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Applying Positive Psychology to Advance Relationship Science

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> If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world at peace.
>
> —Franklin D. Roosevelt

INTRODUCTION

Be it popular culture, age-old wisdom, or rigorous science—most concede that positive relationships are fundamental to what makes life worthwhile. Positive psychology, the *scientific* pursuit of what makes life worth living, would therefore be a natural home for the systematic study of positive relationships. So how has the field of positive psychology contributed to the science of positive relationships? What is the role of relationships in positive psychology? This chapter sets out to explore these questions.

Before we discuss the role of relationships, it is useful to revisit the aims and goals of positive psychology. Positive psychology has been described as the study of the conditions that promote optimal flourishing of people, groups, and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). As such, positive psychology is concerned with evaluating human experience in terms of human assets, rather than liabilities or human shortcomings. At the inception of the positive psychology movement, founding fathers Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi aspired to reframe the investigation of human experience away from the model of pathology traditionally found in the psychological sciences, and toward the features of human experience (e.g., hope, creativity, and wisdom) that make life worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). They envisioned positive psychology as a science of well-being and thriving that stood on three pillars: positive states, positive traits, and positive institutions. Positive states were comprised of positive emotions and experiences (e.g., happiness, love). The study of positive traits included empirical examination of character strengths and virtues, such as wisdom,

courage, and compassion. The third pillar, positive institutions, was concerned with developing of families, schools, organizations, and communities that fostered positive states, enabled the cultivation of positive traits, and exemplified positive qualities.

Leading scholar and a founding father of positive psychology, Chris Peterson (2006) encapsulated the essence of positive psychology in three words: other people matter (p. 249). So what is the role of relationships in positive psychology? Over the years, various conceptualizations of the link between positive psychology and relationships have been advanced. The most popular stance within the positive psychology movement is that positive relationships are fundamental components of well-being (e.g., PERMA model; Seligman, 2011) and psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Further, a wealth of empirical research has found social relationships to consistently be the most robust predictor of well-being, when examined across a range of cultures and contexts (Diener & Seligman, 2009). As such, positive relationships have a firm place in the science of well-being—whether as a component or predictor, depending on how well-being is conceptualized. In terms of its location in the field of positive psychology, according to Mruk (Chapter 3), relationships are fundamental to the institution of marriage, family, and community, and therefore are situated within the third pillar of positive psychology—positive (societal) institutions. Whereas Fincham and Beach (2010) proffered positive relationship science, a marriage of positive psychology and relationship science, to be a fourth new pillar of positive psychology. Others have noted that most psychological processes (Reis & Gable, 2003), and indeed positive psychological processes in general (Maniaci & Reis, 2010), are embedded in relational contexts. As such relationships may be the foundation underlying all the pillars of positive psychology. Despite these connections, however, positive relationships are relatively understudied in positive psychology. Specifically, positive psychological research has offered relatively few insights on what are the defining features of positive relationships, what individual, relational, and contextual factors predict positive relationships, how positive relationships can be developed and maintained, and how positive psychological processes play out in relational contexts.

In this chapter, we argue and highlight that relationships are the fundamental context in which many positive psychological processes are developed and nurtured, and are therefore deserving of more systematic inquiry. We review the existing literature on the most popular areas of research in positive psychology and examine the extent to which they attend to the relational context. Further, we examine how these constructs contribute to the enrichment of relationship science. Finally, we review some of the few emerging contributions on the positive psychology of relationships.

EVOLUTIONARY BASIS FOR THE CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

What is the role of relationships in optimal human functioning? The adaptive role of relationships can be traced back to its vital function in the survival of the species, such that according to Berscheid (2003), relationships constitute the single most important factor responsible for the survival of *Homo sapiens* (p. 39). Brewer and Caporael (1990) suggest

that small, cooperative group living was the preferred survival strategy of humans in response to the natural physical environment (i.e., predators, food). Therefore, sociality may serve as a built-in biological mechanism to promote survival and facilitate social-cognitive processes that spur interpersonal relationships (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Hence, functions of social relationships (i.e., mating, reciprocal alliances, coalitions, and hierarchies) are central to the design of the human mind, which drive humans toward positive, enduring, and significant interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buss & Kenrick, 1998).

The most ancient core configuration of human interaction occurred in dyadic relationships (Caporael, 1997). Moreover, dyadic, work-family groups, and demes all served as focal social groups, providing the template for social patterning (i.e., biological clocks, rhythmicity), mirroring, and mimicry in the process of creating social structures (Caporael, 1997). Other characteristics of dyadic human interpersonal behaviors can be seen in mother-infant attachment, sympathy, and reciprocity. Building on the theoretical position of the evolutionary perspective, we highlight that interpersonal relationships, particularly, dyadic, are the locus of human interaction and the context in which humans develop their physical and psychological capacities.

RELATIONSHIPS AND WELL-BEING

Research shows that relationships are adaptive not only for basic survival but also for human health and well-being. A wealth of research demonstrates that relationships are the most important predictor of well-being, such that people in positive relationships tend to live longer, be more cooperative, and have stronger immune systems (Barak, 2006; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2016; Pressman & Cohen, 2005; Whelan & Zelenski, 2012). For example, married people are happier than divorced or single people, and are more prosocial and interested in social activities (Whelan & Zelenski, 2012). Individuals with higher subjective well-being (SWB) have stronger immune and cardiovascular systems, and positive mood versus negative or neutral mood predicts improved physiological parameters such as cortisol, blood pressure, and immunity to disease (Barak, 2006; Pressman & Cohen, 2005).

Furthermore, relationships and happiness share a bidirectional link so that happiness also predicts positive relational processes. For instance, happier people tend to be more cooperative, pro-peace, and trusting of the government (Graham & Pettinato, 2002; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Tov & Diener, 2009). Happier people also maintain closer social networks and have low marital distress compared to those who are not happy, and happier people appear to be more successful in their relationships than their less happy peers (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). In addition, variables such as relational quality, relational intimacy, and relational satisfaction are connected with happiness (Argyle, 2001; Ballas & Dorling, 2007; Demir, 2008). For example, friendship accounts for 58 percent of the variance in happiness, with relational quality as the most important predictor of friendship over number of friends (Demir & Weitekamp, 2007). Thus, not only the presence of interpersonal relationships, but their *quality* is fundamental to constructing a life worth living.

The link between well-being and relationships is so deeply intertwined that positive psychologists such as Keyes (1998) and later Seligman (2011) suggested that positive relationships should be thought of not just as a predictor of well-being but an intrinsic criterion. Seligman posited that in addition to the three core elements of authentic happiness theory (i.e., positive emotions, engagement, and meaning) positive relationships (i.e., not just how you feel about your relationships, but how your relational partners feel about you) should be included. This reiterates the centrality of positive relationships in well-being and furthers the notion that relationships are the site where we witness optimal aspects of human flourishing.

RELATIONSHIPS AND MEANING IN LIFE

A key aspect of well-being is the sense that life is meaningful. Two fundamental theories of happiness and well-being, that is, orientations to happiness (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) and the PERMA model of well-being (Seligman, 2011) posit that meaning is a core element of well-being. When one perceives one's life as meaningful, one is likely to enjoy higher life satisfaction (Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011; Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012). Martela and Steger (2016) offer three ways through which one may have meaning in life: coherence, significance, and purpose. When one understands one's life better (i.e., has sense of coherence), feels worthy (i.e., sense that life has significance), and has purpose in life (i.e., has core goals, aims, and direction), one may achieve more meaning in life.

Coherence, worthiness, and purpose are often constructed in our interactions with other people. For example, one tends to evolve in the direction of one's ideal self as a product of an intimate partner's affirmation, arguably deriving coherence, worthiness, and purpose as a result (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). In old age, although melancholy may arise from physical and cognitive decline, those older adults who anticipate support from others are more likely to have a sense of worthiness (Krause, 2007). Further, the quality of relationships, that is, positive interactions and emotional support from family and close friends, is important to their sense of meaning in life. Meaning derived from positive relationships have also been found to have health implications. In a study on patients suffering from advanced cancer across Spain, Germany, and Switzerland, interpersonal relationships, at both the family and wider social level, were found to give the greatest meaning in life (Tomás-Sábado et al., 2015). Thus, positive interpersonal relationships are critical to a happy, meaningful, and healthy life.

RELATIONSHIPS AND THE THREE PILLARS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Relationships and Positive Subjective States

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) identified positive subjective experiences as one of the three key pillars of positive psychology. They noted that positive subjective experiences such as optimism, love, and positive emotions are fundamental to what makes life worth living.

In this section, we review the research on the most studied positive subjective experiences in positive psychology and highlight interpersonal relationships that offer the contexts in which many of these are experienced. Further, we examine the contributions of these positive experiences to improving interpersonal relationships.

Positive emotions. According to Fredrickson (2001), positive emotions help build durable assets (i.e., physical, psychological, and social) and promote positive interpersonal relationships, unlike negative emotions, which drain assets and valuable resources. Positive emotions predict greater involvement in social activities, more enjoyable social interactions, and greater friendship closeness (Berry & Hansen, 1996; Berry, Willingham, & Thayer, 2000; Burger & Caldwell, 2000). Thus, positive emotions can foster and strengthen relational processes.

Just as positive emotions can create attentiveness to opportunities in the environment they can also create attentiveness to opportunities in other people. For instance, Cohn and Frederickson (2006) proposed that broadening is essential to the development of relationship bonds. Instead of focusing on our immediate needs, broadening enables us to focus on relationship investment, which can fulfill our needs in distant and far-sighted ways. Similarly, individuals experiencing positive emotional states form more inclusive social groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, Isen, Rust, & Guerra, 1998). In one study with first-year college students, positive emotions predicted self-other overlap with a new college roommate after the first week of the semester, which then predicted a more complex understanding of the roommate at a follow-up a month later (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006). Further, sharing and reinforcing of positive emotions by partners (i.e., positive capitalization) is found to be predictive of relational satisfaction (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Thus, positive emotions can help enhance positive relational processes and outcomes.

In addition, relationships also frequently serve as the context in which positive emotions are experienced. For instance, in one study, ratings of subjective feelings significantly improved when participants viewed emotional pictures together rather than alone. This affect was accompanied by increased brain activity in the ventral striatum and medial orbitofrontal cortex, two areas known for reward circuitry (Wagner et al., 2015). Further, relationships are often the sites in which key life events such as marriage and having children are experienced that produce happiness, joy, and gratitude, among other positive emotions (Fitness & Williams, 2013). Thus, relationships are an important context for the study of positive emotions.

Gratitude. Gratitude is often conceptualized as an "other-oriented" moral emotion (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007) or "other-praising" emotion (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). The experience of gratitude often occurs when individuals are the beneficiaries of others' benevolence (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). However, the research on gratitude has emerged mostly from a personality (i.e., dispositional gratitude; Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch, & Carlisle, 2014), and emotions lens (i.e., state gratitude; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). As such, gratitude is often studied in the context of individual outcomes such as the effect on one's happiness and psychological well-being (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

However, as gratitude usually takes place in a social context, there is much scope for relationship research on gratitude. For example, in a widely cited study (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), participants wrote a weekly benefit list (study 1) and completed self-guided daily gratitude exercises (study 2). The results showed that listing of another's kind behavior increased gratitude, and gratitude in turn, generated more prosocial behavior such as helping another with a personal problem or offering emotional support. Therefore, while the participant was the beneficiary of others' beneficent behavior in the first study, others benefited from the subjects' gratitude later on. Similarly, the research on reciprocity shows that gratitude predicts relational outcomes. In one study, perceptions of benefactor responsiveness predicted gratitude for benefits, and gratitude in the short term (one week in this study) predicted relationship outcomes one month later (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). Thus, it is likely that such gratitude exchanges would spur positive interpersonal interactions, creating virtuous interpersonal cycles of receiving (i.e., receiving help causes gratitude) and giving (giving help to others because of one's grateful feeling) within relationships in which gratitude first occurred, as well as the creation and strengthening of new relationships. This has been supported in recent studies that have examined the "pay it forward" effect of gratitude in social networks (Chang, Lin, & Chen, 2012). Further, research on mentoring dyads suggests that gratitude is associated with relationship development and maintenance (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). Thus, gratitude has the capacity to strengthen relational processes and relational outcomes.

However, barring a few recent research forays, research that examines the relational context and relational impact of gratitude is relatively scarce. Seminal research contributions of gratitude in the context of interpersonal relationships demonstrate that the interpersonal context of gratitude deserves more attention. In doing so, positive scholars would benefit from seeing the wider picture of the way gratitude plays out in real life.

Relationships and Positive Traits

Compassion. Compassion is an interpersonal process that involves noticing, feeling, sense-making, and acting in a way that alleviates the suffering of another (Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014). A few studies indicate that compassion is related to positive relational outcomes across various types of relationships. For instance, compassion is positively associated with prosocial relationship behaviors, relationship quality, and relationship stability in romantic relationships (Fehr, Harasymchuk, & Sprecher, 2014). Similarly, Kirby (2016) suggests that compassionate parenting practices may be critical to enhancing nurturing family environments. Compassionate goals are also related to increased closeness, connection, social support, and trust among friends (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Furthermore, compassion is associated with prosociality to strangers such as charitable giving and helping strangers (Lim & DeSteno, 2016), and therefore has the capacity to not only strengthen and nurture existing relationships but also to help develop new connections.

Although compassion is typically other-focused, there is growing literature on directing compassion toward the self, that is, self-compassion. Zessin, Dickhäuser, and Garbade's

(2015) recent meta-analysis shows that self-compassion is strongly associated with well-being, particularly psychological and cognitive well-being. A few studies recommend self-compassion as a strategy to combat compassion fatigue, that is, burnout experienced by employees in helping professions such as nursing. For example, a study of student counselors and student cognitive behavioral psychotherapists found that self-compassionate individuals experienced less compassion fatigue (Beaumont, Durkin, Martin, & Carson, 2016). In addition to enhancing individual well-being, self-compassion is also shown to enhance relational well-being. For example, self-compassionate couples exhibit more positive relationship behaviors such as being more caring and supportive toward each other compared to those lacking in self-compassion (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Further, in times of conflict with family, friends, and romantic partners, individuals higher in self-compassion tend to compromise rather than subordinate or self-prioritize their needs and therefore have higher levels of relational well-being (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Thus, self-compassion is not only associated with personal well-being but also healthy interpersonal relationships. Thus, both compassion and self-compassion have important positive relational consequences.

Resilience. Resilience refers to "patterns of positive adaptation in the context of past and present adversity" (Riley & Masten, 2005, p. 13; Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 16). A wealth of empirical evidence shows that resilience is associated with psychological well-being (Burns, Anstey, & Windsor, 2011; Christopher & Kulig, 2000), positive emotions (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), workplace well-being and performance (Wanberg & Banas, 2000; Youssef & Luthans, 2007), self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010), and forgiveness (Tuck & Anderson, 2014).

As human interactions occur across interpersonal, social, and cultural levels, each of these relationships has the capacity to foster resilience for the individual as well as the relational unit (Ungar, 2012). For instance, among couples, sharing "we-stories" helps promote meaning and purpose in life among individuals (Singer & Skerett, 2014). Further, the sense of shared identity from a "we-ness" fosters relational resilience by generating positive emotion, restoring commitment, and reducing conflict (Singer & Skerett, 2014). Similarly, resilience can be conceptualized at the family, group, and community levels. Key processes such as clear communication (e.g., sharing meaning regarding stressors or crises), problem solving (e.g., collaborating to develop a strategy), and adaptation (e.g., modifying family rules) can help families build resilience in the face of challenges and fortify the family as a relational unit (Sheridan, Sjuts, & Coutts, 2013). Despite the criticality of the environment and systemic influences in the development of resilience in individuals, this area of inquiry remains understudied. For instance, Masten and Monn (2015) note that studies on child resilience do not adequately account for and integrate theory, findings, and implications of family resilience, even though there is a bidirectional relationship between individual and familial resilience. We encourage future positive psychological research on relational contexts of individual resilience and resilience of the relationships themselves.

Forgiveness. Research shows that forgiveness predicts a host of positive outcomes such as an increase in meaning in life over time (e.g., among intimate partners) (Van Tongeren et al.,

2015), life satisfaction (e.g., for individuals postdivorce) (Yárnoz-Yaben, Garmendia, & Comino, 2016), hope (e.g., Yalçın & Malkoç, 2015), and lower risk factors such as reduced anger, anxiety, and depression (Thompson et al., 2005). Further, forgiveness is associated with positive relational processes such as prosocial behavior (Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005) and gratitude (e.g., Ramírez, Ortega, Chamorro, & Colmenero, 2014).

Although the nature of forgiveness is "bounded in relationships" (Maio, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008), most forgiveness research is conducted at an individual level of analysis (Bies, Barclay, Tripp, & Aquino, 2016; Pargament, McCullough, & Thoresen, 2000). A focus primarily on the individual neglects the relational aspect of forgiveness and thus the demonstration of how forgiveness plays out in a relational context. In order to address this, Bies, Barclay, Tripp, and Aquino (2016) recommend event-based, experience sampling methodologies, diary studies, and longitudinal methodologies. For example, a longitudinal examination of the effect of forgiveness on meaning among couples found that those individuals who regularly forgave their partner had higher meaning in life over time (Van Tongeren et al., 2015). Further, family dynamics and types of family relationships play an important role in influencing the antecedents and consequences of forgiving (Maio, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008). Thus, constructs such as forgiveness need to be understood within the complex dynamics of the relationships. Similarly, there is a need for research on forgiveness across domains such as parent-child dyads, coworkers, supervisor-subordinate, and the like.

Relationships and Positive Institutions

Positive institutions are those that provide the context in which positive traits can be developed and positive states can be experienced. As such institutional contexts offer the natural relational space where positive traits and experiences can be fostered. Next, we examine a few oft-studied institutional relationships that foster development of positive qualities.

Coaching. Coaching is a dyadic relationship established between coach and the coachee for the purpose of achieving desired personal and professional outcomes (Spence & Grant, 2007). The success of coaching can vary based on its purpose. A wealth of research shows that coaching can improve goal attainment, well-being, hope (Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006), resilience (Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009), self-efficacy (Baron & Morin, 2009), and professional growth (McGuffin & Obonyo, 2010). Several recent meta-analyses that have examined the effect of coaching have found that they support positive individual outcomes such as improved learning, performance, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014). Further, they have also been found to improve relationships through behavioral and attitudinal changes in relational contexts (Sonesh et al., 2015). An emerging theme from these studies is that the success of coaching may be predicated upon a positive coaching relationship. For example, clients' development of self-efficacy and the number of coaching sessions received are mediated by the quality of the coaching relationship (Baron & Morin, 2009). Similarly, clients show better coaching results if they consider their coach friendly and attentive (de Haan,

Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013). As such, the coaching relationship is central to positive coaching outcomes.

Positive mentoring. Traditional research on mentoring (i.e., between mentor and mentee) in the workplace has focused on relationship qualities, characteristics, and outcomes of mentoring in terms of the protégés' typical experiences (e.g., career outcomes, career advancement, and organizational commitment; see review by Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004) (Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1989). Rarely has the focus been on high-quality mentoring experiences from the mentors' perspective, even though these seem to be some of the most valuable relationships in their lives (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). The positive relational mentoring approach combats this issue by offering a developmental framework to assess mutual growth, learning, and development in mentoring relationships (Ragins, 2005; Ragins & Verbos, 2007).

One aspect of high-quality mentoring relationships consists of relational caches, which are passed between members of the relationship. These are relational skills and competencies that transfer across time, relationships, and settings (Kram & Ragins, 2007). Not only do these relational caches function across relationships in the workplace, but they also extend to other individuals in one's social networks (Higgins & Kram, 2001). In addition, six key relational functions may result from high-quality mentoring relationships: (1) personal learning and growth, (2) inspiration, (3) affirmation of selves, (4) reliance on communal norms, (5) shared influence and mutual respect, and (6) relational trust and commitment (see Ragins, 2011). Taken together, high-quality mentoring relationships set the stage for a swath of beneficial outcomes in positive relationship research, including psychological capital (PsyCap), thriving, flourishing, and resilience, among others (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005).

Although scant, some evidence suggests that mentors report revitalization, social recognition, and personal fulfillment from their relationships with mentees (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Bozionelos, 2004; Mullen & Noe, 1999; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). However, little is known about the mutual benefits of the mentor-mentee relationship. We suggest that the examination of positive mentoring relationships that spur mutual relationship growth in terms of positive psychological constructs (e.g., PsyCap; psychological capital) are ripe areas for investigation. Future research on positive relationships should empirically investigate the effects of the relational cache cycle on both the mentor and mentee, since relational mentoring may ignite an iterative process of "broaden and build" within the mentor and mentees social networks (Kram & Ragins, 2007). Likewise, research would also benefit from examining whether high-quality mentoring relationships spur other high-quality relationships outside of the organizational context. These areas of future research have implications for uncovering the advantages of relational mentoring, with the mentoring site serving as the foundation for positive relationships both at the dyadic level of analysis and within the larger social network system.

High-quality connections at work. The concept of high-quality connections (HQCs) is

inspired from relational theory, with its emphasis on human growth and development occurring in connection with, and not separated from, other people (Miller, 2015). Stephens, Heaphy, and Dutton (2012) operationalize HQCs as short-term dyadic interactions that are positive in terms of the individuals' subjective experiences and structural features of the connections. A wealth of extant research demonstrates that HQCs lead to positive outcomes. For instance, HQCs provide health benefits in terms of the cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune systems (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). As such, HQCs have been found to help employees recover from illness or those who are suffering from loss (Lilius et al., 2008; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). HQCs also improve individual functioning by enhancing cognitive, physiological, and behavioral processes, including working memory performance (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012; Ybarra et al., 2008). In one study, 212 undergraduate and graduate students were surveyed at two separate time points (three weeks apart), in order to understand the relationship between HQCs, psychological safety, and organizational learning. The results demonstrated that, both directly and indirectly (through the mechanism of psychological safety), the experience of HQCs was associated with organizational learning behaviors over time (Carmeli, Brueller, Dutton, 2009). These findings suggest that HQCs in organizations may serve as key relational processes that foster perceived employee health, psychological well-being and organizational learning. Hence, this has implications for HQCs in the context of relational formation, especially in organizations, and suggests that HQCs should be present at the site and during the initiation of positive relationships.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO RELATIONSHIP RESEARCH

In recent years, the emerging field of positive psychology has offered a fresh perspective to relationship theories and research. In particular, close relationship research has benefited from adopting a positive and proactive stance (e.g., relationship-enhancing processes), as a complement to the dominant deficits-based approach (i.e., conflict reduction). In this section, we examine a few emerging research areas that have developed at the confluence of positive psychology and relationship research.

Positive capitalization. In general, most people are fortunate to experience positive events more often than negative events (ratio of 3:1; Gable & Haidt, 2005). The act of making the most out of, or capitalizing on, these positive events, that is, *positive capitalization,* is a positive dyadic relational process that predicts positive affect, well-being, and self-esteem (Gable & Gosnell, 2011; Langston, 1994). Specifically, the process of positive capitalization occurs when an individual tells another about a positive event, and is met with a response that reinforces and validates the individual and the event as being positive and worthy (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). In a daily experience study, it was found that there is a 70 to 80 percent chance that an individual would disclose to another about a positive event in their day, and 97 percent of people who share positive events do so with close relationship partners (Gable & Gosnell, 2011; Gable et al., 2004). Although disclosure of positive events to close relationship partners is important, the specific response

is equally important for the effects of relational well-being (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). One important type of response, for example, active-constructive response (i.e., reacting to a positive event enthusiastically), has been shown to be the most impactful in increasing positive affect and well-being of the discloser, above and beyond the discloser's initial rating of the positive event (Gable et al., 2006).

In an experimental study on capitalization, participants that received an active-constructive response from a confederate in response to a positive event increased their ratings of the importance of that event, whereas no increase was seen in participants in the passive response condition (Reis et al., 2010). In another study on perceived partner responsiveness, for men and women, perceived responsiveness ratings of a positive event predicted relationship health at a follow-up (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Thus, in interpersonal relationships in which positive capitalization occurs frequently, partners enjoy relationship well-being and growth (Gable et al., 2004). Positive capitalization enhances the positive affect of both partners above and beyond the joy brought on by the positive event itself (Gable et al., 2006). Thus, frequent positive capitalizations can establish relationship-enhancing interaction patterns that may have favorable consequences for relationship maintenance and stability in the long term. In summary, research on positive capitalization highlights how the actions of each partner in a relationship can help cultivate relational well-being, and how partners can improve their connection with each other when things are going right.

Michelangelo phenomenon. In addition to celebrating positive events in each others' lives (as witnessed in positive capitalization), partners can also bring out the best in each other. Renowned 16th-century Italian artist and sculptor, Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, famously described his approach to sculpting as one not of creation of something new, but of revealing the ideal figure that already exists within a marble block. Drawing from this view, the *Michelangelo phenomenon* on describes how individuals in relationships play an important role in bringing out the best in each other and shaping each other's skills, traits, and ideal-self goals (Higgins, 1987). Although this concept has been applied to various types of relationships such as kin, friends, and colleagues, the Michelangelo phenomenon is most profoundly witnessed in close interpersonal relationships (Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009).

In healthy relationships, partners often influence each other to move toward their ideal selves (Gosnell & Gable, 2013; Rusbult et al., 2009). This process unfolds as partners engage in perceptual or behavioral affirmations. Perceptual affirmation refers to the extent to which one's partner perceives one in ways that are congruent to one's ideal-self, and behavioral affirmation is the extent to which a partner consciously or unconsciously behaves in ways that elicit one's ideal behaviors (Rusbult et al., 2009). For instance, in one study, married couples were recorded disclosing a goal in regard to their ideal-self. Trained coders documented affirming behaviors (i.e., assistance, praise for goal pursuits), and at a four-month follow-up, affirmations of goal relevant conversations predicted likelihood of achieving ideal-self goals (Rusbult et al., 2009).

In another study, pairs of friends were asked to answer a complementary questionnaire in

which one friend was the "target" (i.e., who rated movement toward goals and their partner's affirmation), and the other friend was the "observer" (i.e., who rated the target's affirmation of their partner and the target's goal pursuits). The analyses revealed that when the observers found the targets' partners to be affirming, the targets were significantly more likely to move toward their ideal selves (Drigotas et al., 1999). Further, this study found that the affirmations not only helped the targets move toward their ideal selves, but also improved personal well-being, life satisfaction, and psychological health (Drigotas, 2002). In addition, when the partner served as an ally in promoting the ideal-self, the target also enjoyed enhanced relational well-being. Thus, positive relationships in which partners demonstrate the Michelangelo effect not only serve as the context in which partners are the primary catalysts of each other's development, but also foster relational well-being and growth.

Positive empathy. Empathy, a tendency to vicariously experience another's emotional state (Albeiro, Matricardi, Speltri, & Toso, 2009), is often constructed as a feeling of concern for unfortunate others (Davis, 1983). This is a key component and driver of other-focused virtuous behaviors such as compassionate responding and perspective taking (Davis, 1983), and as such, is an important area of research relevant to positive psychology. Despite its many contributions, however, empathy has also been observed to be constructed as "negative empathy," such that it is an affective and cognitive response predicated on the presence of others' *suffering* (Morelli, Lieberman, & Zaki, 2015). This raises the question, is it within the scope of "empathy" to be responsive to others' positive experiences? Thus, emerging from a positive emotional perspective, positive empathy is an emerging construct in positive psychology defined as an individual's understanding and vicarious sharing of another individual's positive emotions (Morelli, Lieberman, Telzer, & Zaki, under review). An individual could experience positive empathy by observing someone else's positive event (i.e., watching someone win a contest), or creating a positive experience for someone else (i.e., giving someone a present). Further, positive empathy may manifest as a short-term emotional state or a stable personality trait.

Past research suggests that positive empathy is related to improved prosocial behavior (Batson et al., 1991; Morelli, Rameson, & Lieberman, 2014; Smith, Keating, & Stotland, 1989). For instance, in two separate studies, participants were more likely to experience positive empathy when they were told they would see the recipient of their helping behavior, compared to when they would not (Batson et al., 1991; Smith, Keating, & Stotland, 1989). Likewise, in another study, participants read about a person in need they could not help and then chose to hear an update for that person or someone unrelated. They then received feedback on the likelihood that the person in need's situation would improve (20 percent chance of improvement or 80 percent chance of improvement). The results demonstrated that the participants were more likely to watch the video with the higher probability of improvement (Batson et al., 1991). This is indicative of the association between positive empathy and prosocial behavior. Neuropsychological evidence also supports this—when the septal area (i.e., brain reward center) is activated during positive empathy, helping behaviors are more predictable between strangers (Morelli et al., 2014).

Positive empathy also has a positive impact on social relationships and well-being. Three studies show that positive empathy is associated with increased relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and trust (Gable et al., 2004; Gable et al., 2006; Gable, Gosnell, Maisel, & Strachman, 2012). In one study, verbal and nonverbal expressions of positive empathy in couples predicted decreased likelihood of breaking up two months later and increased relationship well-being. Although the research in this area is nascent, there also appears to be a link between positive empathy and general well-being (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009). Positive empathy may improve empathizers' personal resources (i.e., hope) as a result of learning about and sharing in another's positive event, which can later be used to manage future opportunities and stressors (Cohn et al., 2009). Trait positive empathy has also been shown to positively predict trait life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

Taken together, the research on positive empathy provides promise for future work on positive relationships. Future research would benefit from a focus on the bidirectional association of positive empathy at the dyadic level (i.e., how much empathy both relationship partners feel toward one another). Further, it would be useful to examine the impact on the recipient and giver of positive empathy. Applied research could examine the impact of positive empathy in coach-coachee and mentor-mentee relationships. Finally, dyadic relationships serve as a ripe context for evaluating positive empathy's various manifestations, at the initiation, development, and outcome phases of positive relationships.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that the positive psychological perspective has been used in various types of research on dyadic relationships (e.g., romantic, parents and children, coaches and coachees; Cramer, 2003; Gable et al., 2004; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Magyar-Moe, 2011; Morry & Kito, 2009; Stafford, 2011). Many positive states and other-focused stable traits are cultivated and nurtured in the relational context. Similarly, institutional contexts offer a ripe space for cultivation of positive relationships. Further, emerging research at the intersection of positive psychology and relationship research, that is, the study of the positive psychology of relationships, are shedding light on new ways in which partners can bring out the best in each other and constructively share in each other's joy. Thus, the positive psychological lens in relationship theory and research has provided insight into novel aspects of relational growth and well-being. We call for future research to more deeply explore how the positive psychology of relationships can better help individuals and their relationships to thrive.

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