



# Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Robert Vallerand

Interview by  
**Aaron Jarden**

**Robert Vallerand** is professor of social psychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, and President of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA). His research focuses mainly on motivation and passion, and he has written more than 200 articles and book chapters mainly in the area of social motivation, as well as five books.

## **In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?**

First, Aaron, let me congratulate you on your attempt to bring together in a book people who are involved in the field of positive psychology. I think it is a highly important service to the positive psychology community. To answer your question, obviously there are several distinctive features and, depending on who you ask, you might get different answers. When you look at positive psychology and some of its defining features, the science is clearly present. You look at textbooks and different websites, and usually people will point to the science. For instance, at IPPA we define positive psychology as the scientific study of what enables or makes people and communities thrive and to do their best. I think that Chris Peterson, in his book *Primer in Positive Psychology*, mentions the fact that it's the study of what makes people get up in the morning and to do their best and be at their best. So the science is very important. At the same time we also care about the applications and how to use that science and apply it so people can actually be better. I would say that both elements are very important, as long as it helps people (and organizations) to thrive and do better and be at their best. So the science and the scientifically-informed applications that will help people to be at their best are both very important elements.

## **What's the biggest challenge that positive psychology faces as it is developing?**

There are a few; but obviously, because positive psychology is really the interface between the science and the applications, one of the challenges that we have is to make sure that everybody is happy with the interface we have. Scientists are saying, 'Well, we need more science', and people who are more applied are saying, 'We need more application'. One of the challenges is to make sure we are on the same page, and that we progress together in the hope that positive psychology, as a field, will thrive and be even better. While we need everyone to be on the same page, sometimes you will have those kinds of disagreements; but that's fine, I think it's part of the game and more of a challenge. Another challenge is at some point to make sure everybody from psychology takes positive psychology seriously. That's why the science is so



important. Already people back in the 50s and 60s, with humanistic psychology, attempted to create some kind of revolution and it didn't work because the science was not a big part of it. I think that with positive psychology, one of the reasons why it's working is that the science is very important. Another challenge is to involve a lot of people from different areas of psychology; in fact I would say all areas of psychology. That means neuroscience, like what Richard Davidson is doing, in emotion research with Barbara Fredrickson, culture with people like Shinobu Kitayama, and motivation with Ed Deci—all these people have to be on board. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress on Positive Psychology organized by IPPA [July 2011] we had these people in Philadelphia, which was just great. These are some of the challenges we face, but they are manageable. We are progressing towards having positive psychology being a thriving area of research and application.

### **Can you tell me about your work in positive psychology?**

My work is basically on passion. When Chris Peterson is saying, 'What makes people get up in the morning?', I say passion makes people wake up in the morning. If today's basketball day, or if today's music day and your looking forward to jamming with your friends, or going to the gym to scrimmage and play basketball or whatever, I think that passion is extremely important in people's lives. In fact some philosophers like Hegel have said that there is nothing great in this world that has been done without passion. So passion makes a big difference in people's lives. The thing is that, as some people have said, you have to look at the positive as well as the negative, and with passion there are two types of passion. One is 'harmonious passion' which gives you a lot of mileage, you will be happy and reach a lot of objectives and goals; but 'obsessive passion' can be a down side, and can lead to some negative effects, especially on one's physical and mental health. We have been doing a lot of research and publishing our work regarding the role of both harmonious and obsessive passion in optimal functioning in society. Obviously, harmonious passion is what will get you towards living the good life, and to be happy, and contribute to society, reach a high level of performance, and is what some people should shoot for. But basically, that's what we do in terms of research; look at the psychology of passion.

### **So passion must be pretty closely related to purpose, meaning, and values as areas of psychology?**

That's right! The basic definition of passion is, 'a strong inclination towards a self-defining activity that one loves, finds important (or cares about), and spends time and energy on'. So, you really care about the activity very deeply, it has a lot of meaning to you, and you value it quite a bit; but you also love the activity, spend a lot of time on the activity—you basically like to talk about it, and you develop friendships around it. It's a central part of your life. How you go about engaging in the activity, what it means to you, that can sometimes get you into trouble (with obsessive passion). But you're right in that meaning and values are very much part of it, and if the activity itself is a positive activity, like volunteering, taking care of others, teaching, obviously it can lead to a lot of good consequences for you, and for other people as well. You tend to contribute towards society; and that's what we find in our work, especially with harmonious passion. You derive from your engagement in the activity what we call 'optimal functioning in society', where you're psychologically happy, physically healthy, and have positive relationships in your life; you achieve high levels of performance and you contribute to society at the same time. So these five elements, we find, are positively predicted by harmonious passion; whereas with obsessive passion you may get a few, but you don't get

the whole package. With obsessive passion, something gets in the way of positive relationships with other people. And even sometimes your health might be in jeopardy.

**As the newly-elected president of IPPA, what's one thing you're personally aiming to change about either positive psychology or IPPA?**

Past presidents, Ed Diener and Antonella Delle Fave, have done a great job, because it's not easy taking on a new association. IPPA was created in 2007, so we are just four years old. It's like having a child and trying to make sure it knows how to walk. They have done a great job. My job is basically to continue on that path, while trying to make some changes that will help us progress along the way. There are a lot of different things we are trying to do. A first goal is to modify the 'front office' so that we are more efficient in getting the work done. This entails bringing in additional people to work with us to connect with our membership. A second goal is to facilitate a grass-root movement within the association and make sure that people from different countries and all individual members feel that they are really a part of IPPA. So, we are in the process of creating 'divisions', just like the APA has, so that people can feel that it resonates with what they do and what they want to get from the association. So instead of having only a group of 2500 IPPA members, we are going to have divisions dealing with health, education, organizations, clinical psychology, and coaching. There will be presidents (or Chairs) for each of the different divisions and people can feel that they are part of some specialized community within IPPA. A third goal has to do with the dissemination of knowledge. This is done through different means such as having our Newsletter out 4 times per year, pursuing the 'positive psychology leaders' series' (with David Pollay who is doing a great job). We are also looking to the possibility of having perhaps either journals or a series of books on positive psychology that would be under the editorship of IPPA. In essence we are looking at different ways of connecting with our membership and to disseminate relevant information. Finally, and perhaps the more important thing we are trying to do is to help countries across the globe get their own national associations off the ground, so they can be part of IPPA and at the same time remain autonomous entities, eventually leading positive psychology to be truly global.

**Can you list some countries that you have been helping out or who you are starting to help out, just as examples?**

Different countries—obviously the US, the UK, and New Zealand have been forerunners—but in fact Russia too. There are different countries where Spanish is the main language; Spain, Venezuela. Right now, as I speak, there is a conference in Brazil on positive psychology (September 2011); and Canada is starting its own association of positive psychology and will have its first conference in July 2012. So it's burgeoning, it's here, there and everywhere, and that's what makes it exciting. When you're trying to set up an association, who do you look up to? IPPA! So we are there to help, trying to do all kinds of things. We have helped people before establish associations in their countries and we are more than willing to do it again, so I think it's our role to be able to assist.

**Do you have a plan of countries that you would like to see positive psychology associations in, or is it more that you wait to be approached from a certain country for assistance?**

Well, obviously, we would like to see all countries involved. What we are trying to do is look at, across the globe, what is happening. James Pawelski has been doing a great job as the executive director on that front. For instance, James is currently in Brazil with Martin Seligman, who has been a great ambassador of positive psychology. We are looking at the situation in Brazil, and at the same time we are trying to help them in any way we can with their association. The same thing will take place next summer (2012) in South Africa. So usually what happens is that people from a given country will contact us and we give them information and then there is discussion back and forth in terms of connecting, and then at some point we go there and try to help them out. That's what we have been doing so far.

**A lot of people wonder how positive psychology differs internationally by country. So I wonder, from your perspective, which are strong countries that are leading the way and which are up and coming?**

There are countries like Spain, for instance, with Carmelo Vázquez over there doing a lot of good work. New Zealand has a thriving national association with yourself and others involved. Australia is doing very good work with Dianne Vella-Brodrick and Tony Grant; they are very strong and they do contribute a lot, not only to their country, but also to IPPA. So Australia is very strong, and in different areas, which kind of makes it interesting—like coaching and the scientific part of it. These countries, I think, at some point will lead the way. I was just talking to someone in Australia who wants to create a whole new centre on positive psychology in one university. It's not finalized yet, but that's what they want to do, so we are trying to help them out in some ways. That's why it was so gratifying at the last conference, the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress in Philadelphia, to see so many people show up with so many ideas; so many people who want to go back to their own countries and bring positive psychology to them and make sure that they can do something that will last beyond the conference itself. That's what we are seeing and we are very excited about it.

**IPPA has faced some criticisms since it was launched, as well as having accomplished a lot of good stuff. Can you outline some of these criticisms that IPPA has been dealing with and how they are being addressed?**

One of the criticisms was that initially people felt that there are a lot of scientific people involved and we need more applied people. When you look at the history, obviously when you have to start something and the science is part of the definition, you want people on the board who will be involved with science. But the application of positive psychology is also important and the current board seems to reflect both dimensions (i.e., the science and application) of positive psychology. Another thing is international representation. We want to have people from a number of countries on the Board of Directors who will reflect this international flavour and who display very high quality. This is not always easy to do, but out of 40-some people on the board, I think there are about 25 or 30 countries represented, perhaps more. So, we have a lot of countries involved and when I look at the meetings we have, the conferences we have had, I can see that people across the globe are very much involved in IPPA. I'm very appreciative of that, so international representation has been addressed as well. A last criticism has to do with the fact that people want to be even more involved in IPPA. People say, 'Well, IPPA's a big thing, how can I be part of it a bit more?'. Now, with the divisions we are creating,

people will be part of it and feel much more involved. They will not have to interact with IPPA as a whole; they can be part of smaller divisions and feel much more involved.

**Just out of curiosity, how many members does IPPA have?**

I think at last count it was around 2,500. I would assume that those numbers will get higher, because in years when we have a conference, membership increases. I would not be surprised if our number was beyond three thousand after the conference, we will see.

**Who do you look up to in the field as the future leaders of positive psychology? Or alternatively, who are the future leaders of IPPA? For example, James Pawelski stands out for me as someone who has done some great work for both positive psychology and IPPA, but who do you think?**

That's a tough one, because there are so many good people involved, including James Pawelski as you mentioned. There are two ways to look at it. Who in the field of scientific positive psychology makes a contribution? The answer is, a lot of people. There are a lot of young people coming up and obviously I don't have to talk about Martin Seligman, Chris Peterson, Barbara Fredrickson, and Richard Davidson, who people already know. The other way to look at this issue is to have top people in other fields of psychology being more involved in positive psychology. What we tried to do during the last conference was to bring 21 invited speakers with about half of those, about 10 or 12 coming from positive psychology, from the field itself; but the other half were top people from other areas. What we wanted is for people in positive psychology to know about their work. But also, when these invited speakers leave the congress, they go back home and they have been changed. They know more about positive psychology and they can perhaps create centres on positive psychology or make a statement about positive psychology in their own field. I heard initially people say, 'Well, I did not know these people, but now, wow, it was really exciting'. For instance Ed Deci presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress and obviously some people may not know of him, but he's a giant in the field of motivation. Arie Kruglanski is a top social psychologist doing work for the past ten years on terrorism and applications that we can address in a more positive light. What can we do for prevention? People like Joan Duda on sports and exercise psychology. We can use exercise psychology in a more positive psychology way, so that we can actually address one of the important problems people have in the UK and across the globe, which is young people becoming obese; what can we do regarding that? So many other people, Herb Marsh in education, Jacquie Eccles in social developmental psychology, the list goes on and on. These are giants in their own field that people in positive psychology did not know much about, but now they do. Hopefully, these people will now spread the gospel about positive psychology. There are also some young people who are doing some very good work. So many people are involved; it would not be fair to mention just a few names. But the whole field is exploding; it's great in terms of the future, in terms of what lies ahead. The issue is for IPPA to become—and that's one of my aspirations—the hub of international positive psychology so that we're there to help, we are available, we disseminate knowledge and application, and we are helping people to set up their own associations in their own countries. People need something, they come to us. We hope we will be able to provide those services and at some point everybody will become one big interconnected happy family. That would be the goal.

**What's one piece of advice for individuals looking to help contribute to the growing field of positive psychology?**

Get in touch. The best way is to contact us directly. People have our email: James, myself, people on the executive committee, Carmelo Vázquez the incoming president-elect, Antonella Delle Fave the past president. Dianne Vella-Brodrick the secretary and Kim Cameron the treasurer. All these people are willing to help and remember we are all volunteers. We are not perfect, but we get involved because we care about the field and want it to progress. So, if you want to help and make a positive contribution, get in touch with us and let us know your views and ideas and we'll pay attention and try to see how those ideas can be transformed into action. Already we are making a lot of changes that hopefully will allow people to connect with us and benefit from IPPA. We hope that people will take advantages of these changes, get on board, and contribute positively to positive psychology.

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