

Psychology Today



“Women want some chase, some drama, some intrigue.”

Jen Kim

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The self in social context
by [Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.](#)



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

A little science on positive energy

Make positive energy work for you.
Published on August 14, 2009

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'Positive energy' is one of those buzz words bandied about at the fringes of psychology. The term is not well-defined and used in a number of different ways. In its simplest usage, positive energy is a bundle of desirable attributes. A person who is enthusiastic, empathic, cheerful, optimistic, courteous, generous, or kind would fit the bill. For scientific purposes, the phrase 'positive energy' is just two broad and fuzzy. Depending on their theoretical orientation, scientists would rather ignore the term or recast it using concepts familiar to them. Friends of the Big-Five taxonomy might say a person with positive energy is someone who is [extraverted](#), agreeable, [conscientious](#), emotionally stable, and open to new experience. Again, 'positive energy' is simply shorthand for 'good person.'

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Now, there is of course another, deeper and more mystical, usage of the term. Some people believe there literally is a psychic energy, which could be positive or negative. It can't be measured with conventional methods, and that makes it all the more exciting and real to those who believe in it. One attempt to give respectability to the idea of positive energy that I recently came across involves a reference to Wilhelm Reich's orgone energy. Remember that Reich thought that orgone energy was a sort of pervasive life force, the kind of force that encompasses Freud's notion of the libido, the physiology of orgasm, and the experience of God. Unlike modern mystics, Reich craved scientific respectability. He built an orgone accumulator to demonstrate the energy's existence, but he failed to convince other scientists that his results were real.

Although I am tempted to regard talk of 'positive energy' as [superstitious](#) mumbo-jumbo, I do have some sympathy for those who use the term. Psychological research has shown that we can verbally articulate only a fraction of what we experience. A radical response to the articulation gap would be just to refuse to talk about anything we can't put in concrete operational terms. As Wittgenstein said "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." [Note: I always wondered if this remark might be a self-referential paradox.] Perhaps a more temperate response is to allow ourselves to invoke—at least from time to time—immeasurable metaphysical concepts. If you come home from a party you hated and just say there was tremendous negative energy, perhaps that is 'nuff said. Let others fill in the content to the satisfaction of their imagination. You, at least, pointed them in the right direction. Let's not forget that scientists routinely postulate immeasurable concepts or entities to summarize or even explain phenomena. For some of these, there is hope that they might be measured some day, as for example the dark matter than physicists talk about. For others, there is no such hope, as in the case of the 'self' that psychologists talk about.

I think it is safe to say that most people would rather project positive than negative energy onto others. How to do it? Well, how about acquiring all the positive [personality](#) attributes listed above? Just become the perfect person, and you will be regarded as someone with positive energy. Ok, that's too hard. Luckily, psychological research done in the trenches of

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experimentation gives us some pointers, and I want to present one of them today.

In the September 2008 issue of the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Gawronski and Walther demonstrate the TAR (Transfer of Attitudes Recursively) effect. The effect is simple. People tend to like a person who expresses liking of a third person. This is interesting because a logical argument could be made that this should not happen. If A learns that B likes C, A has reason to also like C barring any information suggesting that B is not credible. The TAR effect refers to the recursive effect benefitting the communicator B. Why does this happen? Gawronski and Walther suggest that people make the reasonable, if not logical, assumption that someone who likes another has an overall higher baseline of liking people than someone who dislikes another. [One could make a Bayesian argument for this sort of inductive inference, but this is not the place to go into that.]

So far so good. The reader of this research may conclude that one way to project positive energy is to express liking of third parties. This is clever and strategically subtle. If Frank wants Fiona to like him, he can flatter her directly (hint: comment on her hair, not her figure), or he can express liking for someone else, hoping that Fiona will see him as a positive person.

Gawronski's and Wather's experiments are beautifully designed. They isolate the TAR effect, show its boundary conditions, and illuminate some of the psychological processes that underlie it. Their work illustrates how good psychological science does not necessarily boil down to simplistic recommendations for how to behave. Frank is in a pickle. Before he can make the TAR effect work for him, he needs to know some of the things that Fiona knows. If she already dislikes Freddy, the target, hearing that Frank likes Freddy will probably sour her attitude toward Frank (as explained by Fritz Heider's balance theory). What Frank needs to do is find a person or thing that Fiona has no pre-conceptions about, and to say how wonderful he, she, or it is. In real life this should work even better than under stringent experimental conditions because Frank can express his approval with enthusiasm, a broad smile, and reasons for why he feels the way he does. Fiona ought to be impressed by his positive energy and feel no suspicion that Frank might be acting strategically.

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