

Positive Psychologists on Positive Constructs

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McNulty and Fincham (in press) offer compelling evidence that constructs such as forgiveness and optimism can have both beneficial and adverse consequences, depending on the context. Their caution about labeling particular psychological processes as “positive” is timely and well-taken. I fear, however, that their article propagates a misunderstanding of positive psychology – namely, that positive psychologists believe that the constructs or processes they investigate are “good” and should be promoted. To the contrary, the far majority of positive psychological scientists (despite their infelicitous label) simply argue that such topics as optimism, well-being, and courage should be studied. Thereafter, they let the data speak for itself. If optimism, happiness, kindness, or forgiveness have deleterious effects for certain individuals, under specific conditions, or when practiced or expressed in particular ways, then the results are all the more interesting, challenging common assumptions and calling for more research. As Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) eloquently argue in their book, *Practical Wisdom*, no trait or virtue is inherently good, and wisdom is needed to determine the right way to act “in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time” (pp. 5-6). Research, like that of McNulty, Fincham, and their colleagues, is needed too.

References

- McNulty, J. K., & Fincham, F. D. (in press). Beyond positive psychology? Toward a contextual view of psychological processes and well-being. *American Psychologist*.
- Schwartz, B., & Sharpe, K. (2010). *Practical wisdom: The right way to do the right thing*. New York: Riverhead.