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Positive Psychology: FAQs

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As positive psychology gathers momentum, several frequently asked questions (FAQs) have surfaced. Lazarus's (this issue) target article provides a version of some of these, so we distill these FAQs and some of the answers that are emerging with emphasis on some of Lazarus's specific critiques. We do not address several of Lazarus's other points: the need for longitudinal studies (because the bulk of the literature in the fields of optimism and of flow consists of longitudinal studies), that Seligman is a "Johnny-come-lately" (perhaps 40 years of studying these issues seems "lately" to someone who worked on them for 50-plus years), that the literature is already "well-balanced" between the negative and the positive (because there have been 70,856 articles on depression since 1887 vs. 2,958 on happiness; Myers, 2000), and his pervasive aggravation that his own theory has forked no lightning within positive psychology (coping, stress, and appraisals do not seem particularly well-suited concepts to illuminate positive emotion and positive traits). Rather we concentrate on several meatier issues whose resolution is more likely to advance the field.

One note on terminology first: Lazarus (this issue) uses the term *negative* psychology to denote what positive psychology is alleged to oppose. We do not accept this. Lazarus's juxtaposition is his own, and it is unfortunate; positive psychologists intend no disrespect to the many academics and practitioners who have spent the bulk of their careers investigating negative states (Seligman is one of them and is proud of the accomplishments of this field; contrary to Lazarus's invention, we have written no "diatribes" against "negative" psychology). We prefer the term *psychology as usual* to describe work that focuses on human problems. Lazarus claims that positive psychology advocates that we "abandon the negative and focus on positive human qualities." As we have taken pains to

emphasize, psychology as usual is important and necessary, and positive psychology is intended as a supplement, another arrow in the quiver, and not a replacement for this endeavor.

Are the Positive and the Negative Separable, Discrete Classes?

Lazarus (this issue) holds that it is "unwise and regressive" to divide emotions into positive and negative. Thus, a negative emotion like shame or anger, for one person at one time in one culture, can be negative, but at another time or for another person or in another culture, it can be positive. More generally this FAQ doubts the division of emotions, traits, or institutions into negative and positive. This FAQ comes in several forms: (a) that understanding the negative will lead to an understanding of the positive, because the positive is merely the absence of the negative; (b) that positive emotions are opponent processes of negative emotions—for example, the joy that the parachute jumper feels on landing is just the slave process of relief from fear (Solomon & Corbit, 1974); (c) that positive emotions and traits are always intertwined with the negative, and the two cannot be studied separately; and (d) that a food pellet is not truly positive for a hungry animal but just a reliever of the negative state of hunger. If the positive were just the absence of the negative, we would not need a positive psychology, just a psychology of relieving negative states. Similarly, if the positive were just the obverse of the negative, we would not need a positive psychology, because we could deduce everything we needed to know about the positive merely by attaching a negation sign to what we discover about the negative. These are deep

and important objections to a field that advocates the investigation of the positive.

That the same discrete emotion is sometimes negative and sometimes positive is often (but not always, e.g., agony, bliss) true, but this intriguing fact cuts no ice against positive psychology. Rather the scientific issue is the understanding of those emotions under the conditions that they are positive versus negative. This in turn depends on the venerable and difficult question of whether *indifference* can be well-defined. If it can, the states and traits and institutions “north” of indifference are positive and those “south” of indifference are negative. If indifference cannot be well-defined, an enterprise that claims that the positive can be scientifically understood in its own right collapses.

The basic intuition underlying the several attempts to define an indifference point is that there are some (very large number of) events that when added to or subtracted from a particular concatenation of circumstances do not make that concatenation more or less aversive or more or less desired. Those events (e.g., turning the lights down 2% as I write this sentence) are “neutral,” or “indifferent,” in that concatenation. Events that make that concatenation more aversive are negative, and those that make it more desired are positive. Change the concatenation, and there is nothing to prevent the events from changing their intensity or even switching valence. Thus, I believe indifference is definable, and therefore the positive can be well-defined. For related attempts at defining indifference see Nozick (1997, pp. 93–95), and Irwin (1971).

There seems to be value in studying positive emotions and positive traits in their own right, and not as always the slave process to some negative state. Sometimes, of course, positive emotions and positive traits are simply the other end of some bipolar dimension (e.g., agony and relief), but often the positive is not yoked to the negative, only to the absence of the positive. Joy does not seem to be the absence of sadness, because it need not arise when all sadness is removed (the underlying dimension for joy ends at the absence of joy, not the presence of sadness, which is an additional process), nor does sadness seem to be the absence of any positive state (the underlying dimension for sadness ends at the absence of sadness, with the presence of positive states being an additional process).

Theoretically, the idea that positive and negative emotions are different in kind is attractive. Just as negative feeling is a firefighting “here-be-dragons” sensory system that alarms one, telling one unmistakably that one is in a win–lose encounter and one should get rid of the noxious stimulus, the feeling part of positive emotion is also sensory. Positive feel-

ing is a neon “here-be-growth” marquee that tells you that a potential win–win encounter is at hand. By activating an expansive, tolerant, and creative mind-set, positive feelings maximize the social, intellectual, and physical benefits that will accrue (Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman, 2002). On this account, if true, positive emotion is an entirely different system with an entirely different function from negative emotion.

Parallel considerations hold for traits and institutions. My satisfaction at seeing a perfect hybrid tea rose is not the relief of any aversive state, such as beauty deprivation, and the presence of civility in a deliberative body provides benefits (e.g., friendship) over and above the mere removal of the costs of incivility (e.g., revenge). Thus we conclude that although the understanding of a positive sometimes hinges on the understanding of an obverse negative, that state of affairs is far from universal, and therefore the positive must—at least sometimes—be understood in its own right.

Is Positive Psychology Just “Happiology”?

Lazarus (this issue) thinks that positive psychology is almost entirely about the study of positive emotion, and the target article seems largely a vehicle for the promotion of his own theory of emotions. Indeed, positive psychology holds that the scientific understanding of subjective well-being—pleasure, contentment, joy, mirth, ecstasy, ebullience, and the like—is important. We believe, however, that positive psychology is not only the study of positive feeling but also the study of positive traits and positive institutions. Within the study of positive emotion itself we divide it into emotion about the past (satisfaction, contentment, pride, and the like); the present, which is commonly termed *happiness* by the layperson (pleasure, ecstasy, joy, and the like); and the future (hope, optimism, trust, faith, and the like). Seen this way, although happiness in the lay sense is one important subject of positive psychology, it forms only one third of the area of positive emotion, which in turn forms only one third of the domain of positive psychology.

Positive psychology on this view is about more than just *hedonics*, the study of how we feel. We believe that simple hedonic theory, without consideration of strength, virtue, and meaning, fails as an account of the positive life. A simple hedonic theory claims that the quality of a life is just the total good moments minus the total bad moments. This is more than an ivory tower theory, because very many people run their lives around exactly this goal. The sum total of our momentary feelings turns out to be a very poor measure of how good or how bad we judge an episode—a movie, a vacation, a marriage, or a life—to

be. How well an episode ends, how intense the peak of pleasure or pain, the trajectory of the episode—worsening or improving—are all documented violations of hedonics, and they easily override the sum of the feelings in an experience (Fredrickson, 2001; Schkade & Kahneman, 1998).

Ludwig Wittgenstein, the great Anglo–Viennese philosopher, was by all accounts miserable. A collector of Wittgensteinabilia, Seligman has never found a photo of Wittgenstein smiling. Wittgenstein was depressive, irascible, and scathingly critical of everyone around him and even more critical of himself. In a typical seminar held in his cold and barely furnished Cambridge rooms, he would pace the floor muttering, “Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein, what a terrible teacher you are.” Yet his last words give the lie to hedonics. Dying alone in a garret in Ithaca, New York, he said to his landlady, “Tell them it’s been wonderful!” (Malcolm, 2001).

We want to suggest that positive character, the deployment of strength and virtue, is a road to the good life, a life different in kind from the pleasant life, but no less wonderful and no less positive (Peterson & Seligman, in press). The Wittgenstein story illustrates that a life of strength and virtue can override grim hedonics. Flourishing is the centerpiece of positive psychology, and Robert Nozick’s “experience machine” shows that positive experiences alone are not sufficient for flourishing (Nozick, 1974). Nozick imagined a machine that can give a person any experience desired. By placing the person in a floating tank and hooking up electrodes to the brain, talented neuropsychologists could use this machine to give the feeling of writing a great novel, making a new friend, or reading an interesting book. Although we may long for such experiences, few of us would agree to hook up to this machine for life. Nozick argued that this is, in part, because we want to have these feelings only as a result of our actually doing these activities. It is not just positive feelings we want, we want to be entitled to our positive feelings. We want to construe, “appraise” perhaps, our good feelings as stemming from personal strengths and virtuous action (Lyubomirsky, 2001).

Thus positive psychology is not, and has never been, just happiness. It is the study of three very different kinds of positive lives: the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life (Seligman, 2002).

Miss the Mark?

Wealthy cultures invent myriad shortcuts to feeling good. These produce positive emotion in us without our going to the trouble of using our strengths and virtues. Shopping, drugs, chocolate, loveless sex, and television are all examples. Positive psychology does not deny that these shortcuts, along with many others,

can result in positive emotion. However, following Nozick (and Aristotle), positive psychology is principally interested in the emotions that result from the exercise of strengths and virtues.

We are not puritan or sophomoric enough to suggest eliminating shortcuts. There is a cost of getting happiness so cheaply, however, when the shortcuts become one’s principal road to happiness. Positive emotion alienated from positive character leads to emptiness; to a lack of meaning; and as we age, to the gnawing fear that we are fidgeting unto death. It is possible that the spiritual malaise and the epidemic of depression that has swept all the wealthy nations (Seligman, Reivich, Gillham, & Jaycox, 1996) have at their core the use of the shortcuts displacing the use of the strengths to produce positive emotion.

Isn’t Positive Psychology Just Positive Thinking Warmed Over?

Positive psychology has a philosophical but not an empirical connection to positive thinking. Both are relevant to the hoary free will–determinism issue. This issue finds its way into Western theology through the Arminian heresy (Jacob Harmensen, 1560–1609). The Arminian view holds that human beings can participate in their own grace, that grace is not predestined but depends—to some extent at least—on the individual. The individual can choose actions that will get him or her into heaven. This was a heresy because it denied that God alone bestows grace and that the individual cannot participate in grace by choosing good or evil. This heresy is at the foundation of Methodism, and Norman Vincent Peale’s positive thinking movement grows out of this heritage. Positive psychology is also wedded at its foundations to the individual freely choosing. Without such a premise the notion of positive strengths and virtues would make no sense. In this sense, both endeavors have common roots. However, positive psychology is also different in three significant ways from positive thinking.

First, positive thinking is an “armchair” activity. Positive psychology, on the other hand, is tied to a program of empirical and replicable scientific activity. Second, positive thinking urges positivity on us for all times and places, but positive psychology does not hold a brief for positivity. Positive psychology recognizes that in spite of the several advantages of positive thinking, there are times when negative thinking might be preferred. Many studies correlate optimism with later health, longevity, sociability, and success, but pessimists may be able to do at least one thing better: Much of the experimental evidence

suggests that in many situations negative thinking leads to more accuracy (Alloy, Abramson, & Chiara, 2000). This is true of real life as well: when accuracy is tied to potentially catastrophic outcomes. When a pilot is deciding whether to deice the wings of his or her airplane, one wants one's pilot to be a pessimist.

The third distinction between positive thinking and positive psychology is that many leaders of the positive psychology endeavor have spent decades working on the "negative" side of things—depression, anxiety, victims, trauma, and oppression. We do not view positive psychology as a replacement for psychology as usual, or as a "paradigm shift"; rather we view positive psychology merely as a normal science supplement to the hard-won gains of "negative" psychology.

Is Positive Psychology Elitist?

Many of the scientists who work on positive psychology are affluent, White, middle-aged intellectuals (although the majority of the 12 Templeton Positive Psychology Prize winners have been female). However, this does not mean the substance of the science reflects such a bias. First, in its classification of the strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2003), a major inclusion criterion is the ubiquity of the strengths as positively valued across almost all cultures. The success of positive psychology will be dependent on its ability to identify and study strengths and virtues that are valued by persons regardless of their culture, ethnicity, gender, age, and nationality. It is for this reason that the classification of the strengths and virtues includes strengths like kindness and perseverance, but not punctuality and wealth. Unlike punctuality and wealth, kindness and perseverance are valued by virtually everyone, regardless of accidents of culture, class, or gender.

Second, affluent, middle-class academics hardly have a corner on strength, virtue, and happiness. People in Rwanda and Calcutta, contrary to popular myth, are enormously concerned with achieving strength, virtue, and happiness (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). Being poor or oppressed does not extirpate the needs for integrity and honor and kindness and pleasure. Masten (2001), by documenting the sheer ordinariness of resilience, provides persuasive testimony of the importance of positive psychology for all people.

Is Positive Psychology Discovering Anything Surprising?

We believe that much of the value of any science is the discovery of surprising facts, and research in

positive psychology is yielding some unintuitive results. Just to name a few: In one study, researchers asked widows to talk about their late spouses. Some of the widows told happy stories; some told sad stories and complained. Two and a half years later, researchers found that the women who had told happy stories were much more likely to be engaged in life and dating again (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997). Researchers have also found that physicians experiencing positive emotion tend to make more accurate diagnoses (Isen, Rosenzweig, & Young, 1991); that optimistic people are more likely than pessimists to benefit from adverse medical information (Aspinwall & Brunhart, 2000); that in presidential elections over the past century, 85% were won by the more optimistic candidate (Zullow, Oettingen, Peterson, & Seligman, 1988); that wealth is only weakly related to happiness both within and across nations (Diener & Diener, 1996); that trying to maximize happiness leads to unhappiness (Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, et al. 2002); that resilience is completely ordinary (Masten, 2001); and that nuns who display positive emotion in their autobiographical sketches live longer and are healthier over the next 70 years (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001).

Doesn't Human Suffering Trump Human Well-Being in Its Demand on Our Sympathies and Attention?

Positive psychology holds that one of the best ways to help suffering people is to focus on positive things. Persons who are impoverished, depressed, or suicidal care about far more than merely the relief of their suffering. These persons care—sometimes desperately—about strength and virtue, about authenticity, about meaning, and about integrity.

Furthermore, positive psychology holds that the relief of suffering very often depends on the building up of happiness and of strengths. Fredrickson (2001) reviewed her findings on positive emotion as "undoing" negative emotion and as the building blocks of resilience that combats physical illness. Lyubomirsky's (2001) illumination of what conditions enhance happiness has direct relevance for the practice of clinical psychology and the relief of mental disorders. These strengths function as a buffer against misfortune and against the psychological disorders, and they may be the key to resilience (Masten, 2001). The birthright of a psychologist is not merely to heal damage and treat disorder but also to guide people toward the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life.

Note

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While Accentuating the Positive, Don't Eliminate the Negative or Mr. In-Between

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Lazarus's (this issue) trenchant critique of positive psychology in the target article is sure to galvanize the movement's adherents. We suspect that we were asked to provide a commentary as representatives and defenders of positive psychology. Yet we find ourselves agreeing with the premise and nearly all details of Lazarus's argument. We begin with three quibbles and then offer elaborations of what we consider Lazarus's most telling criticisms.

Quibble 1: Surely You're Joking, Dr. Lazarus!

Our first quibble, with tongue in cheek, is with Lazarus's (this issue) implication that positive psychology is

not sufficiently developed to warrant special issues and special sections in psychology's flagship journal and that it has yet to make sufficiently ample contributions to have a handbook devoted to its accomplishments. Lazarus's comments betray his adherence to a view of science that assumes that progress emerges over time; that findings build on one another; that unanticipated findings are embraced; and that paradigm shifts, if they exist, emerge from the accretion of incontrovertible evidence and not from whole cloth. Dr. Lazarus, get with the program! Have you not read the positive psychology "manifesto" (Sheldon, Frederickson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, & Haidt, 2000) or its "declaration of independence" (Snyder & Lopez, 2002)? Do you not know that positive psychology's scientific agenda is being established at conferences, institutes, and summits;