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 that bridge affective and relationship science, for the first time I articulate core features of positive interpersonal processes. 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.
Positive Interpersonal Processes

One of the most robustly-supported conclusions from the psychological literature is that social relationships are good. They are good for happiness and mental health (Thoits, 2011), physical health (Uchino, 2009), and even forecast 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, good relationship partners may help calm you down when things are not going well, or people in good relationships may not fight as frequently or as intensely. But recent research has revealed that good 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 it’s a favorite relative, friend, neighbor, or co-worker. I wager that it’s 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 working with a model of positive interpersonal processes -- influenced by theories from both affective and relationship science -- that may prove useful for understanding how social interactions infused with positive emotions play out. I describe it here to illustrate that pushing for specificity in positive emotions and in aspects of interpersonal processes simultaneously enhances basic research on both emotion and relationships. In turn, these new insights may open doors for understanding the puzzle of how good relationships contribute to health.
(Positive) Emotions in the Center of the Interpersonal Process

Many relationships 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 objectively “good” behaviors 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 changes another’s, fueled by positive emotion.iii

Two decades ago, Fredrickson advanced the groundbreaking hypothesis that positive emotions — as a class -- help promote survival by building resources over time, and one proposed resource was social (Fredrickson, 1998). Indeed, experimental evidence now shows that increasing one’s experience of positive emotions over time does increase self-reported social resources (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 2008). The present paper uses these insights as a foundation and adds three additional insights from recent theory and evidence. First, different types of positive emotions, like joy, gratitude, and curiosity, lead to distinct social consequences (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Campos, Shiota, Keltner, Gonzaga, & Goetz, 2013). Second, emotions help to coordinate social interactions (e.g., Keltner & Haidt, 1999; van Kleef, 2009), which naturally implies that researchers can look for systematic effects of one person’s positive emotion on the person or persons with whom she is interacting. Third, emotions happen most frequently and intensely in the context of ongoing relationships (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2004), which fosters
predictions about consequences for each person in the social interaction, over time. 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, I review evidence regarding three examples of positive-emotion-fueled moments common in high-quality relationships. 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’s 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 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 videorecorded 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 their partner (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). While there is a growing body of literature on the laughter of one person, this research expanded 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 percent 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 connection with the social partner with whom you shared the news.

How? First, let’s acknowledge the well-established finding that – despite their best intentions – others are not always good at responding well when bad things happen to us (e.g., Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel, & Scrimshaw, 1993). Using videorecorded 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, when the partner does respond in a more active and constructive way – that is,
when the partner shares in the joy -- the more the discloser feels that the partner
understands, validates, and cares about them (Gable et al., 2006; Reis, Smith,
Carmichael, Caprariello, Tsai, Rodrigues, & Maniaci, 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 their response when things go
wrong in the present. How can that be? The argument is that once in a relationship, we
expect our partners to respond to negative events; when they respond well to the positive,
it’s a clearer signal of their love and support (Gable et al., 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 capitalization is
some of the sharpest work differentiating relational and personal benefits of positive
interpersonal processes relative to negative.

**Gratitude: Kindness begets kindness.** People do things for one another all the
time. It might be helping a friend proofread a paper, bringing them coffee, or getting
them a birthday gift. These actions may go unnoticed because they are expected, 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’s because
the kind gesture not only produces a positive outcome (“Mmm – coffee!”), but 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 them 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 six 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 some of the sharpest empirical distinctions among positive interpersonal processes.

**Summary of Themes**

I have focused above on moments that are quintessentially interpersonal and for which the most dyadic evidence currently exists. However, many other positive emotions should drive various social interactions, such as love (Fredrickson, 2016; Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006), awe (Bai, Maruskin, Chen, Gordon, Stellar,…Keltner, 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 emotions literature or new to the interpersonal process literature. First, positive emotion is not the same as a lack of negative emotion –
First, it provides fuel for growth (Fredrickson, 1998). Second, not all positive emotions are the same, nor are beneficial relationship outcomes, and 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 now have the statistical sophistication, too (e.g., Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013; Lederman, Macho, & Kenny, 2011). As such, 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 emotions are most often experienced and expressed in the context of ongoing relationships – with our friends, family, co-workers, classmates – means researchers can make predictions about how any given type of social interaction could set the stage for the next, and the implications for the relationship, over time.

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, deeper understanding of positive
interpersonal processes would open the door to a host of other potential pathways to health.

For example, three possible pathways 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 cumulatively reduce metabolic load on the body, over time (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Second, the attraction or simply time spent may lead to more grooming or affectionate, non-sexual touch, like pats on the back, hugs, and kisses. A recent literature 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 (e.g., Steptoe, Gibson, Harmer, & Wardle, 2007). Finally, in a romantic context, more positive interpersonal processes may promote better sex, which facilitates oxytocin release (Carmichael, Humbert, Dixen, Palmisano, Greenleaf, & Davidson, 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 exiting doors for discovery regarding why good relationships are good for health.
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Conclusions

More and more research focuses on processes that people intuitively understand to be important—\textit{we are in our favorite relationships because we were and continue to be drawn to those people. We share joys, we share laughs, we feel admiration, we express gratitude.} Because of the frequency of these positive interpersonal processes within ongoing high-quality relationships, they have opportunity for impact. One area of impact is on the trajectory of the relationship itself. This recent basic research on everyday positive interpersonal processes reveals another intriguing possibility, too: \textit{due to a focus on negative emotional processes, we researchers have overlooked key reasons that good relationships are good for health. I hope the coming years will provide careful tests of this next frontier of research questions.}

Recommended Readings


\ding{53} An overview evidence for one positive interpersonal process that is dissociable from others.

Empirical evidence underscoring the unique added value of positive interpersonal processes, over and above those that reduce negative emotions.


A review emphasizing the wide variety of relationships for which positive interpersonal processes are relevant and shows how relationships produce further positive emotions.


Makes the case for emotions as coordinating links between relationships and health.


Carefully defines positive emotion and provides an overview of evidence for dissociable consequences of various positive emotions.
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2 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).