

# Comment

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## Positive Psychologists on Positive Constructs

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McNulty and Fincham (February–March 2012) offered compelling evidence that constructs such as forgiveness and optimism can have both beneficial and adverse consequences, depending on the context. Their caution about labeling particular psychological processes as “positive” is timely and well-taken. I fear, however, that their article propagates a misunderstanding of positive psychology—namely, that positive psychologists believe that the constructs or processes they investigate are “good” and should be promoted. To the contrary, the great majority of positive psychological scientists (despite their infelicitous label) simply argue that such topics as optimism, well-being, and courage should be studied. Thereafter, they let the data speak for themselves. If optimism, happiness, kindness, or forgiveness have deleterious effects for certain individuals, under specific conditions, or when practiced or expressed in particular ways, then the results are all the more interesting, challenging common assumptions and calling for more research. As Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) eloquently argued in their book *Practical Wisdom*, no trait or virtue is inherently good, and wisdom is needed to determine the right way to act “in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time” (pp. 5–6). Research, like that of McNulty and Fincham and their colleagues, is needed too.

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## Personal Experience in Positive Psychology May Offer a New Focus for a Growing Discipline

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In their recent review of positive psychology, McNulty and Fincham (February–March 2012) indicated the need to think beyond positive psychology. In particular, they argued that positive psychology needs “to move beyond labeling psychological traits and processes as positive” (p. 107).

According to them, this can be achieved through three steps: (a) by examining both the positive and negative sides of the same process or trait; (b) by examining both healthy and unhealthy subjects; and (c) by examining well-being over time.

In general, I agree with the two authors on the need for a “situated” positive psychology that is able to address the context in which we spend our lives. However, I believe that their suggestions have a critical flaw: They do not clearly distinguish between psychology and positive psychology. If the two disciplines examine both the positive and the negative sides of the same process, both healthy and unhealthy subjects, what is the specific focus of positive psychology?

To overcome this issue, I suggest a different approach. The starting point of

positive psychology should be the concept of “personal experience.” But what is personal experience? According to *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/experience>), it is possible to define experience both as “a: direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge” (subjective experience) and “b: the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation” (personal experience).

These definitions underline the two connected faces of our experience: On one side, we can intentionally control the contents of our experience (subjective experience); on the other side, its contents define our future emotions and intentions (personal experience). In other words, we both shape and are shaped by it.

The focus on subjective experience, the first side of experience, is not new in positive psychology. The seminal studies by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the mid-1970s identified in the optimal experience, or flow, a specific consciousness state experienced during challenging activities characterized by deep absorption and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Moreover, different cross-cultural studies demonstrated that subjective experience is the core of a pervasive selective process defined as “psychological selection” (Delle Fave, Massimini, & Bassi, 2011): People choose and cultivate in their lives activities and interests associated with optimal experience.

The main criticisms of this vision are two. First is the lack of attention to the interpersonal context: We experience optimal experiences, like the “nascent state” (*statu nascenti*) or “networked flow,” that are the outcome of a social interaction (Alberoni, 1984; Gaggioli, Milani, Mazzoni, & Riva, 2011). Second, linking the optimal experience to the balance between perceived high challenges/opportunities for action and high personal skills is too vague to be useful within a scientific research program: What are high and low for me and you?

However, there is a critical difference between subjective experience and personal experience. If subjective experience is the experience of being a subject (experience as subject), personal experience is the experience affecting a particular subject

(experience as object). This simple shift suggests that, independently from the subjectivity of any individual, it is possible to alter the features of our experience from outside. In other words, personal experience becomes the dependent variable that may be manipulated by external researchers. Specifically, I suggest that it is possible to manipulate the features of our experience in three separate but related ways (Riva, Banos, Botella, Wiederhold, & Gaggioli, 2012):

- *By structuring it* using a goal/meaning, rules, and a feedback system.
- *By augmenting it* to achieve multimodal and mixed experiences.
- *By replacing it* with a synthetic/fictional one.

For example, as suggested by “positive technology,” it is possible to use technology to manipulate the quality of experience, with the goal of increasing well-being both in individuals and groups (Botella et al., 2012).

Moreover, as argued by McNulty and Fincham (2012), personal experiences are situated. Cognitive psychology has clearly shown how the degree of perceptual stimulation, the meanings and values attributed to it, and the emotions elicited by it have a direct effect on the features of our personal experience (Goldstein, 2010). So, we may have relevant experiences, positive or negative, that we remember for all of our lives and experiences that we forget as soon as they end. Further, interpersonal context, too, shapes our personal experience: Most of our experiences are of cultural and interpersonal activities in which individual experience is connected and/or mediated by collective experience (Goldstein, 2010).

Finally, clinical psychology has clearly shown that personal change occurs through an intense focus on a particular experience (Wolfe, 2002). By exploring this experience as thoroughly as possible, the subject can relive all of the significant elements associated with it and make them available for reorganization.

In sum, these features suggest that positive psychology may be the science of personal experience: Its aim should be the understanding of how it is possible to manipulate the quality of personal experience with the goals of increasing wellness and generating strengths and resilience in individuals, organizations, and society.

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## In Support of Labeling Psychological Traits and Processes as Positive and Negative

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McNulty and Fincham (February–March 2012) provided a service to the field of positive psychology through reminding us that whether psychological traits and processes yield positive or negative outcomes is a function of the interpersonal and cultural contexts in which they are expressed. They demonstrated this through their review of research on four qualities generally viewed by positive psychologists as inherently positive, specifically, forgiveness, optimistic expectations, positive thoughts and benevolent attributions, and kindness.

However, they took a step too far in their conclusion that different outcomes in differing contexts mean that these and other psychological traits and processes should not be labeled as positive or negative.

Consideration of Erikson’s (1963, 1982) treatment of the personality components associated with each stage of psychosocial development is instructive in this regard. Each stage component is conceived as a bipolar dimension with the endpoints labeled, not positive and negative, but rather *syntonic* and *dystonic*. To say that something is syntonic means that it has us feeling invigorated or in harmony with our environment. It makes us feel good; it is what we would like to experience. To say that something is dystonic means that it is associated with functioning poorly, feeling bad; it is something we would wish to avoid. Take, for example, the personality component associated with Erikson’s first developmental stage—basic trust versus basic mistrust. We would much prefer to experience trust rather than mistrust. Yet, though feeling basic mistrust is uncomfortable and unpleasant, when visiting a tourist site that guidebooks describe as frequented by pickpockets, heightened mistrust is situationally appropriate and likely to help us avoid trouble. Correspondingly, someone who experiences trust indiscriminately is likely to be seen as naïve or gullible. Viewed in this way, it would appear that Erikson’s perspective is consistent with that of McNulty and Fincham (2012).

However, for Erikson, at each stage, our experiences do not yield an either–or outcome, or even an averaged point along the component continuum. Everyone has occasions on which syntonic outcomes are experienced and other occasions on which dystonic outcomes result. What Erikson viewed as important for epigenetic development and psychological health was the ratio of syntonic to dystonic outcomes at any given stage. In order to achieve well-being, a positive ratio of syntonic to dystonic outcomes was considered essential, provided both types of outcomes were experienced in situationally appropriate ways. According to the epigenetic principle, without a greater proportion of syntonic to dystonic outcomes at any given stage, successful future development would be fundamentally undermined. Therefore, while basic trust need not, and should not, be sought under all conditions, overall it constitutes a key element in successful psychological functioning and warrants being labeled a positive psychological characteristic. Correspondingly, while basic mistrust need not, and should not, be avoided under all conditions, when it be-

comes the dominant outcome experienced, no matter how situationally appropriate, it undermines psychological health and well-being. It therefore warrants being labeled a negative psychological characteristic. A similar analysis can be made for each of Erikson's psychosocial stage components.

McNulty and Fincham (2012) did not set up bipolar continua for the four ostensibly positive processes they discussed. I suggest the following: The opposite pole to forgiveness would appear to be continuing anger and resentment. The opposite pole to optimistic expectations is pessimistic expectations. The opposite pole to positive thoughts or benevolent attributions is negative thoughts or unsympathetic attributions. The opposite pole to kindness would appear to be meanness. In each instance, the former pole is syntonic, the latter dystonic. As with the analysis of Eriksonian stage components, there are some contexts in which the syntonic process is adaptive in promoting well-being and others in which it may prove maladaptive. Correspondingly, there are some contexts in which the dystonic process is most adaptive and in which to act otherwise would decrease well-being. However, viewed across time and contexts, the proportionally greater expression of forgiveness, optimistic expectations, positive thoughts, and kindness, in situationally appropriate ways, rather than their alternatives, will almost certainly promote greater psychological health and overall well-being. This warrants viewing each of these psychological processes as both contextually dependent and positive contributors to achieving well-being. Proportionally greater expression of anger and resentment, pessimistic expectations, negative thoughts, and meanness, no matter how situationally appropriate, appears a poor basis indeed for making claims with respect to well-being. A similar analysis should be applied to each of the psychological traits and processes positive psychologists have identified as being elements of psychological health or illness.

McNulty and Fincham (2012) noted that many positive psychologists advance the view that psychological research on positive traits and processes should inform our efforts at therapy and prevention. They expressed the concern that endeavors to promote positive qualities for people experiencing suboptimal circumstances may not only fail but may cause harm. In this regard, I believe they misconstrue the objectives of positive psychologists engaged in therapy and prevention. The goal is not to promote positive qualities irrespective of context. Rather, it is to promote the development and expression of positive psycho-

logical traits and processes in those contexts where they would be situationally appropriate and/or to help clients change their situations such that the use of negative psychological traits and processes is no longer necessary. We cannot promote such outcomes unless we can identify, and are willing to label, those ways of psychological functioning that are most healthy and associated with well-being and those that are not.

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## The Pitfalls of Valenced Labels and the Benefits of Properly Calibrated Psychological Flexibility

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### The Contextual Nature of Psychological Processes

There appears to be consistent support for our position (McNulty & Fincham, February–March, 2012) that the implications of any particular psychological characteristic for well-being depend on the context in which it operates. Specifically, Lyubomirsky (2012, this issue, p. 574) stated, “McNulty and Fincham (February–March 2012) offered compelling evidence that constructs such as forgiveness and optimism can have both beneficial and adverse consequences, depending on the context.” Likewise, Riva (2012, this issue, p. 574) stated, “In general, I agree with the two authors on the need for a ‘situated’ positive psychology that is able to address the context in which we spend our lives.” Finally, Waterman (2012, this issue, p. 575) stated, “McNulty and Fincham (February–March 2012) provided a service to the field of positive psychology through reminding us that whether psychological traits and pro-

cesses yield positive or negative outcomes is a function of the interpersonal and cultural contexts in which they are expressed.”

## Valenced Labels

Despite this consensus, however, there is mixed support for our position that we need to move beyond positive psychology by avoiding the “positive” and “negative” labels of psychological constructs that have been thrust upon us by the positive psychology movement. In particular, Lyubomirsky (2012) stated that our “caution about labeling particular psychological processes as ‘positive’ is timely and well-taken” and points out that a number of positive psychologists share our view that psychological constructs are not inherently positive. Waterman (2012), in contrast, defended the use of such labels by describing the theoretical notions put forth by Erikson (1963, 1982).

According to Waterman (2012), Erikson argued that whether particular processes, such as trust, are associated with well-being or harm depends on the situation in which they operate. Waterman's example of a tourist's tendencies toward trust or mistrust is a helpful one in this respect. In an unsafe context, such as an area of town frequented by thieves, trust is not adaptive. In a safe context, however, trust is adaptive because it feels good and can lead to cooperation and successful interpersonal relations. This conceptualization is perfectly in line with the perspective we described in our original article.

However, Waterman (2012) went on to argue that this conceptualization of psychological constructs suggests that trust and other psychological processes, such as the ones we described in our original article, should be called “positive” because Erikson believed people experience the most well-being to the extent that they express these characteristics more often than they do not. But this is only true for people who spend more time in safe contexts than in unsafe contexts. If the tourist in Waterman's example spends most of her time in a safe neighborhood and only occasionally passes through unsafe neighborhoods, she will experience well-being to the extent that she trusts more than she does not. But what if she spends most of her time in unsafe neighborhoods?

This observation alerts us to an important problem—many ideas generated by positive psychologists are (understandably) influenced by the context in which they live. Most positive psychologists have food and shelter, presumably live in the comfort of safe neighborhoods, and do not live in war-ravaged regions or face tyrannical

governments. Accordingly, processes such as trust, optimism, forgiveness, kindness, gratitude, and benevolent attributions seem adaptive to them. But a substantial minority of the world population lives in unsafe regions that are stricken by poverty, does not have food or shelter, and does live in war-ravaged regions and/or face tyrannical governments. It is possible that these people will benefit from thinking more negatively and being mistrustful, pessimistic, and unforgiving more often than not.

### Properly Calibrated Psychological Flexibility

Are there any psychological processes that are universally beneficial? Perhaps—if construed at a sufficiently abstract level. In his classic article on the nature of scientific inquiry, Schlenker (1974, p. 2) stated,

One of the necessary conditions for the formulation of universal theories and laws, whether in the natural or social sciences, is that they be phrased in sufficiently abstract form as to allow for (a) the insertion of specific objects, cases, places, events, and times as variables and/or (b) the deduction and explanation of specifics from higher-order and more abstract theoretical principles. If a theory incorporates specifics, it would not possess the generality to satisfactorily explain the required diversity of phenomena.

In line with this reasoning, it is inaccurate to state that forgiveness, or any other specific psychological construct, is “positive” because the implications of such processes depend on situations, culture, and time. To be accurate, any universal theory of well-being needs to be abstract enough to adequately account for these nuances.

In search of such a theory, we introduce the idea of *properly calibrated psychological flexibility*—the ability to employ the most adaptive cognitive or behavioral process in a given situation. Taken together, the contextualized nature of psychological processes described in our original article and the fact that people encounter different situations throughout their lives mean that achieving well-being requires (a) the ability to know which psy-

chological strategy will be most adaptive in any given situation and (b) the cognitive and behavioral flexibility to employ that strategy.

Consider, once again, our tourist. It is unlikely that any person will *only* encounter situations in which it is appropriate to trust. It is also unlikely that any person will *only* encounter situations when it is appropriate not to trust. Rather, everyone experiences situations when it is appropriate to trust, and everyone experiences situations when it is appropriate not to trust. Those who always trust will sometimes be successful and will sometimes not be successful. Likewise, those who never trust will sometimes be successful and will sometimes not be successful. But those who flexibly trust in some situations *and* mistrust in others will be most successful, provided that they properly calibrate their trust and mistrust such that each is employed in the situation for which it is most appropriate.

Such an approach to understanding well-being is abstract enough to apply across (a) psychological constructs, such as trust, forgiveness, optimism, kindness, and benevolent thinking; (b) situations; (c) cultures; and (d) time. Further, it is testable. Consider the McNulty (2008) finding described in our original article. Newlywed spouses with partners who rarely engaged in transgressions remained more satisfied over time to the extent that they were more likely to forgive those partners, whereas spouses with partners who frequently engaged in transgressions remained more satisfied over time to the extent that they were less likely to forgive those partners. Yet, even the same partner may engage in some transgressions with little frequency and other transgressions with more frequency. Accordingly, people may remain the most satisfied to the extent that they are quick to forgive their partners’ occasional transgressions and less likely to forgive their partners’ more-frequent transgressions. Research to test this possibility could obtain within-person estimates of people’s tendencies to forgive their partners’ various

transgressions, the frequency with which those partners engage in those transgressions, and people’s satisfaction with their relationships with those partners over time.

Finally, properly calibrated psychological flexibility is teachable. Most current approaches to prevention and treatment teach one set of skills to be used across situations. Challenging the logic of this approach, our analysis suggests that the same skill is not adaptive across situations. The best interventions to promote well-being may thus be those that teach people different skills, forgiveness and unforgiveness, for example, and the best time and place to use each one.

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