CHAPTER 46

The Uneasy—and Necessary—Role of the Negative in Positive Psychology

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At the most general level, this chapter argues that from its inception, positive psychology has had a substantial negative core that at various points has clouded positive psychology's definition while also modifying and challenging the field in important ways. Organized into two broad sections, this chapter first examines positive psychology's definition and the extent to which negative phenomena have historically been included in it. The second section discusses how negative phenomena continue to confront positive psychology, suggesting possible modifications for its future. This second section specifically addresses work on (a) the role of negative emotions in coping with, and potentially growing from, traumatic events; (b) the importance of context as illustrated by recent challenges to attempts at characterizing certain psychological traits or processes as inherently positive; and (c) how students' unpleasant emotions in the educational process might be integrated more thoroughly into a positive psychology approach to education. Many of the issues in the chapter have been previously addressed to some extent by those inside and outside positive psychology. The chapter draws substantially upon and benefits greatly from these efforts (e.g., Held, 2002, 2004, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2010, 2012; Lazarus, 2003a, 2003b; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Norem & Chang, 2002; E. Taylor, 2001) and in part attempts to assemble in one place critiques that underscore the challenges still confronting positive psychology.

Numerous traits, institutions, outcomes, emotions, and psychological processes are studied under positive psychology's umbrella, resulting in a field so complex that even the task of marking its boundaries is a topic of study (e.g., Hart & Sasso, 2011; Yen, 2010). However, Linley et al. (2006) do offer a set of distinctions, or levels of analysis, that may help inform a discussion regarding negative phenomena's place in this endeavor.

First, and of lesser concern for the present chapter, Linley et al. (2006) note that positive psychologists may study the "wellsprings" (p. 7) or antecedent factors such

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as genetics and environmental influences in early life that ultimately contribute to individuals' happiness, well-being, virtues, and strengths.

Second, positive psychologists may study "processes," which are "those psychological ingredients (for example, strengths and virtues) that lead to the good life, or equally the obstacles to leading a good life" (Linley et al., 2006, p. 7). This level of analysis includes a wide range of variables that can help facilitate desirable, positive outcomes or, alternatively, impede progress toward such outcomes. To illustrate, a given trait such as optimism may be a psychological ingredient that in one context can contribute to the good life (e.g., optimism can enable better coping with disease), and in another context impede that good life (e.g., optimism may promote reckless investment strategies). As noted later in the discussion of context, McNulty and Fincham (2012) argue that evidence shows "psychological traits and processes are not inherently positive or negative" (p. 101), but can be viewed as such only with reference to precise circumstances.

Third, Linley et al. (2006) identify "mechanisms" of positive psychology as "those extra-psychological factors that facilitate (or impede) the pursuit of a good life" (p. 7) and can include "personal and social relationships, working environments, organizations and institutions" (p.7), a category that extends more broadly to include social, economic, and other macro-level systems. Thus, *mechanisms* might be regarded as the context(s), both immediate and distal, in which the psychological ingredients such as traits, virtues, strengths, psychological tendencies, and so on, operate. Such contexts may moderate how beneficial a given trait or psychological process actually turns out to be for that individual.

The fourth level of analysis is that of positive "outcomes," which are the "subjective, social, and cultural states that characterize a good life" (Linley et al., 2006, p. 8). These are end points or goals that positive psychologists intentionally seek to promote via an understanding of the wellsprings, processes, and mechanisms that contribute to them. They may include subjective states such as happiness or well-being, interpersonal states such as communities, or public policies that "promote harmony and sustainability" (p. 8).

The authors offer this framework not as an inflexible, unchanging classification for all the variables positive psychologists may address. In contrast, for a given study, a particular variable may serve as a process, a mechanism (i.e., context), or an outcome. Thus *happiness* might be conceived of as an outcome to be facilitated for its own sake, or it may be regarded as a mechanism that contributes to other desired outcomes (Linley et al., 2006). The framework's value for incorporating negative phenomena within positive psychology is that it encourages researchers to be explicit regarding the negative phenomenon's relationship to other constructs being studied. For example, *worry* may be conceptualized in a given study as an outcome to be avoided or minimized, or alternatively as a psychological process that in particular circumstances allows some individuals to prepare more effectively for future challenges (e.g., see Norem & Chang, 2002, on defensive pessimism). In the chapter's second half, the importance of distinguishing between processes (i.e., psychological ingredients), mechanisms (i.e., contexts), and outcomes is illustrated in discussions of research on relationships (e.g., McNulty & Fincham, 2012), the consequences of cultural endorsement of extroversion (e.g., Cain, 2013), and the role of negative emotion in education. The general point is that as positive psychology gradually incorporates the negative into its enterprise, understanding how the positive and the negative aspects relate to each other will require more deliberate explication of these relationships, benefiting both individual studies and the field as a whole.

THE HAZY PLACE OF THE NEGATIVE IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Negative aspects of human experience have occupied a shifting position within positive psychology's often hazy boundaries, reflecting ambiguity regarding whether its definition should include topics such as anxiety, loss, and coping. Although numerous advocates of positive psychology explicitly acknowledge the value of studying the so-called negative topics, whether these topics are properly considered inside or outside the field has never been clearly resolved.

Prioritizing the Positive for Its Own Sake

Some early proponents defined positive psychology's purview as distinct from the negative, arguing that psychology had traditionally pursued a disease or pathology model that, while illuminating how people experience adversity, had offered relatively little regarding their pursuit of happiness and flourishing once freed of dire circumstances (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & King, 2001). In this view, positive psychology's primary purpose was to address this deficit while rightfully acknowledging past efforts. As Folkman and Moskowitz (2003) put it,

> Those who advocate the study of positive aspects of psychology do not intend that it replace concern with its negative aspects. What appears to be an overemphasis may instead be indicative of a catch-up phase for an area that has been underemphasized in recent years. (p. 121)

Such a position provided a clear vision for this new set of priorities. Csikszentmihalyi (2003), referring to his and his collaborators' pioneering efforts, provides one of the strongest statements for studying the positive relatively independently of the negative:

> Basically, we intended to do our best to legitimize the study of positive aspects of human experience in their own right—not just as tools for prevention, coping, health, or some other desirable outcome. We felt that as long as hope, courage, optimism, and joy are viewed simply as useful in reducing pathology, we will never go beyond the homeostatic point of repose and begin to understand those qualities that make life worth living in the first place. (pp. 113–114)

Positive psychology would therefore advocate for deliberately studying human happiness and prosperity in and of itself. Still, some early evaluations of positive psychology expressed concern that although such an effort may be valuable, the movement had failed to appreciate how the most meaningful positive aspects of life are frequently inspired by negative circumstances, suggesting that attempts to separate the positive from the negative may be counterproductive (e.g., Harvey & Pauwels, 2003; Lazarus, 2003a).

The Boundary Blurs

Emphasis on studying the positive in its own right, if not entirely new (e.g., Ryff, 2003; E. Taylor, 2001), provided momentum for those seeking to understand the positive without necessarily anchoring their work in the negative. However, the boundary

between positive and negative proved to be diffuse, as various lines of research initially included under the positive psychology umbrella had roots in the study of pathology and adversity. For example, in the January 2000 issue of *American Psychologist* that helped launch positive psychology, several articles engaged at length with presumably negative topics. These include coping strategies and defenses to alleviate distress (Vaillant, 2000), the role of optimism and feelings of personal control in inhibiting physical disease (S. E. Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000), and how considerable distress can result when individuals are overwhelmed by choice (Schwartz, 2000). Commenting on much of the early literature, Held (2004, 2005) noted that while some proponents strongly advocate an apparent separation of the positive and the negative, contributions from those writing under the auspices of positive psychology often illustrated to varying degrees the importance of including negative phenomena. Such scholars demonstrated what Held (2004) termed a "second-wave/nondominant message" (p. 15) that incorporates negative experiences and emotions into positive psychology, and by doing so highlights the limitations of a psychology that attempts to separate the positive from the negative (Held, 2004, 2005). Thus, the practice of positive psychology was perhaps at odds with some of its advocates' intentions, as at least in some circles it continued to study the negative alongside the positive.

Explicit Calls for Integration

As positive psychology evolved, some proponents, such as the editors of this volume's first edition, explicitly called for integrating the positive and negative (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Similarly, in proposing a taxonomy for a revised, more balanced approach, Wong (2011, pp. 71–72) included as legitimate topics "bad living conditions" and "lack of resources" and "negative traits" such as despair and depression, further enlarging positive psychology's scope. Hames and Joiner (2011) called for comparable integration between positive psychology and the ostensibly negative field of experimental psychopathology.

Recommendations for an integrative positive psychology raise larger questions about its proper identity and purview. Positive psychology's advocates might emphasize that including such negative topics illustrates a movement that reflects life's difficult realities. Furthermore, such integration would build upon existing research traditions with foundations in negative topics, and therefore would constitute a strength (Harvey & Pauwels, 2003). However, some have argued that if positive psychology were to embrace the study of the negative, such a move would illustrate a lack of distinctiveness from psychology overall, and the very necessity of positive psychology would therefore have to be called into question (see Held, 2004, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2010).

Should the Negative Be Included? Should We Care? Implications

Perhaps Lyubomirsky and Abbe (2003, p. 132) are correct in suggesting, "Debating what is truly positive and what is not, however, is not terribly productive." At one level, this is true—all new paradigms or movements necessarily have ambiguous boundaries as they incrementally determine which pursuits are more or less fruitful. However, positive psychology operates in the public eye more so than other endeavors, in part because of its potential relevance to that public. Such visibility has surely helped with garnering needed resources, but has also left it open to skepticism

regarding what positive psychology has contributed, skepticism that may become more pointed if the field lacks a coherent identity.

Beyond such public concerns, prioritizing the positive in and of itself can perhaps lead, at least temporarily, to a constricted understanding for some topics. For example, initial enthusiasm among scholars and the general public for the possible benefits of self-esteem resulted in a costly, time-consuming, and frequently ineffective endeavor. Only gradually, as evidence on the limitations of self-esteem accumulated, did psychology offer a more nuanced, if somewhat disappointing, view of the construct (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). This is in part the nature of the scientific endeavor, with initial conclusions gradually revised over time. But it seems that a purely positive approach to positive psychology may, at least in the early stages of investigation, be particularly vulnerable to overly optimistic claims.

If in practice a "purely positive" positive psychology is rarely advocated (i.e., some integration of the positive and negative is valued), then this problem should be limited. However, to the extent that the allocation of scarce resources is affected by whether a topic is more or less positive, the popular view of what constitutes positive psychology among those who set priorities in funding agencies will likely affect the types of work pursued. Admittedly, an integrative positive psychology may not generate the enthusiasm (i.e. the funding) garnered by a "purely positive" positive psychology. This is certainly a familiar predicament in academia, but given its popularity (and in some circles, notoriety), it is of perhaps particular concern for positive psychology.

INTEGRATING THE NEGATIVE INTO TODAY'S POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Just as the positive can take many forms, there are numerous ways to conceptualize the forms of negative phenomena addressed by positive psychologists and its critics. One can emphasize choice of research topics, positive psychology's differences with humanistic psychology or psychology as a whole, or other notions of negative to evaluate positive psychology (see Held, 2004, for one detailed analysis). This section takes up how the negative is relevant to three broad issues or areas of work in positive psychology. First, the potential for positive growth in response to severe life events will be discussed, an area that includes stress, posttraumatic stress disorder (and growth), and coping. Second, the extent to which psychological traits or processes can be defined as positive or negative in a general sense, with relatively little emphasis on context, is addressed. Third, a discussion of positive psychology's approach to education is presented, emphasizing how negative emotions, and specifically their relationship to students' general beliefs about learning, may be integrated into positive education.

Positive Outcomes From Negative Events: Adjustment and Growth After Trauma

In the study of trauma, adjustment, and growth, a central issue from a positive psychology perspective is whether traditional medical models that assume a relatively dichotomous relationship between the positive and negative should be significantly modified. For example, Joseph and Wood (2010) argue that in clinical settings, the deliberate assessment of positive functioning may enhance outcomes by enabling clinicians to promote positive functioning that can serve to thwart future distress. Therefore, the typically strong distinction between assessing negative and positive

outcomes is replaced with a more continuous model in which both are routinely measured. Consistent with this model, posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth (PTG) are viewed not as two separate possible responses to severe adversity. Instead, under certain conditions, posttraumatic stress is recognized as a normal pattern of thoughts and emotions that "can be conceptualized as the engine of post-traumatic growth" (Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012, p. 319). In this approach, stressful ruminations that can follow trauma, frequently viewed as a disorder or pathology to be treated, are instead conceptualized as a component of the normal process of adjustment that can lead to significant psychological growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005). In sum, the authors argue that rather than separating clinicians' tasks into positive or negative categories, such tasks should be integrated in research, assessment, and treatment.

Given the possibility of substantial benefit finding in the aftermath of trauma, positive psychology may help encourage in clinical research the inclusion of measures that assess not only negative outcomes such as stressful ruminations and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but also positive outcomes such as posttraumatic growth. Currently, studies that deliberately assess both PTSD and PTG are still relatively rare (Schuettler & Boals, 2011). However, as scholars attempt to identify the conditions under which PTSD and PTG (or related outcomes) occur independently of each other, are inversely related to each other, or fail to occur at all, an emphasis on assessing the full range of positive and negative as a matter of course would seem to facilitate such efforts.

Implications Posttraumatic growth seems to be a particularly appropriate arena for positive psychologists to integrate the negative and positive aspects of human experiences (Joseph, 2011). However, as clinical psychology places more importance on examining positive outcomes, scholars have acknowledged that such an approach would alter the agenda of therapy and thus the responsibilities of practitioners and perhaps psychologists in general (e.g., Joseph & Wood, 2010; Schwartz, 2000). Gone would be the primary emphasis on the removal of distress, replaced by a broader mandate that would include the active promotion of growth even after pathology has ceased.

To the degree that a positive psychology seeks to identify the specific mechanisms by which trauma leads to (or fails to lead to) psychological growth, such efforts are valuable. However, this agenda could also lead to two problematic consequences. First, psychologists should be careful not to infer that because trauma and adversity *can* (under circumstances not yet fully understood) lead to psychological growth, that trauma and adversity *should* lead to such growth, resulting in a situation where clients who do not show adequate progress toward the good life after trauma are left believing that they are doing something wrong. As Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) put it, "The widespread assumptions that traumas often result in disorder should not be replaced with expectations that growth is an inevitable result" (p. 2). Certainly, responsible practitioners would recognize how uncertain the road to psychological growth can be and communicate that reality to patients. Given the visibility of positive psychology, and the hope it can engender within and beyond the scientific community, this particular point is worth reemphasizing.

A second concern is the greater mandate envisioned by some for clinicians in particular and psychologists in general. Although few would disagree with the desirability of promoting psychological growth (and happiness more broadly), even in the early days of positive psychology some expressed concerns about psychology as a whole taking on this greater responsibility. For example, Schwartz (2000) argued that a truly positive psychology must be willing to offer broad prescriptions for behavior

and choices as individuals pursue more meaningful lives, that "if psychologists are serious about turning psychology's power to developing a theory of optimal functioning, they can no longer avoid *shoulds*" (p. 87; emphasis in original). At the same time, Schwartz (2000) rightfully noted how such an approach conflicts with the American "ideology of liberal individualism—let people decide for themselves what is good" (p. 87), and provided the following caution:

> What will psychologists call the recipients of their services if and when a positive psychology comes to fruition? I don't think that either *patients* or *clients* does justice to the grand vision that informs these beginnings of a positive psychology. The right term, I think, is *students*. Are psychologists prepared to argue that it is future generations of psychologists who should be society's teachers? I think that unless we are prepared to say *yes* to this question and to develop arguments about the content of a good human life, the potential achievements of a future positive psychology will always be limited. I also believe that the time to be thinking and talking about this very big and difficult issue is now, at the beginning, and not later, in the face of angry critics trying to put psychologists in their place. (Schwartz, 2000, pp. 87–88)

Has psychology sufficiently acknowledged this "very big and difficult issue?" I am not sure, but with regard to the present topic, any answer must be informed by a clear evaluation of our discipline's knowledge base, and its limitations. As additional work attempts to clarify complex constructs such as posttraumatic growth, positive psychologists should exert caution so that the expanded role for psychologists (envisioned by some) does not obscure our view of those limitations. Overly enthusiastic claims of what psychologists can actually provide, versus what they would like to provide, will indeed invite critics to put psychologists in their place.

Context Counts: Defining Traits and Processes as Positive or Negative

Some scholars have questioned the goal of discerning which traits, processes, or institutions are inherently positive, arguing that such a task cannot be achieved in any meaningful sense unless contextual factors are consistently taken into account. Thus, the negative inserts itself into positive psychology, perhaps in uninvited fashion, by challenging the notion that particular psychological processes or traits can be consistently identified as positive outcomes for their own sake. For example, McNulty and Fincham (2012), in reviewing research on optimism, forgiveness, benevolent attributions, and kindness within personal relationships, demonstrate that these constructs and behaviors can be beneficial or detrimental depending on particular features of a relationship. They therefore suggest that an approach to relationship research, and psychology in general, that seeks from the outset to identify positive traits and processes without clear reference to context or potential limiting conditions may be counterproductive.

Outside the relationships field, other scholars also emphasize the importance of context. Friedman and Robbins (2012) note that "positive psychologists have tended to argue that resiliency be classified as a virtue, whether or not it involves a healthy adaptive response" (p. 92), pointing out that individuals or organizations can exert resilience to achieve either benevolent or harmful purposes. An individual with the goal of harming others may indeed confront numerous obstacles, especially if considerable planning is required to carry out the harm. The ability to overcome such

obstacles and persevere, even in the pursuit of an abhorrent goal, would appear to reflect resilience as it is often understood, yet is seemingly inconsistent with a positive psychology's intended focus. Accordingly, approaching resilience as an intrinsically positive phenomenon has considerable limitations.

Personality traits and their behavioral manifestations can also be culturally valued in such a way that some are generally deemed desirable and encouraged, while others are considered undesirable, and thus perhaps targeted for remediation. For example, in a broad treatment of how Western cultures place great value on behaviors characteristic of extroverts compared to introverts, Cain (2013) notes that common practices in workplaces and classrooms, such as the use of open spaces and collaborative groups, may often hurt performance on tasks that require more solitary efforts (such as writing, reading, and computer programming, among others). Such deliberately designed physical and social environments, which reflect an underlying cultural assumption that more overt activity and social interaction promotes success (in myriad meanings of that word), can overwhelm introverts who would be more productive in quieter environments (Cain, 2013). From this perspective, a culture that prioritizes extroversion across settings creates conditions that inhibit success on tasks that by their very nature require less social interaction, not more. Thus, just as an academic field, by treating particular relationship behaviors or personality traits as intrinsically positive can obscure the contexts under which they produce undesirable outcomes, cultural beliefs that overstate the desirability of extroversion also do so with unacknowledged costs (see Held, 2002, for a discussion of the possible negative consequences associated with a broad cultural endorsement of maintaining a positive attitude). Whether it is a culture that spontaneously decides which traits are positive or negative, or an academic field that deliberately uses valence to organize and prioritize scholarly efforts, the importance of context in moderating the adaptive value of a given psychological trait should not be overlooked.

Implications For both theorists and practitioners, a research agenda that implicitly or explicitly identifies a given construct as primarily "positive" may prematurely narrow the understanding of that construct and perhaps lead to its over-promotion. Indeed, non-valenced approaches to studying other phenomena in psychology have often been quite productive. For example, group polarization may lead to positive or negative outcomes, as discussion among likeminded individuals can intensify hate in one group or promote generosity in another. Similarly, conformity processes can stifle admirable creativity in one context, but in another provide comforting predictability. Certainly, research on these topics was inspired in part by the desire to understand negative behavior. But systematic attempts to pursue them from an exclusively (or even primarily) positive or negative framework would have likely inhibited psychologists' understanding of them. It is reasonable to ask whether adopting a positive orientation for studying particular psychological processes may systematically result in overlooking the nuance and context sensitivity that necessarily characterizes them (e.g., Friedman & Robbins, 2012; McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Norem & Chang, 2002).

Perhaps some of the difficulty in identifying specific traits or processes as inherently positive lies in a tendency to treat them as outcomes to be pursued in and of themselves rather than as processes that may promote or inhibit desirable outcomes, depending upon context (Linley et al., 2006). Drawing on this distinction, researchers and practitioners of positive psychology should clarify whether the variable of interest—for example, a particular personality trait, behavior, thought pattern, and so on—is best understood as an outcome to be promoted/inhibited or, alternatively, as an intermediate process that promotes desirable outcomes in some circumstances,

but undesirable outcomes in others. If the latter is the case, explicitly acknowledging this from the outset may help positive psychology avoid overemphasizing the inherent positivity of the variable in question.

The work of McNulty and Fincham (2012) seems consistent with this notion. Conceptualizing forgiveness as a generally desirable goal or outcome, even implicitly, could potentially lead counselors, therapists, and researchers to promote it in relationships where doing so is not fully adaptive or even harmful (e.g., in abusive relationships). Likewise, viewing extroverted behaviors as inherently desirable in the workplace to the point where it undermines worker performance on particular tasks (e.g., Cain, 2013) may result in part from failing to distinguish between extroversion as an outcome (to be pursued for its own sake) and extroversion as a process (which may generate positive or negative outcomes depending on context). Norem and Chang (2002) make a similar argument about attempts to characterize optimism as inherently good and pessimism as inherently bad. In sum, positive psychology would add valuable nuance by consistently accounting for how context modifies notions of what is desirable or undesirable, thus recognizing the ways in which context counts.

A Role for the Negative in Positive Education?

A positive psychology approach to education can take various forms. Some efforts emphasize teaching students specific skills to promote their own happiness and well-being, an outcome that would presumably facilitate more learning and creative thinking (e.g., Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; see also Kibe & Boniwell, Chapter 18, this volume). Others suggest incorporating into specific psychology courses research inspired by or consistent with positive psychology. For example, Magyar-Moe (2011) advocates teaching positive empathy in introductory counseling courses and utilizing the concept of flow in personality courses. The table of contents for the *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* (Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009) lists chapters dedicated to topics frequently found in the general positive psychology literature, such as optimism, gratitude, satisfaction, flow, and adaptation. In a detailed critique of positive education, Kristjánsson (2012) asserts that as a whole positive education tends to stress the promotion of particular traits and positive emotions, partly as goals unto themselves, and partly as conditions for improving other learning goals. As with other topics infused with positive psychology, the positive within positive education is of a diverse nature.

However, to the extent that education involves challenging students to improve when their efforts fall short, a complete understanding of how presumably positive concepts can improve education will only come about if they are examined concurrently with the aversive experiences that can accompany hard-earned academic accomplishments. The notion of academic challenge implies the possibility of failure, and by extension the unpleasant emotions that result from negative feedback. If it is to avoid the criticism that it promotes an unrealistic view of learning, positive education will have to actively integrate the negative with the positive, delineating when positive or negative emotions fuel academic success and when they undermine it.

The role of negative emotions in education has received relatively little empirical attention within positive education (Kristjánsson, 2012). In a helpful discussion of several research programs outside positive psychology that have examined emotions' role in education, Kristjánsson (2012) argues that such endeavors, compared to the positive education approach, more effectively take into account the complex nature of both positive and negative emotions relevant to education. Such complexity is also illustrated in Huang's (2011) meta-analysis of studies examining the relationship

between goals and emotions in achievement contexts, as the author notes that one cannot assume negative and positive emotions have a simple inverse relationship with each other. A positive psychology orientation for education, if not thoroughly integrated with the so-called negative or aversive aspects of students' experience, may conceal important complexities as much as it reveals them.

How might a positive psychology approach to education meaningfully incorporate those negative or aversive aspects of learning? Many avenues are possible, but I would suggest examining how unexpected failure or critical feedback (and its accompanying negative emotion) can serve as an opportunity to challenge and ultimately improve students' general beliefs about learning. Indeed, some scholars have sought to document the conditions under which negative emotion results from failure and how such an experience can either enhance or inhibit academic motivation and achievement (e.g., Clifford, 1984; J. C. Turner, Thorpe, & Meyer, 1998; J. E. Turner & Husman, 2008; see also Kristjánsson's [2012] overview of related work). In addition to such efforts, I draw on recent thinking in positive psychology's approach to adjustment and posttraumatic growth, discussing how negative emotion in the context of academic failure can perhaps serve as a springboard to modify students' general beliefs about learning. To be sure, the brief outline provided here is necessarily speculative and does not fully reflect the complex interplay of cognitions, emotions, and goals that characterizes student learning. But as Kristjánsson (2012) asserts, an effective positive psychology approach to education should incorporate the growing body of evidence that documents the important role negative emotions play in the learning process. I offer the following as one tentative possibility for doing so.

Clearly, in terms of severity, the discomfort students experience when encountering an academic failure is not comparable to that experienced by individuals coping with genuine traumas. However, the underlying psychological processes that can lead a trauma victim to either psychological growth, or alternatively, simply a return to pre-trauma levels of well-being, may, perhaps, provide insight into how students may respond to a less severe, if more common, challenge. The crucial shared element is that in order for positive outcomes to occur, *beliefs must be altered*. Just as individuals responding to serious trauma often seek to understand why the trauma occurred and the significance of the trauma in moving forward with their lives (e.g., Joseph & Linley, 2006), students receiving negative feedback in the form of a failing grade or critical comments may seek to understand why their efforts failed to produce the outcome desired. Of particular concern here is how students make sense of a negative outcome in a way that may challenge their beliefs about academic learning *in general* (as opposed to beliefs specific to the academic project, problem, or task at hand), and thus ultimately lead them to change their approach to academics in a way that facilitates long-term academic success.

Students bring to the educational setting broad beliefs about learning and academic success, not all of which may be accurate or helpful. For example, beliefs in the importance of matching individual students' learning styles to modes of instruction are quite prevalent despite much research to the contrary (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2008). In addition, students may wrongfully believe that instructional approaches that they personally enjoy are more conducive to their learning than approaches they do not enjoy, even when the opposite may be true (Clark, Kirschner, & Sweller, 2012). Finally, students who have frequently received inflated grades may have unrealistic, overly positive beliefs regarding their own general approach to academic work, making them particularly sensitive to critical feedback when it is actually encountered (Twenge, 2006). The present issue centers on the role negative emotions

elicited by academic failure play in challenging, and ultimately changing, such general beliefs so that more positive educational outcomes emerge in the future.

As long as students experience positive feedback there would seem to be little impetus to modify beliefs. However, in the face of negative feedback, students may consider a variety of responses as they are forced to examine their beliefs regarding why the negative outcome occurred in order to prepare more effectively in the future. Some of these beliefs are fairly specific to the class or test that generated the negative feedback. For example, J. E. Turner and Husman (2008) suggest that students feeling shame after an academic setback may reconsider how much effort is needed for the class, or whether additional study strategies would improve their performance, among other possible adjustments. In addition to such responses, I would also add the possibility that some instances of negative feedback could serve as an impetus for changing students' broader beliefs about the nature of learning, extending beyond the immediate difficulties presented by a specific exam, course, or instructor.

Certainly, not all negative feedback will alter beliefs in ways that will facilitate learning or performance; indeed, in many contexts, negative emotions in the academic environment can undermine motivation and achievement (e.g., Meyer & Turner, 2002). In addition, the degree to which negative emotion is experienced in light of failure may depend on numerous factors, such as whether a student has a learning oriented focus or a performance oriented focus (J. C. Turner et al., 1998). Thus, there is likely no simple direct correspondence between the experience of negative emotion in certain contexts and the adoption of new beliefs about learning that promote improved academic performance. However, just as the positive experiences of benefit finding and meaning making in the aftermath of trauma may be intricately related to (and even driven by) the negative emotions that challenge broader beliefs and assumptions (Joseph et al., 2012), desirable changes in students' general, broader beliefs about learning may occur under those unpleasant conditions when academic failure is encountered.

Implications First, as J. E. Turner and Husman (2008) advise, students feeling shame in the face of academic failure should be encouraged by instructors to "turn the global focus of their failure into more discrete behaviors for which they can control" (p. 166). Thus, instructors can suggest specific study strategies, emphasizing the necessity of making changes to one's approach when previous efforts have been unsuccessful. I would add that such advice may be received with skepticism or even resistance if a student had previously been able to employ his or her own strategies in less demanding academic contexts and receive high grades. An instructor might note that new, demanding circumstances do not require a student to give up previously held beliefs about self-worth or personal intelligence, but rather that a student's general beliefs about what works in school must necessarily change as the demands presented by school change.

Second, the role of occasional unpleasant emotions may be communicated to students as a normal part of the educational process. To be sure, the excitement of learning something new and the positive feelings that accompany success are important. However, most endeavors that include complexity and challenge can also involve moments of frustration, confusion, anxiety, or anger. Emphasizing to students that such emotions can indicate deep cognitive and emotional engagement offers an interpretation for negative emotions that does not prescribe avoiding them. Indeed, when engaging in a truly demanding and valuable academic endeavor, such emotions can serve to not only realistically signify when a goal has not been met, but may also potentially act as an energizing force for changing one's approach to the

task at hand (e.g., see Clifford's [1984] notion of "constructive failure") and perhaps to one's broader beliefs about learning.

A final implication is that unpleasant emotions must often, at least temporarily, accompany the traits, habits, or values for which positive psychologists may advocate. A student may heartily agree with an instructor's suggestion that a presumably positive trait such as persistence is necessary for success. But acting upon such advice may be difficult if the student does not anticipate the negative emotions that can accompany academic challenges over the long term. This may be particularly true for students consistently trying to balance academic obligations with work and other responsibilities (e.g., J. E. Turner & Husman, 2008). Acknowledging the reality of these competing challenges and the negative emotions they can elicit may better enable students to anticipate and overcome them. Essentially, a positive psychology approach to education that promotes traits or habits conducive to academic success in the long run must also alert students to the genuine negative emotions that can attend that journey in the short run.

CONCLUSION

As illustrated by the contributions of positive psychology's proponents and skeptics, the negative has occupied an uneasy, dynamic, but ultimately useful place in positive psychology. It has served to question the priorities and very definition of positive psychology, illuminate its assumptions and limitations, and eventually integrate itself into positive psychology as the field continues to evolve. In many ways, positive psychology has necessarily had a negative component from its very beginning, albeit one that has occasionally been, and perhaps will continue to be, in conflict with the priorities advocated by some of positive psychology's proponents. Whatever positive psychology ultimately contributes to psychology in general, that contribution will be both molded and challenged by the negative side of human nature and the scholars who study and value it.

SUMMARY POINTS

- The negative aspects of human experience have held a shifting, ambiguous place within positive psychology.
- Substantive critiques of positive psychology that have emphasized the negative have helped to modify and improve positive psychology.
- Attempts to integrate the positive and the negative have both improved positive psychology and also blurred its boundaries.
- Positive psychologists should clarify whether a given psychological construct in a research or applied setting is being regarded as an outcome in and of itself, or as a variable that inhibits or facilitates desired goals.
- The hoped-for benefits of positive psychology must be clearly evaluated with respect to psychology's knowledge base and the admitted limitations of that knowledge base.
- Contextual factors can limit which psychological traits or behaviors should be regarded as positive.
- Disregarding context can lead to unnecessary or harmful promotion of particular traits, processes, or behaviors.
- Positive psychology approaches to education might consider how negative academic experiences can change students' general beliefs about learning for the better.

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