

POSITIVE ORIENTATION: EXPLORING THE FACTORS THAT CONSTITUTE THE BRIGHT SIDE OF PERSONALITY

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Positive orientation is a general tendency to react to life experiences in a positive way. My aim in this article was to characterize the nature of positive orientation in the context of similar psychological variables. The importance of taking into account the sense of meaning in life as an additional positive orientation variable has been highlighted, suggesting that the value in the concept of positive orientation lies in its focus on a general tendency to perceive life in a positive way. The choice of the factors that constitute positive orientation may raise objections, but it may also encourage reflection and discussion.

Keywords: positive orientation, happiness, self-esteem, optimism.

The subject of this article is the concept of *positive orientation*, defined as a general disposition to react to life experiences in a positive way (Caprara et al., 2011). According to Caprara et al. (2009), this positive tendency is probably rooted in a biological system. In statistical analyses using structural equations, positive orientation is recognized as a latent variable explaining covariance in self-esteem (Self-Esteem Scale; Rosenberg, 1965), life satisfaction (Satisfaction With Life Scale; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and optimism (Life Orientation Test; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994; see also Alessandri, Caprara, & Tisak, 2012). Following measurement using these three scales, factor analysis is used to calculate a factor score that is a measure of positive orientation. Caprara et al. (2012) developed the Positivity Scale as a short method to measure positive orientation, with eight items and a Cronbach's alpha of .75.

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Many researchers before Caprara have focused on the similarities among the variables that describe the positive characteristics of personality. Andrews and Withey (1976) first drew attention to the shared variance between self-reported measures of positive constructs. One of the best known constructs relating to the common variance in positive personality characteristics is homeostatically protected mood (HPMood; Cummins, 2010). According to HPMood, every person is equipped with cognitive buffers that enable him or her to reinterpret reality to maintain constant well-being. Among these cognitive buffers, self-esteem and optimism are particularly important. When people lose contact with the HPMood experience under the influence of negative circumstances, negative emotions can evolve into depression. Comparing the concepts of positive orientation and HPMood, the latter relates primarily to the process of maintaining equilibrium in well-being. In the positive orientation approach the focus is on the existence of a latent variable that stands for an instinct for life, encouraging life despite adversity. As a consequence, it can be said that positive orientation explains the source of well-being, whereas HPMood explains the working processes of the mental sense of control.

Positive orientation can also be compared with the mental health model of Taylor and Brown (1988). These authors paid particular attention to the beliefs about self-esteem, control, and optimism that are maintained at a positive level in the population. According to Taylor and Brown (1998), people have unrealistic beliefs about themselves that protect their mental health. In the approaches of both positive orientation and the mental health model the importance of the same interrelated variables are emphasized, namely, optimism and self-esteem. Taylor and Brown (1988) believe that joy of life comes with the ability of self-deception, whereas Caprara et al. (2011) are of the opinion that joy of life is a natural and innate inclination. People with a high level of positive orientation are convinced of the validity of their own positive values as well as the fact that life is good, and they believe that the future will be comfortable. Taylor and Brown (1988) argue that people are happy when they can deceive themselves that they are valuable and that the future is positive. If the two approaches are combined, it could be suggested that positive orientation is simply a natural tendency to believe in illusions about life.

As variables of a similar nature to positive orientation (see Sobol-Kwapinska, 2014), it is also worth paying attention to, for example, the general factor of personality (Rushton, Bons, & Hur, 2008), Czapiński's (1994) onion theory of happiness, an inborn predisposition to, and potential for, happiness as presented by Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006), or vitality according to Ryan and Frederick (1997).

Alessandri et al. (2012) emphasize that other variables, apart from self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism, may constitute positive orientation.

Chalubinksa-Gonerko (2011) and Miciuk (2013) conducted a survey among students and developed the positive orientation model. In addition to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism, the model included a sense of meaning in life. Perhaps the evaluation of the meaning in life is not necessarily based on a system of values but may be neurobiologically and genetically conditioned. The results reported by Chalubinksa-Gonerko and Miciuk will be more relevant if the sense of meaning in life is interpreted as a feeling that life has meaning, even if the individual does not know exactly what this meaning is (see Frankl, 1971).

It is also worth referring to the discussion of the differences between a happy life and a meaningful life, and to the question of whether or not an individual can live a happy life without meaning or a meaningful but unhappy life (see Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). Answers to these questions will depend on the definitions of happiness and a meaningful life, that is, on whether happiness will be understood as subjective or as mental well-being. In other words, is positive orientation more strongly connected with a hedonic or with an eudaimonic understanding of happiness? According to Diener (1984), subjective well-being (SWB) reflects an individual's evaluation of his or her own life in both cognitive and emotional terms. The main elements of SWB are satisfaction with life, the frequency of positive emotions, and the infrequency of negative emotions (Diener et al., 2010). According to Waterman (2011), self-realization is the core of eudaimonia. Variables strongly connected with this core are authenticity, meaning in life, and the pursuit of excellence. Ryff and Singer (2008) believe that eudaimonia means full functioning and being successful in confrontations with the existential challenges of life. Based on a review of the literature, Ryff (1989) distinguished the six elements of eudaimonia as self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relationships, personal development, purpose in life, control over one's environment, and autonomy. When summing up the above concepts, Huta and Waterman (2014) note that the most common elements included in the definitions of eudaimonia are development, authenticity, relevance, and excellence, whereas the core of hedonia comprises life satisfaction, positive affect, and weak negative affect. Following this distinction, the conclusion is that positive orientation is the core of eudaimonia. Variables strongly connected with the core—that is, with positive orientation—include life satisfaction, self-esteem, optimism, and, as shown in the results of the studies by Chalubinksa-Gonerko (2011) and Miciuk (2013), a sense of meaning in life. A sense of self-efficacy, positive interpersonal relationships, or health-oriented attitudes are additional correlates of eudaimonia in this approach.

The concept of positive orientation is interesting in that it draws attention to the importance of the trend towards a positive perception of life. There could be some reservations about this new understanding of the otherwise known variable in that the concept of positive orientation may be weak by virtue of the fact

that only factor analyses were used to extract this variable. It would be useful to apply some other statistical analyses to test the hypothesis that self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction have the same source, causes, and consequences. Additionally, some researchers have suggested that these three positive variables are qualitatively distinct constructs. For example, in the study by Voytsel (2012) the findings showed that after 10 training sessions during which participants learned how to influence their own brainwaves, the level of their optimism increased. Their life satisfaction also increased, although to a lesser extent. Thus, these results can be interpreted as attesting that neurofeedback training has different effects on each of these three variables, which, therefore, can be assumed to be qualitatively different.

The results of other studies have also suggested that optimism and self-esteem are two separate variables. For example, Scheier et al. (1994) proved that the relationship between optimism and depression was statistically significant, while the effect of self-esteem was statistically controlled. Similarly, Symister and Friend (2003) showed that social support influenced optimism through self-esteem. Such findings emphasize the importance of differentiation between self-esteem, optimism, and satisfaction with life, in order to gain a better understanding of the complexity of mental processes.

The next question to answer is whether or not positive orientation is the same as optimal orientation. In other words, is it true that the more positive the orientation, the more optimal it becomes? In order to provide an answer to this question, researchers may refer to studies on the dysfunctionality of excessive optimism or inappropriately high self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Crocker & Park, 2004).

In summary, the value of the concept of positive orientation lies in its focus on the general tendency to perceive life in a positive way. My choice of the variables that constitute positive orientation may raise objections among other researchers, but may also encourage reflection and discussion, which are always beneficial for gaining greater understanding through scientific research.

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