UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Department of Psychology

Eternal Sunshine of the Positive Mind?

A Qualitative Study Investigating Laypeople's Diverse Definition of Positive Thinking

Marie Seberg Primdahl

Master's thesis in psychology, PSY-3900, May 2024

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Prof. Joar Vittersø

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Foreword

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor Joar Vittersø, for your guidance over the past three and a half years. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to investigate what I was most curious about. I have appreciated our conversations and cannot thank you enough for your thorough feedback on countless paper drafts and dozens of presentations. Your wisdom combined with your great humor, warm nature and curious approach to research are truly inspirational.

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Marie Seberg Primdahl

Joar Vittersø

Sammendrag

I krevende situasjoner blir man ofte bedt om å tenke positivt ettersom mange mener det kan føre til alt fra økt motivasjon, til forbedring av sykdomsforløp. Til tross for rådets utbredelse, mangler positivitet som kognisjon en tilstrekkelig definisjon. Derfor har vi i denne oppgaven undersøkt folks definisjon av positiv tenkning gjennom to kvalitative studier; fokusgruppeintervjuer (*n*=18) og nettbasert spørreundersøkelse (*n*=482). Tematisk analyse og databasert teoriutvikling gav fire nøkkelkonsepter i fokusgruppeintervjuene: Definisjon av positiv tenkning, oppfordring til å tenke positivt, balansen mellom negativt og positivt, og den ytre verden. Disse resultatene ble utgangspunktet for påfølgende spørreundersøkelse som gav tre nye hovedtemaer: *Egen lykkes smed*, hvordan tanker forholder seg til følelser, og positiv tenknings kjennetegn. Deltakerne mente positiv tenking var bevisst fokus på det gode. Ellers gav folk forskjellige definisjoner som kunne deles i to hovedperspektiver, hvor hovedforskjellen lå i forholdet mellom tanker og følelser. Flere deltakere sa at positiv tenkning var viktig. Dette understreker behovet for en klarere forståelse av begrepet. Oppgaven bidrar til den mangelfulle litteraturen ved å vise at det finnes et mangfold av definisjoner av begrepet positiv tenkning, og kommer med viktig praktisk innsikt: Oppfordringen til å tenke positivt krever spesifisering av grad og kontekstuell bevissthet.

Nøkkelord: Positiv tenking, positiv psykologi, kognisjon, kvalitativ forskning

Abstract

We often receive advice to think positively when faced with difficulties as it is believed to be helpful by increasing motivation to solve tasks or even to treat illness. Despite its prevalence, positivity as cognition has not been sufficiently defined. Thus, this thesis investigates folk theories about positive thinking through two qualitative studies; focus group interviews (*n*=18) and an online survey (*n*=482). Thematic analysis and grounded theory revealed four key-concepts in the focus group interviews: Defining positive thinking, encouragement of thinking positively, negative-positive balance, and the outside world. These results guided the development of the subsequent survey, where three main themes were revealed: Maker of your own happiness, how thoughts relate to feelings, and positive thinking's trademark. Participants believed positive thinking to be deliberate focus on the good. Aside from this, definitions differed substantially and could be separated into two main perspectives, mainly split by beliefs on the relationship between thoughts and feelings. Participants stated that positive thinking was important, highlighting the critical need for a deeper understanding. This thesis contributes to the sparse literature by revealing laypeople's diverse understanding of positive thinking and suggests practical implications—explicit specification of degrees and contextual awareness are necessary when encouraging positive thinking.

Keywords: Positive thinking, positive psychology, cognition, qualitative research

Eternal Sunshine of the Positive Mind?

A Qualitative Study Investigating Laypeople's Diverse Definition of Positive Thinking

We can easily picture a positive thinker who manages even their most stressful days with ease. It is also likely that we have received the well-meant advice to think more positively, or maybe given it to some of our gloomier friends. However, describing positive thinking is far more difficult than recommending it. There are three major challenges. First, even positive psychologists struggle to provide a proper definition of the overarching "positive" (Held, 2018; Pawelski & Tay, 2021; Pawelski, 2016), which makes the task of defining the more specific "positive thinking" difficult. One key question is whether positive refers to the opposite of negative, or something broader, such as optimal or good. Second, and related to the former challenge, we need to decide whether positive thinking should be defined by content or outcome (Garayeva, 2022). States, affective and cognitive, labeled "positive", have been found to both facilitate (Forgas, 1994; Forgas, 1998; Fredrickson, 2004; Isen et al., 1987; Isen & Reeve, 2005; Kushlev et al., 2020; Nelson & Sim, 2014; Primdahl et al., n.d.) and hinder desirable outcomes (Elsbach & Barr, 1999; Goldenberg, 2017; Melton, 1995; Oettingen et al., 2016; Spering et al., 2005), but some argue that positive value is given a-priori without consideration for context and outcomes (Held, 2018). Therefore, a discussion on the context of positivity is crucial. Third, we must consider whether positive thinking is the cause, such as a strategy to obtain the desired or the symptom, as a result of having obtained the desirable. Or even both as in Garayeva's (2022) individual-environment interaction theory of positive thinking. All three challenges will introduce the knowledge gap that we aim to fill with this thesis by answering what positive thinking is for laypeople.

Positivity Defined by Positive Psychology

Three key challenges related to "positivity" are discussed. We begin with the lack of a sufficient definition. Then, we address the a-priori context-independent labeling. Finally, we look at the positive relationship to the "good".

The first challenge has been discussed by Pawelski (2016), who noted that "positive" was used as a qualifier for the scope of positive psychology without any defining criteria for something to be positive. The positive philosopher then gave a two-part overview, with a historical part—what has been defined as positive earlier—and a normative part—what should be considered positive. Historically, Pawelski looked at early documents in the movement. They stated that positive psychology should concern positive orientation, positive topography, positive target audience, positive processes, and positive desired outcomes. While each domain within the field was explained, the definition of the qualifier—"positive"—was incomplete. However, this lack of definition did not stop labeling certain things as "positive", which is reflected in the next challenge.

The second critical concern was raised by Held (2018), who argued that the labels "positive" and "negative" were often made a-priori, independent of context. This was problematic, as some characteristics, or states, were deemed positive without context, which in many instances changed the outcomes drastically. Research supports her concern with several studies showing positivity's negative effects. For example, in domestic abuse, the desirable character strengths of empathy and forgiveness put victims in danger (Sinclair et al., 2020). While empathy is a preferred characteristic compared to lack of compassion, it is not sustainable for wellbeing in the context of domestic abuse. Thus, each situation and context need to be given sufficient emphasis before evaluating something as positive. That is, at least if positive is something close to our everyday understanding of it as something desirable. This leads us into the third challenge.

The third challenge is whether positive and negative are just two polar sides of a single dimension or whether positive refers to something different than the opposite of negative, such as something larger, optimal, or good. This has been debated in positive psychology since its beginning (Pawelski, 2016). On the one hand, the "positive" in positive psychology was the shift in focus to the things that made life most worth living. The movement directly concerns positive things such as character strengths, happiness, and flourishing. These themes were often portraited as the opposite of the more "negative" focus of what Seligman refers to as traditional psychology (mainly clinical

psychology). Given this framework, where character strengths are contrasted with mental disorders, positive seems to be polar to negative. Positive psychology seems to supplement to the so-called traditional psychology. On the other hand, positive psychology has also aimed to investigate what the good life is as a whole. Here, the distinction between the positive and negative becomes blurry, as a good life is likely to be one that can both facilitate flourishing and address the inevitable sorrows and troubles that come along the way (Hornsey et al., 2018). This is problematic because the two goals – only investigating the positive and understanding of the good life as a whole – can yield unwanted outcomes if not kept separate. It is often when the two are mistaken for each other that social commentators have raised their critical concern about positive psychology.

The movement has, for example, been criticized for claiming that positivity is the only correct way to deal with illness (Andrade, 2019; Ehrenreich, 2009), that it is used to dismiss critical concerns in the workplace (Willig, 2016), and that positivity has become an obligated outlook to have on life (Brinkmann, 2016). These concerns might all be valid but maybe less so if the distinction was clearer. Focus on character strengths at the workplace as a supplement to the literature that also concerns challenges is something completely different than claiming that only individuals' character strengths will fix the workplace and dismissing that there are structural problems that also need to be addressed. We might blame social commentators for being hasty in their judgments and not trying to fully understand the movement; however, Held (2018) claims that this distinction is too blurry even within the movement. One of her main points is that the positive psychology definition of "positive" is hedonic. Although she acknowledges the shift from only positivity to "flourishing", she also argues that by definitions given in positive psychology of the terms, they are not logically independent of each other. Flourishing is too closely related to maximizing the positive, and the positive is what feels good or is pleasant. In conclusion, there are intentions and motivations to define positive as something broad and close to optimal; however, positive has yet to be defined differently from hedonic positivity for this purpose to be achieved.

One who tries to give a clearer definition is Pawelski (2021; 2016), who looks at the relationship between the positive and the negative, as well as a third concept, the neutral. Pawelski (2016) starts by going through earlier conceptualizations. One early theory on indifference is from Irwin (1971; as cited in Pawelski, 2016), who states that preference is relative by being a binary relation between two objects. People are indifferent when the sum of desire and aversion between two objects are the same. A newer definition is Seligman's simple preference model, where indifference, or neutral, is something that neither increases nor decreases preference or related emotions. In the simple preference model, indifference occurs when aversion is equal to the desire of one object. In other words, one object is compared to the absence of the same object, and the sum of aversion/desire for the presence and absence of this object must be equal for indifference to be achieved. It is worth noting that this is the foundational background to Seligman's claim that the positive and the negative cannot be reduced to the absence of the other. They are not on the opposite side of the same scale; instead, there is one scale for the negative side and another for the positive side, both with a neutral point as the opposing side. The difference between these two conceptualizations is that for Irwin, two objects are compared to each other, while according to Seligman, each object must be considered for itself.

Nevertheless, Pawelski raises criticism of both Irwin's and Seligman's conceptualizations of indifference for obscuring information. It is especially two important remarks. First, they do not consider the levels of aversion and desires. According to their definitions, a person would be equally indifferent toward one event with both low aversion and low desire (summed equals zero) as to an event with both high aversion and high desire (summed equals zero). Therefore, valuable information such as the level of aversion and desire in itself is not accounted for by these definitions. Second, while Seligman's definition of the positive and negative is good at explaining how the two are independent of each other, it is insufficient at explaining their relation to one another. Pawelski suggested that Cacioppo and Berntson's (1999) two-dimensional bivariate definition of indifference is more flexible; ".... indifference means that both the level of desire and the level of aversion for a

single object is zero" (Pawelski, 2016, p. 8). First, this definition distinguishes quantitatively between levels of preference by including concern for the level of desire and aversion. Second, it provides more flexibility that might help us explain the relationship between positive and negative attitudes. This idea is developed further in a newer article in which it is suggested that "sustainable preference" should be the definition of positive (Pawelski & Tay, 2021). An objection could be that presence (and not preference) has been part of the classic definition of positive, but preference has the advantage that it makes room for degrees of positivity. When positivity is defined as the presence of something desirable, we struggle to explain how positivity can sometimes be negative (Briñol et al., 2020, for an overview of adverse effects of positive interventions). There is either positivity or not. However, with preference as a defining characteristic to positivity, there can be degrees—we can prefer one thing over another. Moreover, we can prefer it to a certain degree. Hence, sustainable preference seems to be a sufficient definition of the positive in positive psychology for now.

In summary, the word "positive" is not as easy to define as it may intuitively seem. This problem will be further addressed when we dive deeper into the main topic of the thesis, i.e., the more specific "positive thinking." The next section will discuss how positive thinking can be defined, given earlier research on the topic. The strengths and weaknesses of such definitions are also discussed.

Outcome or Content?

We could define positive thinking as outcome dependent. This would mean that positive thinking is thinking that leads to positive outcomes. In problem-solving situations, this would be improved performance. However, earlier research has shown that in complex problem-solving situations, negative affect can result in more information-seeking strategies (Spering et al., 2005), and negative affective environments can improve performance (Barth & Funke, 2010). Given these results and by defining positive thinking as mainly outcome dependent, increasing negative affect and environments seems to be an important part of facilitating positive thinking. However, increasing the negative (used in this thesis as a broad collective term that includes negative thoughts,

negative feelings, and external factors that are deemed undesirable) seems counterintuitive to what we usually picture as positive thinking. The content therefore also seems relevant for a proper understanding of positive thinking; thus, we need a definition that also concerns the content of thoughts.

A fully content-dependent definition of positive thinking could be that more positive thoughts, both quantitively (a greater number of positive thoughts) and qualitatively (more intense positive thoughts), are better. Negative thoughts should be avoided or eliminated. This type of definition is similar to the classic Broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004). The essence of this theory is that positive emotions broaden the thought-action repertoire, which in turn builds psychological resources. The positive effects are a never-ending upward spiral. Of course, this theory concerns positive affect, not positive cognition, but the key principle of positive "content" leading to an upward spiral of positive "outcomes" is also relevant for cognition. A similar definition for positive thinking would be that thoughts that are positive in content will also lead to positive outcomes. To visualize an idealized version of future events, positive fantasizing might be one of the closest concepts to this positive thinking definition, and the outcomes of this thinking strategy have been investigated.

Oettingen and her colleagues (2016) have conducted several studies on how positive fantasizing influences effort. Before entering Oettingen's line of research, we could argue that fantasizing is not relevant to the "think positive" encouragement that people frequently experience because it is too extreme. However, we do find similar versions of positive thinking encouragement in pop culture. We find it in the best-selling self-help book *The Secret* (Byrne 2006) and social media videos where people are encouraged to manifest their goals by picturing the best possible future and live as if they have already achieved it (Madsen, 2023). Hence, this more extreme type of thinking positively should also be critically reviewed as a seriously suggested definition. According to Oettingen and her colleagues, people who positively fantasized were less successful in losing weight (Oettingen et al., 2016), having a romantic relationship (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002) and entering the

workforce. This was suggested to be because people who positively fantasized did not consider the

obstacles that would prevent them from reaching their goals, which ultimately made them

unprepared. From this, we can conclude that thoughts that are only positive do not lead to an

upward spiral of desirable outcomes.

To try to save our content-dependent definition of positive thinking, we could argue that the

outcomes are irrelevant. Instead, positive thinking should be measured by how we feel when we

apply the thinking style, i.e., positive thinking is thinking that feels good. This would result in positive

thinking becoming more like the opposite of negative thinking than optimal thinking. Optimal

thinking would be a third thinking style. This positive thinking definition resembles the positive

definition that Held (2018) criticized positive psychology for preaching because of its hedonic nature.

However, if this limitation to positive thinking is transparent and separated from optimal thinking,

this definition could work. However, another challenge is that positive fantasizing has been found to

reduce depression symptoms measured in the moment, but increase symptoms when measured

longitudinally (Oettingen et al., 2016). This is likely because positive fantasizing reduces the

likelihood of goal obtainment. Since outcome and content influence each other, they are also

difficult to separate. Therefore, both outcomes and the content of thoughts should be accounted for

in a definition of positive thinking.

Cause or Symptom?

Another question concerns how the content and outcome relate to each other. Is it that

positive thoughts result in positive outcomes or that positive outcomes (caused by something other

than mindset) result in positive thinking? The critique of positive thinking has often been related to

the former, as positive outcomes, such as an improved life (Brinkmann, 2016) or cured illness

(Andrade, 2019; Ehrenreich, 2009), are promised from thinking positively in itself. Social

commentators warn that this can result in an exaggerated individualistic responsibility (Madsen,

2020). This concern is valid, as research shows negative effects for people who experience pressure

to feel positive and not negative. For example, it has been found to increase negative emotions,

reduce well-being (Bastian et al., 2012; Dejonckheere & Bastian, 2021), and increase rumination

(McGuirk et al., 2018). Moreover, imposing positive thinking could lead individuals to fake it, which

negatively affects psychological safety perceptions (Garayeva, 2022). Taking this into account,

positive thinking as solely a causal factor for improving life, with the exaggerated individual

responsibility that follows, is at best insufficient and at worst harmful.

The other approach would be that positive thinking is only a result of our positive

environment. On this view, positive thinking can be seen as a symptom of other things going well in

our life. This would protect positive thinking from becoming an overstated personal responsibility.

However, while it might be true that there are limitations to how much we can change our mindset,

it is certainly also possible to control some of our cognition – though perhaps at a cost. Wilson and

colleagues (2019) examined studies where people took on an active role over their thoughts – they

were thinking for pleasure. We have established earlier that content is not sufficient when defining

positive thinking – outcomes should be included as well – and these studies are mainly content

specific. Nevertheless, they found something important – that people can change how they think. In

several experiments, people were told to think for pleasure. People did find this to be more

meaningful than, for example, thinking about planning, but they also found it to require greater

concentration and effort. Increased effort decreased the pleasure outcome of thinking for pleasure.

Hence, positive thinking seems to be problematic if it is defined as either completely within or

completely outside our control.

Garayeva (2022) presented a new approach to positive thinking that unites it as both a cause

for improvement and a symptom of improvement. Instead of laying the burden of thinking positively

on the individual, which she criticizes positive psychology for doing, she presents an individual-

environment interaction theory of positive thinking. This theory acknowledges that individuals can

think positively, but it also states that the environment plays a key role in facilitating or hindering

positive thinking. By interviewing employees, she found that positive thinking was not a natural

state. This is in line with the findings of Wilson and colleagues (2019) that thinking for pleasure is

effortful. Although Garayeva (2022) acknowledged that it required an active choice to think positively, she also emphasized that positive thinking was first and foremost an indicator of underlying factors, both individual and environmental. The individual factor was self-regulation, which could be further divided into reappraisal and self-motivation. The environmental factors were organizational functioning, psychological functioning, and work meaningfulness. Positive thinking appears to contribute to positive outcomes, but first and foremost, it seems to be a symptom of positive outcomes. Even when positive thinking is chosen actively as a thinking strategy, some degree of positive environment is needed.

Preliminary Study

Thus far, the discussion has shown how difficult it is to define what positive thinking is, which is something we also noticed in our own experiments (Primdahl, et al., n.d.). In two problem-solving studies, we either encouraged participants to think positively (experimental group) or to focus on the task (control group) before carrying out a problem-solving task. We hypothesized that participants in the positive group would have impeded performance and reduced effort compared with those in the control group, in line with earlier research on positivity (Goldenberg, 2017; Oettingen, et al., 2016). However, we found the opposite. In both studies, the positive group performed better than the control group on the problem-solving tasks. In the survey, we included an open-end question that asked the participants "When faced with a challenge, how are you supposed to think?" Our initial goal with this question was to check that participants read and understood the instruction. To our surprise, participants provided longer answers that highlighted the different perceptions of the instruction. These answers have provided guidance for the focus group study conducted for the current thesis.

The Present Study

In this study, we take a step back from earlier studies, including our own, and shift the focus to the definition – we want to answer what positive thinking is. To do this, we believe it is important to understand how laypeople interpret the concept of positive thinking. This is because our previous

studies revealed a large variety in how the participants interpreted the instruction to think positively. Therefore, we started by conducting focus group interviews. The results from these interviews then guided the design of the next part of the study, which was an online survey. We aim to further clarify the notion of positive thinking with this exploratory sequential design.

<div align="center">**Study 1: Qualitative Focus Group**</div>

Method

Participants

As recommended by Krueger and Casey (2015), we gathered 4-5 participants for each focus group session, with 4 group sessions. This gave a total of *N* = 18 participants in a convenience sample of students from UiT, The Arctic University of Norway. Our main recruitment route was through acquaintances of the author of this master's thesis. The incentives were either a 150 NOK gift card or coursework approval.

Procedure and Design

Before the interview day, participants received a link via email to the consent form on the Qualtrics online survey platform, which was digitally accepted. On the interview day, we ensured that everyone had read, understood, and signed the consent form before starting the group discussion. The interviews followed Krueger and Casey's (2015) recommended structure.

First, the moderator provided information about the study, the researchers involved, and the ground rules (e.g., "I am interested in what you actually think, therefore no answers are right or wrong") and made participants aware that the interviews were recorded. Then, an easy opening question was used to ask the students where they preferred to read. This was designed to break the ice. We spent approximately five minutes on this opening.

To start the conversation on positive thinking, we first spent 10 minutes on an introduction question. The moderator asked participants to think back to a time they were encouraged to think positively and tell how this differed from how they usual thought. Afterwards, a transition question

followed. Here, they were asked what they did to comply if they were encouraged by someone to think positively.

The moderator then turned to the key questions. For this part, 30 minutes were allotted. The three key questions were 1) what it means to think positively, 2) how does positive thinking influence problem-solving, and 3) what role negative thoughts play in positive thinking.

The interviews included three types of ending questions to clarify the main points of the discussion. First, the participants were asked to give a short definition of positive thinking. Second, the moderator took two minutes to recap the discussion and ask if the summary was sufficient. Finally, the moderator stated the goal of the conversation – to understand what it means to think positively – and asked if something important had been left out of the group discussion. The conclusion was estimated to last 10 minutes.

There was planned a minimum of one week between each focus group interview. This was to have sufficient time to adjust the interview guide as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2015) and to ensure that the guide was in accordance with saturation in the conversation for relevant themes. The plan was followed in the first three interviews, but the last interview was conducted three days after the previous interview due to both the interviewer's and the participants' tight schedules.

Ethical consideration

The study was in line with principals from the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, The Vancouver Recommendations for publishing, and Norwegian laws. It was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt; ref. no. 594796).

Informed consent

By providing the consent form digitally before the day of the interview, the participants had sufficient time to read through and understand the content and sign. The moderator checked whether all participants provided their consent before starting each interview session. If participants wanted to withdraw from the study, they were informed that they could leave at any time and that doing so would have no consequences for them. They were also informed that they could reject

answering questions that made them uncomfortable. If they wanted to draw their consent after the interviews were conducted, they were informed of whom and how they could contact the student and supervisor responsible for the project.

Data materials were treated as sensitive information. Recordings were locked away from unauthorized persons. Consents were stored digitally in the Qualtrics database. The transcribed interviews were anonymized and stored at the private computer of the student.

Interviews

Interview type and details

We conducted academic focus group interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015), which is inspired by market research but incorporate more transparency. We choose this method based on the broad variety of positive thinking definitions. We hoped that the group setting would elicit different views while also giving the participants the opportunity to discuss beliefs that differed from their own. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Both the interview guide and quotes in the results section have been translated to English, but the Norwegian version can be found in the Appendix.

The original interview guide

Question type	Question	Min
Information	Thank you for setting of time to join this group discussion. My name is Marie. I'm in my first year of the master studies in psychology and belong to the research group Social Psychology within the Department of Psychology. Joar Vittersø is the supervisor for this project. I want to understand more about how our thoughts influence problem-solving. You have been invited because I want to hear your thoughts on the topic. I am curious about your true opnions and thoughts, so there is no right or wrong answers. I will be taking notes while we talk, and the discussion will be recorded.	2

Opening	Tell us where you prefer to sit while you study, and one thing you enjoy doing beside studying.	3
Introduction	Think back to a situation where you thought positively, how was this different than how you usually think? Prompt: How did this influence your situation?	10
Transition	If someone encourages you to think positively, what do you do to achieve this? Prompt: How is this different from deciding on your own that you want to think positively? When is this advice helpful? When is this advice not helpful? Do your experience this as an easy advice to follow?	5
Key- questions	What does it mean to think positively? Prompt: What is similar to positive thinking, can you give me a synonym? What is the opposite of positive thinking, can you give me an antonym? What makes positive thinking and [the synonym] similar to each other? What makes positive thinking and [the antonym] different from each other?	10
	How does positive thinking influence problem-solving? Prompt: Can you give an example of when positive thinking is helpful in solving tasks? Can you give an example of when positive thinking is unhelpful in solving tasks?	10
	What is the role of negative thoughts in positive thinking? Prompt: How can negative thoughts aid positive thinking? How can they hinder it? Can you give me an example?	10
Ending All things considered	If you were to provide a brief definition of positive thinking, what would you highlight as especially important?	3
Summary	[brief summary 2 min] Is this an accurate summary of what we have talked about?	5

Last *question*	The goal of this conversation is to understand what it means to think positively. Have we overlooked anything? Is there anything we haven't discussed that is relevant?	3

Interview guide amendments

After the first interview, we made several changes to the interview guide. First, most of the participants mentioned a problem-solving situation in the opening question. Therefore, our key-question, "*How does positive thinking influence problem-solving?",* was changed. To provide new information with this question, we instead asked about the relationship between positive thinking and good thinking: "What are the similarities and differences between good thinking and positive thinking?". Second, we changed the prompts in the introduction. To make this question easier for the participants to discuss, we asked them if they knew someone who thought positively and what characterized this person. We also asked if they knew a negative thinker and about their characteristics.

Interview techniques

The interview approach was semi-structured, and the interview guide was closely followed. If especially interesting points arose during the discussion, we asked people follow-up questions. As shown in the interview guide, we also prepared different prompts to help the participants answer the main questions. These prompts were frequently used in every interview. In addition to the prepared prompts, we encouraged different perspectives and diverse opinions by, for example, asking "does anyone have a different opinion on or experience with this?" If someone took much space in the group, the interviewer encouraged others to speak by keeping eye-contact with other participants while asking questions and prompts.

Data analysis

Transcription

The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically. The transcriptions were close to literal, but sounds without content (e.g., "ehm", "mhm") and unfinished words were excluded. For laughter, it was either stated who laughed or marked: "[laughter]" if it applied to everyone. Longer silent breaks were marked similarly.

Thematical analyses

We analyzed the transcripts of the interviews using thematical analyses and a grounded theory approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This analysis is qualitative and data-driven. This approach was the best suited for our research aim to develop a definition of positive thinking, as grounded theory is used to develop theories and ideas.

First, the interviewer read the transcripts in their entirety and wrote an overall impression of each interview. Afterwards, each interview was read in depth and split into different meaning units. These units were then condensed into shorter summarizing text in parallel columns. The preparation of the data was conducted in Word. The transcriptions, together with the condensed text, were uploaded to NVivo, a sophisticated software for qualitative research, for subsequent analyses.

Then, the recontextualization process was performed. Guides such as Krueger and Casey (2015) and Kvale and colleagues (2015) were followed during this process. In this part of the analyses, each of the meaning units was given one or several codes. The codes summarized the meaning unit using few words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Since the codes were data driven, i.e., developed based on the data, we did not have any codes predetermined. The codes were first developed and suggested by the interviewer. They were organized in a Code Tree with main themes and two levels of sub-themes. The codes were then discussed with the supervisor and revised. Ultimately, we identified four main themes: 1) Defining positive thinking, 2) Encouragement to think positively, 3) Negative-positive balance, and 4) The outside world.

Results

Overall, the participants believed that positive thinking involved directing attention toward the good. Positive thinking was not only perceived as a momentary positive experience but also

recognized for its potential to yield enduring positive outcomes. The groups mentioned several

different strategies for how one could think more positively, but applications and the experience of

being told to think positively depended largely on the conditions in which the encouragement was

given. While the beginning of all the focus group interviews reflected a favorable view of positive

thinking, all the groups acknowledged positivity's negative aspects. This was especially prominent

when negative thoughts were completely excluded. Hence, a balance between negative and positive

was important. Nuances to positive thinking became even clearer when exploring themes that

highlighted how positive thinking is not an isolated act within a person's mind but is interconnected

with the outside world. This will all be reflected when delving into each main theme. First, each main

theme will be presented with a short general description. Second, we provide a description of each

sub-theme matched with an illustrating citation. The results are summarized in Table 1. Figure 1

shows the main themes and sub-themes that were identified.

Figure 1

Code Tree of the Four Main Themes with Sub-Themes for Study 1
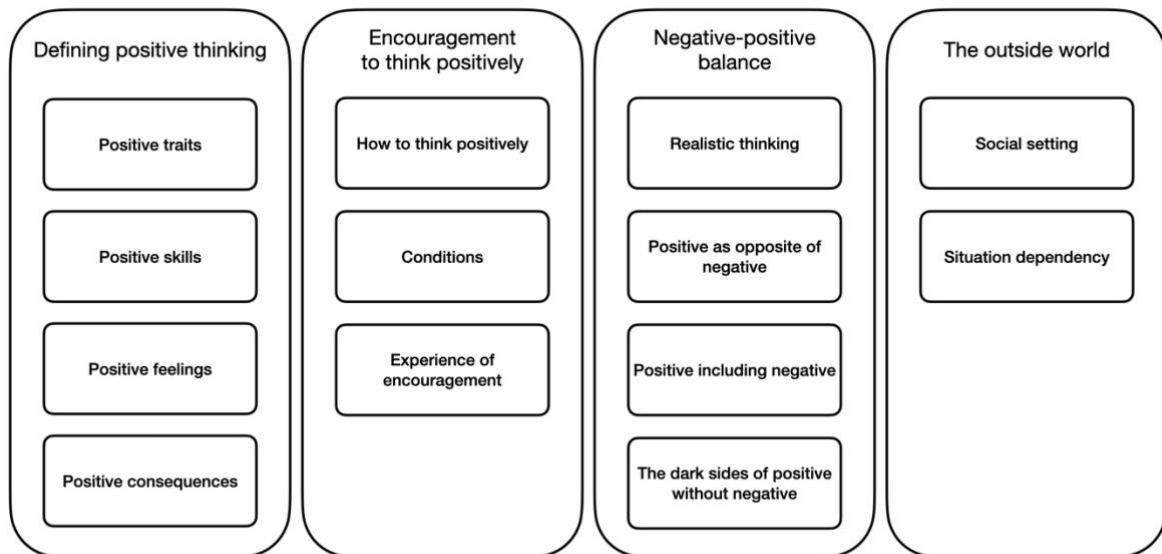
Defining positive thinking

This main theme concerns the answers that were directly relevant for the main purpose of the focus group, namely, defining positive thinking. There are four sub-themes: Positive traits, positive skills, positive feelings, and positive consequences.

Positive traits

A variety of positive traits were mentioned, and we categorized them along two dimensions. First, whether they characterized positive thinking, or whether they improved the ability to think positively. For example, having high self-esteem was seen as helpful for positive thinking, while paying special attention to good characterized positive thinking. Second, their variation in extremity, from being present and grateful, to being delusional. These traits were often spoken of as constant, which also made positive thinking seem less changeable. However, there were exceptions to the stability of the traits, as participants also shared stories about how they changed their personality. In these instances, changing was a longer process than in "positive skills".

A noteworthy trait that addressed the relationship between positive thinking and adverse situations was determination. As discussed later, participants often emphasized goal attainment and eliminating negativity. However, determination, as a positive thinking trait, clearly showed that positive thinking was beyond positive reinforcement or eliminating negativity. This understanding of positive thinking showed that it could also include the negative, precisely by not escaping from it but by being able to sit with it:

[1]Participant 7: [Positive thinking is not helpful] when there is no solution.

Participant 6: But then you just have to endure it, [thus] I disagree. It would still be positive to think; okay, […] I can endure it. Instead of thinking; this is awful, I do not want to endure it.

Participant 7: Yes, but that will not truly solve the problem. But you will feel better by thinking positively.

Positive skills

Compared to traits, positive skills related to positive thinking seemed more malleable. Here, being knowledgeable and self-development were both mentioned. They had in common that the negative needed to be included for positive thinking to give optimal consequences:

[2]Participant 3: I am thinking about a job interview, where you are a bit stressed. There are two types of people, [one type is] those who think that they will perfectly manage no matter the question. Then, they receive the question of their negative sides, and they have nothing. It doesn't make sense; everyone has some [negative sides]. So, in order to become a better version of yourself you also have to show weakness, perhaps negative sides.

Positive feelings

When participants discussed synonyms to positive thinking, positive feelings were always brought up. As previously mentioned, trying to think positively may pose a challenge. However, when positive thinking is already present, it is related to feelings of ease. Happiness, hope, optimism (which could also be seen as an attitude or trait), satisfaction and self-love were also mentioned as positive feelings associated with positive thinking.

The classic debate of whether feelings and thoughts are inseparable, or separable but co-occurring, was also apparent in the interviews. For example, participants often responded with a positive feeling when asked for a synonym for positive thinking, giving the impression that the two concepts were the same. However, when the participants were asked how they were alike, they answered that positive thinking co-occurred with positive feelings, making positive thinking and positive feelings appear distinguishable:

[3]Participant 14: I guess that [positive feelings] are what I associate with thinking positively. It is probably because then you are in a good period, and you are happy and cheerful.

Participant 16: Good feelings are involved.

Positive consequences

The consequences of thinking positively were an important aspect in defining positive thinking in the focus group interviews. Specifically, three positive consequences of positive thinking

were mentioned by the participants. First, positive thinking's perceived consequence was that it

broadened perspectives, in line with Fredrickson's Broaden-and-build theory (2004). Second, and

often together with the former, it helped shed light on the best solutions. Finally, positive thinking

reduced stress. All these consequences were related to each other, but reduced stress stood out, as

it did not necessarily help performance in problem-solving situations. Instead, positive thinking also

reduced stress by reducing motivation to reach a goal, or even by eliminating the problem-solving

situation:

> [4]Participant 1: I'm writing my bachelor's thesis now, but I have chosen to postpone it because
>
> so much has happened. On Monday, I thought, you know what, I will postpone it, and then I
>
> will just see what happens. And I thought like immediately after I had sent an email to say I
>
> postponed it; I just feel so relaxed. It was just nice to kind of just put it away for now.

Encouragement to think positively

Since the advice to think positively is often given to us in problem-solving situations, we

asked questions about how this encouragement was experienced. The first sub-theme concerns how

people try to comply to the encouragement. The second sub-theme is the conditions that affect the

perception of the encouragement. The third sub-theme is how the encouragement is experienced.

How to think positively

The participants mentioned several different strategies for how they tried to think positively,

ranging from specific to more general approaches. Specific strategies included task segmentation,

affective forecasting (envisioning the good feelings that would appear after a difficult period was

over), downward comparison and lowering expectations. Common for all the specific ways of

thinking were that the participants noticed that they felt more positive when they applied the

strategies and that they were helpful for goal attainment. Hence, it seemed more as if the specific

strategies were applied to reach goals and that positive thinking in these cases was more secondary –

by being neither the main strategy to reach the goal nor the goal itself. For the specific strategies, the

function of positive thinking seemed to be more confirmatory or a boost to maintaining the applied

strategy.

Pretending to be positive was also mentioned and seemed to be in the middle between

specific and general strategies. What differentiated this from the aforementioned strategies was that

it was not clear how it could be effectively applied, and it did not necessarily lead to goal-attainment.

Moreover, this strategy seemed to eliminate negative experiences in the short-term but failed to

persist in the long-term:

> [5]Participant 10: I feel like positive thinking pushes your real feelings away. When I was
>
> getting my license, I was stressed about the driving test. Then, I thought: There are many
>
> other [morons] who have gotten their license before me, look at all those idiots driving cars,
>
> it will be fine; it is not a problem. I drove, and when I parked, I cried my eyes out, and all the
>
> feelings I had suppressed in positivity just popped out. […] Maybe thinking positively is
>
> undermining your real feelings.

The more general strategies could be summed up by "changing focus". Several participants

mentioned that one should try to focus on what could be controlled and cognitive restructuring.

These were the most concrete strategies. Less concrete was that positive thinking was simply to

focus on good instead of bad. While changing focus seemed to be an easy advice to give, it was also

validated as a difficult strategy depending on the situation: [6]"Just try to think a little different, but

again, very difficult depending on the situation you are in."

Conditions

When positivity was encouraged, there were several conditions that needed to be fulfilled to

experience the encouragement as helpful. When the encouragement came from within the

participants themselves, it was experienced more positively and easier to do, compared with

encouragement received from someone else:

> [7]Participant 17: I thought it was very silly that I found this so provoking, but at primary school
>
> there was an after-school teacher who said: Every morning I say to myself "Good morning

sunshine!" And I remember it made me so angry, I could not do it. […] She was like: You can

choose to be happy if you do that. It did not work when she told me this, but if I had chosen

to it to myself, it would have certainly worked. There is something about that forced

positivity from others that can go so wrong.

However, the encouragement could also be experienced as positive when received from

someone else if the participants felt that the encourager's intention was good. The intention was, for

example, viewed as more favorable if the encourager was in the same situation as the receiever. One

participant mentioned that they dismissed if their parents told them to think positively before an

upcoming exam, but internalized the advice if it came from a fellow student. Most importantly, the

participants' intentions were evaluated by whether the encourager validated the situation of the

encouraged:

> [8]Participant 17: I think that if you dismiss the fact that it is difficult, and do not acknowledge
>
> that your situation is not good, and that it is brushed off with "just think positively", then it is
>
> extremely provocative, and then it works poorly.
>
> Participant 15: Yes, I also find it annoying when people ask me to think positively because I
>
> feel that I am able to perceive a situation realistically, so if I perceive it as bad, then most
>
> likely it is. And when someone says, "no it is going well", then it is like you say; they dismiss
>
> what I say.

Experience of encouragement

Whether self-discovered or encouraged by another person, trying to think positively has two

polarized sides. Shown in the foregoing quotation, trying to think positively could be experienced as

provoking and difficult. On the other hand, the encouragement can also be motivational and helpful:

> [9]Participant 9: It is in difficult situations where you are faced with one or more challenges
>
> that it can give extreme motivation, both physical and psychological. We humans surprise
>
> ourselves, as we do things that we maybe thought we could not. You manage to walk longer,
>
> climb further, or concentrate longer if you kind off believe in it and are positive.

Negative-positive balance

Another key question when defining positive thinking is its relationship to other thinking styles. Therefore, we asked participants about good and negative thinking and challenged them to compare them to positive thinking. This led to several discussions reflected in the four sub-themes: Realistic thinking, positive as opposite of negative, positive including negative, and the dark sides of positive without negative.

Realistic thinking

Most participants seemed to agree that realistic thinking is synonymous with good or the best way of thinking. As mentioned earlier, some participants said that they already perceived their thinking as realistic and were therefore annoyed if their negative comments were dismissed with positivity encouragements. This led to a discussion on how positive thinking could become too extreme compared to realistic thinking, ultimately eliminating reality. On the other hand, the participants said that if your thoughts were too negative, this also hindered realistic thinking. Moreover, since negative thinking was often an automatic way of thinking for many, and negative thinking weighs more heavily than positive thinking, positive thinking facilitated realistic thinking:

> [10]Participant 14: When I do not think good, I tend to overthink, and then I think of all the negative and all the worst that can happen. If you think positively, then it is better thinking.

Positive as opposite of negative

Positive and negative thinking could be used strategically to counterbalance each other to achieve realistic thinking, and thus, it might not come as a surprise that the two thinking styles were seen as opposites of each other. When asked what the opposite of positive thinking was, all focus groups answered "negative thinking", followed by laughter of how obvious the answer was. There were clear differences between the two thinking styles. Positive thinking was seen as broadening, while negative thinking was seen as limiting. While positive thinking is related to optimism and hope, negative thinking is related to self-fulfilling prophecies. Furthermore, negative thinking was related

to negative feelings such as stress, anxiety, and sadness. However, negative thinking seemed to be perceived as the worst when it ruined things that should have been positive:

> [11]Participant 10: It can maybe make you lose the opportunity to enjoy the good moments. Let us say that you get a B on your exam, and you get disappointed because you wanted an A. But B is super good, and should really be very happy about it.
>
> Participant 13: I have heard that Olympic participants, when they rate how satisfied they are with their performance, then of course gold is very satisfied, and bronze is also satisfied because they got a place on the podium. Then, you have those who get silver who always think, I could have done a little better and I could have gotten gold.
>
> Participant 10: I notice that I'm often more satisfied with a C than I am with a B because a C is like: Yes, it is right in the middle of the tree, above average. And then you are somehow so far from an A, I would not have gotten an A anyway. But when you get a B, oh damn crap, it was so close.

Positive, including negative

The participants did, however, not stop by describing the relationship between positive and negative thoughts as opposites to each other; they also mentioned three ways in which positive thinking included negative thinking. First, for positive thinking to be more than pleasant in the moment and to have long-term positive effects such as successful goal attainment or the facilitation of self-development, the inclusion of negative thoughts was seen as necessary. Negative thoughts were necessary because they warned about potential hinderance and directed attention to important aspects of goal attainment. Second, negative thinking functioned as a reality check that facilitated realistic thinking when there was too much positivity. This balance function was mentioned earlier in the realistic thinking section. Finally, that positive thinking was acknowledging the negative but also hoping for something better and making the best out of the situation:

> [12]Participant 13: I think there might be to categories of positive people. There are those who are almost naïve, they look at everything positively and do not see anything bad in anyone,

but that can also get them into truly bad situations where they almost break because they cannot see the light, after only seeing pleasant things all the time. And then there are those who are like: Life is though, but fuck it, we are going to have good time. When the weather is bad, they think of things they are looking forward to, or maybe it is nice to go to an indoor pool. They almost improvise positivity. Make it good anyway.

The dark sides of positive without negative

The focus group discussed positive thinking without negativity, which they believed was related to mental illnesses (manic disorder, narcissism) and biases (overconfidence bias, optimism bias). Positive thinking without negative was related to being ignorant, naïve, and indecisive. This could lead to inconveniences such as procrastination but also have more serious consequences, such as a person entering dangerous situations. Thus, having negative thoughts seemed necessary. But also inevitable, as repressing negative thoughts only made them turn up more extreme later:

> [13]Participant 4: I was fresh from high school this fall, and there was a lot of new and difficult stuff. I thought; I am very homesick and sad now, and I do not want to deal with that, then it will only get worse. So, I just thought positively constantly. Every time I got sad, I put on the same happy song. However, when I came home to Christmas, a lot of emotions had accumulated.
>
> Participant 1: Then everything came out?
>
> Participant 4: Yes, then I was pretty tired for 3 weeks straight.

The outside world

Another critical concern around positive thinking has been that the situation and conditions have been underrated, but this was not the case in our interviews, as all the focus groups mentioned that the outside world was relevant for positive thinking. This main theme concerns positive thinking relationship with the world outside the head of the thinker. The two categories are "social setting" and "situation dependency".

Social setting

Positivity and social settings seemed to be tied together. The participants mentioned that they became more positive by being with other people. Other people's positivity was seen as contagious, making them more attractive to be around than negative people:

[14]Participant 18: Especially what the other people around point out, if they show you all the things that are negative then the world will be colored a little more negatively because you focus on the negative things. However, if they focus and point out "wow this was nice, and this was good", maybe show you a pretty flower instead of the ugly pile of garbage, then it is a different focus.

Furthermore, since negative people were also seen as contagious, a consequence was that negative people were avoided. This was a strategy to guard oneself from thinking negatively:

[15]Participant 13: It is completely understandable that you have this way of viewing life, but I do not know if I can be around people like that for a long time. From having been a person who think negatively, to starting to look at the small good things in life, I feel that when I am around such people that it can quickly influence my way of thinking as well. And that I feel heavy, almost tired, after being around people like that.

Participant 11: I agree that there can only be a degree of [negativity]. If people are negative about absolutely everything in the whole world all the time, then people tend to shy away.

Situation dependency

The relationship between positive thinking and situations seemed to be bidirectional. Thinking style influences situations, and situations influence thinking style. Moreover, the situation also determined participants' evaluation of whether positive thinking was the ideal thinking style:

[16]Participant 17: There are bigger things that have a lot of influence on how you think, like life situation. It is much easier to think positively when things are going well otherwise. And when things go well it can be easy to forget less positive things. Also, when you talk to others and feel good and think positively about yourself, you think that everyone else should be able to do it too. But you may not know what conditions others have.

Summary of the results

Table 1

Summary of Results from Study 1, including Main Themes, Sub-Themes, Keywords and Core

Statements

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Keywords	Core Statements
Defining positive thinking	*Traits*	Self-esteem, focus on good, be present, gratefulness, delusional, determination	Although something is unsolvable, it is positive to think that you can endure it over thinking that you cannot.
	Skills	Knowledge, self-development	To become a better version of yourself you also have to know negative sides
	Feelings	Ease, happiness, hope, optimism, satisfaction, self-love	Good feelings are involved in positive thinking
	Consequences	Broadening, find solution, reduce stress	Positive thinking makes you relaxed after putting off a difficult task
Encouragement to think positively	*How to think positively*	Split tasks, affective forecasting, downward comparison, lowering expectations, pretend, change focus	Positive thinking is to undermine your real feelings
	Conditions	Self-encouragement, intention, validation	Encouraging positive thinking without validation of the difficult situation is provoking
	Experience of encouragement	Provoking, difficult to do, motivational, helpful	In difficult situations positive thinking can give extreme motivation
Negative-positive balance	*Realistic thinking*	Good thinking, too positive is not realistic, too negative is not realistic, negative weighs heavier	Negative thinking is thinking about all the worst that can happen, positive thinking is better thinking
	Positive as opposite to negative	Limiting, self-fulfilling prophecies, stress, anxiety, sadness, ruin positive	Negative thinking can make you lose the opportunity to enjoy the good
	Positive including negative	Negative as necessity, negative as reality check, negative now but good in the end	Some positive people are naïve and can get themselves in bad situations, others

			acknowledge that life is hard but make it good anyway.
	The dark sides of positive without negative	Manic disorder, narcissism, overconfidence, optimism bias, overconfidence. ignorant, naïve, indecisive, procrastination	Suppressing negative feelings can pile them up to come out at a later occasion
The outside world	*Social setting*	Contagious, positive is social, negative is unsocial	If people are negative about everything people tend to shy away
	Situation dependency	Thinking influence situation, situation influence thinking	Your life situation influence how you are thinking

Discussion

Our aim in the focus group interviews was to investigate how laypeople defined the common advice to think positively. Although the thinking style is found everywhere, from the workplace (Garayeva, 2022) to the healthcare sector (Andrade, 2019; Higuita-Gutiérrez et al., 2023), there is a gap between its prevalence and our understanding of what it means to think positively. Thus, in this study, we began the process of defining positive thinking by asking laypeople for their understanding of the term in four focus group interviews. We found that most people agreed that positive thinking, in its ideal form, was to direct attention toward the good. Aside from this, our interview subjects did not reach a unanimous consensus. Instead, our results further emphasized what earlier research has already pointed toward—that the notion of positive can be defined and understood in numerous different ways depending on the sender, receiver, and context in which the advice exists or is given. Our participants believed that positive thinking was diverse, ranging from something that could facilitate growth, motivation, and self-development to something that could be delusional, unrealistic and lead to procrastination. Thus, positive thinking could be both helpful and harmful. A key feature for it to be the former, rather than the latter, seemed to be that the "downs" in life could not be fully ignored or suppressed. In the long-term, positive thinking needed to exist together with negative thinking since an extreme version of positive thinking was incompatible with the core of what people generally believed positive thinking to be, directing attention toward the good.

The definition of positive thinking remains elusive, with earlier studies showing that the broader "positive" can have both beneficial (Forgas, 1994; Forgas, 1998; Fredrickson, 2004; Isen et al., 1987; Isen & Reeve, 2005; Kushlev et al., 2020; Nelson & Sim, 2014; Primdahl et al., n.d.) and unwanted effects and outcomes (Elsbach & Barr, 1999; Goldenberg, 2017; Melton, 1995; Oettingen et al., 2016; Spering et al., 2005). Our findings from the focus group interviews align with earlier research showing that positivity is interpreted as a variety of different things. However, it also contributes to the field by taking a step back and shifting the focus from outcome to the meaning of positive. For example, our study showed that some gave definitions of positive thinking that were almost identical to those of positive affect, while others viewed positive thinking as pure cognition. In other words, the same "think positive" encouragement can initiate several different strategies depending on the receiver, ultimately leading to numerous different consequences. This broadens the potential scope of the field on motivation and goal attainment. For example, we already know from earlier research that positive affect can reduce willingness to participate in effortful behaviors (Goldenberg, 2017), but our research questions whether this can transfer to those who interpret positive thinking as closely related to affect. By highlighting the diverse interpretations of positive thinking, our study raises new questions and problems to discuss.

Given the popularity and prevalence of encouraging positive thinking, together with our finding of the variety in interpretations of this advice, it seems crucial to investigate the mechanisms that determine interpretation. To understand this, one side of earlier research would suggest that it depends on the degree of positivity (Pawelski, 2016, Oettingen, et al., 2016), while the other would focus on the importance of context (Held, 2018; Garayeva, 2022). We find support that the degree is important, as the participants mentioned several instances where one trait could be beneficial to some degree but undesirable in larger amounts. For example, high self-esteem was identified as a positive trait by participants, but they also acknowledged that it could become overconfidence if it existed without any negative thoughts. Moreover, the entire main theme of *negative-positive balance* was a discussion of positivity's degree in relation to negativity. This shows that the degree of

positivity was important in our research; however, participants also said that sometimes being

delusional, although it was not realistic nor the right amount of positivity, could be beneficial and

thus a positive thinking trait. This means that the degree alone was not enough to explain how

positive thinking could be interpreted differently. Some situations demanded exaggerated positivity

for positive thinking to have beneficial effects. This could be because, as many participants stated,

the negatives often weighed more heavily than the positives. Nevertheless, this shows that positive

thinking cannot be abstracted from the context. Therefore, our research suggests that both the

degree of positivity and its context are relevant for understanding what people believe positive

thinking to be.

Our study both supports and adds new insights to the literature on the importance of context

in positive thinking. Earlier research has shown that context is generally important to consider in

positive thinking (Held, 2018) and in specific scenarios such as domestic abuse (Sinclair et al., 2020).

This was supported in our study, as many participants mentioned the importance of situations. In

addition, our study explored how context is important when people are encouraged to think

positively. For example, participants made a clear distinction between self-encouragement and

encouragement to think more positively coming from an outsider. While self-encouragement could

be an adaptive strategy, encouragement from others could be provoking – especially if the

encourager was in a different position than the receiver of the advice. In this context, the advice was

interpreted more as an invalidating statement that diminished their difficulties. However, if the

encourager was in a similar situation or the advice was accompanied by validation, it was often

welcomed and interpreted as a well-meant reminder to focus on the good. Thus, while earlier studies

have lifted positive thinking from being solely focused on the individual without considering the

context in which the individual finds themselves, we add that the context also includes an

encourager. When interpreting positive thinking, it seems that the context in which the person

provides advice is just as important as the context in which the person receives it.

In conclusion, our study has initiated the process of trying to define positive thinking. By asking laypeople how they defined the concept, we revealed a spectrum of interpretations and the importance of degree and context. This emphasizes that we should be careful to tell people to think positively without clearly defining what it means, as it can both lead to different strategies and be interpreted in several different ways depending on the situation. However, considering that this causation is not found in our daily lives where encouragement to think positively is prevalent without adequate definitions, future studies should continue to explore the mechanisms determining the interpretation of positive thinking. This would be preferable with a larger sample to increase the generalizability of the results.

Study 2: Qualitative Online Survey

Building on the results from the focus group interviews, we wanted to further our understanding of folk theories about positive thinking in a survey that enabled a larger sample size. To do this, we asked both open-end questions and repertory grid questions (e.g., Tschudy & Winter, 2012) about the definition of positive thinking in an online mixed-method study survey.

We focused on three research questions. Our first question was how laypeople defined an instruction to think positively (R1). We were also curious about how positive thinking differed from and was similar to positive feelings (R2) and how positive thinking differed from and was similar to negative thinking (R3). Positive feelings were included to elicit the difference between thinking and feelings, as many in the focus group used both concepts when they defined positive thinking. Negative thinking was included to contrast positive thinking, but also because the focus group participants mentioned that negativity needed to be included in positive thinking to ensure realistic thinking.

Method

Participants, Procedure, and Design

We gathered a Norwegian convenience sample of 482 participants for this online survey. Participants were recruited through the students' social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram)

and UiT students' email lists, where potential participants were informed that they could win one of three 1000 NOK gift cards in a lottery after completing the survey. They could also participate in an additional lottery of a 2100 NOK gift card that could only be used at the Jekta shopping mall in Tromsø, Norway. The final sample consisted of 199 females (41.3%), 79 males (16.4%), 3 others (0.62%), 3 who preferred not to answer (0.62%), and 198 who did not answer any of the background questions (41.1%). The mean age was 25.5 years (SD_{age} = 8.02). There were 258 students (53.5%) in our sample and 26 who were not students (5.39%).

We used the online survey Qualtrics (https://www.qualtrics.com) to conduct this study. The first survey block investigated the wellbeing profile. Participants answered frequently used measures of wellbeing; life satisfaction, meaning in life, personal growth, and trait emotions. In the second block, participants were asked five open-ended questions related to the definition of positive thinking in a repertory grid-inspired manner. A third block, comprising a semantic differential word-pair design, was also included in the questionnaire but will not be reported in the present thesis. The survey ended with background questions regarding gender and age before forwarding participants to an independent survey where they could enter, their email to participate in the lottery. Instructions and questions were given in Norwegian.

Mixed-methods were used. The repertory grid-inspired open-ended questions provided qualitative data in text format generated by the participants and quantitative numerical data for wellbeing measures and the semantic differentials. All the data were based on self-reports, as it was peoples personal experiences we set out to investigate.

Qualitative text data were generated by the participants by answering five different open-end questions related to the definition of positive thinking. The first question asked how people interpreted "think positive" when this was requested or instructed. The second question asked for a description of what it means to "think positively". Then, the next question asked how positive thinking was different and similar to positive feelings. Finally, participants were asked how positive and negative thinking differed from each other.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Department of Psychology at UiT (IPS-REC) and was preregistered at the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/n493g).

Results & Discussion

Data analysis

Thematical analyses

Similar to Study 1, we analyzed the survey using thematical analyses and principals from grounded theory approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The difference in this study's analysis was that we used the codes from Study 1 as a starting point. However, we were not strictly bound by these codes and therefore supplemented them with new codes when necessary. Thus, the analysis was qualitative and data-driven.

The researcher started by reading all qualitative answers from the survey in their entirety. Then, an overall impression of the answers was written. In interview analyses, it is natural for the next step to be to split the content into different meaning units and condense it. However, since the answers were short summaries of people's opinions, we skipped this step of the analysis. From the raw data file, the columns including qualitative data were entered into a Word document, one document for each question, resulting in five different Word-files. Each Word-file was then uploaded to NVivo, the same qualitative research software that was used in Study 2, for analyses.

We continued using guidelines such as those of Krueger and Casey (2015) and Kvale and colleagues (2015) in the recontextualization process. Although we used the codes developed in Study 1 as a starting point, we did not keep the Code Tree from Study 1 but rather moved codes around to form a new Code Tree with main themes and two levels of sub-themes, that accounted for our new findings from this survey. The student and supervisor then discussed the codes and revised them. This resulted in a new Code Tree with three main themes: 1) "Maker of your own happiness", 2) "How thoughts relate to feelings", and 3) "Positive thinking trademark".

Results

Generally, participants believed that thinking positively was desirable and that people can influence, even control, their thoughts to become more positive. Focusing on the good was one of several strategies that one could actively choose to achieve a positive mindset, where one main benefit was that it could help solve problems by broadening one's perspective. However, the experience of receiving the advice to think positively largely depended on whether participants "filled" the advice with strategies and desirable outcomes beyond its immediate appearance, as some criticized it for being an ambiguous and vague advice. These findings are important for understanding people's ideas about positive thinking. Moreover, comparing positive thinking to something similar, such as positive feelings, was useful for fully grasping how people defined positive thinking. Sometimes, thoughts and feelings have been discussed interchangeably, but when we compared our participants' descriptions of each, it was revealed that for most people, they were experienced as distinct concepts. Furthermore, and more importantly, for the purpose of discovering how laypeople define positive thinking, comparing thinking to feeling sheds light on the distinct features of positive thinking. The most mentioned features included that thinking occurred in the head, was controllable and could be independent of the affective response that one had in situations. In contrast, positive feelings took place in the body, were uncontrollable and were more anchored in reality, as it was a response to the situation one found themselves in. In addition to positive feelings, we also found three other relationships that were important for defining positive thinking: its relationship to negative ones, social settings, and time. All the abovementioned findings are represented in Figure 2 and will be further elaborated upon when delving into each main- and sub-themes. Table 2 summarizes the differences between positive thinking, positive feelings and negative thinking.

Figure 2

Code Tree of the Three Main Themes with Sub-Themes for Study 2
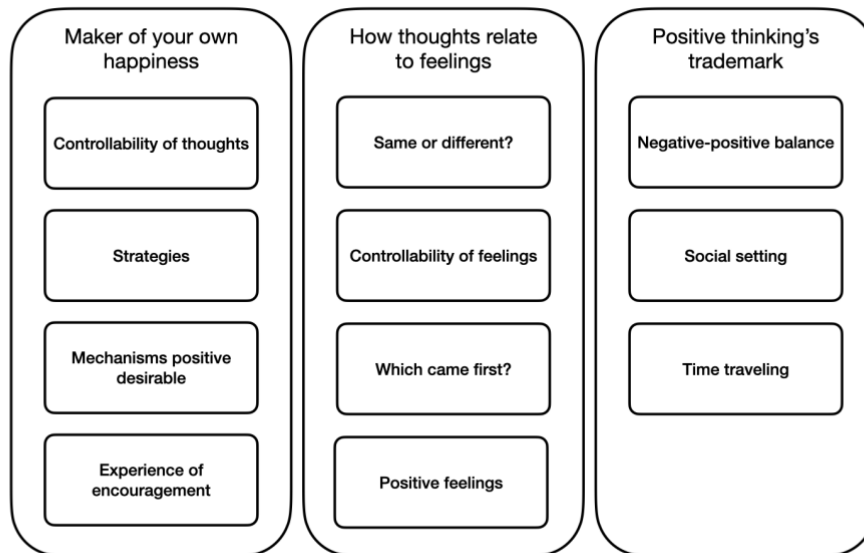
Maker of your own happiness

To what extent people are responsible for and capable of influencing their own happiness is a debate with both moral and political implications, and it is therefore interesting that the participants touched upon it when asked to define positive thinking. The following sub-themes demonstrate that most participants believed that thoughts were controllable. Moreover, they had strategies for controlling thoughts in a more positive direction and expectations for the positive outcomes of this act. People's perception of receiving this responsibility from the outside was also addressed. The last sub-theme suggests that too much responsibility can be placed on the individual by others, indicating a difference between choosing to think positively for oneself and being pressured by others. This main theme is summarized in Figure 3 after each sub-theme has been presented.

Controllability of thoughts

Many participants identified "to focus on the good" as a defining characteristic of positive thinking, echoing the main finding from the focus group interviews. However, a deeper exploration

revealed an important premise that was more explicitly mentioned in this survey than in the

interviews. Namely, the ability to control or direct one's thoughts. Many participants claimed that

thoughts were controllable and could be actively shaped and altered. However, a minority held the

opposite view, believing that thoughts were beyond their control. Nevertheless, the prevailing belief

was that thoughts were changeable and controllable while recognizing them as difficult. While some

directly wrote that changing their thoughts was difficult, most of the participants said so indirectly by

emphasizing that it required effort to think positively:

> [17]For me, 'thinking positively' means actively choosing to look for the good in every situation,
>
> even when things seem challenging. It involves being mindful of my thoughts and feelings
>
> and consciously shifting them in a more optimistic direction.

Strategies

Unsurprisingly, following the prior sub-theme, both to focus on good and to change one's

thoughts reoccurred in this sub-theme as strategies to obtain positive thinking. Although these were

the most prominent strategies, they were not the only ones mentioned. In addition, participants

highlighted cultivating determination through difficulties, together with acceptance. Both strategies

underscore that positive thinking can involve the confrontation of negative rather than merely

escapism and immediate gratification:

> [18]Don't give up. Believe that you can overcome the challenge, even if it is demanding.

The confrontational strategies contrasted with the other strategies the participants

mentioned. For example, decreasing negativity, lower expectations, and pretending to be positive

are often involved in diminishing negativity as much as possible. Although they were intended to

increase positive thinking, one could argue that they were more related to affect:

> [19]Be happy no matter what has happened. Don't talk about the negative feelings.

Mechanisms making positive desirable

In the forthgoing sub-themes we addressed the "how" part of positive thinking, but the

"why" part remains. Therefore, this sub-theme delves into the motivation for pursuing positive

thinking. First, several participants expressed the importance of positive thinking in their lives. Specifically, people said that positive thinking was beneficial because it fostered openness, broadened their perspectives, and enhanced their problem-solving abilities. As a consequence of improved problem-solving skills, people experienced reduced stress. However, positive thinking could also result in reduced stress through a different route. Instead of improving the ability to solve the problem, positive thinking could reduce the perceived importance of the problem, such as by minimizing the importance of an exam. Furthermore, positive thinking has the potential to improve overall quality of life and self-esteem and facilitate personal growth. By thinking positively, one's perspective could be broadened and transform adversity into an opportunity for growth:

> [20]One can see more opportunities in a bad situation by thinking positively. Perhaps something can be gained from it afterwards. Thinking negatively has a negative impact on motivation.

Experience of encouragement

Given the foregoing benefits, positive thinking seems intuitively appealing to promote. It might be tempting to think that the encouragement is always helpful, and like many in the focus group interviews, the survey participants also believed that the advice could be helpful. However, it depended on the origin of the advice, for which self-encouragement was preferred over external encouragement, and the perception of the encourager's intentions. Concretely, advice from someone in a similar situation to one's own, or validation of one's difficulties, was preferred over more distanced encouragers.

The similarities in these findings with those from Study 1 indicate consistency. However, the survey also revealed a novel aspect of how people experienced the advice to think positively. Those who embraced the advice to think positively seemed to automatically incorporate the different strategies mentioned earlier, while those who did not like the encouragement criticized it for being "empty". This could explain the large gap between those who liked the advice and does who were provoked by it:

[21]Might react negatively because it can feel belittling and unappreciative. However, I respond

well to concrete tips for shifting the mindset to something more positive.

Summary and relationship of sub-themes

Figure 3

Maker of Your Own Happiness Results Summarized
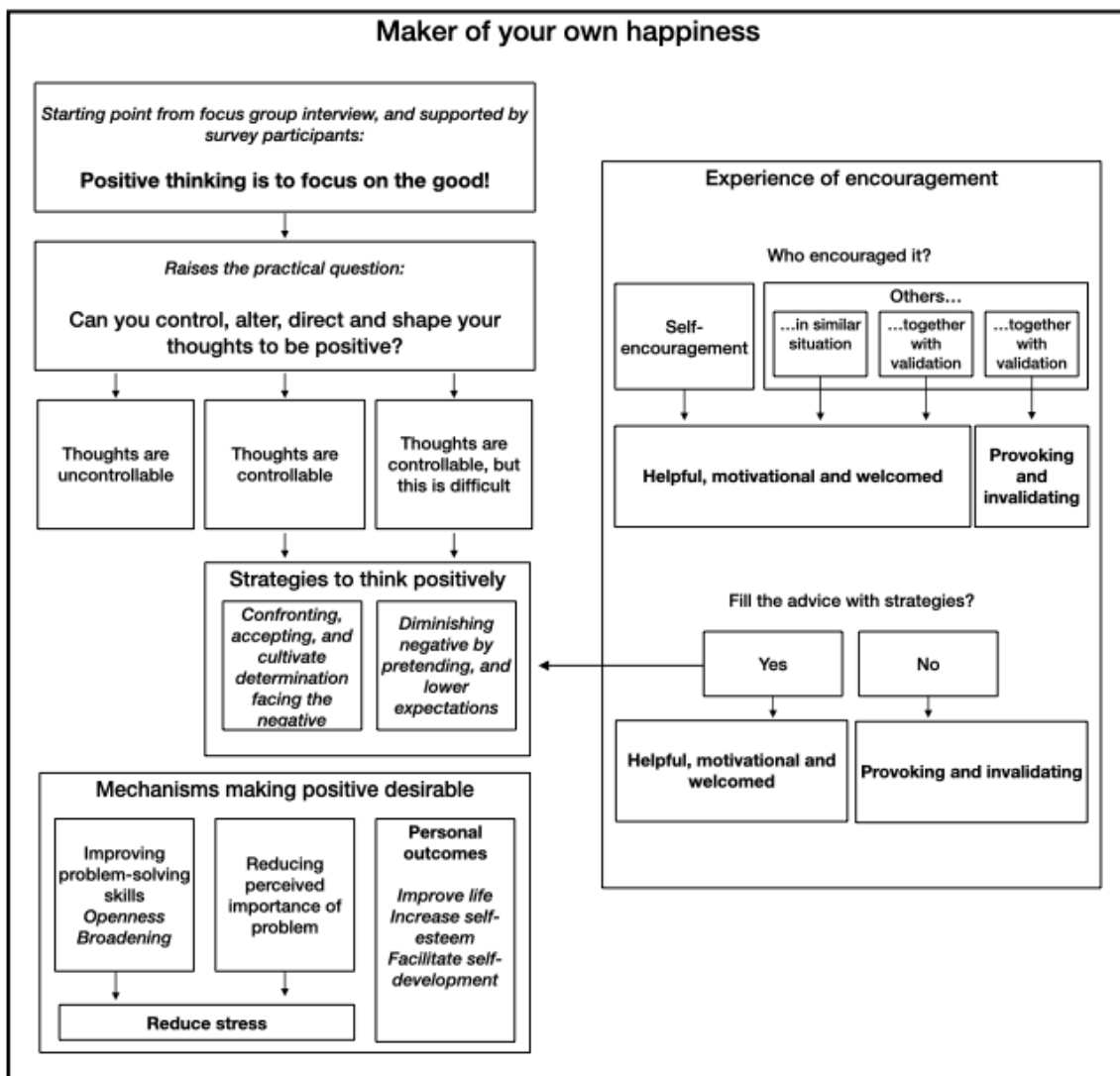
How thoughts relate to feelings

Following grid methods, we wanted participants to reflect on the differences and similarities

between positive thinking and closely related, positive feelings. In the first part, we present how

similar participants believed the two concepts to be. We continue by elaborating on the specific

difference that was most often mentioned: the controllability of feelings. After this analysis is

presented, we will change our scope from description to causality. In the third sub-theme, "which

came first", we investigate people's causal beliefs regarding thinking and feelings. In other words,

whether they believed that thinking influenced feelings or the other way around. The last sub-theme

concerns positive feelings concretely, which some participants believed was the end goal of trying to

think positively. Figure 4 summarizes all the findings within this main theme.

Same or different?

There were three different views on the similarity of positive thinking to positive feelings.

First, some perceived thinking positively and feeling positively as interchangeable. They did not

differentiate between feelings and thoughts. Second, were those who argued that feelings and

thoughts were independent. These participants advocated for their independence because

incongruent thoughts and feelings could be experienced simultaneously. In their experience,

alignment of thoughts and feelings was more expectational. Third, positioned between these

extremes were those who believed that thinking and feeling were different but closely connected.

Some expressed this directly by stating that thoughts and feelings influenced each other. While

others were more indirect by initially claiming independence, but later elaborated on their interplay:

> [22]Thoughts and feelings are vastly different, where feelings arise on their own and all one can
>
> do is process them, while thoughts can be manipulated and controlled mostly as one wish.
>
> One can have positive thoughts even with negative feelings, such as in the case of a death
>
> where one experiences sadness and grief, but perhaps thinks that the person is in a better
>
> place—precisely to help process the emotions. Thinking negatively in such a case will usually
>
> exacerbate negative feelings; for example, "how will I manage without them?" [and] will not
>
> help me process grief. In this case, it is therefore appropriate to think positively precisely to
>
> get through life, as thinking negatively too much can lead to giving up.

Controllability of feelings

The degree of controllability was a frequently mentioned difference between thoughts and feelings. While the majority of respondents indicated a sense of agency over their thoughts, the opposite was true for feelings. A general belief was that feelings were uncontrollable. Consequently, strategies for fostering positive thinking primarily centered around manipulating thoughts rather than attempting to directly alter feelings. Moreover, an intriguing result of perceiving feelings to be more uncontrollable than thoughts was that several participants equated uncontrollability with heightened authenticity and intensity. Compared to positive thoughts, which were more malleable and less grounded in external reality, positive feelings were more closely tied to reality:

[23]A positive thought comes from yourself and is 'just' a thought, while a positive feeling comes as a result of an action from either yourself or others.

Which came first?

Most participants believed that positive thinking and feelings were closely connected, but they also dove deeper into explaining how this relationship worked. The general view was that thoughts and feelings mutually influenced each other, with congruent feelings facilitating the acquisition of positive thoughts. However, among those who reported a more detailed conceptualization of the causal relationship, a prevailing idea was that thoughts lead to feelings rather than vice versa. This finding is interesting regarding controllability, as it suggests that feelings can be indirectly regulated by controlling thoughts:

[24]They often correlate, but it is the thought that leads the way.

Positive feelings

Despite a general distinct conceptualization of thoughts and feelings, there also existed an overlap regarding the outcomes of positive thinking. Positive thinking emerged as a pathway to achieve positive feelings. The positive feelings identified were ease, happiness, hope, optimism, satisfaction, and self-love—consistent with the answers from the focus group interviews. In addition to identifying positive feelings that were closely connected to or emerged as a result of thinking positively, the survey results also raised an intriguing new perspective. For those who viewed

positive thinking as an instrument to reach positive feelings, it could be hypothesized that

differentiating between thoughts and feelings was more difficult, as exemplified in the following

quote:

> [25][...] By thinking positively, the goal is to elicit a positive feeling. I also believe it can be
>
> difficult to distinguish between a positive thought and a feeling, as both can make you smile
>
> and lift your mood.

Summary and relationship of sub-themes

Figure 4

Summary of how Thoughts Relate to Feelings
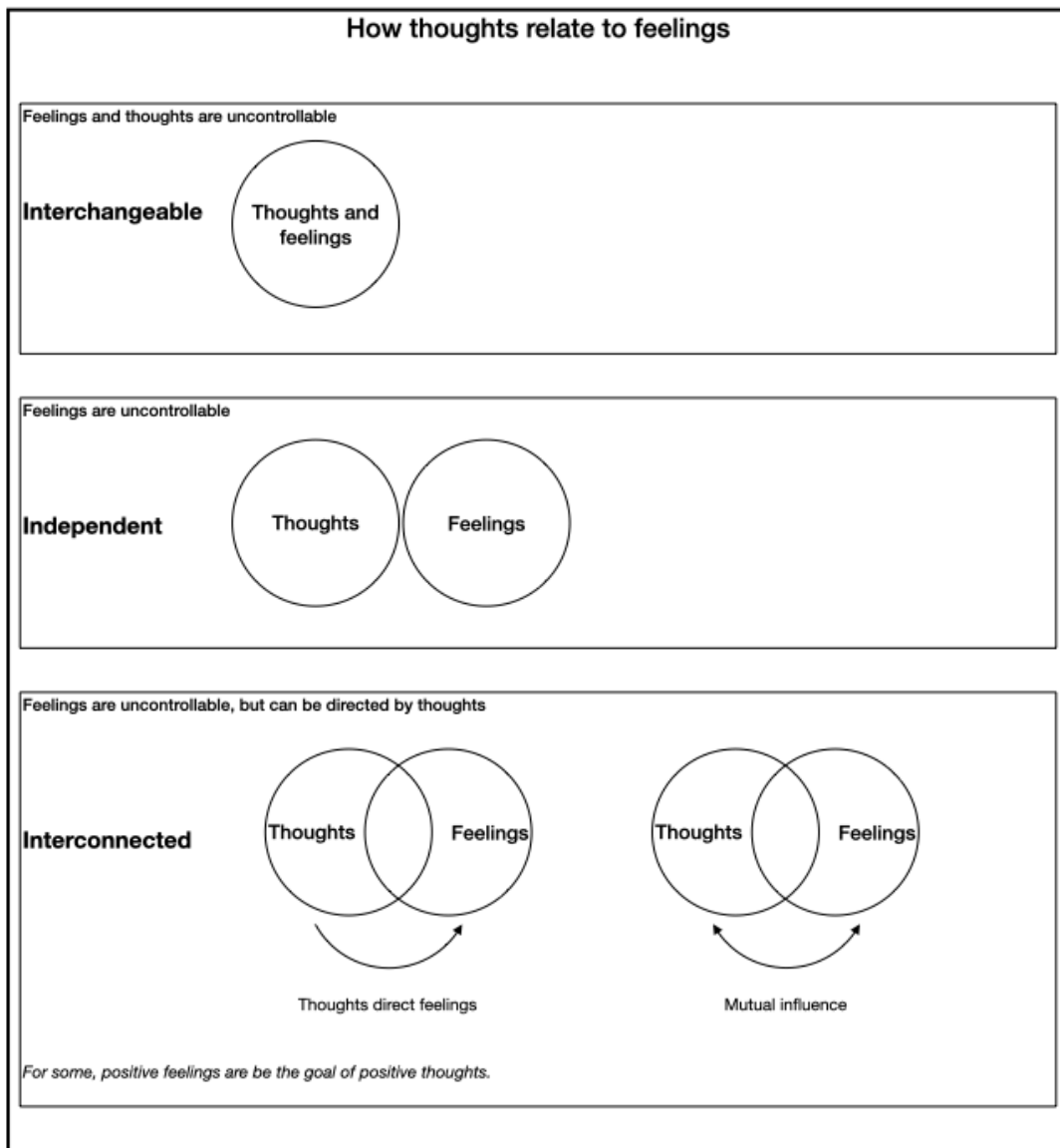
Positive thinking's trademarks

In this main theme, we examine three important concepts in people's beliefs about positive

thinking. First, the relationship between positive thinking and negative thinking appears to be crucial

for interpreting its definition. Second, the social context seems to influence and be important in

determining the demand for positive thinking. Finally, one's orientation toward the present, past, and future appears to be pivotal in defining positive thinking.

Negative-positive balance

By comparing positive thinking to negative thinking, participants provided interesting insights into how negative thinking could complement positive thinking. Negative thinking was widely recognized as the opposite of positive thinking. For some, this was so obvious that they simply wrote "the opposite of negative" when asked to define positive thinking. However, a more nuanced perspective was also mentioned in which the two opposing mindsets could coexist. This perspective suggested that while negative thinking often arises automatically in difficult situations, positive thinking could contribute to a more realistic outlook as a supplementary thought. In this view, positive thinking transcends mere opposition to negativity; it serves as a complementary approach that facilitates resilience during challenging times:

> [26]It means seeing the best in a situation without necessarily forgetting the negative. What can one do to improve a negative situation, and what can one learn from it?

Social setting

Although positive thinking occurs within a person's mind, external social factors are crucial. Specifically, positive thinking seems to be regarded as the most socially acceptable mindset to adopt. Several participants reported that they had encouraged others to be more positive and that social interactions facilitated positive thinking. However, social expectations to remain positive had a downside. It constrained the expression of other less positive thoughts, and negative thoughts were perceived by some to be antisocial. Moreover, social pressure to be positive could be hypothesized to impair openness, as some expressed reluctance to share negative thoughts with others. This is emphasized in the following answer to the question of how they experienced the encouragement to think positively:

> [27]Often condescending. Thinking positively to me means not being able to share burdensome things because others find it too much.

Time traveling

One participant wrote that positive thinking was tied to time. Although the abstract definition was a unique way of defining positive thinking, it indirectly resonated with the views of many others. Specifically, many believed that positive thinking was to anticipate a hopeful future by envisioning overcoming difficulties or by reminding yourself of something you already looked forward to. However, if the future scared you, another positive strategy was to focus on the present and accept uncertainty. Some also mentioned the past, for example, by remembering past triumphs or cherished memoirs. According to this interpretation, thinking positively means intentionally time travel to where you find hope:

[28]It means focusing on the good things and having faith that it will turn out okay in the end.

Summary of differences between positive thinking, positive feelings and negative thinking

Table 2

Summary of Differences between Positive Thinking, Positive Feelings, and Negative Thinking from Study 2 Core Statements and Keywords

Positive thinking	Positive feelings	Negative thinking
Look for the good in every situation. *Focus on the good*	Feel the good. *Focus on the good*	See the negative in every situation. *Focus on the bad*
Trust myself. *Self-esteem*	Believe I am good enough. *Self-love*	Think things are too difficult for oneself to manage. *Self-doubt*
Appreciate what I already have. *Grateful*		
See things from different perspectives. *Broaden*		
Makes life better. *Improvement*	Makes life better. *Improvement*	
Gives peace. *Reduce stress*	Gives peace. *Reduce stress*	
Focus on solving challenges. *Solutions*		
Makes problems less complicated. *Ease*	Feel "light-headed", low effort and issues are	Makes thing more difficult. *Difficult*

	experienced more positively. *Ease*	
Think about things that make you happy. *Happiness*	Feel happy. *Happiness*	
Hope for a better future. *Hope*	Hope for something better. *Hope*	Will not improve in the future. *Hopelessness*
Will either go well, or it will pass, don't give up. *Determination*		
Be optimistic, trust that it will be okay. Be aware of the opportunity to be optimistic. *Optimistic*	To truly be optimistic. *Optimistic*	Be pessimistic, given up on something. *Pessimistic*
Find something that makes you satisfied with your life. *Satisfaction*	Feeling of being satisfied. *Satisfaction*	
Accept the negative, and do something about with the things that are within your control. *Acceptance + focus on controllable*		Let things outside your control bother you. *Reject + focus on uncontrollable*
Compare with others in less fortunate situations. *Comparison*		
Used to get away from the negative. *Decrease negativity*		Negative thoughts comes from the situation. *Increase negativity*
Things are not as serious as you think they are. *Lower expectations*	Lower expectations can lead to positive feelings. *Lower expectations*	Low expectations can lead to positive feelings, or low effort. *Lower expectations*
Evaluating your thoughts positively *Meta-cognition*		Evaluating your thoughts negatively *Meta-cognition*
Fake it till you make it, if done for long enough it can lead to positive feeling. *Pretend*	Fake your mood in front of others. *Pretend*	
Learn from mistakes and negative experiences. *Self-development*		Necessary with negative to develop and change. *Self-development*

Discussion

By conducting a survey based on the results from the focus-group interviews, we aimed to

increase the generalizability of our previous findings and investigate new perspectives on how

positive thinking was defined by laypeople. Again, we confirmed that there were many different

definitions and interpretations of positive thinking, as well as similarities in what was agreed upon by

the survey participants. A predominant view was that they defined positive thinking as a way of

controlling one's thoughts to focus on the good. Moreover, many believed positive thinking to be

different from positive feelings and from negative thoughts, which were both seen as more

uncontrollable automatic ways to respond to the external world. Thus, the survey findings were

generally consistent with the results from the focus group interviews, but new and important

components were also revealed. Specifically, the survey participants provided a more detailed

overview of the relationship between thoughts and feelings, which revealed two patterns of

interpreting positive thinking: one in which positive thinking was closely defined as positive feelings,

leading to distancing oneself from negative, and another in which positive thoughts coexisted with

the negative, but were defined differently from positive feelings. This will be further discussed in

depth, as the findings have the potential to further our understanding and answer the question of

why positive thinking was defined differently between participants.

Two patterns of interpreting positive thinking

There is no doubt that the variety of positive thinking definitions leads to a cluster of

different perceptions, motivations, and strategies, yet if we were to condense our findings, there

seem to be two patterns of interpretation that stand out. The first perspective holds that positive

thinking and positive feelings are closely tied together. From this perspective, reducing the negative

seems important, and can be achieved by, for example, pretending to be positive. Stress is reduced

by diminishing importance of a task or avoiding the task altogether (for example, the participant in

Study 1 who postponed their thesis). It is difficult to separate positive thinking and positive feelings

in this perspective. This also suggests that thinking and feeling influence each other equally. When

time traveling, it is either to a past memory that makes you feel good or to the future to something

you look forward to. However, being present seems most important for this interpretation of positive

thinking, as it is improving the current situation that matters the most. From this perspective,

positive thinking includes positive fantasizing (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen et al., 2016) and is likely to prompt similar strategies as positive affect by reducing motivation to work toward goal-attainment (Goldenberg, 2017).

In the alternative interpretation of positive thinking, feelings and thoughts still influence each other but are more separate than in the former perspective. Positive thinking does not mean pleasurable thinking, which explains why people put in work to obtain this thinking style, although pleasantness is reduced by effortfulness (Wilson et al., 2019). The negative is accepted and confronted, with positive thinking functioning as a determination to overcome difficulties. "Time-traveling" is used to increase motivation. The past is visited to remind oneself of a time one managed through a similar difficult situation. The future motivates by thinking that the hardships in the present will be worth it in the end. We believe it is this perspective of positive thinking that most of our participants had when their performance was improved by being encouraged to think positively in our earlier studies (Primdahl et al., n.d.). Moreover, while the other perspective entails positive fantasies, this perspective includes positive expectancy (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen et al., 2016). Furthermore, a reduction of negatives can also be achieved here, although it has to be put into a longer perspective. Stress reduction can, for example, be achieved as positive thinking can improve problem-solving abilities by helping one to focus on controllable aspects and not become overwhelmed by the negatives. Thus, this perspective is better for reaching long-term goals since negative effects are accounted for, ultimately helping in overcoming difficulties for longer periods or preparing for potential hinderance.

Degree and context in different perspectives of positive thinking

The two perspectives revealed in this survey add to our main findings from the focus group interviews that the degree and context are important to positive thinking. The difference in the degree seems most obvious to be different for the two positive thinking perspectives. In the first perspective, the degree of positivity is more extreme compared to the second perspective, to such an extent that it is difficult for the negative to coexist. There are two tempting conclusions one can

draw from this. First, one could suggest that the second version of positive thinking is superior, as it seems more realistic and compatible for facilitating long-term goal-attainment. Second, the degree seems to explain the positive thinking perspectives alone; thus, one could conclude that the context is not crucial after all. However, there are certainly situations in which diminishing the negative by escaping from it leads to better outcomes than does the more conservative positive thinking perspective. For example, in domestic abuse, the determination to stay longer can be dangerous (Sinclair et al., 2020). Therefore, the context is again the deciding factor on how to interpret positive thinking.

Given the importance of context, it is also worth noting that the survey participants mentioned context more seldomly than did the focus group participants. Many still mentioned that the advice to think positively had the potential to be both provoking and invalidating. Moreover, this was still to some extent decided by whom the advice came from and how their intentions were interpreted—all contextual factors. However, circumstances were not as nuanced or accounted for to the same extent as in the focus group interviews. This might be explained by the survey format, which prompted shorter answers and less debate than more dynamic focus group interviews. Another explanation might be that most people internalized the advice, suggesting that positive thinking was something people believed they were in full control of. Thus, social commentators concern that positive thinking has become the norm and puts an exaggerated individualistic responsibility on people (Brinkmann, 2016; Ehrenreich, 2009; Madsen, 2020; Willig, 2016), and the critical concerns that positive thinking is taken for granted without paying sufficient attention to the context (Held, 2018) are hinted toward in the answers from this survey. This might not be an issue for the majority but can be problematic for those who mentioned that they did not feel that there was space for their negative thoughts and feelings. Therefore, context is important for promoting positive thinking. This finding goes beyond theoretical importance as it also needs to be considered by well-being promoters and other professionals.

This study provides important practical implications related to the requirement to think positively in social settings. Considering that some feel that there is no space for their negative experiences and that there is great variety in how positive thinking is defined by different people, it seems necessary that mental health promoters are careful to encourage positive thinking without a clear definition. Since many do not consider the context's importance, mental health promoters should clearly state in which context this advice is helpful and in which it can be harmful. If people perceive that social settings demand positivity, which is both suggested by our study and earlier research (Thompson et al., 2016), positive thinking should be promoted carefully so that it does not lead to stigmatization of those who are perceived as negative. According to the APA definition, stigma is "the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency. A stigma implies social disapproval and can lead unfairly to discrimination against and exclusion of the individual" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). This stigmatization and social rejection have already been found in a study on pessimistically biased individuals (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2002). Our study supports this further and advances the field by offering an explanation of why people were stigmatized. Participants mentioned that both negative and positive thinkers were seen as "contagious", leading people to withdraw from those they perceived as negative. Viewing negative people as contagious seems extremely dangerous in a world with a demand for positivity. If thinking positively is the goal without consideration for the context, those who are perceived as negative can, in the worst case, be left out of society. Thus, positive thinking should be encouraged carefully, as it might have negative consequences for social inclusion.

Positive thinking as a direction for future positive psychology

Before ending this discussion, we want to underscore one last finding from this thesis—the importance of investigating positive thinking. Despite the vague definition of positive thinking, dismissing the importance of studying it overlooks the consequences it has in everyday life emphasized by our participants, and shown in earlier research in the health-care sector (Andrade,

2019; Higuita-Gutiérrez et al., 2023) and workplace (Garayeva, 2022). Many participants said that they regarded positive thinking as important, although they had to put in effort to obtain it. A reduction in pleasantness due to the effortfulness of thinking positively has also been found in earlier studies (Wilson et al., 2019). The fact that people put effort into obtaining positive thinking highlights the importance of further investigations but also suggests that positive thinking is something different than positive feelings. However, while positive feelings have been within the scope of positive psychology research since the classic Broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004), the cognitive aspect of positivity has been overlooked. Thus, with this thesis, we have not only started the work of defining positive thinking but also showed that we should broaden the scope of positive psychology to include positive thinking.

Limitations and future studies

Both studies have some limitations. First, the participants were recruited through email lists at the same university that the author of this thesis attends and through their social media profile. Therefore, many of the participants had been affiliated with the university or were acquaintances of the master's student. It is thus possible that we would find a greater variety in answers by having a more representative sample. Another related limitation is that although our second study had a large sample size, it might still not fully capture the diverse definitions that exist across different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, generalizability is limited, and future studies using more diverse samples should aim at replicating the current findings.

Given that earlier studies have shown that people believe that they should be more positive than they already are (Bastian et al., 2012; Dejonckheere & Bastian, 2020), the themes of both studies could have elicited social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010). Social desirability bias occurs when participants are more concerned about providing socially desirable answers than about stating their true thoughts. The focus group could be especially concerning because participants were not anonymous to the others in the group. However, by having the interviewer explicitly say that no answers were right or wrong and that we were curious about people's opinions, we hope to have

revealed people's true beliefs concerning positive thinking. Nevertheless, this should be taken into account when considering our findings, and future research should continue replication in environments that are less likely to elicit social desirability bias.

The studies we conducted were qualitative, which reduces the generalizability of our findings. However, we see this type of study as a necessary step toward effective hypothesis generation that can be tested quantitatively and experimentally. Future studies should test the effects of positive thinking and some of the outcomes participants in our survey mentioned, such as stress reduction and improved problem-solving skills.

Conclusion

This thesis uncovers the nuances to how positive thinking is defined by laypeople, starts the journey to understand how positive thinking encouragement is received, and uncovers important aspects regarding how it ought to be defined by professionals. Positive thinking is a multifaceted concept that divides people as they choose different strategies, have different motivations, and experience receiving the advice differently. Focusing on the good is a key-finding for how laypeople define positive thinking. Beyond this, the interpretation of positive thinking seems to depend on the degree. The degree can be roughly separated into two different perspectives, one that is closer to positive feelings but more distant from the negative and another that is more separated from positive feelings but more determined at dealing with the negative than at escaping from it. To determine which degree is most appropriate, the context needs careful interpretation. Thus, to define positive thinking, we should not ignore or separate it from the degree and context. The variety in perception of the advice deepens our understanding of how positive thinking can lead to a variety of different outcomes and emphasizes the pitfalls of a one-size-fits-all approach in mental health interventions. Future studies should continue building on these insights by collecting data from more diverse samples and expanding the analytical scope by including quantitative designs. This thesis thus marks a critical step toward understanding positive thinking.

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Appendix

Norwegian Original Interview Guide

Type spørsmål	Spørsmål	Min
Info	Takk for at dere har tatt dere tid til denne gruppe diskusjonen. Jeg heter Marie, går første året på master i psykologi og tilhører Forskningsgruppe for sosialpsykologi ved Institutt for psykologi. Joar Vittersø veileder masteroppgaven min. Jeg vil prøve å forstå mer av hvordan tenkingen vår påvirker hvordan vi løser problemer. Dere er blitt invitert fordi jeg vil høre deres tanker om temaet. Jeg er ute etter hva dere faktisk mener og tenker, så her er det ingen svar som er riktig eller feil. Underveis mens vi snakker kommer jeg til å notere, og det vil bli tatt opptak av diskusjonen.	2
Åpning	Fortell oss hvor du best liker å sitte når du studerer, og en ting du liker å gjøre når du ikke studerer	3
Introduksjon	Tenk tilbake på en situasjon der du tenkte positivt, hvordan tenkte du annerledes fra slik du vanligvis tenker? Prompt: Hvordan påvirket dette situasjonen du var i?	10
Overgang	Hvis noen oppfordrer deg til å tenke positivt, hva gjør du for å få dette til? Prompt: Hvordan kan dette oppleves annerledes fra å finne ut selv at man vil tenke positivt? Når er dette ett hjelpsomt råd? Når er dette ett råd som ikke hjelper? Oppleves dette som ett enkelt råd å følge?	5
Nøkkelspørsmål	Hva betyr det å tenke positivt? Prompt: Hva ligner på positiv tenking, kan du gi meg ett synonym? Hva er det motsatte av positiv tenking, kan du gi meg ett antonym? Hva gjør positiv	10

	tenkning og [*synonymet*] lik hverandre? Hva gjør positiv tenkning og [*antonymet*] ulik hverandre?	
	Hvordan påvirker positiv tenking det å løse oppgaver? Prompt: Kan du gi ett eksempel på at positiv tenkning hjelper med å løse oppgaver? Kan du gi ett eksempel på at positiv tenkning ikke hjelper på å løse oppgaver?	10
	Hva er negative tankers rolle i positiv tenking? Prompt: Hvordan kan negative tanker hjelpe positiv tenking? Hvordan kan det ødelegge? Kan du gi meg ett eksempel?	10
Avslutning *Alt tatt i betraktning*	Hvis du skulle gitt en kort definisjon på hva positiv tenkning er, hva ville du trukket frem som spesielt viktig?	3
Oppsummering	[oppsummer 2 min] Er dette en god gjengivelse av det vi har snakket om?	5
Siste spørsmål	Målet med denne samtalen er å forstå hva det betyr å tenke positivt. Er det noe vi har oversett? Er det noe vi ikke har snakket om, som er relevant?	3

Norwegian Original Quotes

Study 1

[1]Intervjuer: Når tenker dere at det ikke er hjelpsomt? Kan dere gi ett eksempel på det? At det ikke hjelper å tenke positivt?

Deltaker 7: Der når det ikke er noen løsning i det hele tatt, liksom, jeg vet ikke.

Deltaker 6: Men da må man jo bare sitte i det.

Deltaker 7: Ja.

Deltaker 6: Og er det da, jeg er uenig.

Deltaker 7: Ja.

Deltaker 6: Da vil det jo uansett være positivt å tenke sånn: Okei.

Deltaker 7: At det går bra på en måte?

Deltaker 6: Men. Ja, eller det går bra, jeg klarer å stå i det.

Deltaker 7: Ja.

Deltaker 6: Istedenfor å tenke: Dette er fælt, og jeg vil ikke stå i det.

Deltaker 7: Ja, men det vil jo ikke på en måte løse problemet.

Deltaker 6: Neinei

Deltaker 7: Men du vil få det bedre da med å tenke positivt.

[2]Deltaker 3: Det jeg klarer å tenke på er en jobb intervju. På en jobb intervju så er du litt stressa, sant? Hvordan vil det gå, hvilke spørsmål får jeg. Så finnes det jo forskjellige type folk, så finnes det jo de som er sånn: Ja det skal jeg få til, det skal jeg naile, perfekt, alle spørsmål, uansett hva jeg får. Så får man det spørsmålet ikke sant, hvilke negative sider har du for eksempel. Også still, sitter du igjen med ingenting. Liksom, og det er sånn, det gir jo ikke mening, alle har jo noen, ikke sant? Så det er litt det da, for å bli bedre versjon av seg selv da, så må jo du også vise svakheter da, kanskje negative sider. Sånn sett er det bra å punktere det.

[3]Deltaker 14: Det er vel det jeg assosierer med det når jeg tenker positivt. Så er det jo gjerne fordi da er du i en god periode, og du er lykkelig og glad, og så videre.

Deltaker 16: Det er liksom gode følelser som er involvert.

[4]Deltaker 1: Jeg kan jo ta en som er veldig nylig da jeg har valgt å utsette [studiene]. Jeg skriver egentlig bacheloroppgave nå, men jeg har valgt å utsette den, for det har vært så veldig mye som har skjedd, og jeg tenkte jo, jeg tror det var på mandag når jeg liksom var så OK nå, nå skal jeg bare nå velger jeg, bestemmer jeg, OK, jeg utsetter den, for jeg har på en måte tenkt litt sånn i bakhodet, ikke sant? På mandag så tenkte jeg: Vet du hva, jeg utsetter den, og så får jeg bare se hva det går. Og jeg, da tenkte jeg sånn med en gang jeg måtte

sende mail sånn for å si at jeg utsetter, og etter det så bare føler jeg meg så, hva skal jeg si,

avslappet? Det var liksom sånn. Det var bare veldig deilig å på en måte bare legge det fra

meg for nå da.

[5]Deltaker 10: Jeg føler at positiv tenkning også er med å skyve de følelsene du egentlig

tenker, litt bort. Sånn som jeg skulle ta billappen, kjempe stresset på oppkjøring, også var jeg

sånn: Okei men det er mange, andre løker som har tatt lappen før meg, se hvor mange

idioter som kjører bil. Okei greit, men det går fint, det går fint. This is no problemo. Kjørte, og

i det jeg parkerte bilen, så begynte jeg å strigråte, og alle følelsene jeg hadde undergravet i

positivt bare poppet frem. Så sensor var sånn: Okei, jeg skulle egentlig gi deg svar på slutten,

men du får bare få den nå for du må slutte å gråte. Du besto, du besto. Kanskje det å tenke

positivt, er sånn du undergraver de egentlige følelsene dine, det du egentlig føler på.

[6]Deltaker 1: [...] Bare prøv, bare prøv å tenk litt annerledes. Men igjen, veldig vanskelig utifra

situasjonen man er i. Ja.

[7]Deltaker 17: Jeg kom på ett lite eksempel, og det synes jeg var veldig teit at det synes jeg var

provoserende, men på barneskolen så var det ei SFO-lærer som sa: Hver morgen sier jeg til

meg selv: Good morning sunshine! Og jeg husker det gjorde meg så sint, og jeg klarte ikke si

det, for jeg ble så sur av å si det i speilet til meg selv. Og det var sånn, at hun var sånn: Du kan

velge å være glad hvis du gjør sånn. Når hun sa det til meg så var det sånn, det hadde ikke

fungert. Men hvis jeg hadde valgt å si det til meg selv uoppfordret, da hadde det gått helt

fint, da hadde det fungert sikkert. Men, det er noe med den derre påtvungne positiviteten fra

andre som kan slå så feil.

[8]Deltaker 17: Jeg tenker at hvis man vil prøve å på en måte avfeie at det er vanskelig, og på

en måte ikke anerkjenne at det man står i faktisk ikke er så greit, at de liksom bare feier vekk

med: Arh bare tenk positivt. Da er det ekstremt provoserende og da fungerer det veldig

dårlig.

Deltaker 15: Ja for jeg synes ofte også det er veldig irriterende når folk ber meg tenke positivt for jeg føler liksom at jeg klarer å oppfatte en situasjon realistisk. Og da, hvis jeg oppfatter at det er kjipt, så er det jo mest sannsynlig det. Og da at noen er sånn: Neida, det går bra, så er det sånn, ja som du sier, de avfeier det jeg sier.

[9]Deltaker 9: Det er jo liksom, i vanskelige situasjoner, der du står ovenfor en eller flere utfordringer, at det kan gi ekstrem motivasjon, både fysisk og psykiske ting. Og der, overrasker vi mennesker oss selv ofte, at vi gjør jo ting vi kanskje ikke tenkte vi kunne gjøre. Man klarer fort å gå lengre, eller klatre lengre, eller konsentrere seg lengre hvis man på en måte har troa, og er positiv.

[10]Deltaker 14: Ja for når jeg ikke har god tenkning, så er jeg gjerne på at jeg overtenker, og da går det til alt det negative, og alt det verste som kan skje. Men hvis du skal tenke positivt, så blir jo det mye bedre tenkning. Så jeg ville jo tenkt egentlig det samme. Så lenge jeg klarer å holde meg positiv så blir det bedre.

[11]Deltaker 10: [...] Og det kan kanskje få deg til å [...] miste muligheten til å nyte de bedre øyeblikkene. Positive øyeblikkene, og negative tanker kan overskygge oppturer du har. La oss for eksempel si at du får en B da, for eksempel, på eksamen, også er du drit skuffet for det for du ville ha en A, men B er jo superduperduper da. Og det burde man jo egentlig være kjempe glad for. [...]

Deltaker 13: Jeg har hørt det at OL deltakere, altså sånn når de skal rate på en skala fra 1-10 [...] hvor fornøyd de er med sin prestasjon, så er det jo selvfølgelig gull er jo drit fornøyd, også har du bronse som også er fornøyde fordi de i det hele tatt fikk en plass på podiet. Så har du de som har sølv som alltid tenker sånn, jeg kunne gjort det litt bedre så kunne man fått gull. [...]

Deltaker 10: Jeg merker egentlig ofte selv at jeg nesten ofte er mer fornøyd med en C, enn det jeg er med B, fordi da er man liksom, C er en sånn: Ja det er jo en helt midt på treet, altså over middels karakterer. [...] Og da er du liksom så langt fra en A, jeg hadde ikke fått A

uansett på en måte. Men når du på en måte er på B-en, årh jævlig drit at det var så liksom close.

[12]Deltaker 13: Jeg tror kanskje det er to kategorier med positive mennesker. Du har de som er liksom naïve nærmest, de ser på alt positivt og ser ikke noe vondt i noen, men det kan jo også få dem i skikkelig dårlige situasjoner, der de får nærmest en knekk fordi de ikke ser noe lyst på en måte, etter å ha sett så hyggelige ting hele tiden. Men så er det jo de som er sånn: Livet er kjipt, men faen, vi skal ha det koselig uansett. Også ser de på ting de kanskje gleder seg til når det ikke er dritt vær i Tromsø, eller ohshit, kanskje det er fint vær for tromsøbadet. At man på en måte, ja at man, improviserer positivisten nærmest. Får det til å bli bra uansett.

[13]Deltaker 4: Jeg, jeg var også fersk fra videregående i høst, også var det mye nytt og mye vanskelig. Så jeg tenkte, på høsten så tenkte jeg: Jeg har mye hjemlengsel nå, jeg er mye trist, og det gidder jeg ikke å deale med, da blir det bare verre. Så jeg bare tenkte positivt konstant, hver gang jeg ble trist så satt jeg på den samme glad-sangen. Og jeg ble glad etter fem minutter. Men når jeg da kom hjem til jul, så hadde det liksom hopet seg opp en god del følelser.

Deltaker 1: Ja, da kom alt ut?

Deltaker 4: Ja. Da var jeg bra sliten 3 uker i strekk vil jeg si.

Deltaker 2: Ikke sant.

Deltaker 4: Det som også har skjedd er at jeg har også har klart å assosiere å være her med ikke-negativ tenkning, så følelsene ligger liksom og venter til ett tidspunkt hvor det passer seg å føle, som kanskje ikke er så praktisk fordi da sitter du og spenner deg, og klarer ikke egentlig å konsentrere deg før du har fått det ut. Også er det veldig mye å få ut på en gang, og da passer det aldri.

[14]Deltaker 18: Spesielt også hva de andre menneskene rundt påpeker, hvis de viser deg alle tingene som er negativt, så vil på en måte verden farges litt mer negativt fordi du fokuserer på de negative tingene. Men hvis de fokuserer og peker ut: 'oi det her var fint og det her var

godt', kanskje viser deg en fin blomst istedenfor den stygge søppeldynga på siden, så er det

liksom litt annet fokus.

[15]Deltaker 13: Det er jo sånn, det er fullt forståelig at man på en måte har disse vinklingene

på livet, men jeg vet ikke om jeg klarer å være rundt sånne mennesker i lang tid for jeg føler

at det... Fra å ha vært en person som tenker mye negativt, til å på en måte, begynne å se på

de små gode tingene i livet, så føler jeg at når jeg er rundt sånne mennesker at det fort kan

påvirke min tankegang også. Og at jeg føler meg veldig tung og sliten nærmest etter å ha

vært rundt sånne.

Deltaker 11: Det er jeg enig i, det må være en grad av det liksom. Hvis folk er bare negativ til

absolutt alt i hele verden hele tiden, så er det sånn at folk gjerne skyr unna.

[16]Deltaker 17: Kanskje også litt sånn livssituasjon, det er liksom større ting som har veldig

mye å si for, ja kanskje hvordan man tenker og sånt. Det er jo mye lettere å tenke positivt når

på en måte, ting går greit ellers rundt. Og det er lett å kanskje glemme, det som har vært

mindre positive, med en gang ting går bra da. Og det er kanskje også når man snakker med

andre, når man har det fint selv og er positiv, så burde jo alle andre også klare det, men man

vet jo kanskje ikke helt hva slags forutsetninger andre har for å ta imot det nå eller da.

Study 2

[17]For meg betyr "å tenke positivt" å aktivt velge å se etter det gode i hver situasjon, selv når

ting ser utfordrende ut. Det innebærer å være oppmerksom på mine tanker og følelser og

bevisst vri dem i en mer optimistisk retning. Å tenke positivt handler også om å ha tillit til

meg selv og mine evner, samt å stole på at ting vil ordne seg til slutt, selv om veien dit kan

være vanskelig. Det betyr å være takknemlig for det jeg har, og å se muligheter for vekst og

læring selv i motgang. Å tenke positivt er en bevisst ting som jeg jobber med hver dag for å

opprettholde en sunn og optimistisk holdning til livet.

[18] Ikke gi opp. Tro at du kan klare utfordringen, selv om det er krevende.

[19]Vær glad uansett hva som har skjedd. Ikke snakk om de negative følelsene.

[20]Man kan se flere muligheter i en dårlig situasjon ved å tenke positivt. Kanskje man kan få noe ut av det i ettertid. Tenke negativt har en negativ påvirkning på motivasjon.

[21]Kan reagere negativt fordi det kan oppleves som bagatelliserende og lite anerkjennende. Konkrete tips for å snu tankegangen til noe mer positivt derimot, responderer jeg fint på.

[22]Tanker og følelser er vidt forskjellige, der følelser oppstår av seg selv og alt man kan gjøre er å bearbeide dem, mens tanker kan man manipulere og styre stort sett som man vil selv. Man kan ha positive tanker selv ved negative følelser, som for eksempel ved dødsfall der man opplever tristhet og sorg, men kanskje tenker at vedkommende er på et bedre sted - for å nettopp hjelpe med å bearbeide følelsene. Å tenke negativt i et slikt tilfelle vil i de fleste tilfelle føre til forverring av de negative følelsene, for eksempel, "hvordan skal jeg klare meg uten dem" vil ikke kunne hjelpe med å bearbeide en sorg. Her er det i så fall hensiktsmessig å tenke positivt nettopp for å kunne komme seg gjennom livet, da å tenke negativt for mye kan føre til at man gir opp.

[23]En positiv tanke kommer fra deg selv og er "bare" en tanke, mens en positiv følelse kommer som et resultat av en handling fra enten deg selv eller andre.

[24]De korrelerer gjerne, men det er tanken som leder an.

[25][...] Ved å tenke positivt er målet å få en positiv følelse. Tror også det kan være vanskelig å skille en positiv tanke og en følelse da begge deler kan få deg til å trekke på smilebåndet og få deg i bedre humør.

[26]Det betyr at man ser det beste i en situasjon, uten å nødvendigvis glemme det negative. Hva kan man gjøre for at en negativ situasjon kan bli bedre og hva kan man lære av det?

[27]Ofte nedlatende. Å tenke positivt for meg betyr å ikke kunne dele ting som tynger fordi andre syntes det er for mye.

[28]Det vil si å fokusere på de gode tingene og ha troen på at det skal gå bra til slutt.