn Resiliency Programme at the University of Pennsylvania has been delivered in Australia, US and UK schools, in the US army and in adult mental health settings (with university students at risk of depression). Meanwhile, educational programmes base on emotional literacy and wellbeing have been in place since at least 2007 in the UK⁶⁴. The emphasis on positive psychology and character has developed somewhat in parallel with the UK government's so-called happiness agenda, as promoted by Lord Layard⁶² and the Action for Happiness organisation, though for Seligman, the word 'Flourishing' captures his intents more closely – happiness being for him inadequate for giving life meaning and achieving fulfilment (Seligman, 2011: 26). However, they share what is in some ways a self-contradictory analysis of the potential multiplication of happiness or flourishing. For Layard, the conundrum to be solved is that despite our ever increasing income levels, we remain culturally pessimistic, and depression continues to grow. He thus indicates a certain moral deficiency in society which has impacted on our national wellbeing. And for Seligman, the development of character virtues and training of positive emotions will address the moral deficiencies left by the decline in religiosity, marriage and sociability serve as the solution to unhappiness. Whilst people may be biologically limited in terms of their 'set range' of happiness, according to Seligman, *authentic happiness* is under your voluntary control; it is educable, and it is therefore your responsibility to optimise⁶³. Positive psychology workplace training providers can be seen as just one set of actors mobilised in what has become an internationalised programme of behavioural change involving no less than the re-invention of the human subject. This neurocitizen is as morally deficient but at the same time capable – with the right education and the cultivation of a better 'explanatory style' (i.e. an optimistic one) of learned greatness. If these sound like grand claims, it is because the claims of positive psychology are couched very much in these transformational terms. But if the effects of a shift towards happiness in workplace cultures and other contexts are to be taken seriously, then a set of political concerns arise which must be given due consideration. These relate to the dark side of happiness which has been subject to critique by psychologists and social/cultural theorists alike⁶⁴, and which has implications for a geographical understanding of the relationship of workplace cultures to the wider political and cultural economy. Psychologist, Barbara Held has argued that positive psychology is characterised by a "tyranny of the positive attitude" which has its roots not in scientific experiment but in American popular culture⁶⁵. She suggests that this can have obvious negative side-effects; that of blaming individuals for their own unhappiness. Moreover, she calls into question some of the main scientific tenets of positive psychology, which she finds to be wanting in terms of their grip on reality. She argues that Seligman's methods for countering pessimism rely on the cultivation of what he himself terms "positive illusions" for avoiding depression, improving health and increasing achievements⁶⁶.

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3 Whilst Held's focus is on the internal validity of some of the core arguments of positive psychology,
4 particularly the place of optimism bias, others have sought to problematize happiness and positive
5 psychology as a movement which shapes new citizen-subjectivities and reframes the logic of
6 government. Sam Binkley has argued that happiness itself has become an object of governance – it
7 has been rendered governable through a new set of techniques aimed at “the optimization,
8 coordination and integration of human behaviors”⁶⁷. For Binkley this poses a problem for
9 governmentality theorists who have not yet adequately considered the non-rational realm of
10 emotional governance. The integration of happiness with economic policy (in Layard's promotion of
11 the index of Gross National Happiness Index⁶⁸) is one sense in which the optimisation of optimism is
12 rendered a national policy goal. In the same terms, positive psychology in workplace training can be
13 seen as an everyday manifestation of this overall ambition – that is, in the optimisation of the
14 psychologically resilient, adaptive and optimistic worker in uncertain economic times. Binkley's
15 observation of positive psychology's disassociation of the psyche from social relations has particular
16 resonance for geographers seeking to better understand the situated nature of (workplace)
17 subjectivity⁶⁹. ~~It provides a corrective to pPositive psychology's can be over dismissal~~
18 of the role of context in determining authentic happiness; ~~its account of globally universal character strengths~~
19 is one testament to this. ~~Positive psychology prioritizes the individual over cultural-economic~~
20 ~~context. So w~~ whilst ~~a limited set of~~ certain 'life circumstances' such as being married, religious or
21 living in a democratic country may have a positive impact on your happiness, it is through developing
22 a *sense of personal control* over the conditions in which one lives that will help people to avoid
23 learned helplessness and to instead re-educate their optimism and improve their health, wellbeing,
24 life satisfaction and longevity; to escape their contexts⁷⁰. It is not through changing those
25 circumstances, nor through social change nor political conflict that one can achieve happiness, but
26 through changing the individual self. Curiously though, it is precisely *because of* the growth of
27 market individualism and the simultaneous decline of family, nation and God, that positive
28 psychology is said to be needed⁷¹. Seligman contends that a belief system which values the
29 'maximal self' has come at the expense of a common purpose⁷². This is curious in the sense that it is
30 through the highly individualistic project of self-optimisation that positive psychology is said to reap
31 benefit, not least in the aforementioned approaches based on maximizing character strengths to
32 foster more effective workplace identities.

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43 It is by 'feeling good and functioning well', particularly in the workplace, that one can fulfil one's own
44 potential within a free market in which continued employment is increasingly precarious. In this
45 scenario, externally imposed controls such as a too restrictive and weakness-focussed workplace
46 culture, an entrepreneur-stifling business environment or a dependency-creating welfare state are
47 an impediment to the personal well-being that comes from developing a personal mastery over your
48 cognitive habits and your emotional states. Happiness therefore lies in your sense of agency and
49 freedom to escape your social situation through learned exercises and training programmes which
50 only work if you put in the emotional labour to be adequately optimistic.

51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 **3. Conclusion: emotional work cultures**

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3 In this paper, we have argued that workplace training programmes have become an important
4 pedagogic site for re-education of 'neurocitizens'; in this case, workers who have developed
5 psychological self-mastery such that they can manage their own emotional states in ways which are
6 both optimistic and optimising. Workers' conceptions of personal transformation and growth
7 become closely aligned with the goals of their organisation, company and the wider economy. These
8 conceptions are intentionally shaped by the science and practice of positive psychology courses,
9 training and coaching, ~~and increasingly by neurobiological accounts of the effects of positive~~
10 ~~affects~~⁷². We began by outlining the perceived need for such emotional labour within a recession-
11 state service and knowledge economy in which the narratives of absentee and presenteeism have
12 come to the fore. This global economic situation has provided the circumstances in which positive
13 psychology can, excuse the pun, flourish. For whilst as we have shown, positive psychology has been
14 self-consciously mapping out its disciplinary identity as assuredly scientific, it is this very
15 scientificness which has provided positive psychology workplace providers and consultants with
16 their unique selling points both in the commercial sector and in an increasingly commercialising
17 public sector (the commissioning of the VIA Institute in UK welfare being just one case in point).
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24 We have outlined how despite efforts to distinguish positive psychology from self-help and the
25 intangible 'magic' of positive thinking, the goal of universal optimism remains a core current running
26 through positive psychology training in workplace settings, whether they take a psychometric
27 strengths approach, a whole institutional appreciative inquiry approach or a holistic mindfulness
28 approach. In a global business environment in which perpetual change is the only certainty, the
29 attributes of motivation, maximization, emotional self-management, and personal growth have
30 become key attributes of the employable and effective worker. And this sense of optimisation
31 enrols the emotional self of the whole person into the workplace culture in ways which as
32 Hochschild argued, can be wholeheartedly alienating.
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39 What we have also ~~hinted-suggested~~ here is that a geographical understanding of workplace
40 culture can offer an original insight into the role of particular versions of psychological knowledge in
41 reframing citizenship and governance in three principal ways. First, educational geographies can be
42 productively extended into new sites of empirical study such as workplaces. Secondly, we have
43 made visible the interwoven spatialities of emotions, social relationships at work and attempts to
44 govern worker subjectivities through the emotions. And thirdly, we have offered insights into the
45 embodied and emotional performances of economic subject positions within specific workplace
46 cultures. But the broader claim we make here is that a geographically context-sensitive approach to
47 workplace training programmes sheds new light on the confluence between brain culture and its
48 neoliberal economic context, contributing to emerging geographical analyses of 'neoliberalism'⁷⁴.
49 We do not take contemporary emotional and psychological forms of governance for granted but
50 rather investigate the uses to which they are put and the ways in which reflexive actors
51 conceptualise their role as emotional managers within organisational settings. —In this instance, it is
52 positive psychology and its several manifestations which for workplace training providers has
53 become the *de rigeur* explanation of human identity – valued not just in terms of human resource
54 management and organisational change but in terms of the personal resources that such knowledge
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can bring to the personal life of the trainees and trainers alike. Both the literal and figurative 'movement' of positive psychology from the US academic context to the UK field of workplace practice marks a geographically specific ~~and not rather than~~ universal cultural transfer which imports the long running cultural undercurrent of the American Dream into the UK workplace environment. At times this is quite explicit, for instance in the case of Appreciative Inquiry, which includes the specific notion of the dream phase in its toolkit for organisational change and decision making: "[d]reaming creates a beacon or incentive in the landscape of future possibilities"⁷⁵. Certainly dreaming is not restricted to American culture, but as Thornton has elaborated, the distinctly American rhetoric of the possible accomplishment of "personal and self-perfection" in partnership with the frontier mythology of "the solitary individual battling the forces of nature [here, the emotional brain] to acquire freedom and mastery over the environment" are both powerful forces in explaining the salience of ~~what she terms~~ 'brain culture' in US popular culture⁷⁶.

In rendering scientific the ancient wisdoms of mindfulness, everyday manners of showing gratitude and appreciation, or the apparently 'flakey' techniques of positive visualisation, the discipline of positive psychology has set out – and in many ways succeeded – to achieve truth status for the science of optimism and optimisation. But in replacing the pseudoscience of positive thinking with the neuroscience of positive emotion, positive psychology has the effect of taking the culturally specific person out of her geographical context. By examining the specific development of positive psychology in workplace training in context as we have done here, we have tried to re-place the geographically situated subject, and to demonstrate not only the emotional labour but the practical leg-work that has gone into re-producing this increasingly wide-spread manifestation of brain culture.

~~Thornton, D.J. (2011) *Brain Culture: Neuroscience and Popular Media*. Rutgers University Press, Piscataway, New Jersey.~~

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¹⁴ We did not undertake interviews with workers or participants in workplace training and so make no assertions as to the effectiveness or otherwise of such programmes in successfully shaping workers' sense of self or behaviours.

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