

Other People Matter: The Power of Positive Relationships

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“Other people matter.” I say that in every positive psychology lecture I give and every positive psychology workshop I conduct. It sounds like a bumper sticker slogan, but it is actually a good summary of what positive psychology research has shown about the good life broadly construed. It is in the company of others that we often experience pleasure and certainly how we best savor its aftermath. It is through character strengths that connect us to others—like gratitude—that many of us find satisfaction and meaning in life. It is with other people that we work, love, and play. Good relationships with other people may be a necessary condition for our own happiness, even in markedly individualist cultures like the contemporary United States.

—Christopher Peterson

INTRODUCTION

The International Positive Psychology Association defines positive psychology as the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive (IPPA, 2017). Over the past two decades, hundreds of empirical studies using rigorous scientific methods commonly found across the discipline of psychology have been conducted to address cutting edge research questions about human thriving. In 2015, a systematic review of 1,336 peer-reviewed positive psychology articles, titled “Happiness, Excellence, and Optimal Functioning Revisited: Examining the Peer-Reviewed Literature Linked to Positive Psychology,” was published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015). More than 750 of these peer-reviewed articles included empirical tests of positive psychology theories, principles, and interventions. This work examining the scientific basis of positive psychology was recently expanded in a book titled *Scientific Advances in Positive Psychology* (Warren & Donaldson, 2017). One of the most striking metafindings from all this

scientific work focused on understanding happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning is that “other people matter.”

Edward Diener, another pioneer and contemporary thought leader in the area of positive psychology, has conducted and analyzed numerous empirical studies of happiness and subjective well-being. He concluded that despite the common myth that income and wealth are the strongest predictors of happiness (they are not highly correlated in most studies), it is actually the quality of our social relationships that emerges in study after study as the strongest predictor of our happiness and well-being (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2011). This robust finding extends to the quality of our relationships with our significant others, family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, and supervisors or leaders at work. For example, Warren, Donaldson, and Luthans (2017) summarized the theory and research supporting that positive work relationships are significant predictors of employee well-being and optimal functioning at work. This literature shows that high-quality relationships at work are clearly linked to outcomes that foster employee and work team flourishing (Dutton & Ragins, 2006). Reis and Gable (2003) argued that the positive and negative aspects of relationships may be best understood as functionally independent, and encouraged researchers to develop a “positive psychology of relationships.” The authors in this volume have responded to that call. In the chapters that follow you will learn about some of the latest thinking and research illustrating the power of positive relationships in most aspects of our lives. A brief overview of each chapter is provided below to get you ready to dive deeply into some of the latest theories, research, and applications, moving us toward an evidence-based understanding of the power of positive relationships.

APPLYING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO ADVANCE RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE

Warren, Donaldson, and Lee ([Chapter 2](#)) systematically reviewed the most popular areas of research on positive relationships and the extent to which they attend to the relational context.

Positive interpersonal relationships were found to be intrinsic components of both psychological well-being and life satisfaction across the human lifespan (Diener & Seligman, 2009; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000; Reis & Gable, 2003). [Chapter 2](#) suggests positive relationships are the primary context to initiate, develop, and demonstrate the three pillars of positive psychology (i.e., positive states, positive traits, and positive institutions). How these constructs contribute to the enrichment of relationship science was examined, as well as some of the emerging contributions to the positive psychology of relationships.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY, RELATIONAL SELF-ESTEEM, AND INCREASING WELL-BEING

Mruk ([Chapter 3](#)) examined the intersection of positive psychology and self-esteem, reviewing self-protective and self-enhancing factors as mechanisms of self-esteem in relationships. He then addressed the similarities of the research on self-esteem and positive

emotions followed by the application of a training program called Competence and Worthiness Training (CWT), which is focused on using self-esteem to increase relational well-being. Mruk concludes with future directions, asserting that self-esteem is crucial for fostering healthy, positive interpersonal relationships.

THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF ROMANTIC LOVE

Acevedo ([Chapter 4](#)) examined and discussed the research on the positive psychology of romantic love. She provided a background of what is known about romantic love, emphasizing work on the neural underpinnings of love, such as the mechanisms of romantic love, motherly love, and compassion among others. However, in her view this paints an incomplete picture of love, wherein she believes a positive mindset can develop love even further and maintain it in close romantic relationships. She also described the history and scholarly thinking on the topic of love, modern studies, and theoretical perspectives, including new findings on genetics and pair-bonding relationships. Acevedo concluded by suggesting a robust area of future research focused on investigating an effortful approach to romantic love composed of such topics as shared relationship engagement and cognitive control of positive thoughts toward relationship partners.

TOWARD A POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF ONLINE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A NEW FRONTIER?

How can positive psychology promote romantic relationships online? Dowlat and Donaldson begin to answer this question in [Chapter 5](#). They observe that traditional face-to-face relationships have been central to research on romantic relationships, but an understudied area is the exploration of antecedents and consequences of online dating and relationships. Applications of positive psychology theory and research to this new phenomenon in modern societies, romantic online relationships, may hold great promise for improving romantic relationships.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Douglass ([Chapter 6](#)) uses a positive organizational scholarship (POS) lens to review early childhood education. As a field that is heavily focused on child outcomes in the child-teacher relationship, an emphasis on adult relationships (i.e., teachers, administrators, between teachers and parents, etc.) has long been overlooked. In this chapter, the focus is on adults in early childhood education settings, and how the quality of their relationships impacts both child and adult outcomes. Douglass initially described parent-teacher partnerships and systems change, followed by current research that is being done through the positive relationships and positive change lens. She concluded by suggesting future directions and applications in the early childhood education setting, particularly aimed at using positive principles to promote quality improvement in the educational workplace.

DEVELOPMENTAL TOOLS THAT BUILD SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IN SCHOOL: A FOCUS ON EFFORTFUL CONTROL AND EGO-RESILIENCY

How well children do in schools is not just a function of cognitive and academic abilities, but also social and emotional competence. In [Chapter 7](#), Taylor and Spinrad examined two facets of socioemotional functions, effortful control and ego resiliency, both positive adaptive characteristics important for academic achievement in early childhood and adolescence. The authors described how important positive socioemotional factors are for school success in the immediate and long term, for children in the educational setting.

BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADOLESCENTS IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR EDUCATORS IN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED SETTINGS

Brion-Meisels, Fei, and Vasudevan ([Chapter 8](#)) examined how to develop positive relationships in adults and adolescents in educational settings. Building on Sameroff and Chandler's (1975) transactional model of development, the authors reviewed both interpersonal practices that build positive relationships with adolescents and structural practices that build contexts in which these relationships occur. This chapter is important for researchers and practitioners seeking to develop such positive contexts. Although building positive relationships with adolescents is no easy task, Brion-Meisels and colleagues believe that by collaborating with each other (i.e., other adult practitioners) and youth it is possible to build powerful positive relationships.

SOCIAL FLOW: OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS AT WORK AND PLAY

A wealth of research has been conducted on the phenomenon of flow, including how flow leads to performance in groups, and how social contexts enhance mood and subjective well-being. However, few studies have examined flow in social settings. Lucas ([Chapter 9](#)) discussed a relatively new theory called "social flow." Although this is a nascent area of research, Lucas highlights the potential of social flow to be more enjoyable than solitary flow, especially when high-quality connections (HQCs) are present. She concluded her chapter by calling for future research to identify the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of the social flow experience.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE POSITIVE EMOTIONAL ATTRACTOR

Using his intentional change theory for identifying high-quality connections (HQCs), Boyatzis ([Chapter 10](#)) developed a research program around shared vision, compassion, and positive mood in relationships. He examined decades of research findings and came to the

conclusion that relationships are indeed a crucial component of shaping behavioral and performance outcomes, such as positive mood, engagement, and leadership effectiveness. In this chapter, he discussed the new construct of positive and negative emotional attractor, and developed and validated a scale to measure it. Boyatzis posited that future research should continue to explore these avenues of quality relationships aimed at finding more mediators and moderators of these positive relationships.

FACILITATING MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION AMONG OLDER ADULTS

With an aging population and limited resources it is more important than ever to understand what constitutes a positive relationship (e.g., meaningful and warm relationship) for older adults. In [Chapter 11](#), Roos attempted to understand what happens interpersonally between older adults using an interactional perspective. Using person-centered interviews, she observes the importance of the relationship between effective interpersonal styles and relational well-being, given that older adult relationships are dynamic and contextually based. In her view, positive relationships have the ability to empower and enable older adults to lead a healthy lifestyle.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY, CLOSE RELATIONSHIP PROCESSES, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Rao and Donaldson (2015) exposed the lack of research on diversity and inclusion in positive psychology and issued a call for researchers to engage this important topic. Gaines and Ferenczi ([Chapter 12](#)) answered this call by examining the intersection among positive psychology, close relationships, and diversity. They suggested the value of relying on key assumptions within interdependence theory and the self-expansion model as a foundation to build a path forward in this area of research.

“BEING HUMAN TOGETHER”: POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIVERSITY, CULTURE, AND COLLECTIVE WELL-BEING

The final chapter by Harrell ([Chapter 13](#)) expanded conceptual and applied boundaries in positive psychology by looking at positive relationships in the context of cultural diversity, socioecological context, and sociopolitical dynamics of power. Her first call to action was to extend the dyadic level of relationships to include communities, countries, and nations. She then suggested a balanced positive relationship science that can aid us in addressing diversity and equity issues, as a way to focus our concerns on collective well-being. In summary, *being human together* argues that positive relationships can connect humans across all levels of race, ethnicity, and religion, among other social categories of difference.

CONCLUSION

The authors of the chapters in this volume were asked to expand our understanding of the

power of positive relationships and why “other people matter.” By drawing on theory, research, and applications of both positive psychology and relationship science, we think they have delivered. We hope that you discover new knowledge and much insight about the positive psychology of relationships as you travel through and develop a positive relationship with the following pages.

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