

Review

Cultivating Positivity to Achieve a Resilient Society: A Critical Narrative Review from Psychological Perspectives

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Abstract: With the rapid speed of globalization and technological breakthroughs, current social issues have become more complex than in past decades. As many issues such as pandemics, terrorism, and interracial conflict are realistically unpredictable, the idea of resilience offers an intuitively plausible and attainable strategy to deal with these potential adversities. The current narrative review explores the cultivation of positive emotions and traits as a plausible way to achieve a resilient society. Based on research in the social and industrial organizational psychology literature, we reviewed the role of positive emotions and traits on resilience. Lastly, we highlight important experiences and interventions that have been shown to be effective in cultivating positivity and discuss several potential considerations and boundary conditions.

Keywords: positivity; optimism; resilience; psychological perspectives; adversity

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1. Introduction

Current social issues have become more complex than the past decades [1]. In many countries, the rapid speed of globalization and technological breakthroughs have accelerated issues such as the aging population, changing family structures, social inequality, and the increasing diversification of culture and beliefs [2–6]. These issues are further exacerbated by potential threats, including terrorism and disease outbreaks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic [7–9]. As a result, a successful society can be partly dictated by how they adapt to the changes and how resilient they are when adversities occur [10,11]. Since many of the aforementioned adversities are both inevitable and unpredictable, the idea of resilience offers an intuitively plausible and attainable strategy to deal with adversities instead of unrealistically allocating limited resources to safeguard from all potential risks. Therefore, it is important to consider how to achieve a more resilient society to realistically prepare for potential changes and threats.

In the current review, we argue that cultivating positive emotions and psychological traits (e.g., optimism and self-efficacy) could accelerate the pathway towards a resilient society. Based on a narrative approach, the current narrative review begins with our conceptualization of positivity and resilience. We then discuss why negativity is not adaptive. Subsequently, we review evidence in social and industrial organizational psychology literature that could be translated to explain the importance of positivity in increasing resilience. Lastly, we explore important experiences and interventions that have been shown to cultivate positivity and discuss several potential considerations and boundary conditions.

2. Conceptualization of Positivity and Resilience

It is noteworthy that positivity is a broad and multidimensional construct. To establish the scope of the current review, based on well-established research in positive psychology [12,13], we focus on two important aspects of positivity: positive emotions and

positive psychological traits. Positive emotions refer to pleasant or desirable situational responses, ranging from interest and contentment to love and joy but are distinct from positive sensation (e.g., satiety, comfort) and undifferentiated positive mood [14,15]. Positive psychological traits refer to cognitive and emotional traits that focus on one's strengths and virtues [16] and indicate positive psychological functioning, such as optimism, self-efficacy, and dispositional gratitude [17–22]. Thus, positivity in the current review is restricted to both positive emotions and psychological traits.

For resilience, following Bergami et al. [23], we conceptualized resilience as a continuous process of anticipating and adjusting to environmental changes [24] and the ability to overcome disruptive events [25]. This conceptualization of resilience fits well with the background of the current review that focused on crisis management in view of the complexity and unpredictability of current social issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, an aging population, and terrorism. While the conceptualization focuses on individual-level resilience, it is important to note that individual-level resilience is essential for building higher-order-system-level resilience, such as a resilient society [23,26].

3. Why Is Negativity Not Adaptive?

Before we start our discussion on the importance of positivity, some may argue that instead of positivity, negativity in the form of pessimism can be an adaptive strategy to prepare for the worst in face of uncertainty in the future [27,28]. Similarly, one may also argue that negativity is an adaptive coping strategy to deal with potential disappointments [29]. However, some of these justifications may not be accurate. There is a misunderstanding that negativity is similar to prevention focus—which is an orientation to emphasize safety, responsibility, and security needs [30]. It is entirely plausible for an individual to be highly prevention-focused in their actions but at the same time feel positive and optimistic about their decisions. As such, negativity is not a specific type of coping strategy. In fact, research in psychology has demonstrated that those who feel negative and pessimistic regarding their future will be less likely to take charge of their own destinies [31] and engage the necessary efforts and resources to persevere in the face of obstacles [32,33]. Moreover, negativity has been found to be associated with psychological states and behaviors that are less likely to be useful in decision-making processes during a crisis [34–36]. Translating these research findings to the current issue, it suggests that negativity may adversely impact one's ability to cope with potential adversities. Indeed, high levels of negativity in individuals could also create the self-fulfilling prophecies of their own negativity if they behave in non-resilient ways [37]. Given that negativity could be detrimental to national progress towards a resilient society, we turn our focus to positivity and translate research in psychology to explain the importance of positivity in increasing resilience.

4. Positivity and Resilience

Research in social psychology and industrial organizational psychology have accumulated impressive evidence that suggests both positive emotions and traits could enhance resilience [18,38–41]. We begin by translating research that examines the broaden-and-build effect of positive emotions on resilience from the social and personality psychology literature. Subsequently, we review research in industrial and organizational psychology that has investigated positive psychological constructs, such as hope, efficacy, optimism, engagement, and organizational citizenship, in relation to resilience. Within these two sub-disciplines, we also explore research that examines the effect of positivity on cognitive abilities, such as creativity, which may facilitate resilience.

4.1. Positivity in Social Psychology

One theory that supports the influence of positivity on resilience is the broaden-and-build theory [40]. The broaden-and-build theory posits those discrete positive emotions, including joy, gratitude, interest, contentment, pride, and love—although conceptually distinct, all share the ability to broaden one's thought-action repertoires and positively build lasting personal resources, ranging from physical resources to socioemotional and intellectual resources. The theory further posits that enduring personal resources due to positive emotions will facilitate coping with stress and adversity. Supporting the broaden-and-build theory, a study by Tugade and Fredrickson [42], where a time-pressured speech preparation task was administered to induce highly stressful situations, found that participants who reported a high level of psychological resilience showed higher levels of positive emotions even before the speech task was introduced. More importantly, the effect of self-reported resilience on lower levels of cardiovascular activation following the speech task was mediated by positive emotions, suggesting that positivity fuels psychological resilience. Consistent with this finding, other studies have also found that positive emotions fuel post-crisis growth in the wake of terrorist attacks [43], help people effectively recover from stress both in daily life and during bereavement [41], and have a motivational effect on individuals by increasing persistence and effort in the face of adversity [43].

Moreover, existing research has shown that positive emotions not only fuel resilience but may also build psychological resilience over time [44–47]. Cohn et al. [48] showed that daily experiences of positive emotions—consisting of amusement, awe, compassion, contentment, gratitude, hope, interest, joy, love, and pride—predict increases over time in psychological resilience. Relatedly, Gable et al. [49] found that positive emotions expressed during interactions between romantic partners predict increases in relational resources, such as commitment, satisfaction, intimacy, and love, over a 2-month period, which in turn served as a protective factor when the couples were confronted with negative-event discussions.

In summary, research findings based on the broaden-and-build theory have demonstrated that positivity is an important factor for individuals to be able to cope with social issues and bounce back when potential threats occur. More importantly, during a peaceful time, focusing on improving positive experiences would increase psychological resilience and allow individuals to cope with future adversities.

4.2. Positivity in Industrial and Organizational Psychology

In the field of industrial and organizational psychology, positive psychological constructs, such as efficacy, optimism, and hope, have been widely studied in relation to resilience. For instance, an employee's efficacy—defined as the employee's confidence about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, or courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task—has been shown to be strongly associated with adaptiveness and resilience [50–52]. Similarly, efficacious employees were found to possess positive expectations for goal achievement accompanied by tenacious pursuit and persistent efforts toward accomplishment [53]. Even when a setback or challenge occurs during a process of change, efficacious employees were likely to attribute the setback to external, one-time circumstances and immediately consider alternative pathways to goal success. These adaptive and resilient outcomes have also been found in employees with high optimism and hope in their future with their organization [54–56]. Perhaps, more importantly, individuals with efficacy, optimism, and hope were found to generate more creative and innovative ideas to adapt to potential stressors [57,58]. For instance, Speier and Frese [59] demonstrated that employees with high self-efficacy were found to prefer training that enables them to restructure their roles innovatively to adapt with potential organizational changes. Although most of the reviewed studies focused on individual-level resilience, it is noteworthy that individual-level resilience is a constituent of

organizational resilience, and organizational-level resilience is essential for building higher-order-system-level resilience, such as a resilient society [23,26].

Other than efficacy, optimism, and hope, which are commonly grouped under psychological capital [60], other positive work-related constructs, such as job satisfaction, authentic leadership, emotional knowledge, workplace belongingness, and organizational commitment, have also been shown to be closely associated with resilience and better decision making [61–68]. Cullen et al. [69] demonstrated that employees with higher job satisfaction require less assistance in adapting to workplace changes than employees with lower job satisfaction. Similarly, employees with higher affective organizational commitment were associated with better acceptance and coping outcomes during organizational changes [70]. These findings from industrial and organizational psychology highlight the importance of enhancing positive psychological traits—such as efficacy, optimism, and affective commitment—to adapt and cope with any possible changes and crises. Moreover, studies have demonstrated that individuals who have positive attitudes and are efficacious, optimistic, and hopeful about their future are more likely to be able to cope with possible societal changes and bounce back quickly and persevere when conflicts and crises arise.

5. Discussion

5.1. Considerations When Cultivating Positivity

Research evidence from both social and organizational psychology indicates that positive emotions and psychological traits not only motivate individuals to persist against stressors but also allow them to see innovative solutions to the problems they are facing and prepare them for any adversities in the future. Therefore, positivity is an important factor to achieve a resilient society. However, there are many pre-existing factors that may undermine the effort to cultivate positivity.

When individuals in societies exhibit high negativity, the attempt to cultivate positivity would require a more thorough consideration. This is because the pre-existing negativity would bias any genuine attempt to increase positivity. One mechanism that complicates the attempt to increase positivity is confirmation bias, which is the tendency for people to tend to seek, perceive, interpret, and create new evidence in ways that verify their pre-existing beliefs [71,72]. Research has demonstrated that confirmation bias is one of the most pervasive cognitive biases that could be unconsciously exhibited by many people in different contexts [73]. The prevalence of confirmation bias suggests that individuals who have pre-existing pessimistic attitudes regarding their future are more likely to be skeptical when they are presented with positive information about their future outlook. Other than confirmation bias, research in negativity bias has also demonstrated that negative events have a greater effect on one's psychological state and processes than neutral or positive events of similar intensity [74]. Consequently, negative impressions and negative stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than their positive equivalences [75]. These asymmetries between negative and positive events could exacerbate the difficulty of cultivating positivity because increasing positivity requires more effort and persistence than increasing negativity.

5.2. Experiences and Interventions to Cultivate Positivity

Even though confirmation bias and negativity bias can exacerbate the difficulty of increasing positivity, the existing research findings do not suggest that positivity is fixed and not modifiable. In fact, research in social and personality psychology has established that positive emotions and psychological traits are malleable and can be improved in most contexts [76–78]. For instance, many experiences and interventions, such as counting blessings [79–81], visualizing one's best possible self [82,83], loving-kindness meditation [84,85], experiencing or witnessing kindness [86,87], engaging in prosocial behavior [88–90], and mindfulness practices [91–93], have been shown to be effective in increasing

positive emotions and psychological traits. Furthermore, research has shown that positive emotions and psychological traits can be cultivated through several important factors, such as increasing trust [94–96], increasing social engagement and support [97,98], reducing conflicts and stressors [99–101], inducing a sense of meaning [102,103], promoting inclusiveness and diversity [104,105], and, most importantly, increasing exposure to positive experiences and emotions [16,78,106].

5.3. Maladaptive Positivity

While positivity has been shown to facilitate resilience, it is noteworthy that some constructs of positivity can be maladaptive on the extreme side. For instance, research has demonstrated that an unhealthy level of self-efficacy and optimism may lead to optimism bias, which causes the person to believe that they are at less risk of experiencing a negative event [107]. Other research has demonstrated that high levels of positive emotions are associated with gullibility [108]. These findings suggest that positive emotions and psychological traits could compromise adaptivity and resilience to some extent. Therefore, there is a need to accompany positivity with realism to ensure the effectiveness of positivity in facilitating resilience.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, positive emotions and psychological traits are essential factors to achieve an adaptive and resilient society. Psychological research has established that positivity not only motivates individuals to persist against stressors but also allows them to see innovative solutions to the problems they are facing and prepare for any adversities in the future. Our review suggests that cultivating positive emotions and psychological traits will accelerate the goal towards a resilient society that can overcome new challenges caused by unpredictable situations.

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