

COMMENTARY

Positivity is an up-to-date predictor of well-functioning instead of a eudaemonAttila Oláh *Institute of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary*

Summing up the process of conceptualization of positive orientation theory (POT), the results of empirical studies which confirmed its validity, the operationalization of the positive orientation as a personality disposition in the Positivity Scale (PS), and the verification of the scale responsibility and empirical validity, it can be established that POT is a very promising, empirically validated theory. The dissemination of the POT and the PS in high-impact scientific journals is an important contribution to the research on well-being and in the domains of health psychology and positive psychology as well.

Keywords: flourishing, positive orientation, Positivity Scale

This article of Caprara, Alessandri & Caprara (2018) gives an overview about a series of studies which confirmed an outstanding theoretical and measurement contribution to the understanding and further explorations of human well functioning.

What is in the background of well functioning? An up-to-date answer for that ancient question (after reading the article of Caprara et al., 2018) is that it is the positivity instead of a eudaemon. Keeping strict scientific rules, theoretically well-founded studies (led by Caprara et al.) have confirmed that the most promising predictor of well functioning and effective adaptation is the positivity, a psychological construct, which has been operationalized in an eight-item self-report measurement tool by Caprara et al.

Scientific criteria for validity of basic personality disposition were formulated by Hans Eysenck (1991) in his directive article. Eysenckian directives to personality construct developers and inventory constructors suggest taking into account the following important criteria when a new psychological construct is introduced: (a) *A theory*, plausible and logically consistent, related to the construct; (b) *genetic or other causal basis* established for the disposition; (c) *generalizability across cultures and language*; (d) *reliability and cross-time stability*; (d) *generalizability across types of data*; (e) *comprehensiveness (not restricted to a narrow segment of research)*; (f) *predictive power and validity (mainly in practical context)*; and (g) *social importance* of the variables or factors; that is, whether they are

“shown to interact powerfully with social activities widely regarded as important.” (Eysenck, 1991, p. 785).

Caprara et al. (2018), observing these rules in a series of empirical studies, reached a valid scientific answer for the central question of positive psychology and earlier well-being studies. The outcome of the study series led by Caprara (between 2006–2018) resulted in the concept of *positivity* (or in the beginning, *positive orientation*) and its measurement tool. This new construct is formulated as a basic disposition characterized by positive orientation toward self, life, and the future, and lies at the core of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism. Individual differences in people’s evaluations of own self, life, and the future rest upon a common basic personality disposition labeled as *positivity*. In the series of studies, the labeling of that trait-like construct was changing from positive thinking and positive orientation until to the positivity.

My review of this article follows in the evaluation process of the Eysenckian criteria. It can be declared that the conceptualisation process of the positive orientation is clear and plausible, and that positivity as a personality disposition is a well-founded concept with high incremental validity.

Theoretically positive orientation is a mirror opposite of the negative cognitive triad suggested by Beck (1967). From his cognitive perspective, depressive disorders are characterized by people’s dysfunctional negative views of themselves, their life experience (and the world in general), and their future. Similarly, positivity—empirically constituted by a combination of high self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism—may properly represent the proximal sufficient cause of a syndrome of optimal functioning and may act as a protective factor

Correspondence: Attila Oláh, Institute of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Izabella Street 46, Budapest, 1064, Hungary. E-mail: olah.attila@ppk.elte.hu

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against mental illness. In rationale, the same theoretical suggestion was proposed by Huppert and So (2013) in their flourishing model of mental health in which flourishing as a positive pole of mental health can be described by the mirror opposite syndrome of mental illness. Well-being is seen as lying at the opposite end of a spectrum to the common mental disorders (depression, anxiety). Considering a small theoretical overlap between Huppert and So's flourishing concept and the positivity to investigate discriminant validity of these constructs can be suggested in the future. The heuristic feature of the positivity construct model is the idea which has been confirmed in empirical studies: that common latent basic personality disposition can be found in the background of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism.

The concept of positivity theoretically is nearly related to Kozma, Stone, and Stones's (2000) "propensity model" of subjective well-being (SWB). According to this formulation, there is a dispositional component to SWB that operates much like a trait and accounts for the stability in SWB regardless of environmental change. The propensity component of SWB may be related to, but not entirely explained by, personality. However, it is hypothesized how individuals construct different types of evaluations in general influenced by positivity as a dispositional component of SWB. Diener, Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, and Suh (2000) also used the concept of positivity as a global dispositional component of SWB which influences the construction of life-satisfaction judgments. However, they did not use direct measurement for operationalization of dispositional positivity.

Fredrickson, who wrote a book in 2011 about positivity, was characterized by Seligman as the "genius of positive psychology movement" (2011, p. 72). According to Fredrickson, positivity means the dominance of positive emotions in the emotional world of individuals over negative ones. To give orientation to readers about the theoretical relationship between Fredrickson's positivity concept and the concept of positivity disposition of individuals constructed and operationalized by Caprara et al. (2018) would be important—even within this reviewed article—in the future. Actually, there are two somewhat different positivity concepts from two well-known experts (Fredrickson and Caprara) of positive personality and health psychology; however, there is no interpretation about their relations. It can be hypothesized that the fusion of the two concepts gives new information to a better understanding of the global well-being of individuals.

The basic idea of Caprara et al.'s (2018) POT is that an optimistic view of oneself, life, and the future is a basic predisposition allowing people to cope successfully with life despite adversities, failures, and losses. The

empirical findings from different populations (i.e., Canada, Italy, Germany, and Japan) have confirmed that the positive judgments people hold about themselves, life, and the future can be traced to a higher order dimension. Cross-sectional findings have converged with longitudinal findings in pointing to positive orientation as a basic predisposition that accounts for individuals' adjustment and achievement to a considerable extent. Their longitudinal studies have shown that positive orientation is stable through adolescence and into adulthood and positively associated to indicators of successful adjustment across domains of functioning. Their twin study, which explored self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism together with the target to discover their common genetic and environmental architecture and to further clarify the high degree of phenotypic correlations, has shown that a large amount of shared genetic factors are responsible for large components of phenotypic correlations (Caprara et al., 2009). The genetic correlation (that measures the extent to which two traits are affected by the same genes) was estimated at 0.80 for self-esteem and life satisfaction, 0.83 for self-esteem and optimism, and 0.87 for life satisfaction and optimism (Caprara et al., 2009). These results confirmed that self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism share a large genetic core, as indicated by the substantial portion of variance explained by the common genetic factor simultaneously affecting the three dimensions. Despite cultural differences in the means of the dimensions of positive orientations, findings have attested to the cross-cultural stability of a common factor structure across Western (i.e., Italy, Canada, Germany) and Asian (i.e., Japan) samples.

In the next step of the development of POT, a new scale (the PS) was constructed to assess positive orientation as a unique construct. Based on an initial pool of 36 items assessing aspects of positive orientation, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted. This procedure yielded an eight-item scale. Further studies have confirmed good convergent and discriminant validity, temporal stability, and cross-cultural invariance of the PS. In several studies, the PS was positively associated with emotional stability, good physical health, high hedonic balance, and high perceived quality of interpersonal relationships, especially with family members and partners. Positivity plays a significant role in sustaining individuals' efforts to quit smoking. Positive orientation plays a significant role in Internet and facebook addiction, and may act as a protective factor against mental illness, particularly against depression. Based on research findings, positive orientation is an adequate indicator of positive mental functioning and an excellent scientific tool in research studies as well as in the design and implementation of interventions. It seems to properly represent the proximal sufficient cause of a "syndrome of optimal functioning."

In the future, however, it will be necessary to investigate the relation between positive orientation and other well-known indicators of positive mental health; namely, its discriminant validity concerning Ryff and Keyes's (1995) Psychological Well-Being, Huppert and So's (2013) flourishing, and Seligman's (2018) PERMA model.

Reading this very impressive and well-documented review about the history of the evolution of POT and using Eysenckian evaluation criteria, my opinion is that POT is one of the current concepts in health and positive psychology that is highly convincing according to any important scientific standard.

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