

Editorial

Unpacking positive emotions: Investigating the seeds of human flourishing

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The editors of the *Journal of Positive Psychology* chose to create this Special Issue on positive emotions because pleasant affective states appear to be critical ingredients within the recipe for human flourishing. People who flourish live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that simultaneously connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Understanding and promoting human flourishing is perhaps the most central mission within positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

To be sure, there are other critical ingredients as well: positive character, positive cognitions, and positive relationships are each in themselves central mechanisms that also seem to seed human flourishing. Yet positive emotions, if construed in appropriate breadth and depth, may turn out to be the most bedrock of these enablers and mechanisms of human flourishing. This is because positive emotions frequently covary with and energize positive character, positive cognitions, and positive relationships. To the extent that these fundamental associations exist, one strategy that researchers and practitioners can adopt is to estimate people's prospects for flourishing by tracking their experiences of genuine positive emotions (e.g., Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

Favoring this strategy, a recent groundswell of empirical work has revealed that experienced and expressed positive emotions predict not only the quality of life (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Harker & Keltner, 2001) but also the quantity of life (e.g., Danner, Snowden, & Friesen, 2001; Moskowitz, 2003; Ostir, Markides, Black, & Goodwin, 2000). Indeed a recent meta analysis of more than 300 cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies supports the conclusion that life success not only engenders positive affect, but that positive affect also engenders life success (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, in press).

How does this work? Many explanations draw on the broaden-and-build theory of positive

emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001), which asserts that positive emotions evolved as psychological adaptations that increased our human ancestor's odds of survival and reproduction. Specifically, the theory states that, unlike negative emotions which narrow people's behavioral urges toward specific actions that were often life-preserving in times of threat (e.g., fight, flight), positive emotions widen the array of thoughts and actions that spring to mind (e.g., play, explore) which facilitates generativity and behavioral flexibility. The benefits of these broadened mindsets emerge over time because through play, exploration, and the like, our human ancestors built a variety of durable personal resources, like social connections, coping strategies, and environmental knowledge, which later functioned as reserves they could draw on to manage future threats and increase their odds of survival. The broaden-and-build theory, then, provides a lens through which the links between people's positive emotions and their subsequent generativity, resilience, growth, and longevity make sense.

Knowing that positive emotions may play this pivotal role within human flourishing, it behooves researchers within positive psychology to unpack these pleasant states further and to examine them from all angles. Who experiences which positive emotions the most? How can we sustainably augment people's experiences of positive emotions? What role do positive emotions play in healthy coping? What role do they play in relationship development? These are but a subset of the many researchable questions that need to be addressed if we are to gain an empirically-grounded appreciation of positive emotions and their status within the greater mission of positive psychology. The papers of this Special Issue address these questions.

The paper by Shiota, Keltner, and John underscores that positive emotions come in many varieties and that people differ from one another not just in their propensities to experience positive affect in general, but rather in their propensities to experience

specific, discrete positive emotional states, like joy, contentment, pride, love, compassion, amusement, and awe. This represents a key conceptual advance in our understanding of the ways that positive emotions relate to personality. Most past research on individual differences in positive emotions has relied on monolithic assessment tools, such as the widely popular PANAS scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Shiota and colleagues offer a new tool for classifying individual differences in positive emotion, one that appropriately honors the breadth and depth of qualitatively distinct positive emotional states. They also begin the work of unpacking how these different positive affective traits align with other foundational concepts within personality psychology, namely the Big Five traits of extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, neuroticism, and conscientiousness, and various attachment styles within close relationships. Their work goes far beyond the classic findings that extraversion and secure attachment each predict positive affect. Their data not only specify which positive emotions extraversion and secure attachment predict, but also reveal new and compelling associations between other Big Five traits and other attachment styles with specific positive emotion profiles.

The paper by Sheldon and Lyubomirsky joins a growing scientific literature on interventions that reliably increase positive emotions and overall happiness (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Scientifically-tested happiness-boosting interventions may well become the most practical products of positive psychology. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky test two different interventions, one based on counting blessings and the other based on envisioning one's best possible self. In a sample of young adults, they find that envisioning one's best possible future self was particularly effective in producing sustainable increases in positive affect. As work in this important area goes forward, it will become increasingly necessary to unpack the specific positive emotions that particular mental and behavioral interventions produce and to tie these emotion outcomes to specific life benefits. It will also be necessary to test various intervention strategies with different sub-populations. For instance, it may be that, for young adults, envisioning best possible future selves is highly engaging and effective whereas counting blessings is not. The reverse may be true for older adults.

The paper by Moskowitz and Epel examines the link between finding benefit in adversity, experiencing positive emotions, and biomarkers of stress reactivity indexed by healthy daily cortisol rhythms. Their findings deserve our thoughtful consideration

for the implications they hold for the tie between positive cognitions and positive emotions. They found that healthy daily cortisol rhythms were predicted by the co-presence of benefit-finding and positive emotions, and not by either variable in isolation. In these data, positive emotions may index whether people "walk the talk" or genuinely take their positive cognitions to heart. It is perhaps far easier for people to say that they've found the silver lining in times of trouble than to actually feel that to be true in their daily lives. Likewise, it may be that the most consequential positive emotions are those that are meaningfully grounded in people's core values and new found life philosophies. This work also adds to a small but growing literature on the physiological correlates of positive emotions. As this literature advances, it will become important to extend beyond the classic biomarkers of negative emotions (e.g., cardiovascular reactivity and cortisol) to also explore ones perhaps uniquely connected to positive emotions (e.g., vagal tone, progesterone, oxytocin, and human growth hormone).

The paper by Waugh and Fredrickson integrates the broaden-and-build theory with Aron and colleagues' self-expansion theory (1991) and hypothesizes that one way that positive emotions broaden people's mindsets is to expand the self to include close others to a greater degree. By studying first-year college students' developing relationships with their new roommates, Waugh and Fredrickson uncovered a link between positive emotions and growing self-other overlap. They also found that self-other overlap in turn predicted developing a more complex understanding of one's new roommate over time. Perhaps most importantly, these data provide an initial test of Fredrickson and Losada's (2005) recent assertion that positive emotions do not build personal and social resources unless they are experienced within a ratio of positivity to negativity equal to or greater than 2.9 to 1. This positivity ratio represents the bifurcation point between the complex dynamics of human flourishing and the simpler dynamics of human languishing or human pathology (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Waugh and Fredrickson's data provide an early glimpse into the possible non-linear effects of positive emotions.

The picture of positive emotions portrayed by these four papers is far from complete. My hope is that these papers, once read and appreciated, will inspire other and especially new investigators to take the next steps needed to advance these lines of inquiry about positive emotions and to chart new ones. If positive emotions are indeed critical ingredients within the recipe for human flourishing, the press to learn more about them is intense.

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