

Leveraging self psychology to strengthen positive psychology:
Conceptual analysis of three paths to well-being

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“Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth.”

- *Pharrell Williams, 2013*

Pharrell Williams’ song “Happy” recently became one of the most popular songs of all time. Its up-tempo beat and sing-along chorus are quite infectious. But its success may also stem from the song’s near-perfect attunement with the current zeitgeist of psychological positivity in the United States and abroad. People in Western cultures around the world long for happiness, self-acceptance, a sense of purpose, and belonging, and Americans alone spend over \$10-billion annually pursuing these laudable goals (Self-Help, 2015). Within psychological science, these priorities have given rise to the burgeoning field of *positive psychology*. This movement has both a long and short history. Maslow (1954) coined the term “positive psychology” over 60 years ago, but it was just 17 years ago that positive psychology went mainstream. As president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman (1998) lamented psychology’s failure to focus on cultivating the positive aspects of human existence—optimism, happiness, gratitude, virtue, resilience, and strength. It was time, he insisted, to expand psychology’s horizons by shifting attention onto these positive aspects and developing strategies for improving well-being.

Seligman’s (1998) exhortations struck a chord. Today dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of psychological scientists are developing new strategies for cultivating positive psychological states, or adapting existing interventions to the task of improving well-being. Although these efforts have borne considerable fruit, the optimal path to achieving well-being remains unclear. In this chapter, we offer a

conceptual framework for organizing and evaluating the diverse strategies for achieving well-being that have appeared in recent years, both within and outside academia, and both within the field of positive psychology and outside that discipline.

Our reading of the relevant academic and popular literatures led us to identify three potential paths to well-being, each of which depends on the self to function, either directly or indirectly. First, the *embrace-self path* encourages people to recognize overlooked aspects of themselves and bring these aspects into focal awareness (for a discussion of tacit vs. focal awareness, see Polyani, 1966). Once in awareness, these previously untapped aspects of self may guide behavior and these behaviors may, in turn, improve objective life circumstances. Second, the *embrace-relationships path* encourages people to forge stronger connections with others through expressions of positive sentiments, ranging from simply acknowledging the existence of others to expressing gratitude. The expression of such sentiments may enhance relationship quality and, in turn, become internalized and bolster the self and improve well-being. Third, the *embrace-illusions path* encourages people to replace accurate beliefs about the self and reality with positive, counter-factual illusions that might have self-fulfilling consequences associated with improved well-being.

In the passages to come, we describe and evaluate the research that represents each path. Our goal is to identify the major themes that dominate each path rather than present an exhaustive description of the relevant literature. Because we were agnostic with respect to the theoretical orientation of the researchers we surveyed, our expansive approach produced connections between heretofore independent literatures that can inform one another in theoretically meaningful and practically significant ways. We then identify barriers on the path to well-being that can be overcome by applying central theories from self psychology. But first, we describe a rudimentary model of the perceptual cycle (cf., 1976), which serves as an organizing structure for our analysis.

The Perceptual Cycle and Improving Well-Being

Our rudimentary model of the perceptual cycle turns on a simple assumption: To survive, beliefs and emotions must be sustained by “stimulus nutriment” from the social environment (Piaget, 1962). As displayed in path “*a*” of Figure 1, people’s beliefs and emotions (both positive and negative) guide their behaviors. In path “*b*”, behaviors shape people’s experiences, which, in turn, influence subsequent beliefs and emotions in path “*c*”. Occasionally, causality may flow in the opposite direction, as in path “*d*”. This causal path reflects the contemporary adage, “fake it ‘til you make it.” In this scenario, behavior change may benefit people’s emotions and beliefs through a self-perception process (e.g., “I am standing tall, so I must be feeling confident!”; Bem, 1972).

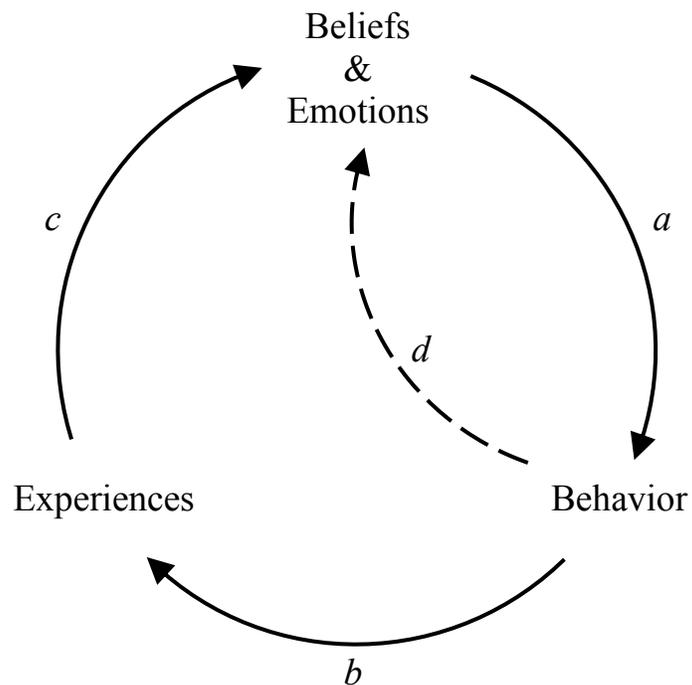


Figure 1. The perceptual cycle.

A key implication of this model is that changes in one component of the perceptual cycle will be sustained over time only if they are supported by changes in the other components in the cycle. For example, changes in people's beliefs and emotions will be lasting only insofar as they are reinforced by changes in overt behavior, which produce corresponding changes in people's experiences, which in turn reinforce the initial changes in beliefs and emotions. The same applies to changes in other components in the cycle; changes must lead to corresponding changes to downstream components or they will be fleeting. With this model in hand, we turn to our analysis of the three paths to well-being.

The Embrace-Self Path to Well-Being

One prominent theme in both the popular and academic literatures of the positive psychology movement is what we have dubbed the *embrace-self path* to well-being. This approach encourages people to improve well-being by more fully engaging previously dormant, overlooked, or avoided aspects of the self. Consider the grassroots *body positivity* movement (e.g., Harding & Kirby, 2009), exemplified by the “EffYourBeautyStandards” hashtag in social media (Munster, n.d.). Self-compassion plays a central role in this movement, which encourages kindness towards one's perceived physical flaws as well as recognizing the shared humanity of appearance-based self-doubts (e.g., Baker, 2015). Thus, the body positivity movement attempts to remedy the tendency to either ignore or devalue the self and one's experiences. In particular, people are encouraged to focus their attention onto the current self and to do so in an accepting, non-judgmental manner. In what follows, we describe two classes of well-being interventions based on this general approach.

Contemplate, and Accept, the Current Self

The most influential interventions in this class encourage *mindfulness* in various forms, including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 1982), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive

Therapy (e.g., Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (e.g., Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (e.g., Linehan, 1993). All four mindfulness interventions encourage people to focus on and accept their immediate, current circumstances and experiences, without attempting to judge them as positive or negative. Most of these interventions employ meditational techniques to increase sensory awareness and attentional stability. For example, people are often encouraged to attend to their own physical posture, a mental image or single word such as a mantra, or, most frequently, their own breathing. Rival thoughts are not encouraged. The one intervention that does not employ meditational techniques is Dialectical Behavior Therapy. Instead, Dialectical Behavior Therapy encourages people to shift attention onto strengths, identify dysfunctional thinking patterns such as perfectionism, and resolve problems in their relationship with the therapist.

An important benefit of focusing on one's *current* experiences is that it discourages people from focusing on their past and future experiences. In particular, mindfulness induces people to refrain from focusing on future-oriented planning or past-oriented reminiscences or regrets. Not only can these foci be distracting and exhausting, they can also fuel anxiety or negative affect. When effective, mindfulness training diminishes anxiety and fosters a relaxed attitude (Brown, Ryan, Creswell, 2007).

Another form of embracing the self is featured in the *self-compassion* approach (e.g., Neff, 2003). This technique encourages people to buttress their well-being in three ways: 1) practice mindfulness by focusing on the present and avoiding rumination on past mistakes; 2) treat the self with care and kindness, especially in response to perceived faults; and 3) recognize that self-doubt, negative emotions, and adversity are a normal part of the human condition. People vary in the degree to which they spontaneously practice self-compassion, and those who are characteristically more self-compassionate experience better well-being. For example, compared to their less self-compassionate

counterparts, highly self-compassionate individuals cope better with physical illness and aging (e.g., Allen, Goldwasser, & Leary, 2012) and recover more quickly following divorce (Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2012). Experimental interventions have also demonstrated that self-compassion can be actively cultivated, and there is some preliminary evidence that such cultivation benefits well-being (e.g., Neff & Germer, 2013).

Thus, both mindfulness and self-compassion interventions target beliefs and emotions in the perceptual cycle depicted in Figure 1. To the extent that these interventions diminish anxiety and negative emotions, they may improve people's capacity to work effectively and behave constructively within their relationships. These behaviors may improve the quality of people's experiences which may, in turn, reinforce initial improvements in positive beliefs and emotional well-being.

Attend-to, and Engage, Positive Aspects of the Self

The second class of interventions in the embrace-self category is designed to foster positive emotional states by addressing the maladaptive tendency for people to place undue focus on negative aspects of themselves and their situation. People with depression and low self-esteem are particularly prone to such negativity. One potential solution is to shift attention onto strengths, positive qualities, or emotions, and then use these positive aspects of the self to guide action. Interventions in this class also encourage people to overlook difficulties or impediments they may face in life, and instead exploit opportunities for positivity and personal growth. The most straightforward interventions in this class guide people to write about positive aspects of the self or the environment (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003). For example, people may be encouraged to "count their blessings" by listing things for which they are thankful, record positive daily experiences, describe their best selves, or write about how they used a unique personal strength in a new way.

Positive emotions may be beneficial for several reasons. Insofar as they are incompatible with negative emotions, positive emotions will neutralize negative affect. Also, positive emotions may build psychological resilience and encourage people to find meaning in ordinary events and even in adversity. In addition, positive emotions may encourage people to savor experiences, seek out others to share experiences with, and think positively about the future. Such emotions may also foster qualities like confidence, optimism, and self-efficacy that can have self-fulfilling effects downstream in the perceptual cycle in Figure 1 (e.g., Lyubomirsky, King, & Deiner, 2005). For example, a positive mood may prompt active, approach-oriented goal pursuit, which may lead to the acquisition of skills and resources that facilitate stellar performances that foster pleasant moods in the future.

The *broaden and build model* offers a more formal account of the processes by which positive emotion benefits well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). It proposes that cultivating positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, and pride, will *broaden* attention, cognition, and action; as well as *build* physical, intellectual, and social resources. Translated into the perceptual cycle in Figure 1, positive emotions shape people's beliefs and information processing, which in turn alter behavior. These behaviors, in turn, improve people's experiences; specifically, the individual's physical, intellectual and social outcomes.

Many of the features of the aforementioned models can be found in Aron and colleagues' *self-expansion* formulation (e.g., Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013). Self-expansion is most apparent when someone engages in a new and challenging activity, the performance of which adds new skills or abilities to one's personal repertoires, and thus expands one's corresponding sense of self. Interpreted in light of the perceptual cycle in Figure 1, self-expansion involves behaviors that enable people to achieve their goals, which improves their experiences. These positive experiences, in turn, support more positive beliefs and expectations. Self-expansion is most effective when the new activities

are physiologically arousing, such as participating in a new sport, and when the activities are completed together with a relationship partner. For example, non-clinical interventions that assign romantic couples to engage in self-expanding activities together – like completing a silly and physically taxing obstacle course – foster personal well-being and improve relationship quality.

Another intervention in the embrace-self path called *self-affirmation* emerged from attempts to help stigmatized individuals remain resilient in the face of negative stereotyping and prejudice. This intervention operates by focusing people's attention on positive aspects of the self (e.g., Stinson, Logel, Shepherd, & Zanna, 2011). In a brief guided-writing task, individuals select from a list of values the single value that is most important to them, and then write a short essay about why the chosen value is important. Self-affirmation is believed to improve well-being by buffering the self against threats to self-worth, such as failure, rejection, or discrimination, thereby allowing individuals to respond to adversity in constructive, non-defensive ways. As in Figure 1, such behavioral changes will tend to improve the quality of people's experiences and these improvements will, in turn, bolster their positive beliefs and emotions.

Does Embracing the Self Improve Well-Being?

Two recent meta-analytic reviews of positive psychology interventions – the vast majority of which fall into the embrace-self path – concluded that several techniques produce modest boosts to well-being (i.e., effect sizes in the range of .15 to 0.30; Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These results are encouraging, but they must be treated cautiously (e.g., Coyne, 2014a, b). Only six of 73 studies reported follow-up assessments beyond the period of intervention (see Bolier et al., 2014). While these longer-term studies did reveal persistent benefits of the interventions for beliefs and mood, none assessed the behavior or experiences of participants, which is a serious shortcoming from the vantage point of the perceptual cycle in Figure 1. It is thus unclear whether the observed changes in mood and well-being were sustained by feedback from the social environment. Moreover, in both meta-analyses, self-administered interventions were notably less effective than group- or individually-administered interventions. Given that self-administered manipulations are much cheaper to implement for the general public, these findings suggest that there exists a tradeoff between the cost and effectiveness of interventions.

The Embrace-Illusions Path to Well-Being

A second theme that emerged from our survey of the relevant academic and popular literatures is what we call the *embrace-illusions* path to well-being, which encourages people to replace negative self-views with positive, counter-factual illusions. Although this path shares some common features with the embrace-self pathway, we think that the historical roots and popular treatment of this pathway are sufficiently distinct to warrant a dedicated analysis.

In its most extreme form, which dominates popular accounts of the embrace-illusions pathway, this path to well-being assumes that beliefs can, of themselves, create reality. In Figure 1, this subtype of the embrace-illusions approach suggests that beliefs can shape experience directly without the

intervening link to behavior. The pseudo-scientific “law of attraction” (Atkinson, 1906) exemplifies this type of thinking. As featured in the best-selling popular-psychology book “The Secret” (Byrne, 2006), the law holds that people’s thoughts create “frequencies” that attract experiences, events, and people that match that same frequency. Hence, people who think positive thoughts and feel positive emotions will send out frequencies that attract positive experiences and people into their lives. If people desire new relationship partners, all they need do is imagine love and positivity, and a loving partner will materialize. Although the notion that positive thinking can influence experiences in absence of any intervening behavior flies in the face of basic theories of psychology (and physics), Byrne’s book sold more than 21 million copies and grossed over \$300 million (The Secret[book], n.d.). Clearly, the message that one’s thoughts alone can control one’s destiny is profoundly appealing to millions of people, perhaps because such beliefs are consistent with an individualistic, “can do” mentality.

Slightly more plausible versions of the embrace-illusions path to well-being were advanced by the self-help industry beginning with Peale’s (1952) *Power of Positive Thinking*. Although there is considerable variability in how these types of popular positive-thinking programs are structured, some of them do suggest that an active imagination is not sufficient to reap the benefits of positive thinking. Instead, such programs stipulate that only when the individual translates the positive thinking into behavior will it produce self-fulfilling consequences for experience and beliefs.

For decades, these early forays into the use of illusions as psychological interventions gained no purchase in mainstream, academic psychology. That began to change in the late 1980s when Taylor and Brown (1988) asserted that people will deny reality in the service of a desire for self-enhancement. Taylor and Brown contended that *positive illusions* about the self -- including unrealistically positive self-evaluations, exaggerated perceptions of control, and unrealistic optimism -- promote mental health and well-being. The emphasis of the article was on marshaling evidence for an association between

well-being and self-enhancing illusions rather than identifying mechanisms to explain such a connection. Nevertheless, the authors did suggest that positive illusions might trigger self-fulfilling prophecies. In Figure 1, illusory beliefs might bolster motivation and task persistence, thereby shaping behavior. In turn, these resultant behaviors could shape positive experiences that reinforce the original illusion.

Taylor and Brown's (1988) article has been enormously influential, with a recent search on google scholar yielding nearly 7000 citations. Moreover, in the landmark issue of *American Psychologist* heralding the debut of positive psychology into the academic mainstream, Taylor and colleagues (2000) extended the benefits of positive illusions to include physical well-being as well as psychological well-being. Subsequent research expanded the beneficial reach of positive illusions still further. For example, researchers have reported that positive illusions are negatively associated with psychopathology (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004) and that overconfident individuals are conferred social status denied their more modest counterparts (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012). Older people who hold the most extreme, and thus unrealistic, positive self-perceptions of aging seem to enjoy better mobility, health, and cognition (Levy, 2009), and are even reported to live up to 7.5 years longer than their more negative counterparts (Levy, Slade, & Kasl, 2002). Such findings have captured the adulation of the popular media, where the finer nuances of the literature are often overlooked, including cultural variability (e.g., Mezulis et al., 2004) and the difficulty of interpreting correlational data.

Does Embracing Illusions Improve Well-Being?

Despite wide-spread enthusiasm among the general public concerning the power of positive thinking, the association between positive illusions and well-being is not as straightforward as it may seem. Claims concerning the nature, ubiquity and utility of positive illusions have been repeatedly

criticized by academics (e.g., Colvin & Block, 1994; Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Moore & Fresco, 2014; Robins & Beer, 2001). Critics have argued that rather than being beneficial, extreme positive illusions about one's traits and abilities are associated with poor social skills, as rated by objective observers (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; John & Robins, 1994; but see Goorin & Bonanno, 2009; Sosik, 2005). Furthermore, there is growing evidence that positive illusions can be maladaptive in the long-term (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004), predicting undesirable outcomes like decreased self-esteem and disengagement from academics (Robins & Beer, 2001). However, these dissenting voices and contradictory results have often been lost in the tumult of popular media support.

The most significant problem with research supporting the benefits of positive illusions may be that it is all correlational, leaving open the possibility that positive illusions are a consequence rather than cause of positive experiences, or that a third variable – such as personality or competence – causes both positive illusions and positive outcomes. Because most research in this area relies on self-reports, it is also possible that people who are prone to positive illusions may also be prone to inflating their self-reports of well-being (e.g., Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). Similarly, some of the putative benefits of positive illusions may reflect defensiveness rather than actual psychological adjustment. Stronger research designs like those featured in the work reviewed in the previous paths to well-being – including experimental intervention studies, the use of behavioral outcome measures, and daily-diary and longitudinal designs – could help address some of these weaknesses. Until such research has been conducted, though, researchers and lay people alike should remain circumspect regarding the benefits of positive illusions.

The Embrace-Relationships Path to Well-Being

The third theme that emerged from our survey of the popular and academic positive psychology literatures is what we call the *embrace-relationships path* to well-being, which aims to foster well-being by encouraging behaviors known to improve the quality of people's relationships. This path rests on the premise that improving relationships will satisfy the fundamental *need to belong* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which will, in turn, contribute to well-being in several domains, including psychological, economic, and physical well-being. Most relevant to the book in which this chapter appears, high quality relationships can bolster the self by improving self-esteem, relational security, and self-views over time (e.g., Stinson et al., 2008). Thus the self is an important mechanism through which improving close relationships comes to also improve personal well-being. We first consider the beneficial effects of improving close relationships. Although most of the research in this domain concerns romantic relationships, these approaches probably generalize to non-romantic, close relationships as well.

Strengthen Bonds with Close-Relationships Partners

Close-relationships researchers have identified many interpersonal behaviors that seem to support continued satisfaction and personal well-being. Consistent with the underlying tenets of positive psychology, expressions of positive emotions and attitudes, especially during conflict, may be particularly effective in strengthening romantic bonds (for a discussion, see Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). For example, displays of humor, acquiescence, active listening, and soothing a highly agitated partner during a conflict all benefit relationship quality and lower the risk of divorce. Sharing positive experiences with a partner, called *capitalization*, can also support both intimacy and personal well-being independent of the benefits of the positive experience itself (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Making personal sacrifices that will benefit a partner's well-being or the well-being of the relationship also predicts relationship quality (e.g., Impett & Gordon, 2008).

Engaging in *accommodation* by inhibiting negative responses to a partner's bad behavior also predicts greater relationship satisfaction for both partners (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998). Partners who respond to transgressions by forgiving the partner, for example, are better able to resolve conflicts a year later (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; but see also McNulty, 2011). Being responsive to a partner's needs seems especially beneficial (Maisel & Gable, 2009). It is easy to see why. Responsiveness creates the expectation that one will "be there" when a partner needs support, thereby fostering trust and commitment. Similarly, expressions of gratitude for a partner's sacrifices make the partner feel appreciated, which increases desire to maintain the relationship, which, in turn, fosters feelings of appreciation that diminish insecurity and increase satisfaction (Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012).

Further testimony to the salubrious effects of expressions of positivity in relationships comes from studies that have examined the impact of *resistance* to praise and positivity. For example, people with low self-esteem tend to rebuff compliments from their partner, and reject a support provider's attempts to make them feel better (Marigold, Cavallo, Holmes, & Wood, 2014). Support providers whose efforts are spurned in this way grow despondent about the relationship. Moreover, when people with low self-esteem are guided to perceive compliments in an accepting and positive manner, they behave less negatively towards their partner and this improves the relationship (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2010). Conceivably, these new positive experiences may eventually lead to lasting improvements in beliefs about the self and relationships for people who initially experienced low self-esteem.

Partners can also work together to forge stronger mutual connections, thereby increasing their well-being. Couples benefit when they engage in meaningful conversation that communicates mutual acceptance, understanding, and appreciation (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). As discussed earlier, partners can increase their relationship satisfaction by participating in shared leisure

activities, especially novel and physiologically arousing activities (Aron et al., 2013). The mutual self-expansion that results from such novel activities can increase mutual feelings of passion and sexual satisfaction, two of the strongest predictors of relationship quality. Indeed, sex can buffer couples against daily stressors (Ein-Dor & Hirschberger, 2012) and the stress of personality traits like Neuroticism that otherwise predict negativity in relationships (Russell & McNulty, 2011). Of course, physical intimacy and touch need not be explicitly sexual to benefit well-being. Frequent touch and warm physical contact, like hugging, is an essential component of social support that not only benefits psychological well-being, but also supports physical health (Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, Turner, & Doyle, 2015).

Several highly-popular “marital enrichment” interventions provide training in some of the behaviors mentioned above (e.g., Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004). Commonly-used interventions include the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), which teaches communication skills such as problem-solving and the speaker-listener technique, and the Compassionate and Accepting Relationships through Empathy (CARE) program, which teaches acceptance-based communication skills like seeking to understand a partner’s perspective during conflict (Rogge, Cobb, Johnson, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2013). These intensive, small-group interventions reduce rates of divorce in the early years of marriage by nearly half (i.e., from 23% to just 11%), and can also increase relationship satisfaction and well-being. Another effective social-psychological intervention that buffers satisfied couples against normative declines in marital satisfaction encourages them to reappraise conflicts in their relationship from a third-person perspective (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013).

All of these relationship processes reflect a dyadic version of the perceptual cycle depicted in Figure 1. That is, the beliefs and emotions of one partner channel that person’s behaviors which, in

turn, shape the partner's behaviors, which determine the experiences that both partners have in the relationship. These experiences, in turn, influence the subsequent beliefs and emotions of both partners.

Strengthen Bonds with Strangers and Acquaintances

Experimental research also suggests that forging closer ties with strangers may foster well-being (e.g., Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Being open to conversation with strangers in public places such as trains, buses, or coffee shops appears to increase happiness. Spending one's own money to help others also improves well-being (e.g., Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2014). For example, when companies offer their employees a bonus in the form of the opportunity to make a charitable donation, such employees experience more happiness and job satisfaction than employees who receive a typical monetary bonus in their paycheck. Similarly, members of sport clubs who spend money on a fellow teammate enjoy more positive affect and perform better than those who spend money on themselves. These types of social behaviors probably influence path "d" in Figure 1 via a simple self-perception process (Bem, 1972), such that people who observe themselves behaving in a prosocial manner develop more positive beliefs and feelings about themselves than those who do not. The popular enactment of these same processes may be evident in viral social-media events like the "Ice Bucket Challenge" (Ice Bucket Challenge, n.d.), which asked people to dump buckets of ice water on their heads in an effort to raise awareness and money for Lou Gehrig disease. The rampant success of this campaign likely rested in the positive affect experienced by participants as a result of donating money to others and interacting socially with strangers via social media.

Does Embracing Relationships Improve Well-Being?

It is widely accepted within psychological science that high-quality social bonds are essential for well-being, yet relatively few interventions have been developed to target this pathway (but see Masi, Chen, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2011, for a meta-analytic review of loneliness interventions).

Indeed, one general critique of relationship science is that it relies heavily on correlational methods, which limits the causal conclusions that can be drawn from the results. However, relationship scientists do utilize complex daily-diary and longitudinal methods that not only provide rich data concerning naturally-occurring close relationships processes, but also strengthen arguments that relationship quality causes well-being. For example, one decades-long longitudinal study demonstrated that the quality of infants' attachment relationships with their caregivers predicted social competence in elementary school, which in turn predicted relationship quality with close friends as teenagers, which then predicted emotional well-being and conflict resolution as adults (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). These and related findings are strongly suggestive that improving relationships should contribute to well-being. Furthermore, the effectiveness of marital enrichment interventions like PREP lend further support for a causal link between relationship quality and well-being (e.g., Jakubowski et al., 2004), as does experimental evidence revealing the benefits of connecting with strangers (e.g., Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Future research should build upon this strong foundation to develop simple interventions appropriate for use by the general public.

Overcoming Barriers on the Path to Well-Being

In this chapter we identified three distinct paths to well-being and asked whether each of these paths is theoretically and empirically viable. Our analysis led us to conclude that although all three paths could theoretically foster well-being, the embrace-self and embrace-relationships paths are more likely to bear fruit than the embrace-illusions approach. At the same time, the extant empirical literature suggests that the effect sizes of even the most potent interventions have been modest. Clearly, barriers remain on the path to well-being that must be overcome before the general public can benefit from these interventions.

To begin to address this shortcoming, we draw on the science of self-psychology to offer some very general guidelines for maximizing the impact of interventions designed to foster well-being. We suggest that change agents must be sensitive to the fit between the intervention and the self-views of the target. Self-views reside in the center of people's psychological universe, giving them a sense of how others are likely to treat them, a sense of place, and a crucial guide to behavior. No wonder, then, that people take active steps to verify and maintain their self-views, even if it means seeking and embracing information that confirms negative self-views (e.g., Swann, 1983; 2012). Self-verification strivings are known to influence each component of the perceptual cycle, including attention, information seeking, and overt behaviors, and could thus override self-enhancement strivings (Kwang & Swann, 2010) and thwart attempts to bring people to adopt more positive, optimistic self-views. For example, a woman with negative self-views may choose to surround herself with friends who also evaluate her traits negatively. Such partners will provide her with a steady diet of self-verifying feedback, and her experiences with such feedback may stabilize her beliefs, behaviors, and emotions.

Of particular relevance here, self-verification strivings may cause well-being interventions to backfire for some people. For example, when people with relatively negative self-views repeated positive self-statements (e.g., "I am lovable") for two minutes, they actually felt *worse* than their counterparts in a control condition (Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009). Similarly, when researchers attempted to improve low-performing students' grades by urging them to think positively (e.g., "Hold your head – and you self-esteem – high", p. 452), the boosting messages actually resulted in lower grades at the end of the semester relative to students in the control conditions (Forsyth, Lawrence, Burnette, & Baumeister, 2007). Well-being interventions that focus on increasing positive emotions may also backfire for people who are chronically high in negative affect. For example, depressed primary-care patients may be pressured into exercises that encourage them to think good thoughts,

express optimism, and snap out of their depression. If their depression fails to lift, they may perceive their poor outcomes to be yet another failure experience that further confirms their self-perceived shortcomings (for a thoughtful discussion, see Ehrenreich, 2010; see also Sin, Della Porta, & Lyubomirsky, 2011). For people with negative self-views, the problem with such positive messages is that they are disjunctive with their broader experiences and self-conceptions. This discrepancy creates an aversive state of uncertainty regarding the self that people are motivated to alleviate (e.g., Stinson et al., 2010), often by rejecting or discrediting the positive messages. By negating the positive messages, the apparent discrepancy between existing self-views and social feedback is eliminated and self-certainty is restored.

Nevertheless, individuals with negative self-views and attitudes can be quite receptive to all types of messages if they are delivered in a supportive context by a change agent who is perceived to be sincere and credible. For example, in one experiment, a trusted romantic partner provided low-self-esteem participants with a positive message that exaggerated the participants' *self-identified* personal strengths (in fact, the feedback was created by the experimenters; Stinson et al., 2010). For example, if a low self-esteem participant identified creativity as a personal strength, then his partner provided feedback about his creativity that was even more positive than the participant's already-positive self-evaluation. Rather than rejecting the positive message, participants shifted their self-views to align more closely with the positive message from their (likely sincere and credible) romantic partner. Presumably, this change occurred because it was easier to alleviate the self-concept confusion caused by the discrepant feedback by changing existing self-views than by rejecting the positive feedback from such a credible source. In another study, researchers established warm and supportive relationships with counseling clients and then provided feedback that verified the clients' self-views (Finn & Tonsager, 1992). Two weeks later, clients who had received self-verifying feedback displayed better

psychological functioning and higher self-esteem than a no-feedback control group, even though the verifying feedback was sometimes decidedly negative (e.g., "you are depressed, thought disordered, angry, obsessive;" p. 284). By affirming the client's self-views, the self-verifying feedback may have provided the foundation of self-certainty that is necessary for psychological growth. These results reveal that, as long as the feedback fits with their evolving self-knowledge, people with negative self-views can benefit enormously from learning about their strengths as well as shortcomings.

Self-verification processes may also cause interventions that are designed for people with negative self-views and attitudes to backfire for people with positive self-views and attitudes. For example, although some of the interventions from the embrace-relationships path appear to be highly effective for distressed couples (i.e., couples who are low in relationship satisfaction and/or high in conflict), they can *diminish* satisfaction among thriving couples (Williamson, Rogge, Cobb, Johnson, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2015). Many of these interventions are effective because they cause distressed couples to re-evaluate their maladaptive scripts and attitudes about their relationship. Of course, these scripts and attitudes are not maladaptive for thriving couples, and attending to them may interrupt their optimal, uncontrolled functioning. Instead, thriving couples benefit from simple interventions that increase relationship rewards by fostering opportunities for positive shared experiences through meaningful discussion, self-disclosure, and emotional intimacy. Similarly, social-psychological interventions that *increase* low self-esteem individuals' use of effective relationship-initiation behaviors actually *decrease* high self-esteem individuals' use of such behaviors (see Stinson, Cameron, & Robinson, 2015). For example, if social rewards like acceptance and belonging are made salient, low self-esteem people will increase their use of warm and friendly social behaviors, perhaps because they believe that their efforts may actually be successful. However, when social rewards are made salient, high self-esteem people actually decrease their social efforts, perhaps because they perceive that

acceptance is easily attainable. Instead, high self-esteem people are most motivated by the threat of rejection, which motivates them to work hard to win acceptance. Positive psychology will benefit by explicitly acknowledging these possibilities when communicating the potential benefits of a given intervention to the general public, lest they inadvertently harm the well-being of thriving individuals.

Conclusions: Towards a More Realistic Positive Psychology

Despite its rising popularity among the general public and in some circles of academic psychology, to date, many psychological scientists (including the authors of this chapter) have remained wary of the positive psychology movement. This wariness stems not from the *goals* of the movement – after all, who could object to expanding knowledge of the human condition and improving well-being? Rather, the wariness stems from the *strategies* most popularly associated with achieving those goals, many of which reflect the embrace-illusions pathway to well-being. For example, consider the “I’m lovable and capable” affirmations common to the self-esteem movement (Wood et al., 2009), assertions that positive thinking alone can reverse aging, manage diabetes, and cure cancer (Grierson, 2014), or the “law of attraction” endorsed by the author of *The Secret* (Byrne, 2006). For psychologists who trace their roots to foundational theories of well-being that emphasize realism and the virtues of authenticity (Jahoda, 1958; Rogers, 1951), there is something deeply unsettling about promoting the use of such pseudo-scientific techniques. Such feelings of incredulity may even spill over onto more scientifically rigorous proposals from the embrace-illusions pathway, for example, the more general argument that realism is a disease for which positive illusions are the cure (e.g., Sedikides & Greg, 2008; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Distrust for the positive psychology movement also may have grown out of public-spirited considerations. For example, *The Secret* (Byrne, 2006) continues to be foundational to a multi-million dollar self-help industry that methodically betrays unsuspecting consumers who are desperately searching for a solution to their troubles (Ehrenreich, 2010). Because

the popular and academic branches of the positive psychology movement are so well-integrated (e.g., witness the many popular psychology books published by academic positive psychologists), an implicit association with non-scientific and deceptive self-help programs may have tarnished the reputation of the larger positive psychology movement.

Yet many of the same psychological scientists who have been wary of the positive psychology movement (including the authors of this chapter) conduct research that is clearly aligned with the goals of the movement. Bringing these researchers into the fold could help forge connections between sub-disciplines. This would benefit not only the positive psychology movement, but also the field of psychological science more generally. To achieve this goal, going forward we believe that it will be beneficial for the positive psychology movement to continue to distance itself from illusion-based strategies for pursuing well-being (e.g., Lopez & Snyder, 2009). One way to expedite this goal is for the movement to remain open to all viable interventions for improving well-being that emerge from all fields of psychological science. Broadening the scope and reach of the positive psychology movement will allow researchers to more effectively address the essential questions posed by the movement: How might extant interventions designed to improve well-being work—or fail to work? And how can theory-based, methodologically rigorous, well-replicated research be utilized most effectively to facilitate this goal (e.g., Finkel, Eastwick, & Reis, 2015)?

Our conceptual analysis provides one preliminary answer to these questions: the most effective interventions will produce changes in each facet of the perceptual cycle. That is, interventions must facilitate changes in beliefs and emotions, which influence behaviors, which, in turn, improve the experiences on which beliefs and emotions are based. Our analysis therefore suggests that improvements in well-being can be achieved not only by changing the self directly via the embrace-self path, but also by changing the self indirectly via the embrace-others path. With these interventions,

psychology's recent emphasis on positivity can be compatible with its longstanding emphasis on the utility of authenticity and realism. When based on sound psychological science, positive psychology may enable people to construct, both in their minds and in actual reality, idiosyncratically skewed social worlds that bolster their well-being while maintaining their feelings of authenticity.

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