

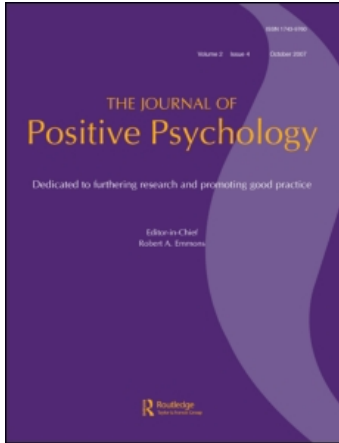
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Positivity, by Barbara Fredrickson

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Book Reviews

Positivity, by Barbara Fredrickson, New York, Crown Publishers, 2009, 277 pp., US\$24.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780307393739

'How can you study positive emotions scientifically? You should have chosen a research topic that is more concrete and measurable.' A few years back, a skeptical family friend offered me this advice as I was starting with my research as an undergraduate. If you are a positive psychologist, you may be able to resonate with my experience. Fortunately, in the past decade tremendous strides have been made both via scientific and popular books towards increasing awareness about the science of positive emotions. Currently, more than 20,000 books are listed on Amazon.com for the term 'positivity.' In this already glutted market, what new information does *Positivity* offer that other recent positive psychology books have missed? Consider the following excerpt:

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, 'My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.' The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, 'Which wolf wins?' The old Cherokee simply replied, 'The one you feed.' – Anonymous (Chapter 10) (p. 179).

Positivity successfully supports this ancient insight with more than 20 years of rigorous research. The author, Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, is Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Director of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The goal of the book is to provide strategies for increasing positivity while acknowledging the inevitable negativity in our lives. According to Fredrickson, the recognition of negativity promotes a realistic starting point for experiencing genuine positivity. This heartfelt positivity not only facilitates enduring psychological and social benefits, but also enables successful coping during challenging life events. Across 12 chapters, Fredrickson

proposes several strategies derived from her research (e.g., 'broaden-and-build' theory, 3-to-1 positivity ratio) to achieve and maintain the benefits of sincere positive emotions.

The first half of the book (Chapters 1–7) focuses on the defining features of positivity explained through both scientific and real-life illustrations of the 'broaden-and-build' theory. Chapters 1 and 2 present and counter common myths about the study and conceptualization of positive emotions. One key message from these two chapters is the importance of recognizing the potential psychological and physiological dangers of insincere experience of positive emotions (e.g., insincere engagement in positivity can increase the risk of coronary danger similar to that caused by anger). The 10 forms of positivity described in Chapter 3 provide an excellent overview of the psychological benefits of our different positive emotions all of which are described as avenues for enduring broadening and building benefits. The strategic order of presentation of these emotions enables a better appreciation of their nature (e.g., 'love' has been mentioned at the end as an all encompassing positive emotion). Chapters 4 and 5 provide an introduction to the *broadening* and *building* effects of positive emotions. Subsequently, in Chapter 6 Fredrickson explains the role of positive emotions in overcoming stress through the broadening effects of positive emotions (e.g., forming social bonds through gratitude) and presents evidence for control over one's resiliency via the positivity ratio.

One of the most captivating and innovative ideas of the book is the 3-to-1 positivity ratio (Chapter 7), and hence deserves a brief discussion. The derivation of the 3-to-1 positivity ratio, the crucial tipping point for flourishing is based on Marcial Losada's mathematical model of group behavior. Director of the Center for Advanced Research (CFAR) in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Losada was interested in measuring the degree of attunement between team members, derived by measuring the positivity ratio for each team. A positivity ratio of 2.9013 to 1 (simplified to 3-to-1) emerged as the tipping point, i.e. teams above this ratio exhibited better connectivity and teams below this ratio exhibited limited performance. Of particular

relevance and interest to Fredrickson's research, Losada's positivity ratio emerged as the mathematical counterpart of Fredrickson's 'broaden-and-build' theory. For example, Losada's highly performing teams (i.e. with positivity ratio over 3-to-1) exhibited greater openness to new ideas (i.e. broadening), and more connectivity between team members, success, and greater resiliency (i.e. building of social resources). Besides convincingly providing interdisciplinary support to the theory, the concreteness of the 3-to-1 positivity ratio opens avenues for more precise practical strategies to increase positivity. Therefore, based on the theoretical ideas presented in the first half of the book, the second half (Chapters 8–12) is oriented towards self-assessment and enhancement of one's positivity ratio.

Chapter 8 provides a starting point for the road to positivity through practical tools (e.g., the Positivity Self Test and the Day Reconstruction Method) by encouraging the reader to first recognize, understand, and experiment with his or her own level of positivity. Thereupon, Chapters 9 and 10 provide tools for decreasing negativity and increasing positivity. Positive reappraisals of people/situations and greater mindfulness to positivity in our surroundings form the crux of these two chapters. The practical applications of Fredrickson's research described in the first half truly become alive in the description of the 12 practical tools recommended in Chapter 11. Mindful awareness to surroundings, positive social interactions, and love-and-kindness meditation are just few of the diverse and innovative strategies included in this toolkit. Even though the 12 tools pertain to people with different positivity ratios, there is an important caveat to be considered. For people with a positivity ratio below 1-to-1, Fredrickson provides an online resource for more information and help to readers who may be suffering from depression. Below a certain positivity ratio the tools and strategies presented in the book may only be useful when combined with additional help (e.g., clinical treatment for depression).

The 'broaden-and-build' theory of positive emotions is the centerpiece of the book. The theory proposes that positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, cognition, and action, which ultimately contributes to building physical, cognitive, and social resources for psychological well being in the long run. For example, the broadening part of the model includes widening one's cognitive scope, which makes broad exploration of the world and oneself more possible. This broadening, unlike the highly focused effects of negative emotions, results in improved problem-solving strategies, deeper social bonds, enhanced social skills, and greater optimism (Fredrickson, 1998, 2003). Findings from Fredrickson's Open Heart Study brought to life in an account of one of the participants in the study (see Nina's transformation in Chapter 5), robustly support

the 'broaden-and-build' theory by showing the broadening effects of meditation on stress.

The writing style of the book is strongly commendable and further adds to the engagement of the ideas. Fredrickson has a talent for clarifying theoretical ideas through metaphors. For example, she cleverly uses an analogy of lilies opening in presence of sunlight to illustrate the transforming 'opening' effects of positive emotions. The book also includes real-life personal examples to illustrate scientific ideas and findings. For example, Fredrickson offers a heartfelt description of her own experiences during her husband's prolonged hospitalization while she was writing this book. Moreover, Fredrickson frequently challenges her own ideas and then provides a compelling answer soon after, making the reading both entertaining and scientifically appealing.

Even though the book is extremely well written and includes several noteworthy ideas, I just have one minor criticism. Since interpersonal conflicts are a major hindrance to positivity, a brief discussion about the potential contribution of forgiveness to enhance positivity would have been useful. Consider an example. In Chapter 9, Fredrickson presents three innovative techniques to deal with negative people: modifying the situation, attending to different aspects of the individual, and changing meanings of situations. First, by replacing the complex negative emotion of unforgiveness by positive other-oriented emotions, accompanied by constructive thoughts towards the person who hurt them (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), forgiveness may promote greater empathy when interacting with negative people. Second, given the enduring interpersonal and psychological benefits of forgiveness (Wade & Worthington, 2005; Worthington, 2006), forgiveness may have the potential to increase the positivity ratio following interpersonal conflicts. In all, forgiveness may be perceived as a transformational skill for cultivating positivity when coping with interpersonal stress.

Based on evidence generated from years of rigorous research, and enhanced by skillfully presented examples from real life, *Positivity* is an engaging guide to flourishing. The book successfully introduces readers to groundbreaking research on positive emotions and practical tools for enhancing positivity. *Positivity* has a wide-ranging appeal. Both critical scientific readers and people who are just being introduced to the science of positive psychology will find the book compelling. Research is explained in simple terms suitable for a diverse audience; but care has been taken to avoid oversimplification. I would especially recommend this book to anyone who is doubtful about the value of studying positive emotions scientifically. My skeptical friend will soon be receiving a copy of the book.

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