

Stephen Paul McKenzie

Reality Psychology

A New Perspective on Wellbeing,
Mindfulness, Resilience and Connection



Springer

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*To my brother Dean, who has shown me the
way back to reality since we were very young.*

Preface: From Positive Psychology to Reality Psychology

There is an old story—a sea wind suddenly changes and a pessimist on board a boat that is swept along with it thinks that it will get worse, an optimist on the boat thinks that it will get better, and a realist adjusts their sails to meet the new wind. Reality psychology is a possible new way of meeting psychological reality, which could valuably counterbalance the positive psychology paradigm. Reality psychology can also provide an independently valuable paradigm, which can help guide the progression of psychological theory and practice towards the optimal development of real-life applications to meet real-life needs.

Reality Psychology: A New Perspective on Wellbeing, Mindfulness, Resilience and Connection dynamically introduces and describes a new psychological paradigm that can potentially help a wide range of people benefit from real-life focused psychological principles and practices. These principles and practices start with acceptance of current reality, no matter what it is, and making the best of it rather than distorting it. This can allow and encourage optimal and realistic responses to life challenges, including the development of real-life wisdom. This book can help a wide range of people recognise how psychology can systematically provide a basis for helping people help themselves to its real benefits, including students, teachers, practitioners, and other human influencers from psychology and other disciplines.

Psychology is needed now even more than it ever was, to help transform our great human challenges into our great human opportunities—to expand rather than to contract our deep responses to our large and small real-life challenges. To achieve our real human potential, we need to fully connect with reality as it really is, rather than pretend that it is positive in ways that it really is not, and therefore not fully connect with it and benefit from it.

Positive psychology was developed in the 1990s as an attempt to shift the emphasis of psychology from fixing what is wrong with people to recognising and expanding what is right with them. It is now a very well-known and successful psychological paradigm that is being increasingly widely used in psychological practice and research, as well as in education. It is possible, however, that the value of positive psychology has been reduced by distortions of its popular

conception or misconception—that we can and need to be positive—*always* (for example Smith, 2020).

The positive psychology paradigm has become increasingly influential in psychology and also in education, even though it is increasingly being recognised that there are potential problems with it as well as benefits. Ciarrochi et al. (2016, p. 1), stated that “positive psychology has been criticized for being decontextualized and coercive, and for putting an excessive emphasis on positive states, whilst failing to adequately consider negative experiences”. The paradigm can lead people including its practitioners towards unrealistic, unachievable, and unsustainable desires for ongoing positivity, and even towards guilt about a lack of positivity, rather than to reality. This can lead to a non-acceptance and non-appreciation of life’s realities rather than to a deep acceptance and appreciation of them. This was actually a key aspect of the ancient life wisdom traditions that positive psychology has been related to. Artificially positive thought aims such as “I *should* be positive, no matter what!” are actually distortions of the real messages of the ongoing life wisdom systems that positive psychology and seemingly related techniques including mindfulness, resilience, and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) are based on.

The ongoing life wisdom of accepting that it is not always possible or even desirable to be positive has been widely recognised before and after the advent of positive psychology. For example:

- The Buddhist noble truths that there is suffering, as well as a reason for suffering—the illusion of non-unity, and a way out of suffering—unity.
- Oliver Cromwell, England’s Lord Protector who fatally took over as England’s CEO in 1653 from King Charles 1st, and instructed that his portrait be painted realistically rather than artificially positively—“warts and all”.
- The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously observed that “What doesn’t destroy me makes me stronger.”
- The English supergroup *The Rolling Stones* observed in the title and lyrics of one of their songs that *You can’t always get what you want*.
- The Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Frazer once very unpopularity observed in defence of a very unpopular policy that “Life wasn’t meant to be easy.” He was in fact paraphrasing a line in George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah*: “Life is not meant to be easy, my child; but take courage: it can be delightful.”
- The famous Canadian singer and poet Leonard Cohen observed that—“Reality is one of the possibilities I cannot afford to ignore.”

The reality psychology perspective potentially offers psychological insights and solutions that are genuine and sustainable. This introductory book about it can bring to life and potentially to *your* life deeply practical as well as theoretical knowledge, and professional as well as personal knowledge. *Reality Psychology: A New Perspective on Wellbeing, Mindfulness, Resilience and Connection* provides a working knowledge of reality psychology and its context, applications, and potential new directions. The book provides a coming together of diverse psychological theories and practical applications that can valuably be returned from a

twilight zone of distortions of their true nature and value, and includes these key components:

- Self-knowledge
- Mental health
- Wellbeing
- Mindfulness
- Resilience
- Behaviour change
- Communication, connection, and creativity

Reality Psychology: A New Perspective on Wellbeing, Mindfulness, Resilience and Connection includes descriptions of these components and their existing and potential relationship with the reality psychology paradigm. The book features evidence-based explorations of how these relationships can be even greater than the sum of their parts, and transcripts of interviews with a range of reality psychology related experts including Professor Elizabeth Loftus, from the University of California, who was listed by the *Review of General Psychology* as the most influential female psychological researcher of the Twentieth Century. This helps bring the book to real life as well as to theoretical life and to transform its ideas into reality, by providing a range of expert's perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Reality Psychology



Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.

—Lao Tzu

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

—Philip K. Dick

The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.

—Rachel Carson

1.1 Introduction

This starting chapter of the book introduces Reality Psychology and its potential value as a new psychological paradigm, or unifying theme, that can valuably bring together many aspects of psychology with a common focus on their real underlying principles and practical value. This can help psychology students, psychologists and many other people understand and practice psychology, including to improve people's mental health and wellbeing. This introduction to Reality Psychology and its underlying principles and potential includes an exploration of what it is and isn't, a brief description of the need for it, and the big Reality Psychology picture which provides an overall context for how it can help people's mental health and wellbeing. This chapter sets the scene for the next chapters of the book which describe and explore particular Reality Psychology components and applications (Image 1.1).

1.2 Chapter Keystones (Image 1.2)

The fundamental interconnectedness of all things.

—Douglas Adams, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*

Image 1.1 In the beginning
(Source: Shutterstock)



Image 1.2 Keystone
(Source: Shutterstock)



A keystone is the key and essential component of a structure that supports it—from its centre. The keystones of this chapter include –

- The power of reality and connecting with it as it is rather than avoiding it or wanting something better than it.
- The power of Reality Psychology as a way to help people help themselves and other people connect with reality.
- The power of a systems-based approach to psychological theory and practice.
- The interconnectedness of all things, including mental illness, mental health and wellbeing.

Image 1.3 Myth or fact?
(Source: Shutterstock)



1.3 What Reality Isn't, Is and Can Be (Image 1.3)

Reality is something that everybody experiences at least occasionally, however it is not necessarily something that we consistently think about or directly ask questions about such as:

- What is reality?
- What good is it?
- What benefits will people potentially get from having a good relationship with reality?
- How can psychology help people understand and really be themselves, and live life as well as they can, by helping them have a better relationship with reality?

The consideration of the nature of reality tends to be left to philosophy or to religion, and to be described in philosophical, religious, or spiritual terms. This potentially limits the development of an increasingly necessary and valuable deep understanding of deep human experience to people who view life within philosophical, religious or spiritual contexts. This limited interest in reality also potentially really excludes people who see the understanding of reality as being esoteric, and/or impractical. The pursuit of a deep understanding of and connection with reality can actually be valuably viewed as highly practical and as offering great potential benefits that are not limited to people who understand life, or who can potentially understand life, in a philosophical, religious and/or spiritual way.

Psychology as the science of the human mind can greatly help make reality more accessible, better understood and more fully lived, by helping people develop a deeper level of understanding of the human mind. This deepening of understanding can be valuably directed by a new psychological paradigm that supports access to a deeper level of reality than is commonly experienced, by the people who benefit from and by the people who practice psychology.

Reality is described by a wide range of life wisdom systems as having two aspects—a superficial aspect and a deep aspect—a transient aspect and a permanent

aspect. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato described the superficial aspect of reality as the reality of forms, which can include any type of form, from thought forms to human forms. Plato described the deep aspect of reality as formless, causal reality, that the forms form from and return to. Buddhist philosophy/religion makes a distinction between a sensory reality and an ultimate reality, and makes the point in its four noble truths that human suffering exists only in the superficial reality. It is in this state that we experience our illusion of being separate—from each other and from our unified deep reality. According to this belief system liberation comes when we discover or re-discover our deeper reality—our oneness. Hindu/Vedantic religion/philosophy makes a vital distinction between our relative, sensory reality and our absolute, unchanging reality. Human suffering is attributed in this life wisdom system to ignorance—of our deeply real nature—and an associated desire for impermanent, and therefore ultimately unsatisfying, sensory objects.

O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), the ideas of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, are produced by the contacts of the senses with their objects. Such ideas are limited by a beginning and an end. They are transitory, O Descendent of Bharata (Arjuna); bear them with patience!

—*The Bhagavad Gita* II:14

Other long-lasting life wisdom systems offer a similar understanding of the nature of reality, and the benefits of developing of a deeper understanding and living of it. Christianity offers the knowledge that “the kingdom of heaven is within”, and Psychology offers many deep reality connections that could be linked and expanded by a Reality Psychology paradigm. These include the *theory of mind*—based on the empirically acquired knowledge that children don’t experience themselves as being separate entities until about the age of 18 months. This is about the same time that another key human developmental event occurs—the acquisition of language.

It is possible that Psychology could become even more valuable than it is by systematically helping people transition from experiencing mainly a superficial, separate and potentially problematic reality, to experiencing mainly a deeper, more connected and fulfilling reality. It is also possible that Psychology could achieve this within a Reality Psychology paradigm.



Conversation

In this excerpt from a conversation with Dr. Ian Gawler, the well-known founder of the Gawler Foundation healing centre, author of influential books including *You Can Conquer Cancer*; *Meditation: an In Depth Guide*; and *The Mind That Changes Everything*, and serious cancer survivor, talks with me about reality.

SM

Welcome Ian. So, what is and isn’t reality?

IG

(continued)

I think this is actually easier to understand than a lot of people might think. My understanding of this is based on having experience with all the great reality traditions, including a deep dive into the Christian tradition and probably an even deeper dive into the Buddhist tradition, and their understandings of reality. I think that most people these days can get this understanding of reality intellectually—that there are actually two versions of reality—the way things appear to be, and the way they really are. When it comes to actually living based on our understanding of reality, we can base our life on how things appear to be, or on how they really are.

At the moment you are now talking over zoom, and I'm looking at an image, which is a collection of dots on a screen. And it appears to be Stephen McKenzie, and I'm reacting to you as if you're real. And you can make a very good case to say you are real but if I say 'well, what are you really, what am I talking to really?', you're actually much more than little dots of light and bits of sound coming out of a screen. And if we were talking face to face you would seem to be more solid than you are on the screen, in the normal course of events, I would take you to be a real human being, and give you credit for three things:

You're permanent. I'm talking to Stephen McKenzie, and then if we talk in a week's time, I'm talking to Stephen McKenzie, and I know you from decades back, and I think well, that's the Stephen McKenzie I was talking to years back. But in fact, when I think of you as being permanent, you've been changing all the time. And even while I'm talking to you, you're changing.

You're independent. I look at you and I think well, Stephen's an independent person, he has a body and he has limits, you're an independent entity in your own right. But in actual fact, you don't exist as an independent entity. You only exist because of an incredible multiplicity of causes and conditions, you don't exist unless you have parents, you don't exist unless you had meals for the last week or so, unless you drank for the last day or two. In a true version of reality, you're actually highly interdependent.

You're singular. I can say, well, you're one body, one separate entity, but actually you've got a face, you've got arms, you've got legs, you have all sorts of components.

So those three things are the hallmarks of reality, or actually a level of reality. And the difficulty with our common way of living, and actually the root of all of our problems is that we commonly miss-identify reality. We actually identify with an incorrect version of reality, we actually attach a deep reality to an idea that things are permanent, independent and singular, whereas in actual fact, they're impermanent, interdependent, and multiple. And what happens when we think of ourselves as being permanent, and independent, and singular, is that we think of ourselves as separate, the way we've been habituated to think. If we're having an academic debate this could easily take

(continued)

me into either an aggressive or defensive stance, like 'who's right, who's wrong? Who's going to look good? How am I going to come out of this? How are we separate?' It's just a recipe for anxiety. And we do that in all sorts of contexts, so that a dualistic view goes with this relative view of truth or reality, and we live according to what we like, or don't like, at this separate human level. It leads to aggression and defensiveness. It leads to pain and pleasure, perception of pain and pleasure, even hope and fear. And all these things are root causes of dissatisfaction, anxiety, lack of mental health, emotional health issues.

To address that, we need to understand that at the surface reality life is changing all the time, life is incredibly interdependent, and life is multiple in its facets. People need to understand reality at a deeper than intellectual level, to really live it, and stop thinking 'when I get a permanent home, or job or relationship I'll be happy'. People need to live life in the light of the fact that life events are changing all the time, and accept that and work with it and just make the most of it, which is eminently possible.

When people develop a really deep understanding of our interdependence it leads naturally to gratitude, it leads naturally to tolerance, it leads naturally to compassion. So this underpins all those human qualities that we probably all aspire to, and it provides a way out of being stuck, in the idea of being separate—there are always more possibilities than your first thought, there is always a deeper reality.

1.4 What Reality Psychology Isn't, Is and Can Be

1.4.1 What Reality Psychology Isn't

Reality Psychology isn't an artificial or arbitrary construct, it is a response to a pervasive paradigm that is guiding psychological and allied thought and practice in a direction that potentially has pitfalls as well as positives. These potential pitfalls include the potential to direct people including psychological practitioners and their clients into believing that they can and should always be positive, no matter what. This approach can reduce the fullness, the full potential, and the full reality of people's living potential.

Prevailing paradigms are powerful influencers of human thought and behaviour including because they provide a widely accepted framework for thinking and acting, particularly for people who don't have the expert knowledge or inclination to find their own way. Just as there can be a perceived physical safety in numbers there can be perceived psychological safety in following conceptual leads. This is particularly common when the people leading a paradigm are high profile and respected experts in their fields, as the leaders of the Positive Psychology movement undoubtedly are. The American Systems Thinking expert Donella Meadows

(Meadows, 1999) contended that the most effective way to intervene in any system, which includes human thought and behaviour influencing systems, is at their highest level –

1. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system—its goals, power structure, rules, its culture—arises.

Psychological paradigms are particularly powerful including because psychology is the science of human thinking and behaviour. This has helped it become a very popular academic and professional discipline, and therefore helped it become very influential, and very pervasive, as well as persuasive. Many people trust psychological theories and practitioners in the way that people used to trust priests—as experts who can interpret phenomena that can be complex, mysterious and even threatening. Paradigms can be very valuable as well as powerful including because they can provide a systematic approach and a high-level positive influence, including of psychological and other practice, and education. Paradigms however can also be *dangerous* because prevailing paradigms are not always fully beneficial to humanity.

A general example of a prevailing paradigm that is more problematic than it might seem is the *progress paradigm*—the largely unquestioned assumption that we have a continual need to go forwards no matter where we are going. This includes progress to ever increasing Gross Domestic Product rates and replacement of traditional community and communication systems with virtual ones. Before climbing aboard our prevailing paradigm thought trains we should stop and reflect on where they are really going, and whether they are heading towards pitfalls as well as promises. The dangers of the *progress paradigm* include its potentially leading us to negative human consequences such as de-personalisation and alienation for many people, as well as to positive consequences such as life convenience and economic gains for some people. It is vital for us to reflect on whether we are making *real progress*, or *fool's progress*.

A psychological example of a powerful paradigm is the *Behaviourist paradigm* which became popular and influential firstly in America in the 1920s, and was led by high profile and high energy psychologists such as John Watson. This pioneer behaviourist once famously claimed that he could make anything out of anybody, because our behaviour is 100% learned. This paradigm had negative consequences as well as positive ones including leading people to unrealistically think that they could and should learn and be anything (nurture), regardless of their hardwired structure (nature). As is usual in the development of psychology paradigms and many other paradigms a balanced position was eventually achieved that recognized the importance of both nurture and nature.

A valuable lesson that we can learn from the history of paradigms, including psychological ones, is that they tend to be either inherently unbalanced or to lose balance as they gain momentum, as do all speeding objects. Paradigms tend to be increasingly represented or interpreted as having all of the relevant answers to all of the relevant questions, and to suggest that all other ways of proceeding are wrong ways. It is therefore valuable to recognize that Positive Psychology is a paradigm, and that Reality Psychology is a potentially balancing paradigm. The Reality

Psychology paradigm needs to be tested as any hypothesis or possibility needs to be tested—rather than just accepted—on blind scientific faith. Is it true and also is it useful?

1.4.2 What Reality Psychology Is and Can Be

Reality Psychology is a possible paradigm that can possibly balance Positive Psychology's excesses and also provide its own potential theoretical and practical value. It is also a possible perspective that focuses on the reality and the real value of what people are actually experiencing—here and now—and potentially on how this can take them to a deeper reality that is beyond the sensory one. This approach is based on the active ingredients of its aspects and applications that include mindfulness. Mindfulness techniques are based on the ancient essence of mindfulness—being fully awake, being fully aware of, being fully accepting of and therefore fully open to the opportunity of the reality that is manifesting here and now. This can take us to a deeper and non-separate underlying reality, and doesn't mean living with an artificial reality or an unreality that I would like to be real. The Reality Psychology approach is one of building a theoretical and practical psychological and whole life system that is based on solid and unchanging foundations rather than building ideas in the sand.

Reality Psychology is a potentially valuable new psychological term and paradigm that is being offered and described in this book as a potential provider of valuable new opportunities for reality-friendly and focused psychological theory and practice. It is also a potentially valuable re-connection with the essence of our ongoingly valuable human knowledge systems, including psychology. This book will describe and explore what Reality Psychology most valuably is and can be, with your help.

1.5 Reality Psychology: A Mental Health Expert's Perspective



Conversation

In this conversation the internationally recognized expert in mental health and wellbeing, well-known clinician, researcher and reformer, and recipient of honours including Australian of the Year in 2010, Professor Patrick McGorry AO FAA FASSA FAHMS FRCP FRANZCP, talks with me about the potential value of Reality Psychology.

(continued)

SM

I have recently come up with a possible psychological paradigm called Reality Psychology, which emphasises the importance of focusing on what is real, rather than on what should be real, and that can therefore potentially lead to an artificial focus on positivity. Do you think that this is a useful way of looking at psychology and at psychopathology?

PM

Yes, that's a very interesting idea, actually. I mean, people adjusting their expectations to reality, that might put less pressure on people, I suppose, and reduce stress. That's a very interesting idea. I'm speaking as an idealist here. I've always been an idealist. And you know, I probably never grew up, I have had that idealism that young people often have my whole life, and I found that this creates pressure to do things I might not otherwise do. It does create stress as well, and pressure, but there's probably an upside to getting the balance right between reality and what, ideally, could actually happen. And if you set the bar too high, you're probably setting yourself up to fail. Your concept is very interesting.

SM

I think that's an important point—to strive for balance—or I suppose in Buddhist terms, a middle path, rather than being too accepting of apparent reality, which in its extreme form would mean that you wouldn't change anything—you wouldn't make any positive changes.

PM

Yes, exactly. Your middle path probably is a good way for most people to go. But you do need the revolutionaries—the people who are going to push the boundaries, and you need the people who are actually going to sort of, I suppose, push themselves beyond their limits as well. And that's a choice for each person.

SM

It's an interesting point. And I think that perhaps an important aspect of reality is that it's not one size fits all, there's different potentially real solutions for different people.

PM

Yes, some philosophers have questioned what reality actually is. Is there such a thing as reality?

SM

And is it something that you can make friends with!

PM

In terms of mental health reform, being able to translate evidence, even scientific evidence for treatment and care into reality, you have to be pragmatic, you have to be able to work politically, collaboratively, in all sorts of ways to actually make the world better based on what you've learned from your research and experience.

(continued)

SM

That's right. And do you think that learning from reality is something that relates to resilience, in that being exposed to experiences that we regard as challenging could potentially be real positives, and in a way there could be a psychological equivalent to physical immunization—we need some exposure to psychological toxins to develop our full capacities in life?

PM

Yes, I actually do think that and I think that's a really good way of putting it. And while you don't seek adversity, no one seeks trauma or loss, there is a thing called post traumatic growth. And people can actually end up as much better and stronger people than they would have been if they hadn't been through even something that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. I've treated local refugees and torture survivors, and some of those people are highly inspirational because of what they've become as a result of their adverse experiences. And then I've also seen people, middle class people, who have grown up in a bubble. They've grown up in a protected environment, and not actually experienced any adversity until they reached middle life, and something bad happens to them—they don't grow from it.

SM

That's an interesting point, it could be seen as a converse to Martin Seligman's theory of learned helplessness in the 1970s—maybe people learn helplessness when life is too easy as well as too hard!

PM

Yes. I think learned helplessness is a great concept, as were his later positive [psychology] concepts. I don't want to be rendered helpless by never having been challenged either.

1.6 Reality Psychology: Psychology Students' Perspectives



Discourses

Here are some Reality Psychology reflections from a group of Clinical Psychology Master's students who were recently introduced to the Reality Psychology paradigm, in the *Wellbeing in Practice* Master's level psychology course –

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