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Reflections on the Science of Joy: Current Challenges and Future Directions

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Abstract

This paper offers a response to Matthew Kuan Johnson's paper, *Joy: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Future Directions* (this issue). In dialogue with Johnson's review paper and other writings, I will describe what I view as the predominant challenges currently faced in the young science of joy, reflect on potential distinctive features of joy, and offer some ideas for future research. In particular, I offer thoughts on Johnson's theme of the relation between joy and suffering. This topic has been explored most extensively within theology. I will briefly offer a non-religious theory to complement religious themes in the literature. I will describe how, contrary to some current thinking, hardship may be a mechanism that promotes joy. This is a topic ripe for empirical investigation.

Keywords: joy, suffering, challenge, broaden-and-build, positive psychology, religion, spirituality

Reflections on the Science of Joy: Current Challenges and Future Directions

In offering a response to Matthew Kuan Johnson's paper, *Joy: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Future Directions* (this issue), I first want to express appreciation for Johnson's helpful synthesis of knowledge from multiple fields that clearly articulates the importance of studying joy. In this response, I will describe what I view as the predominant challenges currently faced in the science of joy, reflect on potential distinctive features of joy and how these may uniquely situate joy in relation to suffering, and offer some ideas for future research. I will do this in dialogue with Johnson's paper as well as the thoughtful writings of participants of the Theology of Joy and the Good Life project (TJ&GLP).

Challenges in the Conceptualization of Joy

Definitions of joy within the literature are quite disparate and, as Johnson aptly pointed out, existing psychological work on the topic of joy is often not in dialogue with itself. The most pressing challenge for the young science of joy may be to settle on one or a few useful conceptualizations of joy that advance the empirical study of the construct. Some essential ingredients of a foundational conceptualization of joy include that it is distinct, inclusive, and precise.

A distinct conceptualization of joy. One difficulty in conceptualizing joy involves unfuzzifying the fuzzy lines between joy and other positive psychology constructs. A lack of conceptual distinction hampers our ability to examine the unique functions, motivational and neurological properties, environmental circumstances, and outcomes of joy in comparison to other variables. For this reason, a conceptualization of joy must be unique enough to distinguish it from other positive psychology constructs; Johnson noted hope, gratitude, happiness, elevation, bliss, ecstasy, elation, and gladness. Additional contenders for the space include life

satisfaction, subjective wellbeing, positive thinking, and enthusiasm. Given existing bodies of literature on some of these constructs, joy need not be studied separately if it is the same thing.

Even though it is important, operationalizing joy distinctly is not an easy task. For example, Volf's (2015) definition of joy as a positive hedonic response to an intentional, un-owned, good object sounds quite a bit like gratitude. Measures of joy building on this definition have included items that seem to overlap conceptually with gratitude (e.g., "I often find myself amazed at the good things I have received"), as well as other positive psychology constructs, such as flow ("...time just seemed to fly," "I found myself enjoying something so much that I lost track of time"), and life satisfaction ("I feel like my life is going well," and "...my life is working out the way it should"; Watkins, Emmons, Greaves, & Bell, 2018). Despite this, Watkins et al. (2018) were able to empirically distinguished joy from both gratitude and wellbeing in their work, indicating there is something unique within their constellation of items.

One possibility is that joy represents a combination of other positive psychology constructs. For example, in a video interview from the 2014 TJ&GLP consultation, Robert Emmons described joy as "happiness plus gratitude" (Yale Center for Faith and Culture, 2014). This raises areas for exploration about whether joy functions as a higher order factor. A key direction the science must pursue at this time is discovering what, if anything, *unique* joy brings to the table.

An inclusive conceptualization of joy. Where the first challenge involves having a conceptualization of joy that is narrow enough to distinguish it from other constructs, a second challenge is somewhat in tension with the first: a useful conceptualization of joy must be broad enough to encompass the full, complex human experience of joy and broad enough to be relevant to the lived experiences of joy in diverse people. I believe this matter of inclusivity is important

to attend to early in the developing science of joy, given that conceptualizations dictate the nature of measurements, which dictate the type of research questions that can be addressed. Drawing the boundaries around joy too narrowly could result in needlessly limiting the study of joy among certain individuals. My goal is not to imply that all groups necessarily have equal access to joy or that all people experience joy in the same way without unique features. However, the nature and extent of joy among specific populations is an empirical question that we will not be able to address accurately if theories and measures of joy lack sensitivity within certain segments of the population and thereby result in a systematic under-reporting of joy among certain segments of society. Further, Johnson offered reflections regarding the limited amount of cross-cultural and developmental work conducted on joy to date. Being able to address this will necessitate a conceptualization (or multiple conceptualizations) of joy that encompasses presentations of joy among people along the lifespan and individuals of various cultures. I would add that an inclusive conceptualization of joy must also be considerate of the experiences of individuals with a range of mental abilities, the religious and non-religious, the spiritual and non-spiritual, those with privilege and the oppressed, and so forth. Although it is perfectly appropriate to study joy in particular presentations, when this is done, it would be beneficial to be explicit about which groups are excluded by the conceptualization of joy employed. I'll elaborate with two particular examples. First, some authors have focused on joy as essentially or primarily religious or spiritual in nature. For example, Vaillant (2008) suggested that joy involves a spiritual reconnection with a greater power. This and similar ideas raise questions about the experience of joy among those who do not identify as religious or spiritual. Do they have access to joy? If so, is their joy a lesser reproduction of religious/spiritual joy, as Johnson observed in the literature? Or does joy exist in distinct spiritual and nonspiritual forms?

If so, how are these forms of joy similar and distinct? Some of these questions are conceptual whereas others are empirical. Of course, the nature of conceptualizations of joy can limit or extend the empirical questions that can be addressed. For example, if joy is conceptualized as an inherently or exclusively spiritual phenomenon, this will limit methods for exploring research questions such as how spiritual and non-spiritual forms of joy differ, if in fact they exist in distinct forms.

Second, some conceptualizations of joy seem to be incompatible with a life of substantial hardship, perhaps ruling out joy as a viable construct to be examined among those living in situations of poverty, oppression, lack of stability, mental/physical illness, and so forth. For example, Volf (2015) described joy as a manifestation of three dimensions of the good life: life going well, life being lived well, and life being pleasurable. I wonder about the danger of inextricably linking the phenomenon of joy to life going well and being pleasurable. Might this bias the science of joy against an understanding of joy among people who face difficulties? Can joy abound, even in unfavorable circumstances? We will not truly know the answer to this question if we build assumptions regarding life going well into our definitions and measures of joy. For example, joy items such as, "I consistently feel like my life is going well," "My life is always improving," and "...my life is working out the way it should," (Watkins et al, 2018), may result in those facing any number of difficulties necessarily scoring lower on measures of joy. As the science of joy progresses, it is important to consider how theories and measures of joy may lack sensitivity among populations and individuals who have less privilege, opportunities, education, freedom, or resources.

Consideration of the structure of joy. As conceptualizations of joy are clarified, we must be thoughtful about the variety of structures of joy. Johnson thoughtfully reviewed a

number of "levels of analysis" for joy: emotion, mood, disposition/trait, and spiritual fruit. We might add virtue and spiritual discipline to this list.

One possibility is that joy is a unitary construct that can exist in distinct forms on the basis of where it falls along a number of continuums, including persistence, nature of source, and individual-to-collective nature. Persistence simply refers to the typical perseverance of joy within a target across time and circumstances, differentiating the more state-like presentations of joy (e.g., joy as an emotion) from the more trait-like presentations (e.g., joy as a disposition or virtue). Sources of joy can range from intra-individual to external triggers of joy. Intra-individual triggers of joy include biology (e.g., hormones, neuropeptides) and free will factors (e.g., willful cognition, discipline), whereas external sources of joy may include environmental circumstances or, in the case of spiritual fruit, workings of the Holy Spirit. Here, the emphasis is on the primary or initial trigger of joy, given that many of these categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, biology is likely involved in all experiences of joy, even those that are triggered externally. Finally, joy may present in more individualistic or more collective forms. Joy can be the characteristic of a person, social group, or community (Volf, 2015). Visualizing these dimensions, joy might exist in diverse forms anywhere within three-dimensional space along the continuums of persistence, source, and individual-to-collective nature.

A Working Definition of Joy

Although this paper is not focused on developing a particular conceptualization of joy, it may seem unfair to list challenges without attempting to work toward solutions. For that reason, I will offer for consideration a brief, working definition of joy as an emotion. Specifically, joy may be thought of as *delight that arises in response to a source of meaning or value in life*. Delight describes a pleasant emotion, conveying the positive valence of joy. Connecting this to a

matter of meaning or value differentiates joy from other positive emotions, such as happiness, a more general case in response to anything pleasant; amusement, in response to something entertaining; gratitude, in response to receiving something; pride, in response to accomplishing something; interest, in response to engaging in something, etc.

In this conceptualization, the source of meaning or value is based on the perception of the target and need not be defined objectively, however, sources of joy may tend to be of long-term or stable value (e.g., belonging, love, nature, beauty, nourishment, security, sacredness, influence, respect, and autonomy). Further, in this conceptualization, joy may be triggered by a symbol of a matter of meaning or value to the individual, for example, the sight of a daisy may give joy because it represents nature or beauty, or the love felt for the person who picked the daisy, or the carefree feeling experienced when rolling down a hill of daisies as a child. The fact that sources of meaning will differ from individual to individual or even from time to time makes this definition inclusive of individuals across ages, cultures, religious persuasions, and so forth. Further, the connection of a person's joy to a matter of meaning or value need not exist within a person's conscious awareness or ability to articulate. For example, someone may not realize that a whiff of apple pie made her feel joy because it reminded her of the love or security felt in a grandparent's home. This also serves the purpose of inclusivity, extending the conceptualization to those who are non-verbal, pre-verbal, or simply lack insight about their source of joy in a given moment.

A Distinctive Feature of Joy: Resilient in Suffering?

One of Johnson's important themes was the relationship between joy and suffering. A number of theories have been developed on this topic. Vaillant (2008) observed that what distinguishes joy from happiness, is that joy allows us to acknowledge suffering and can even let

us run *toward* pain. He further emphasized that joy may be more easily recognized in contrast to pain: there can be no joy in reunion without pain in farewell, no joy in forgiveness without pain in disapproval, and no joy in exodus without pain of captivity. In addition, Volf (2015) explored how joy can occur in the midst of suffering either because of the good suffering will produce or because of some good that exists despite suffering.

Yet, ingrained within theory of joy is also the idea that joy is incompatible with suffering. Johnson included reference to Fredrickson's (2009) description in the Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences that, "Feelings of joy arise in circumstances appraised as safe, familiar, and requiring little personal effort" (p. 230). Similarly, with emphasis on links between joy and the good life, there are sentiments that joy is less present, true, or robust in times of difficulty (Volf, 2015). The idea that true or full joy cannot be present when life is a struggle may be a popular cultural assumption, as well. For example, aid organizations targeting poverty often lead with images of individuals in destitute circumstances with serious or sad facial expressions. Perhaps these efforts are capitalizing on a myth that a life of struggle is a life devoid of joy. Yet, I have seen brilliant smiles and heard songs of joy in the poorest of settings. Further, superficial indicators of life going well may, in actuality, not be closely linked to true joy. Luxury and technology can promote social isolation and wealth can result in psychological strain such as choice overload. We may compare to research on life stressors. Stressors have predominantly been linked to less life satisfaction, yet, through nuanced research the literature has revealed that, although hindrance stressors are associated with decreased life satisfaction, challenge stressors are associated with increased life satisfaction (Flinchbaugh, Luth, & Li, 2015). Might we see similar links between difficult life circumstances and joy?

Interestingly, many who have written on ways to reconcile joy and suffering have done so on the basis of religious insights (see Johnson for review). Among participants of the TJ&GLP, Thompson (2015) described the possibility of joy despite suffering on the basis of faith that such circumstances do not signal the absence of God and hope in God removing affliction and bringing forth the conditions for joy. Similarly, Crisp (2015) described the possibility of religious joy *because of* suffering, when one is joined by Christ who will transform suffering to glory. Further, when Volf (2015) considered joy in the midst of suffering due to some good that transcends suffering, his examples of goods included God's character, deeds, and the promise of redemption.

This discussion may be enriched by consideration of how suffering may be a mechanism that promotes joy, and not *only* in religious contexts. In this sense, suffering is not the source of joy, but a vehicle through which joy may arrive. Johnson suggested that suffering may promote joy through post-traumatic growth. A more specific case may be that suffering can shift people's focus away from the many distractions to meaning or value in life. When focused on money, youth, health, or number of twitter followers, disaster, stress, or loss can cut through pretenses and help us take stock of what is meaningful in life – those things that are not, perhaps cannot be, touched by difficulties. This may bring us closer to the possibility of joy or delight in those things that are meaningful. As popularized by Tim McGraw, it may take a terminal diagnosis to start prioritizing skydiving, mountain climbing, and relational choices that bring true joy. Or in the case of Horatio Spafford, shortly after substantial financial loss and the death of all of his children, he wrote the following lyrics to a well-known Christian hymn when approaching the location his family had capsized:

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

These examples suggests that some individuals are able to face challenge by connecting with some deeper realization that all remains well, despite change in or loss of what was previously held dear. This line of thinking – that suffering may help individuals take stock of matters of deepest value in life (however defined), thereby setting the stage for deep delight and joy in these matters of significance – may supplement previous theories in a way that is not specifically religious in nature, and is thereby more inclusive of individuals who do not identify as religious.

Of course, these ideas about the links between joy and suffering must be examined empirically to be substantiated. This line of inquiry is worth pursuing, given that positive emotions like joy have been associated with resilience through increased coping abilities (e.g., Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). If positive emotions increase psychological resources, this may provide long-term benefits that buffer individuals from the negative impact of a variety of difficult life events (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Feldman-Barrett, 2004). This means that those facing difficult life circumstances may particularly stand to benefit from joy.

Summary and Future Directions

Johnson suggested the possibility that joyous individuals may be so rare that it would be too difficult to study joy empirically. My personal intuition is that joy is more abundant than this. For many individuals, life is difficult and involves strain, but people are resilient and, despite the

bleakness of outward circumstances, are able to access joy. Even the caged bird, despite clipped wings and tied feet, has not lost her core identity; she sings a song of freedom (Angelou, 1994).

The, perhaps paradoxical, relationship between joy and suffering has been explored more extensively within theology than psychology (see Johnson). It is time for psychology to pursue an empirical understanding this relationship. It is worth examining whether life's challenges may place individuals and communities in a greater positions to connect with sources of deeper meaning that bring life joy. Given the broaden-and-build emphasis on positive emotions increasing psychological resources and coping abilities (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 2003; Tuagade et al., 2004), individuals who face hardships might benefit most from joy.

Therefore, work is needed to consider what joy looks like among individuals and communities across a range of life circumstances, as well as ages, mental abilities, religious persuasions, and cultures. If joy is a universal human experience, this raises empirical questions about whether all joy is of the same essence or perhaps exists in distinct forms. Research may attend to whether the nature, presentation, or tone of joy differs on the basis of the particular source or object. For example, research may examine whether sacred and secular joy exist in distinct forms. If so, it would be worthwhile to explore how joy in response to a sacred versus secular object may differ within and between individuals who are and are not religious.

In addition, the extent to which will is involved in experiencing joy is a question worthy of empirical examination. Some have argued that we cannot make joy happen, but we can pursue joy obliquely (Frankl, 1962) or “choose to establish a context within which it may happen” (Meadows, 2013, p. 21). Empirical exploration of joy may give rise to proximal and/or distal methods for encouraging joy. As research moves toward evaluating how to elicit and sustain joy, it will also be helpful to understand what cognitive, behavioral, spiritual, and relational barriers

to joy exist, and how to overcome them. These may include factors that are pursued as part of the *good life* (e.g., some aspects of wealth, choice, or technology).

As the science of joy advances, it will be necessary to use theoretically grounded measures of joy to address these research questions. Some conceptualizations of joy, including the one described in this paper, will pose challenges to operationalization. Ideally, measures will strike a balance between being narrow enough to distinguish joy from other positive psychology constructs and broad enough to measure the complex and comprehensive nature of joy. As measures are developed and selected, it is important to consider the extent to which research participants can and should grasp researchers' conceptualizations of joy when responding to self-report items. Even when researchers work from thoughtful theoretical conceptualizations of joy, research participants may respond to self-report items of "joy" on the basis of a variety of personal interpretations, if no conceptual guidance is provided. One way to balance this concern is to continue to also think beyond self-report assessments of joy, including the use of physiological and observational (including photo and video) data. As the science of joy develops, we will gain more insight into the far-reaching implications of this construct.

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