

Positive Interpersonal Processes

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Abstract

Good relationships are characterized by frequent positive social interactions, such as having fun together, sharing laughs, doing kind things for one another, and expressing gratitude. Here, building on rapidly emerging findings, I articulate core features of *positive interpersonal processes* for the first time. This approach leads to useful specificity in predictions about relationship consequences and simultaneously contributes to both affective and relationship science, two domains that span disciplines within the psychological literature. In turn, basic research on everyday positive interpersonal processes points toward new avenues for understanding the well-established links between good relationships and health.

Keywords

positive emotion, interpersonal processes, relationships, health

One of the most robustly supported conclusions from the psychological literature is that social relationships play a vital role in human health and well-being. Beyond their influence on a wide range of behaviors central to everyday functioning (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000), high-quality relationships show a robust positive association with happiness and mental health (Thoits, 2011), physical health (Uchino, 2009), and even longer life (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Yet why? To address this question, many researchers have focused on the well-known link between stress (i.e., highly arousing negative emotion) and health. For example, high-quality relationship partners may help calm you down when things are not going well, or people in high-quality relationships may not fight as frequently or as intensely. But recent research has revealed that high-quality relationships are not simply marked by lower negative emotions. Additionally, the best relationships are infused with doses of positive emotions.

As a thought experiment, consider what attracts you to your favorite relationship partners, whether they are relatives, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. I wager that it is the good stuff. Having fun, giving encouragement, sharing laughs, being kind, and celebrating together draws us in and keeps us coming back for more. Over the past several years, I have been using a framework to define and study *positive interpersonal processes*,

influenced by theories from both affective and relationship science. In my own work, it has proven useful for understanding how social interactions infused with positive emotions play out. I describe some foundational theoretical assertions from the framework here to illustrate that pushing for specificity in positive emotions and in aspects of interpersonal processes simultaneously enhances basic research across disciplines. In turn, these new insights may open doors for understanding the puzzle of how high-quality relationships contribute to health.

Positive Emotions at the Center of the Interpersonal Process

Many relationship researchers try to understand how certain interpersonal processes produce beneficial outcomes for the members of ongoing relationships, and these are sometimes referred to as “positive” processes. However, given recent evidence regarding the value of positive emotions in social life, reviewed here, and other work suggesting that objectively “good” behaviors

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can produce “bad” outcomes (McNulty & Fincham, 2012), I reserve the term *positive* to refer to certain situations: when positive *emotion* is at the heart of the interaction. A positive interpersonal process is a social dynamic in which one person’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior change another’s, fueled by positive emotion.¹

Broadly speaking, to specify “positive” in the label adds opportunities for precision in predictions from relationship scientists, whereas to specify “interpersonal process” adds opportunities for precision in predictions from affective scientists. More concretely, two decades ago, Fredrickson advanced the groundbreaking hypothesis that positive emotions—as a class—help to promote survival by building resources over time (Fredrickson, 1998), and this novel “build” hypothesis has been confirmed via experimental evidence for changes in self-reported social resources (among other types of resources) resulting from changes in daily positive emotions (e.g., Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). In addition to explicit hypotheses about building up or growing relationships rather than merely preventing their decline, subsequent research revealed that theorists can get more specific about both the positive emotion under investigation and the type of social outcome: Different types of positive emotions, such as joy, gratitude, awe, and curiosity, lead to distinct social consequences (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Campos, Shiota, Keltner, Gonzaga, & Goetz, 2013). In part, focusing on the specific positive emotion will be beneficial for theorists because emotions have long been thought to serve adaptive social functions (e.g., Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Van Kleef, 2009), with any given emotion helping to coordinate social interactions in specific ways, in the moment. For relationship scientists, then, understanding emotion theory—and more about the specific positive emotions under investigation—can help with predictions regarding relationship processes.

At the same time, for affective scientists, taking seriously the possibility that emotions coordinate social interactions means getting systematic about predictions for both members of the dyad—that is, recognizing not only the intrapersonal process that is typically investigated but also the interpersonal process. This might include taking into account the type of relationship the dyad members have (e.g., strangers vs. lovers), which would set norms and expectations (e.g., willingness to express emotion; Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008). More fundamentally, this approach encourages systematic predictions regarding Person A’s influence (X) on emotion (M) and subsequent impact (Y) on Person B. Finally, relationship scientists have argued that emotions happen most frequently and intensely in the context of ongoing relationships (Berscheid &

Ammazzalorso, 2004), which implies that faster gains in discovery might happen from studying positive interpersonal processes in meaningful relationships—such as those with loved ones, friends, and coworkers—then generalizing to interactions with strangers, rather than vice versa. Regardless, because in good, high-quality relationships positive emotions happen frequently, it behooves researchers to better understand the role of positive emotions in interpersonal dynamics.

Next, to illustrate the potential of this approach, I will review evidence regarding three examples of positive-emotion-fueled moments common in high-quality relationships. Existing research has not comprehensively tested the full positive interpersonal process for each example. However, each of these examples are useful because one underscores the value of studying both people in the social dyad, another reveals the independence of positive relative to negative interpersonal processes, and a third showcases specificity among positive emotions.

Amusement: sharing laughter

Many people assume that laughter is good for relationships. They may assume this because laughter is highly social—it is more likely to happen around other people than when alone (Provine & Fischer, 1989) and is actually contagious (Provine, 1992). But what if, while hanging out with a friend, one’s laughter at an amusing joke is not reciprocated? Can one conclude that the laughter is good for the relationship?

Recent research emphasizes the value in focusing on both members of the social dyad, showing that *shared laughter*—simultaneous laughter by all members of a social interaction—is a marker of high-quality relationships (Kurtz & Algoe, 2015). In one study, couples in romantic relationships talked about how they first met, which kicked up a lot of positive emotion and laughter. Their behavior—actual time spent laughing, either alone or at the same time as the partner—was documented from their video-recorded conversations. Results showed that the extent to which the couple shared laughter, over and above time spent laughing alone, was positively associated with their feelings of closeness and safety with each other (Kurtz & Algoe, 2015). Laughing at the same time as someone else, about the same thing, suggests that you see the world in the same way: Whatever event or statement caused the laughter caused it in both of you. In other research, even new acquaintances who laughed together thought they would like each other more specifically because their shared laughter caused them to see themselves as more similar to the new potential friend (Kurtz & Algoe, 2017). Although there is a growing body of literature

on the laughter of one person, this research expands the investigative lens to incorporate both dyad members and in so doing introduces new considerations regarding the roles of amusement and laughter in social life.

Joy: disclosing good news

When something good happens to us, up to 80% of the time we share that good news with someone else (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). This simple and natural act, which researchers call *capitalizing*, typically makes people feel better about the event as well as themselves (Gable et al., 2004; Langston, 1994). More than that, however, capitalizing provides an important opportunity for connecting with the social partner with whom you shared the news.

How? First, we should acknowledge the well-established finding that—despite their best intentions—other people are not always good at responding well when bad things happen to us (e.g., Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel, & Scrimshaw, 1993). Using video-recorded conversations between romantic partners, researchers showed that this is also true when good things happen to us—sometimes even loved ones respond to joyous news by pointing out the downsides of the situation (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006). However, the more the partner does respond in an active and constructive way—that is, the more the partner shares in the joy—the more the discloser feels that the partner understands, validates, and cares about him or her (Gable et al., 2006; Reis et al., 2010). Critically, having a partner respond well when something goes right signals that this person will be there for you when things go wrong in the future more strongly than does his or her response when things go wrong in the present. The authors suggest that this is likely because we expect partners to support us during negative events, yet it is harder to effectively provide support during negative events than during positive events. Thus, when partners respond well to a positive event, it is simply a clearer signal of their love and support (Gable, Gosnell, Maisel, & Strachman, 2012); in turn, this sense of security that someone will be there for you in the future is one of the most robust predictors of mental and physical health (Uchino, 2009). The research on sharing joy is the clearest example in the literature of the value of positive interpersonal processes relative to negative ones.

Gratitude: kindness begets kindness

People do things for one another all the time. It might be helping a friend proofread a paper, bringing a loved

one coffee, or getting a relative a birthday gift. These actions may go unnoticed because they are expected or cause negative emotions because they are unwelcomed, or, sometimes, such actions trigger the positive emotion of gratitude in the beneficiary (Algoe, 2012). When they do, it is because the kind gesture not only produces a positive outcome (“Mmm—coffee!”) but also because the person’s gesture momentarily stands out (“You didn’t have to do that!”). Gratitude draws our attention to people who have just demonstrated that they get our needs and are motivated to look out for us—they are responsive to us (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). In turn, the emotion coordinates the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of the grateful person in ways that bind him or her more closely with the kind person (Algoe, 2012). That is, gratitude strengthens relationships with high-quality partners.

There are many avenues through which this can happen, but just saying “thank you” goes a long way. For example, benefactors who were thanked for helping a stranger were more likely to leave contact information in case of a future encounter (Williams & Bartlett, 2015). And key evidence comes from ongoing relationships: When a benefactor perceives the thank you as being especially responsive, the benefactors themselves are more satisfied in the relationship as long as 6 months later (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013). Critically, these results were independent from how responsive that same partner was when the benefactor shared good news (i.e., capitalized) during a different lab task. Research on the positive interpersonal process surrounding gratitude provides one of the clearest examples in the literature regarding specificity among positive interpersonal processes.

Summary of Themes

I have focused on moments that are quintessentially interpersonal and for which dyadic evidence exists. However, many other positive emotions should drive various social interactions, such as love (Fredrickson, 2016; Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006), awe (Bai et al., 2017), pride (Martens & Tracy, 2013; Williams & DeSteno, 2009), admiration (Algoe & Haidt, 2009), and curiosity or interest (Kashdan & Roberts, 2004). Regardless of the positive emotion, key insights from the last two decades of research and theory in affective and relationship science can guide research in this domain, whether you are new to the emotion literature or new to the interpersonal-process literature. First, positive emotion is not the same as a lack of negative emotion—it provides fuel for growth (Fredrickson, 1998). Second, not all positive emotions are the same, and neither are all beneficial relationship

outcomes, so we can and should get more precise in our theorizing: Affective and relationship scientists should be talking to one another regarding constructs and measurement.

Third, since at least the 1980s, relationship scientists have had sophisticated models of social dynamics that are helpful prototypes for thinking through the types of predictions we can and should be making about the intricacies of these interactions (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988); we also now have the statistical sophistication (e.g., Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013; Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011). Thus, we will learn much by moving beyond the thoughts or behavior of the individual experiencing the positive emotion and widening the theoretical lens to consider the thoughts, feelings, behavior, and biology of each member of the dyad. Fourth, recognizing that, theoretically (Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2004), emotions are most often experienced and expressed in the context of ongoing relationships means researchers can make predictions about how any given type of social interaction could set the stage for the next social interaction and the implications for the relationship over time. Finally, adding temporal considerations means researchers can consider both short- and long-term consequences; for example, a positive interpersonal process that produces short-term benefits (e.g., closeness through shared laughter) might produce long-term consequences (e.g., trouble being productive together).

Why Does It Matter? Changing the Story on Pathways to Health

In good relationships, positive interpersonal processes happen frequently (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Gottman, 1994). Because emotions coordinate mind, body, and behavior in the moment (e.g., Keltner & Haidt, 1999), with implications for future interactions with a social partner, this frequency sets the stage for long-term cumulative impact on health. Critically, I suggest that rather than looking at how positive emotions might reduce stress to bring about health, instead, a deeper understanding of positive interpersonal processes would open the door to a host of other potential pathways to health.

Here are three examples of possible pathways—currently uncharted but theoretically plausible—that have deep roots in our evolutionary history: social affiliation (contrasted with isolation), grooming, and sex. First, people with whom we have more positive interpersonal interactions are more attractive to be around. This may simply lead to spending more time in the presence of the other person (Kirchier, 1988); in turn, a recent review suggests the mere presence of others

we like and trust has several concurrent effects that would produce less physiological activation of the body (e.g., vigilance to threat is less necessary than when alone) and thus would cumulatively tax the body less (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Second, the attraction or simply time spent may lead to more grooming or affectionate, nonsexual touch, such as pats on the back, hugs, and kisses. A recent review suggests that receiving affectionate touch releases endorphins, which make people feel good (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017); in turn, independent of social context, feeling good is associated with its own downstream physical health benefits, theoretically caused by the activation of several psychobiological processes (Dockray & Steptoe, 2010). Finally, in a romantic context, more positive interpersonal processes may promote better sex, which facilitates oxytocin release (Carmichael et al., 1987); in turn, oxytocin has been characterized as cardioprotective (Gutkowska & Jankowski, 2012). Each of these potential pathways is fueled by the positive emotion at the heart of social interactions—not the reduction of negative emotions. The latest theory and evidence merging affective and relationship science to showcase positive interpersonal processes therefore opens exciting doors for discovering why good relationships are good for health.

Conclusions

More and more research focuses on processes that people intuitively understand to be important. We are in our favorite relationships because we were—and continue to be—drawn to the people with whom share joy, we share laughs, we feel admiration, and we express gratitude. Because of the frequency of these positive interpersonal processes within ongoing high-quality relationships, they have a strong opportunity for impact. One such area is the trajectory of the relationship itself, which is meaningful in its own right (Reis et al., 2000). Recent basic research on everyday positive interpersonal processes reveals another intriguing possibility, too: Because of a focus on negative emotional processes, we researchers have overlooked key reasons that good relationships are good for health. Exploring the effects of positive interpersonal processes may very well be the next exciting frontier in research linking social life with health outcomes.

Recommended Reading

- Algoe, S. B. (2012). (See References). An overview of the evidence that supports how one positive interpersonal process, gratitude, is dissociable from others.
- Gable, S. L., Gosnell, C. L., Maisel, N. C., & Strachman, A. (2012). (See References). Provides empirical evidence underscoring the unique added value of positive

interpersonal processes over and above those that reduce negative emotions.

- Ramsey, M. A., & Gentzler, A. L. (2015). An upward spiral: Bidirectional associations between positive affect and positive aspects of close relationships across the life span. *Developmental Review, 36*, 58–104. doi:10.1016/j.dr.2015.01.003. A review emphasizing the wide variety of relationships for which positive interpersonal processes are relevant and showing how relationships produce further positive emotions.
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- Shiota, M. N., Campos, B., Oveis, C., Hertenstein, M. J., Simon-Thomas, E., & Keltner, D. (2017). Beyond happiness: Building a science of discrete positive emotions. *American Psychologist, 72*, 617–643. doi:10.1037/a0040456. Provides an overview of evidence for dissociable consequences of various positive emotions.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Note

1. By this definition, a negative interpersonal process has negative emotion at its center, even if the interaction is about reducing negative emotion and therefore increasing beneficial outcomes (e.g., Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008).

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