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Commentary on [Cultivating Positive Emotions to Optimize Health and Well-Being](#)

## On Studying Positive Emotions

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### ABSTRACT

[Fredrickson \(2000\)](#) presents a provocative new model of the function of positive emotions. The originality and significance of her approach lies in the implications of the broaden-and-build model for the study of optimal human functioning. That is, Fredrickson makes a persuasive case that learning how to cultivate positive emotions will ultimately advance knowledge of how to enhance health, resilience, and well-being. In this article, a number of questions raised by the concepts of "broadening" and "building" are discussed. For example, it is argued that the broadening concept needs greater definitional precision. Fredrickson's analysis may also benefit from consideration of the conditions under which negative emotions "broaden and build" and positive emotions have narrowing or negative effects. Finally, because of the model's immense generativity and a lack of sufficient empirical evidence, it is critical that Fredrickson's hypotheses be put to empirical test.

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[Fredrickson \(2000\)](#) has proposed a provocative new model of the function of positive emotions. According to the broaden-and-build model, positive emotions broaden people's "momentary thought–action repertoires" and build their physical, social, and intellectual resources. Applying this model to a diverse set of research findings on strategies for treating problems associated with negative emotions (e.g., relaxation, behavioral, and cognitive therapies), Fredrickson persuasively argues that these strategies share a common mechanism underlying their effectiveness — that is, all of them evoke positive emotions. Because the

thought–action repertoire is broad during positive emotions, it is hypothesized to be incompatible with the narrowed thought–action repertoire associated with negative emotions. Moreover, Fredrickson holds that the effects of intervention strategies "are likely to go beyond treating and preventing problems that stem from negative emotions and into the realm of building personal strength, resilience, and wellness" (¶ 31). Herein lies the originality and significance of her approach. Learning how to cultivate positive emotions is presumed to advance knowledge of how to enhance health and psychological well-being. Fredrickson makes a strong case that positive emotions do not simply make people feel good, but that they also serve to alleviate problems associated with negative emotions as well as promoting overall mental and physical health.

Indeed, the broaden-and-build model suggests an exciting "upward spiral" that may underlie the path to happiness and health. That is, the experience of positive emotions leads to the broadening of people's thought–action repertoires and the building of personal resources, which in turn predisposes people to experience positive emotions at later moments, which in turn leads to broadening and building, and so on. Fredrickson's concept of an upward spiral is in itself a potentially powerful new idea that could be applied by future investigators in a variety of different contexts.

Another important implication of [Fredrickson's \(2000\)](#) proposal is that the practice of strategies that cultivate positive emotions should prove fruitful not just for individuals plagued by negative emotions, but for "normal," healthy people as well. Indeed, the broaden-and-build model is uplifting because it predicts that momentary experiences of positive emotion can have lasting positive outcomes. This notion must surely be comforting in light of growing evidence that affective traits like happiness and optimism have large heritable components and appear to be stable over the life course (e.g., [Costa & McCrae, 1980](#); [Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999](#); [Lykken & Tellegen, 1996](#); [Scheier & Carver, 1993](#)). If chronically unhappy, neurotic, or pessimistic individuals can learn to cultivate positive emotions at least some of the time, then they may experience some of the same benefits (i.e., health, resilience, and well-being) as those "lucky" enough to be born with sunnier dispositions.

## **Broadening and Building: Further Questions**

[Fredrickson's \(2000\)](#) provocative arguments raise a number of questions, especially concerning the broadening and building components of her model. To my mind, the most promising and exciting aspect of this model is the idea that positive emotions build personal resources — resources that are durable and can be tapped at a later point in time. This notion of building is much more persuasive, I believe, than that of broadening. Accordingly, I will first discuss several questions and concerns pertaining to the concept of broadening and then consider the concept of building, as well as issues pertinent to both concepts.

Fredrickson offers a compelling argument that (a) positive emotions evoke changes in cognitive activity (as well as physical action) and (b) those changes are not necessarily specific. However, her proposal that such changes in activity reflect a broadening of a person's momentary thought–action repertoire, leading to "broadened scopes of attention, cognition, and action" (¶ 19), needs greater definitional precision. That is, what exactly is meant by broadening? Throughout her article, Fredrickson equates the following terms and phrases with this concept: The thinking and behavior of people who exhibit broadening is presumed to be flexible, creative, generative, unpredictable, unusual, and receptive to a wide

range of ideas and actions. In addition, such individuals are hypothesized to have the capacity to "integrate those momentary experiences into an enriched appreciation of one's place in the world" (¶ 33), as well as to show constructive and flexible coping, abstract and long-term goals, and greater emotional distance following stressful events. By contrast, a broadened thought–action repertoire is presumed *not* to be rigid, shallow, scattered, structured, predictable, fixated, or unfocused. Unfortunately, at the present time, these descriptions of the broadening concept may be far too broad, encompassing numerous and wide-ranging ideas, to render the concept a strong theoretical tool. Indeed, there is a danger that readers of these descriptions might conclude that *any* thought and behavior that is positive, constructive, and beneficial may be construed as broadening.

A further question that needs to be addressed is, what is the reference point for broadening? That is, is the broadening associated with positive emotions presumed to occur relative to the narrowing associated with negative emotions, or alternatively, do positive emotions broaden relative to a neutral or typical state of affairs? To offer a specific example, [Fredrickson \(2000\)](#) argues that because joy, exhilaration, and amusement spark the urge to play — a generic, nonspecific thought–action tendency — they thereby broaden an individual's thought–action repertoire. Yet these positive emotions broaden with respect to what? Does the experience of joy broaden as compared to experiences of sadness or anxiety, or as compared to experiences of simply neutral states?

In sum, although I expect that Fredrickson's concept of broadening may indeed be the key to the many benefits of positive emotions, she needs to specify the definition more precisely and, furthermore, to test novel predictions derived from the broadening concept. For instance, one might begin with an a priori definition of broadening, listing its essential features, and then generate predictions for how people showing a broadened thought–action repertoire might behave in the laboratory. Measuring breadth promises to be a fruitful, although admittedly difficult, endeavor.

In addition to the issue of definitional precision, a number of questions arise from the broadening concept. First, is it possible for negative emotions to lead to broadened thinking or behavior? For example, [Fredrickson \(2000\)](#) writes that people experiencing positive emotions "typically maintain their focus within the emotion-relevant domain (e.g., the specific love relationship, playful episode, or target of interest), but are at the same time generative of, or receptive to, a wide range of ideas and actions within the domain of their focus" (¶ 19). One could argue, however, that people can often be quite creative or flexible or receptive to different alternatives when fleeing a particular situation or fighting an object of anger.

Second, can people experiencing positive emotions sometimes show narrowed thinking or behavior? For example, with respect to the positive emotion of interest/curiosity, [Fredrickson \(2000\)](#) argues that "the openness to new ideas, experiences, and actions is what characterizes the mind-set of interest as broadened, rather than narrowed" (¶ 13). Furthermore, she maintains that interpersonal (i.e., sexual) interest is associated with a momentarily broadened thought–action repertoire. However, it is possible that the opposite also holds. That is, curiosity can lead to a narrowing of interest onto a particular object or topic, and sexual interest in a specific individual surely represents a narrowing of thinking and behavior. For another example, in reference to negative emotions, Fredrickson writes that "when angry, individuals may dwell on getting revenge or getting even, when anxious or afraid, they may dwell on escaping or avoiding harm, when sad or depressed, they may dwell on the repercussions of what has been lost" (¶ 28). Alternatively, it could also be

noted that joyful people may dwell on a recent success, curious people may dwell on a piece of trivia, and people in love may dwell on their specific partners.

Not coincidentally, analogous questions can be posed with reference to the concept of building. That is, (a) can the building of personal resources occur in the presence of neutral or negative emotional states?, and (b) do positive emotions always "build"? In her article, Fredrickson implies that people build physical, social, and intellectual resources for survival *only* in the presence or as a consequence of positive emotions. However, the question of whether the building of personal resources is specific or unique to positive emotions deserves further study. For example, it can be argued that a great deal of learning may take place during negatively-toned or challenging situations and events (e.g., those involving stress, anxiety, anger, shame), that people may gain social support or courage or physical prowess during traumatic events, and that negative emotions may sometimes foster creativity or insight. Related to the above point, it is notable that positive emotions can sometimes have negative effects — for example, curiosity can lead to danger ("killing the cat"); finding positive meaning in daily events can lead to ignorance of the "big picture," or the world at large; and contentment can lead to complacency, passivity, lack of vigilance, or deficits in motivation.

Finally, two questions come to mind with respect to both the broadening and the building components of Fredrickson's model. First, are all positive emotions equally likely to broaden people's thought–action repertoires and build their personal resources? In answer, the broaden-and-build model may benefit from consideration of the structure of affect.

According to a growing number of emotion researchers, positive emotions are said to differ both in levels of pleasure (or pleasantness) and in levels of activation (or energy; see [Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1999](#), for a review). Do positive emotions varying in the degree to which they are characterized by these two dimensions also vary in their positive effects? For example, Fredrickson's analysis implies that both low-activation positive emotions (e.g., contentment) and high-activation ones (e.g., joy) are equally likely to lead to broadening and building, but this question can only be addressed with further research.

Second, what is the temporal (or, indeed, causal) relationship, if any, between broadening and building? In the abstract, as well as in the original statement of her theory ([Fredrickson, 1998, 2000](#)), Fredrickson proposes that the broadening of the momentary thought–action repertoire has the effect of building a person's resources. However, throughout this article, she implies that there may be two separate pathways, respectively, for broadening and for building. Future research could clarify this issue.

## Conclusions

To my mind, the power of [Fredrickson's \(2000\)](#) model, and its application to treatment intervention, lies in its generativity. That is, as any strong theory should, the broaden-and-build model generates numerous predictions and promises to stimulate a great deal of future research. At present, however, empirical evidence to support the predictions derived from the model is either lacking, weak, or indirect. As a case in point, consider her application of the broaden-and-build model to the emotion of contentment. Support for the presumed broadening and building effects of contentment presently comes only from theoretical writings, and these, unfortunately, are not sufficiently relevant or precise. For example, Fredrickson reports that contentment "carries the urge to savor and integrate" ([¶ 17](#)) momentary experiences and "feel 'oneness' with others or the world" ([¶ 16](#)). However, as yet

there is no evidence to support these conclusions, and indeed, it is difficult to imagine how one would test them. Furthermore, it is not yet convincing that these properties of contentment (e.g., savoring, oneness, or reflection) necessarily reflect a broadening of people's thought–action repertoires or the building of their personal resources.

In sum, as Fredrickson herself acknowledges, it is imperative that her hypotheses be put to empirical test. Indeed, the broaden-and-build model should invigorate research on positive emotions and positive affective traits, granting both young and experienced investigators alike renewed purpose and impetus to pursue work in this area. Such research efforts hold great promise for advancing the study of optimal psychological functioning and the positive side of human life.

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