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Martin E. P. Seligman: Realizing human potential

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ABSTRACT

This is a personal review of Marty Seligman's career and contribution as seen through the eyes of a long-time friend and colleague.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Marty and me

I was a second year Assistant Professor at Penn when Marty arrived, in 1964, fresh from a *summa cum laude* in philosophy at Princeton. He began a short three-year graduate career in Richard Solomon's lab. His graduate lab mates, Bruce Overmier and Vin LoLordo, and I hold the record for knowing him longer than any other living psychologist. I taught him part of his first year proseminar in physiological psychology, and was on his dissertation committee. I have known Marty Seligman for 57 years. We have been colleagues in the Penn psychology department since 1970. During that period, Marty has been a consistently stimulating and intellectually engaging colleague. Until last year, we had never published together. In 2020, we collaborated on an obituary for our marvelous colleague, Robert Rescorla.

Marty was very generous to me in three different ways over these years. In 1987, while I was undergoing a difficult divorce, Marty offered me a place to stay in Seligmanor (as I dubbed his beautiful house and grounds), and I spent a few soothing months there.

The second generous act was both personal and academic. As president of APA in 1998, Marty initiated two major projects. One was the beginning of Positive Psychology, and the other, unrelated to his own research interests, was the engagement of psychology in one of the major problems of our time, ethnopolitical conflict. Up until that time, ethnopolitical conflict had been in the domain of political science and some other social sciences. It was not part of psychology.

I volunteered to start the ball rolling at Penn, engaging Clark McCauley, at Bryn Mawr, who actually knew something about the area. We set up the Solomon Asch Center for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict. Marty

played a pivotal role in getting us financial support for the Center, from foundations, and we had a great start. We educated, in an annual intense 10-week full-time summer course in ethnopolitical conflict, 20 scholars, primarily postdoctoral fellows from all over the world, and working in a range of disciplines. We explored problems in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Sri Lanka, and other places. We set about building the virtually absent discipline of psychology in Sri Lanka. The Asch Center was a very meaningful experience for me. Unfortunately, for complex university political reasons, the Center was closed after 10 years. One of our biggest mistakes was not to have a Board of Directors, with Marty at the top. Marty wouldn't have let that happen.

Marty's third generous act occurred in the last 15 years. My research on how humans function in the food domain in different cultural settings had been unfunded for years. Marty arranged annual support so that I could keep my projects going. It was a lifeline.

That's a lot of help. Marty was and is someone I could count on to see the value in areas of research that are not currently fashionable and to support work in those areas both via discussion and via financial backing.

Marty and I have generally taken similar stances in department politics. For example, we are both committed, Marty even more than me, to hiring the most promising job candidates without too much attention to specific areas. Colleagues have been surprised at Marty's willingness to hire junior faculty for designated positive psychology positions whose work was not central to positive psychology. His criterion was excellence. We are both romantics: we like exciting people who combine brains, taste, and dedication. We were once (the only two faculty) enthusiastic about a graduate student candidate who was the world champion in 7-card stud poker.

We also both have a commitment to building social science psychology at Penn: although we recognize the value of 'natural science psychology', we see the world's major problems as needing social science psychology.

Seligman by the numbers

When it comes to numbers (not math models), Marty is unbeatable.

Equalizing for font, margins, paper weight, and what is included in a vita, Marty must have one of the heaviest CVs in psychology. I once produced a picture of a large moving van moving down a main street in front of our psychology department, captioned: moving Marty Seligman's vita.

But Marty's most telling number is small. It is five (5). Diener et al. (2014) have calculated eminence in psychologists, using a reasonable metric combining citation impact, major awards, and textbook citations. They applied the metric to 348 accomplished psychologists from the mid twentieth century onward. Marty Seligman was fifth. Those ahead of him (Bandura, Piaget, Kahneman, and Lazarus) were all older than him. B. F. Skinner was sixth and Noam Chomsky was seventh! We could stop with the numbers at this point.

Martin Seligman is at or near the top in many other important categories. Counting only first editions, he has six solo-authored books. One of them, *Learned Optimism* (1990), had 47 translations. There are seven coauthored books, and nine edited or coedited books. There is a coauthored (with David Rosenhan) major textbook, *Abnormal Psychology* Rosenhan & Seligman, (1989), with four editions.

There are 329 scholarly papers (as of 2021). There are at least 23 PhD students 6 of whom have held full time faculty appointments in 6 of the top 20 psychology departments in the United States. There is the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award (2006) and the Lifetime Contributions to Psychology Award (2017) from the American Psychological Association. As of 2021, there are 249,436 citations, with an *h*-index of 172. There is, I think, the largest number of participants ever in a substantial psychology intervention study – a million American soldiers in Comprehensive Soldier Fitness.

We started with a low number (5), and we will end with a lower one: How many living psychologists have started a durable, valuable and thriving sub field? I think, only one (1). Martin Seligman, Positive Psychology.

Scholarly style and trajectory

As a graduate student at Penn, under Richard Solomon's guidance, and with Bruce Overmier and Steve Maier, Marty established learned helplessness in animals. This work went outside of the behavioristic tradition to invoke cognitive mechanisms in learned helplessness. The continuing importance of this concept can be seen through google ngram; learned helplessness has essentially no references until the very early 70s and then rises very rapidly; it remains very frequently mentioned through 2019.

Marty's first theoretical paper was 'On the generality of the laws of learning' (1970), published three years after he got his PhD. It was not related to his thesis work. It was thus the first of what would be many new developments in his thinking. In that paper, Marty introduced the idea of 'preparedness', a predisposition for animals to learn certain evolutionary adaptive things. Animal learning researchers had assumed that the principles of learning were the same across different animals and across different situations. Marty's paper questioned that core idea in general process learning theory. The paper played an important role in the displacement of animal learning from its pivotal place at the center of experimental psychology. And that was his own field!! Marty wrote another paper on phobias and preparedness (Seligman, 1971), and a coedited book titled *Biological Boundaries of Learning* (Seligman & Hager, 1972). That book ended his work in this area.

Unlike many researchers who work on the same topic for their whole career, Marty has worked on many topics, though most have developed from his previous topics. Most have an important common thread – increasing human potential and well-being.

After a short time as an assistant professor at Cornell, sensing that his future was not in the animal learning lab, Marty undertook clinical training at Penn Psychiatry and refashioned himself as an experimental clinical psychologist. He extended learned helplessness in animals to a theory of human depression, an outstanding example of moving from animal research findings to psychopathology. It was a bold and risky change of field for a young assistant professor.

At the end of his internship, Penn hired Marty in 1970 as a researcher of depression. While I was chair, I appointed him in 1980 as director of our clinical area, a position he held for 14 years. He continued the tradition established by his predecessor, Julius Wishner, of a clinical program with a solid base in academic psychology.

Marty is still at Penn, a 51-year stay. His interest in depression continued for years, through attributional style and into learned optimism, touching on issues with children and old people.

A general style emerged, in which Marty, often in conjunction with a graduate student, would think of a new problem or approach. After one or a few publications together, the student would launch an excellent career on the topic in question, and Marty would move off to something new. And the cycle repeated. It happened with attributional style and with depression in children and older adults.

With the onset of positive psychology, the pattern continued with comprehensive soldier fitness, creativity/imagination, the measurement of wellbeing, character strengths, prospection, 'big data' (in part, a methodological venture), positive education, grit, and most recently, self-transcendent experiences and primals (basic beliefs about the world).

Marty's newest project is a historically-oriented book on the concept of agency and its relation to flourishing. He is testing his idea that cultural innovation and progress tend to occur when, as measured by text analysis in major historical documents, there is an increased focus on agency.

The path from learned helplessness to human agency (the two are closely related) represents the expression of a fundamental interest in increasing well-being. The path started with reducing suffering from depression, the most common human mental illness. With the adoption of a positive psychology framework, the focus changed from improving the lives of the minority of people with mental illness, to improving the lives of the majority of people who are not thriving as much as they could be. Marty left psychopathology for a field he invented that had, he felt, more potential for improving the human condition. As with his first shift, he did not reject the field he left, but rather found something else which would better meet his urge to improve the human condition.

There have been a few brief intellectual excursions outside his main areas. One was the work on preparedness, and another, a superb, original and unappreciated theory of dreaming (Seligman, 1987). But Marty has been steadily oriented to his main goals, even as those goals have changed.

While working on depression and on thriving, Marty literally founded a field. To do that well, as he did, involves a concerted intellectual effort, recruitment of excellent colleagues/collaborators and graduate students, and arranging for funding and publicity. Marty does it all, but foremost for him are ideas and making the world a better place. Following on founding a field, he

originated a very successful positive psychology master's program, and recruited an excellent director for it (James Pawelski), under whom it has thrived.

Mounting a research program and carrying it successfully to a conclusion involves about the same skill set as building a field, with somewhat more emphasis on the academic skills. On the academic side are: a fine and deep intellect, taste, mastery of the relevant literature, ability to design a study, carry it out, analyze the results and communicate them, ability to motivate one's students, staff and colleagues. plus of course, focus, energy, and dedication. There are also critical entrepreneurial skills, including ability to generate funding, effective presentation of ideas in appropriate settings, and knowing who to know. The latter skills are vital, especially for large scale research. There are very few academics who have high levels of all these skills. Marty is one of them, and his former student Angela Duckworth is another. She may have learned some of them from Marty. None of this is sufficient without really hard work, and the resilience to bounce back after frustrations and failures. Marty has had his share of paper and grant/funding rejections. His wonderful dream paper was submitted and rejected many times. Of the many excellent lines of work that have emerged from positive psychology, of particular interest to me is work Marty did with Chris Peterson, as represented initially in their excellent semi-edited book, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In that book, and with the engagement of the Templeton Foundation, they essentially started the robust study of character. Just as psychology had ignored the positive side of human nature, it had also ignored character. A major field of personality developed over decades in psychology without paying much attention to differences in moral standing and moral trajectory.

Moral character is probably the most important property of people. What is the most important feature you would want in a mate? As the field of moral psychology arose in recent decades, its almost exclusive focus (as in moral philosophy) was on moral dilemmas and moral principles. There was scant attention to the very important issue of moral trajectories, that is, character. A prominent theory of personality identified two dimensions of personality, competence and warmth. Supported by a Positive Psychology grant on moral character, Geoffrey Goodwin, Jared Piazza, and I carried out research that helped to establish the importance of moral character as a third dimension of personality (Goodwin et al., 2013).

Marty Seligman the person

Marty loves ideas. He gets excited by them, whether they are his own idea or the ideas of others. He has recruited fine minds like Roy Baumeister and Ed Diener to participate in positive psychology. He loves to participate in meetings he has arranged, where people discuss important issues that fall under the broad scope of positive psychology. At the beginning of the field, in Akumal, Mexico, he invited some of the best young minds in psychology to meet and talk, to generate ideas and develop research programs, and to engage talented new people in positive psychology. He has held other exciting meetings of minds in Canterbury Cathedral on vocation, secular and religious (2014), Uluru Australia on spiritual imagination (2018) and Adelaide Australia on prospection. At our department faculty meetings, Marty raises the level of discussion, from details to ideas. The same is true for his questions at colloquia. When Marty likes an idea, like Jeremy Clifton's idea of primals (basic views about the nature of the world, written as a master's capstone by Clifton *before* he became a doctoral student), he enthusiastically supports it with encouragement and funding.

Marty spends his time with very intelligent and accomplished people. He seeks them out, whether students or colleagues or public figures. He has a nose for that special combination of brains, taste, dedication and practical wisdom that so often make for success in the world. He invests in talent, finding outstanding students and giving them a lot of freedom and arranging support for their ideas. Although it is extraordinarily important for psychologists, politicians, funders, and people in general to deploy great attention to the billions of unfortunate people in the world, it is also extremely important that some people focus on the best, and how to make them even better and make more of them. Martin Seligman does this very well. The Mozarts and Benjamin Franklins need to be discovered and nurtured. Such talented people can improve the lots of millions, if not billions of people.

It might be thought that someone as productive as Marty spends all of his time on his work. But he is surprisingly not one dimensional. Marty travels a lot, partly for entertainment. He is a dedicated husband and father of seven (7). He developed a special caring relationship to his mother- and father-in-law, and went on trips with them. He has developed intense interest and accomplishment in areas other than psychology. These include cultivating roses, becoming expert in

late harvest wines, and bridge. In 1998 and 2021, he was on the world champion bridge team.

How could he accomplish so much while nurturing his hobbies, especially bridge, and paying attention to his large family? Maybe he doesn't sleep much. No, he sleeps a highish normal 8–9 hours a night.

One answer is that Marty Seligman is a master of time management. He should teach a graduate pro-seminar on this subject. Marty doesn't waste time. He is great at delegating activities, and rarely does things that someone else could do as well. Marty keeps an eye on his intellectual, practical and personal goals, and tends not to be distracted by less important goals and activities. There is some controversy about positive psychology, and some about Marty Seligman. His great success and influence make him (and others with comparable success) a target of criticism. Every person and every field has shortcomings or controversial aspects, but when there is an eminent person or an exciting and growing field, these are likely to encourage vocal critics and attract attention. Marty has met critical comments forthrightly and with dignity, neither downplaying the seriousness of the serious criticisms nor responding defensively.

Positive psychology has had to fight off the opinion that it was just a warm and fuzzy field trying to make people happier. Making meaning is not warm and fuzzy, and is an important part of positive psychology. The field promotes rigorous science. The five PERMA components of the field express what it is about, so much more than feeling good: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. I think positive psychology has won its place as an important subfield of psychology

I have some reservations about positive psychology. I think it has taken on some of the shortcomings of psychology as an academic discipline, while trying to reform it. It has paid too much attention to Americans, and has too readily assumed that the Western, individualistic frameworks, are more promising than the more communal Eastern frameworks. It has paid too little attention to the actual domains of life: work, food and religion, for example. The promotion of signature strengths is a reasonable, but far from certain strategy. There are virtues in balance and versatility (Bermant et al., 2011). But positive psychology is a really constructive and corrective movement. It is influencing psychology and the world in a very (appropriately) positive way. You can't do everything.

The brash graduate student I once knew has grown into a more mellow, more thoughtful and less assertive person. But he is still intense, confident in his intuitions and more

effective than ever. And as someone who twice in the past, left a successful career or line of work for something different, he is still willing to take risks. He continues, to the present, embarking on new and different projects.

At 80, Marty hasn't slowed down at all. I personally know no one who has done more to improve the human condition. Thanks, Marty.

Disclosure statement

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