

## THEORY/REVIEW MANUSCRIPT

# Positive Psychology in Research with the Deaf Community: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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## Abstract

The emergence of positive psychology as an approach to studying what makes life worth living has inspired a new wave of research. Studies have focused on the prevalence and degree of positive attributes, attitudes, and characteristics in the wider population. Increasingly, lessons learned from positive psychology have been applied to understanding the more diverse experiences of individuals belonging to various groups. Only recently, however, has positive psychology research incorporated a disability perspective, and very little research from a positive psychology stance has been conducted with deaf people. This article addresses the application of positive psychology constructs in the context of deaf communities and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. We argue that utilization of a positive psychology paradigm can broaden and enrich a collective understanding of deaf people, and suggest a different set of research questions. A positive psychology mindset encourages scholars to learn how people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and those within the larger deaf community<sup>1</sup>, may define and attain “the good life.”

## Introduction

Research with deaf and hard-of-hearing people and their families and communities, by and large, has focused on the difficulties and challenges that are faced. In deaf education, research has long focused on literacy and the development of teaching approaches that would improve literacy (see Marschark, Lampropoulou, & Skordilis, 2016 for a review). In the area of social development, there are many studies with deaf children documenting the greater prevalence of behavior problems (cf. Barker et al., 2009; van Eldik, Treffers, Veerman, & Verhulst, 2004), while with deaf adults, authors have pointed out the challenges of, and need for, providing services to those dealing with mental health challenges (Fellinger, Holzinger, & Pollard, 2012; Glickman, 2013).

Certainly, not all writing in the field has focused on the struggles. Increasingly, research involving deaf individuals has attempted to provide balanced approaches to considering both strengths and difficulties that arise in different groups within

deaf communities, such as children who utilize cochlear implants (Anmyr, Larsson, Olsson, & Freijd, 2012), or deaf children interacting with hearing peers (Batten, Oakes, & Alexander, 2014).

Other scholars have focused primarily on identifying and describing the strengths of members of the deaf community. For instance, Moore and Mertens (2015) examined how Deaf cultural experiences help to shape deaf youths' resilience process, particularly in youth of color. Rostami, Younesi, Movallali, Farhood, and Biglarian (2014) documented that positive thinking skills training had a positive effect on reported levels of happiness in deaf adolescents. A Deaf Acculturation scale was developed by Maxwell-McCaw and Zea (2011) to examine Deaf cultural identity; its theoretical framework is informed by recognition of the positive influence that involvement in Deaf cultural activities can have on one's identity. Zand and Pierce (2011) edited an entire volume that explored the role of resilience in deaf children.

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Yet, despite these strong examples of research in the deaf community that has emphasized strengths, there remains a need for more work that highlights not only deaf strengths in comparison with those found in hearing groups, or that are derived as a part of particular experiences, such as placement in a Deaf residential school or a family's involvement with a deaf mentor. While those experiences themselves are certainly highly valuable for some individuals, we argue that the questions being asked in deaf-related research, even when attempting to highlight strengths and weaknesses, do not often take into account broader questions for those associated with deaf communities, such as inquiring how they define health, successful adjustment, and well-being and what those constructs might look like in this population.

In this paper, we argue that it is time for a new, more positive paradigm in the study of members of the deaf community. It is time for a different approach to constructing our views. We argue that utilization of a positive psychology paradigm can broaden and enrich collective understanding of how people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and those within the larger deaf community, may define and attain "the good life."

## Positive Psychology

The term "Positive Psychology" was coined by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) as an alternative way of thinking about and studying human development and adaptation proposing that investigators ask, "What makes life worth living?" By establishing Positive Psychology as a field that would focus on empirical evidence of the "life well lived," its founders sought to strengthen the science of psychology that focused on human potential and aspirations (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A focus on human potential, personal growth, happiness, and achievement seems sorely lacking in research with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Examining the questions asked by positive psychology researchers and applying them to deaf and hard-of-hearing people can change the narrative in potentially dramatic ways.

The early work of investigators in positive psychology laid the foundation for arguing for the study of positive emotions, separately and distinctly, from the study of negative emotions (Shogren, 2014). Fredrickson and Levenson (1998) were among the first researchers to demonstrate that negative emotions differ from positive emotions in their physiological effect on the body, thus informing both theories of emotion and health promotion strategies. They found that the presence of positive emotions caused negative emotions to dissipate more rapidly, and physiologically, positive emotions reverse the cardiovascular after-effects of negative emotions. Positive psychology perspectives can shift the focus from understanding solely how to "fix-what's-wrong" to "build-what's-strong" (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p. 3).

In their work on developing ways to understand and study happiness, Duckworth et al. (2005) and Haybron (2013) proposed three related factors that could be studied: the pleasant life; the engaged life; and the meaningful life. For the pleasant life, aspects of the past and future are examined. From the past, contentment, satisfaction, and serenity are examined, while optimism, hope, and faith are the topics for the future. Those who cherish the pleasant life tend to maximize positive emotions, and minimize emotions that are painful or negative. The engaged life encapsulates strength of character, leadership, kindness, and originality. When individuals can effectively use their talents and strengths, they experience more engagement

in their life and work, and more "flow." Lastly, the meaningful life centers around serving and belonging. For some people, commitment to a particular cause and dedication to service on behalf of others contribute most significantly to happiness. Based on this work, it is presumed that "many roads can lead to happiness," yet there is value in determining how particular individuals might attain that which they would describe as "the good life" for themselves.

At this juncture, the field of Positive Psychology is well established and the world has gained important insights into such topics as rates of happiness, understanding of subjective well-being, the role of goal-setting in our lives, and – as highlighted below – how individuals develop resilience. The field has shown that these topics can be empirically studied, and that "feel good psychology" need not be relegated to secondary status as a science.

To illustrate the central argument for conducting research from a positive psychology perspective with deaf communities, we will highlight the examination of the concept of resilience. This paper will show how resilience, which is just one construct of numerous areas of strengths explored in studies of positive psychology, can be both misapplied and how it can be better used in disability studies, and, as will be highlighted later, how resilience can also be understood in the context of research conducted with deaf communities.

## Positive Psychology and Disability

Historically, the fields of both disability studies and traditional psychology emphasized deficits in human functioning by identifying problems and attempting to fix them (Wehmeyer, 2014). Increasingly, the desire to understand "what is right" and "what is going well" is also valued. Adopting a positive psychology approach, by itself, however, will not guarantee research that is useful or that moves the field forward. Most researchers would acknowledge that people with disabilities/disabled people<sup>2</sup> can (and should) have equal opportunities for a fulfilling life. Yet, when using conceptualizations of well-being socially constructed by abled-bodied people, persons with disabilities rate lower in studies of well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness (Buntinx, 2014; Wehmeyer, 2014). The application of "standard procedures" for evaluating perspectives of positive psychology with persons with disabilities may yield results that are incorrect or, worse, perpetuate misconceptions about the community. For example, the topic of vigor, as studied in able-bodied individuals, is defined as feeling cheerful, lively, alert, and energetic (Snyder & Lopez, 2002, p.108). Do individuals with physical limitations who are not conventionally "physically strong" or energetic not experience vigor?

## Misapplication of positive psychology to understanding disabilities

Individualistic accounts of resilience have not been helpful to disabled people and, in some cases, have resulted in more "placing the blame" on the individuals themselves for not overcoming challenges (Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013). If resilience is the process of adapting to or overcoming risk and, as such, is typically shown only in the face of a particular risk, how then is resilience defined in the face of ongoing and constant adversity? If living with a disability creates an on-going "stressful experience," how might we define resilience?

Too often, the experiences of persons with disabilities are viewed in contrast to the experiences of persons without

disabilities, with corresponding assumptions about loss, grief, sorrow and discontent (Hanisch, 2014). Disability scholars have argued that a comparative perspective to understanding the experiences and beliefs of individuals with disabilities, especially as applied by “temporarily able-bodied” persons (since no one is immune to possibly developing or acquiring a disability at some point) can lead to false interpretations of the experience (Schramme, 2014).

### A better application of positive psychology to understanding disability

Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2013) explored the meaning of resilience in the lives of persons with disabilities and examined how resilience is built and sustained. In doing so, these researchers incorporated a review of the literature and examined the shifting conceptualization of resilience. They interviewed people with disabilities to explore resilience in their lives and incorporated focus groups during which they gathered more information, shared their findings of the themes that emerged from the interviews, and asked for feedback. In what they described as their “Community of Practice” phase, the researchers, along with the participants, produced a toolkit to use with disabled people to promote resilience. Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2013) argued that we must deconstruct our understanding of a positive strength if it stems from ableist norms, such as former definitions of resilience. Rather than conceptualizing resilience as an individual strength, resilience in persons with disabilities seems to be developed through relationships and by having access to the appropriate resources that allow each individual to describe his/her own experience as living well (Ungar, 2007).

Individuals who are resilient readily and effectively “bounce back” from negative or stressful experiences (Tugage & Fredrickson, 2004). Resilient individuals, even in the midst of stressful situations, experience positive emotions. Different from “optimism,” where people tend to be generally positive much of the time, individuals who are resilient both recognize the effects of high stress situations, and, despite the adversity that they face, are able to experience positive outcomes. Indeed, studies show that individuals who have suffered hardships recover more quickly when they encounter adversity in the future (Haidt, 2006). In general, people underestimate their own ability to cope with trying or adverse situations; we are not good at predicting the personal growth and resilience that may result from encountering difficult circumstances. Carel (2014) noted that people dealing with challenges associated with disability often demonstrate resilience through strengthening their existing relationships, re-consideration of their priorities and values, and altering their sense of being-in-the-world.

### Positive Psychology and the Deaf Community

Similar to able-bodied perspectives applied to disability studies described earlier, the research involving deaf people has a long history of research constructed from the social perspective of hearing investigators and clinicians. This is exemplified by work in mental health, the history of which is summarized by Glickman and Harvey (2008). Inappropriate verbal measures were used to judge the intelligence of deaf people as inferior; personality testing (again using English/verbal tests) revealed psychopathology; and even when there was affirmation that deaf people were capable of benefitting from traditional psychotherapy, their struggles were interpreted from a hearing

perspective (Glickman & Harvey, 2008). It took decades of work, often by deaf professionals (e.g., Sussman and Brauer, 1999; Sussman and Stewart, 1971) before the field began to acknowledge the many personal strengths that deaf people possess and move toward culturally affirmative therapies (Glickman & Gulati, 2003; Glickman, 2013).

As a whole, the deaf community has worked on a different social construction to shift the discourse related to being deaf from a focus on the medical model of “impairment” to a socio-cultural perspective of “difference” (Benedict et al., 2015). Some leaders in the deaf community have embraced the concept of *Deaf Gain*<sup>3</sup>, which essentially challenges the emphasis typically placed on hearing loss, and instead focuses on the ways in which being deaf can contribute to the cultural diversity of the human experience (Bauman & Murray, 2009; Holcomb, 2013).

Many scholars have written about the Deaf Gain concept. A consistent theme has been the contributions to our larger world from the Deaf community. There is an emphasis on the advantages of diversity (Bauman & Murray, 2009) and how the world benefits from having Deaf people in it, such as in learning how the brain functions in tasks like comprehending language (Petito, 2014), visual spatial reasoning (Bahan, 2014), as well as broadening our understanding of what constitutes a culture and cultural exchanges (Garcia & Cole, 2014).

Sutherland and Rogers (2014) have written to encourage research on the benefits of life as a deaf person. They have highlighted work, particularly by deaf researchers and members of the deaf community, that is culturally sensitive, starting with the measurement approaches and involving the participants deeply in the process. Sutherland and Rogers (2014; Sutherland, 2008) highlight the importance of measures with a strong visual approach, guided by the participants’ feedback, and informed by a Deaf Gain perspective. To be certain, the concept of Deaf Gain has been described by members of deaf communities as empowering and affirming. Yet, it is less clear from reading the limited literature regarding Deaf Gain how these ideas have influenced the conduct of empirical research into the lives of deaf people.

### Understanding of resilience in deaf communities

Researchers in deaf studies have argued that living a good life in the face of challenges associated with an environment that is not highly positive shows resilience (Young, Rogers, Green, & Daniels, 2011). Not only must a person be resilient, the environment must be such that it creates space for people to be resilient. Young and colleagues suggest that there is a need to, “Reframe resilience in this community as the ability to positively navigate the experience of being deaf in a world that may create risk and adversity in response to deafness and d/Deaf people” (p.17). Resilience has been examined from the perspective of the need for families to adapt to their child hearing status (Ahlert & Greeff, 2012). In an edited volume by Zand and Pierce (2011), researchers address a host of topics related to resilience and strength in deaf children and their families.

Application of resilience to being deaf suggests that deafness is a risk or adversity that must be overcome (Young et al., 2011). To understand whether this is true, one would need to explore the socially-constructed definitions of resilience and adversity within the deaf population, as well, perhaps, as what it means to be deaf. In the deaf experience, resilience-based skills may be mediated or impacted by communicative competence, reduced access to information, and/or fewer opportunities to “take responsibility for oneself,” or explore new experiences. These

are not necessarily a result of being deaf, but are influenced by the “proximal risk mechanisms” that may be present in a person’s deaf experience (Young et al., 2011).

The meaning of resilience depends upon context and is informed by the deaf community.<sup>4</sup> To effectively study resilience in the lives of deaf people, therefore, it is necessary to gather their input regarding the meaning of the term and the applicability of the concept to their lives. Zimmerman (2015) did exactly this with a small sample of deaf people, as well as hearing family members, in Guam. Using a mixed-methods approach, she interviewed deaf and hearing people asking about what defined success, or “doing well,” for deaf people. A theme that emerged from her data was keeping positive about one’s life and being able to stand out against a hearing background. Zimmerman described it by saying, “This positive outlook on life, a staunch ability to meet one’s goals, to be a leader in one’s community, and surpass hearing peers were recognized as successful characteristics necessary for resilience. Deaf and hard-of-hearing people were not only expected to be better than the norm, but were also expected to *do well* without adequate contextual supports. Resilient deaf people were able to circumvent difficulties and demonstrate effective communication skills in social, educational, and employment settings” (2015, p. 20). This begins to point to different ways of attaining the good life in deaf communities.

### Measurement Challenges in Positive Psychology with Deaf People

Positive psychology frameworks do not mandate a particular research design or methodology. In examining positively oriented research with deaf people, some work has been qualitative in nature (e.g., Szarkowski & Brice, 2016), while many questionnaires and scales have also been used (e.g., Allahi, Mirabdi, & Mazaheri, 2012). Most paper-and-pencil measures, however, are not designed with the deaf population in mind and do not consider the unique, and even positive aspects, of what it means to be deaf. As a linguistic and cultural minority within the greater hearing culture, deaf individuals have particular concerns and life experiences that may not be captured using standard measures designed for hearing persons.

As with studies conducted with disability communities, when standard research measures and quantitative methods are used in conducting research with the deaf community, results often show “less desirable outcomes.” Allahi et al. (2012) compared deaf and blind exceptional children (including those with learning disabilities, reduced attention, emotional and behavioral challenges, intellectual disabilities, communication disorders, etc.) on Diener’s Satisfaction with Life questionnaire (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); deaf students reported greater satisfaction than did blind students, although both seem to be less satisfied than typically developing peers. In their review paper, Proctor, Linley, and Maltby (2008) found just one study (Gilman, Easterbooks, & Frey, 2004) examining satisfaction with life among deaf individuals, which documented that deaf and hard-of-hearing youth reported lower life satisfaction across most domains than hearing peers. These reports of deaf people not doing as well as hearing people tend to be the norm in the literature.

To address this measurement challenge, Patrick et al. (2011) developed a quality of life measure for deaf and hard-of-hearing youth that specifically included questions relevant to people who are deaf. Kushalnagar et al. (2011) then used that measure to investigate quality of life and its correlates in deaf

adolescents. She and her colleagues found that perceived satisfaction with communication with parents was predictive of better quality of life, and that deaf youth frequently reported feeling positively about many aspects of their lives. The research of Patrick et al. (2011) and Kushalnagar et al. (2011) illustrate that both qualitative and quantitative research designs can be used to effectively and fairly study deaf communities. When objective measures are developed that are culturally sensitive both in terms of relevant topics and language of administration, different and more positive pictures emerge regarding deaf people.

### Application of Positive Psychology to Research with the Deaf Community

Studies of psychology have historically sought to find, understand and describe universal “human truths.” Yet, newer lines of inquiry and understanding have recognized that knowledge about human nature and experiences are not a direct perception of a “true reality” (Burr, 2015). Rather, our own realities are socially constructed through an on-going, interactive process based on interactions with each other, with our environments and our reflections on these (Andrews, 2012). Rather than aiming to “find the truths” believed to apply to everyone, social construction paradigms recognize that understanding of particular phenomena is only partial, and is dependent on several factors. Burr (2015) suggests that, when using a social constructionist framework, it is critical that one not accept “taken-for-granted knowledge,” but rather critically question information that is widely accepted. This entails the incorporation of other world views, particularly the world views of the research participants. The importance of questioning our way of thinking leads directly to the need to examine what we as researchers have asked about our research participants and the assumptions we have implicitly or explicitly made.

### Implications of the Paradigm Shift

Historical perspectives towards disabled people as suffering and in need of treatment and rehabilitation have been changing to emphasize the many things people can do. Collectively, there does seem to be a change toward emphasizing the functions and capabilities of individuals rather than focusing on disabilities - highlighting the *deaf gain* over the *hearing loss*.

As people who study the human condition, it is incumbent upon us to remember that our findings and the questions we ask, have been socially constructed out of our particular worldview. Cultural backgrounds and teachings influence how we view people, how we conceive of our research questions, and how we formulate interventions (Burr, 2015). Some scholars have begun to describe this; for example, Hauser, O’Hearn, McKee, Steider, and Thew (2010) argue for a “Deaf episteme,” a way of learning about the world that is unique and exclusive to people who grow up deaf in a hearing society. Thus, “Deafhood” shapes one’s worldview. As multicultural work expands and is integrated into the study of human development, we recognize that social processes may be constructed differently between major cultural groups such as different countries, and that it can vary even among subgroups and subcultures of a single larger cultural group (Campos & Shenhav, 2014). These ideas lead us to recognizing the importance of asking basic questions of, and respecting the answers from, unique cultural groups, such as the deaf community.

## Research Programs Incorporating Positive Psychology that Involve the Deaf Community

We argue here that simply finding and reporting on occasional healthy outcomes is not sufficient. Stress and strain should not be considered, inevitably, the only possible experience. Instead, we propose that the framework of study needs to expand such that the search for what constitutes *optimum* health is included as an alternative construction. Furthermore, that search needs to acknowledge and respect that various cultures will define health differently. The basic tenets of positive psychology have the potential to change how we go about studying and working with deaf people. No one to date, to our knowledge, has asked deaf or hard-of-hearing people, directly and explicitly, about the positive aspects of their lives, with the aim of understanding those not as a contrast to “what is negative,” but rather as an important entity unto themselves. Szarkowski and Brice (2016) asked hearing parents about the positive features of raising deaf children. But we do not know of research that has framed the questions with deaf and hard-of-hearing people themselves as to what is positive.

A first research topic may involve happiness itself. A search for research that has explored happiness in deaf people yields limited results that are largely conducted from hearing versus deaf perspectives. This leads to a long list of possible questions. How is happiness defined by deaf people? Does it fit the Duckworth et al. (2005) paradigm? What are the paths to happiness among the diverse community of deaf and hard-of-hearing people? Are there developmental characteristics to it? These sorts of questions deserve merit on their own, and should not simply be framed as whether deaf or hard-of-hearing people are as happy as hearing people, or as happy as people with disabilities. Learning about how deaf people come to be happy is important in its own right as happiness, rather than adjustment, should be life's goal. Furthermore, this can be done from a variety of methodologies, ranging from correlational to experimental and qualitative to quantitative. The questions asked, however, can incorporate a positive framework.

Another potentially profitable research program could be examining the *strengths of character* (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) among deaf people. As in Zimmerman's (2015) work, it could be enlightening to explore among deaf people themselves what is perceived as strength of character. Who does the community identify as examples of people with strength of character? How is it achieved and how is it maintained? How is strength of character involved in the intersectionality of roles and identities that deaf and hard-of-hearing people manifest? Studying these questions changes the process and the paradigm. No need for comparative research dependent upon one's “social address,” but investigations into the power of the development of a group of people.

Researchers and participants construct a shared meaning of the world as they investigate questions of interest. That construction, however, is not the only one possible, and it is not inevitable. Examining the lived experience of individuals who comprise deaf communities from a different frame grants a much-needed perspective on “what is the good life?” Application of a Positive Psychology frame of inquiry will not only allow for a more balanced perspective on the experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, but it can inform and enhance understanding of the experiences of a group of people whose “voices” are not typically included in studies of positive psychology, thereby benefiting the field of positive psychology

by incorporating greater diversity as well (Christopher & Howe, 2014).

## Notes

1. Deaf Culture, Deaf Community and Deaf Population are all terms that can be seen in the literature; authors ascribe different meaning to these dependent upon their perspectives. In our conceptualization, we use the phrase deaf community as an inclusive term, bringing in all those who see themselves as deaf or hard of hearing and their surrounding ecosystem. As a result, we see the deaf community as an extremely heterogeneous collection of people (Holcomb, 2013). It ranges from those who reject all things “hearing,” use a visual signed language (based on the regions/nations in which they reside), and spend most of their time with deaf people, to those who embrace oral/aural qualities and see themselves as part of the hearing world, and all gradients in between.
2. We acknowledge the individual and collective preferences of those who support “people first” language and as well as those who prefer “disability identity” terminology. We would argue that this decision is also informed by social construction. As authors, we do not wish to take a stand on this; rather, we defer to individuals' preferences.
3. Credit for coining this term is given to Aaron Williamson, which he used during a presentation in a graduate course taught by Dirksen Baumen, *Enforcing Normalcy: Deaf and Disability Studies*. In American Sign Language, the phrase can be glossed: DEAF INCREASE, DEAF BENEFIT and DEAF CONTRIBUTE.
4. An interesting insight into deaf views on resilience can be gleaned from the fact that, for users of sign language, the term resilience is not consistently signed in a particular way (this is true for users of British Sign Language and American Sign Language, but may be the case in other signed languages as well). Some might utilize a sign that is akin to “continue” or “persevere.” Other deaf individuals might express resilience similar to how they might show “resistance,” still others might depict it as more aligned with the concept of “protection” – suggesting that resilience is seen as a protective factor against challenges.

## Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest were reported.

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