

## A SUMMARY OF SELECTED POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY LITERATURE SUPPORTING STRENGTHS-ARTICULATION

Jerald R. Forster  
University of Washington

### The Positive Psychology Movement

In the field of psychology, there is a movement known as *positive psychology*, led by a respected researcher and leader, Martin Seligman. Professor Seligman has activated an energetic group of psychologists and social service practitioners, who are starting to have an impact in America (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). For example, the January 17, 2005 issue of *Time Magazine (2005)* was mostly devoted to what they called “The Science of Happiness.” Seligman, who was President of the American Psychological Association in 1998, has initiated numerous conferences and summits on positive psychology. During the four-year period following his APA presidency, he influenced the publication of seven scholarly books that described research studies, theories, and practices related to positive psychology (Chang, 2001; Seligman, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Most of the studies cited below are reported in those seven books.

### Selected Studies Supporting Positive Approaches

The research supporting the value of focusing on the positive is extensive and compelling. Ten years ago, Seligman (1995) summarized studies he had done by writing:

I have studied pessimism for the last twenty years, and in more than one thousand studies, involving more than half a million children and adults, pessimistic people do worse than optimistic people in three ways: First, they get depressed much more often. Second, they achieve less at school, on the job, and on the playing field than their talents augur. Third, their physical health is worse than that of optimists. So holding a pessimistic theory of the world may be the mark of sophistication, but it is a costly one. It is particularly damaging for a child, and if your child has already acquired pessimism, he is at risk for doing less well in school. He is at risk of greater problems of depression and anxiety. He may be at risk for worse physical health than he would have if he were an optimist. And worse, pessimism in a child can become a lifelong, self-fulfilling template for looking at setbacks and losses. The good news is that he can, with your help, learn optimism. (Pp. 51-52)

In the ten years since Seligman wrote those words, a large number of studies have provided additional evidence supporting positive approaches. Selected themes in these studies have been *optimism* (Carver & Scheier, 2002), *hope* (Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2002), *positive emotions* (Fredrickson, 2002), *happiness* (Veenhoven, 2004) and *subjective well being* (Pavot & Diener, 2004).

### Optimism

A person’s optimism is characterized by the extent that person focuses on positive experiences and expectations. Carver & Scheier (1990) elaborated on this definition when they wrote: “Optimists, by definition, are people with favorable expectations about the future. Such expectations should make success on a given problem seem more likely and should thereby promote continued problem-solving efforts, resulting in better outcomes.”

Scheier, Carver and Bridges, 2001, tell us about the 'optimistic advantage' which

.... is due to differences in the manner in which optimists and pessimists cope with the difficulties they confront. That is, optimists seem intent on facing problems head-on, taking active and constructive steps to solve their problems; pessimists are more likely to abandon their effort to attain their goals. (p. 210)

There is a growing literature to show that expectations for the future have an important impact on how people respond in times of adversity or challenge. Expectancies influence the way in which people confront these situations. Positive thinking really seems to be useful.

### Hope

Snyder, et al. (2001) point out, "...furthermore, individuals with higher levels of hope would be expected to have an enhanced sense of self-esteem both because of past successes and because of their beliefs that workable routes to future goal pursuits are likely." Snyder and his co-authors go on to show how hope is correlated with psychological adjustment, achievement, problem solving, and coping with health-related concerns. In hope theory the focus is on reaching desired future positive goal-related outcomes. The importance of the goal is essential in hope theory. Measures of hope and of optimism correlate in the .50 range. Hope theory also has a lot in common with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and self-esteem theory. A more complete description of the theory and research on *hope* can be found in Snyder's (2000) *Handbook of hope: theory, measures, & applications*.

### Positive Emotions

A closely related branch of theory and research explores the value of *positive emotions*. Fredrickson (2002, 2000, 1998) describes what she calls her *broaden-and-build model* of positive emotions. Fredrickson explains the important differences between *positive emotions* (such as joy, interest, and contentment) and *negative emotions* (such as fear, anger, and sadness), as well as the effects of both emotions on a person's thoughts and actions. Fredrickson (2000) writes:

Negative emotions narrow a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. They do so by calling to mind and body the time-tested, ancestrally adaptive actions represented by specific actions tendencies. This effect is clearly adaptive in life-threatening situations that require quick action to survive. Because positive emotions are not linked to threats requiring quick action, an alternative model seems warranted. I have proposed that positive emotions broaden a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. (p. 4)

In this same award-winning article, Fredrickson goes on to show how positive emotions can loosen the hold that destructive negative emotions have on the mind and body. She writes: "Indeed, empirical studies have shown that contentment and joy speed recovery from the cardiovascular aftereffects of negative emotions. (P.1)" As the title of her article implies, Fredrickson (2000) recommends the cultivation of positive emotions to optimize health and well-being. She documents her implications by referring to a wide range of empirical evidence that supports specific predictions flowing from her broaden-and-build model. She states that "positive emotions and related positive states have been linked to broadened scopes of attention, cognition and action and enhanced physical, intellectual and social resources (for a review, see Fredrickson, 1989, p.6)" Fredrickson also highlights work of Alice Isen and her colleagues, who have demonstrated that positive emotions produce creativity, flexibility, and other outcomes that "enlarges the cognitive context."

### **Happiness**

The construct of happiness has a mixed history in the fields of philosophy and psychology. It was generally considered to be too elusive and difficult to measure, thereby making it a poor psychological variable for empirical study. However, Veenhoven (2004) reported that some empirical research on happiness took place in the 1960s. Jahoda (1958) had proposed happiness as a criterion for positive mental health and it was used in several epidemiological surveys in the 1960s. Since that time it has been used by researchers who identify with the International Society for Quality of Life Research ([www.isoqol.org](http://www.isoqol.org)). There is a Journal of Happiness Studies ([www.wkap.nl/journals/johs](http://www.wkap.nl/journals/johs)). After reviewing various issues and studies, Veenhoven (2004) concludes that happiness, as a criterion appears practically feasible and morally sound. Seligman (2002) has led the positive psychology movement in the acceptance of happiness as an important variable, calling his popular book, *Authentic Happiness*. However, the construct of happiness remains somewhat unpopular as a criterion for empirical studies, possibly because of its broad and elusive reputation. Variables such as *subjective well being* and *life-satisfaction* have been used more often to get at a similar construct as happiness.

### **Subjective Well-Being**

Pavot and Diener (2004) report a remarkable growth over the past 25 years in the use of *Subjective Well-Being (SWB)* as a psychological variable. They view SWB as a broad, multifaceted domain, rather than as a specific, narrow, unidimensional construct. When analyzed by multitrait-multimethod analyses, the domain breaks down into three separable constructs, (1) pleasant affect, (2) unpleasant affect, and (3) life satisfaction, Pavot and Diener report on the following results when they reviewed studies using SWB scores: SWB scores correlate quite highly with measures of temperament. For example, SWB correlates positively with personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, as well as dispositional optimism and self-esteem. Although negative or aversive events might produce some dip in SWB, the effect usually does not last very long. The long-term SWB is rather stable and it does get at what might be called one's "set-point" for life satisfaction or happiness. This is not to say that major events do not affect a person's usual SWB level. Women were found to have more substantial drops when their spouses died, and their scores stayed lower for some time. Also, caregivers of Alzheimer's patients showed deteriorating SWB over time. Likewise, long-term unemployment usually results in lower SWB scores. SWB levels are useful for predicting the quality of social relationships that might develop in the future. People with high SWB scores have an advantage for developing and maintaining friendships, and marital bonds. Numerous studies have shown that people with high SWB scores have more successful work lives. Happy people are better able to solve conflicts on the job. Overall, SWB outcome studies provide considerable evidence for the benefits of being positive. Pavot and Diener conclude their chapter by saying "Virtually all evidence to date identifies the experience of positive emotion and SWB as beneficial."

### **Other Research Supporting Positive Approaches**

The research evidence supporting the beneficial effects of being positive continues to accumulate. The health benefits are showing up in a large number of studies. For example, Levy, et al, (2002) found increased life expectancy for those who hold a positive view of aging. Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen (2001) foretold longevity from expressions of happiness in essays written by the study's subjects when they were young adults. Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser (2005) found that couples took longer to heal physical wounds when they were asked to thrash out points of conflict rather than deal with neutral issues. These researchers also found that hostile couples --peppering their discussions with criticism, sarcasm and put-downs -- healed the slowest of different types of couples being studied. It took them 40 percent longer to heal, and they also produced less of the proteins linked to healing.

Even marital satisfaction can be predicted from signs of positive dispositions. Harker & Keltner (2001) analyzed the smiles of people in their college yearbooks, and used that information to successfully predict if they would be satisfied with their marriages later in life. Earlier, Gottman (1998) had found that happy couples are characterized by the surplus of positive sentiments they have accumulated when they

think about their partners. This accumulation of positive sentiments becomes crucial when conflict inevitably arises, because it serves as a social resource that helps them deal with the conflict in more satisfying and productive ways.

### Can People Learn to Focus on the Positive?

The literature reviewed above strongly suggests that most of the well-known constructs studied by positive psychology researchers show that there is a benefit to being optimistic, hopeful, happy, prone to positive emotions and experiencing a subjective sense of well-being. There is considerable research support for the benefits of being positive. However, it appears as if most of the studies are correlational in design, meaning that we do not know for sure what caused the subjects to be positive in the first place. There is quite a lot of support for ideas about genetic predispositions. But even researchers who study the life satisfaction scores of identical and fraternal twins indicate that genes probably account for only about half of the variation. The Time Magazine (2005) coverage on the science of happiness includes the following description:

In 1996 University of Minnesota researcher David Lykken published a paper looking at the role of genes in determining one's sense of satisfaction in life. Lykken, now 76, gathered information on 4000 sets of twins born in Minnesota from 1936 through 1955. After comparing happiness data on identical vs. fraternal twins, he came to the conclusion that about 50% of one's satisfaction with life comes from genetic programming. (Genes influence such traits as having a sunny, easy-going personality; dealing well with stress; and feeling low levels of anxiety and depression.) Lykken found that circumstantial factors like income, marital status, religion and education contribute only about 8% to one's overall well being. He attributes the remaining percentage to "life's slings and arrows."

Later in the article Lykken said, "It's clear that we can change our happiness levels widely – up and down."

Seligman and others connected with the positive psychology movement clearly believe that psychological practices can help people become more optimistic, hopeful and happy. The positive psychology practitioners tend to use cognitive behavioral methods to make changes. For example, Seligman (1995) suggested methods such as these when he wrote *The optimistic child: A revolutionary program that safeguards children against depression & builds lifelong resilience*. The methods in this book were adapted from tactics that cognitive therapists use to treat depression. The adaptations take into consideration that the children involved in these activities were probably not depressed in a clinical sense. Four basic skills were taught: (1) learn to recognize the thoughts that flit across your mind when you feel worst. (2) evaluate these automatic thoughts and look for things you say that are inaccurate. (3) generate more accurate explanations of the bad things that happen. (4) reflect on the times that went wrong and decatastrophize them.

In addition to the basic skills mentioned above, children were also taught to change their explanatory style. In other words, explanations for bad experiences were adjusted so that the cause was regarded as changeable or transient. The cause was also regarded as specific and likely to affect only a few future situations. And third, the cause was attributed to something related to other people or circumstances, rather than the child who experienced the bad situation. The causes of good experiences were regarded as more likely to persist, likely to affect many situations in the future, and were attributed to the action of person who experienced the good situation.

In the next part of this literature review, I will direct attention to the literature on self-identity and how focusing on strengths can change self-identity. I will start by looking at the literature on strengths articulation and strengths-based development.

### Focusing on Strengths

A key construct in the enterprise of focusing on the positive is summarized by the word *strengths*. When the focus of your attention is directed to your own strengths or the strengths of another person, you are almost sure to be positive in your approach. Focusing on strengths requires that you pay attention to the person's most positive attributes. For this reason, awareness of positive qualities and a good vocabulary for identifying strengths are crucial for seeing yourself and others in positive ways.

The importance of strengths has been recognized in the psychology literature for many decades. For example, Allport (1961) articulated the idea of *signature strengths* when he developed a classification of personal traits. He identified signature strengths as ones that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises. Allport proposed that a process of articulating these strengths could enable a person to identify from three to seven of these signature strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest the following criteria for signature strength:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity (“this is the real me”) vis-à-vis the strength;
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first;
- A rapid learning curve as themes are attached to the strength and practiced;
- Continuous learning of new ways to enact the strength;
- A sense of yearning to act in accordance with the strength;
- A feeling of inevitability in using the strength, as if one cannot be stopped or dissuaded from its display;
- The discovery of the strength as owned in an epiphany;
- Invigoration rather than exhaustion when using the strength;
- The creation and pursuit of fundamental projects that revolve around the strength;
- Intrinsic motivation to use the strength. (P.18)

### Objective Approaches to Identifying Strengths

The leaders of the positive psychology movement recognized the importance of strengths early in the movement and provided special resources for developing a handbook for classifying strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) authored the book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. This book includes the key ingredients of an assessment instrument designed to help people identify their strengths. When fully developed, this classification system and the related instruments should advance the science of positive psychology a good deal.

Another book that describes the identification of strengths is titled *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Buckingham and Clifton describe the Internet-based *StrengthsFinder® Profile*, the product of a 25-year, multimillion-dollar effort to identify the most prevalent human strengths. This program introduces 34 dominant “themes” with thousands of possible combinations. This program is designed to help users translate their knowledge of these themes into personal and career success.

### The Dependable Strengths Approach to Identifying Strengths

Haldane (1984,1989,1996) coined the phrase Dependable Strengths and described elaborate methods for helping participants identify those Dependable Strengths® (Forster, 2003). Haldane's idea of Dependable Strengths was quite similar to Allport's signature strengths. Since I had the good fortune of working with Bernard Haldane for twenty years, I am very familiar with his approach to identifying Dependable Strengths and have written a rationale for this process (Forster, 1989). You can learn more about Haldane's methods by reading a special issue of the *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*. This special edition describes the influence of Bernard Haldane (Duttro, 2003). A website developed by the Center for Dependable Strengths provides additional information and resources regarding the methods developed by Bernard Haldane. The address of the website is: [www.dependablestrengths.org](http://www.dependablestrengths.org). Information can also be obtained by calling toll free, 866-398-9474, or

emailing inquiries to ds@highline.edu. One resource listed on that website is a manual titled *Helping Kids Find Their Strengths* by Huggins (1994). This 713-page book is especially useful for helping elementary school children identify their strengths. Also listed on that website is a chapter (Forster, 2004) from a resource book for educators. This chapter, “Your Best Plans Should Use Your Best Strengths,” can be used to help high school students articulate their strengths. Another helpful resource for working with high school students is a manual written by Boivin-Brown (1990).

### **A Difference in Methods of Identifying Strengths**

The two books previously mentioned, (1) by Peterson & Seligman (2004) and (2) by Buckingham & Clifton (2001) used methods that are similar to those used in many psychological inventories. Responses to these inventories are scored and used to develop profiles showing the responders scores on several predetermined scales. In contrast, the methods developed by Bernard Haldane guide the person through a process whereby the participant articulates his or her own descriptions of Dependable Strengths®, after considering several Good Experiences®. Good Experiences are recalled memories. These memories are selected by using the criterion that the experiences were characterized by feelings of pride and enjoyment. The Haldane methods are more likely to result in the identification of strengths anchored in the personal experiences of the person participating in the articulation process. In the methods described in the two books mentioned above, the strengths that are identified may or may not have meanings that can be directly anchored to personal experiences because the strengths labels were created and named by the instrument’s authors. The Dependable Strengths articulated by the Haldane approach elicit words that can be tied to memorable personal experiences. This means that the person can connect his or her strengths words to real life experiences, enabling him to remember personal events when he actually used those strengths. Thus, the self-descriptions he articulates use the strength words that can be related to actual experiences he can remember.

### **Strengths-Based Development**

In addition to the methods of strengths-articulation mentioned above, there are other researchers and practitioners who have devised approaches that help people develop and use their strengths. For example, Hodges & Clifton (2004) wrote a chapter titled “Strengths-Based Development in Practice,” in which they review the theory and practice of strengths-based development and report on several studies showing the outcomes of such practices. Strengths-based development involves the identification of talents, integration into individuals’ views of themselves, and resulting changes in behavior. Follow-up surveys and other outcome studies of strengths-based development show significant impact on valued outcomes in educational and workplace settings. In the workplace, strengths-based development appeared to have a direct impact on employee engagement. Focusing on strengths also impacted other positive psychological measures such as hope, subjective well being, and confidence. Many of the studies reported in this chapter show that the strengths-based practices caused changes in the behavior of subjects. This is different from many of the studies of optimism, hope and happiness, which are correlational in design. These studies indicate that behavior can be changed by focusing on strengths.

### **Focusing on Strengths during the State of Flow**

Earlier in this paper, several criteria were given for Allport’s construct of *signature strengths*. Three of those criteria were:

- Invigoration rather than exhaustion when using the strength;
- The creation and pursuit of fundamental projects that revolve around the strength;
- Intrinsic motivation to use the strength.

These three criteria resemble the experience of a person in the *flow state*, or a period of *vital engagement* (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). A person can be said to be more vitally engaged with his environment when using a signature strength. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) elaborate on this basic idea when they relate information and consciousness to the emergence of the self. They write:

In the course of daily life, people encounter a vast amount of information. Information appears in consciousness through the selective investment of attention. People's *subjective experience*, the content of consciousness from moment to moment, is thus determined by their decisions about the allocation of limited attention..... The quality of the attention paid to the world affects the nature of people's interactions and the quality of their subjective experience.

.....Information, the medium of exchange between person and environment, is also the material out of which the self is formed. The self emerges when consciousness becomes aware of itself as information about the body, subjective states, and the personal past and future. Mead (1934) distinguished between two aspects of the self. The sum of one's conscious processes make up the "I," or knower; the "me," or the known, is defined by the information about oneself that enters awareness when attention is turned on oneself. (P.85)

This passage suggests that the self is developed and elaborated by focus on selected information. When signature strengths are being used and the person is vitally engaged, the person is focused on information that has a positive valence for the person. Thus, the person's self identity is elaborated to be more positive, characterized by the person's self-identified strengths. It might be said that a person whose self-identity is based mostly on experiences where signature strengths were involved will have a strong positive flavor.

If we accept that the self is formed by the information we choose to give our attention, then it only makes sense that it is advantageous to choose to focus more attention on positive information than negatives.

### **Focusing on Strengths and Developing a Positive Self Identity**

This passage from Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) provides support for the theoretical model by which focusing on strengths enables a person to develop her self-identity in a certain direction, a more positive direction. When focusing on activities during which she is using her strengths, a person is more vitally engaged with what she is doing. When this occurs, she is more likely to recognize new things about herself and to become more aware of who she is, juxtaposed to her immediate environment. She is also developing a self-identity as a person who does certain types of activities that enable her to use certain strengths. She is increasing her likelihood of identifying herself as a person defined by those strengths.

If I focus my attention on those special experiences when I am using my strengths, I am more likely to think of myself as a person who naturally uses those strengths. For example, right now, as I review the ideas of Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi and relate them to my own thinking, I experience vital engagement and the sense that I am using my analytical and creative strengths. As I do that, I identify myself as an analytical and creative person. This picture of me seems to describe the "me" that I experience as the "real me."

### **Conclusion of Literature Review**

Considerable evidence has been cited to support the position that people are better off if they have a positive perspective. Studies of optimism, hope, happiness, positive emotions, and subjective well-being all show that people with these qualities are more likely to have better results or outcomes on several activities. For example, positive qualities characterize people who are mentally and physically healthy. These qualities also characterize those who live longer, have better marriages, make better teammates, get better grades in school, receive higher ratings in work performance, solve problems better, are more creative, are better adjusted and generally have more successful lives.

There is little doubt that it is beneficial to focus on the positive in life. The tough question involves a person's possibilities for changing his or her genetic predisposition to be negative or positive.

Most experts on the topic believe that people can be changed to become more positive, but the best change-methods are not clearly proven by studies that have the recommended designs of experimental treatment and controlled conditions.

In this review of literature, I have suggested that a focus on strengths offers promising possibilities for encouraging people to become more positive. Studies of strengths-based development have demonstrated positive outcomes. Theories and models of the *flow state* build a compelling case for focusing on signature strengths to develop the self. I have studied changes in measures of positive self descriptions during workshops focused on the articulation of Dependable Strengths (Forster, 1991). Significant changes were detected as participants described themselves with more positive adjectives. Thousands of evaluations submitted by participants in the DSAP have reported that they learned a good deal about themselves during the workshops. More outcome studies need to be done, but initial efforts support the idea that focusing on strengths does result in more positive self-identities.

If we can design more effective methods for facilitating positive outcomes and if we can prove that these methods work, we are likely to make meaningful contributions. This is especially the case when children are encouraged to become more positive because it is likely to benefit them through their whole lives. If there were to be a groundswell towards positive self-development, whole societies might flourish (Keyes & Haidt, 2003). Wright (2000) makes a case that such changes are likely to further the cultural evolution of the human species.

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