



keynote article

Positive orientation: Turning potentials into optimal functioning**Gian Vittorio Caprara*¹**¹ “Sapienza” University of Rome, Italy**Background**

Over recent years, a rapidly growing body of research has focused on human strengths and individual optimal functioning. Findings point to the critical role that people's evaluations of themselves, their life and their future exert with respect to their wellbeing and success across a variety of domains of functioning (Diener & Suh, 2000; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999). In particular self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism, are often correlated with a number of outcomes that attest to individual optimal functioning and feeling good, such as health, job success, and interpersonal positive relationships (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener 2005; Pyzczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arnt, & Schimel, 2004; Scheier & Carver, 2001).

All three constructs correspond to enduring knowledge structures about oneself and the world that significantly affect one's feelings and actions, shape the present and predispose to future experiences. Life satisfaction refers to one's overall evaluation of different activities and relationships that make one's own life worth of living (Diener, 1984). This overall judgment summarizes the degree of gratification one ultimately draws from the multiple activities and relationships that have marked her/his life. Self-esteem refers to one's global self-regard and to the degree of acceptance of herself/himself (Harter, 1999). This overall judgment reflects the manifold person/situation transactions that mark one's course of life, as people draw recognition from what they accomplish with others over the course of time and across diverse life contingencies. Although one should not underestimate the costly pursuit of self-esteem under severe contingencies (Crocker & Park, 2004) or the risky consequences of an exaggerated opinion of oneself (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003), one cannot doubt about the beneficial effects of self-esteem along the entire life-span and in various life domains (Du Bois & Tevendale, 1999; Emler, 2001). People with high levels of self-esteem adopt more efficacious strategies in pursuing their goals, are less prone to give up in front of obstacles and adversities, feel more control over life events, are at lower risk for anxiety and depressive symptoms and have better health outcomes (Baumeister, 1993; Greenberg, et al. 1992; Kernis, 2003). Optimism refers to a view about future personal and social events in which good things will be plentiful and bad things

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scarce (Carver & Scheier, 2002). The beneficial effects of this view have been largely documented in various settings and life circumstances. In particular, optimism has been found positively correlated with physical health, effective coping strategies, successful recovery from diseases, and longevity (Maruta, Colligan, Malinchoc, & Offord, 2000; Scheier & Carver, 1985, 2001; Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny, & Fahey, 1998).

The high degree of inter-correlation between life satisfaction, self esteem and optimism lead to focus on what they have in common and ultimately to hypothesize that they rest upon a common latent factor, namely a common mode of viewing at the world and facing reality that affects the ways people construe their experiences and predispose to action (Caprara, Delle Fratte, & Steca, 2002; Caprara, Steca Alessandri, Abela, & McWhinnie, 2009).

What is common to Self-esteem, Life Satisfaction, and Optimism

In earlier studies several thousand subjects, equally distributed by sex and age between 20 and 80, filled out a questionnaire including items to assess life satisfaction, self esteem, and optimism (Alessandri, 2008; Caprara, Alessandri, Tisak, & Steca, 2009). Results from these studies, demonstrated that life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism, were positively and strongly correlated to each other. Moreover, in confirmatory factor analyses life satisfaction, self esteem and optimism were modeled as indicators of a common latent factor and ►

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showed high and statistically significant positive loadings on the common factor (Caprara, Alessandri, Tisak, & Steca, 2009). Likewise the explained variances of the three indicators were uniformly high, and fit indices attested to a good match between the conceptual model and the observed data (Alessandri, 2008; Caprara, Alessandri, Tisak & Steca, 2009; Caprara, Delle Fratte & Steca, 2002). Subsequent studies attested to the generalizability of these findings across linguistic and cultural contexts, in Japan, Germany, Spain and Canada (Caprara, Alessandri, Gunzenhauser, Peirò, Trommsdorff, & Yamaguchi 2009; Caprara, Steca Alessandri, Abela, & McWhinnie, 2009).

Stability and predictive value of Positive Orientation

Longitudinal findings attest to the high stability of positive orientation during the course of adolescence (Alessandri, 2008; Caprara, Alessandri, Tisak, & Steca, 2009). Furthermore, positive orientation was a strong predictor of measures tapping depression, positive and negative affectivity, quality of friendship and health, as well as others indicators of individual optimal functioning at school and at work (Alessandri, 2008; Caprara Alessandri, Tisak, & Steca, 2009), over and above the unique and summative power of self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism.

The genetic of Positive Orientation

A twin study has examined together self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism, with the aim to unravel their common genetic and environmental architecture (Caprara, Fagnani, Alessandri, Steca, Gigantesco, et al. 2009). Multivariate genetic analyses revealed that a model assuming genetic and unshared environmental influences as partly common to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism, and partly specific to each trait, provided a clear portrait of the genetic architecture of positive orientation. Heritability (defined as the proportion of total variance in a trait due to genetic variance) for the three first order component of positive orientation was: 73% for self-esteem, 59% for life satisfaction, and 28% for optimism. Moreover, the genetic factors common to the three variables accounted for at least three-quarters of the heritability of each of them. Environmental effects explained an important part (40%) of the variance of optimism, but showed a weaker impact on the variance of self-esteem (5%) and life satisfaction (8%). For each trait, a sizeable amount of variance (22% for self-esteem, 33% for life satisfaction, 32% for optimism) was accounted for by environmental factors that are specific to the trait. Shared genetic factors were responsible for large components of phenotypic correlations. Genetic correlation (that measures the extent to which two traits are affected by the same genes) was estimated at .80 for self-esteem and life satisfaction, .83 for self-esteem and optimism, and

.87 for life satisfaction and optimism.

Turning potentials into optimal functioning: challenges and future directions of research

The above findings converge in pointing to positive orientation as a basic pre-disposition that may account for individuals' adjustment and achievements to a considerable extent. Whereas one may wonder whether any change is possible, interventions designed to nurture and to strengthen a positive view of oneself, life and the future, represent a major challenge for researchers, clinicians and health psychologists. Even though genes may determine our average set-point for positive orientation, they are probably not responsible for our position within our personal range of variation at any particular time. The influential role of unique experiences deserves particular attention in order to identify the strategies more suitable to promote individual flourishing.

In this regard previous findings point to the contributions of self-efficacy beliefs to positive orientation within the frame of social cognitive theory that places self efficacy beliefs at the core of human agency and provides direction to target properly the processes and mechanisms that enable people to exert control over the course of their life and to contribute actively to their happiness (Bandura, 1997; Caprara, 2002).

In particular earlier findings have corroborated a conceptual model in which one's perceived self-efficacy in managing affect, influences one's perceived efficacy in managing interpersonal relationships and both in concert contribute to positive orientation (Caprara & Steca, 2005; 2006ab). Recent findings highlight the contribution of positive orientation to perceived efficacy and further clarify the contribution of perceived efficacy to positive orientation over time. In particular perceived emotional efficacy and social efficacy contribute to lower order components of later positive orientation, namely self-esteem and life satisfaction, over and beyond the high stability of positive orientation across time.

These results, although preliminary, appear particularly encouraging as they show that self-efficacy in dealing with affect and social relations may significantly contribute to strengthen positive orientation. In this regard, social cognitive theory attest to mastery experiences as effective means to promote self efficacy beliefs and provide directions to design and implement proper interventions to enable people to deal effectively with affect regulation and interpersonal relations. ►



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Conclusion

The interest in the positive features of individual functioning has gained greater attention over the last decades in accordance with the theoretical and empirical growth of the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The above program of research points to human strengths and aims to disclose new ways to promote human potentials. Positive orientation has been the name given to what life satisfaction, self-esteem and optimism share in common, likely a pervasive mode of facing reality, reflecting upon experience, framing events and processing personal and interpersonal experiences along time and across life circumstances. The studies summarized above attest to positive orientation as an important pre-disposition that may exert a great influence in colouring individuals' view of life and in seizing their potentials. Recent findings attest to the pivotal role that self-efficacy beliefs in the domain of affect regulation and interpersonal relations, may play towards promoting individuals' positive orientation. ■

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