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A Science of Healthy Relationships Is Not a Healthy Relationship Science

There is no gift of nature, or effect of art, however beneficial to mankind, which, either by casual deviations, or foolish perversions, is not sometimes mischievous. Whatever may be the cause of happiness, may be made, likewise, the cause of misery. The medicine, which, rightly applied, has power to cure, has, when rashness or ignorance prescribes it, the same power to destroy.

—Samuel Johnson, “A Project for the Employment of Authors,” 1756

Imagine if economists, unsatisfied with a field that focused disproportionately on poverty, began a movement to balance the scales by studying the rich, starting with the establishment of the *Journal of Wealth Studies*. Imagine if physicists, to correct a literature preoccupied with how objects get hot, formed a subdiscipline devoted to the study of how things cool down. Neither of these developments is likely because scholars in these fields recognize, as Samuel Johnson shows in the quotation that opens this article, that the same basic processes may, under different conditions, give rise to a wide range of outcomes. In most scientific disciplines, the goal of research is to identify the processes through which a dynamic phenomenon may reach different outcomes and to identify the conditions that affect which of the possible range of outcomes is achieved. Thus, economic principles are described not to understand poverty or wealth but rather to identify the

forces that give rise to unequal distributions of resources, and the laws of thermodynamics address not heating or cooling but the transfer of thermal energy more generally.

In recent years, a burgeoning movement in psychology has advocated a different approach (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The emerging field of positive psychology suggests that there are benefits to studying healthy human functioning independent of unhealthy human functioning. This has been a widely popular view, and positive psychology now boasts its own conferences, international association, and journal.

Fincham and Beach (2010), in their call to action, argue that relationship scientists should explicitly adopt this approach as well. They propose that relationship research would benefit by focusing on the strengths and positive qualities that allow relationships to succeed and thrive. This argument rests on several premises: (a) that relationship science as it currently exists has been disproportionately concerned with negative outcomes, (b) that there are important unanswered questions about what makes relationships healthy and fulfilling, and (c) that the processes that maintain and promote healthy relationships should be studied independently from the processes that contribute to dysfunctional relationships.

In this article, I suggest that none of these three premises can withstand scrutiny. On the contrary, I point out that positive and negative elements of intimate relationships can rarely be disentangled, making the prospect of a “positive science of relationships” one that

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threatens to mislead more than it informs. I argue instead that progress in relationship science requires research that acknowledges, integrates, and develops theory to account for both positive and negative experiences in relationships.

IS RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE DISPROPORTIONATELY NEGATIVE?

Positive psychology has been called a “movement” because the popularity of the approach stems not from any technological or scientific breakthrough but rather from an ideological stance: specifically, the position that research in psychology has focused disproportionately on negative outcomes and that this emphasis is a problem that should be redressed. Fincham and Beach describe relationship science in precisely this way, suggesting that relationship researchers have been guided primarily by a “bias that constructs are only valuable to the extent that they help us better understand the negative” (p. 7).

This premise is repeatedly asserted as if it were self-evident, but what is the actual support for this claim? In their article, Fincham and Beach conduct a keyword search through the *Journal of Marriage and Family* between the years 2000 and 2008, comparing the many hits obtained for negative keywords (e.g., divorce, conflict) to the relatively few hits obtained for positive keywords (e.g., love, appreciation, commitment). This is not a powerful way of characterizing a literature because the results of such searches are heavily dependent on the choice of specific search terms and journals. For example, I conducted searches for the same period using terms that (in my reading) are quite common in relationship research and adding two other prominent outlets for empirical research on relationships: *Personal Relationships* and the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. On the positive side, a search for the word “satisfaction” anywhere in these journals yielded 309 hits, and “intimacy” yielded 158. On the negative side, “divorce” yielded 338 hits, and “distress” yielded 121. More to the point, “positive” yielded 223 hits and “negative” yielded 221. Pick the right search terms and the field of relationship science looks quite balanced, with even a slight edge for the positive side.

Of course, similar hit rates for searches on positive and negative words no more prove that relationship science is balanced than the

prior searches proved that relationship science is biased. The point of comparing the two searches is merely to point out that finding evidence for the bias that a positive relationship science would correct is no easy task. Indeed, Fincham and Beach make the task still more difficult by attributing negative bias even to research on positive outcomes, claiming that “many studies that ostensibly examine the bright side of relationships (e.g., marital satisfaction) really seek to understand their ‘dark side’ (e.g., marital distress)” (p. 5).

By acknowledging that the choice of a construct does not, in fact, determine whether a particular study is emphasizing negative aspects of relationships or not, Fincham and Beach implicitly recognize that, for the great majority of research on relationships, whether a specific finding is described as positive or negative is a matter of framing and rhetoric and nothing more.

To illustrate this point, consider that in research using continuous bipolar measures (like almost all popular measures of relationship satisfaction, relationship cognition, problem-solving ability, personality, etc.) some people will score on the high end of the scale and others on the low end. Any covariance between continuous measures may be described in ways that emphasize either end; the choice is entirely up to the researcher. For example, Fincham and Beach, citing an example of the negative bias in relationship science, suggest that research on attributions tends to focus on negative questions like “how conflict promoting attributions play a role in the generation of marital distress” (p. 4). Indeed, the results of research on these variables have been described in these terms. Nevertheless, the measures used in these studies have been continuous, bipolar, and relatively normally distributed. Thus, it would be equally accurate to describe the results in the language of positive psychology, for example, “attributions that excuse the partner play a role in the protection of marital satisfaction.” The ability to describe the same results in positive or negative terms is equally true of research on divorce (vs. marital longevity), conflict (vs. compromise), physical attractiveness (vs. unattractiveness), and so forth. For most results in relationship research, the description can be completely flipped from negative to positive or vice versa, but doing so affects neither the measurement, nor the result, nor the phenomenon.

To the extent that the same results may be described in ways that make them seem like evidence of negative bias or in ways that make them models of positive psychology, then the search for what researchers “really seek to understand” seems beside the point. What matters is not the ideological stance of the researcher, but whether the phenomena being studied are important and the whether the questions being asked are worth answering.

HAS RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE FAILED TO DESCRIBE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS?

The case for a positive relationship science can be made on the strength of the new and important questions that such a science would raise. Fincham and Beach attempt to make this case when they propose that research on relationships should turn attention toward a new construct that they call “relationship flourishing” (p. 7). They suggest that research on this new construct would be important because “when examining the marriage and family literature one is hard pressed to find systematic research on what makes a relationship flourish” (p. 8). This assertion is only true if one adopts the restrictive view that a flourishing relationship is somehow distinct from one that is healthy, intimate, satisfying, and committed over a significant period of time. On the other hand, if we allow that maintaining a healthy, intimate, satisfying, committed relationship over time is likely to play a large role in relationship flourishing, then there has been substantial systematic research describing such relationships, and the results of this research have been remarkably consistent across decades and disciplines (Bradbury & Karney, 2010).

Anthropology, evolutionary psychology, and developmental psychology have led the way. For example, when the anthropologists William Jankowiak and Edward Fischer (1992) examined 166 hunting, foraging, and agricultural societies, they found evidence of the experience and value of romantic love in 147 of them, leading them to conclude that “romantic love constitutes a human universal, or at the least a near-universal” (p. 154). When evolutionary psychologist David Buss and his colleagues (Buss, Abbott, Angleitner, & Asherian, 1990) asked people living in 33 different countries about what they wanted in a partner, love and mutual attraction emerged in all of them. Even 9-year-old children understand

that successful romantic relationships are characterized by a desire to be in the presence of the partner, physical attraction, and commitment (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). These studies barely scratch the surface of the voluminous literature on the elements of the ideal relationship, but the results that I am aware of repeat the same themes that were found in a factor analysis of data from college students: Human beings seek out relationships that are intimate, supportive, and committed on the one hand and passionate and exciting on the other (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; see Gangestad & Simpson, 2000, for an evolutionary explanation for the general consistency in relationship ideals around the world). It is true that what people seek out from their relationships may not be what sustains those relationships and keeps them vibrant over time. Nevertheless, it seems likely that relationships that meet these criteria are going to be well positioned to be healthy, satisfying, and flourishing as well.

Thus, far from being a mystery, relationship science knows quite well what a well-functioning relationship looks like and has known for some time. Moreover, adults and children around the world have a pretty good idea of what a well-functioning relationship is like, too.

SHOULD POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF RELATIONSHIPS BE STUDIED INDEPENDENTLY?

To support their call for a positive relationship science, Fincham and Beach review several important studies showing that positive and negative processes that have been commonly described as opposite poles of a bipolar scale may be better characterized as orthogonal unipolar dimensions. For example, although most marital research assumes that spouses who are less *happy* with their marriage are more *unhappy* with them (indicating a bipolar dimension ranging from unhappy to happy), Fincham and Linfield (1997) have shown that, with careful measurement, happiness and unhappiness in marriage can be assessed separately and may not share that much variance (indicating two unipolar dimensions ranging from no affect to happy and from no affect to unhappy). This research joins similar research on emotion and on motivation

suggesting that positive and negative responses may activate separate areas of the brain. This is groundbreaking research with many implications yet to be explored.

Nevertheless, it does not follow from the relative independence of positive and negative processes that positive and negative processes in relationships should be studied independently. Two dimensions can be conceptually and empirically distinct and still be fundamentally intertwined. Consider height and weight. These are two distinct dimensions, but our understanding of an individual's physical stature would be incomplete if we did not measure both of them. A complete understanding of relationships similarly requires research that embraces both positive and negative experience and both optimal and suboptimal functioning.

For example, Fincham and Beach discuss resilience, a phenomenon that implies maintenance and growth taking place in the context of stress and trauma. The fact that some families thrive in circumstances that cause other families to decline gives research on resilience in families its poignancy. Yet a purely positive science of resilience would have no meaning; the phenomenon is defined by the juxtaposition of positive and negative. Understanding resilience when it occurs, and promoting resilience in other families, requires research that assesses the details of the stressors and traumas that families experience and addresses the full range of family functioning afterwards, from resilience to dissolution. The family sociologist Reuben Hill understood this, and his classic model of family responses to crisis attempted to explain the full range of outcomes in military families that had been separated during World War II (Hill, 1949).

Even research on specific relationship processes may benefit from acknowledging both positive and negative outcomes. For example, McNulty and Karney examined the long-term consequences of positive expectations and adaptive attributions in the context of newlywed marriages (McNulty & Karney, 2004; McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). Both types of cognition have been described as elements of optimal functioning in relationships, and our data indicated that engaging in these cognitions is, in fact, associated with positive marital outcomes over time. But not for everyone. The circumstances of the relationship and the degree to which couples engage in these processes interact, such that couples facing serious challenges actually

experience worse outcomes over time when they engage in these sorts of relationship-enhancing cognitions (see also Norem & Chang, 2002). Research guided by an interest in successful relationships would miss the fact that the same processes associated with positive outcomes for most couples may be harmful for the most vulnerable couples. What makes findings like these important is not the extent to which they promote a positive view of relationships but the extent to which they develop an accurate view of relationships.

ALTERNATIVES TO A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE

Research that identifies new ways that couples and families promote intimacy and closeness holds great promise, as does recognizing that positive and negative processes in relationships can be independent. Yet it does not follow that research centered on developing intimacy or closeness, for instance, should be segregated to a positive relationship science. On the contrary, to date, progress in expanding relationship science in these directions has not been impeded by the lack of a positive relationship science, as the research reviewed by Fincham and Beach attests. Relationship science benefits when the perspective of researchers broadens to encompass positive and negative outcomes and the multiple processes and pathways that may lead to those outcomes.

Further progress in relationship science may be spurred by investigating the juxtaposition of positivity and negativity in relationships even further. How is it that dysfunction can arise in relationships that may start out healthy? In the midst of stress and impoverished surroundings, how is it that some families find the strength and resources to persevere and grow? Given widespread agreement on the elements of healthy and rewarding relationships, why are healthy relationships so difficult to sustain over time? In developing a discipline to address these questions, relationship researchers might look toward public health for a model. In public health, there is no tension between promoting health and identifying the causes of disease because frequently both outcomes are the result of the same underlying forces. When relationship research can articulate a set of principles that explains how the complete range of relationship outcomes may come about, it seems likely there

will be no further calls for a positive science of relationships. A science of relationships will suffice.

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