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Commentary on [Cultivating Positive Emotions to Optimize Health and Well-Being](#)

## The Positive Emotion of Elevation

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### ABSTRACT

The previously unstudied emotion of elevation is described. Elevation appears to be the opposite of social disgust. It is triggered by witnessing acts of human moral beauty or virtue. Elevation involves a warm or glowing feeling in the chest, and it makes people want to become morally better themselves. Because elevation increases one's desire to affiliate with and help others, it provides a clear illustration of [Fredrickson's \(2000\)](#) broaden-and-build model of the positive emotions.

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If interest is a positive emotion that makes a person more open to possibilities and more likely to stop and savor a good new idea, then it was clever of Fredrickson to write such an interesting article. Her broaden-and-build model brings pleasing clarity to an otherwise confusing area of emotion research. The functionalist perspective, a powerful tool for understanding the negative emotions, can now be neatly applied to the positive emotions as well. [Fredrickson \(2000\)](#) shows how the positive emotions of joy, interest, and contentment do useful things, not only from an evolutionary point of view but also from a clinical point of view.

This brief essay applies Fredrickson's model to a new positive emotion that has not been described thus far by academic psychologists: *elevation*. Elevation is a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness,

and compassion ([Haidt, Algoe, Meijer, Tam, & Chandler, 2000](#)). It makes a person want to help others and to become a better person himself or herself. Elevation makes sense when viewed through Fredrickson's broaden-and-build model.

My prior research with Paul Rozin and Clark McCauley focused on the negative emotion of disgust ([Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994](#); [Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993](#)). Disgust is a puzzling emotion — a response to elicitors as diverse as cockroaches, incest, and greed. The disgust response to objects that spread bacterial contamination (e.g., feces, cockroaches, corpses) is easy to understand as an evolutionary adaptation for an omnivorous species. But why is disgust so often felt toward social behaviors? So far, the best way to make sense of this extension into social space, which happens across cultures as well ([Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997](#)), is to posit that human cultures generally order their social space in terms of a vertical dimension, running from God and moral perfection above to demons, devils, and moral evil below. Human beings are generally seen as being precariously suspended somewhere in the middle of this vertical dimension, capable of rising to godly sainthood or falling to bestiality or "subhuman" behavior. The medieval *scala natura* and the Hindu notion of reincarnation at higher or lower levels, depending on one's actions in life, illustrate this vertical dimension. Social disgust can then be understood as the emotional reaction people have to witnessing others moving "down," or exhibiting their lower, baser, less Godlike nature. Human beings feel revolted by moral depravity, and this revulsion has some overlap, and also some difference, with the revulsion they feel toward rotten food and cockroaches.

But if this powerful negative emotion can be triggered by seeing people move down on the vertical dimension, then what happens when one sees people move "up"? Is there a corresponding positive emotion triggered by seeing people manifesting their higher, better, more saintly nature?

## **The Emotion of Elevation**

Preliminary evidence suggests that there is such an emotion ([Haidt et al., 2000](#)). We asked people to write in detail about five situations that seemed likely to produce positive emotions. We then asked specific questions about bodily changes, thoughts, and action tendencies or motivations. In one condition, participants were asked to write about "a specific time when you saw a manifestation of humanity's 'higher' or 'better' nature." The stories told in response were often moving and beautiful. To understand the participants' responses, the same kind of analysis that [Fredrickson \(2000\)](#) applies to joy, interest, and contentment can be applied: it is possible to examine (a) the circumstances that elicit the emotion, (b) the changes in the momentary thought–action repertoire, and (c) the consequences or outcomes of these changes.

### ***Circumstances That Cause Elevation***

In our research ([Haidt et al., 2000](#)), the most commonly cited circumstances that caused elevation involved seeing someone else give help or aid to a person who was poor or sick, or stranded in a difficult situation. A particularly powerful and detailed case captures the flavor of these situations:

Myself and 3 guys from my church were going home from volunteering our services at the salvation army that morning. It had been snowing since the night before and the snow was a thick blanket on the ground. As we were driving through a neighborhood near where I lived I saw an elderly woman with a shovel in her driveway. I did not think much of it, when one of the guys in the back asked the driver to let him off here. The driver had not been paying much attention so he ended up circling back around towards the lady's home. I had assumed that this guy just wanted to save the driver some effort and walk the short distance to his home (although I was clueless as to where he lived). But when I saw him jump out of the back seat and approach the lady, my mouth dropped in shock as I realized that he was offering to shovel her walk for her.

## ***Changes in the Thought–Action Repertoire***

When participants saw unexpected acts of goodness, they commonly described themselves as being surprised, stunned, and emotionally moved. Their descriptions imply that cognitive structures were changing under the surface — changing their views about humanity in a more optimistic way and triggering more prosocial goals for themselves. When asked "Did the feeling give you any inclination toward doing something?," the most common response was to describe generalized desires to help others and to become a better person. Several participants described the kind of openness and urge to be playful that Fredrickson ascribes to joy. The woman who wrote about the snow-shoveling episode above also wrote,

I felt like jumping out of the car and hugging this guy. I felt like singing and running, or skipping and laughing. Just being active. I felt like saying nice things about people. Writing a beautiful poem or love song. Playing in the snow like a child. Telling everybody about his deed.

A common theme in most of the narratives is a social focus — a desire to be with, love, and help other people.

## ***Consequences of These Changes***

The social and prosocial orientation produced by these feelings appears to have potentially life-altering effects. One participant described how moved he was when so many people came to visit and support his family while his grandfather was dying. He said that he still has these feelings 7 years later and that these feelings influenced his decision to become a doctor. Feelings of elevation seem particularly capable of fostering love, admiration, and a desire for closer affiliation with the doer of the good deed. The woman in the snow-shoveling incident wrote,

My spirit was lifted even higher than it already was. I was joyous, happy, smiling, energized. I went home and gushed about it to my suite-mates, who clutched at their hearts. And, although I have never seen this guy as more than just a friend, I felt a hint of romantic feeling for him at this moment.

Love and a desire for affiliation appears to be a common human response to witnessing saints and saintly deeds, or even to hearing about them second hand. If disgust is a negative emotion that strengthens ego boundaries and defenses against a morally reprehensible other,

then elevation is its opposite — a desire to affiliate with those who are morally admirable.

A second study confirmed this general portrait of elevation (Haidt et al., 2000). This second study induced elevation experiences in the laboratory by showing one group of participants selections from a documentary on the life of Mother Teresa. Control groups were shown other videos, including a comedy and an interesting but nonemotional documentary. Compared to participants who watched the control videos, participants who watched the elevating video clip reported feeling more loving and inspired, they more strongly wanted to perform prosocial and affiliative actions, and they were more likely to actually volunteer to work at a humanitarian charity organization.

## Elevation Broadens and Builds

Elevation appears to fit well with Fredrickson's (2000) broaden-and-build model. For an observer, seeing others do unselfish good deeds creates no threat requiring immediate or specific action. Rather, it signals the presence of an altruist, a good candidate for cooperation and affiliation (Frank, 1987). Witnessing good deeds changes the thought–action repertoire, triggering love, admiration, and affection for the altruist and making affiliative behavior more likely. Fredrickson describes the benefits to the individual of experiencing positive emotions, and elevation may indeed confer such individual benefits (e.g., the energy and playfulness of the woman in the above example). However, elevation is particularly interesting because of its power to spread, thereby potentially improving entire communities. If elevation increases the likelihood that a witness to good deeds will soon become a doer of good deeds, then elevation sets up the possibility for the same sort of "upward spiral" for a group that Fredrickson (2000) describes for the individual. If frequent bad deeds trigger social disgust, cynicism, and hostility toward one's peers, then frequent good deeds may have a type of social undoing effect, raising the level of compassion, love, and harmony in an entire society. Efforts to promote and publicize altruism may therefore have widespread and cost-effective results.

The positive emotions may indeed be powerful and understudied mechanisms for the improvement of human health and well-being. Fredrickson has helped us to see their potential.

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