

Philip C. Watkins

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# Gratitude and the Good Life

Toward a Psychology of Appreciation

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Why a Science of Gratitude?

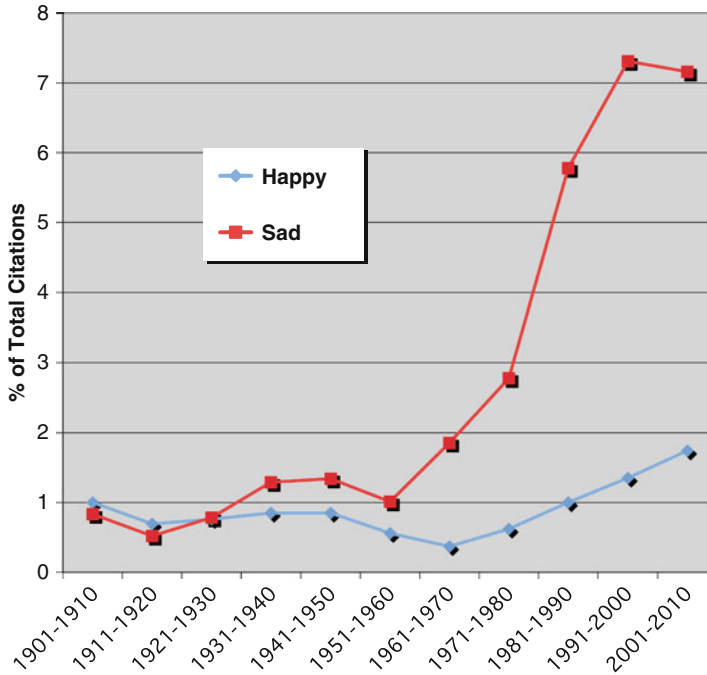
*Sadly, while plumbing the depths of what is worst in life, psychology has lost its connection to the positive side of life – the knowledge about what makes human life most worth living, most fulfilling, most enjoyable and most productive.*

–Martin E. P. Seligman (1998)

Why should there be a science of gratitude? For that matter, why should there be a science of positive psychology? Given the economic, social, and psychological problems in the world, does it even make sense to spend valuable research time and money on the “positive side of life”? Psychological disorders seem to be increasing in prevalence, so why should we even be writing articles and books on gratitude and positive psychology? In this chapter I hope to answer these questions; I hope to demonstrate why a science of positive psychology is needed, and why a science of gratitude is an important aspect of that endeavor.

### 1.1 Neglecting the Good: Ignore It and It Will Go Away

First, I would like to argue that psychology has been overly focused on the unpleasant side of life. But before discussing psychology’s bias toward the negative, it is important to be clear about the definition of positive psychology, and Seligman’s definition contained in the epigraph is as good as any. Positive psychology is the scientific study of “the positive side of life”, and this includes four important facets: the factors that make life “most worth living, most fulfilling, most enjoyable, and most productive.” Elsewhere Seligman has defined the four “pillars” of positive psychology, which he cites as the study of subjective well-being, positive emotions, positive psychological traits, and positive institutions. Clearly, gratitude is one of



**Fig. 1.1** Percent of “Happy” and “Sad” citations by decade (Note: “Happy” citations included the following descriptors: joy, happy, happiness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, contentment, euphoria, cheer. “Sad” citations included the following descriptors: Sad, depressed, depression, dysphoria, dysphoric, melancholy, melancholic)

those “positive emotions” and is also a “positive psychological trait.” Why is it important to study these subjects?

Because psychology’s preference for studying unpleasant emotions and unhappiness has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), I will not continue to bemoan this bias here. Instead, I would like to emphasize some interesting trends in this bias. In Fig. 1.1, I show the proportion of studies that investigated positive and negative conditions over time. There are several aspects of this figure I would like to highlight. First, note that I computed the number of citations by decade as a percent of the total number of citations in a given decade. Although not always done in this way, I believe it is important to deal with proportions because the number of publications in psychology has generally increased over the years as the discipline of psychology has grown.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A quick note is in order about the total number of citations over the years. Although in general the total number of citations has grown over the years—and at times has grown exponentially—the total number of citations actually decreased from the 1930s to the 1940s. This is likely because of the war effort.

Thus, proportions allow us to see whether there has been real change in the study of these variables relative to other areas of concern in psychology. I conducted an unrestricted word search using *PsycInfo* that emphasized happiness and sadness. Rather than choosing a number of positive and negative state variables, I chose to focus on these two states because it is well known that there are more distinct negative than positive emotions.<sup>2</sup> Second, note how the study of emotional variables (both positive and negative) seemed to reach a low point in the 1950s. I believe that this was probably because of the dominance of the behavioral paradigm at the time; the zeitgeist was that emotions were unseen variables that could not be studied scientifically. Third, note how the study of emotion has progressively increased since the 1950s.

The final point I would like to highlight in this figure is how the study of positive emotion has grown relative to the study of negative emotions in recent years. The turning point appears to have occurred in the 1960s, when the study of pleasant emotions continued to decline but the study of unpleasant states began increasing. Although the study of positive emotions has grown in the last 40 years, this appears to be reflective of the general growth in interest in the study of emotion, rather than increased interest in positive affect per se. Indeed, the increase in the study of positive emotions has been dwarfed by the growth in the study of unpleasant emotions over the last 40 years. Interest in negative emotions showed a steep incline during the 1980s, and seems to have reached its apex in the 1990s. Only during the last decade has the interest in the study of positive emotions gained slightly on the study of unpleasant states. Thus, although recently researchers are indeed devoting more of their research efforts to the study of positive emotions, there has been a much greater increase in the study of negative emotions over the last 40 years. In sum, the negative bias in psychology has increased in recent years.

But perhaps this is as it should be. Perhaps unpleasant emotional states are more frequent and more important than pleasant emotions, and thus they should receive more research attention. In fact however, positive affective states are experienced much more frequently than negative states. A good example of this positive emotion bias is found in the experience sampling study conducted by Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, and Nesselroade (2000). In this study participants were paged five times per day at random intervals and were asked to report their current emotional experience on 11 negative and 8 positive emotional states. On average, participants were over three times more likely to be experiencing a positive than a negative emotional state. For example, there was an 89 % chance that a participant would be experiencing “happiness” at any given sampling point, while there was only a 28 % chance that they would be experiencing any sadness. The most frequently experienced negative emotional state was anxiety (reported on 44 % of the sampling occasions), whereas the least frequently reported positive emotion was reported on 69 % of

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<sup>2</sup>I also conducted a literature search using a number of positive and negative state terms, and I also conducted title searches on these variables. Basically all of the literature searches that I conducted revealed the same story.