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Book Review

Positive Psychology at the movies 2: Using films to build character strengths and well-being. 2nd Edition

Ryan M. Niemiec & Danny Wedding (2014)
Hogrefe, Gottingen, Germany

Reviewed by Melissa Monfries¹
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This is a substantially revised edition of *Positive Psychology at the Movies* (2008) and like its predecessor provides a creative way to explore positive psychology principles through the exploration of films which portray the significant character traits of wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence espoused by positive psychologists (i.e. Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Essentially the book is about movies but authored by psychologists and provides a novel way of approaching movies, so that movies can be viewed differently. Viewers are encouraged to become co-participants by identifying with characters. In this way they can identify factors that contribute to character development and to encourage optimal functioning. Niemiec and Wedding have selected films that fulfil specific criteria that are believed to lead to positive change. As such, *Positive Psychology at the Movies 2* provides an impressive approach to teaching tertiary psychology and education and encourages a focus on values, character strengths, and well-being.

From the educational perspective, films such as *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Dead Poets' Society* (1989), *Mr Holland's Opus* (1995), *the Emperor's Club* (2002), *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), and *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011) are examined in light of the "teacher as protagonist" and encourage lateral discovery of an array of traits that relate to learning, creative expressivity, and self-development. Pertinent themes are discussed in the context of a rich integration of contemporary cross-disciplinary research. Any psychology educator will find a plethora of films to use to teach a wide array of psychological concepts and principles that extend beyond Positive Psychology and are legitimised by rigorous research.

Recently added films focus on a variety of human qualities: the *The Blind Side* (2009) focuses on kindness; *Another Year* (2010) examines love; and *Avatar* (2010) exemplifies fairness. Contemporary cult films such as *Twilight* (2008), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2009), *the Artist* (2011), and the *Life of Pi* (2012) are also included. Each chapter includes a section on international films. For example, there is *Departures* (Japan) 2008 and *The Separation* (Iran) 2011). These provide scope for cross-cultural comparisons in the depiction of traits. Australian films figure prominently, for example, *Animal Kingdom* 2010, *Memento* 2000, and *Strictly Ballroom* 1992. I was surprised to read the authors' argument that the main character in *Animal Kingdom* demonstrates resilience and the maintenance of integrity (pg 119). I am not sure that his final act of murder, albeit murder as seemingly justified revenge, fits with this description. Nevertheless, the comprehensive list of movies includes classic, contemporary, and international movies of significance.

The authors acknowledge that this book could be used as a form of cinematherapy (cf. Berg-Cross, Jennings and Baruch, 1990). This is an infrequently explored therapy but it is one that could provide motivation for students and clients/patients with perhaps more enthusiasm than regular forms

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of therapy. It would certainly be a useful tool to consolidate psychological concepts and inspire behaviour change.

The new inclusions of film exemplars and extended appendices add to the quality of teaching resources that the book provides. There are additional chapters addressing PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement/accomplishment). These aspects of well-being are embraced by positive psychologists and add to the scope of the analysis.

This book provides an interesting way to teach principles associated with values and encourages a novel approach to learning about human beings and their psychological development. The authors' intentions are to use movies as medium for learning about the benefits of positive psychology. In addition, its stimulating and contemporary presentation should encourage a broader audience including lay people who want to evaluate the meaning of movies. It supports Steve Martin's statement that "*All of life's riddles are answered in the movies*" (*Grand Canyon*, 1991).

If you like to teach using movies to consolidate concepts, Niemiec, Boyd and Wedding have also written a book *Movies and Mental Illness*. This is a useful resource for appreciating, through film, the complexities of mental illness.