

# Book Reviews

Positivity: Groundbreaking research reveals how to embrace the hidden strengths of positive emotions, overcome negativity and thrive

**Barbara L Fredrickson**

Crown Publishers, 2009, 280pp, \$24.95 hardback

Review by Mark McKergow

Barbara Fredrickson's theory of 'broaden and build' has been discussed in the SF community for some time, notably by Michael Hjerth. Fredrickson is strongly connected to the positive psychology movement, and this accessible yet excellently-referenced book is her first for a wide audience. The book is in two parts; the first part deals with the whole background and idea of positivity and introduces Fredrickson's Positivity Ratio – comparing positive and negative activities, thoughts, emotions and so on during our day to day lives. She shows a tipping point in the ratio around the 3:1 mark, where people experience transformed lives through positivity. The second part of the book deals with practical ideas in raise your own ratio.

The research on the impact of positive emotions – broadening outlooks, making people more receptive and creative, allowing us to discover new skills, connections and ways of being – will be of great interest to many SF practitioners. This phenomenon is one we observe all the time in our practice, and it must surely be a help that someone is bring academic rigour to this area. This part of the book could be a real boon in adding to the case for SF practice, especially for audiences who are impressed by scientific frames.

Fredrickson keeps the discussion at the level of people throughout the book, steering well clear of anything looking like neuroscience. This works well in at least two ways – it’s immediately accessible to a wide readership (who will be comparing their own experiences) and avoids many of the philosophical difficulties tied up in suggesting that people are controlled by their brains. Fredrickson presents thoughts, emotion and actions as interconnected throughout, again avoiding causal pitfalls.

I also enjoyed the continuing focus on everyday activities – positivity as something to be found and nurtured minute to minute during regular daily routines and experiences, rather than some kind of barrier-busting transformation which, once attained, will change everything for ever. This is surely a sound place to be looking, and I found some connections with our own ‘future perfect’ day-after-the-miracle tools in the focus on everyday little details. There are also echoes of other classic SF tools and processes – the idea of gratitude, affirming what’s good and helpful will be very familiar.

There is, unsurprisingly but rather depressingly, no mention of the SF approach or any of the considerable SF literature in the book. This is absolutely normal for books in the positive psychology canon. In this case, however, there is a particularly interesting point. Fredrickson refers to a meta-analysis of ALL the literature on positivity, nearly 300 different studies covering over 275000 individuals (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005), showing that positivity produces success in life as much as it reflects success in life. Excellent. It seems, however, that the meta-analysis does not include any of the extensive literature on SF therapy and practice (summarised by Macdonald, 2007).

Why is this? I think there is a serious question here – is SF practice ‘positive’? It certainly appears so to outside observers – ‘I like the positive questions’ is one comment I hear frequently from our clients and people on training courses. Indeed, experienced SF practitioner Guy Shennan (2008) commented:

*I do wonder if we protest too much sometimes. I too fear being seen as Pollyanna-ish, and being solution-forced/over-positive. But often, near the start of my courses, when a group I am training have done a few exercises and I then ask them to consider what characteristics of solution focused interviewing they have been noticing so far, people start off by saying "it's a positive approach"!*

*Either they're wrong, my exercises are poorly judged, or it's a positive approach. Pragmatically, I think I prefer the third option!*

Many others in the same discussion were of the view that SF is better viewed as 'usefulness' based or 'what's working' focused rather than positive. Personally, I am of the view that SF practice is nothing to do with psychology, which might be borne out by the lack of any mention in this or other positive psychology books. However, Fredrickson goes out of her way to assert her credentials as a scientist, "one who seeks to find new ways to quantify" human emotions (p12). As a scientist myself it seems that a large amount of relevant data and practice is being overlooked.

It seems to me that we in the SF community are on the horns of a dilemma here. If what we do is relevant to positive psychology, then the data (8 randomised controlled trials and over 80 peer-reviewed papers to date) should clearly be included in such meta-analyses and considered by responsible scientists such as Fredrickson. If it's not relevant, then it's right we are excluded and marginalized, and we need to find other ways to make our case. However, it's still infuriating to me to find practices which have been used in hundreds of thousands of SF interventions like imagining the details of a world where everything is working and writing them down attributed to an American performance coach called Jim Loehr with a 2007 reference! I am sure we would not claim original ownership of such ideas, but to see them attributed elsewhere with no apparent awareness of the history and widespread application of SF practice is galling, to say the least.

To sum up, this is a very readable book aimed at a wide audience. It deserves to sell well, and will probably help many readers. It's still a psychology book, and therefore is presented in terms of 'this is how it is'. I fear that the subtle individual 'every case is different' SF approach either risks being swallowed up or, as here, omitted from history completely

## References

- Lyubomirsky S, L King and E Diener (2005), "The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success?" *Psychological Bulletin* 131: 803–855.
- Macdonald, A. (2007). *Solution-focused Therapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, London: Sage.
- Guy Shennan and others, UKASFP members discussion list (2008), "*Can we be too positive sometimes*", October 2008.

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