




2017

# Genuine, Independent, Holistic, and Appropriate: Four Considerations for the Optimization of Positive Interventions

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Obermann, Luke August, "Genuine, Independent, Holistic, and Appropriate: Four Considerations for the Optimization of Positive Interventions" (2017). *Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) Capstone Projects*. 111.  
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# Genuine, Independent, Holistic, and Appropriate: Four Considerations for the Optimization of Positive Interventions

## **Abstract**

People desire to be happy but do not always know how to do so. As a relatively new field of psychology, positive psychology offers a host of research and positive interventions aimed at increasing positive emotions to improve well-being. But these interventions must be applied with care. Valuing, pursuing, and expressing happiness have each been associated with negative outcomes, creating the need for a greater understanding of how to optimize positive interventions. This paper assists in this goal by characterizing positive interventions as a form of emotion regulation that actively seeks to upregulate positive emotions. Upon reviewing research on effective emotion regulation, this paper offers four considerations for optimizing positive interventions: authenticity, autonomy, dialectics, and context. Positive interventions should allow for authentic emotional expression. They should support the autonomy to select and modify interventions. The dialectics of well-being illustrate the need to mitigate positive emotions and include negative emotions in positive interventions. Finally, examining personal and cultural context highlights the need for context-sensitive interventions. Considering each of these aspects while implementing positive psychology will help the field further its mission of enabling others to flourish.

## **Keywords**

positive psychology, dangers of happiness, positive interventions, emotion regulation, authenticity, autonomy, dialectics, context

## **Disciplines**

Cognition and Perception | Other Psychology | Personality and Social Contexts | Social Psychology

Genuine, Independent, Holistic, and Appropriate:  
Four Considerations for the Optimization of Positive Interventions

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A Capstone Project Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Robert Biswas-Diener

August 1, 2017

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### Abstract

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### Acknowledgements

This capstone represents the culmination of the most challenging and fulfilling year of my life and the beginning of my professional journey into positive psychology. It would not have been possible without the steadfast support and encouragement of many close mentors, friends, and family. Though I cannot hope to list each individually, there are a few to whom I would like to specifically express my gratitude.

Several people have supported my academic journey in positive psychology. First, I want to acknowledge my undergraduate advisor, Donna McMillan, who offered an introductory course to positive psychology in my final year of college. By showing me the power of the positive, you turned a lifelong math nerd into an aspiring psychologist.

I could not be more grateful to have my graduate advisor, Robert Biswas-Diener, as an incredible mentor and teacher throughout my capstone. Not only did you provide selflessly of your time and energy this summer, but you also expanded my positive psychology horizons far beyond what I had learned at MAPP and challenged me to become a better thinker and applier of positive psychology.

This year would have been impossible without the support of my coworkers. While many people stepped up to cover me in busy situations so that I could focus on school or travel to Philadelphia, I want to especially thank Drew Killian. Thank you for encouraging my interest in employee well-being and allowing me to flourish at work even when I was busier than ever.

The MAPPsters have supported each other in incredible ways. Thank you to my fellow Taco Kitties: Ryan Wynia, Jackie Gaffaney, Chira Cassel, and Patricia Joo, who welcomed me into their group with open arms and allowed me to experience how a cohort thrives. Special

thanks to my dear friend Denitsa Marinova. I ended my first and last days of MAPP by talking to you, and my MAPP year would not have been the same without your companionship.

I am very grateful to my Philadelphia host, Maxine Schwartz. I could not ask for a more gracious and caring host to welcome me to Philadelphia every three weeks at any hour of the night. If you are ever in my city, you will always have a place to stay.

Thank you to my girlfriend and rock, Sandy Shepherd. Perhaps more than anyone, you understand how challenging this year has been for me at times. When the stress of my schoolwork or job threatened to topple me, it was your steadfast love and care that kept me going. I am so excited to reclaim the time that I can spend with you.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Thank you to my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who always support my goals. My parents, David Obermann and Stacy Sakoulas, have always encouraged my wildest aspirations and especially supported me throughout this year. You contribute to my well-being in ways that years of positive psychology cannot hope to accomplish. And to my dearest friend and brother, Kyle, your indomitable spirit and restless pursuit of your passions inspire me to strive for my potential every day. You are, for me, the optimal positive intervention.

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### Genuine, Independent, Holistic, and Appropriate:

#### Four Considerations for the Optimization of Positive Interventions

Few would argue with the statement that they would like to feel happier. Many consider the pursuit of happiness to be an inalienable right that offers a fulfilling life of positive emotions and well-being. Yet, when examined more closely, this objective presents a number of unsettling questions. If someone is not happy, should they fake it? Should we force people to be happier? Is it acceptable to experience negative emotions? Should people strive to be happy in all situations? To answer these questions, and to understand how to pursue well-being effectively, it is first necessary to examine the origins of positive psychology and its current interventions, the limitations thereof, and the subsequent new wave of positive psychology aimed at fostering holistic well-being. Second, I will argue that positive interventions are a form of emotion regulation and that this perspective provides insights into how to improve their application. Finally, I will illustrate that by considering the role of authenticity, autonomy, dialectics, and context in emotion regulation, we can optimize positive interventions to better increase well-being for all.

#### **The Past, Present, and Future of Positive Psychology**

To understand the importance of optimizing positive interventions, it is first necessary to give a brief overview of today's unique positioning of positive psychology. I will do this in five steps. First, I will describe the origins of positive psychology and key theories of well-being. Next, I will illustrate current research on existing interventions and then discuss the dangers inherent in such pursuit of happiness. Fourth, I will explain how these limitations have given rise to a second generation of positive psychology. Finally, because of the challenges facing the field, I will argue that the time is ripe for a new set of optimized positive interventions.



## Theories of Well-being

Positive psychology, as a field, was institutionalized in 1998 (Peterson, 2006). This was the year that Martin Seligman was elected president of the American Psychological Association (APA) and took it upon himself to lay the foundation of positive psychology as a formalized field (Peterson, 2006). Interestingly, he originally felt that he would focus on prevention and interventions that target the many disorders before they become severe. During the years after World War II, psychology had greatly increased its focus on treating such mental illness due to the distribution of funds and the preponderance of veterans needing care (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This disease model of psychology provided the field with many insights and allowed severe mental disorders to be researched and treated effectively. However, Seligman realized that continuing such a psychology of suffering would only illuminate part of the human condition (Seligman, 2002). Additionally, he argued psychology should focus on the strengths, traits, and conditions that lead to a fulfilled and happy life, and in 1998, during his presidential address to the APA, he called for the creation of positive psychology. Almost two years later, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) published their seminal introduction to the field.

In their introduction, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued that positive psychology would allow psychology to return to fulfilling its original three missions of “curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent” (p. 6). While funding in the post-World War II era had allowed psychology to effectively pursue the first mission, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi believed positive psychology would serve a valuable role in advocating for the second two. In particular, they argued that positive psychology research can be separated into three main realms: (a)

subjective experiences such as well-being, satisfaction, and flow, (b) positive individual traits such as the capacity for love, talents, and values, and (c) positive institutions facilitating the advancement of the first two domains (Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Importantly, they did not argue that psychology should cease its focus on curing mental disorders. Rather, they hoped to remind the field that it “is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). In this way, positive psychology can be viewed as a movement to broaden the focus of psychology to include the scientific study of the positive (Rebele, 2015). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) hoped that by doing so they would enable psychology to build the factors that allow flourishing at the individual, community, and societal levels.

Over the next two decades, Martin Seligman continued to have an impact on the field. In particular, he created a framework for well-being known as PERMA (Seligman, 2011). He argued that flourishing is the goal of positive psychology, that flourishing is also the standard for measuring well-being, and that well-being is composed of five unique elements that are often pursued for their own sake and are measured independently of each other. These five elements are positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (Seligman, 2011). Seligman drew this list from existing research from positive psychology pioneers such as Fredrickson (2009) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) who authored many studies on positive emotions and engagement, respectively. Nevertheless, it would be remiss to suggest that Seligman’s (2011) theory of well-being was the first theory of well-being. Indeed, philosophers and scientists alike have been studying happiness and well-being for centuries.

The desire to understand how to live an excellent and full life goes back as far as the Ancient Greeks and Aristotle and is linked with the term *eudaimonia*. It was Aristotle who

coined the term and it is a word that is often used to represent well-being in positive psychology today (Melchert, 2002). Noticeably, Aristotle argued that eudaimonia entails more than simply feeling happy. Rather, he defined it as living in the most excellent way in accordance with reason. He believed that if you use reason to rationally navigate the mean between virtues throughout life, then you are living a life of excellence and eudaimonia (Melchert, 2002). This term lay dormant but resurfaced in the modern era when Waterman attempted to conceptualize the elements of eudaimonia in the 1990s (Biswas-Diener, n.d.). Shortly after the formalization of positive psychology, approaches to well-being began to be categorized as either eudaimonic, characterized by the utilization of objective standards for the good life, or as hedonic, in which the good life is defined through subjective experiences. Both approaches offer important contributions to understanding well-being, although they are by no means the only way to conceptualize happiness. Nevertheless, eudaimonia is now inextricably tied to positive psychology (Biswas-Diener, n.d.).

Since Aristotle's time, there have been a number of religious and philosophical references to happiness. Christianity treats its pursuit as a punishing reminder of our earthly banishment from eternal grace with God (McMahon, 2013). In the Enlightenment, however, attitudes towards happiness began to shift. During this era, it became crafted as a basic entitlement of life, that itself was worth striving for. In this way, The United States boldly declared the pursuit of happiness to be an inalienable right in its founding document. Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill once again reversed the importance of pursuing happiness for its own sake. Instead, he argued that happiness was only attainable as a byproduct of the pursuit of an unrelated purpose (McMahon, 2013). Each of these attitudes towards happiness treats it differently. Some value it for its own merits and others argue that it

should not be explicitly pursued. This will become more important as we examine the limitations of current approaches to positive interventions below. Nevertheless, these philosophical and theoretical approaches to well-being were not the only conceptualizations of the topic prior to the advent of positive psychology. Scientists also established empirical approaches to measuring it.

One of the earliest and most well-established conceptualizations of well-being was created by Ed Diener in the 1980s. He argued that it is primarily composed of positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction, and that it can be measured across a variety of different life domains (Diener, 1984). This model became known as subjective well-being (SWB) and is supported by decades of empirical research. Among the findings include the many situational influencers of subjective well-being, including its heritability through personality traits, the importance of setting appropriate and achievable goals, and the tendency to habituate to situations causing positive affect (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Further correlates of subjective well-being include the findings that wealthy nations outperform poorer ones, religious people have higher subjective well-being, marriage is an important positive factor, and that job morale and education level are also important for well-being (Diener et al., 1999). This research combines to paint a picture of subjective well-being as a relevant factor in many life outcomes, and one that is determined in part by situations, by genetics, and by cognitive processes.

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) has emerged as a widely used instrument for measuring SWB. (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). It was conceived with the assumption that life satisfaction is an internal and personal judgment based on an evaluation of one's situation compared with internal standards. Thus, a subjective questionnaire served as an accurate and useful assessment tool (Diener et al., 1985). Both subjective well-being and

satisfaction with life are considered by many to be hedonic measurements of happiness, as they primarily address one's subjective affective experience (Biswas-Diener, n.d.).

A well-known and empirically validated concept of eudaimonic well-being is known as psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Ryff and Keyes (1995) argue that psychological well-being is composed of six distinct dimensions of wellness, including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. They use this framework as a counterpoint to Diener's subjective well-being, in that they believe true well-being is better construed objectively than subjectively. They reinforced this claim by performing a factor analysis demonstrating the fit of each of the six independent factors for measuring well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Psychological well-being has now become another commonly included dependent variable in studies measuring the impact of interventions on positive outcomes, even though it was created long before the official founding of positive psychology.

In the years since its inception, positive psychologists have continued to add to the wealth of theories and constructs related to well-being and flourishing. In addition to PERMA, satisfaction with life, subjective well-being, and psychological well-being (Diener et al., 1985; Diener et al., 1999; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011), researchers have studied concepts such as character strengths, (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), meaning (Steger, in press), resilience (Reivich & Shatté, 2002), and human connections (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011), to name a few. Nevertheless, much of the contribution of positive psychology does not lie in its theoretical and empirical research, but rather in its practical impact on the world through interventions.

### Positive Interventions

At their core, positive interventions are positive psychology's means of direct application. Although this may seem like a simple explanation, deeper consideration reveals how complicated it can be. There are a number of possibilities to consider when defining positive interventions including questions about the definition of the positive, whether positive refers to an outcome, process, or context, and whether positive interventions are generally effective. Several practitioners and researchers have attempted to address these issues in creating their own definitions of a positive intervention.

One of the major issues for positive psychologists to consider is the definition of the positive. Pawelski (2016) approached the challenge of defining positive by considering the historical and modern definitions of the word. He argued that it has been defined as both (a) the presence of, and (b) the desirability of an object, and that these two dimensions then combine into four quadrants as shown in Figure 1.

*Figure 1.* Conceptualizing the two dimensions of the positive.<sup>1</sup>

	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
	Desired	Undesired
Presence	Directly Positive – Presence of the Preferred	Directly Negative – Presence of the Dispreferred
Absence	Indirectly Positive – Absence of the Dispreferred	Indirectly Negative – Absence of the Preferred

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “Defining the ‘positive’ in positive psychology: Part II. A normative analysis,” by J. O. Pawelski, 2016, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(4), p. 359. Copyright 2016 by Taylor & Francis. Adapted with permission.

As illustrated, something can be directly positive or negative, thereby increasing the presence of the preferred or dispreferred respectively. Alternatively, it can be indirectly positive or negative by removing the dispreferred or preferred respectively (Pawelski, 2016). Both directly and indirectly positive approaches are ultimately positive outcomes. Nevertheless, Pawelski (2016) argues that positive psychology improves outcomes by pursuing the directly positive, while clinical psychology focuses on the indirectly positive through removing pathology. The question then remains of whether the directly positive should refer to the ultimate outcome of an intervention, or one of its constituent elements.

Pawelski (2009) argues that positive interventions can be deconstructed into five components:

1. The desired outcome of the intervention.
2. The target system in which the intervention will occur.
3. The target change of the intervention.
4. The mechanism that affects the change.
5. The specific intentional activity recommended by the positive intervention.

Pawelski (2009) hopes to enable others to create new interventions by manipulating certain elements while holding others constant, thereby creating multiple combinations of different positive interventions. But which element needs to be positive? Pawelski believes a positive intervention must intend to increase well-being with a non-clinical or positive target population, through a directly positive method, or both (personal communication, September 10, 2016). Nevertheless, Parks and Biswas-Diener (2013) argue that each stand-alone definition cannot hope to practically include all positive interventions because they necessarily serve as post-hoc rationalizations for research that has already expanded. Therefore, they offer a set of

criteria which they believe encompasses all positive interventions. First, a positive intervention should aim to increase a positive variable, or be directly positive in method. Second, empirical evidence should exist that the intervention both successfully increases the target variable and eventually leads to positive outcomes for the participants (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). In this light, a positive intervention must create a positive outcome through utilizing a positive method.

These attempts to classify, define, and deconstruct positive interventions illustrate the difficulty in creating a concrete definition. There are initial challenges that come with the definition of positive. Is an intervention positive when it successfully increases well-being no matter the mechanism? Or does positive mean that it should always work through positive phenomena? Furthermore, must it necessarily be performed on a non-clinical population? These are challenges that positive psychologists continue to address. But while appropriately defining positive interventions is certainly important for the progress of the field, interventions are ultimately measured by their empirically validated success or failure. This is a critical point for positive interventions and one that Pawelski also makes: they need to be distinguished from popular self-help strategies by the research upon which they are based (personal communication, October 2, 2016).

Existing research on positive interventions points both to their effectiveness and a need for greater nuance. Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of over fifty positive interventions with four thousand individuals and ultimately indicated that positive interventions significantly enhance well-being and alleviate depressive symptoms. However, they also identified several moderating variables that, when present, increased the effects of the interventions. These variables include participant factors such as age and psychopathology, the role of personal choice in selecting interventions, and intervention duration. Their review also



indicated that positive interventions are generally more effective when they are split into multiple activities to maintain variation and utilized in individualistic cultures (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These variables highlight the potential for improvement. Similarly, in their definition and review of positive interventions, Parks and Biswas-Diener (2013) call for the importance of additional outcome measures of personal well-being to be included in interventions, more nuanced designs that can be contextualized in real-world situations, and the consideration of the potential for positive interventions to do harm. Subsequent research has confirmed that interventions are sometimes accompanied by severe consequences, and it is these and similar concerns that have created the impetus for this paper and momentum towards a future wave of a more nuanced positive psychology and set of interventions.

### **The Dangers of Happiness**

The founders of positive psychology did not intend for positive interventions to eliminate the need for addressing mental illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Unfortunately, this message can easily be drowned out by the loud voices of practitioners who tout happiness interventions, and an exclusive focus on the benefits of positive emotions can also mask the importance of addressing negative ones. Indeed, in the decades since the founding of positive psychology, it has become apparent that valuing, pursuing, and expressing happiness can come with great costs and that people sometimes avoid it for this reason. Understanding the mechanisms behind these dangers provides insight for positive psychology as it develops.

Valuing happiness can directly lead to negative consequences. In one illustrative study, Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, and Savino (2011) found that in happy conditions or times of low stress, an increased value on happiness was significantly correlated with decreased life satisfaction and psychological well-being. They hypothesized that this occurs in situations

where one should easily experience happiness because people who explicitly value it pay closer attention to their positive affect and become increasingly disappointed in its absence when it should be expected. These same researchers have also found that experimentally inducing participants to value happiness caused them to subsequently feel lonelier (Mauss et al., 2012). Given these findings, it is logical to assume that pursuing happiness may not always be appropriate.

Many positive psychologists have been quick to point out that the pursuit of unmitigated happiness is not desirable. Diener and Scollon (2003), for example, argue that the mere fact that happiness is valued differently across cultures implies that it should not necessarily be considered a universal good. Furthermore, they propose that some levels of negative emotions are necessarily adaptive in certain contexts, and that the optimal level of positive affect is not necessarily a linear curve, but rather dependent upon circumstance (Diener & Scollon, 2003). Similarly, Grant and Schwartz (2011) assert that positive phenomena often display nonmonotonic inverted-U-shaped effects characterized by an inflection point in which they are no longer adaptive. They reviewed virtues such as wisdom, courage, love, and justice and showed that each of these examples can produce negative effects at certain points. While positive psychologists are generally aware of the importance of finding the mean, Grant and Schwartz's (2011) commentary serves as a reminder that viewing positive states and attributes as ultimate ends can be ill-advised.

Expressing and experiencing positive emotions can also sometimes be maladaptive. In many cases, positive emotions can have adverse consequences when expressed in inappropriate contexts. For example, when people with a history of childhood sexual abuse, a highly negative experience, showed genuinely positive emotions when describing their abuse, they exhibited

poor long-term social adjustment (Bonanno et al., 2007). Furthermore, although vendors often hope to elicit positive emotions to encourage consumption, the positive emotion of pride combined with a motivation to avoid mistakes actually reduces the likelihood that a consumer repurchases from a vendor (Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2005). Such findings are examples of situations in which positive emotions are not well-suited. Taking this one step further, intensely experienced positive affect is itself not linked to overall well-being (Diener, Colvin, Pavot, & Allman, 1991). Indeed, this may be because it is often accompanied by intense negative affect, a condition observed in bipolar disorder. Diener and colleagues (1991) examined that idea and found support for the notion that intense positive affect and intense negative affect often co-occur via several mechanisms: people use a cognitive set to either amplify or dampen both, the occurrence of a highly positive event can make moderate events be judged worse, negative events can precede highly positive events, and the stronger someone values an outcome the more affect they might experience when it fails to occur. Taken together, these findings illustrate the downsides of valuing, pursuing, an even experiencing positive emotions. It is therefore not surprising that certain individuals and cultures fear happiness.

Joshanloo and Weijers (2014) documented that across both Western and non-Western cultures, people display an aversion to happiness characterized by beliefs that happiness should be avoided for various reasons. Upon reviewing literature and research, they argued that happiness can be avoided because of beliefs that it may make bad things happen to you, it can make you a worse person, and expressing or pursuing it can be bad for you and others (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). In summary, people sometimes avoid happiness altogether because explicitly valuing, pursuing, and expressing positive emotions can be counterproductive. This has deep

implications for positive interventions which often aim to do just that, making it important to understand why this occurs.

As authors of many of the studies citing the dangers of explicitly pursuing happiness, Ford and Mauss (2014) also offer a conceptualization for which mechanisms may cause those consequences. They argue that when people pursue happiness, it is first common for them to set unreasonably high expectations around their desired eventual happiness levels. This can have negative consequences: they may then attempt to express positive emotions in inappropriate contexts or judge their happiness more harshly against a higher standard. Secondly, people sometime engage in misguided activities in their pursuit of happiness (Ford & Mauss, 2014). People are poor at understanding how happy certain actions will make them, and Ford and Mauss (2014) argue that when such activities are engaged in only for their outcomes, happiness levels can decrease. Finally, people who value happiness tend to spend more energy monitoring their happiness levels. This then often disrupts their ability to experience positive affect in the present moment (Ford & Mauss, 2014). These maladaptive aspects of happiness strategies are useful considerations in the development of effective positive interventions.

Positive emotions are not always beneficial. Instead, when misused through interventions, they can carry grave costs and consequences, and even directly impede the increased well-being they intend to produce. Such research has given rise to a second wave of positive psychology, a wave characterized by an increased emphasis on the importance of context and the full scale of emotions.

### **Next Generation Theories of Well-being**

As a relatively young field, positive psychology is still discovering itself. Research on well-being has exploded in the last two decades, and positive interventions are being empirically

validated across academia. New discoveries have given rise to many potential directions for positive psychology to explore as it continues to advance. In addition, revelations about the limitations and dangers of pursuing happiness through positive interventions have also created a movement aimed at reshaping positive psychology. This future positive psychology has been termed many things, including second wave positive psychology (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016) or positive psychology 2.0 (Wong, 2011), and it seeks to include both the positive and the negative, considers context, and emphasizes flexibility, among other factors, to improve the application of the science.

One common theme among the arguments for a reorientation of positive psychology includes greater emphasis on the dialectical nature of well-being. Dunn (2017) offers an illustrative review into some of the challenges facing positive psychology in the coming years. As he examined articles pertaining to many of the accomplishments of positive psychology's first twenty years, he argued that there is a growing need to better understand positive phenomena. In particular, he highlighted studies arguing that optimal well-being is often characterized by both positive and negative emotions, or a mean amount of a positive emotion (Dunn, 2017). Taking this a step further, Wong (2011) outlines his vision for a positive psychology 2.0 in a concept paper he believes should serve as a supplement to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) original introduction to the field. He argues that the greatest challenge for positive psychology 2.0 is to research the symbiotic relationship of both the good and bad, and to create a positive psychology which focuses on the adaptability of both types of emotions and how they interact to form the good life (Wong, 2011). Lomas and Ivtzan (2016) also describe the emergence of a second wave positive psychology that takes an increasingly nuanced approach to well-being. They argue that, above all, second wave positive psychology

should explore the dialectics of well-being involving the interplay of positive and negative emotions. Indeed, they see this as the natural evolution of positive psychology, synthesizing its current form with a traditional psychology that focused on psychotherapy (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Other researchers, however, have also aimed to design the future of positive psychology around additional factors.

Considering the role of context is important and represents the maturing of positive psychology and its interventions. In fact, increasing context sensitivity offers an answer to critics of positive psychology. Sugarman (2007), for example, levels complaints against positive psychology based largely on what he considers to be its misinterpretation of the proper use of character strengths. He argues that Aristotle defined rationality to be the expert use of character strengths based on certain situations. Meanwhile, positive psychology, in promoting the unmitigated use of strengths, has removed the importance of rationally choosing in which context a strength is appropriate to use (Sugarman, 2007). Such criticisms are not unwarranted. McNulty and Fincham (2012) evaluated several positive processes to expose how they can be maladaptive based on context. This led them to argue that positive psychology should avoid labelling emotions with the value-laden terms of positive or negative. Emotions are neither, they are instead simply adaptive based on context, and theories of well-being should account for this (McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Some positive psychologists have subsequently done just that. Ciarrochi, Atkins, Hayes, Sahdra, and Parker (2016) created a DNA-V model for positive psychology that guides its implementation while taking context into account. Their model aims to build Values by promoting Discovery, Noticing behavior, and Advising proper learning based on the presence of self and social contexts. While this is by no means the only way for positive

psychology to incorporate context in its interventions, it is an intriguing example of such an approach.

Finally, psychological flexibility is an additional topic proposed by many proponents of a more nuanced positive psychology. Psychological flexibility involves how one adapts to circumstances, adjusts mental resources when needed, changes perspectives, and balances competing priorities and needs, and it depends on a combination of cognitive functioning, default emotional states, and personality traits (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Based on these mechanisms, it is possible to understand how a flexible model might incorporate a willingness to appreciate both positive and negative emotions and recognize the nuances of context to increase well-being. Indeed, Levin, Hildebrandt, Lillis and Hayes (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of studies to determine whether psychological flexibility impacts psychological outcomes as theorized. Their results indicated that each of the processes thought to be inherent to the psychological flexibility model predicted well-being outcomes (Levin et al., 2012). Because of these findings, Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010) propose that positive psychology should focus on how to target psychological flexibility to optimally increase well-being.

### **Future Positive Interventions**

Research on the potential dangers and limitations of pursuing positive emotion has given rise to a host of proponents of new theories of well-being and positive psychology. Yet to focus exclusively on theory would be to ignore positive psychology's greatest potential for impact: in its application. Just as positive psychology theory should be re-examined and adjusted for the very real dangers of the unmitigated value, pursuit, and expression of well-being, so should its interventions be constructed in ways that increase their effectiveness and reduce the risk of the creation of maladaptive outcomes. This paper aims to offer such an examination into

maximizing the effectiveness of positive interventions. First, I focus on one aspect that appears common to many positive psychology interventions; namely, that they are a form of emotion regulation. Second, upon reviewing literature addressing the mechanics of emotion regulation and the nuances needed for its optimal implementation, I argue that positive interventions may be made more effective through the consideration of four concepts: authenticity, intrinsic motivation, dialectics, and context.

### **Positive Interventions as Emotion Regulation**

Positive interventions are not the first concept aimed at improving affective experience. Emotion regulation is a broader and older subject that precedes and encompasses the main goals of positive interventions. It has also been implemented in forms that have had maladaptive consequences. As such, to assist in conceptualizing the need to optimize positive interventions, I offer an explanation of the theory and mechanisms behind emotion regulation, followed by an examination of the motivations for engaging in emotion regulation as positive interventions, and finally an exploration of the potential costs of emotion regulation.

### **Emotion Regulation**

Emotion regulation refers to the processes that influence the emotions individuals experience, when they occur, and how they are experienced and expressed (Gross, 1998). It describes the conscious effort people make to adjust their emotional experience. Furthermore, emotion regulation theory places no implicit or explicit value on whether it occurs. Rather, it is simply an essential process through which human beings attempt to control their emotional reactions to utilize the adaptiveness of emotional response tendencies (Gross, 1998). In psychology, it is regarded as a key aspect of emotional development, and an increased capacity for emotion regulation leads to improved emotional well-being as people age (Carstensen et al.,



2011; Causadias, Salvatore, & Sroufe, 2012; Sroufe, 1996). This makes sense, as the more one is able to control their emotions to suit their needs, the better they can function. As Gross (1998) opined in his concluding remarks, effective and optimized emotion regulation therefore plays an important role in well-being. This makes it prudent to understand how and why it occurs.

There are several mechanisms through which emotion regulation processes can occur prior to or following an affective experience. Antecedent-focused emotion regulation processes focus on modifying the situation and associated cognitions before an emotion is elicited and can involve four different strategies: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, and cognitive change (Gross, 1998). The former two describe objectively altering aspects of an emotion-eliciting event while attentional deployment and cognitive change involve mental emotion regulation processes that either focus attention or adjust cognitive evaluations. Finally, response-focused emotion regulation refers to modifying an expressed behavioral or psychological emotional response in a desired direction (Gross, 1998). Each of these processes can be utilized differentially throughout an emotional event to attain a desired outcome, and one of these desired outcomes is often positive emotion.

### **Positive Interventions and Emotion Regulation**

Individuals leverage emotion regulation to pursue desired emotional states based on their motivation to achieve specific outcomes. Tamir (2016) defines emotion regulation goals as target emotional states, while emotion regulation motives are the outcomes partially dependent on attaining those specific goals. In other words, to pursue a desired outcome an individual may use emotion regulation to feel a particular way because of the adaptive benefits that emotion bestows. These motives can be classified in two broad categories: hedonic and instrumental. Hedonic motivations explain the fact that emotions are occasionally sought purely for their

affective properties. Instrumental motivations, meanwhile, imply that emotions can be utilized in additional adaptive ways such as to improve performance, gain knowledge, strengthen relationships, and increase meaning (Tamir, 2016). This model helps illustrate how individuals often engage in emotion regulation because of the benefits a certain emotion goal can bestow. Although people sometimes regulate for negative emotions because of their valid adaptive benefits, the majority of emotion regulation strategies involve an upregulation of positive emotions (Quoidbach, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015). Such an upregulation is the precise aim of a positive intervention.

Positive interventions are a form of emotion regulation and can be understood and analyzed through the same processes that characterize emotion regulations strategies. At their core, positive interventions aim to increase well-being, of which positive emotion is an important component, and Ford and Mauss (2014) point out that since positive interventions therefore involve adjusting the experience or expression of an emotion, they are a form of emotion regulation. A meta-analysis of existing positive interventions that sought to characterize them according to Gross' (1998) original emotion regulation process model found that positive interventions target emotion regulation strategies that occur before, during, and after positive emotional events. They are then utilized to increase both short- and long-term positive emotion (Quoidbach et al., 2015). In addition, situation modification, attentional deployment, and cognitive change were identified as the emotion regulation processes targeted by most positive interventions, although many positive interventions utilize more than one emotion regulation processes, and these processes can interact across time and regulation strategies to affect experienced emotion outcomes (Quoidbach et al., 2015). In other words, positive interventions utilize emotion regulation mechanisms to increase positive affect. Conceptualizing positive

interventions as emotion regulation therefore provides us with an understanding of the mechanisms leveraged by such interventions to improve well-being. However, it also sheds light on why they can occasionally produce undesired effects.

### **The Consequences of Emotion Regulation and Emotional Labor**

Examining positive interventions as forms of emotion regulation partially explains their occasional paradoxical effects. The findings that valuing happiness can lower experienced life satisfaction and increase loneliness, among other negative outcomes, may occur in part because positive interventions are a form of emotion regulation (Mauss et al., 2011; Mauss et al., 2012). As Tamir (2016) indicated, although emotion regulation is driven by a variety of motives, it always includes a specific emotion goal. Because the goal of positive emotion regulation is increasing positive emotion, and therefore itself an emotion, this can conflict with the emotions that naturally occur when someone cognitively evaluates their progress towards that goal (Mauss et al., 2011). This creates a paradoxical relationship inherent to positive interventions or other emotion regulations strategies: how one feels about their progress in pursuit of a goal can directly conflict and impede their ability to achieve that very emotion goal. The more frustrated you are at not feeling happier directly makes you less happy. This is an important concept for positive psychology practitioners to remember when creating nuanced interventions, especially when targeted at large groups. Emotional labor illustrates this fact.

Emotional labor is a form of group-level emotion regulation. It originated as a concept prior to emotion regulation, when sociologists studied occupations in which employees were expected by management to control their emotions for customer service (Grandey & Melloy, 2017). Grandey (2000), however, saw the connections to emotion regulation research and conceptualized emotional labor as a form of emotion regulation. This connection is logical, as

emotional labor requires employees to regulate their emotional expression to meet company-enforced display rules. Furthermore, Grandey (2000) connected emotional labor processes to Gross' (1998) antecedent- and response-focused emotion regulation strategies. The two primary processes examined in emotional labor research are deep acting and surface acting. Deep acting is an antecedent-focused emotion regulation process that involves modifying one's actual feelings through attentional deployment and cognitive change, while surface acting utilizes the response-focused emotion regulation process of modifying emotional expression (Grandey, 2000). Each of these strategies can produce different effects, but Grandey and Melloy (2017) additionally call out the influence of context, person, and event level variables in interacting with emotional labor strategies to produce a specified outcome. Examining these outcomes more closely highlights the need for greater care in implementing positive interventions.

Outcomes associated with emotional labor further indicate the need for creating nuanced positive interventions. In many cases, deep acting appears to be a more effective strategy. For example, while deep acting was positively correlated with customer satisfaction and unrelated to well-being in a meta-analysis of emotional labor research, surface acting was found to increase emotional exhaustion, psychological strain, and negative job satisfaction (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Contrasting with these findings, Grandey and Melloy (2017) pointed out that in some situations, surface acting improved performance and job attitudes over deep acting and deep acting appeared to be the less effective strategy in highly negative customer interactions. Ultimately, they argue that the consequences of emotional labor are based on a dynamic interplay of emotion regulation processes and contextual variables. Nevertheless, the very potential for such negative outcomes based on certain emotion regulation mechanisms

emphasizes the need for greater focus on properly implementing emotion regulation interventions.

Research on emotion regulation provides a framework for conceptualizing positive interventions. It also highlights the need for caution in their application. In their examination of positive interventions through an emotion regulation lens, Quoidbach and colleagues (2015) argue that an understanding of emotion regulation processes can help guide the creation of more effective positive interventions. Emotional labor illustrates how this is needed. While coercing employees to upregulate their emotions can be associated with positive outcomes, it can also incur consequences depending on the emotion regulation process used and other contextual variables. With the potential for real harm to come from positive emotion regulation, it is therefore important for positive psychology practitioners to examine variables that may enhance or dampen the effectiveness of a positive intervention. It is with this mission in mind that this paper offers four such considerations.

### **Optimizing Positive Interventions**

This paper has so far examined positive psychology's noble purpose of aiming to increase well-being, the variety of positive interventions designed for this cause, and the potential pitfalls and dangers of those interventions. Furthermore, I have argued that positive interventions are a form of emotion regulation, a concept that further emphasizes the need for a greater understanding of how to effectively tailor their application. In searching for this understanding, I conducted an analysis of literature related to emotion regulation, positive interventions, the dangers of pursuing happiness, self-determination theory, cultural differences, and other fields. Throughout this qualitative literature review, I sought to synthesize common themes contributing to or inhibiting the effectiveness of positive interventions. My final list of

variables is by no means meant to serve as an exhaustive model for tailoring the application of positive psychology. Rather, I hope the responsible positive psychology practitioner will use them as a guide. With that introduction, in the next four sections, I offer authenticity, autonomy, dialectics, and context as important considerations when optimizing positive interventions.

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity is a concept that has existed since long before the origins of positive psychology. Intuitively, people are perceived as authentic when they act and express themselves without pretense or falsehood. Harter (2005), for example, argued that it involves owning personal experiences. Nonetheless, like most psychological concepts, authenticity is more complex than common sense would indicate. There have been a number of different conceptions and definitions of it throughout history and psychology, most of which stress its importance in determining well-being. Humanists argued that authenticity is necessary for openly receiving, interpreting, and acting on emotions, and therefore for personal growth (Mengers, 2014). It has been correlated with the satisfaction of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness inherent in self-determination theory and was one of the early character strengths identified by positive psychology (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Mengers, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). To gain a proper appreciation of its role in application, it is necessary to examine authenticity's historical and modern conceptualizations, its relationship to well-being, and finally how it can be used to craft authentic positive interventions.

**Defining authenticity.** Concepts related to authenticity have been examined in different ways throughout history by philosophers and psychologists alike and each of them emphasized a sense of coherence, unity, and self-knowledge. Ancient Greek philosophers, for example, argued for the importance of knowing oneself and acting accordingly (Harter, 2005). Modern

psychologists have since approached this idea in a number of additional disparate ways.

McAdams (2001) argues that as people develop, they integrate their experiences into constructed life stories. These narrative identities provide their lives with unity and purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The tendency of people to integrate their lives for unity can be conceived as an attempt to authentically incorporate events into one's broader life story. A similar exploration of authenticity is the argument that people experience various levels of integration, defined as aligning aspects of their personality with their organismic needs (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Such integration, when measured by the coherence of one's strivings and goals, and the congruence of how intrinsic those strivings are, is associated with increased well-being. Both McAdams (2001) and Sheldon and Kasser (1995) researched the importance of unity and coherence within the self, which can easily be understood as authenticity. Others have illustrated the dissonance that inauthenticity perpetuates.

Research on cognitive dissonance and the absence of self-knowledge has shed light on the difficulties inherent in maintaining authenticity. Festinger proposed perhaps the most well-known theory of cognitive dissonance and argued that, when experienced, people actively work to reduce dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance is experienced when someone behaves in a way that does not match their private opinions such that their private cognition no longer aligns with the cognition of the knowledge of their behavior (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). They then experience pressure to resolve this dissonance and can even do so by changing their private opinion to match the expressed behavior (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). The presence of dissonance illustrates the importance of authentically expressing one's conscious awareness, but the fact that people change their internal experiences to match inauthentic behavior highlights the vagueness of defining genuine authenticity. Indeed, despite the relative frequency with which

authentic concepts have been mentioned in philosophical or theoretical contexts, there is still no widespread agreement on an empirical model for directly measuring it.

Several scholars have attempted to use measures to define authenticity. Researchers have created multicomponent models of authenticity, measures that understand authenticity to represent behavioral autonomy, and measures that aim to assess one's subjective experience of authenticity (Mengers, 2014). Some have argued that authenticity should be measured as a temporary state in addition to a dispositional trait (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013), and Sheldon, Gunz, and Schachtman (2012) created a measure aimed at evaluating the congruence between one's projected social character and experienced inner self. Each of these models addresses slightly different concepts of authenticity. Perhaps one of the more helpful measures for understanding authenticity is the Authenticity Scale developed by Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, and Joseph (2008) which conceptualizes authenticity in a person-centered format. Their model argues that consistency between one's internal experience, conscious awareness, and outward expression is needed for authenticity to occur. Dissonance between these aspects can create three separate types of inauthenticity: self-alienation, inauthentic living, and accepting external influence (Wood et al., 2008). Self-alienation occurs when one's physiological arousal differs from their conscious awareness. Authentic living necessitates behaving in congruence with that same awareness. Meanwhile, both self-alienation and authentic living can be altered by accepting external influence. Therefore, all three aspects influence authenticity and form the tripartite person-centered concept (Wood et al., 2008). While it is only one model, it can help in explaining the role of authenticity in well-being.

The preponderance of historical and modern conceptualizations of authenticity indicate how intuitively important it is for living a good life. They also illustrate how difficult it can be to



define and precisely measure authenticity. Nevertheless, regardless of the precise definition used to categorize it, one thing is clear: authenticity can be linked to increased well-being. Research supports this idea.

**Authenticity and well-being.** Authenticity is highly correlated with several measures of well-being. As one of the primary measures of authenticity, Wood and colleagues' (2008) Authenticity Scale is a helpful tool for examining this relationship. Indeed, it is highly related to both subjective and psychological well-being, which is notable considering that they each measure slightly different conceptualizations of well-being. It is also a significant predictor of self-esteem (Wood et al., 2008), and Boyraz, Waits, and Felix (2014) found that authenticity as indicated by the Authenticity Scale was significantly correlated with greater life satisfaction and lower distress later in time. In addition, the separate components of Wood and colleagues' (2008) model also appear to each be significant predictors of well-being, as Satici and Kayis (2013) found that psychological vulnerability was positively related to self-alienation and accepting external influence and inversely related to authentic living. The combined research on the Authenticity Scale therefore provides strong evidence for that particular conceptualization of authenticity's relationship to well-being, but it is far from the only support for this general idea.

Additional modern and historical research supports the argument that authenticity is a meaningful contributor to many components of well-being. Historically, McAdams and McLean (2013) point out the importance of life narratives for increased well-being, and Sheldon and Kasser (1995) offer similar evidence in support of integration. Harter (2005) argues for the importance of authenticity by describing how it is correlated with increased self-esteem, more positive affect, high hope and cheerfulness, and adaptive adolescent development. Meanwhile, Mengers (2014) illustrates that authenticity decreases stress, anxiety, and depression, that it

improves the pursuit of authentic goals allowing for perseverance and increased well-being, and that it can increase mindfulness. Each of these outcome variables can be hypothesized to contribute to well-being and Wood and colleagues (2008) even suggest that “authenticity is one of the strongest predictors of well-being” (p. 396). With such an important role to play, it would seem imperative to include authenticity in developing interventions for the application of positive psychology. Examining the existing literature on interventions and authenticity provides further support for this argument.

**Authentic interventions.** Some of the greatest support for the importance of authentically engaging in positive interventions comes from research on emotional labor. As mentioned previously, emotional labor occurs when employees are expected to regulate their emotions to conform with management expectations and it is a common strategy used in customer service positions (Grandey, 2000). Furthermore, one clear distinction in the research on emotional labor is the differing effects between two common strategies that relate to authenticity: surface acting and deep acting. As discussed, surface acting involves inauthentically modifying one’s expressed behavior regardless of conscious experience (Grandey, 2000). Deep acting, meanwhile, entails deliberately striving for authentic cognitive change so that one’s feelings align with the organizations’ prescribed display rules. Because emotional labor is a form of emotion regulation that involves authenticity, it can be used to illustrate the dangers of inauthentically regulating emotions, the possibility of authentically suppressing emotions, and the importance of authentically aligning cognitions and emotional expression in positive interventions.

Surface acting demonstrates the need for positive interventions to avoid coercing others to inauthentically regulate emotions. As discussed previously, surface acting is associated with a

host of negative outcomes and has been found to hurt employee well-being, customer satisfaction, and emotional performance, and to increase job strain when employed as an emotional labor strategy (Grandey, 2003; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). Hülshager and Schewe (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of emotional labor studies and replicated this correlation between surface acting and negative outcomes. They then argued that these results occur in part because surface acting is associated with inauthentic expression. English and John (2013) offer perhaps the strongest evidence that authenticity accounts for this effect. They were interested in understanding whether the consequences of surface acting were due to the negative effects of suppressing positive emotions or to the cognitive dissonance and inauthenticity that results from the misaligned expressed behavior and experienced feelings. They found that reduced social functioning due to surface acting was significantly predicted by inauthenticity, while suppression of positive emotions did not predict the relationship (English & John, 2013). In other words, surface acting, a response-focused emotion regulation strategy, is a maladaptive intervention precisely because it is inauthentic. Positive interventionists should take note, and avoid creating situations in which others feel coerced to suppress authentic emotions. Additional research highlights how suppression can be done authentically.

It is possible to construct response-focused positive interventions that suppress emotions authentically and effectively. Le & Impett (2013) offer support for the idea that one can increase well-being by authentically engaging in suppression. They studied cases where romantic partners sacrificed for their significant others and suppressed the resulting negative emotions they experienced because of that sacrifice. Partners who were not interdependent felt inauthentic when they suppressed their feelings, and such behavior therefore hurt their relationship quality. However, when a participant viewed themselves as highly interdependent and valued

maintaining harmony in the relationship, their suppression of negative emotions about their sacrifice was construed as authentic and improved personal well-being and relationship satisfaction (Le & Impett, 2013). Such research suggests that the costs of insincere expression can be mitigated when aligned with authentic values. Positive interventions, therefore, can encourage the suppression or expression of certain emotions by aligning them with the values of the participants. Nevertheless, it may be best to focus on changing inner feelings so as to behave authentically.

Positive interventions should ultimately aim to support the authentic expression of emotion. As an authentic emotional labor strategy, deep acting can offset the costs often associated with emotional labor. Although surface acting used as an emotional labor strategy is associated with many adverse outcomes, deep acting has been found to improve emotional performance and customer satisfaction (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). This is because deep acting reduces cognitive dissonance by changing one's inner cognitions to align with behavior and it therefore does not compromise an individual's authenticity. English and John (2013), for example, found that deep acting did not correlate with inauthenticity. Prescribed emotional interventions need not have negative consequences. When positive interventions allow for authentic engagement, they can greatly improve one's chances of experiencing positive outcomes.

Overall it is important that positive psychologists consider authenticity when designing and implementing positive interventions. Authenticity has been theorized and shown to correlate highly with several strong measures of well-being. Emotional labor research illustrates the importance of authentically regulating cognitions and emotions to improve well-being. Perhaps what is most important for positive psychologists to take away is that they would be ill-advised

to use their interventions as blunt instruments and prescribed approaches. Instead, practitioners would be better off offering interventions as a guide and allowing participants to authentically engage in ways that feel the most congruent with their inner selves and that allow them to thrive.

### **Autonomy**

Closely related to the concept of authenticity is autonomy. Indeed, to allow an individual to authentically engage in positive interventions in ways that are congruent with their true cognitions and experiences, they must have a certain amount of autonomy to choose their means of engagement. Autonomy, however, has even broader implications. Intuitively conceived as personal freedom of choice and behavior, it is also a major component of a critical conceptualization of well-being: self-determination theory. It is therefore necessary to begin any examination of autonomy with a discussion of self-determination theory to illustrate how autonomy contributes to well-being. It is then important to examine its role in positive interventions. Autonomy can improve the effectiveness of positive interventions by supporting the freedom of both whether and how to engage in an intervention.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-determination theory is a well-known conceptualization of well-being that highlights the importance of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). At its core, it argues that people have three basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Furthermore, the fulfillment of these needs enables people to foster autonomous or intrinsically motivated behavior, which has important implications for regulation and psychological well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory was initially developed after Deci and Ryan (2012) examined research on how external events enhance or diminish intrinsic motivation and determined that differences in autonomy, control, and impersonal orientations predicted intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) developed a

scale of motivation orientations, such that one could move from amotivation to intrinsic motivation depending on how internally they regulated their own behavior. The more intrinsically motivated an individual, the more self-determined they are and they identified the three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness as needs that must be satisfied for self-determination to occur (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Ultimately, then, self-determination theory argues that the more someone is given support for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, the more they can autonomously motivate their behavior to achieve well-being outcomes.

The relationship of self-determination theory to well-being is supported by a host of research. Ryan and Deci (2000) found that need satisfaction indeed enables intrinsically motivated behavior which subsequently enhances mental well-being. They then incorporated their theory into a model of eudaimonic living in which Ryan, Huta, and Deci (2008) argue that eudaimonia implies an intrinsically worthwhile lifestyle and thus requires a pursuit of intrinsic goals. Furthermore, they posit that living eudaimonically entails behaving autonomously, mindfully, and working to satisfy the three basic psychological needs. Doing so will increase subjective well-being, meaning, vitality, and the quality of social relationships (Ryan et al., 2008). Overall, they believe that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness mediates the positive effects of living eudaimonically on well-being outcomes. It is therefore critical to find ways to support and fulfill these psychological needs to allow people to live eudaimonically. When it comes to positive interventions, autonomy is arguably the most important of these. Ryan, Huta, and Deci (2008) admit as much themselves when they claim that “eudaimonia is necessarily rooted in human autonomy” (p. 158).

**Autonomy and positive interventions.** Autonomy can play a crucial role in optimizing the effectiveness of positive interventions. As self-determination theory makes clear,

practitioners of positive psychology should focus on supporting the satisfaction of psychological needs to increase well-being. While positive interventions can be constructed such that they foster a sense of relatedness with others, many of them are performed individually. Furthermore, it is difficult to feel competent engaging in interventions for the first time. In contrast, supporting the participant's psychological need of autonomy by allowing them to select interventions or components thereof is within the interventionist's capability and can effectively enable the pursuit of well-being. Empirical research illustrates how positive interventions can be optimized by providing autonomy support that allows participants to either choose the intervention they engage in or adjust aspects of the intervention, and this is summarized in the person-activity fit model of positive interventions.

Positive interventions should offer autonomy support for participants. The founders of self-determination theory, Brown & Ryan (2015) point out that of their three psychological needs, the "support of autonomy in fostering intrinsic motivation is thus very critical" (p. 144). In an illustration of the importance of this concept, Sheldon and Krieger (2007) set out to examine which conditions could prevent the corrosive effects of law school on student well-being and motivation. While they found evidence that the fulfillment of all three psychological needs improved the subjective well-being of students, this effect was fully mediated by perceived autonomy support. In other words, students who felt that their environment gave them autonomy in turn satisfied their psychological needs and increased their well-being (Sheldon & Krieger, 2007). Positive interventions should aim to support this autonomy, and can do so by allowing participants to decide whether to partake in interventions or to adjust characteristics of their activities.

Self-selection can increase the effectiveness of positive interventions. In their meta-analysis of positive interventions, Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) found that self-selection was a strong moderator on several outcome variables. Individuals who autonomously elected to participate in positive interventions exhibited greater improvements in well-being and decreases in depression than those who did not have this autonomous choice. Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) argued that people should therefore be able to choose whether to participate in a positive intervention. Nevertheless, this does not always translate into the real world where companies and institutions often enforce standards and interventions in which participation is not optional. In such situations, supporting the autonomy of how to engage is crucial.

Positive interventions that are not optional should allow participants to act autonomously within the intervention. Since emotional labor is a coerced form of emotion regulation, it offers insight into the importance of this argument. Grandey, Fisk, and Steiner (2005) sought to understand what factors besides authenticity could mitigate the effects of emotional labor. They hypothesized that the emotional regulation of emotional labor depletes psychological resources thus leading to its maladaptive outcomes, and that, as a psychological need, perceived job autonomy might mitigate this depletion. Their results were consistent with this hypothesis. When employees believed that their jobs provided them with autonomy, emotion regulation was not associated with exhaustion in any way. In addition, job satisfaction improved (Grandey et al., 2005). Since positive interventions are a form of emotion regulation, these findings suggest that interventions that support autonomy within them can offset the dangers of coercing participation. Adding strength to this line of reasoning is a qualitative study performed by Hoffmann (2016) in which she found that members of worker cooperatives, while they also engaged in emotional labor at times, cited the greater freedom of emotional expression when



compared to conventional jobs as one of their greatest enjoyments. Positive interventions should therefore allow participants to act autonomously within them.

The person-activity fit model offers a conceptualization of each of these aspects of autonomy in positive interventions. In developing this concept, Layous and Lyubomirsky (2014) were interested in understanding the mechanisms that enhanced or inhibited the effectiveness of positive interventions. They pointed to evidence illustrating that positive interventions generally produce positive outcomes, but that conflicting research exists that illuminates the need for greater clarity. After a careful examination of theoretical and empirical evidence around positive interventions, Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) then created the positive-activity model in which they argued that a positive intervention works through positive emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and the satisfaction of psychological needs to increase well-being. However, aspects of the intervention, including its dosage, variety, and social support, combine with features of the participant including motivation, self-efficacy, baseline affect, personality, social support, and demographics to optimize or impede the efficacy of the intervention. Ultimately the most effective positive intervention is one in which the characteristics of the intervention and individual match to create a person-activity fit (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). This model is rife with references to the importance of autonomy. To begin with, positive activities are posited to utilize need satisfaction, of which autonomy is crucial, to create their effects on well-being. Furthermore, they argue that individuals who are intrinsically motivated to partake in a positive intervention will maximize its benefits (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Even in their explication of the salient characteristics of positive interventions, Layous and Lyubomirsky (2014) suggest that the optimal timing, dosage, and variety of the activity depend on the autonomous choice of the participant. Ultimately, this model promotes the importance of

incorporating autonomy support into positive interventions by enabling autonomous choice in the participation and modification of positive interventions.

Positive psychology practitioners should strive to respect the autonomy of their participants when implementing positive interventions. Autonomy is one of the key psychological needs that can allow participants to not only feel intrinsically motivated in their engagement of interventions, but that will also increase their well-being by enabling self-determined behavior. It should be incorporated into positive interventions by allowing participants to self-select their preferred interventions or adjust aspects within them. Practitioners can enable this by offering selections of malleable interventions that allow participants to engage autonomously and therefore optimally.

### **Dialectics**

Although positive psychology is associated with an increased focus on positive emotions and well-being, it is important to keep in mind the benefit and adaptiveness of negative emotions as well. Both are necessary ingredients to any complete theory of flourishing, and this interaction between opposing forces has been termed the dialectics of well-being (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Lomas and Ivtzan (2016) argue that the dialectical nature of well-being is apparent in the fact that positive phenomena are difficult to categorize, many emotional states are both positive and negative, and wellbeing necessarily involves both light and dark emotions. In line with this reasoning, I will offer evidence that positive emotions are not the only ingredient needed for well-being, that negative emotions are both adaptive and can increase well-being, and that there must therefore be room for both positive and negative emotions in any application of positive psychology.

**Positive is not enough.** Although we have seen that positive interventions largely seek to upregulate the experience of positive emotions, positive emotions are not necessarily an unmitigated good that in and of themselves provide well-being. Harmon-Jones, Gable, and Price (2013), for example, challenged one of positive psychology's strongest assertions: that positive emotions provide psychological resources that broaden and build horizons and create an upward spiral of well-being (Fredrickson, 2009). Harmon-Jones and colleagues (2013) instead argued that the primary correlation of positive emotions with broadened cognitive processes occurred for positive emotions low in motivational intensity. In other words, when people experienced a positive emotion that included only mild motivation to approach a stimulus, their cognitions broadened. Meanwhile, when they experienced a negative emotion indicative of a highly adverse reaction to a stimulus, they narrowed their cognitions. Harmon-Jones and colleagues (2013) flipped these variables, and illustrated that recent research indicates it is the motivational intensity that predicts a broadening of cognitive scope. In other words, positive emotions with high motivational intensity such as desire, also narrowed cognitive processes instead of broadening them. Ultimately, this means that the inherent positivity of positive emotions is not so simple. Diener and Scollon (2003) agree with this argument and acknowledge that subjective well-being, a powerful outcome variable of positive psychology, is not the ultimate good. They admit that the happiest people experience both positive and negative emotions and do not seek to explicitly maximize the positive. A balance is needed.

Positive emotions are often most effective when their mean is achieved. As previously discussed, Grant and Schwartz (2011) highlight wisdom, courage, love, and justice as examples of positive emotions that are most adaptive when experienced between their extremes. They use these illustrations to suggest that positive phenomena demonstrate nonmonotonic curves in

which they continually produce positive effects until a certain point is reached, at which point their outcomes become negative. Oishi, Diener, and Lucas (2007) lend empirical support to this argument. They found that happiness seems to have a somewhat linear effect on improving relationships and volunteerism, but that it exhibits the proposed nonmonotonic effects for income, education, and political participation. Furthermore, it is also often necessary to balance short- and long-term happiness or intense versus frequent experiences of positive emotion to find the optimal level (Biswas-Diener & Wiese, in press). All of this shows that there are situations in which maximum happiness is not the most adaptive for well-being. This aligns with Aristotle's original concept that eudaimonia be achieved through finding the appropriate mean in each virtue (Melchert, 2002). Thus, positive emotions are often best experienced in a balance. But sometimes they are not all that is needed; it is also important to consider the negative.

**Usefulness of negative emotions.** Negative emotions can be adaptive when used appropriately. A precursor to this idea is affect as information theory which argues that emotions serve a valuable purpose in informing an individuals' behavior (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Schwarz and Clore (1983) illustrated this idea with a study designed at examining how affective states influence evaluations of well-being. They found that participants expressed increased happiness and life satisfaction when in a good mood as compared to a poor mood, and that those in a negative mood were more likely to search for external explanations for their emotional state. This study has several implications for the dialectics of well-being. First, it illustrates one small way in which negative emotions can be adaptive: they prompt individuals to search for additional explanations for their cognitions. On a larger scale, however, this study supports the idea that emotions inform and alter cognitions and behaviors (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Negative emotions, therefore, do not exist solely to make one miserable. On the contrary, it is likely that

they provide key pieces of information as we navigate our complex interpersonal world, and that they facilitate adaptive behavior in appropriate contexts.

Negative emotions can be useful for both interpersonal and personal outcomes. Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014) explain how anger, guilt, and shame can each serve important purposes. Indeed, people even sometimes desire to experience negative emotions because of the adaptive benefits they can provide. In two illustrative studies, Tamir and Ford (2012b) presented participants with a negotiation in which they were either motivated to confront or collaborate with their partners. In the confrontation condition, participants believed that anger, considered to be a negative emotion, would be more useful to them. This then motivated them to achieve an emotion goal of anger and they regulated their emotions accordingly. Furthermore, when motivated to become angry, participants performed better in their negotiations (Tamir & Ford, 2012b). Thus, not only can negative emotions serve adaptive goals, but people can be motivated to pursue them for precisely those reasons.

In addition to their instrumental value, negative emotions can also improve well-being and psychological health. Tamir and Ford (2012a) took their research one step further, and suggested that pursuing different emotions for their instrumental reasons can be more important for well-being than always pursuing positive emotions. They compared participants' general preferences for happiness and anger, their preferences for those same emotions in a confrontation, and their overall well-being and life satisfaction. While they found that general preference for anger is negatively related to well-being, preference for it in the appropriate context of a confrontation correlated with higher well-being. Furthermore, though preference for happiness in general was associated with high well-being, the opposite was true when it was preferred in a confrontation (Tamir & Ford, 2012a). In other words, when people pursue

negative emotions when they are adaptive and avoid positive ones when they are not, they may not only achieve better instrumental outcomes but also higher well-being. Further research supports this claim, and has illustrated that when negative emotions are appropriately pursued for their adaptive purposes, they additionally predict improved relationship adjustment, positive responses to peer rejection, and other measures of psychological health (Coifman, Flynn, & Pinto, 2016). Because negative emotions are therefore both instrumentally adaptive and potential precursors to well-being, people can value them just as they value positive emotions.

Additional research into the value people place on negative emotions illustrates the difficulty in classifying emotions as specifically positive or negative. Luong, Wrzus, Wagner, and Riediger (2016) argue that negative emotions can be valued for a variety of reasons in addition to their instrumental value, including for their hedonic pleasure, situational appropriateness, or meaningfulness. They subsequently hypothesized that the extent to which a person values the experience of negative affect is likely to mitigate the commonly observed relationship of negative affect to poor psychological and physical health outcomes. Sure enough, they found support for this idea in that participants who placed a high value on negative affect did not experience any adverse effects from such emotion (Luong et al., 2016). Aside from the objective usefulness of negative emotions, when valued for their own sake, they can be associated with positive outcomes. Negative emotions are adaptive, provide instrumental and well-being benefits, and are often therefore valued in their own right. With so much potential upside, it would be foolish not to include them in applications of well-being.

**Dialectical well-being.** Because of the observed limitations of positive emotions and benefits of negative ones, positive psychology needs to include both. Accordingly, positive psychologists are increasingly calling for the inclusion of both positive and negative emotions in

theories and applications of well-being. Wong's (2011) call for the advancement of Positive Psychology 2.0 is largely founded upon a balanced model of the good life. He argues that one of the primary characteristics of second wave positive psychology should be understanding the interactions of both positive and negative emotions and their contributions to well-being. Dunn (2017) also expresses this concern in illustrating that a major challenge for positive psychology is to address the fact that it is difficult to exclusively characterize emotions as either positive and negative, and to understand their dynamic interplay. Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010) incorporate this idea in their model of psychological flexibility since one aspect of it is being able to flexibly utilize the adaptive benefits of negative emotions. Each of these theories of positive psychology, when attempting to understand well-being, acknowledges and addresses the dialectics inherent in such a concept.

Lomas and Ivtzan (2016) offer a deeper examination into the dialectical component of second wave positive psychology. They argue that this idea is based on three principles of the interplay of positive and negative emotions. The principle of appraisal explains the difficulty of categorizing an emotion as positive or negative, as illustrated by case studies of optimism, self-esteem, freedom, forgiveness, and happiness in which each emotion has both adaptive and maladaptive effects. Posttraumatic growth and love underscore the principle of co-valence by illustrating that positive and negative emotions are often inextricably intertwined. Finally, the principle of complementarity emphasizes the idea that true flourishing is dependent on both the light and the dark (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). This idea is not antithetical to positive psychology. Rather, just as the initial wave of positive psychology research was meant to balance the negative orientation of traditional psychology, incorporating the dialectics of well-being in second wave

psychology is their necessary synthesis (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). If the field is to theoretically synthesize the positive and negative, so too must its interventions.

Positive interventions should incorporate the dialectical nature of well-being by avoiding an exclusive focus on the positive. Our review has illustrated the dangers of conceiving positive emotion as an ultimate goal, the importance of striving for the emotional mean, the instrumental value of negative emotions, their ability to promote well-being, and the need to combine both the positive and negative in theories of positive psychology. Positive psychology practitioners can utilize this knowledge by avoiding an exclusive focus on positive emotions, emphasizing an appropriate balance of desired emotional states, and utilizing negative emotions when appropriate. This final piece, however, emphasizes the need to understand one additional critical consideration for positive interventions: context.

### **Context**

Much of the argument for optimizing positive interventions thus far has warned against treating them as blunt instruments without allowing space for authentic and autonomous engagement, including through the expression of negative emotions. Implied in such reasoning is the understanding that positive interventions need to have the flexibility to be tweaked for a given individual and situation. In other words, they need to be contextually sensitive. It is this attention to context, or the nuanced real-world situations in which interventions are needed, that may serve the positive psychology practitioner greatest when taking positive interventions created in an artificial lab and applying them in the field. Armed with such sensitivity, a positive psychologist can understand when to allow a participant the autonomy to choose an intervention and when to select one for the group and allow them to tweak other aspects of it. Although there are countless contexts in which positive interventions could be applied that all have different



effects on their outcomes, I use personal and cultural context to illustrate the need for the contextualization of positive interventions. Personal context involves the relative adaptiveness of positive or negative emotions based on each individual situation and cultural context entails how cultural differences between the east and west affect positive psychology. Finally, I will consider the ways in which positive psychology already is and can continue to incorporate context in its application.

**Personal context.** The dialectics of well-being is necessarily dependent on personal context. We have already examined the adaptiveness and instrumental value of negative emotions. Upon further consideration of the research, it becomes apparent that such value is dependent upon individual circumstances. For example, as described in the previous section, Tamir and Ford (2012a) expected different emotions would be adaptive depending on whether a negotiation was collaborative or confrontational in nature. They found that subjects who believed anger to be useful and pursued it in a confrontation experienced greater well-being and adaptive functioning measured by GPA and interpersonal support. Similar findings were observed for happiness in collaborations. By examining general emotional preferences, Tamir and Ford (2012a) did show that an overall preference for anger correlates with lower well-being than a general preference for happiness. Nevertheless, interventions are not conducted in general, they are applied in specific situations, and as Tamir and Ford's (2012a) research indicates, based on the nuances of those circumstances, very different emotions should be preferred.

Coifman and colleagues (2016) strengthen the argument that negative emotions are adaptive based on personal context through a series of studies. First, they illustrated that when negative emotions were expressed specifically regarding a negative film, they improved

relationship adjustment. Furthermore, they found that sadness in response to a life-long disease improved rates of treatment adherence, and that anger in response to peer rejection was somewhat adaptive in the short term (Coifman et al., 2016). Again, such research does not support the idea that anger or sadness are beneficial everywhere, but rather, that in particular circumstances, negative emotions have the greatest effect on positive outcomes. Emotional adaptiveness is dependent on personal and situational context.

The benefits of expressing positive emotions are also moderated by the appropriateness of the given circumstances. Kalokerinos, Greenaway, and Casey (2017) explicitly tied this to emotion regulation. In a series of six experiments they sought to demonstrate that expressing positive emotions is not always an adaptive behavioral strategy and that suppression can be useful depending on context. They did this by having participants watch a film clip which induced positive or negative emotions and then record videotaped interviews in which they were told to either express or suppress those emotions. Furthermore, raters viewed the interviews and were told that the participants had watched a happy or sad clip regardless of what they had actually seen. This created some situations in which raters witnessed an emotion-context match, such as when interviewees expressed positive emotions and raters thought they had seen a positive film. Meanwhile emotion-context mismatch occurred when raters thought participants had seen a sad film but they expressed positive emotions. The results indicated that participants received favorable social evaluations when their emotions matched the context. However, when they expressed positive emotions and raters believed they had watched a negative clip, they received poor social evaluations (Kalokerinos et al., 2017). In other words, when raters believed someone had seen a negative film clip, that person was rated more favorably when they suppressed the expression of positive emotions. This finding even held when the participant

suppressed positive emotions but the rater knew that the person was experiencing them internally, suggesting that expressing positive emotions is only an adaptive response in the right situation (Kaloerinos et al., 2017)! Context dictated whether the expression of a positive emotion was appropriate.

Bonanno and colleagues (2007) reinforce the importance of context for positive emotions in their examination of appropriate response to trauma. They studied the expression of positive emotions among survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Although they found that positive emotional expression was associated with overall improved well-being, when expressed while describing an abuse experience it correlated with lower long-term outcomes. They summarize the importance of these findings up nicely: “Emotions are adaptive to the extent that they facilitate beneficial responses to specific concerns” (Bonanno et al., 2007, p.834). The dialectics of well-being are dependent upon the contextual relevance of both negative and positive emotions, a phenomenon which becomes much more apparent upon examining culture.

**Cultural context.** Culture is a very powerful and constantly salient context. It informs how we behave, our norms and values, and can form at many different levels of society. Because of this, it shapes the perceptions, cognitions, and emotion regulation of people embedded in its context (Triandis, 2001). In the present review, I will focus on how differences in culture between the eastern and western hemispheres can cause people to form different self-construals, how this affects the pursuit of positive emotions, and how it also informs how positive interventions should incorporate autonomy.

The degree to which a culture is individualist or collectivist affects the self-construals of its members. Triandis (2001) characterizes individualism as a culture that conceives of the individual as autonomous and independent while collectivism emphasizes the interdependency of

individuals within groups. He argues that this dimension is the most significant cultural syndrome and indeed, this cultural difference predicts important differences in personality traits, values, self-definitions, motives, cognitions, and emotions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 2001). Markus and Kitayama (1991) particularly focus on how these cultural differences manifest different self-construals. Consistent with individualism, an independent construal of the self considers an individual to be independent, autonomous, and responsive to the social environment because of the need to assert internal attributes. In contrast, Asian cultures view the self as interdependent and an integral part of a collective relationship between the self and others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Unfortunately, psychological theorizing has largely focused on an independent view of the self in which internal attributes are the primary explanations of behavior and Markus and Kitayama (1994) argue that psychology needs to take these cultural differences into account to maximize its effectiveness. Considering them more closely illustrates how cultures may interact with positive interventions differently.

Culture may explain key differences in the value individuals place on attaining happiness and well-being. Tsai (2007) argues that actual affect and ideal affect are separate and important concepts. Actual affect involves an individual's currently experienced emotion while ideal affect is the emotion they would like to feel and therefore strive after. In her affect valuation theory, she argues that differences in actual affect and ideal affect motivate individual pursuit of mood-producing behavior or emotion regulation. Furthermore, cultural factors are a large predictor of ideal affect, and Tsai (2007) illustrates that individualist cultures are more likely to value high-arousal positive states while collectivists emphasize low-arousal positive emotions as ideal. This difference drives emotion regulation, and is therefore likely to play a role in the effectiveness of positive interventions. Furthermore, not only do cultures differ in the types of positive emotions

they value, but whether they place a high value on happiness at all. In fact, many collectivist cultures exhibit an aversion to happiness (Joshani & Weijers, 2014). The idea that cultures vary in the types of emotions they value and are motivated to pursue indicates the need to tailor the delivery of positive interventions appropriately based on cultural considerations. One such alteration involves autonomy.

Positive interventions should consider the interaction of differences in individualist and collectivist self-construals with autonomy. We have already explored how autonomy support is important for optimizing positive interventions, but these effects change with culture. Triandis (2001) emphasizes that one of the primary differences between the two cultures is that individualism emphasizes autonomy while collectivism is not concerned with it. It is therefore worth examining whether autonomy would play such an important role in positive interventions for collectivist cultures. Indeed, some evidence suggests that while autonomous interventions may be well-suited for individualist cultures, collectivist cultures are better served by social activities. Ford and colleagues (2015) found that collectivist cultures were more likely to pursue happiness through socially engaged means, and this led to a positive relationship between motivation to pursue happiness and well-being in those cultures. These findings combine with those of Boehm, Lyubomirsky, and Sheldon (2011) who examined the effects of an optimism and gratitude intervention on improving well-being across cultures and found that while they increased well-being in all cultures, participants in individualist cultures showed significantly greater increases than those in collectivist ones. This is because those were largely independent interventions. Among collectivist cultures, happiness may be best increased through social means, thus explaining the poor effects of the largely individual and autonomous interventions of optimism and gratitude (Boehm et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2015). Reassessing autonomy's role is

just one consideration for positive psychology practitioners to consider because of culture, and culture is only one example of a salient context. Because of this, context is increasingly emphasized in concepts of well-being.

**Contextual well-being.** As previously described, several positive psychologists now aim to include context in their future conceptualizations of positive psychology. McNulty and Fincham (2012) use forgiveness, optimism, and kindness as case studies for the importance of expressing positive emotions in their appropriate context and argue that any examination of positive psychology should incorporate contextual considerations into its research.

Psychological flexibility attempts to do this, as it emphasizes the importance of openly changing between emotion regulation strategies based on the demands of the situation (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Wong (2011) also expressed his hope that positive psychology 2.0 will provide practitioners with a more contextualized theory of well-being, and Biswas-Diener and Wiese (in press) identified both life domain and culture as key considerations for pursuing optimal levels of well-being. This reasoning has also made its way into the development of interventions. Ciarrochi and colleagues (2016) argued that positive psychology has focused too much on creating content-focused positive interventions that emphasize altering personal cognition to increase well-being. In contrast, they believe that context-focused positive interventions should focus on creating applications of positive psychology that are relevant and adaptive to the target environment. They then utilize their DNA-V model to suggest contextual interventions that can allow young people to thrive (Ciarrochi et al., 2016).

Such research is a good start and needs to be continued in developing positive interventions. Interventions should recognize that negative emotions are not inherently bad and positive emotions are not necessarily good; they become so based on their adaptiveness in certain

contexts. Additionally, differences in individualist and collectivist cultures suggest that context can play a major role in changing how individuals value and autonomously pursue happiness. Findings such as this have changed the way positive psychologists conceptualize well-being and should also influence how they design positive interventions. Indeed, only through considering the contextual appropriateness of a given intervention can positive psychology practitioners ensure that they allow for optimal authenticity, autonomy, and dialectics in a given situation so that their participants can truly thrive.

### **In Conclusion**

It is time for greater responsibility to be taken with the application of positive psychology. As a newly institutionalized field twenty years ago, researchers were rightfully justified in exploring the myriad of benefits offered by positive emotions and in creating activities and interventions for realizing such outcomes. But as the field matures, it has become clear that positive emotions and interventions are not always risk free. With the potential to not only help but also harm well-being, some have called for the creation of a code of ethics in guiding the responsible application of positive psychology (Vella-Brodrick, D. A., 2014). This paper is slightly less extreme of a measure, but no less ardent in its call for greater consideration to be taken around the implementation of positive interventions.

As the primary instrument for applying positive psychology in the world, positive interventions should be optimized to meet the needs of their target population. Positive interventions are an important and often used form of emotion regulation that have so far primarily involved upregulating positive emotions to increase well-being (Quoidbach et al., 2015). I do not mean to argue that this format has not been working. On the contrary, the efficacy and benefits of current positive interventions are undeniable (Sin and Lyubomirsky

2009). But they can do so much more when they branch beyond simply upregulating positive emotions at all times. Through the course of this paper, we have examined how positive interventions can be improved by focusing on the authentic regulation and expression of emotional experiences, by allowing for the autonomous selection and modification of emotion regulation strategies, by upregulating both positive and negative emotions to find a harmonious balance, and by adjusting each of these variables in the presence of relevant personal and cultural contexts. Regulating positive emotions through positive interventions while remaining mindful of such considerations can only help positive psychology in its quest to create a thriving world.

Although this paper argues for the inclusion of authenticity, autonomy, dialectics, and context in positive interventions, there are some important limitations to keep in mind. This was a non-exhaustive qualitative review of literature that merely sought to identify some relevant considerations for positive psychology. As such, the four factors offered here are not to be taken as a complete list. It is likely that an empirical meta-analysis of positive interventions could point to additional aspects that deserve more attention. Nonetheless, based on the volume of literature around the considerations offered here, these are still worthy of greater investigation in future research on positive interventions.

Positive psychology has a noble mission. But as with many noble causes and theories it is crucial that practitioners effectively apply its purpose in the real world. Positive interventions created primarily through university laboratory research should not be inflexibly applied so as to force a participant to inauthentically and robotically engage. They should not be so rigid as to focus only on the expression of positive emotions or so blind as to ignore the contextual realities of the situations in which they are utilized. Rather, they should be offered as flexible and malleable tools, free to be adjusted and optimized based on the personality, preferences,



emotions, and context of the participant. When applied in such a way, positive interventions can enable not only the thriving of their target population, but the flourishing of the entire field of positive psychology.

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