

What (and Why) Is Positive Psychology?

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Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions. In this brief introduction, the authors give examples of current work in positive psychology and try to explain why the positive psychology movement has grown so quickly in just 5 years. They suggest that it filled a need: It guided researchers to understudied phenomena. The authors close by addressing some criticisms and shortcomings of positive psychology, such as the relative lack of progress in studying positive institutions.

The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. (Kennedy, 1968)

Robert F. Kennedy's lament about the gross national product is analogous to positive psychology's lament about what might be called the "gross academic product" of psychology. In January 2000, when Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi edited a special issue of *American Psychologist* devoted to positive psychology, they claimed that psychology was not producing enough "knowledge of what makes life worth living" (p. 5). In the second half of the 20th century, psychology learned much about depression, racism, violence, self-esteem management, irrationality, and growing up under adversity but had much less to say about character strengths, virtues, and the conditions that lead to high levels of happiness or civic engagement. In one metaphor, psychology was said to be learning how to bring people up from negative eight to zero but not as good at understanding how people rise from zero to positive eight.

In just 5 years since that special issue, quite a bit has happened in what has become known as the positive psychology movement. Many edited volumes and handbooks have been published (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Schmuck & Sheldon, 2001; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Dozens of conferences have brought researchers together from all over the world. Numerous grants have facilitated the research of young investigators and created collaborations among researchers from many countries. Courses in positive psychology are springing up in scores of universities and high schools. Those of us involved in positive psychology are often amazed at how fast the train has been moving.

However, scholars who are not involved in positive psychology may be skeptical about both the cargo and the destination of the train. In this introduction, we would like to address those who are doubtful about positive psychology, or just unfamiliar with it. We relate our view of positive psychology, how we respond to some recent criticisms of the positive psychology movement, and where we think the field is going. Both of us are experimental social psychologists whose work happens to fall within the purview of positive psychology. We also co-run a yearly conference, the Positive Psychology Summer Institute, in which 20 graduate students, postdoctoral students, and assistant professors from all over the world and from all of the subfields of psychology are brought together for 6 days to learn from each other and from a handful of more senior researchers. We are excited by the quality of the work we see each summer and by the caliber and diversity of

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the scholars who attend the summer institute and participate in other positive psychology activities. We would like to invite you to consider getting involved too, because if all goes well, positive psychology may not be around for much longer. If the positive psychology movement is successful in rebalancing psychology and expanding its gross academic product, it will become obsolete.

What Is (and Was, and Is Not) Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions. Defined in this way, positive psychology has a long history, dating back to William James's writings on what he termed "healthy mindedness" in 1902, to Allport's interest in positive human characteristics in 1958, to Maslow's advocacy for the study of healthy people in lieu of sick people in 1968, and to Cowan's research on resilience in children and adolescents (e.g., Cowan, 2000). However, for reasons discussed later, the past half century has seen the study of the psychological aspects of what makes life worth living recede to the background, whereas studies on disorder and damage have taken center stage. The recent positive psychology movement grew out of recognition of this imbalance and a desire to encourage research in neglected areas.

What are some neglected areas? A sampling of the research topics covered by the 60 scholars who have taken part in the Positive Psychology Summer Institute in the past 3 years¹ provides a nice illustration of some of them. Many of the scholars are studying areas that were not truly neglected, such as attachment, optimism, love, emotional intelligence, and intrinsic motivation. But others are studying areas of human experience about which there was very little published research before the year 2000, such as gratitude, forgiveness, awe, inspiration, hope, curiosity, and laughter (there are commonalities between tickle-induced vocalization in rat pups and youthful laughter in humans, highlighting the likely possibility of common underlying neurobiological systems; Burgdorf, 2001). Some are studying well-being or flourishing in unusual or understudied populations, including Latinos in the United States, South Asians in arranged

marriages, elderly people with cognitive impairments, cancer patients, and people with schizophrenia (whose daily lives turn out to include about the same balance of positive and negative moments as those of nonschizophrenics; Gard, 2001). Others are studying the psychobiological underpinnings of happiness and morality. Some are studying techniques to improve well-being, such as mindfulness meditation, journal writing, well-being therapy, savoring, and exposure to green spaces. If these research programs seem worthwhile and interesting and you agree that our field is better off with an understanding of flourishing to complement our understanding of despair, then you too may be a positive psychologist.

However, positive psychology does *not* imply that the rest of psychology is negative, although it is understandable that the name may imply that to some people. In fact, the large majority of the gross academic product of psychology is neutral, focusing on neither well-being nor distress. Positive psychology grew largely from the recognition of an imbalance in clinical psychology, in which most research does indeed focus on mental illness. Researchers in cognitive, developmental, social, and personality psychology may not believe that things are so out of balance. However, even in these fields, we believe that there are many topics that can be said to have two sides, and although a great flurry of research occurs on the negative side, the positive side is left to lie fallow. For example, in the two areas with which we are most familiar, this imbalance is evident. In the field of close relationships, many studies have examined how couples respond to each other's misfortune (e.g., social support) or bad relationship behavior (e.g., criticisms and infidelities), but little is known about how couples respond to each other's triumphs (e.g., savoring positive events) or good relationship behavior (e.g., compliments and displays of affection; see Reis & Gable, 2003). And there are volumes of work examining how couples and families resolve conflict but very few studies examining them having fun and laughing together. In the area of morality, there are thousands of published studies on the negative moral emotions, the emo-

¹ The first year of the summer institute was run by Dacher Keltner and Lisa Aspinwall.

tions we feel when others do bad things (anger, contempt, and disgust) or when we ourselves do bad things (shame, embarrassment, and guilt); however, there are only a few empirical studies of the positive moral emotions, the emotions we feel when others do good things (gratitude, admiration, and moral elevation; see Haidt, 2003).

Despite these inequities, positive psychology's aim is not the denial of the distressing, unpleasant, or negative aspects of life, nor is it an effort to see them through rose-colored glasses. Those who study topics in positive psychology fully acknowledge the existence of human suffering, selfishness, dysfunctional family systems, and ineffective institutions. But the aim of positive psychology is to study the other side of the coin—the ways that people feel joy, show altruism, and create healthy families and institutions—thereby addressing the full spectrum of human experience. Moreover, positive psychology makes the argument that these positive topics of inquiry are important to understand in their own right, not solely as buffers against the problems, stressors, and disorders of life (although we believe the evidence is clear that many positive processes shield us from negative outcomes, a point we return to later).

Sheldon and King (2001) defined positive psychology as “nothing more than the scientific study of *ordinary* human strengths and virtues,” one that “revisits the *average* person” (p. 216; italics added). In this definition is the acknowledgment that our field as a whole is relatively silent regarding what is typical, because what is typical *is* positive. Indeed, 9 of 10 Americans report being “very happy” or “pretty happy” (Myers, 2000). And, contrary to the notion that this is unique to American soil, studies have consistently revealed that most people across the globe score well above the neutral point on measures of life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1996), and even people who many might assume would be very unsatisfied with their lives, such as slum dwellers in Calcutta, are actually quite satisfied with their lives (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). Thus, despite the very real impact of the negative aspects of life documented in the past few decades of psychological research, most people are doing well, and we, as psychologists, tend to overlook the greater part of human experience and the majority of people, families, groups, and institutions.

Why a Positive Psychology *Movement*, and Why Now?

Why do we need a *movement* in positive psychology? The answer is straightforward. The science of psychology has made great strides in understanding what goes wrong in individuals, families, groups, and institutions, but these advances have come at the cost of understanding what is right with people. For example, clinical psychology has made excellent progress in diagnosing and treating mental illnesses and personality disorders (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Researchers in social psychology have conducted groundbreaking studies on the existence of implicit prejudice and negative outcomes associated with low self-esteem (e.g., Josephs, Bosson, & Jacobs, 2003; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). Health psychology has shown us the detrimental effects that environmental stressors have on our physiological systems (e.g., Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). And cognitive psychology has illuminated the many biases and errors involved in our judgments (e.g., Gilovich, Vallone, & Tversky, 1985). These are all important findings in our field, but it is harder to locate corresponding work on human strengths and virtues.²

So why has our field been so much more interested in foibles than in strengths? We see three reasons. The first is compassion. Those who are suffering should be helped before those who are already doing well. We certainly agree with this notion; however, we also think that an understanding of human strengths can actually help prevent or lessen the damage of disease, stress, and disorder. For example, research on coping has demonstrated that appraisals of negative life events that put them into perspective with one's own capabilities for meeting the challenge mediate the actual experience of distress (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). And Taylor and colleagues (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenwald, 2000) have provided persuasive evidence that beliefs such as optimism and a sense of personal control are protective factors for psychological and physical health.

² One can point to inspiring work such as the jigsaw classroom of Aronson, Blaney, Stephan, Sikes, and Snapp (1978), which brought out the best in students, but such cases are few and far between.

This evidence, as well as a plethora of findings from other research programs, leads us to believe that a better understanding of the environmental conditions and personal strengths that buffer against illness will actually equip us to better help those who are suffering.

Furthermore, there is the question of ratio. Even if everyone agrees that we should spend more money and research time on problems and suffering than on health and strength, the question is, how much more? Five, 10, or 50 times more? If our research "investment portfolio" gets too far out of balance, we are passing up opportunities to make rapid scientific progress with minimal investment. Many of the participants in the Positive Psychology Summer Institute are now leaders in their fields of study despite their young ages, because they have chosen fascinating and important topics that nobody had bothered to invest in before.

A second reason for psychology's focus on distress and disease in the past 50 years is pragmatic and historical. After World War II, psychologists found that funding agencies were prioritizing research into mental illness and other problems, and much work could be found helping returning veterans (Seligman, 2002). Moreover, by this time, clinical psychology had come to focus on diagnosis and treatment of disorders, in the fashion of a medical disease model (Maddux, 2002). And, as Keyes and Lopez (2002) have argued, akin to the medical disease model, we have invested greatly in identifying proximal causes of mental illnesses and creating effective therapies for those who are already suffering from disorders, but we have fallen short in identifying distal buffers to mental illness, such as personal strengths and social connections and prevention aimed at the larger population. Ironically, then, one cost of focusing resources solely on the treatment of those who are already ill may be the prevention of these very same illnesses in those who are not ill through research on the strengths and circumstances that contribute to resilience and wellness. And this analysis applies equally well to branches of psychology other than clinical. For example, a focus on prejudice overlooks the process of acceptance, a focus on conflict ignores how compromises are forged, and a focus on bias misses the many instances of accuracy and the circumstances that surround it.

The third reason for our field's focus on the negative may very well reside in our own nature and our theories about psychological processes. As Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) have documented, "Bad is stronger than good." In a review of the literature, they argued that negative events have more impact than positive events and that information about bad things is processed more thoroughly than information about good. For example, there is evidence that automatic vigilance tends to be greater to negative stimuli than to positive stimuli (e.g., Pratto & John, 1991). There is also evidence that we see negative acts as more diagnostic about someone's inner qualities than positive acts by making internal attributions for the former and external attributions for the latter (e.g., Vonk, 1994).

It may be evolutionarily adaptive to recognize potential threats more readily than potential rewards. The former may have had immediate and irreversible consequences for survival and reproduction, whereas the latter's impact on survival and reproduction may have been more indirect and reversible. For example, Cosmides and Tooby (1992) have demonstrated that people have a mechanism for the detection of individuals who violate social contracts by benefiting themselves without reciprocally contributing to the group (i.e., cheaters), but thus far there is no evidence that we possess a mechanism for the detection of the reverse (i.e., altruists).

Moreover, a key reason for the primacy of negative information may be that it violates our expectations (Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996). Positive events, information, processes, and interactions simply occur more frequently than negative ones. For example, one study showed that when asked how often a list of eight positive (e.g., "A friend, romantic partner, or family member complimented me") and eight negative (e.g., "A friend, family member, or romantic partner insulted me") social events had occurred in the past week, participants reported that the negative interactions occurred an average of 5.9 times and the positive interactions occurred an average of 19.0 times. This yielded a ratio of 3.2 positive events for each negative event (Gable, 2000), and the pattern of experiencing more positive than negative events has been replicated in daily experience studies in-

cluding both social and nonsocial events (e.g., school or work; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). Thus, negative information, events, and interactions become the figure to the positive ground because they are the exception and not the norm.

Our bias as humans to more readily perceive and process negative information should not, however, be reflected in the subject matter of our science. Indeed, because positive processes occur more often, their impact on long-term outcomes may be even greater, despite the more subtle impact of any single positive process. As evidence for this claim, we draw your attention to two recent studies on positive emotions, which until recently (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998) have been undertheorized and understudied by emotion researchers. In the first, Harker and Keltner (2001) coded the emotional expressions of women in their college yearbook photos and correlated them with outcomes such as marital satisfaction and psychological well-being 30 years later. Women who expressed more positive emotion in their photos at 22 years of age had significantly more favorable outcomes in their 50s. Similarly, Danner, Snowdon, and Friesen (2001) found that autobiographies of Catholic nuns written in their early 20s predicted survival in old age. Specifically, nuns whose essays contained positive emotional content lived longer than nuns whose essays lacked such content. Astoundingly, there was a 2.5 risk-ratio difference between the lowest and highest quartiles of positive emotional expression!

In summary, despite the philosophical, historical, and theoretical underpinnings that led to the current imbalance in psychology, we believe that there is little empirical justification for our predominantly negative view of human nature and the human condition. Therefore, it is not surprising to us that what has become known as the positive psychology movement grew so rapidly from its beginnings (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Research on positive psychology topics is not new, but the time was right for a correction and an organized positive psychology movement. In the past 5 years, many investigators have been getting on the train and discovering that it is taking them to interesting places and new frontiers.

Challenges to Positive Psychology

The positive psychology movement is not without its challengers and critics. Many criticisms seem to arise from the assumption that if there is a positive psychology, then the rest of psychology must be negative psychology, and if we need a positive psychology it is because this so-called negative psychology has taught us little. This interpretation is unfortunate and, more important, untrue, as we hope what we have written here already demonstrates. In fact, it is because psychology (which is mostly neutral, but with more negative than positive topics) has been so extraordinarily successful that the imbalance, the lack of progress on positive topics, has become so glaring.

A second criticism is that people who study positive psychology fail to recognize the very real negative sides of life, preferring a Pollyanna view of the world. However, here we echo those who have come before us in articulating the goals of positive psychology. The aim is not to erase or supplant work on pathology, distress, and dysfunction. Rather, the aim is to build up what we know about human resilience, strength, and growth to integrate and complement the existing knowledge base. A related concern is that the movement has cultlike qualities in which people get together to share their Pollyannaism. Here we invite the reader to peruse a list of researchers involved in positive psychology conferences, meetings, and publications (a comprehensive list can be found at <http://www.positivepsychology.org/>). This list contains the names of many of the top scholars in each field. Nearly all of us involved in positive psychology research are housed in traditional psychology departments, and we publish in mainstream journals. We do not think of ourselves as rebels, and many of us rarely if ever refer to ourselves as “positive psychologists.” We merely find that the positive psychology movement helps us study our topics more effectively.

Perhaps some of the most daunting challenges to positive psychology stem from defining what actually is positive and the ambiguous line between *describing* something as “good” and *prescribing* it as “good” (Held, 2004). An appropriate analogy can be drawn from medical research showing, for example, that exercise and leafy green vegetables are “good” for us. In the same way, we believe that findings from

positive psychology can and should encourage people to adopt behaviors and mental practices that are “good” for them.

However, in medicine, what is good is rather straightforward: living longer, without illness. In psychology, labeling something as positive or good may not be as simple (Held, 2004). Diener and Suh (1997) suggested three bases for what is positive or what is valuable. First, the choices people make are one indication of value. That is, if something is chosen regularly, the chooser probably believes in its value or goodness. Second, people can judge whether or not something is satisfying: whether an object, event, process, or outcome is pleasant. Third, judgments of what is positive or good can be made with reference to some value system or set of cultural norms. Our shared beliefs regarding what is wrong or unacceptable and what is right or acceptable can guide decisions about what aims to pursue. These three criteria sometimes agree and sometimes do not. For example, sex outside the context of a committed relationship may be pleasant and enjoyable but may be unacceptable in terms of one’s religious value system, and one may not choose to engage in it often. Filling up one’s gas tank may be chosen often, but it is neither experientially enjoyable nor valued by an environmentally conscious belief system. Reporting for jury duty may be good as defined by civic values, but it may not be pleasant and is rarely chosen freely. Conversely, the three criteria may also converge, for instance, in playing with one’s child.

In short, the meaning of what is positive or good is complex and multidimensional, and the study of positive psychological topics requires recognition of this complexity in theories and empirical designs. An excellent example of this complexity unfolding in psychological research is Norem’s (2001) work on defensive pessimism. There is a great deal of evidence that optimism is associated with good outcomes (e.g., health and well-being) and pessimism is associated with bad outcomes (e.g., Taylor et al., 2000). This may lead to the prescription “Think optimistically and you will do better.” However, as suggested by Norem and Chang (2002), people are much more complex, and a “one size fits all” model does not work. Specifically, Norem’s work shows that for a subgroup of people with a defensive pessimism personality style, there are real costs associated with

positive thinking, and to insist that optimism would be good for them would be a disservice. There are likely to be many other circumstances in which the three criteria of goodness may not converge, or may not converge for everyone. To meet the challenge of complexity, positive psychology must move beyond the description of main effects (optimism, humor, forgiveness, and curiosity are good) and begin to look more closely at the complex interactions that are the hallmark of most of psychology, as well as of medicine.

The Future of Positive Psychology: Just Plain Psychology

The final question is, where does psychology go from here? We echo Ryff’s (2003) call that positive psychology needs to properly map “the domain of human optimal functioning” (p. 158). The future task of positive psychology is to understand the factors that build strengths, outline the contexts of resilience, ascertain the role of positive experiences, and delineate the function of positive relationships with others. Positive psychology needs to understand how all of these factors contribute to physical health, subjective well-being, functional groups, and flourishing institutions. Ultimately, positive psychology needs to develop effective interventions to increase and sustain these processes.

In this way, we see a final criticism of, and direction for, positive psychology. The original “three pillars” of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002) were positive subjective experience, positive individual characteristics (strengths and virtues), and positive institutions and communities. So far, positive psychology has produced a great deal of new research into the first two areas but much less into the third. Early hopes for linking up with a “positive sociology” and a “positive anthropology” have gone largely unfulfilled. If such links cannot be forged in the future, then we hope that positive psychologists will become more daring in their theory and their interventions and will try, in the coming years, to actually improve the functioning of schools, workplaces, and even governments.

We began this article with a quote from Robert F. Kennedy, who nearly 40 years ago recognized that the gross national product provides a woefully incomplete picture of the value of a

country. It is our contention that the gross academic product of psychology as it exists today provides an incomplete picture of human life. The recent movement in positive psychology strives toward an understanding of the *complete* human condition, an understanding that recognizes human strengths as clearly as it does human frailties and that specifies how the two are linked. Only a balanced, empirically grounded, and theoretically rich view of human experience can fulfill the mission of our field, as outlined in William James's (1890/1950) description of psychology as "the science of mental Life, both of its phenomena and their conditions" (p. 1).

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