

Reference:

Lyubomirsky, S., & Sin, N. L. (2009). Positive affectivity and interpersonal relationships. In H. Reis & S. Sprecher (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships*. New York: Sage.

Positive Affectivity and Interpersonal Relationships

Conventional wisdom holds that happy people have stronger social relationships than their less happy peers, and empirical research supports this popular belief. In this chapter, we examine how social relationships are influenced by positive affect (PA) – the feelings reflecting one’s level of pleasurable engagement with the environment. High PA is characterized by excitement, alertness, and enthusiasm. High negative affect (NA), by contrast, is a state of subjective distress and encompasses a number of unpleasant moods, such as anger, disgust, fear, and nervousness. Both PA and NA play important roles in interpersonal relationships; however, this entry is limited to discussing PA.

Assessing PA

PA measures. PA is commonly measured using self-report questionnaires that require participants to rate various mood descriptors. Disagreement exists, however, regarding the subcomponents of PA, and this is evident in the discrepancies in content among PA measures. Consider, for example, the widely used Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). Its PA scale contains 10 descriptors (e.g., *enthusiastic, confident, alert*) that assess the PA subcomponents of Joviality, Self-Assurance, and Attentiveness. In contrast, the Profile of Mood States scale only assesses the Vigor subcomponent of PA (e.g., *active, lively, energetic*). The

Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale contains four items measuring enjoyment, happiness, optimism, and self-esteem. The Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist – Revised divides positive mood into two subscales – Positive Affect (e.g., *friendly, happy, satisfied*) and Sensation Seeking (e.g., *active, daring, enthusiastic*).

In addition to self-report questionnaires, PA is also assessed using a number of other methods, including observer ratings, counts of positive emotional words in narratives or essays, and the coding of facial expressions (i.e., sincere or so-called “Duchenne” smiles).

Despite the diverse approaches in PA assessment, both self-report and non-self-report measures of PA evidence high convergent validity, suggesting that they are tapping the same construct. Nevertheless, it remains unknown how different PA assessment tools might impact studies of interpersonal relationships.

Related constructs. PA is closely related to other positive psychology constructs and is sometimes considered equivalent to them. The most common of these is the Extraversion personality factor, which is strongly correlated ($r = .46$) with the PANAS PA scale. Measures of subjective well-being and self-esteem are also closely related to PA. However, these measures do not directly assess pure PA, and they often contain a low NA component in addition to a high PA component.

Stability. Trait PA has been found to be remarkably stable across time, suggesting that people typically return to their individual baseline affect levels soon after the occurrence of significant life events. However, although PA is often studied as an enduring trait, it also can be measured and manipulated as a short-term state.

PA and Relationships

Frequency of social interactions. What are the implications of individual differences in trait PA for social relations? Anecdotal evidence suggests that people who experience frequent positive moods are viewed more favorably by others and are more likely to engage in social interactions than those with rare positive moods. This association between level of PA and frequency of social activity has, in fact, been demonstrated in several studies. For example, in one study, researchers tracked participants' daily moods and social activities over a 6- to 7-week period and found a significant correlation between PA and socializing.

Sociability. High-PA and low-PA individuals appear to differ in their temperaments. As mentioned above, those high in trait PA are likely to have extraverted personalities – that is, they are warm, energetic, and seek to affiliate with others. Their sociable, pleasant natures may lead them to actively search for opportunities for interpersonal contact; likewise, others enjoy interacting with them. For example, one study examined the influence of affect on social interactions between unacquainted dyads. The results showed that participants who interacted with high-PA partners rated their experiences as more enjoyable than those paired with low-PA partners. Additionally, independent observers judged the videotaped interactions involving high-PA partners to be of relatively better quality.

Social networks. One of the most robust findings in the literature on PA is that happy people have relatively stronger interpersonal relationships. Indeed, given that high-PA individuals are generally sociable, it is not surprising that they are more likely to be involved in a romantic relationship than their low-PA peers. In a longitudinal study, women whose facial expressions showed high levels of genuine PA in their college photos were relatively more likely to be married 6 years later and less likely to have remained single 22 years later. PA is also

significantly associated with the number of friends one has, as well as one's amount of social support and perceived companionship.

Satisfaction and quality of relationships. Studies further suggest a link between PA and *satisfaction* with social relationships. In the context of romantic relationships, this effect has been found among both married and dating samples. High-PA individuals rate themselves as relatively more committed to their intimate relationships, and they evaluate their relationships as being of higher quality. Those high in PA are also more likely than their low-PA counterparts to feel close to a friend, to experience few friendship conflicts, to report having high-quality friendships, and to be rated by their peers as having high-quality relationships. Furthermore, high-PA individuals are not the only ones who benefit from their abundance of positive emotion: The *spouses* of high-PA individuals are relatively more likely to experience increases in marital well-being across time.

Conclusion

Throughout much of the history of psychology, researchers have emphasized negative affect. This entry reflects new-found attention to PA and its role in interpersonal relationships. Studies conducted in recent decades have reliably demonstrated that PA is correlated with numerous indicators of social bonds, including social activity, sociability, size of social network, and satisfaction and quality of relationships. However, the direction of causality remains unclear. In particular, researchers do not yet know which is the stronger influence – namely, whether PA promotes these social indicators or whether these social indicators themselves foster PA. Currently, empirical evidence points to both paths. For example, longitudinal studies have shown that happier individuals are relatively more likely to attract friends and marriage partners; and laboratory experiments have demonstrated that those induced to feel happy are more likely

to socialize, self-disclose, and show interest in social activities than those induced to feel neutral or sad. Conversely, high-quality relationships and frequent social engagement are associated with positive emotions and overall well-being, both cross-sectionally and across time. This growing evidence supports the folk belief that happy people have better relationships than unhappy people.

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See Also

Emotion in Relationships; Extraversion and Introversion; Happiness and Relationships; Mood and Relationships; Personality Traits, Effects on Relationships

Further Readings

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