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Of Memes and Marriage: Toward a Positive Relationship Science

Marital and family research has tended to focus on distressed relationships. Reasons for this focus are documented before keys to establishing a positive relationship science are outlined. Increased study of positive affect is needed to better understand relationships, and the best way to accomplish this goal is to embrace the construct of ''relationship flourishing.'' The behavioral approach system and the behavioral inhibition system are described and their potential role in understanding positive relationship processes is described using, as examples, commitment and forgiveness. A link to positive psychology is made, and it is proposed that the study of positive relationships constitutes the fourth pillar of this subdiscipline. Finally, the potential for focus on positive relationship processes to integrate multiple literatures is noted.

> ''The time has come,'' the Walrus said,
> ''To talk of many things.''
> —Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

The biologist Richard Dawkins (2006) provided a metaphor for thinking about the flow and transmission of ideas in his classic text *The Selfish Gene*, when he offered the concept of the *meme*: A *meme* is the conceptual analogue to the gene in that it is the core element of an idea that is transmitted and replicated over time. Instead of DNA replicating within a physical milieu, however, the meme replicates within a given cultural and conceptual context. Just as genes may have multiple alleles, with the frequency of the alleles being determined by environmental selection pressures, memes may also have positive and negative forms, and they may also be subject to selection pressures.

If we use this metaphor to examine the literature on marriage and family, we immediately notice that there are many important memes, but most concern their negative form in that they focus on deficits and dysfunction. For instance, the idea that explanations guide responses to partner behavior gave rise to a substantial literature on attributions in families. In itself, the attribution meme could easily focus on either positive or negative explanations and either positive or negative outcomes (i.e., it could have multiple ''alleles''). In practice, however, the variant that has thrived is the variant focused on the negative, that is, how conflict-promoting attributions play a role in the generation of marital distress and, to a lesser degree, on conflict in parent-child relationships. The literature on positive attributions is sparse in comparison. The value of the meme metaphor is that it directs us to consider the selection pressures in our field that may promote the proliferation of negative conceptual ''alleles.''

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Of course, we do not wish to overtax the meme metaphor. Rather, we use it to highlight the reasons the field has allowed the proliferation of alleles that focus on the negative, and we explore these reasons in the first section of this article. We begin by examining the ‘‘negative is interesting, important, and substantial’’ meme that permeates the field as well as methodological considerations and attentional biases that reinforce this focus. We then turn to consider ‘‘relationship flourishing,’’ a topic that may help counterbalance the field by promoting greater attention to positive relationship process. The second half of the paper discusses some key distinctions for a positive relationship science and, in doing so, briefly discusses two memes, commitment and forgiveness. The link to positive psychology and its rich ‘‘meme pool’’ is made before concluding the article.

Why Has Marital and Family Research Focused on the Negative?

Before addressing the question posed in this section, it is worth noting that a cursory review of publications in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* from 2000 to 2008 yielded findings consistent with our initial premise. Specifically, reference to the negative in article titles and abstracts were plentiful (e.g., ‘‘conflict’’ yielded 76 hits; ‘‘divorce’’ yielded 110). In contrast, positive constructs were mentioned far less frequently, and seldom were they the focus of the article. For example ‘‘love’’ yielded 16 hits and was only truly central to one article, a historical analysis of mate preferences (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2004). Other constructs associated with healthy relationships fared no better (e.g., appreciation yielded 5 hits; commitment, 22; forgiveness, 1; fun, 1) and again were predominantly mentioned in the context of understanding deficits (e.g., marital instability). A similar pattern was obtained from an examination of titles in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, suggesting that the bias is not limited to a single discipline. Although it is no doubt possible to derive somewhat different counts by using different terms, searching key words rather than titles, or expanding the range of journals examined, the relative abundance of attention to negative outcomes is likely to be apparent across a wide range of alternative searches. (Examination of the *Social Science Citation Index* yielded 42 articles with ‘‘family strengths’’ in the title that average 4.41 citations per year. In contrast, 375 articles include ‘‘family conflict’’ in the title that average 224.44 citations per year. In 2008 the former were cited 17 times, whereas the latter were cited 1,256 times. Such data strongly support DeFrain and Asay’s, 2007, observation that ‘‘Most of the research in the 20th Century in America focused on why families fail’’ [p. 302].) This is especially the case when it is noted that many studies that ostensibly examine the bright side of relationships (e.g., marital satisfaction) really seek to understand their ‘‘dark side’’ (e.g, marital distress).

In seeking to understand the focus on deficit and dysfunction (the ‘‘negative’’), it is worth noting that marital and family researchers are certainly not alone in this regard. For example, ‘‘Sociologists of mental health and illness have generally assumed that the only conditions worth studying are those that are problematic and preventable’’ (Horwitz, 2002, p. 148), a sentiment that has been echoed repeatedly about psychologists by those advocating a new positive psychology (e.g., Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This suggests that a widely distributed meme in the source disciplines for relationship research is the view that ‘‘the negative is inherently more interesting and more deserving of attention than the positive.’’

There are at least three good reasons for a pervasive emphasis on the negative in research, and the first alone may help account for the power of this meme to influence the distribution of positive versus negative alleles of other relationship-oriented memes. From an evolutionary perspective, it appears that our attention to and processing of negative events is more thorough than that of positive events, possibly because it is more adaptive to recognize and respond to them. After all, the costs of not doing so may have immediate and irreversible effects (e.g., ignoring the grizzly bear on our path), and so it is not surprising that brain wave activity (evoked response potentials) is stronger for negative than equally extreme and likely positive events (Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998). It is perhaps not surprising that negative events tend to influence cognition, emotion, and behavior more strongly than positive ones (see Rozin & Royzman, 2001). In fact, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and

Vohs (2001, p. 362) argued that research across a broad range of human functioning shows that ‘‘bad is stronger than good in a disappointingly relentless pattern.’’ Happily, negative events tend to be the exception rather than the rule in everyday life (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000), another possible reason for why we attend more to them and see negative behavior as more diagnostic of a person's character than positive behavior (Vonk, 1994).

The second reason for the focus on family distress involves helping those in need. Who can argue against the notion that those experiencing pain and suffering should be helped before those who seem to be doing OK and who are not showing visible signs of suffering? It is this compassionate viewpoint that prompted scientific study of families at the turn of the 20th century, when changing economic and social conditions presented serious challenges to them. With the family being observed to be ‘‘in transition from an institution to a companionship’’ (Burgess, 1926, p. 104), it is not surprising that attention focused on marital quality and on divorce. This focus continued throughout the century and was, according to Glenn (1990), justified on practical grounds. The ‘‘meme’’ in this case is the view that ‘‘alleviating harm is inherently more ethically compelling than is promoting well-being.’’

The third, perhaps most compelling reason for the focus on the negative is that this focus has been very productive and helpful. For instance, research on marital conflict shows it to be a clear risk factor for marital distress/divorce and child problems, with evidence supplied from both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (e.g., Buehler, Lange, & Franck, 2007; Christensen & Walcynski, 1997; Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). The earlier idea that positive reciprocity was critical for marriage (Lederer & Jackson, 1968) proved incorrect because negative reciprocity accounted for substantially more variance in marital outcomes (see Fincham, 2003) and predicted poorer parenting (see Erel & Burman, 1995) and poorer child adjustment (see Fincham, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Because of these associations, conflict enjoys particular attention as a construct of import in marital interventions and in public policy discussions on marriage (e.g., Stanley, 2004). The central idea reflected in this view is that ‘‘it is more scientifically fruitful to study negative processes than to study positive processes.’’

Methodologically Reinforced?

The negative focus also appears to have been reinforced by our research methods. First, there has been little attempt to equate the extremity of positive and negative events studied in marital and family literatures, a task that is extraordinarily difficult. As a result, the negative behaviors studied are typically more extreme than positive ones, which may account for their greater demonstrated impact (Rook, 1998). Second, as already noted, positive behaviors are more common than negative ones. This means that their power likely lies not so much in each occurrence but in their cumulative effect over time. Gottman's (1994) contention that positive behaviors must outnumber negative ones by at least five to one for a relationship to be successful is consistent with this view. Thus, comparisons based on single-event impact may inherently bias us toward the negative. An implication is that one-shot laboratory studies of marriages and families will inevitably yield an incomplete picture of a positive relationship process because they require investigation over longer time frames. Finally, asking about recent relationship events lends itself to the identification of salient, discrete (and therefore likely negative) events to study rather than less salient events whose impact is more cumulative (see also Reis & Gable, 2003).

As a consequence, negative relationship processes (i.e., the negative alleles of relationship relevant memes) tend to be viewed by researchers as more interesting, more important, and more likely to yield replicable results. As a consequence, any new meme introduced in the relationship area will tend to come under selection pressure. If the new meme can show its relevance for negative outcomes and negatively valenced processes, its likelihood of survival is enhanced. As we outline below, however, this selection pressure may be limiting the long-term development of the field in important ways, even from the perspective of understanding negative outcomes.

Toward Understanding Relationship Health

For the reasons we have outlined above, the intellectual milieu has provided strong selection pressure in favor of negatively valenced variants of key memes, and they have proliferated. This

very success, however, prompts the question that we now address.

Do We Really Need to Change Course?

Although the need to help families is compelling, our best efforts will necessarily be limited by focusing only, or primarily, on the negative. It is axiomatic that the impact of negative events on couples and families will likely depend on strengths that they possess that buffer the impact (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Indeed, a literature is beginning to emerge suggesting that understanding ''resilience'' to stress requires assessment of positive relationship context (e.g., Janicki, Kamarck, Shiffman, & Gwaltney, 2006) as well as positive factors outside the relationship (e.g., Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). This literature shows that understanding resilience to negative processes and stress requires assessment of positive contextual factors. These observations suggest that it behooves us to understand relationship strengths and how they might be harnessed in the face of stressors and life challenges. Because this still reflects the bias that constructs are only valuable to the extent that they help us better understand the negative, however, we would argue it does not represent sufficient change to provide the field with increased balance between attention to positive and negative relationship processes.

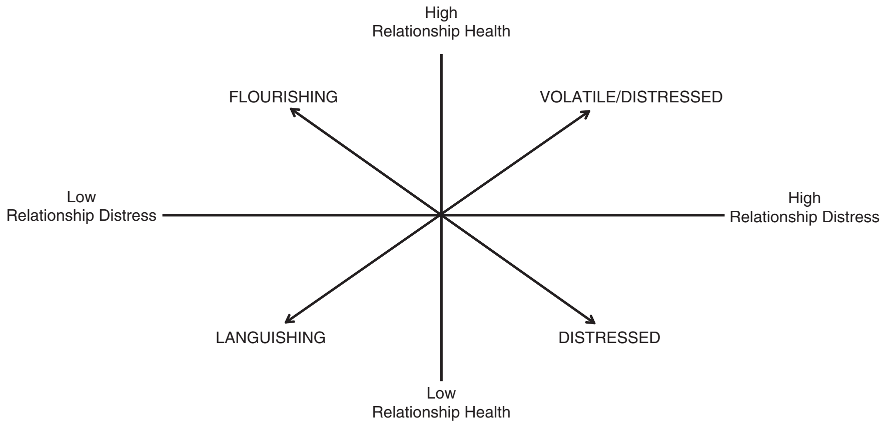
Relationship health is not merely the absence of relationship dysfunction, just as the absence of a physical illness is not sufficient to define physical health. That is, just as the absence of diagnosable disease does not imply freedom from a range of borderline conditions that may compromise functioning or create health-related vulnerabilities (e.g., low levels of good cholesterol, low levels of essential nutrients, limited exercise, chronically increased stress hormones), freedom from relationship dysfunction does not imply freedom from a range of conditions that affect relationship functioning such as relationship insecurity, lack of support, or lack of emotional engagement. Indeed, freedom from these conditions is not well captured by assessments that focus only on the negative, despite their potential significance for long-term outcomes and resilience as well as their importance to families. It is for this reason that positive constructs have begun to push their way into a literature dominated by a focus on the negative.

Presaging the recent emphasis on marital health in public policy, attempts were made a decade ago to identify and promote marital health (see Kelly & Fincham, 1998; Stanley & Markman, 1998). Although the promotion of marital health took root in public policy and has contributed to a thriving literature on preventing marital distress, a disturbing disconnect persists: Preventing relationship suffering does not imply relationship health. It may just as well lead to a devitalized, ''numbed'' marriage, that is, a marriage that is relatively free of pain but is also relatively free of the positive benefits of relationships that would be captured by ''relationship thriving.'' Such a relationship may be described as ''languishing'' and is not likely to be resilient to external stressors or difficulties that may arise within the relationship. At a minimum, we need to focus on positive aspects of relationships to ensure that we have not settled for palliative ''cures'' that do not reflect the deeper aspirations of couples, that is, their aspirations for connection, engagement, and meaning. We argue below that the best way to ensure the development of a more balanced treatment of positive and negative relationship processes is to explicitly investigate ''relationship flourishing.''

Relationship Flourishing

What is relationship flourishing? We suggest that flourishing is not merely relationship happiness, satisfaction, adjustment, or well-being. Instead, it describes a relationship that is emotionally vital; is characterized by intimacy, growth, and resilience (e.g., rising to challenges and making the most of adversities or setbacks); and allows a dynamic balance between relationship focus, focus on other family subsystems, focus on other social network involvement, and engagement in the broader community within which the relationship exists. Many memes may be relevant to the description of relationship flourishing, including commitment, sacrifice, spirituality, emotional connection, partner support, forgiveness, acceptance, trust, respect, positive affect, relationship satisfaction, love, and shared fun. A science of relationship flourishing would seek to examine the way these various processes combine to give the partners in a flourishing relationship a sense of meaning and purpose in life, a sense that their life as a couple is a life well lived. Figure 1 places flourishing

FIGURE 1. A TYPOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS DEFINED BY RELATIONSHIP HEALTH AND RELATIONSHIP DISTRESS.



in context by showing where it fits in the space defined by relationship health and relationship distress.

Imagine having a solid empirical literature that mapped the domain of optimal relationship functioning. How much more potent could our contribution be if we understood relationship flourishing and how to facilitate it (and not just prevent suffering)? For example, we have evidence that positive behavior during conflict is important for predicting changes in satisfaction attributable to negative behavior (M. D. Johnson et al., 2005), but we do not have a solid literature on ways to promote positive behavior during conflict. Likewise, we have evidence that social support buffers the effects of chronic stress on marital satisfaction for wives (Brock & Lawrence, 2008), but we do not have good models of the way this resilience is created. Indeed, when examining the marriage and family literature, one is hard pressed to find systematic research on what makes a relationship flourish or even on what a flourishing relationship looks like. It shows in our treatment outcome data. Although efficacious interventions have been developed for relationship problems, ''a sizable portion of the couples remain distressed at the end of treatment'' (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998, p. 62), and a persistent problem in the treatment outcome literature is the problem of relapse (D. K. Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006). Even when couples therapy moves spouses into the maritally satisfied range (something it does not do reliably even using established approaches; see Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002; Shadish & Baldwin, 2003), there is little in current models of couples therapy to suggest that they flourish, which might help account for why relapse is such a problem.

We believe that marital and family scholars have the potential to offer much more to families. This potential will be realized to the extent that we learn about what makes a relationship fulfilling as well as how to identify and facilitate flourishing, positive relationships.

How do we get there? The path to relationship flourishing. It would be a mistake to infer from the observations made thus far that we are pessimistic. On the contrary, we are optimistic, and our optimism rests on a solid foundation. Marital and family researchers have already begun moving toward a positive relationship science, albeit not always one identified as such. In this section we briefly identify and describe some memes that are fellow travelers with ''relationship flourishing'' before turning to outlining initial keys to developing a positive relationship science.

Family resilience. Longitudinal research on resilience in children and adolescence (e.g., Garmezy, 1991; Luthar, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982) inevitably identified positive family factors as important for resilience (e.g., Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990) and fostered relevant studies under the rubric of family stress and coping research (H. I. McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997). An influential model soon emerged

that outlined how resilient families utilize individual, family, and community resources in adjusting and adapting to both normative (e.g., birth of a child) and nonnormative events (e.g., military deployment of a parent). Although family protective factors vary in their importance by life cycle stage and by ethnicity, common protective factors across the family life cycle include family celebrations, family hardiness, family time and routines, family traditions, family communication, financial management, and personality compatibility (McCubbin et al., 1997). In addition to protective factors, studies of families in crisis identified several recovery factors that facilitate adaptation.

This meme of ''resilience is interesting and important'' reflects a strength-based approach that starts us on the path toward a positive relationship science. In this literature, stress and crisis are not viewed as inherently negative but rather as containing opportunities for fostering healing and growth (H. L. McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; M. A. McCubbin & McCubbin, 1996; Walsh, 2003) as well as the potential for less-favorable outcomes. This is indeed valuable insofar as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Specifically, strengths are not examined as an end in themselves, as integral to the realization of a flourishing relationship. Instead, the positive tends to be valued because of its potential to buffer the negative or to facilitate recovery from a crisis. This is no doubt valuable, but it would be a logical error to assume that what buffers the negative or facilitates recovery, or both, is the same as that which initiates or promotes health and flourishing. Nonetheless, as we shall later see, family resilience has played an important role in helping give birth to the multidisciplinary positive relationship literature we seek to facilitate in this article.

Family Strengths Model. A small but dedicated group of scholars have continued the pioneering work of Woodhouse (1930) and Otto (1962) in elaborating a model of family strengths (see DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002; Mberengwa & Johnson, 2003; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). This work has a strong international element that shows remarkable similarity in family strengths across cultures (see the special issue of *Marriage and Family Review*, 2007). The International Family Strengths Model developed by Stinnett, DeFrain, and colleagues identifies six major qualities of strong marriages and families, namely, appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being, and effective management of stress and crisis.

This work provides a welcome antidote to the earlier mentioned focus on the negative, and it is helpful in identifying what may be universal family strengths. Application of this work and its policy implications have been central concerns to those who work in this area. Not surprisingly, it has had a profound impact in family life education that has embraced a preventive, family strengths approach. Perhaps because the work is largely descriptive, however, it has had a limited impact in the empirical research literature, as noted above. Development of systematic empirical research informed by the family strengths model would be a welcome addition to the literature.

Social support and affectional expression. The robust literature on marital behavior found in psychology has begun to undergo a welcome change. Whereas observation of spouse behavior was previously almost exclusively limited to conflict and problem solving, recent research has begun to focus on spousal support and on affectional expression (Cutrona, 1996). The importance of this development is emphasized by the finding that, although behavior exhibited during conflict and support tasks tended to covary, their shared variance is small (<20%; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). This suggests that somewhat independent systems may exist for positive and negative behaviors in relationships, a point to which we return later. As might be expected, attention to the positive has increased understanding of conflict. For example, compromised conflict skills lead to greater risk of marital deterioration in the context of poorer support communication (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; see also Carels & Baucom, 1999; Saitzyk, Floyd, & Kroll, 1997).

Research on affectional expression also supports the importance of attending to the positive. Specifically, high levels of affection between spouses significantly decrease the relationship between negative spouse behavior and marital satisfaction (Huston & Chorost, 1994). High levels of positivity in problem-solving discussions also moderate the negative effect of disengagement on marital satisfaction 30 months later

(Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990). As regards communication patterns, in the context of high affectional expression the demand-withdraw pattern and marital satisfaction are unrelated, but they are inversely related in the context of average or low affectional expression (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

This work highlights the fact that our understanding of dysfunction and distress is enhanced by consideration of that which can be seen as promoting health. Again, however, an important limitation arises. Successfully enacted support averts or resolves a negative situation (an avoidance motivation that likely leads to relief). This cannot tell us much about approach motivation in relationships, the kind of motivation likely to be necessary for flourishing, and the experience of emotions such as joy, fun, hope, and so on.

Secure attachment. Another welcome change in the marital literature has been the increasing emphasis on secure attachment in romantic relationships and its value as an organizing positive construct. This construct has been highlighted explicitly by some writers (e.g., S. M. Johnson, 2008) as well as indirectly by others in the marital area who have increasingly focused on relationship safety (PREP; Markman, Stanley, Blumberg, Jenkins, & Whiteley, 2004), friendship (Gottman, 1999), and positive reframing of conflict (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). These separate streams in the treatment literature all reflect a profound movement toward a greater focus on the development of positive connection in relationships.

Building on Bowlby's (1969) conceptualization of attachment processes over the life span, Shaver and Mikulincer (2002, 2008) developed a model of attachment system activation and deactivation that has the potential to be very useful to researchers developing a positive psychology of relationships. In particular, they highlight three key stages that should unfold for all attachment related events. That is, (a) events may activate the attachment system, (b) perceptions of partner availability and responsivity may influence continuation of felt security, and (c) efficacy to engage the partner when necessary may determine the continuation of security in the relationship versus emergence of hypervigilance or deactivating strategies. The picture of a secure relationship that emerges underscores the value of relationships in promoting emotional self-regulation and supports the importance of felt relationship efficacy, open communication with responsive listening, disclosure, and validation (S. M. Johnson, 2002, 2008).

Transformative processes. Recognition of some of the developments described thus far led Fincham, Stanley, and Beach (2007) to offer focus on ''transformative processes'' in marriage. This was useful in drawing attention to remission of relationship distress that occurs in the absence of professional intervention, to nonlinear changes in relationships, and to empirically determined, nonarbitrary definitions of marital discord. Although it is a recent addition to the literature, it is not too soon to note an important limitation of this approach in that it falls far short of helping us understand relationship flourishing. But in identifying and reviewing several positively focused memes, it pointed us in the right direction.

In sum, five areas have been briefly noted that point us toward the pool of positive memes. But all have a common limitation: Directing attention to positive relationship characteristics tends to be done in the service of contextualizing negative events that occur within relationships or the broader environment in which they are situated. This has resulted in a far richer understanding of when and how such events influence relationships, and it constitutes a valuable contribution. Nonetheless, in the remainder of this article we make the case for reaching even higher in seeking to draw attention to the underlying approach and avoidance systems in relationships without which, we argue, neither relationship flourishing nor health can be understood.

Keys to a Positive Relationship Science

In this section we identify memes that are likely to be pivotal in the development of a positive relationship science. Lest it appear otherwise, our goal is not to offer a theory of positive relationships, nor even the beginnings of such a theory. It is, instead, to draw attention to some constructs and distinctions that that are likely to be important in developing such a theory.

Positive and Negative Affect Systems

There has been a resurgence in the study of affect over the past two decades in which the

structure of affect has been conceptualized in different ways ''each with its own measurement model, conceptual framework, and accumulating literature'' (Feldman Barrett, & Russell, 1999, p. 10). Common to these conceptualizations, however, is a two-dimensional space in which emotions fall in a circular order around the perimeter of this two-dimensional space. Variability arises in these circumplex models in defining exactly what constitutes each dimension. This immediately puts to rest any notion that affect can simply be viewed as a bipolar dimension with endpoints defined as positive and negative. But some scholars combine such a bipolar dimension with an arousal dimension to define the two-dimensional space (e.g., R. J. Larsen & Diener, 1992; Russell & Carroll, 1999). Within such systems, ''bipolarity says that when you are happy, you are not sad and that when you are sad, you are not happy'' (Russell & Carroll, p. 25). That is, happiness precludes sadness and vice versa.

A challenge to this valenced bipolar view is offered by Watson and Tellegen (1985), who proposed a model with positive and negative activation dimensions. As assessed by their Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), the two dimensions are consistently found to be only weakly correlated. This has been viewed as evidence against a valenced bipolar dimension of affect. There is some controversy as to whether this really constitutes contrary evidence (e.g., J. T. Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001) and whether positive and negative activation dimensions are independent by definition (e.g., Feldman et al., 1999).

For our purposes it is enough to note that positive and negative affect have been conceptualized as different dimensions and that each appears to have distinct neural processes (e.g., the amygdala in negative affect, Irwin et al., 1996; the dopamineric pathways in positive affect, Hoebel, Rada, Mark, & Pothos, 1999). This raises the question of whether they can be coactivated: Can people be happy and sad at the same time? J. T. Larsen et al. (2001) addressed this question in a series of three studies and found that people can indeed feel both happy and sad concurrently. They argued that even though typical affective experience is more likely to be bipolar (one either feels happy or sad) coactivation needs to be accommodated, and they therefore showed how it can be done in Cacioppo and Berntson's (1994) Evaluative Space Model. This model comprises a surface (the net affective predisposition) in three dimensions arising from an affective component attuned to appetition (i.e., positivity) and one attuned to aversion (i.e., negativity). Positing activation functions for each component allows for both reciprocity and coactivity between positive and negative affect.

Understanding Relationship Flourishing Requires Study of Positive Affect

An important implication of relatively independent positive and negative affect systems is the need to better understand positive affect in relationships. But why does positive affect matter? There is considerable evidence that positive affect helps one live a better, more productive life (for a review, see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005) with several longitudinal studies showing a link between frequent positive affect and longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001; Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002; Moskowitz, 2003). Moreover, there is evidence that positive affect reflected in women's college yearbook photographs at age 22 years predicted their marital satisfaction some 30 years later (Harker & Keltner, 2001) and that a spouse's happiness can potentially influence the partner's marital well-being a year later (Ruvolo, 1998). Finally, and not inconsequentially, it is inconceivable that flourishing relationships can be understood without considering positive affect.

So where do we begin? We already know that people's most common emotional state is mildly positive (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1999), and the intercept for the positivity function must therefore be higher than for the negativity function (the so-called positivity offset). This positivity offset is what allows us to face each day and encounter novel situations with curiosity rather than fear. It may also account for why relationship (Gottman, 1994) and individual (Schwartz et al., 2002) well-being are characterized by a higher ratio of positives to negatives. From this we see that flourishing in relationships requires something that produces ratios that exceed the positivity offset.

Unfortunately, we know little about how this occurs, and we therefore turn to two theories that might help advance understanding of positive affect and relationship well-being. The first is the self-expansion model in which each

partner in a relationship includes attributes of the other in the view of the self (see Aron & Aron, 1986), a process that is associated with feeling pleasure, arousal, and excitement (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001). As such, there is a desire to continue experiencing self-expansion. Rapid self-expansion is hypothesized to be associated with highly positive affect, which, in turn, leads to greater relationship quality (Strong & Aron, 2006). One way to do this is via shared participation in novel, challenging activities. There is correlational evidence that shared participation in exciting activities is, indeed, associated with reports of greater relationship quality (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000, Studies 1 and 2), and experimental studies have established the direction of effects (e.g., Aron et al., 2000, Studies 3–5) and ruled out cooperation (Aron & Norman, 2005) and arousal as responsible for the effect (Lewandowski & Aron, 2005). Finally, Strong and Aron argued convincingly that it is increased positive affect that mediates the relationship between these activities and relationship quality.

The second theoretical perspective is the ''broaden and build'' theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). According to this theory, positive emotions widen attention, broaden the array of thoughts and actions evoked (e.g., play, exploration), facilitate generativity and behavioral flexibility, and dismantle (''undo'') physiological processes induced by negative emotion. There is a growing empirical database to support the broaden and build theory. In contrast to negative emotions, whose impact tends to be immediate, the impact of broadened thought-action repertoires occasioned by positive emotions are posited to emerge over time. Importantly from our perspective, the view that effects of positive affect accumulate over time provides a mechanism that might account for increased positivity ratios. Indeed, Fredrickson has already shown that initial positive affect predicts increased well-being weeks later through widened mindsets (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002) and through increased psychological resources (see Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Finally, and importantly, these accumulated effects ''function as reserves that can be drawn on to manage future threats and increase odds of survival. So experiences of positive affect, although fleeting, can spark dynamic processes with downstream repercussions for growth and resilience'' (Fredrickson & Losada, p. 679). As a result, positive affect can be seen as critical to individual and relationship flourishing (Fredrickson and Losada identified positivity ratios above about 3 to 1 and below about 11 to 1 as ones that humans need to flourish).

Although speculative, Fredrickson (2009) suggested several ways to increase positivity ratios and thereby promote flourishing. The first is to reframe bad circumstances or events to find positive meaning, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive emotions like gratitude or hope. Second, she argued that increased openness can promote the experience of positive emotion, especially in light of the positivity offset noted earlier. All else being equal, being present in the moment and open to the experience it offers (mindfulness) is likely to result in positive experiences. Finally, she offered two interpersonal strategies: helping others, which is known to generate and reinforce positive affect, and spending time with others, that is, being social. This last suggestion requires modification in light of the earlier described work on self-expansion. Simply engaging in shared activities with a romantic partner is unlikely by itself to enhance relationship well-being; it is only when these activities activate positive emotions (are novel and challenging) that they are likely to do so. Reis and Gable (2003) suggested that intrinsically motivated activities may also engender positive affect and that, when they are shared with a partner, this might enhance relationship well-being. These last two observations remind us that caution is needed in extrapolating from scholarship regarding individual functioning to relationships. But whatever the fate of Fredrickson's speculations, her work is important and provides a useful platform from which to conduct much needed research on fun, elation, contentment, serenity, and other positive emotions experienced in intimate relationships. Indeed, there is already exposition of a broaden and build cycle of attachment security, a ''cascade of mental and behavioral events that enhances emotional stability, person and social adjustment, satisfying close relationships, and autonomous personal growth'' (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008, p. 58).

Fincham and colleagues argued that marital well-being can be conceptualized and measured as separate, although related, positive and negative dimensions (Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997). Data obtained with a simple measure used to capture this two-dimensional

conception of marital quality, the Positive and Negative Quality in Marriage Scale (PANQIMS; Fincham & Linfield, 1997), indicate that the dimensions have different correlates and account for unique variance in reported marital behaviors and attributions. Moreover, using the two dimensions allowed identification of those who were high in positivity and high in negativity (ambivalent partners) versus those who were low in positivity and low in negativity (indifferent partners), both of which had previously been ignored in marital research. Although both types are indistinguishable on traditional measures of marital satisfaction (scoring in the midrange), Fincham and Linfield were able to show that they differ in attributions and reported interactional behavior. In an extension of this work, Mattson, Paldino, and Johnson (2007) showed that the PANQIMS captured well the relationship quality of engaged couples and accounted for unique variability in observed behavior and attributions. For example, the negative dimension predicted men's observed negative affect and women's observed positive affect while holding constant variance associated with the positive well-being dimension and a unidimensional measure of relationship quality. In a similar vein, Huston and Melz (2004) used the idea of independent positive and negative affect systems to define a two-dimensional space that described the affectional climate of a marriage. Again those high in positivity and high in negativity were identified and labeled ''tempestuous,'' with the label ''bland'' being used to describe those low on both dimensions.

This work is noteworthy because it draws attention to the important but largely overlooked distinction between positive and negative dimensions of intimate relationships made in prior research that incorporated reports of behavior in assessments of marital quality (cf. Braiker & Kelley, 1979; D. R. Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986; Orden & Bradburn, 1968). Moreover, the measure derived from this view, the PANQIMS, enables more detailed descriptions of change in marital satisfaction and the factors that might account for these changes. For example, it would be theoretically important if happily married spouses first increased in negativity only (became ambivalent) before then decreasing in positivity and becoming distressed, as compared to a progression in which negativity increased and positivity decreased at the same time. Such progressions may, in turn, differ in important ways from one where there is simply a decline in positive evaluations over time. Documenting the existence of different avenues of change, examining their determinants, and exploring their consequences suggest a program of research that may do much to advance our understanding of relationships over time.

Needless to say, relationship research capitalizing on the distinction between positive and negative affect systems has barely begun. We turn now to another meme that has hardly been noticed in marriage and family literature, but it is one with substantial influence in other literatures, and it has the potential to further underscore the value of attention to ''relationship flourishing.''

Avoidance and Appetitive Systems

Two different functional systems have been recognized across a diverse range of research, including personality, social cognition, motivation, and affect: They concern approach or appetition associated with desired, rewarding outcomes and avoidance of undesired, negative outcomes. Their manifestation differs across domains, and it is unlikely that a single mechanism underlies their operation across domains. Because evidence for the utility of this distinction is perhaps best in the area of motivation and emotion, we focus on these domains.

There has been a great deal of attention given to the separate neurobiological systems that may underlie approach and avoidance motivation and emotion (e.g., Gray, 1990, 1994a, 1994b). It is hypothesized that there is a behavioral approach system (BAS) that is responsible for reactivity to incentives and rewards. In neuropsychological terms, this system is commonly thought to be related to circuitry that includes the left prefrontal cortex (e.g., Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000). Conversely, the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) is thought to be activated by threat and result in inhibition or withdrawal. This system is thought to be related to circuitry in the right prefrontal cortex (Davidson, 1992).

It would be natural to assume that, in developing a positive or healthy relationship science, we would be primarily concerned with incorporating couple patterns reflective of the behavioral approach system. A focus on the behavioral approach system is presumably important if we are to understand such affects

in relationships as joy, zest, and fun. This would be a welcome complement to our extensive knowledge of what dysfunctional relationships look like. We are not alone in making this observation; Gable and Reis (2001) discussed these two systems, positing that if they are functionally independent in relationships they ‘‘are likely to affect different relationship outcomes’’ (p. 181). In a subsequent chapter, and the only extant scholarship devoted to developing a ‘‘positive psychology of relationships’’ (Reis & Gable, 2003), they incorporated these systems as a central feature of their analysis of positive relationships.

Understandably, these authors offered a two-dimensional model of appetitive and aversive processes in relationships. The appetitive dimension is anchored by ‘‘flourishing’’ at the high end and ‘‘stagnant’’ at the low end (Gable & Reis, 2001, p. 182), and the endpoints for the aversive dimension are ‘‘insecure’’ (high end) and ‘‘sanctuary’’ (low end). Although they changed these labels in their later analysis (‘‘growth promoting, passionate,’’ ‘‘unfulfilling, stagnant,’’ ‘‘danger, threat’’ and ‘‘safety, security,’’ respectively) the equating of high appetition with relationship health remained. Gable (2006) provided some general support for this view in three studies that showed approach motivation and goals are linked to positive social outcomes (e.g., satisfaction with social bonds) and avoidance motivation and goals are linked to negative social outcomes (e.g., loneliness).

We should not presume, however, that the linkage of the appetitive system to relationship health or to particular positive emotions is so simple or straightforward. That is, we should not assume that the BAS yields only positive affects or healthy relationship outcomes. Conversely, we should not assume that the BIS yields only negative relationship outcomes and negative affects. In particular, as noted by Carver (2004), the BAS system contributes unique variance to some negative emotional experiences such as frustration and anger, whereas the BIS system appears to contribute no unique variance to these emotions, contributing instead to anxiety and fear. Interestingly, the experiences of frustration and anger may be particularly pathonomonic of relationship discord, suggesting that the BAS system may have much to offer in accounting for what is positive *and* negative in relationships.

Given the complex relationship of the BAS and BIS to emotions, and likely relationship outcomes as well, it may be useful to assume that both will be implicated in the elaboration of a positive relationship science. Rather than assume that the foci of such a science will be just one of the two systems (i.e., the BAS), it may be more fruitful to assume that the constructs of interest to a positive relationship science will prove to be understandable in terms of both systems. That is, for each meme integral to positive relationships (e.g., resilience, forgiveness, relational security) there may be two distinct motivational systems to consider that contribute to its realization.

To illustrate the importance of both avoidance and appetitive systems in understanding memes central to healthy relationships, we offer a brief analysis of two of them, commitment and forgiveness.

The case of commitment. Since the importance of understanding healthy relationships, and not simply nondistressed relationships, was first noted (M. P. Johnson, 1973; Kelly & Fincham, 1998; Stanley & Markman, 1998), commitment has invariably been identified as a central feature of healthy relationships (Adams & Jones, 1997; M. P. Johnson, 1991). It is generally treated as a central, positive aspect of relationships and one that may be essential for effective relationship functioning over time. Commitment has been defined in several different ways, however (e.g., Adams & Jones; Levinger, 1976; Rusbult, Wieselquist, Foster, & Withcer, 1999), using a range of terminology, and this has hampered empirical progress.

Partially addressing the long-standing problem of terminological heterogeneity, Strachman and Gable (2006) provided a conceptualization of commitment in terms of the approach and avoidance systems (BIS and BAS). Their approach provides an interesting example of the way that consideration of underlying approach and avoidance systems may be helpful for understanding and describing positive constructs such as commitment. This approach also illustrates some of the potential complexity in fully explicating ‘‘positive’’ constructs. Accordingly, we review their framework below and suggest some elaboration.

Strachman and Gable (2006) suggested that two types of commitment goals exist: approach commitment (i.e., the desire to maintain and continue the relationship) and avoidance commitment (i.e., the desire to avoid

relationship dissolution). In addition to helping organize much of the prior theoretical literature and creating the potential for a common language to describe types of commitment, this approach highlights the importance of both BIS- and BAS-related patterns in understanding positive aspects of close relationships.

One advantage of conceptualizing commitment in terms of BIS and BAS processes is that it allows us to consider the goal of long-term commitment within a goal theoretic framework. We can consider the goal of commitment to be an ''internal representation of desired states'' (Austin & Vancouver, 1998) and highlight the important role of ''intentions'' (Gollwitzer, 1993). As a consequence, a goal theory perspective leads us to view commitment in new ways and to envision new possibilities for its enhancement, suggesting avenues for a positive relationship science to have an impact on public policy discussions of how to best enhance long-term commitment in relationships. As a specific example from a positive relationship science, it also illustrates the unique contribution a focus on positive constructs may provide.

If we apply this framework to commitment, there immediately emerge the two types of commitment goals posited by Strachman and Gabel (2006): approach and avoidance commitment. As these authors noted, the two goals do not fully account for all the distinctions in the commitment literature (e.g., the role of barriers or constraint), but they do help establish commonalities across many previous treatments of commitment and a common language for discussing these commonalities. Likewise, this approach suggests the likely presence of individual differences in the types of commitment goals that most strongly motivate different individuals, opening the door to sensitive intervention and prevention efforts. Specifically, some individuals may be more responsive to intervention rationales linked to approach commitment, whereas others may be more responsive to intervention rationales linked to avoidance commitment. This should result in couples who report equal levels of commitment but are driven by fundamentally different motives. If so, consideration of these individual differences should help to maximize positive outcomes by helping interventions to focus on addressing the appropriate goals in each case.

Rather than assume that the BAS system is associated with sensitivity to all types of approach commitment and the BIS system is associated with sensitivity to all types of avoidance commitment, it may be more fruitful to examine whether the BAS is particularly associated with a commitment goal structure that emphasizes relationship activities and pleasures as a goal *but also contains the antigoal of boredom*. Conversely, it may be fruitful to examine whether activity in the BIS system is particularly associated with avoidance of the antigoals of conflict and rejection *but is also associated with the goal of security and dependability*. This underlying structure would allow both systems to contribute to the experience of long-term relationship commitment as well as relevant positive and negative affects associated with commitment, giving both the BIS and BAS systems (with each reflecting their own goal and antigoal structure) a place in a positive relationship science.

Superimposed on this structure would be both the internal dynamics of the goal systems and the dynamics of the couple's goal systems. Carver and Scheier's (1990) analysis suggests that there are both discrepancy-reducing feedback loops (related to goals) as well as discrepancy-enlarging feedback loops (related to antigoals) that add an additional level of complexity. Carver and Scheier's analysis suggests that there will be increased effort expended by those who are slipping away from a desired goal or toward an antigoal but reduced effort for those who perceive that they are moving quickly toward their desired goal or away from their antigoal. That is, a goal framework also presumes iterative, dynamic processes that can push individuals more rapidly toward particular goals or away from antigoals. This creates conditions that sometimes result in discontinuous change, as new goals capture or entrain the individual's behavior. If the new goal structure is sufficiently powerful, it could lead to a discontinuous change in behavior reflecting orientation to a new goal (or away from a new antigoal; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007). Transformative change would lead a couple to function in an entirely different manner than they did before, with a qualitatively different level of commitment. On the negative side, for example, transformative change would be captured by a couple moving from a relatively high level of relationship commitment to a strong focus on separate interests and individual

goals. On the positive side, transformative change might be captured by a couple who, confronted with a relationship difficulty, find that they each emerge more focused on joint goals and relationship maintenance than they were before. We turn now to our second example, forgiveness.

The case of forgiveness. At first blush, the case for forgiveness being central to positive relationships is not obvious. But it becomes so when one recalls that it is a rare person who is not wronged, let down, betrayed, or hurt by a relationship partner. Although various alternatives exist for dealing with such hurt (e.g., withdrawal, denial, condoning, reframing the transgressions), over the course of a long-term intimate relationship such as marriage, they are unlikely to suffice. Little surprise, then, that the well-known journalist/humorist Robert Quillen (1887–1948, the Garrison Keillor of his day; see Moore, 2008) wrote that ‘‘a happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers.’’ This quip is substantiated by open-ended data collected from highly satisfied couples married for 20 or more years who reported that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and marital satisfaction (Fenell, 1993).

In the face of injury by the partner, victims commonly respond with immediate fear (of being hurt again) and avoidance of the partner. Commonly, coactivation of the BAS may also occur if anger is experienced, and a desire to retaliate or seek revenge may be evident. In short, partner transgressions lead to a negative motivational state toward the transgressor. Researchers define forgiveness as overcoming this negative motivational state. Most of the literature on the topic therefore focuses on ‘‘unforgiveness’’ (and yet another instance of inferential error occurs: forgiveness is inferred from the absence of unforgiveness). Fincham (2000, 2009), however, argued that study of unforgiveness is inadequate for understanding forgiveness in ongoing intimate relations where multiple hurts can occur over time. Drawing on philosophical analysis, he noted that fundamental to forgiveness is ‘‘an attitude of real goodwill toward the offender as a person’’ (Holmgren, 1993, p. 34) or ‘‘the attitude of respect which should always characterize interpersonal behavior’’ (Downie, 1971, p. 149) Forgiveness thus entails a positive or benevolent motivational state toward the harm doer that is not achieved simply by overcoming the negative motivational state occasioned by the hurt. Again the BAS is activated but in a way that is quite different from the anger experienced in the immediate aftermath of a transgression. Specifically, appetition is now prosocial rather than directed toward the pleasure derived from satisfaction of a retaliatory impulse. Thus forgiveness (an intrapersonal process) gives rise to a positive response (e.g., compassion, empathy, affection, approach behavior) that sets the stage for possible reconciliation (an interpersonal process).

There is accumulating evidence to support the above analysis. An initial longitudinal study showed that, in the first few weeks following a transgression, avoidance and revenge motivation decreased, whereas benevolence motivation did not change (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Fincham and Beach (2002) formally examined the structure of forgiveness in married couples and showed that a two-dimensional model comprising benevolence (forgiveness) and unforgiveness fit the data better than a unidimensional model, a finding also obtained in the recent development of an offense-specfic measure of forgiveness for couples (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009). Further, both cross-sectional and longitudinal data show that the two dimensions function differently in marital relationships; spouses' retaliatory motivation following a transgression is related to partner reports of psychological aggression and, for husbands, to ineffective arguing, whereas benevolence motivation correlates with partner reports of constructive communication and, for wives, partners' concurrent reports of ineffective arguing as well as their reports 12 months later (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004, Fincham, Beach, et al., 2007).

Although speculative, we believe that, after the initial impact of a partner transgression, coactivation of BIS and BAS systems or alternating activation of the systems, or both, is common. For example, a spouse may be reminded of the harm resulting from a specific partner act (e.g., an adulterous one-night stand) by the partner's behavior (e.g., his or her comment on the appearance of an opposite-sex friend or stranger). In this event the pain of the transgression may be experienced afresh, resulting in, for example, coactivation of the two systems in a manner similar to

that immediately following the transgression (leadings to reexperiencing of anger and desire for retaliation accompanied by desire to withdraw from the partner), activation of the BIS with reciprocal deactivation of the BAS that had given rise to the decision to forgive (leading to avoidance/withdrawal from the partner), or perhaps activation of the BIS in addition to the preexisting prosocially activated BAS (leading to an approach avoidance conflict vis-à-vis the partner). Other scenarios are also possible. This admittedly brief and rather simple analysis suffices to illustrate the potentially complex relation between the appetitive and avoidance systems in understanding memes central to a positive relationship science.

It is possible to identify and discuss a number of further memes that are keys to understanding human flourishing and therefore also a successful positive relationship science. To do so, however, would likely replicate a decade's worth of work that has mushroomed in psychology. We therefore turn to considering this work.

Positive Relationship Science: The Fourth Pillar of Positive Psychology

In the late 1980s the zeitgeist in psychology began to change to accommodate the study of human strengths and virtues. This ultimately culminated in the formal naming of a field of positive psychology in 1998 by the then APA President Martin Seligman. This field has grown spectacularly in the past decade with the appearance of special journal issues (e.g., *American Psychologist*, 2000; *Psychological Inquiry*, 2003), handbooks (e.g., Linley & Joseph, 2004; Ong & van Dulmen, 2006; C. R. Snyder & Lopez, 2006), textbooks (e.g., Carr, 2004; Compton, 2005; Peterson, 2006), and a new journal in 2006, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

All of this activity is geared toward addressing what has become known as the three pillars of positive psychology, positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions, as captured in the definition of the field: ''Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development'' (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p. 630). Marriage and family fall under the rubric of the third pillar, which is by far the least developed in positive psychology. There are two reasons why this is the case, one general and one specific. At a general level, psychology (especially in North America) has historically focused largely on individual functioning, and relationship research is a relative latecomer to this discipline. In fact, the self-proclaimed emergence of positive psychology occurred almost simultaneously with the coming of age or what Berscheid (1999) called the ''greening'' of relationship science (research on close relationships). At a more specific level, positive psychology has not emphasized relationships per se but has instead, as seen in the above definition, incorporated them under institutions that facilitate understanding of positive experiences and individual traits. Thus, it seems that institutions are important for their enabling powers, their ability to facilitate the development of positive traits and thereby positive subjective experiences (Peterson, 2006). Even in a somewhat broader view of institutions, it is noted that ''understanding positive institutions entails the study of the strengths that foster better communities, such as justice, responsibility, civility, parenting, nurturance, work ethic, leadership, teamwork, purpose, and tolerance'' (Positive Psychology Center, 2008). The peripheral mention of relationships (cf. parenting, teamwork) is surprising, given that psychologists recognize the centrality of relationships in human functioning and even posit a basic need to belong, in which people are motivated to make close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The upshot is that, even though there is coverage of intimate relationships in positive psychology textbooks (e.g., Carr, 2004; Peterson, 2006), the material reviewed seldom amounts to more than standard coverage of research on topics such as attachment and love that has been conducted outside of the context of positive psychology (and often outside the context of established family relationships; en passant, it is worth noting that integration of marriage and family literatures into the newly greened relationship science is also still much needed, as barriers to inter-subdisciplinary and interdisciplinary work remain substantial). The one exception appears to be Gable's work mentioned earlier (Reis & Gable, 2003; Strachman & Gable, 2006). In her empirical work, Gable has not only sought to examine approach and avoidance motivation in social relationships but has also initiated research that is clearly informed by

positive psychology. For example, she examined a new meme, capitalization, which refers to the intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of seeking out others to communicate the occurrence of positive events. Communicating these events is associated with positive well-being and affect that goes beyond the impact of the event, and, in close relationships where the partner responds to capitalization enthusiastically, it is associated with higher relationship well-being (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

It is no exaggeration to characterize relationship science and positive psychology as the proverbial ships passing in the night. We believe that the current mutual isolation of one from the other is a detriment to both and have subsequently called for a ''marriage'' between them (Fincham, 2009). We have pursued this matchmaker role and have extended it to include family studies in the current article for two very important reasons. First, we believe that marital and family scholars have much to contribute to this emerging field in psychology and, in view of the limited attention given close relationships, this contribution may be necessary for positive psychology to realize its potential. Indeed, an infusion of research and theory from marriage and family scholars who approach issues of flourishing and optimal human functioning from the perspective of relationships is likely to facilitate what we consider to be a necessary fourth pillar of positive psychology. That is, we propose that a complete positive psychology requires positive relationships as a fourth pillar of equal importance to its existing three pillars.

Second, lest it appear to be a one-way street in which only positive psychology benefits, we hasten to point out that the literature in positive psychology is teeming with positively valenced memes likely to be of interest to marriage and family researchers. For example, flow has been extensively analyzed in positive psychology, and the identification of this experience in the relationship context is intriguing. Flow is Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) term for the experience that occurs during highly engaging activities where, among other things, there is a merging of action and awareness, transformation in time perspective, and a loss of self-awareness. Analogous lay terms for flow are ''on the ball'' and ''in the zone.'' Although flow is conceived in terms of skills being optimally challenged and is viewed as ''good because it increases the strengths and complexity of the self'' (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 70), this does not preclude the interpersonal. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi suggests ways in which a group could function to promote flow in each member, but the application to family relationships has yet to be made, even though activities between intimates (e.g., sexual intercourse) are recognized as ones in which flow might occur. Flow experiences have the potential to make relationships richer and more intense and meaningful and thereby help advance understanding of optimal, flourishing relationships.

The potential value of positive psychology to marriage and family scholars is not limited to the flow meme. As noted, positive psychology is rife with rich conceptual analyses of memes relevant to relationships; these include such memes as meaningfulness in life (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2002), authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002), gratitude (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003), and wisdom (Kunzmann & Stange, 2007). This list is necessarily incomplete because there has been a concerted effort to develop a taxonomy of human strengths analogous to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* that documents psychological dysfunctions. The authors of this taxometric exercise introduce this impressive work as a ''manual of the sanities'' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 3). Finally, there are also helpful methodological advances in positive psychology such as the clear specification of the role of introspection and retrospection in assessing well-being (Kahneman & Riis, 2005) and use of dynamic factor analysis to affective processes in dyads (Ferrer, 2006).

In closing, we note that relationship research and positive psychology some time ago, without fanfare or explicit recognition, began a courtship. There is a thriving literature on forgiveness in marriage, though the positive psychology connection has not been openly acknowledged (see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005). As noted earlier, similar statements could be made about attachment and commitment. With the courtship well underway, it remains to recognize the union formally. Declaring and consummating the marriage with positive psychology is long overdue.

It is hard to conceive of a fully actualized positive psychology that does include a central focus on intimate relationships like marriage. Human kind is nothing if not a social animal. It therefore appears that, in advancing marriage and family scholarship, researchers also have

the opportunity to contribute to an exciting new area of psychology that has remained largely untouched by such scholarship.

Conclusion

A great deal of ground has been covered in this article, and the journey has taken us into territory that may be unfamiliar to many marriage and family scholars. The purpose of the journey was to identify and describe positively valenced memes that might invigorate the study of close relationships and at the same time help improve primary and secondary interventions with families. It was argued that without understanding of optimal relationship functioning, flourishing, our understanding of marriage and family will remain incomplete. We have attempted to extend the foundations that are already in place for this enterprise, such as the literatures on family resilience and on family strengths. It is our sincere hope that we have chartered territory that can now be fruitfully ploughed not only to increase understanding of marriage and family but also to further interdisciplinary scholarship. Absent integration of several somewhat disparate literatures (e.g., close relationships research, family studies, sociology of the family, family psychology), we fail not only ourselves as scholars but also more importantly, the couples and families we seek to serve. The emergence of a strong positive relationship science has the potential to integrate relevant scholarship across several disciplines.

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