

Column:
Family Crucial Matters

Edited by Giovanna Giancesini

*Smiling, Laughing or Crying in the Face of
Adversity? How Our Emotions Impact us and those
around Us*

We posted some provoking questions on CIRF online forum (<http://firblog.psy.unipd.it>) to provide an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to share and comment about this current and controversial issue and stimulate both a theoretical and empirical discussion.

According to George Bonanno, professor of psychology, chair of the Clinical and Counseling Psychology, Department at Columbia University, Teachers College, and head of the Loss, Trauma, and Emotion Lab, positive emotion and its expression are both signs of resilience and successful coping with adverse life events. Showing genuine laughter and smiling, rather than crying, is a healthy response to a loss or stressor event. Non genuine laughing, however, could be a predictor of less successful social adjustment due to difficulties regulating emotions in social situations, which could contribute to long term adjustment problems. According to American positive psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Principal Investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at the University of North Carolina, the more positive emotions you experience, the more likely you are to have healthy heart rhythms that make you more adaptive to different situations, in both a psychological and physical sense. Experiencing positive emotions, Fredrickson says, like joy, contentment and gratitude, boost our health and wellbeing. Positive emotions are mind and body events as they not only improves the way we learn and make decisions, but also our immunity, our cardiovascular health and our emotional connection to others, which in turn

Rivista di studi familiari, 1/2011

boosts aspects of our physical health. Experiencing positive emotions, however, is more than just being free of negative emotions. Luciano L'Abate, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Georgia State University who created a powerful theory for understanding relational competence (RCT), believes that sincere and non-manipulative crying shared with loved ones produces intimacy and improves intimate relationships. Crying does not have to be viewed as a noxious stimulus to be avoided, suppressed, and repressed. Hurt feelings, defined as unpleasant, painful, and harmfully subjective affects experienced from objectively aversive or negatively perceived life events, not only can be alleviated and may even dissipate by sharing them with intimates, family and friends or mental health professionals, but they create intimacy in a process that implies and involves mutuality or reciprocity and lead to social support. Only when feelings emerge and are shared they transform themselves into emotions. Could it then be that positive emotions have a better intrapersonal function while negative a better interpersonal one? How individuals evoke positive emotions in different context, both positive and negative, and how do they respond to positive and negative emotions within interpersonal interactions? Does the display of only positive emotions elicit positive responses in other people thus encouraging social affiliation and making social resources available for coping with adversities? Does it matter who they are shared with? What are the mechanisms that may link positive emotion expression to well being? Is the experience of stress during adversity related to a loss of resources? Does the positive emotional response in face of adversity promote or rather imply a higher level of material, individual and relational resources? Or just a better ability to modulate emotional responses and expressions? And how is it related to resilience?

Keywords: *resilience, post-traumatic growth, stress, coping, positive psychology, relational competence, positive emotions, emotion regulations.*

Luciano L'Abate, commented our post specifying that “what's crucially important, before dealing with the sharing of hurt feelings, is the ratio in the frequency, nature, intensity, and rate of joys and pleasures with frequency, nature, intensity, and rate of hurt feelings. Developmentally, this is crucial in infants where there are no words to describe joys and hurts except for laughing and crying. Fredrickson used a normative ratio of 3 positives to 1 negative. She varied the number of pleasures from 1 to 6 and kept the number of negatives to one constant single number, thus she encapsulated all of humanity's psychopathology into one single constant digit. L'Abate (L'Abate, Cusinato, Maino, Colesso, & Scilletta, 2010) instead, presented a model of six types of interactions according to a simple arithmetical model,

ranging from multiplicative, additive, static positive, static negative, subtractive, and divisive interactions. By making hurt feelings vary between 1 and 6, according to this model, one then would obtain the following ratios of joys to hurts: 6/1, 5/2, 4/3, 3/4, 2/5, and 1/6. The principle underlying this model is that: joys offset hurts up to a point in static positive interactions but, starting with negative static interactions, hurts offset joys and psychopathology emerges.”

Carly J. Larson, an American sociology student, commented our post starting with the line *“Showing genuine laughter and smiling, rather than crying, is a healthy response to a loss or stressor event”* as he found interesting that the author connotatively attested tears and crying to sadness and a deemed bad or unhealthy emotion. Crying can be done in forms of anger, sadness, physical injury, overtiredness, need (in infant), but also in happiness, surprise, sympathy, empathy, and sentimentality/memories-both good and bad. Crying is merely an expression of release of emotions and a connection to humanity-feelings”. Moreover, in response to the researcher saying *“Crying does not have to be viewed as a noxious stimulus to be avoided, suppressed, and repressed”* he commented that “this goes back to both inherent characteristics and compounded perceptions. All parts of the large whole of the person and largely based upon dominant characteristics for which a person is born with and their developmental process-growing and developing if needed and falling by the wayside if they are not needed. This starts at birth and usually represents and correlates with conflict resolutions and resiliency at the nuclear familial level. It also is dependent on the perceptions of whom is watching or in direct contact with the action-therefore offering the reaction. This is the stimuli and response for which perceptions are built, repeated, compounded, and developed on. It is such that teaching a child conflict management, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary, regardless of environment, would be then the pieces of the puzzle to allow them to act and react, and disassociate from those things which in a volatile structure would have rendered them unable. By giving them the skills to read a situation and act either into or out of it, taught would be life skills that can work in almost any environment. Parental means of handling situations and conflicts directly correlate to the child’s feelings of security, and their future reactions to similar exposure. Giving them these tools to succeed all-around, focusing at the family level, which is the base for development, and understanding the dynamics and potential problems a child may be faced with; items like conflict management and stress relief can be rendered as a life long skill.

“What accounts for why some stay healthy and do well in the face of risk and adversity and others do not (Patterson, 2002, pg. 352)?” This is resiliency. However “practitioners and researchers have used the concept of resiliency differently (Patterson, 2002, pg. 352).” They go on further to map

“distinctions between family resiliency as capacity and family resilience as a process (Patterson, 2002).” The indication and separation of these two items in regard to families would help target potential triggers or stimuli to conflict and therefore the assessment of what outcomes may fit that situation. “Our family of origin socializes us into constructive and destructive ways of handling conflict that carry over directly into how romantic relationships are later handled. For example, step families’ conflicts are destructive 95 percent of the time ...Ongoing conflict at home has a greater impact on adolescent distress and symptoms than does parental divorce (Wilmont & Hocker, 2010).” This also includes methods of discipline. We know that discipline methods are typically passed through generations, and are the make-up of both stress and fear. “Harsh discipline practices at home are more at risk for aggression, hyperactivity, and internalizing by withdrawing... (Wilmont & Hocker, 2010).”

“Only when feelings emerge and are shared they transform themselves into emotions.” In sociology this theory of self-identification through perception is based upon the following theories of self by actions of another (i.e. the looking glass self). George Herbert Mead theorized this as we identify ourselves by how we perceive another to look at us, react to what we say, react to our presence, etc. and therefore this is how and where we place ourselves with in or on the outsides of the culture for which we are raised (Scott & Marshall, 2005). “How she was treated and how she experienced herself in the relationship (Garfat, 2010, p. 55),” are the two important steps in perception, the action and the reaction. This then extends further in to the argument of nature versus nurture. Are we really a production of environmental classification and perspective or are we born predisposed to certain more dominant characteristics which carry us to an advantage of another, never rendering two people to play on an equal playing field. How much of our behavior is socio-biological?” Carly J. Larson looked at modern studies as “this is a relatively recent thought in sociology, but not so in philosophy. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls, whom differs in thought from John Locke’s perspective that we are all born blank in state (Mannion, 2006), but yet comparable to Immanuel Kant’s perspective of innate hardwiring (Scott & Marshall, 2005), (Mannion, 2006); he one hand believes, as stated within his genetic determinant theory (Rawls, 1971), we are born with hardwiring, but in his book, he says that we can inexplicably both leave and use this hard wiring and make the optimal justice for all, breaking down how the nature of uneven genetics predisposes the existence of certain characteristics of one and the vastly differing characteristics of another, even if the genetic contributors are the same (i.e. the mother and father). This nature differentiation would create alternatives for the way we perceive, handle situations, and attach ourselves to another. In conclusion, Carly J. Larson says, emotions are based on what “we” make them. They can vary person to person, society to society, and culture to culture. They are in

and of the mind through the vast perception process. They develop and change based upon need and the response or reaction of others to us. They can be good and bad for health, for response, for intent, etc. But as stated above they also have the ability to connect us as humans and give us the knowledge and skills to see a situation and be resilient to it regardless of its degree of adversity just by understanding what emotions are”.

According to **Alberto Dionigi**, PhD Student at University of Macerata and Member of the *International Society for Humor Studies*, in recent years interest in positive emotions has grown, thanks to a change that occurred when some researchers decided to focus on positive emotions instead of negative ones. In fact, almost ten years have passed since the *American Psychologist* devoted its millennial issue to the emerging science of positive psychology: the study of positive emotion, positive character, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, if we look back, we can find that Martin and Lefcourt (1986) made one of the first researches in this field focusing their interest on humor and its role as a coping strategy. Nowadays it is acknowledged that stressful life events may affect psychological and physical health and there is a growing interest in humor and in its role in helping to relax, improve relationships with others, and reduce negative emotions. Starting from Martin and Lefcourt’s study, various researches aimed at finding a relationship between psychological adaptation and the use of humor, endeavoring to confirm the belief that people with a greater sense of humor are less prone to developing symptoms such as distress, anxiety and depression and are more able to face stressful events. This claim is due to the fact that research shows how people who suffer from psychological distress, through humor can learn to increase their self-efficiency, to transform their mood in a positive one and find constructive solutions to their problems. Smiling and laughing in front of the adversity could be helpful in restructuring a situation so it is less stressful, and humor can help with both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies.

The positive effects of humor may be explained by the role of humor in the cognitive appraisal of threatening, hence stressful, situations and its function as a coping strategy in general. Humor has been described as producing a cognitive-affective shift or a restructuring of the situation so that it is less threatening, with a concomitant release of emotion associated with the perceived threat (Dixon 1980; Martin et al. 1993) and reduction in physiological arousal (Shurcliff 1968). To remain positive and optimistic is more easily accomplished with humor and laughter: humor and laughter help people to see the brighter side; moreover they can help to be more creative and effective in problem-solving. Other than cognitive and mental effects, humor and in specific laughter have some evidence-based benefit for the health: an hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, decreases stress

hormones and increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies, triggers the release of endorphins, and protects the heart improving the function of blood vessels and increases blood flow (Fry, 2001). These studies are just a little example of how the scientific community is focusing ever more on positive feelings, with the purpose of investigating how smiling, laughter and humor can be a sensitive construct to help people to deal with adversities and in promoting mental and physical wellbeing.

Jacki Fitzpatrick, Ph.D and **Erin Kostina-Ritchey** from Texas Tech University have proposed (see full article "*Literary portrayals of US siblings' emotional expressions in response to adoption of Chinese sisters*") that family members can experience a wide range of emotions during significant events, such as marriage, the birth/adoption of a child, or even the first day of school. Emotions such as joy, excitement, happiness and pride can occur during such moments. However, these are not the only common emotional responses. These seemingly happy events also bring significant changes in family composition, status and interactions. In the adoption process, families might face an ambiguous situation in which they don't know what will occur or how they will emotionally respond. This is a significant (and likely) permanent life change over which children might not have any control. Although children might not find the adoption to be an adversity, adjustment to the family changes require some resilience on their part. The children might experience both positive (e.g., excitement over a trip to China), negative (fear about how parent-child relationship will change) or mixed emotions in the context of the adoption.

In the end, all our suggested questions have found an answer. According to Bonanno (2009), positive emotions do have a better interpersonal function as "*positive states do more than propel us out of sadness; they also reconnect us to those around us, Laughter in particular, has a contagious effect on other people, and in our research we've shown this to be true even during bereavement. Laughter makes other people feel better and pulls them towards us, in a way rewarding them for having bothered to stay with us through the painful moments (p. 199).* While the function of sadness is to turn our attention inward, promote deeper and more effective reflection, become more detail-oriented, accurate (in evaluating our abilities and performances), and less biased (toward others). It's an intrapersonal "*essential tool that help us accept and accommodate to the loss*" (p.31) that "*dampens our biological systems so that we can pull back*" (p. 32) but comes "*equipped with a build-in safety mechanism*" (p. 21), facial emotion expression, that also serves as "*compelling signal to others that we may need help*".

Individuals evoke positive emotions in different context, both positive and negative, to cope more adaptively with unexpected challenges. Emotion are short-terms reactions, "*personal and raw*" (Bonanno, 2009, p. 36) to

immediate demands, and their usefulness depends on its context. The function of laughing and smiling is to “*give us a break, a temporary respite from the pain of loss (...) come up for air, (...) breathe*” (p. 39).

Displaying emotions, either positive or negative, elicits positive responses in other people thus encouraging social affiliation and making social resources available for coping with adversities, as long as they somehow alternate each other in a wavelike manner. When negative emotion, like sadness, become too strong, overwhelming, pernicious and dysfunctional they lock others out causing a withdraw from the world, a lost of focus in life, and confusion about personal identity. Larson suggested that only when feelings emerge and are shared they transform themselves into emotions, and all contributors agreed on the importance of close relationships as inner resources, connections and bonds which are culturally different and contextually adaptive. However, L’Abate introduces that also the ratio between positive and negative emotions matters, as well as their frequency, nature, intensity, and rate and who they are shared with, intimate versus non-intimate others. If hurts offset joys, in fact, psychopathology emerges.

Finally, the experience of stress during adversity is a loss of resources, but reflecting and recalibrating to the reality of loss, moving in and out of sadness, by switching to more positive states of mind, by finding joy and laughter within pain, and making sense out of it, as well as a balanced ratio of joys and hurts, allow individuals to gradually return to a state of equilibrium and resources restoration. A positive emotional response in face of adversity does not necessarily imply a higher level of material, individual and relational resources, but simply a more flexible way to modulate emotional responses and expressions, and use a broader repertoire of behavioral strategies, sometimes even less than perfectly healthy. Resilient individuals have the ability to use avoidance and distraction as coping strategies, and a broader flexibility to adjust to the shifting demands of different situation.

References:

- Bonanno, A. G. (2009). *The other side of sadness*. New York: Basic Books.
- Dixon, N. F. (1980). Humor: A cognitive alternative to stress. In I. G. Sarason, C. D. Spielberg (Eds.), *Stress and anxiety, hemisphere*. Vol. VII: Hemisphere (pp. 281-289). Washington DC: Wiley.
- Fry, W. (2001). *Una dolce follia. L’umorismo e i suoi paradossi [A gentle madness. The humor and its paradoxes]*. Raffaello Cortina, Milano.
- Garfat, T. (2010). The truth in their experience: The evidence from youth and families. *Relationship Beachheads*. 19(2), 55-57.
- L’Abate, L., Cusinato, M., Maino, E., Colesso, W., & Scilletta, C. (2010). *Relational competence theory*. New York: Springer.
- Mannion, J. (2006). *Essentials of philosophy: The basic concepts of the world*. New York, NY: Fall River Press.

- Martin, R. A., & Lefcourt, H. M. (1983). Sense of humor as a moderator: Relationship between stressors and moods. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 45(6), 1313-24.
- Martin, R. A., Kuiper, A. N., Olinger, L. J., Dance, K. A. (1993). Humor, coping with stress, self concept, and psychological well-being. *Humor* 6, 89-104.
- Martin, R. A. (2001). Humor, laughter, and physical health: Methodological issues and research findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 4, 504-19.
- Patterson, J. M. (2002). Integrating family resilience and family stress theory. *The Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(2), 349-360.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Scott, J., & Marshall, G. (2005). *Oxford dictionary*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 14.
- Wilmont, B., & Hocker, J. (2010). *Interpersonal conflict*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.