



## Approaching Disability From a Strengths-Based Perspective

A Review of

*The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability*

by Michael L. Wehmeyer (Ed.)

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Many professionals in the fields of disability and psychology may be unaware of their shared mission to move away from models of pathology to models based on greater integration of strengths-based approaches. Because there are more than 54 million people in the United States living with a disability, all professionals in psychology should develop at least some level of competency in working with this population.

Much of the previous literature on disability and positive psychology has focused on acquired disabilities, including traumatic brain injuries and physical disabilities due to accidents or war. *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability*, edited by Michael Wehmeyer, provides an in-depth exploration of research on people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. According to the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (2000), the term *developmental disability* is defined as a chronic and severe disability of an individual that is attributable to a physical or mental impairment; it must manifest prior to the age of 22 and is likely to continue to affect functioning in three or more major activities throughout the lifetime.

Similar to other handbooks, this collection of original research benefits from the credibility of authorities in the fields of disability and positive psychology. The 31 chapters are organized thematically into five sections, which makes the book an accessible guide for professionals who may have background in one field but not the other. The first section provides an introduction to the intersection of the two fields, and the second and third sections highlight disability variants of common positive psychology concepts and systemic issues that facilitate application of these findings to interdisciplinary networks.

This handbook provides an extensive and informative appeal to a broad audience, which could range from researchers to community providers. Chapters on measuring quality of life, resiliency, and optimism could be particularly useful as researchers and clinicians adjust their assessments and shift paradigms to inclusively consider the perspectives of individuals with disabilities. Professionals working in the disability field may find the discussion of the

historical perspective of the field repetitive, but educators could use the material to facilitate student learning and insight on the changing experience of this population over just a few decades of time.

## **Application to Clinical Work With People With Disabilities**

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The field of positive psychology positions research and clinical approaches at the other end of the continuum from a focus on human suffering and disorder. Rather, the emphasis on positive emotions and characteristics unique to the culture of disability offers a supplemental and valuable approach to understanding the overall human experience (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Buchanan, & Lopez, 2006). The current volume offers an insightful depiction of the trajectories of the disability field and positive psychology in a simultaneous and complementary manner. The theoretical discussion throughout the text regarding the shift from the medical model of assessing and treating disabilities to the social-ecological model is beneficial for clinicians and other professionals in the field. Students who understand the historical underpinnings that have led to movement toward valuing an individual's overall strengths will be better prepared for their careers in psychology. Ultimately, this shift of focus could drastically alter the types of care offered to these populations in clinical settings.

Clinicians strive to provide evidence-based care that focuses on patient- and family-centered priorities. This handbook challenges an additional transformation of care to move from institutionalization to community-based, inclusive services. The authors offer examples and approaches to assist clinicians in a variety of settings to identify strengths and design interventions that promote self-determination and inclusion. Although a main focus of today's clinical work is to assist individuals to build functional or adaptive skills, with less emphasis on level of intelligence or IQ scores, these skills require the engagement of an individual in his or her societal or community setting. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) studied a sample in the general population and found that very little of the variance of happiness was due to external conditions such as money, whereas almost half of the variance of happiness was determined by intentional activities, such as treatment interventions, that aim to increase happiness (Dykens, 2006).

The authors in the current handbook openly discuss the lack of research in the field of disabilities on measurement of internal states such as hope, happiness, and gratitude. This volume addresses this gap by offering distinct themes and how each may be further operationalized, researched, and applied to disability populations by using the theoretical paradigms of positive psychology. The authors expand on the work of Dykens (2006), who identified that research of disability populations is unique and that it offers multifaceted benefits to clinical applications even outside of the disability field. She identified genetic syndromes and highlighted the positive attributes characterized by individuals in this population and the tremendous information they may offer regarding the abstract concept of "flow." There is a clear need for further research that is inclusive and sensitive to the ideas and experiences of people with disabilities. This volume highlights this need versus attempting to generalize findings from general population studies.

## Application to Disability Policy

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*The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability* represents the first compilation of work to contemplate disability from a strengths-based perspective. Legislators and policy makers are often ill informed about the unique strengths derived from and experienced through disability. When supported by evidence-based findings, advocates can fortify arguments for policies that support inclusion. The volume also conceptualizes current barriers to full community inclusion as part of the larger social and ecological challenges faced by people with disabilities. This is in stark contrast to outdated, deficit-based models that have produced many of the government-based systems in need of repair today.

The trouble in defining disability is one that plagues multiple professional fields. It also creates obstacles for individuals with disabilities who may qualify for one service but not another, with seemingly little consistency across systems. In her chapter "Cognitive and Developmental Disabilities," Karrie Shogren identifies *disability* as a mismatch between an individual's capacity and the environment. Viewing the provision of supports as a way to optimize everyone's full potential has lasting implications for change in a number of subfields of psychology, including school psychology, and policies related to health care, transition of youth with disabilities, and employment.

Although various international laws and legislative changes are discussed in this volume, most authors avoid specific focus on disability policy. The chapter by Wil Buntinx is a welcome exception as the author illuminates parallels between the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and internationally accepted values related to the fundamental rights of people with disabilities. Buntinx highlights the significant contributions by people with disabilities in the creation of the CRPD. Interestingly, it is less clear how much direct influence individuals with disabilities contributed to the development of this *Handbook* and its chapters.

## Pitfalls and Limitations

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The editor and several authors recognize the general challenge of heterogeneity within the population of people with disabilities. Still, *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability* neglects specific emphasis on the implications of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographical location on the experiences of this population. Just as the cultural element of disability is often overlooked in multicultural literature, it is equally problematic to circumvent the intersections between culture and disability with this publication. Similarly, the diversity even within the field of disabilities is a potentially underestimated aspect in the text, given the vast distinction between people with various degrees of intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder, just to name a few. Not only is operationalizing these concepts difficult, given the challenges of cognitive, language, or social-emotional deficits in this population, but also what may bring happiness to individuals with intellectual disability, such as socially related activities, may be aversive for individuals with autism.

The compilation is also somewhat burdened by the typical criticisms of the field of positive psychology, which is largely based on definitions of a good life as characterized by

individuals without disabilities. Are such conclusions always applicable to other cultural groups?

Although this compilation of works has a few general limitations, *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability* is a valuable addition to the library of any professional or student interested in increasing overall cultural competence in working with individuals with disabilities. The *Handbook* views disability not as a component of adversity but as a natural part of human development. It challenges professionals to embrace their responsibility to advocate for and with people with disabilities in recognition that basic provision of rights is meaningless if individuals cannot access the freedoms and opportunities that these rights are intended to afford. The contributions of positive psychology to professionals who work with individuals with disabilities are immense, as the paradigm shift from deficit-based to strengths-based models could significantly improve treatment outcomes as well as the general attitudes of society.

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