

What Is a Positive Psychology Film?

A review of the film



The Pursuit of Happyness

(2006)

Gabriele Muccino (Director)

Reviewed by

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To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness.

—John Dewey

I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. That is clear. Whether one believes in religion or not... we all are seeking something better in life. So, I think, the very motion of our life is towards happiness

—the Dalai Lama

Positive psychology, the scientific and clinical study of strengths and virtues, has proliferated in offices, university classrooms, and research labs around the world since it was

delineated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). Seven years later, hundreds of positive psychology courses have emerged, and several texts and hundreds of articles have been published specifically on positive psychology, many giving reference to thousands of humanistic, philosophical, and strength-based sources that have been written over the last several decades.

Due to the powerful nature of the medium of cinema and its significant impact and role in the daily lives of countless individuals around the world, it seems appropriate to discuss positive psychology's depiction and promotion of character strengths and virtues. This leads to a question: What is a positive psychology film?

DVD cases frequently describe their contents as a breathtaking journey of self-discovery or describe characters who find love in the most unlikely places. It is common for movies to depict pseudo-positive psychology themes: finding oneself, discovering who one really is, achieving a deep transformation, making a real difference in life, realizing that hard work pays off, and discovering that love can conquer all problems. Although many of these elements have a positive psychology flavor, they do not necessarily make a positive psychology film. It is the *ingredients* that lead to these idealistic or favorable outcomes that make a positive psychology film. The human strengths are the ingredients.

Criteria for Positive Psychology Films

A good representation of a positive psychology film has at least four elements: (a) a balanced portrayal of a character displaying at least 1 of the 24 strengths, such as creativity, vitality, fairness, humility, and hope (categorized by Peterson & Seligman, 2004); (b) depiction of obstacles and/or the struggle or conflict the character faces in reaching or maximizing the strength (this may be metaphorical); (c) a character portrayal that illustrates how to overcome obstacles and/or build and maintain the strength; and (d) a tone or mood in the film that is inspiring or uplifting. One can also assess the impact the film has on the viewer and the inspiration that results from watching the movie; however, due to the variance of individual differences, cinematic preferences, emotional status, and personal background, it is beneficial to adopt more objective criteria.

The portrayal of positive psychology in the movies is a fascinating new area that warrants further exploration. For example, a clinician or instructor would do well to start with the film *The Pursuit of Happyness* (note: *Happiness* is misspelled in the title for practical and symbolic reasons; for the former, it is spelled this way on graffiti near a day-care center that the protagonist visits; for the latter, it represents an ideal that is never fully achievable, at least in a permanent way).

This film is based on the true story of an African American man, Chris Gardner (Will Smith), living in San Francisco in the 1980s. Financial hardship leads Gardner's wife to

leave him and their son in pursuit of a better life in New York. Gardner, already struggling to bring in a small income selling bone density scanners, faces increased financial pressure along with the new challenge of being a single father.

Gardner gives brief voice-overs in six categories—riding the bus, being stupid, running, doing an internship, paying taxes, pursuing happiness—that serve to provide an overview of this portion of his life. It is interesting to consider these as metaphors of the life journey—moving along in the flow of life, making mistakes, trying to solve problems, taking time for formal and informal learning, paying one's dues, and achieving positive results, respectively. Each of the first five can be seen as building blocks of the last, especially when one considers Gardner's positive approach to these in terms of Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2001), in which positive emotions broaden the person's thought–action repertoire in the moment and build his or her personal resources. Although happiness is listed as a final stage or achievement, the viewer may want to consider (also through voice-over) that “maybe happiness is something that we can only pursue, and maybe we can actually never have it, no matter what.” Gardner's quote, also echoed in the book *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Myers, 1992), explains that happiness is not a static end point as alluded to in the hedonic treadmill model (Brickman & Campbell, 1971), which reveals that good and bad events temporarily affect happiness, whereas adaptation brings people quickly back to neutral.

Although the film panders to the pseudo–positive psychology theme that hard work makes anything possible, it does meet the criteria proposed earlier to qualify as a high-quality positive psychology film. The Gardner character is a fairly balanced portrayal of several positive psychology strengths (e.g., persistence, love, and hope); there are a variety of real-life obstacles to each strength (e.g., homelessness, unemployment, being a victim of theft, and the protagonist's separation from his wife); he overcomes obstacles and builds on his strengths (e.g., empathy for his son, creativity in an imagination game at a low point, finding ways to save time at work, and staying motivated at difficult times); and the film's tone is uplifting and inspiring.

Positive Psychology Movies for the Classroom

Movies have been used as a helpful adjunct with a variety of student populations, such as undergraduate and graduate psychology students; medical students; and students in nursing, occupational therapy, and pharmacy programs. The benefits have been well established; therefore, it is likely that students in positive psychology courses and any course related to building strengths and enhancing health and well-being would benefit from the decision to add films to the curriculum.

The title's misspelling of *happiness* suggests that the film is asking the viewer to think about the ingredients of this transient experience we call happiness. The Gardner character is a fascinating cinematic figure from the positive psychology vantage point, especially if one considers the strengths-and-virtues typology systematized by Peterson and Seligman (2004), who looked at 200 virtue catalogs spanning 3,000 years from various philosophies, religions, and traditions and found uncanny parallels, in that nearly all of these sources referenced six virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. They then broke these down further into a system of 24 human strengths. Gardner displays many of the strengths under each virtue. It can be interesting for positive psychology courses to look at the characteristics of each positive psychology strength that can be seen in Gardner and hypothesize about how the strengths might be buffering life's stressors.

Gardner is a prototype for persistence and perseverance (under the virtue *courage*) through ongoing adversities. These are an internal default regardless of the external pressures and demands. Having kindness, love, and compassion (under the virtue *humanity*) for his son, managing emotional distress through self-regulation (under the virtue *temperance*), and hoping for a better future and using playful imagination to help his son (under the virtue *transcendence*) are also well-represented strengths. At a low point, on being rejected by a homeless shelter and stuck in a subway station for the evening with his son, Gardner resorts to creativity, playfulness, and imagination reminiscent of Guido in *Life Is Beautiful* (Benigni & Cerami, 1997) as he sacrifices to help his son cope. It is likely that the total combination of strengths buffered Gardner from the impact of the significant stressors that he encountered—financial, marital, civic, parental, and occupational—and aided him through adversity.

His wife's classic burnout syndrome, represented as fight and flight, is a one-dimensional portrayal in the film, but her portrayal does contrast nicely with Gardner's approach, serving to remind the viewer of other human responses to stress and to the pursuit of happiness.

Positive Psychology Movies for the Therapeutic Encounter

Although positive psychology in the therapy setting is a new field with promising theoretical ideas (Joseph & Linley, 2006) and outcome data (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), the use of positive psychology movies in the clinical setting is even newer.

This film can be used as a springboard for discussion of positive psychology strengths and their application to patients as well as to important theories of happiness, such as the broaden-and-build theory, the adaptation process in happiness, and the new revisions to the classic hedonic treadmill theory (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006), which report that people

actually have multiple set points for happiness and that these can change. Seligman (2002) relayed a happiness formula, $H = S + C + V$ (Happiness level = set range/barriers + life circumstances + factors under voluntary control), that can be used as an educational element for patients, particularly those who are depressed or experiencing chronic stress. A clinician could apply the equation to the Gardner character to explain how he was able to maintain a happiness level through his various stressors and then help the patient apply the equation to his or her life.

In addition to using positive psychology films with patients, it is interesting to consider what would occur if Gardner were to seek psychotherapy. At times of crisis depicted in the film, Gardner's strengths appear to buffer him from depression or the development of a chronic illness. Hypothetically, if Gardner had not been offered the prestigious job that he had rigorously competed for as a volunteer intern, would that have led to a financial and existential crisis and ultimately a depression? If so, a positive therapy approach designed to tap Gardner's repertoire of strengths would be a valid approach to help him recover (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006).

Limitations

Many of this film's viewers will not consider the analysis above and may be left with a couple of unhealthy and unrealistic notions. One such notion may be "Work hard enough, and you will achieve all of your goals despite overwhelming odds against you." Certainly there are many hard-working people who never reach their goals; at the same time, there are many people living in poverty or homelessness who have worked very hard in their lives. Another is "Happiness is about having a highly successful job, big bank accounts, sports cars, and a mansion." There are several characters in the film who are portrayed as happy and who have these superfluous possessions or achievements; the "real" Chris Gardner went on to be a successful multimillionaire. It is not made concrete to the viewer that these peripherals do not bring happiness; instead the viewer sees the Gardner character take a new (ultimately successful) path following a chance interaction with a stockbroker about his stylish sports car. It would be important for the teacher or clinician to alert the student and patient to these limitations and remind them of research on what actually does contribute to happiness. It is refreshing to note that the film does not pander to dried-out cinematic stereotypes of the Black man abandoning his child or the Black man being suppressed by the successful White businessman.

Some viewers may argue that Gardner is too good to be true and that the portrayal is unbalanced. Although the character leans in this direction, the director does represent Gardner as imperfect in that he yells at his son, skips out on paying his cab fare, is

threatening when a homeless man cuts in front of him in line, and shows no empathy when his son drops an important transitional object (action figure doll) in the street.

Conclusion

Although there may be different perspectives on what happiness is, it is clear that happiness is a process—something to be sought—and not a static end point. This is a dynamic film that offers numerous learning opportunities for teachers, students, clinicians, patients, and the general public. At face value, the film could be written off due to the trite message of “work hard enough and you will overcome any odds.” However, the viewer is challenged to look more deeply at the ingredients of this message. It is there that *The Pursuit of Happiness* reveals many redeeming qualities and proves itself as a useful teaching and clinical tool of positive psychology.

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