

STEVEN R. H. BEACH *University of Georgia*

FRANK D. FINCHAM *Florida State University**

Conflict Can Be Constructive: Reflections on the Dialectics of Relationship Science

The current set of comments is remarkably robust and forthright. We found them refreshing and stimulating and strongly recommend each of them to all the readers of the original paper. The authors were well chosen by the editor to reflect the range and the subtlety of current theorizing in the relationship area, and the disagreements of the commentators with us and with each other highlight the vitality of the debate over our current understanding of the proper place of positive processes in relationships. Obviously we cannot respond on a point-by-point basis to each of the commentators—and in many cases this would be unnecessary because we would simply be repeating what another commentator has already said. The commentators do an excellent job of presenting the subtleties of multiple dialectics and carrying on the debate with each other as well as with us. So, rather than issue a rejoinder, we use our response to affirm each of the commentaries and to highlight what we found most instructive in each. It will likely be obvious that our position is considerably further away from some of the commentators than others, but we believe that it is out of the creative tension between differing perspectives that conceptual progress is most likely to emerge. Indeed, one of the great values of introducing

a focus on positive relationship functioning is the creative tension it produces in the field. Accordingly, we use this opportunity to highlight some of the areas we see as “creative points of tension” and suggest that the discussion may continue fruitfully in these areas in the future.

Before briefly discussing each of the commentaries, we would like to acknowledge that they are outstanding as a set of responses. First, they do an excellent job of demonstrating that many in the field believe that we should not focus on positive aspects of relationships. As we noted in our original paper, the scientific study of families was prompted by compassion toward those who were suffering, and this naturally draws attention toward families who are failing in various ways. The comments also explore a number of areas and nuances of areas that we left unexplored in our original paper, and we are very grateful to them for this elaboration. At the same time, they do a very nice job of highlighting the positive potential that may result from utilizing insights from positive psychology in the study of marital and family relationships as well the potential benefits to the field of positive psychology from a more explicit focus on relationships.

In particular, Walker and Hirayama present a view we believe is common in the study of social and personnel relationships, namely, that “only certain individuals and couples are likely candidates for [having a positive relationship].” As they note, many researchers, perhaps a majority, believe that the others, including most people who live in challenging contexts or have

510 Boyd GSRC, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602
(srhbeach@uga.edu).

*Family Institute, 120 Convocation Way, Florida State
University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1491.

faced significant developmental obstacles, are excluded from any benefits that might emerge from a focus on positive, thriving relationships. Obviously we disagree, but this is an excellent example of a creative point of tension between perspectives. It is extremely important and useful to lay out the case for adopting an unrelentingly negative focus on the chances of success for those who live in challenging circumstances, particularly in the context of examining and working with previously understudied groups. Certainly, even though we may choose to focus on resilience and transformation, there is good reason to focus as well on failure and entrapment.

Likewise, Karney does an excellent job of portraying the moderate position in the field that “the processes that maintain and promote healthy relationships should [not] be studied independently from the processes that contribute to dysfunctional relationships.” Given our arguments that “negative processes” can only be understood if they are studied in the context of “positive processes,” this would seem to be an effective way for Karney to hoist us on our own petard. Even as we agree with the thrust of the criticism, however, we would argue that data of interest can be and have been generated by a focus on positive relationship processes and that, because of the relative imbalance in the field, it is appropriate for these processes to receive increased attention now. In addition, there are often good reasons for highlighting and emphasizing resilience and positive processes when dealing with couples in disadvantaged or underresourced communities. Most notably, a focus on positive processes is a counterweight to the pessimism that such communities commonly encounter, and it creates a basis for partnership between researchers and communities. Indeed, we suggest that the more disadvantaged the community context and the more challenging the couples’ own relationship background, the more likely it is that a focus on positive relationship processes will provide useful information and much needed encouragement. Our commitment to positive processes notwithstanding, we acknowledge their complexity and the need to ultimately present an integrated account of relationships that recognizes not only the relative independence of positive and negative processes in relationships but also the way they may influence each other developmentally and in response to environmental challenges.

Karney asks us to “imagine if economists, unsatisfied with a field that focused disproportionately on poverty, began a movement to balance the scales by studying the rich.” Instead, we would ask that you “imagine if economists, unsatisfied with a science that provided no guidance regarding the escape from poverty, began a movement to balance the scales by focusing on positive avenues out of poverty.” Like those hypothetical economists, we would suggest that researchers have been far too complacent in seeing their role as telling those who are doing poorly that they are likely to continue to do poorly in the future. Frankly, we suspect they could have come to that conclusion on their own without our help. Karney also asks us to “imagine if physicists, to correct a literature preoccupied with how objects get hot, formed a subdiscipline devoted to the study of how things cool down.” We would ask that you “imagine a group of physicists, to correct the preoccupation with visible objects in the universe decided to devote their research, and form groups focused on, the study of dark matter.” What good, we ask, could possibly come from that? As these examples suggest, the problem with Karney’s critique is that he is arguing with the Cartesian scientific method. We certainly acknowledge that this tradition has its limits, particularly when it comes to understanding families, but one cannot seriously argue that breaking problems into component parts and then solving the problem piecemeal is without its success stories.

Complementing these perspectives, Caughlin and Huston argue that researchers studying positive psychology have *not* been overly infected by an individualistic bias and have, in fact, provided considerable attention to positive aspects of relationships. As their comment highlights, there has been a growing recognition within the field of positive psychology that positive aspects of relationships are important. In many ways, this is not so much a criticism of our perspective as an agreement with our fundamental thesis that relationships are a natural part of positive psychology and should be a primary part of the agenda for positive psychology in the future. At the same time, leading figures in positive psychology do not typically emphasize relationship processes. Instead, portrayals of positive psychology more typically emphasize (a) The Pleasant Life, (b) The Good life, or (c) The Meaningful life (Seligman, 2002). In each case, the initial focus

is on experience, engagement, and personal feelings of well-being. Rather than a focus on relationships per se, there is typically only a recognition that relationships contribute to these goals. Hence, relationships are typically presented as being “instrumental” rather than being ends in themselves. We believe this portrayal reflects a culturally induced blindness that still deeply infects positive psychology and is manifested in a relentlessly Western, individualistic portrayal of human functioning. This is why we argue that it is important for the future of positive psychology that there be a fourth pillar, one that might be termed “The Connected Life.” This fourth pillar would explicitly highlight relationship functioning and the central role of “belonging” in all its facets. Such calls are apparently being heard, as evidenced by Seligman’s very recent acknowledgment at the first World Congress on Positive Psychology of the need for a fourth pillar of positive psychology—positive relationships.

Finally, the Maniaci and Reis paper illustrates and introduces an apparently subtle difference in perspective that we agree has the potential to dramatically change the nature of positive relationship science going forward. Despite the fact that they appear to be agreeing with almost all our premises, and indeed are agreeing with us on the basic issue that relational flourishing is not merely the absence of distress and that it is useful to think of relationship flourishing and distress as two functionally independent dimensions (rather than as contrasting endpoints of a bipolar scale), their equation of high appetite with relationship health opens the way to a very different dialectic than the one we have highlighted and would take the field in a somewhat different direction than the one we propose. At the same time, a focus on the appetitive versus the aversive has the potential to be complementary and expand the study of positive processes. Accordingly, we agree that it deserves particular attention and discussion.

The Maniaci and Reis perspective has certain advantages that should be acknowledged. Rather than focus on the distinction between processes that result in benefit versus harm to the relationship or those that are positively valenced or that can be seen as “health promoting,” they suggest that the field would do better to focus on the distinction between appetitive and aversive processes. This approach has the advantage of

paralleling exciting developments in other areas of science and to mapping onto what appear to be fundamental aspects of neural organization. In addition, the terms are more readily defined at an operational level and more squarely in the domain of value-free science. These are all substantial benefits, and we agree that this is an exciting perspective with great potential to advance relationship science. At the same time that we endorse this perspective and its application to relationship science, however, it is not clear to us that it can adequately replace the evaluative dialectic we have highlighted. Nor are we confident that it will provide a simplifying framework that, by itself, will help translation of basic research findings into useful interventions for couples. Rather, we expect that both BIS and BAS systems will be implicated in the elaboration of a positive relationship science.

As Maniaci and Reis note, the dialectic of appetitive versus aversive has some difficulty incorporating such key relationship processes as social support and relationship security. This should give us pause if we are considering this framework as a unifying paradigm for the field. We also note that this framework has trouble dealing with important relationship virtues such as gratitude, sacrifice, trust, loyalty, and fidelity. Again, because these are core constructs with considerable potential applied importance, it should cause us to pause to consider giving them up in order to utilize a particular perspective. It seems likely to us that an exclusive use of the “appetitive versus aversive behavior” framework would tend to guide research away from topics that have traditionally been viewed as very important in the relationship area and that are central to the successful melding of relationship science and positive psychology. As important, an exclusive focus on appetitive versus aversive processes seems limiting in its potential to foster constructive partnerships with communities that have been historically underserved.

Maniaci and Reis ask the question, “Would anyone describe a relationship as flourishing if all that was known was that it was high on commitment and forgiveness?” We would ask the parallel question: “Would anyone describe a relationship as flourishing if all that was known was that the couple knew how to have a good time together on Saturday night?” Maximizing appetitive outcomes does

not fully capture our intuitions about the nature of flourishing relationships. Nor do we think it will fully capture the imagination of potential consumers. At the same time, we agree with Maniaci and Reis that research devoted to better understanding ways to sustain appetitive processes has the potential to inform and expand a positive psychology of relationships. At a minimum then, we strongly endorse the Maniaci and Reis position—even if we are not quite ready to give up our own.

With all the commentators we would agree that the study of positive factors should supplement rather than supplant the study of problematic relationship outcomes. It would be unfortunate if, in our zeal for a positive relationship science, we no longer supported traditional foci of relationship research or quit addressing factors that predict divorce, abuse, and marital discord. Likewise, we acknowledge that for practical reasons, those interested in extramural funding will need to demonstrate

relevance for traditional outcome variables studied. It seems unlikely that there will be significant new funding for marital and family research that focuses only on positive processes in relationships. If, however, the discussion resulting from our paper produces greater attention to the diversity and power of positive relationship processes and their role as an important context for understanding relationship outcomes, we will be more than satisfied.

NOTE

This paper was supported in part by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to both authors.

REFERENCE

- Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Simon & Schuster.