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The emotion of joy: commentary on Johnson

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, I push for a deeper understanding of the emotion of joy as compared to happiness and to other discrete positive emotions, by specifying its appraisals and functions. I suggest that joy connects us to our core identity, values, and priorities. It is the emotion that makes life worth living in the moment. I further discuss the distinction between an objective versus subjective account of instances of joy, a distinction I find important to bear in mind when dealing with morally problematic cases of joy. Finally, I discuss points of connection between the psychologies of joy and religion and suggest multiple lines of future research.

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In everyday life, out of all positive and negative emotions, joy is the emotion that is most frequently experienced by people (Trampe, Quoidbach, & Taquet, 2015). It is also the main positive emotion that has received scientific attention since the early days of emotion research. Yet, our scientific understanding of joy, as an emotion, and as an emotion distinct from other positive emotions, is limited to the point that this special issue is needed. Here I react to various aspects of Dr. Johnson's review as these points were most relevant to my own work as a dual scholar in social psychology and biblical studies investigating positive emotions, well-being, and religion.

Origins of the vagueness surrounding the science of joy

I echo Dr. Johnson's evaluation that the literature on joy is disjointed. Understanding some of the reasons for this confusion can help us to delineate what joy is. What I see as the main reason for the lack of specific and clear theoretical understanding of the nature of joy, is its confusion with happiness, a term often used interchangeably with joy. Following others (Diener & Diener, 1996), I define happiness as referring to a general sense of well-being and to a cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole. As such, happiness corresponds to a broader and more cognitive evaluation of one's life, whereas joy is a momentary emotion.

Turning to the literature on joy as an emotion, one quickly realizes that early psychologists of emotions focused mostly on the study of negative emotions.

Indeed, very few positive emotions made the influential list of basic emotions put forth by Ekman (e.g. Ekman & Davidson, 1994). Joy/happiness is one of them. However, joy served as an umbrella term for any good feeling and its specific forms and functions compared to *other positive emotions* were not developed. Adding to the challenge, positive experiences are less differentiated than negative experiences (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988). Since these early days, research on specific positive emotions has boomed. Just like we do not theoretically bundle together anger and sadness, emotion researchers have uncovered the specific shades and complexities of positive emotions such as awe, gratitude, amusement, pride, or love. This shift signals an opportunity to better specify what joy is, not only in comparison to negative emotions, but also in the constellation of other specific positive emotions.

What is the emotion of joy?

I organize this section in categories that emotion scholars in psychology would resonate with (componential approach to emotion, e.g. Scherer, 1984, and appraisal theories, e.g. Frijda, 1986): throughout, joy is considered as an emotion, which means that it is brief, triggered by specific appraisals, associated with distinctive phenomenological, expressive, and physiological features, and fulfills specific functions. I specifically discuss prototypical, rather than exceptional instances of joy among adults. Examples of joy-eliciting situations can include: watching your kids playing kindly with each other, having an otherwise unexceptional meal with your family, running in a field on a sunny spring day.

Appraisals

According to appraisal theories, emotions are triggered by specific evaluations of a situation. Appraisals do not necessarily involve conscious, controlled processes, but can sometimes be automatic and unconscious (e.g. Frijda, 1993; Lazarus, 1991). I find that current treatments of joy's appraisals are too broad because they often reflect definitions of what a *positive* emotion is and could therefore apply to any other positive emotion. For example, joy has been commonly conceptualized as the emotion arising from an event that is appraised as highly relevant and highly conducive to the attainment of one's goals (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). Joy is triggered when someone registers progress toward a goal at a rate higher than one's standards (Carver & Scheier, 1998). In sum, joy is evoked by goal congruent and desirable situations.

Instead of these broad definitions, I suggest that joy is the brief, at the moment, version of happiness: whereas happiness requires a deliberate evaluation of one's life as a whole, joy is triggered by moment to moment overall positive evaluation of our circumstances. Joy implies taking a step back and assessing the globality of a (ever-changing) situation. While taking in the bigger picture of our circumstances, joy arises from realizing how circumstances align perfectly and just make sense: things are exactly how they ought to be at that moment. Joy is elicited by the appraisals that an event aligns with who we truly are, with what we value, what we strive for, what we live for. Joy is the emotion that makes life worth living in the moment because it resonates with our core identity. It is associated with feelings of ease, appreciation, and meaning. According to this definition, the opposite extreme of joy would be despair: nothing makes sense to the individual, nothing is how it ought to be (Dr. Johnson proposes sorrow and *acedia*). Readers will find this definition to resonate with Izard's (1977) treatment of receptive joy or with Fredrickson's treatment of contentment/serenity (1998, 2001). Both authors also discussed separately a more high arousal and active joy that can be triggered by accomplishments and creates the urge to play (Fredrickson, 1998). I find that instances of joy can be understood through the appraisals I suggested above while not being limited to low arousal and receptive modes of relating to the environment.

This definition of joy calls for empirical verification. However, some evidence for its relevance comes from research comparing the themes associated with specific positive emotions. Interestingly, we can see in a detailed table provided by Campos, Shiota, Keltner, Gonzaga, and Goetz (2013) that U.S. participants rate 'appreciating the present circumstances' as the most relevant theme

associated with instances of joy. This theme was rated higher than the themes theorized by the authors to be associated with joy: improvement in resources and increase in positive energy. In addition, the theme of 'feeling satisfied and secure' was also rated highly for joy, even as much as for love.

Phenomenology

Joy subjectively feels positive (valence) and is often described as a highly energetic emotions (high arousal, although Izard, 1977, discusses two types of joys that vary on a dimension from active to receptive). However, I suspect that our view of joy as a high arousal positive emotion is the product of the American culture, which values high arousal positive emotions more than low arousal positive emotions such as calm (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992; Tsai, 2007). Careful consideration of the influence of culture, age, and religious identity on the phenomenology and effects of joy will be important future research directions.

Expressive behavior

Joy is expressed in the face by an open-mouthed Duchenne smile: simultaneous pulling of the lip corners and contraction of the orbicularis oculi muscles around the eyes (Campos et al., 2013). More research is however needed to document how joy is expressed in the full body (gestures and postures), or in the voice (prosody and laughter; but see Sauter, McDonald, Gangi, & Messinger, 2014; Van Cappellen & Edwards, 2019).

Peripheral physiological correlates

Joy is selectively associated with profiles of activation in the autonomic nervous system that are qualitatively different from other positive emotions (however, what these profiles exactly are depend on the ways that joy is defined by the researchers; see review by Kreibig, 2014). Moreover, as Dr. Johnson notes, joy is presumed to have an 'undoing effect' following negative emotions. At the physiological level, the emotion of contentment/serenity, which shares conceptual space with the present definition of joy, has a quieting function by dismantling the sympathetic arousal generated by negative emotions, supporting physiological and psychological resilience (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000).

Functions

Emotions serve fitness-enhancing functions, preparing the individual to both respond to challenges (negative

emotions) and opportunities in the environment (positive emotions). In her broaden-and-build theory, Fredrickson (1998, 2013) showcased the specific functions of positive emotions to prepare people to pursue opportunities to the fullest, by broadening their scope of attention and by building, over time and through repeated experiences, individual and social resources. Joy, as a positive emotion, shares these functions but more research is needed on what joy *selectively* produces. Frijda (1986) first proposed that joy promotes 'free activation,' or an aimless readiness to engage in whatever presents itself. Fredrickson (1998) proposed that joy creates the urge to play in a broad sense and the building of skills. My hypothesis is that joy signals opportunities to understand ourselves better. By letting go of petty concerns, joy serves to inform us about our core identity and values. Joy motivates us to invest energy in what truly matters for us. This is close to Fredrickson's (1998) treatment of contentment's functions, which prompts the savoring and integration of the present circumstances in the self-concept and worldviews. As Dr. Johnson wrote, 'In joy, one becomes more truly oneself.'

Is joy a self-transcendent positive emotion?

Self-transcendent positive emotions are characterized by 1) being triggered by other-focused appraisals: something larger or bigger than the self is evaluated as beautiful (in contrast with self-focused appraisals where the situation is directly benefiting the self) and 2) promoting positive regard toward others and the world (Haidt, 2003). They also typically promote meaning and spirituality (Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2014; Van Cappellen, Saroglou, Iweins, Piovesana, & Fredrickson, 2013). As I argued elsewhere (Van Cappellen, 2017), joy's current definition in psychology does not reflect many self-transcendent characteristics: joy is triggered by situations conducive to *self-relevant* goals. Yet, this contrasts with accounts of joy in Judeo-Christian religious writings, *the* most frequent and studied positive emotions in these writings, and which point to joy's potential for self-transcendence (e.g. Crisp & Volf, 2015; Morrice, 1984; Muffs, 1992). At least in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, joy is not described as a highly self-focused emotion but is associated with other-focus and expressions of gratitude (Van Cappellen, 2017). In addition, the definition provided above places greater emphasis on the connection between joy and finding meaning but also recognizes that joy resonates with the true *self*. It also points to joy not being a virtue per se but potentially leading to virtuous behavior by orienting the self toward others. Therefore, it is not yet clear whether joy can be considered as a self-transcendent positive emotions but it may well share some elements with these emotions.

Objective vs. subjective joy

I also want to emphasize the importance of distinguishing between a subjective vs. an objective ('proper') account of joy (similar to discussions on happiness among philosophers and psychologists). Many psychologists tend to study happiness (or would study joy) from a subjective perspective. This means that although situations that elicit joy have objective features, these features are interpreted ('appraised') subjectively (the same objective situation can elicit different emotions depending on whom is encountering the situation). As such, no other person than the individual experiencing joy can judge whether this experience is valid. It also means that psychologists are not judging whether an instance of joy is morally right or whether joy can only be experienced toward an objectively good object. According to a psychological approach to emotions, joy is not a response to an objective good construed rightly, but instead to a constructed ('appraised') subjective good.

This subjective approach helps dealing with cases such as the Nazis rejoicing (which Dr. Johnson discusses) because it takes away the moral evaluation one feels inclined to make. For example, Schadenfreude (joy at another's misfortune) can be studied as a real instance of joy without this label closing the discussion on joy and its relation to morality. Experiences of Schadenfreude find its sources in what others can consider non-valuable causes and will most often engender negative outcomes (e.g. suffering of the mocked one). In other words, it is not necessary in my view to argue that perverse or mocking joy, for example are not true instances of joy. From the point of view of the joyous individual, it is real joy. Focusing on joy's sources and effects can uncover that although joy is genuinely experienced in every case, it is not always happening in a context that affords positive growth for the community (but could be positive for the joyous individual).

What empirical issues are at the intersection of religion/spirituality and joy?

There are various ways that a psychologist of religion can study how joy and religion are interrelated and I provide here some topics. First, religion can be considered as a form of culture (Saroglou & Cohen, 2013), which can color the way that religious people experience and express joy. For example, when and to what extent is joy interpreted as sacred or divine? What implications do these spiritually infused interpretations hold compared to secular versions of joy? Second, religious practices provide frequent opportunities for the experience of joy. What difference does it make when

religious practices are infused with joy? I suggested elsewhere the potential role of joy in deepening people's faith and knitting them to their religious practices in enduring ways (Van Cappellen, Rice, Catalino, & Fredrickson, 2018) as well as building people's well-being (Van Cappellen, Toth-Gauthier, Saroglou, & Fredrickson, 2016). Relatedly, given that religious practices provide a context for the *shared* experience of joy, what are the implications of communal joy for the nature of joy itself and for its social effects? Does this shared experience of joy (see Fredrickson, 2013b on positivity resonance) create greater social connectedness and spirituality? Finally, religion highlights the importance of *doing* joy, bridging the gap between a solely internal feeling to an enacted emotion (Van Cappellen, 2017). Joy is an act of worship, is expressed behaviorally, and leads to good actions. One may ask for example, what can we learn about the behavioral expression of joy from studying it in a religious context?

Disclosure statement

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