

Positive Constructivist Psychology

Jerald R. Forster
University of Washington

I have been primarily focused on psychology since 1961 when I started graduate school in Counseling Psychology at the University of Minnesota. During my time in the psychology field I have been exposed to the prevailing theoretical models such as behaviorism, cognitive behavioral psychology, and developmental psychology. During my fifty years in psychology, I have been especially influenced by two somewhat specialized approaches: Constructivist Psychology (CP), and Positive Psychology (PP).

In this paper I propose a fusion, combining the best of these two approaches. I call this fused specialized approach, Positive Constructivist Psychology.

Constructivist Psychology (CP)

When I first learned about CP, what I learned was primarily George Kelly's theory and practice of Personal Construct Psychology. Kelly developed the important idea of the *personal construct* and a procedure called *The Repertory Test*. These ideas and procedures provided new avenues for the articulation of personal interpretations of meaning and experiencing. I mention the concept of *articulation*, because it focuses attention on the unique ways that an individual gives voice to his or her experience, or what might be called his or her personal reality. It is assumed that each individual creates meaning or construes his or her input of external and internal stimuli. These individual interpretations, which could be called *construals*, are anchored by means of the individual's *personal constructs*, which Kelly describes in great detail in his seminal book, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs: Volumes 1 & 2* (Kelly, 1955).

During subsequent years, other versions of constructivism have evolved, including *social constructionism*. Most practitioners now group these new versions of constructivism with Kelly's *Psychology of Personal Constructs*, and call the overall approach: *Constructivist Psychology (CP)*. I especially appreciate the proposition or assumption underlying CP stating that each person constructs or creates his or her own reality. The corollary of this assumption implies that human beings do not have access to a real, objective, or true *reality*. Awareness that I do not have access to a true reality enables me to be open to multiple possible realities. This awareness also keeps me from continually looking for the truth, which can encourage a tendency to be *closed-minded* about all other possibilities. This openness to many possibilities supports a quality of *flexibility*, which helps me when I am attempting to solve problems that do not really have one right

answer. This perspective also enables me to pay more attention to my inner processing, because I am now more sensitive to the likelihood that my feelings are generated by my inner processing, and that I am creating my realities as I go along.

Constructivist Psychology also encourages more personalized explorations of self-identity. An example of such explorations can be found a chapter titled: “Differentiating the *I* from the *ME*” (Forster, 2009a), where the *I* is similar to Kahneman’s *experiencing self*, and the *ME* is similar to Kahneman’s *remembering self* (Kahneman & Riis, 2005).

Positive Psychology (PP)

The positive psychology movement was initiated by the leadership of Martin Seligman during the latter part of the 1990s (Seligman, 2002). The PP movement gained great favor in the world of psychology during the first decade of the 21st Century (Fredrickson, 2009; Lyubomirsky, 2007). I was interested in PP from the beginning of the movement because it provided a rationale and empirical research to support practices that Bernard Haldane and I had been collaborating on since the mid 1980s (Forster, 2003). The research results generated by the positive psychology movement supported the basic idea that people whose perspectives were most positive demonstrated more beneficial outcomes in their lives than those whose perspectives were not so positive. For example, optimistic people demonstrated more productivity at work and school, better marital relations, increased longevity, as well as better mental and physical health (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). Focusing on strengths was one important aspect of the positive psychology movement (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Clifton & Harter, 2003). Strengths are positive qualities used to describe aspects of human beings. Strengths are, by definition, positive. Therefore, they represent the positive perspectives through which people observe or evaluate themselves and each other. I have read many of the studies making up the general body of PP research, and I summarize the results with the following conclusion: **If you can facilitate people to pay more attention to strengths when thinking about themselves and others, you are helping them increase the positivity of their perspective, which is likely to benefit them.**

Fusing the Best of CP and PP

CP and PP each have assets and liabilities when they are evaluated in terms of their usefulness for facilitating people to pay more attention to strengths when thinking about themselves and others. Listed below are some of my ideas about the assets and liabilities of each of these two approaches.

Starting with Positive Psychology, I suggest that the asset of ensuring rigorous scientific research methods, including insistence on objective measurement, has been valuable for demonstrating that a positive perspective is advantageous to those who can view themselves and others with such a perspective. It was the rigorous research methods that built the solid case for optimism, positive emotions, and focusing on strengths. Because of the rigor of the methods, the results of the PP research are well accepted in the scientific community and the community of psychological practitioners.

However, a related aspect of an asset can become a liability, and that appears to have been the case when the PP researchers and practitioners focused on the extreme aspect of objectivity. Objectivity in measurement requires that variables be defined and measured so that reliability and agreement can be obtained by large numbers of people. To do this, the variables considered must be carefully defined and operationalized. To qualify as a reliable and valid measure, much agreement must be obtained, thereby limiting the number of variables that can meet the rigorous standards. In the process of developing rigorous and objective measures of strengths, PP theorists and researchers developed inventories that provided data on a limited number of pre-identified strengths. Thus, individuals whose strengths are measured by these objective instruments are provided with a fairly short profile of strengths to consider. Many of the words that an individual commonly uses to think about his or her own strengths and the strengths of others are not on the list. The list restricts the person from considering a large number of multifaceted possibilities of potential strengths that exist in any individual's personal vocabulary. An individual is faced with a list that could be called "reductionist." Practitioners and those seeking creative ways of describing people in terms of strengths are left with sterile classifications that do not represent the richness that is available to those who use their own personal experiences as a source for recognizing possible strengths.

If the purpose of working with another person is to facilitate his or her articulation of strengths that might characterize self or others, a limited, but rigorous list of strengths is not going to be terribly useful.

Assets and Liabilities of CP Approaches

The assets of the constructivist approach are the multifaceted and complex possibilities that can be generated by methods designed to articulate personal constructs. These methods are ideal for articulating strengths and/or becoming aware of personalized ways for expressing what is being experienced by the individual. These assets are designed to facilitate the articulation a participant's rather unique, subjective perspective. Unfortunately, the lack of objectivity in CP

approaches does limit the ability to generalize across groups of people. It is unlikely that constructivist methods would have allowed research which provides generalizations about the value of certain practices, such as viewing the world with a positive perspective. So a fusion of practices from CP and from PP approaches is required to develop a framework where individuals can articulate their subjective perspectives, while at the same time being able to generalize across individuals. It is doubtful that generalizations about the advantages of having a positive perspective could have been detected and verified while focusing on CP methods. By combining the results of PP research with practices that facilitate the articulation of subjective thoughts and feelings, people can be helped to see themselves and others in terms of strengths that have a wide variety of more elaborated personal meanings.

A Personalized Experiment to Compare and Contrast CP and PP Approaches

I propose that you compare and contrast the two approaches described in this paper for identifying/articulating your strengths. You can do this by participating in two different ways of getting at your strengths, the objective way that evolved out of the PP approach for identifying strengths, and the subjective way that evolved out of the CP approach for articulating strengths. Both ways are similar in costs and time required to complete the two processes.

The PP approach using the objective instrument *Strengths-Finder 2* (Rath, 2007) can be purchased for about \$12 and it can be completed on your computer using an internet-connection. It will take you about four hours to take the inventory and read the profile of results that are later returned to you.

The CP approach can be started by buying a \$11.99 book titled *Articulating Strengths Together (AST): An Interactive Process to Enhance Positivity* (Forster, 2009b) through Amazon.com. You can read the book in a couple of hours and then follow its directions for assembling three other people for a three-hour period to articulate your strengths together. When you have completed the three-hour process, you will have a listing of your articulated strengths.

It is noteworthy that the AST approach combines CP activities with what might be called relational activities. The importance of relational considerations have been emphasized in the powerful book, *Relational being: Beyond self and community* (Gergen, 2009).

After trying both approaches, you can compare/contrast the CP and PP approaches and decide for yourself the approach you prefer for articulating/identifying your strengths.

My Own Results from Completing this Personalized Experiment

My own use of the CP approach when articulating my strengths demonstrated the advantages of fusing CP practices with generalized knowledge gained from PP research results. PP research results had convinced me that it is advantageous to view others and myself with a positive perspective. Knowing this, I could rely on my own abilities to articulate more elaborate and useful descriptors of strengths that would enable me to be more aware of the many ways to recognize positive qualities in others and myself.

I participated in the personalized study I proposed above to compare the two primary approaches to identifying and/or articulating strengths. I used the most popular objective instrument, the *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, to identify my strengths, and received a profile of my top five strengths as measured by that instrument. I also articulated my strengths using the AST with the help of three other people. The top five strengths identified or articulated by these two approaches are shown below:

My top five objective strengths identified by responding to the *StrengthsFinder 2.0*:

Learner
Ideation
Maximizer
Input
Connectedness

Top five subjective strengths articulated while using the *AST*:

A Positive Perspective (Optimism)
Emotional Balance/ Solid Mental Health
Theorizing & Designing Applications
Mentoring (Facilitating Development)
A Big Picture Perspective

My Conclusions

As might be expected, I clearly preferred the five subjective strengths articulated while using the *AST*. I had actual personal experiences that were associated with each of the subjective strengths articulated while using the *AST*. The meanings of these strengths were very clear and vivid for me because each was tied to real experiences that I remember well. In contrast, I had to carefully

read the extensive definitions of the five objective strengths identified by the *Strengths-Finder 2.0*. The definitions were not clearly tied to my life experiences and the words did not have personal meanings that I could easily relate to.

By fusing the best aspects of the CP and the PP approaches, subjective strengths can be articulated and used to develop a more positive perspective. PP research has documented the benefits of a more positive perspective.

References

- Buckingham, M. & Clifton, D. O. (2001). *Now, discover your strengths*. New York: The Free Press.
- Clifton, D. O., & Harter, J. K. (2003). Investing in strengths. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn, (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 111 to 121). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Forster, J.R. (2003). Bernard Haldane was ahead of his time. *Career Planning & Adult Development Journal*. Vol. 19:Number 3, 28-38.
- Forster, J. R. (2009a). Differentiating the *I* from the *ME*. In R.J. Butler, (Ed.). *Reflections in Personal Construct Theory*. West Sussex, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Forster, J. R. (2009b). *Articulating strengths together (AST): An interactive process to enhance positivity*. Charleston SC: BookSurge
- Fredrickson, B. (2009). *Positivity*. NY: Crown Publishers.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Kahneman D., & Riis J. (2005). *Living, and thinking about it: Two perspectives on life*. In F.A. Huppert, N. Baylis & B. Keverne (Eds.), *The science of well-being* (pp. 285-304). Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs: Volumes 1 and 2*. NY: WW Norton (reprinted London: Routledge, 1991)
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. NY: The Penguin Press
- Rath, T. (2007). *Strengthsfinder 2.0*. NY: Gallup Press.
- Seligman, M. E. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. NY: Free Press.
- Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (2001). Optimism, pessimism, and psychological well-being. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*. (pp. 189-216). Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.