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Citation

CATALINO, Lahnna I., & TOV, William.(2022). Daily variation in prioritizing positivity and well-being. *Emotion*, 22(5), 874-879.

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Daily Variation in Prioritizing Positivity and Well-being

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Author Note

The data presented are accessible through the Open Science Framework:

<https://osf.io/pn39c/>

Funding for this study was supported by a Lee Kong Chian Fellowship awarded to William Tov from Singapore Management University and a Scripps Faculty Research Grant awarded to Lahnna I. Catalino from Scripps College.

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Abstract

Prioritizing positivity is the tendency to use pleasant states (e.g. contentment, joy) as a key criterion to structure daily life. Research shows that people who tend to possess this trait are happier (between-person effect), but a separate question remains: on days people prioritize positivity, relative to their own baseline, do they feel happier (within-person effect)? In a sample of college students ($n = 301$) who completed a 2-week diary study resulting in 3,894 reports, we evaluated this hypothesis using hedonic and eudaimonic indicators of well-being. We also tested whether between-person differences in prioritizing positivity (measured as a trait and mean daily state) predicted daily well-being—people’s actual, lived experience of well-being, as opposed to their global reports. Results showed that daily variation in prioritizing positivity predicted higher daily well-being (more positive emotions, satisfaction, and meaning; fewer negative emotions). Exploratory analyses revealed these within-person effects were stronger for people who scored higher on mean daily prioritizing positivity. Last, between-person differences in prioritizing positivity (trait, mean daily state) predicted most aspects of daily well-being, and these effects held when adjusting for other traits (extraversion, attitude towards joy). The results shed light on how people can effectively pursue happiness in their daily lives and show that the benefits of prioritizing positivity are not limited to people’s ‘top-down’ evaluations of their well-being, but also extend to their actual, lived experience.

Daily Variation in Prioritizing Positivity and Well-Being

Why is it that some of us eat lunch outside instead of at our desks? Or make the time to go running? Or put in the effort to host a dinner party? Could it be that some of us seek out positive emotional experiences more than others? The tendency to use positive states (e.g. contentment, joy) as a key criterion to structure daily life is *prioritizing positivity* (Catalino, Algoe & Fredrickson, 2014; Catalino & Boulton, 2020). Prioritizing positivity is measured with a 5-item scale (e.g., “I structure my day to maximize my happiness”), and psychometric work reveals it has a single factor structure, good reliability, and relates in expected ways to other constructs (Catalino & Boulton, 2020). For example, prioritizing positivity is positively linked with traits that reflect intentionality (e.g. conscientiousness) and emotionally intelligent tendencies (e.g. resilience) shown to predict well-being (Catalino & Boulton, 2020). Cross-sectional research reveals that prioritizing positivity is associated with a host of well-being outcomes, including more positive emotions (Catalino, et al., 2014; Catalino & Boulton, 2020, Russo-Netzer, 2019), more satisfaction with life (Catalino, et al., 2014; Catalino & Boulton, 2020; Humphrey, Szoka, & Bastian, 2021; Russo-Netzer, 2019), fewer negative emotions (Catalino, et al., 2014; Catalino & Boulton, 2020, Russo-Netzer, 2019), and more flourishing (Passmore, Howell, & Holder, 2018; Catalino & Boulton, 2020). And longitudinal work suggests the links between prioritizing positivity and positive emotions operate in a reciprocal fashion (Datu & King, 2016). Ties between prioritizing positivity and well-being have been found in the United States, but also in some other cultural contexts, including the Philippines (Datu & King, 2016), Canada (Passmore et al., 2018), and Israel (Russo-Netzer, 2019).

The personality trait prioritizing positivity is associated with greater happiness, but a separate question remains: on days people prioritize positivity, relative to their own baseline, do

they feel happier? This question is important, because it asks whether adopting the practices of people who prioritize positivity may be linked to greater well-being. In other words are the well-being benefits associated with prioritizing positivity limited to people who tend to possess the trait (between-person effects), or do they extend to the act of prioritizing positivity (within-person effects)? This question is also important, because it informs whether designing interventions to promote prioritizing positivity for mental health is warranted. To that end, we conducted a daily diary study to test whether people actually are happier on days they make an effort to plan for positive experiences than on days they do not.

The use of daily diary methods also allowed us to test whether the personality trait prioritizing positivity is linked with greater daily well-being. Past research examining the links between prioritizing positivity and well-being has relied upon global reports of well-being (e.g. Catalino et al., 2014), the “top down” beliefs people have about their typical states. Global reports of emotions, for example, positively correlate with actual lived experience (e.g. daily emotion reports), but the magnitude of these effects are small-to-moderate (Hudson, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2016; Anusic, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2016; Solhan, Trull, Jahng, & Wood, 2009), suggesting that global and momentary reports offer overlapping yet distinct information. Thus, to gain a complete grasp on the extent to which prioritizing positivity predicts well-being, it is critical to test whether between-person differences in prioritizing positivity predict daily well-being. Here we examined two forms of between-person differences: mean daily prioritizing positivity (based on aggregated daily reports) and trait prioritizing positivity (based on global reports). We predicted that people who routinely prioritize positivity will experience more daily well-being.

To rule out alternative explanations for the between-person results, we also adjusted for two individual differences—extraversion and attitude towards joy—that have been shown to predict well-being and may overlap with prioritizing positivity. Extraversion, a broad trait that includes the tendency to be assertive and talkative, is associated with positive emotions¹ and shows links with prioritizing positivity (Catalino & Boulton, 2020). Attitude towards joy, the tendency to like joyful experiences, also predicts positive emotions (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Gable, 2011) and likely correlates with prioritizing positivity, given the strong ties between liking pleasant experiences and seeking them out (Berridge & Robinson, 2003). Thus, for all between-person results, we summarize the findings with and without adjusting for extraversion and attitude towards joy.

Finally, whereas previous research on prioritizing positivity has been largely conducted in Western nations, we recruited participants from a Singaporean university. Examining the links between prioritizing positivity and well-being in another non-Western (Southeast Asian sample) is important given that the pursuit of happiness and its effectiveness may vary across cultures. For example, valuing happiness is associated with lower well-being among U.S. students but higher well-being among Russian and East Asian students (Ford et al., 2015). Although prioritizing positivity is associated with higher well-being in U.S. samples (e.g., Catalino et al., 2014, Catalino & Boulton, 2020), the generalizability of this finding to other cultures requires more study.

To test the ideas outlined above, we collected over 3,000 records of people's daily lives. Participants completed a battery of questionnaires at the start of the study and then each evening for 14 consecutive days answered items about their daily experience. We included measures of

hedonic (daily emotion and satisfaction) and eudaimonic well-being (daily meaning). We hypothesized that:

H1: Within-person differences in daily prioritizing positivity will predict within-person differences in daily well-being (more positive emotions, fewer negative emotions, more satisfaction with life, more meaning).

H2: Between-person differences in prioritizing positivity (mean daily prioritizing positivity and trait prioritizing positivity) will predict between-person differences in daily well-being.

Method

Participants

Using data from a previous study in Singapore (Indra Alam Syah, 2018), we conducted a power analysis (Bolger, Stadler, & Laurenceau, 2012). Results indicated that a sample of 200 participants (14 diary surveys each) provided 81% power to detect an effect of trait prioritizing positivity on daily positive affect. The actual sample consisted of 301 university students (219 female) in Singapore. The majority of the sample was Chinese (90.4%), with the remainder consisting of other Asian ethnic groups. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 27, $M = 22.31$ ($SD = 1.75$). Participants' familial socio-economic status was moderate ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.63$) on the MacArthur Subjective Socioeconomic Status Scale-Youth Version (1 = "*least money, little or no education, no job, or jobs that no one wants or respect*", 10 = "*most money, the highest amount of schooling, and the jobs that bring the most respect*"; Goodman, Adler, Kawachi, Frazier, Huang, & Colditz, 2001).

Procedure

Participants attended a briefing and were emailed a link to an online survey that included the individual difference measures prioritizing positivity, extraversion and attitude towards joy, as well as other measures not relevant to the current investigation. For the next 14 days, participants were emailed links to the online diary surveys at 9pm. Each survey was accessible from 9pm to 3am² each night and included the daily measures of prioritizing positivity, emotions, satisfaction, and meaning, as well as other measures not relevant to the current investigation. Participants received up to 43 Singapore dollars depending on their level of participation. Full versions of each measure below can be found in the OSM. This study was approved by the sponsoring institutions' IRB (Singapore Management University and Scripps College) and was not preregistered.

Materials

Prioritizing Positivity. The revised 5-item Prioritizing Positivity scale (Catalino & Boulton, 2020) measures the tendency to use pleasant states as a key criterion for structuring daily life. Participants indicated their agreement ($1 = disagree\ strongly$, $9 = agree\ strongly$) with five items, including “I structure my day to maximize my happiness” ($\omega = .759$). All scale scores presented in this article reflect means, unless otherwise noted.

Extraversion. The extraversion subscale ($\omega = .854$) of the Mini-International Personality Item Pool (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006) consists of four items (e.g., “I am the life of the party”). Participants rated how accurately each item described them ($1 = very\ inaccurate$; $5 = very\ accurate$).

Attitudes Toward Joy. The Attitudes Towards Joy subscale ($\omega = .803$) from the Attitudes towards Emotions scale (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Gable, 2011)

contains five items (e.g., “I really like feeling happy”). Participants indicated how often each item described them (1 = *rarely/never*, 5 = *almost always/always*).

Daily prioritizing positivity. We adapted the revised 5-item Prioritizing Positivity scale for daily assessment (Catalino & Boulton, 2020). Participants rated their agreement (1 = *disagree strongly*, 9 = *agree strongly*) with four items, including “Today, I structured my day to maximize my happiness”. We judged the fifth item from the Prioritizing Positivity scale (“*My major decisions in life (e.g. the job I choose, the house I buy) are influenced by how I might experience positive emotions*”) unsuitable to be modified for daily assessment. We computed reliability coefficients at the within ($\omega = .892$) and between-person ($\omega = .981$) levels (Geldhof, Preacher, & Zyphur, 2013).

Daily emotions. We adapted the “actual affect” portion of the Affect Valuation Inventory (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006) for daily assessment. Participants indicated how often (1 = *Never*, 5 = *All the time*) they felt 11 positive emotions (*enthusiastic, excited, calm, peaceful, relaxed, elated, content, happy, satisfied, serene, grateful*³; within-person $\omega = .919$) and 8 negative emotions (*dull, sluggish, fearful, hostile, nervous, lonely, sad, unhappy*; within-person $\omega = .767$) that day (Tsai, et al., 2006).

Daily satisfaction and meaning. Participants rated their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) with items measuring daily satisfaction (two items; within-person $\omega = .744$; Tov & Lee, 2016) and meaning (four items; within-person $\omega = .766$; Tov & Lee, 2016). Examples include “Today I was satisfied with life” and “Today was personally meaningful for me”.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Participants completed on average 12.94 (SD = 1.51) daily surveys resulting in 3,894 observations. The intraclass correlations (ICC) for positive emotions (PE), negative emotions (NE), satisfaction and meaning were .53, .51, .28 and .27, respectively, indicating that responses from the same person were not independent and multilevel modeling was appropriate. Descriptive information about the variables and their intercorrelations are presented in Table 1.

Data Analytic Approach

We ran two models for each outcome (see OSM for equations). In Model A⁴, we predicted daily well-being from daily prioritizing positivity (person-mean centered) to assess H1 and mean daily prioritizing positivity (grand-mean centered) to assess H2. In Model B, we predicted daily well-being from trait prioritizing positivity (grand-mean centered) to assess H2. Both models included a random intercept and Model A included a random slope. An autoregressive (AR1) structure was specified for the within-person residuals.

We ran diagnostic checks on the models (see OSM), and discovered a model misspecification for model A which suggested a possible omitted cross-level interaction. We added a cross-level interaction between daily prioritizing positivity and mean daily prioritizing positivity to Model A (Bauer & Curran, 2007) and it resolved the issue (see OSM). We present the results of revised Model A in Table 2.

H1: Do within-person differences in daily prioritizing positivity predict within-person differences in daily well-being?

As Table 2 shows, daily fluctuations in prioritizing positivity were positively associated with daily PE, daily satisfaction, and daily meaning, and negatively associated with daily NE.⁵

Daily prioritizing positivity explained 40% of the within-person variance in daily PE, 25% in daily NE, 29% in daily satisfaction and 29% in daily meaning.

H2: Do between-person differences in prioritizing positivity predict daily well-being?

Mean daily prioritizing positivity⁶ (see Table 2) was positively associated with daily PE, daily satisfaction, and daily meaning, but not daily NE. Mean daily prioritizing positivity explained 23% of the between-person variance in daily PE, 14% in daily satisfaction, and 14% in daily meaning. Results also revealed that the cross-level interactions⁷ between daily prioritizing positivity and mean daily prioritizing positivity were significant for all outcomes, suggesting that for those higher on mean daily prioritizing positivity, the benefits of daily prioritizing positivity are stronger. To illustrate, a one-point increase in daily prioritizing positivity was significantly associated with a .20 increase in daily PE for people low (-1 SD) on mean daily prioritizing positivity, compared with a .31 significant increase for people high (+1 SD) on mean daily prioritizing positivity. A one-point increase in daily prioritizing positivity was significantly associated with a .10 decrease in daily NE for people low (-1 SD) on mean prioritizing positivity, compared with a .17 significant decrease for people high (+1 SD) on mean daily prioritizing positivity. A one-point increase in daily prioritizing positivity was significantly associated with a .35 increase in daily satisfaction for people low (-1 SD) on mean daily prioritizing positivity, compared with a .44 significant increase for people high (+1 SD) on mean daily prioritizing positivity. A one-point increase in daily prioritizing positivity was significantly associated with a .23 increase in daily meaning for people low (-1 SD) on mean daily prioritizing positivity, compared with a .41 significant increase for people high (+1 SD) on mean daily prioritizing positivity. We ran revised model A again, adjusting for extraversion and attitude towards joy, and results did not change (see OSM).

Results of Model B revealed that trait prioritizing positivity was positively associated with daily PE ($b = .16$, $CI_b [.10, .22]$, $p < .0001$), daily satisfaction ($b = .15$, $CI_b [.08, .22]$, $p < .0001$), and daily meaning ($b = .14$, $CI_b [.08, .20]$, $p < .0001$), but not daily NE. Trait prioritizing positivity explained 10% of the between-person variance in daily PE, 7% in daily satisfaction, and 8% in daily meaning. We ran model B again adjusting for extraversion and attitude towards joy and results did not change (see OSM).

Discussion

The present study tested whether daily variation in prioritizing positivity predicted daily hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. On days people prioritized positivity, relative to their own baseline, they experienced more positive emotions, satisfaction and meaning and fewer negative emotion. Exploratory analyses revealed that these associations were stronger for people who scored higher on mean daily prioritizing positivity. In addition, individual differences in prioritizing positivity (measured as an average daily state and a trait) predicted more daily positive emotions, satisfaction and meaning, but not fewer negative emotions, and these effects held when adjusting for extraversion and attitudes toward joy.

This study provides the first test of whether daily fluctuations in prioritizing positivity predict well-being. This question is important to test, because it provides one answer to the question that so many of us ask ourselves: how, in my daily life, do I become happier? Past research has only examined the well-being correlates of people who tend to possess the trait prioritizing positivity (between-person effect), which technically provides no insight into whether the act of prioritizing positivity predicts well-being (within-person effect). The current results suggest that on days people deliberately weave pleasant experiences into their routine, they experience more well-being. These results provide support for the notion that people can

influence their own well-being through intentional behavior. Why might the act of prioritizing positivity be associated with greater well-being? We speculate that when prioritizing positivity, the aim is not to structure each hour to maximize happiness, but rather to structure one's *day* to maximize happiness (Catalino, 2013). Doing the former would inevitably lead to putting off chores or duties that could result in lower well-being. Doing the latter allows the person to balance responsibilities with interests. The present work complements research on the anti-depressive effects of scheduling pleasant events in daily life (Lewinsohn, Sullivan, & Grosscup, 1980) and provides initial support for translating prioritizing positivity into interventions to promote well-being.

This study also provides the first test of whether individual differences in prioritizing positivity affect people's actual lived experiences of well-being, as opposed to their "top-down" evaluations. Here we found that between-person differences in prioritizing positivity predicted all positive aspects of daily well-being, but not negative emotions. In supplemental analyses (see OSM), trait prioritizing positivity did not predict global reports of negative emotions either, suggesting that the null relations found here were not due to mode of emotion measurement (daily versus global self-reports). These null results are perplexing given other research which shows significant, negative links between trait prioritizing positivity and negative emotions (e.g. $r = -.33$, Russo-Netzer, 2019; $r = -.24$, Catalino & Boulton, 2020), although a recent study also found null relations between prioritizing positivity and negative emotions (Humphrey, et al., 2021). Given that few studies have examined prioritizing positivity in a Southeast Asian sample as we have, it is important to consider how the cultural context might shape its form and function. For example, the dual tendency to increase positive emotion and decrease negative emotion is more prevalent among students from the U.S. compared with those from China and

Hong Kong (Sims et al., 2015). As a result, mixed affective experiences are more common among the latter groups. Perhaps in an Asian cultural context, trait prioritizing positivity—the core of which involves the up-regulation of positive emotions—uniquely affects people’s positive emotions, but less so their negative emotions. Although further replications are needed to determine the nature of the relationship between prioritizing positivity and negative emotions, future work should also consider how cultural factors can moderate the effects of prioritizing positivity or valuing happiness more generally on well-being (e.g., McGuirk, Kuppens, Kingston, & Bastian, 2018).

Exploratory work showed that the links between daily prioritizing positivity and positive emotions were stronger for those who scored higher on mean daily prioritizing positivity. Why might this be? A regular habit of prioritizing positivity may help people discover how well various behaviors elicit positive emotions, and expose them to a wider array of such activities. Thus, their pleasant activities may be both more effective and varied. Routinely prioritizing positivity may also sensitize people to pleasant events. After randomly being assigned to learn about judicious ways to prioritize positivity (versus a control topic), participants experienced more positive emotions while engaging in a pleasant behavior, relative to a more neutral one (Van Cappellen, Catalino, & Fredrickson, 2019). Future work should explore other traits that may amplify or weaken the links between daily prioritizing positivity and well-being. In addition, experimental manipulations of prioritizing positivity are needed to have more confidence that prioritizing positivity causes well-being. Limitations of the current study include the restricted age range of the sample, as well as the gender imbalance.

Given the current state of the science, the pursuit of happiness seems to be tricky. On the one hand, experimental work suggests that when people try to maximize their happiness during a

pleasant event, this backfires (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011) and correlational research suggests that people who value happiness to an extreme degree experience lower well-being.⁸ On the other hand, research on prioritizing positivity shows that when people use pleasant states as a key criterion to structure daily life, they experience greater well-being. One possible reason for the diverging effects of these two personality traits (valuing happiness to an extreme, prioritizing positivity) is how accepting people are of their negative emotional states⁹ (Humphrey et al., 2021); another is the extent of active engagement in pleasant behaviors. The idea that intentional activity may be a critical ingredient in the effective pursuit of happiness resonates with theoretical models in the literature (e.g. Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2019; Zerwas & Ford, 2021). Plausibly, when people prioritize positivity they engage in behaviors shown to raise mood, such as socializing (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011), exercising (Reed & Ones, 2006), committing kind acts for others (Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016) and behaviors that more generally fulfill basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness, Ryan & Deci, 2001). We further speculate that the types of pleasant behaviors people weave into their daily routines are particularly suited to the self, and thus are more rewarding.

In sum, these results provide support that prioritizing positivity—assessed as a daily state, an average daily state, and a trait—promotes daily well-being. Moreover, exploratory analysis reveal that the strength of the daily prioritizing positivity and daily well-being links may depend upon people’s tendency to prioritize positivity. Further work is necessary to understand whether the results found here replicate in other samples.

Table 1
Descriptives and Intercorrelations

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Daily PriPos	4.98 (1.84)	--	.59	-.40	.50	.46	--	--	--
2. Daily PE	2.81 (0.86)	.50	--	-.48	.63	.57	--	--	--
3. Daily NE	1.86 (0.66)	-.09	-.07	--	-.56	-.45	--	--	--
4. Daily Sat	4.87 (1.28)	.43	.65	-.55	--	.67	--	--	--
5. Daily Meaning	4.62 (1.15)	.43	.61	-.43	.85	--	--	--	--
6. Trait PriPos	6.56 (1.21)	.38	.30	-.03	.24	.26	--	--	--
7. Extraversion	2.76 (0.97)	.20	.28	-.10	.27	.27	.33	--	--
8. AT Joy	4.45 (0.55)	.19	.14	-.18	.17	.15	.27	.31	--

Note. $N = 301$ participants (3890-3894 daily records). PriPos = prioritizing positivity; PE = positive emotion; NE = negative emotion; Sat = satisfaction; AT Joy = attitude towards joy. Between-person correlations appear below the diagonal; within-person correlations appear above the diagonal. Correlations greater than or equal to $|.14|$ are significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2
Within-Person and Between-Person Effects of Daily Prioritizing Positivity, and Their Interaction Predicting Daily Well-Being

Dependent Variable	Daily Prioritizing Positivity ("within-person")			Mean Daily Prioritizing Positivity ("between-person")			Cross-level Interaction		
	b	95% CI		b	95% CI		b	95% CI	
		LB	UB		LB	UB		LB	UB
Positive Emotions	.25***	.24	.27	.26***	.20	.31	.05***	.03	.06
Negative Emotions	-.13***	-.15	-.12	-.04	-.08	.01	-.03***	-.04	-.01
Satisfaction	.39***	.36	.42	.25***	.19	.31	.04**	.01	.06
Meaning	.32***	.29	.35	.22***	.17	.28	.07***	.05	.10

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Footnotes

¹Arguably, given that a facet of extraversion is positive emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1992), using extraversion as a covariate for the relations between prioritizing positivity and positive emotions could be too stringent a covariate and should generally be interpreted with caution. The extraversion scale used in the present study (Donnellan et al., 2006) however primarily measures gregarious behavior which is related to but empirically distinct from positive emotion (Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000).

²A small percentage (~3%) of participants submitted their surveys after 3am (e.g. 10am the next day), because they had technically started the survey prior to 3am and had not hit submit.

³We added the emotion adjective “grateful” to the positive emotion assessment.

⁴We included both predictors in the same model, because daily prioritizing positivity (person-mean centered) explains only Level 1 variance and mean daily prioritizing positivity explains only Level 2 variance (i.e. the predictors are orthogonal in their explanatory power).

⁵We tested whether the effects were moderated by gender and found no evidence except for NE (see OSM).

⁶We tested whether the between-person effects (mean daily prioritizing positivity, trait prioritizing positivity) were moderated by gender and found some evidence for the positive outcomes (see OSM).

⁷We replaced mean daily prioritizing positivity with trait prioritizing positivity as the moderator, and the cross-level interaction was significant only for PE.

⁸This result, however, may be applicable only to one component of the valuing happiness to an extreme measure (Luhmann, Necka, Schönbrodt, & Hawkey, 2016; Zerwas & Ford, 2021).

⁹This divergence, however, was found only when partialing out the effects of valuing happiness to an extreme from prioritizing positivity (Humphrey et al., 2021).

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