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Book Review

Positive Psychology at the movies: Using films to build virtues and character strengths

Ryan Niemiec & Danny Wedding (2008)

Hogrefe, Gottingen, Germany¹

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Positive Psychology has evolved from a number of areas in psychology that have examined the way those cognitions, attributions and experience impact on an individual's capacity to be happy. According to positive psychologists, being happy is not just about hedonistic fulfilment. Positive psychology explores the influence of virtues and character strengths on the experience of happiness or fulfilment. The area draws on the thoughts and tenets of many renowned psychological theorists and researchers as well as philosophers. Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi are two proponents of Positive Psychology. Seligman was the first to operationalise what we now call "Learned Helplessness" while Csikszentmihalyi is well known for his work on self esteem and the "flow" experience. Both researchers have advanced educational and psychological thought significantly. By drawing attention to these researchers I hope to engage people who may be sceptical about a book combining Positive Psychology and movies. I encourage educators and researchers to peruse this book both for intellectual erudition and for motivational teaching techniques. With increasing emphasis on Values Education in curricula in Australia and worldwide, this book usefully explores the significance and development of good character and virtues.

Positive Psychology at the Movies includes an impressive array of research from a number of disciplines. It includes Buddhist and Kantian philosophies, as well as research by Seligman, Sternberg, Erikson and Snyder, all of whom have contributed to psychological research. The book explores the following strengths: **wisdom and knowledge** viewed as cognitive strengths; **courage** viewed as emotional strength; **humanity** viewed as interpersonal strength; **justice** viewed as civic strength; **temperance** viewed as protective strength; and **transcendence** viewed as spiritual strength. The authors acknowledge that positive psychology is rooted in science and each chapter provides research relevant to a particular strength. Niemiec and Wedding then provide detailed examples of films they believe portray the strengths and virtues explored the chapter. The films are diverse. They range from Hollywood blockbusters such as *Star Wars*, *Schindler's List*, *Brave Heart*, and *Superman* to art house movies such as *Antonia's Line*, *Happiness*, *Cinema Paradiso*, and *Three Colours: Red*. Film classics such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Casablanca*, and *Dr Zhivago* as well as a number of Australian films such as *Strictly Ballroom* and *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* also feature. These films are only a few of the many explored in the book.

Positive Psychology at the Movies is an engaging read. As well as providing a plethora of ideas for educating students about values, it also stimulates intellectually and would inspire anyone with an interest in films to compile a list of must-see movies. I would see this book as a useful teaching tool for many university courses. Each chapter can be read on its own. The significance of the movies for the particular strength is linked with a clear synopsis of

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relevant themes and characters. I also could also envisage the whole text used as a university elective in either psychology or education.

Positive Psychology at the Movies provides an engaging perspective on how to teach values education. It includes scholarly research to explain the nature and development of strengths and virtues and provides an extensive list of films that can be used to consolidate learning around the concept of positive psychology.