

## **Bringing Coherence to Positive Psychology: Faith in Humanity**

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### Abstract

Currently, positive psychology is experiencing problems with coherence, and the field could benefit from more organizing concepts linking disparate findings and researchers within the field. This incoherence can be seen in several domains. At a conceptual level, the field has produced an abundance of important studies clarifying predictors of well-being, but no consistent theory has emerged explaining why these factors predict well-being. In addition, disunity has emerged between first wave positive psychologists and second wave positive psychologists, and also between practitioners and researchers. The field could benefit from more unifying constructs that explain links between constructs and practices within positive psychology. Faith in humanity (FIH) has potential as a unifying construct. FIH is like a forgotten sibling whose important story is mentioned rarely and mainly obliquely. In fact, this construct, though seldom mentioned, already implicitly pervades much of positive psychology, and the field would benefit by explicitly recognizing this fact.

Keywords: positive psychology, faith in humanity, FIH, future, directions, definition

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### Reference

Tweed, R. G., Mah, E. Y., Conway, L. G., III (2020). Bringing coherence to positive psychology: Faith in humanity. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1725605>

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/17439760.2020.1725605>

### **Bringing Coherence to Positive Psychology: Faith in Humanity**

It is highly unlikely that a single construct can account for every phenomenon in a given field. However, there is also value in bringing together discrepant parts of a field under a larger theoretical umbrella. Currently, positive psychology is experiencing problems with coherence, and as a result, the field could benefit from more organizing concepts linking disparate findings and researchers within the field.

This incoherence can be seen at several levels. First, at a conceptual level, the field has produced many studies clarifying predictors of well-being (for a review of some, see Veenhoven, 2015), but no consistent theory has emerged explaining why these particular factors predict well-being. The underlying principle creating potency for these factors remains a mystery. The current situation was foreshadowed by the original formulation of the field. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) original influential American Psychologist piece did not define the field with unifying theories generating hypotheses and explaining prior findings, but instead defined the field by its topic: The study of positive states, traits, and institutions. Consistent with this focus on topic rather than theory, the field has produced lists of predictors of well-being and lists of positive character strengths, but no central coherent theory making sense of these or generating more hypotheses. Second, incoherence has emerged between the first and second wave of positive psychology (e.g., Ivztan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016; Wong, 2011). The second wave positive psychologists argue that happiness is not the ideal focus, and that positive psychologists need to address alternative manifestations of well-being and address individuals in negative circumstances. Third, the current distinction between positive psychology researchers and practitioners is significant. In the past, a similar distinction between clinical psychologists and research psychologists contributed to the split between the APA and the dissident group that formed the APS. These divides within positive psychology could possibly be reduced by further explication of what links these groups.

Academic fields that lack coherence can enter disarray, and thus it is important to seek ideas explaining coherence. Consider the field of trait personality psychology which re-emerged stronger after clarification of previously unrecognized themes pervading the discipline. In the 1970s and 80s, the field had many competing systems of personality such as that of the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), the 20 factors of the CPI (Gough, 1987), the 16 factors of Cattell (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970), and many others, but the links between these were poorly understood. The five-factor model of personality (Digman, 1990) helped redirect the field by providing central organizing principles linking all these systems and by replicating in many different populations and cultures (McCrae, 2002). This framework returned more respectability to the field and generated new directions for research. Social psychology likewise has been characterized by a wide array of often disconnected theories and hypotheses. The field has been revitalized in some ways by the evolutionary perspective, which explains some previously unrelated prior findings and generates many new theoretically driven hypotheses based on a few simple concepts.

In the present paper, we argue that faith in humanity (FIH) similarly links disparate findings and activities within positive psychology. In fact, this construct, though seldom mentioned, already implicitly pervades much of positive psychology, and the field would benefit by explicitly recognizing this fact. Within positive psychology, FIH might be seen as a forgotten sibling whose story is central to the family, but who is mentioned rarely, and then mainly obscurely and obliquely. This argument need not rely on FIH being the most central construct within positive psychology. A neglected sibling would not be the whole story of a family, but it

would deserve attention. Likewise, FIH may not be the most central theme in positive psychology, but if neglected yet pervasive, it may deserve much more attention. For these reasons, FIH should be particularly attractive to positive psychologists.

Before describing the justification for these claims, however, we will provide a clarification of the concept. Because any attempt to unify disparate domains is bound to be fraught with difficulties, we will address potential concerns as well.

### **The Concept: Faith in Humanity (FIH)**

*You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.*

-Mahatma Gandhi

We draw here on philosopher Preston-Roedder's (2013) explication of FIH. Preston-Roedder asserts that FIH involves a tendency to initially judge people as trustworthy and moral, a tendency to not hastily judge people harshly, and a sensitivity to and focus on 'the good in people' (2013). Importantly FIH, in Preston Roedder's definition, is not blind. The faithful do not ignore moral failings. People who have FIH, according to this definition, take steps to protect themselves and others from the poor behavior by others. Preston-Roedder also argues that a person expressing FIH also will be invested in other people (i.e., act as if they have value), in enabling them to achieve their potential to live a good life. Belief that *all humanity includes at least some goodness and something good worth keeping* is the creed of FIH. The definition used here will extend that definition beyond initial contact with others and adds some details that will matter from a psychological perspective.

*We take FIH to be a (1) readiness to perceive positive (RtPP) traits, intention, potential, and impact in (a) people in general as well as in subgroups and individuals, strangers as well as familiar people (b) in the past, present, and future, (c) while remaining aware that the other person may be an outgroup member, may display negative behavior, and may hold opinions unlike those of the self, and (2) a readiness to enact this positive perception (RtEP) by behaving as if other people have value (i.e., actualizing a better world for and within other people).*

In its most compelling forms, FIH manifests in individuals such as Gandhi, who even in the face of violence, bigotry, institutional intransigence, and even threatened assassination, refused to veer from his steadfast belief that many of his oppressors and opponents had positive potential to realize their error and become allies in the cause of justice (Preston-Roedder, 2013). Similarly, one might think of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Preston-Roedder, 2013), who responded to murderous church bombings with the assertion that even violent segregationists had within them the potential to realize the worth of all human beings. He did NOT describe segregationists as 'good people' (as someone who believed in basic human goodness might do), but implored his followers to remember that even segregationists may have redeeming qualities; he reminded them that some were 'kind to neighbors and family, helpful and good spirited at work' and King said '...we must try not to end up with stereotypes of those we oppose even as they slip all of us into their stereotypes' (Coles, 1994, p. 32). Even while being fully aware of many segregationists' evils, King still recognized the possibility of redeeming traits. Gandhi and King's readiness to perceive positives even in those they knew to have engaged in profoundly evil acts illustrates FIH and provides a starting point for this discussion of positive psychology and FIH. Consistent with the RtEP aspect of FIH, both Gandhi and King also went beyond perception and acted as if other people have value. They took steps to better the world for and within other people.

### **Not Faith that People are Good or Can Be Trusted**

FIH is NOT faith that humans will always be good (King did not describe these people as good), but instead is a recognition that humans will demonstrate humanity. They will tend to demonstrate positive traits or intentions or potential or impact even amidst the negative elements they display. FIH need not denote blindness to the evil and potential harm brought by others. Blindness to these aspects would be faith in positivity or faith in optimism or pure good will or something other than a faith in a realistic understanding of humanity. Ghandi and King, as victims of hatred, were aware of the potential for evil within humanity and would have been aware that some people seem more evil than others.

### **A Forgotten Theme of Positive Psychology**

One could reasonably ask why FIH deserves more attention within positive psychology, and part of the answer can be found by considering the domains within the field. According to an early definitional statement by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), the domains of positive psychology include the study of (a) 'positive subjective experience' [e.g., life satisfaction, happiness], (b) 'positive individual traits,' [e.g., character strengths and virtues] and (c) 'positive institutions' (2000, p. 5). Each of those will be discussed in turn, with more attention on the first, consistent with the vast amount of research attention it has received in positive psychology compared to the others. Second wave positive psychology (e.g., Ivtzan et al., 2016, also called Positive Psychology 2.0, Wong, 2011) will also be briefly discussed as will the behavior of positive psychologists in relation to FIH. We will argue that FIH is an important theme within each of these domains, and thereby illustrates a seldom mentioned, but common link among many positive psychologists and their ideas, one that may have power to show links between findings, between researchers, between practitioners, and also may have power to generate new hypotheses.

### **FIH in the Original Domains of Positive Psychology**

#### ***Domain one: Predictors of positive subjective states***

The first domain, the study of positive states, is in some ways the signature piece of positive psychology in the sense that it attracts immense interest from academics and also journalists and lay people. Numerous studies within this domain have clarified predictors of positive subjective states, yet no single theory has emerged to explain the common elements that underlie those predictors. Einstein's relativity theory illustrates the value of simplifying and unifying concepts; his theory clarified the link between mass and energy, and also the link between space and time. At a conceptual level, FIH may take us some way toward this type of simplification of some psychological factors related to positive subjective states. In particular, some of the most consistent psychological predictors of personal well-being share little in common other than an underlying association with FIH: Gratitude toward other people, perceived social support, generalized trust, attachment, and generosity.

*Gratitude.* Gratitude has been studied extensively in positive psychology, and findings suggest gratitude can cause well-being (Wood et al., 2016). Gratitude as a construct overlaps significantly with the RtPP element of FIH. Gratitude involves recognizing a benefit that has been provided to the self by an entity outside the self. Gratitude is, in essence, a positive interpretation of others' impact, sometimes in spite of mixed evidence. In other words, it is a faith that others have done good things for us. FIH is a broader construct than gratitude in part because FIH can be forward, present, or backward looking while gratitude is focused only on the past. Though gratitude is backward looking, the next construct to be discussed focuses on the present and future.

*Perceived social support.* Social support has received so much research attention that it has become a truism in psychology that social support promotes well-being, but one possibly puzzling finding is the repeated result that perceived social support has a stronger relation to well-being than does actual received levels of social support (e.g., McDowell & Serovich, 2007). This suggests that interpreting people as currently providing and being ready in the future to provide social support is more important than the extent to which those people actually provide support. The finding becomes less puzzling when one considers perceived social support to be a form of FIH. Unlike gratitude, which is past focused, perceived social support is focused more on the positive interpretation of the provisions of other people in providing support to the self now and in the future. Once again, a predictor of well-being is actually a form of FIH. The next construct to be discussed is not a form of FIH, but attachment theory suggests it is enabled by FIH.

*Healthy social attachments.* Ongoing healthy social attachments also tend to promote positive subjective states, and, consideration of adult attachment theory suggests an important role for FIH in the facilitation of healthy attachments. In particular, the adult attachment theory of Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) relies on variance in one's internalized perception of self and others. People who perceive the self negatively and others negatively are fearful in relationships. People who perceive the self positively but others negatively are dismissive. People who perceive the self negatively and others positively are preoccupied. In contrast, secure attachment is built on positive cognitive models of self and others that enable the self to be comfortable with both intimacy and autonomy. Admittedly, attachment theory's model of others is specific to the domain of interpersonal relationships (and often more specifically romantic relationships), so it is narrower than FIH. Nonetheless, according to this adult attachment theory, a positive model of others in personal relationships enables the healthy attachments that are associated with positive subjective states. Once again, one of the disparate set of predictors of well-being is strongly connected to and may even require FIH. This theoretical orientation also concurs with work by Canavello and Crocker (2010) suggesting that readiness to perceive positive in one's partner may create improved interactions that self-perpetuate and contribute to ongoing relational strength (Canavello & Crocker, 2010).

*Generosity.* One notable finding of positive psychology is the value of generosity in promoting subjective well-being, an effect that generalizes well across cultures and contexts (Aknin, Broesch, Hamlin, & Van de Vondervoort, 2015). Generosity will be much easier if one has a high view of others (i.e., FIH). One could conceivably engage in prosocial behaviors for the selfish purpose of gaining positive affective states, but that type of selfish effort probably undermines promotion of positive affective states (Martin, 2008). The second dimension of FIH, the idea that other people have value (Preston-Roedder, 2013) provides further justification for generosity. This focus echoes positive psychology pioneer Chris Peterson's (2008; Park & Seligman, 2013) contention that a core idea in positive psychology is the belief that other people matter (OPM; see also Hwang on "other-esteem," 1995).

### ***Domain two: Positive traits***

The study of positive traits—often referred to as character strengths or virtues—is quite distinct from and has received less attention than have positive states, yet once again, it seems that FIH underlies many of the constructs central to this domain of positive psychology. Within positive psychology, character strengths are most often organized according to the VIA Strengths framework (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which was designed to classify virtues recognized across cultures. Here we describe some of the central traits and their relevance to FIH.

*Humility.* Humility is important enough to get a 2017 issue of the *Journal of Positive Psychology* devoted to one form of humility. Tangney's (2000) influential discussion of humility suggests that philosophical and psychological discussions do not tend to portray humility as low self-regard, but instead focus on aspects such as low self-focus and willingness to recognize, appreciate, and accept contributions from others. This willingness to attend to others and recognize value in others' contributions would be difficult if not impossible for people who lacked the FIH readiness to perceive positive in others.

*Kindness.* The VIA (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) also includes kindness. The discussion of generosity above already clarifies the role of FIH in facilitating generosity. Kindness likewise will be easier if one perceives others as deserving and if one perceives others as having value. In contrast, the opposite orientation, which would involve dehumanization, clears the psychological path for harsh treatment and even violence toward others (Haslam & Loughnan, 2016).

*Other Strengths.* The VIA structure (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) also includes other dimensions related to FIH such as open-mindedness (also called judgment), which involves a willingness to see value in others' perspectives (similar to the philosophical virtue of charity: being inclined toward positive interpretations of others' ideas). Likewise, Peterson and Seligman's discussion of appreciation of beauty and excellence involves a strong social element. According to their description, people with this strength appreciate beauty and excellence not only at a material level but also in the lives and acts of other people. Patience, a traditional virtue, does not absolutely require FIH, but it is plausible that patience will be much easier if one believes that in spite of momentary slow progress, positive potential and value exist in those testing your patience. Peterson and Seligman's VIA framework of strengths (2004) also lists leadership as a character strength; leadership efforts would lack justification unless one presumes that people have the potential and proclivity to rise up in response to leadership and move in a positive direction. Similarly, teamwork is considered a character strength, but teamwork efforts would not be justified unless one has a tendency to perceive positive potential in one's teammates.

*FIH itself.* At a broad level, Preston-Roedder (2013) argued that people whom societies recognize as exemplars of virtue tend to manifest a strong sense of FIH (e.g., Ghandi, Martin Luther King). Because FIH is so prevalent among people manifesting virtue, and for other reasons, Preston-Roedder argued that FIH itself deserves to be designated as a separate virtue.

Not all positive traits are manifestations of FIH (e.g., self-control, zest, humor), but nonetheless the theme of FIH underlies a number of the central constructs. Thus, both the domains of positive states and positive traits have a recurring theme of FIH.

### ***Domain three: Positive institutions***

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) definition of positive psychology also included the study of institutions facilitating positive states and positive traits. Institutions receive less attention in positive psychology research journals than do positive states and traits. Nonetheless, some research (Gheilen, Woerkom, & Meyers, 2017) indicates that organizations implementing strengths interventions, which would indicate leadership readiness to perceive positive potential in their workers, succeed in promoting well-being and work engagement among their employees. Also, even the desire to create a positive institution (i.e., one that promotes positive states and positive traits) relies on perceptions of positive potential in the people that will be influenced. For example, government leaders who seek to promote psychological well-being through purposeful policy choices (Tweed, Mah, Dobrin, van Poele, & Conway, 2017), must presume that people can be influenced in positive ways, that is, believe that positive change is possible.

FIH may deserve a large role in the discussions of positive psychology's application to public policy and other large societal issues (Tweed et al., 2017). For example, societies with more equal incomes tend to have lower rates of homicide, and one element of FIH (generalized trust) may serve as a mediator facilitating this effect (Elgar & Aitken; 2010). Similarly, historical data suggest that periods with more equal incomes coincide with higher reports of happiness, and again an element of FIH (generalized trust) may mediate this effect as well (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener; 2011). Helliwell (2003) argued for the same mediator between social capital and happiness.

FIH may also have relevance to societal violence and discord. At the individual level, an opposite of FIH which has been called "hostile attribution bias," has long been known to be associated with interpersonal violence (Dodge, Price, Bachorowski, & Newman, 1990). That finding is consistent with other research indicating that an absence of generalized trust (an element of FIH) may be associated with a more violent society (Elgar & Aitken, 2010). Similarly, Beck (2019), the founder of cognitive therapy, argued that dyadic anger and aggression are associated with cognitive biases leading each party to notice mainly negative behavior, overinterpret minor negative behavior, perceive neutral behavior negatively, and draw globalized negative judgments of a complete person. He argued that these same processes are also a source of group conflict and even war and genocide. For these types of issues, allophilia, positive attitude towards members of an outgroup (Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011) may be particularly relevant. In an interesting application, Staub (2019) has worked to reduce societal discord by means of entertainment programs promoting more realistic perceptions of "enemy" groups. The realization that people tend to harshly mischaracterize their enemies is not new (e.g., Orwell, 1946/2001), so it is not a feature unique to modern society. FIH may provide a helpful corrective while possibly avoiding the opposite problem of unbelievable simplistic positive portrayals of others.

### **FIH in Second Wave Positive Psychology**

These previous paragraphs have illustrated that though FIH is seldom mentioned in positive psychology, it emerges as a strong theme within all three of the major domains of positive psychology. There is, however, a growing area within positive psychology that has been referred to as positive psychology 2.0 (Wong, 2011) or second wave positive psychology (Ivtzan et al., 2016). Advocates of this second wave have complained that positive psychology is so focused on happiness and positive emotion that it can be irrelevant to people who live amidst trauma and the inevitable accompanying frequent negative emotions (e.g., Wong, 2011). These scholars argue for explicitly and consistently including consideration of negative experiences and negative emotions within the purview of positive psychology research and practice.

One could reasonably ask why this second wave deserves the title of 'positive psychology' if it consistently includes discussion of the negative. Again, FIH emerges as a central, if not defining element for second wave positive psychology. If we ask how positive psychology 2.0 approaches the study of negative emotion and trauma, the answer is that this approach emphasizes that even amidst trauma and negative emotions, humans can grow, become stronger, show resilience, and find meaning (Ivtzan et al., 2016). Admittedly, this perspective on difficult situations is not completely new (e.g., Rutter, 1987), so our intent is not to defend second wave positive psychology as distinct from other domains, but instead to show that even this offshoot of positive psychology has FIH as a core element. Similarly, some resilience research suggests that FIH may have value for people amidst distress (e.g., Tingey, McGuire,

Stebbins, & Erickson, 2017). We also recommend reading work by Yeager (2017) for discussion of the benefits of an FIH-related construct amidst social difficulty and even bullying.

### **FIH in Positive Psychologists**

At a much more practical level, interacting with positive psychologists provides strong evidence that many positive psychology researchers and practitioners are driven by a strong FIH regarding the potential for positive change in others. FIH becomes very obvious at positive psychology conferences when one realizes that every session on making schools more positive, or making organizations more positive, or making people happier, or treating pathology with positive psychology interventions presumes that the targets of the intervention have potential for positive change. We know of no direct research on the nature of positive psychologists, but our informal encounters make it clear that positive psychologists tend to embody a strong FIH. One notable example of FIH involves positive psychologists intervening to build positive, rich, and good lives for prisoners (Huynh, Hall, Hurst & Bikos, 2015). This orientation would not be possible if these positive psychologists were unable to see positive potential even within people that others might see as unworthy of societal care (see also Fortune, Ward, & Mann, 2015 for work with sex offenders). Thus, FIH can be central to not only the study but also the practice of positive psychologists.

### **Research Directions**

#### ***Development of FIH interventions***

Perhaps interventions to build FIH could even have value. Prior research in positive psychology has shown that observing exemplars of virtue and excellence can inspire individuals to pursue virtue and excellence themselves (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Witnessing ‘second-hand’ excellence can lead to increased motivation, elevation, gratitude, admiration, generosity, and courtesy among others, and exemplars can be celebrities, workplace leaders, and even fictional characters (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Bandura, 2019; Niemiec, 2012; Galliani & Vianello, 2012; Staub, 2019). Thus, exposing individuals to past or current exemplars of FIH may serve to increase FIH. Admittedly, low FIH may be difficult to change because a low view of particular groups may become central to one’s meaning system, as suggested by both recent research (Rovenpor et al., 2019) and classic theory (Kelly, 1955), and, at times, low FIH may seem sensible and self-protective for relations with particular individuals. However, the testing of potential FIH interventions may produce a fruitful research program. Also, research could examine the extent to which broader societal change enables or inhibits FIH.

#### ***Measurement of FIH***

If FIH inhabits many constructs in positive psychology, there could be value in developing a reliable and valid measure of FIH. The process, however, may be difficult as discussed in concern #3 below.

### **Possible Concerns Regarding the Usefulness of FIH**

Thus far, we have argued that FIH has the potential to enhance coherence in the field of positive psychology by highlighting an implicit theme that underlies the work of many positive psychologists. In sum, what has previously been a disparate set of predictors of well-being, strengths of character, traits of positive organizations, and a new movement within positive psychology starts to seem more unified when one considers that a number of these predictors, strengths, traits, and the movement fall squarely under the FIH conceptual umbrella. Each domain of positive psychology seems to have FIH as a central theme. However, this argument is not without potential objections that it would be remiss of us to ignore. Below, we deal with several of these.



***Potential concern 1: Is FIH the same as generalized trust?***

One possible reaction to what we have said so far is that we are simply re-naming existing constructs. One possibility involves *generalized trust*. Generalized trust is a belief that people will tend to be helpful, fair, and trustworthy. Generalized trust has shown stronger relations at the country level with well-being ( $\beta=.62$ ) than has GDP ( $\beta=.36$ , Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2012).

FIH (which involves RtPP and other valuing) overlaps to some degree with prior conceptualizations of generalized trust. In fact, generalized trust has origins in sociologist Rosenberg's (1956) 'faith in people' questionnaire; a modified form of Rosenberg's (1956) 'faith in people scale' was reworked into the measure of trust for the 1972 General Social Survey (Miller & Mitamura, 2003). This measure consists of three questions: '*Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*', '*Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?*', and '*Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair?*' (Smith, Hout, & Marsden, 2013). The notion is called 'generalized' trust because the questions do not ask about any specific person, or time, or place. This construct of generalized trust has thus been defined as a 'generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, oral or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon' (Rotter, 1980: 1) or similarly a belief that others will act in our interests (Newton, 2001).

Though generalized trust clearly overlaps with FIH, there are several reasons why conceptualizations and measurements of generalized trust do not fully capture FIH. These trust items make no mention of a broader perception that people have positive potential or other positive traits, but instead, focus on this idea of whether others will be helpful or harmful toward the self.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the measures of generalized trust ignore positive traits beyond trustworthiness. Generalized trust also ignores readiness to hold positive perceptions of past behaviors by others. Furthermore, one can have generalized trust (i.e., believe that people tend to be trustworthy, helpful, and benign) *without perceiving good within people*. According to the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes (1651/1998), selfish individuals will cooperate not out of goodness, but because it preserves the social order that prevents society from descending into a chaotic state that would inevitably lead to personal ruin. For example, I can believe that my neighbors are trustworthy and helpful, not because they are morally virtuous, but because I know they are bound by the force of law and pushed by social pressures to cooperate. Also, generalized trust lacks some of the nuances of FIH, as defined here. Humans are complex and can act morally but can also be selfish and destructive. Generalized trust does not capture this complexity. Also, generalized trust is typically operationalized as a belief about people in general, but FIH is broader because it relates also to attitudes toward specific individuals. Given these problems, it is clear that the construct of FIH is not fully captured by generalized trust. FIH may often manifest in trust of others, but FIH includes a broader time perspective, individuals as well as generalized populations, and a number of characteristics beyond trustworthiness.

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<sup>1</sup> There were some who argued that trust involves seeing others as basically good (e.g., to trust someone is to expect that they have 'goodwill' and 'benign intentions' Miller & Mitamura, 2003) but these definitions are less representative of the construct used by most scholars, who tend to focus on people in general and the expectations of how they would treat the self.

***Potential concern 2: Are other constructs more central in positive psychology?***

Critics might also suggest that other, more prominent constructs may better enhance coherence in positive psychology. Optimism, for example, has been considered to be the cornerstone of positive thinking (Scheier & Carver, 1993) and is implicated in many concepts central to positive psychology: happiness, perseverance, achievement, health, resilience, coping, and hope among others (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Peterson, 2000). In fact, one might argue that FIH as defined in this paper is simply a form of optimism, namely optimism about humans.

Optimism, however, leaves out much of positive psychology. Definitions of optimism are predominantly self-focused and future-focused; optimism is ‘the extent to which people hold generalized favorable expectancies for *their* future’ (Carver et al., 2010, p. 1); optimism is ‘a mood or attitude associated with an expectation...which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to *his [or her]* advantage, or for *his [or her]* pleasure’ (Tiger, 1979, p. 18 as cited in Peterson, 2000). Thus, even optimism about other people tends to be framed in terms of the benefits to the self. Because of these characteristics and because optimism references only the future rather than current or past, we argue that it lacks the potential value of FIH. Perhaps these aspects explain why optimism’s long and otherwise fruitful research program has thus far failed to serve as a unifying concept in positive psychology.

Well-being and virtue, two pillars of positive psychology, might also be seen as alternative candidates. Between them, well-being and virtue encompass character strengths, values, happiness, health, flourishing, optimal functioning, self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose, autonomy, life satisfaction, and many more of the most important measures of the good life (Wong, 2011). However, well-being and virtue (and the other pillars of positive psychology) stand as somewhat distinct subfields within positive psychology. Virtue, well-being, meaning, and resilience all employ different frameworks with different instruments and different terminologies to explain the good life. We argue that FIH can tie together these crucial pillars of positive psychology. FIH also includes the recognition and development of well-being and character strengths in others.

Other potential competitors include prosociality, ethical-mindedness, empathy, and eudaimonia. Each of these alternate terms has some justification for deserving to be a central theme within the science of positive psychology. However, FIH does add something beyond these terms. First of all, eudaimonia is problematic as an organizing theme because many positive psychologists have focused on happiness, so a focus on eudaimonia, rather than uniting, might highlight existing divisions within the field. Eudaimonia more clearly inhabits one particular stream within the discipline of positive psychology than does FIH. Ethical-mindedness has the same problem. Some researchers perceive their focus within positive psychology to be virtue, so again, a focus on ethical-mindedness would be boosting one area of positive psychology rather than linking disparate areas within positive psychology. Prosociality is an interesting suggestion because, if we focus on the level of behavior, one could argue that prosociality does emerge as a central construct within positive psychology. The one difference is that prosociality has already received much attention within positive psychology (e.g., Aknin et al., 2015), but has thus far not served to unify it conceptually; as a result, prosociality may have less potential as a construct that provides new realizations and new perspectives regarding links within positive psychology. Likewise, empathy may seem central to positive psychology, but empathy may at times increase bias against outgroups (Bloom, 2016), so may actually counteract FIH. Additionally, these and other potential competitors can arguably be reduced to or explained

by FIH, while the reverse does not seem to be true. As such, they may not suffice as central themes within positive psychology.

***Potential Concern 3: What about the lack of adequate measures?***

Within psychology, one often important step in studying a topic is the creation of an adequate measure, yet no single adequate measure of FIH currently exists. Perhaps the closest to an actual measure of FIH is the measure of generalized trust, but we have argued that, while generalized trust overlaps with FIH's RtPP manifestation, it also contains many differences. Thus, we agree that the current lack of a good measurement of FIH is a problem. We hope that our arguments for the value of FIH blaze a trail for the creation and validation of measures and a novel experimental literature exploring the nomological network of the construct. If FIH connects disparate areas in positive psychology, as we argue, such efforts would ideally involve large-scale, multi-lab collaborations involving researchers from all three core subfields of positive psychology. Beyond the benefits of such collaborations for theoretical coherence in the field, united research fronts would likely serve to increase the replicability of findings in positive psychology (c.f., the Open Science Collaboration, 2015). On the other hand, developing an adequate and brief measure of FIH will be particularly difficult because this construct is large, and in fact might be better conceived of as a meta-construct. Each sub-element may have a cumulative effect, but the presence of one sub-element may not make another much more likely. Furthermore, an adequate measure of FIH will need to assess multiple time perspectives including expectations of the future (e.g., generalized trust), perceptions of the present (e.g., perceived social support) and interpretation of the past (e.g., gratitude). It will also include various levels of specificity such as beliefs about people or groups in general and also beliefs about individuals. An adequate measure will also assess various domains including beliefs about others within romantic relations, within family relations, within friendship relations, within stranger relations, within authority relations (e.g., bosses and underlings), and toward strangers. It will also assess FIH toward members of ingroups and outgroups (e.g., personal enemies, adherents to opposing political or activist movements, and groups perceived as usurping one's resources). Also, an adequate measure should assess both beliefs and behavioral indicators that the beliefs are impacting behavior (e.g., acts of generosity, trust in games) because proclaimed beliefs are sometimes inconsistent with implicit or effective beliefs and because the definition of FIH includes not only perceptions but also the idea that these perceptions must manifest in behavior. A measure of this many disparate subcomponents may be difficult to create. That is why the term 'meta-construct' rather than 'construct' might be a better descriptor of FIH. We may never have a brief measure of this construct because of its great breadth. Nonetheless, composite measures that include multiple other measures could potentially be created.

Some have recently argued that the field of psychology is undergoing a "theory crisis" (e.g., Oberauer & Lewandowsky, 2019), in which weak theoretical-empirical links result in poor replicability. Others (e.g., Kruglanski, 2001) have argued for the importance of broad theorizing for addressing several negative consequences in the field, including field fragmentation and a lack of engagement with general cultural dialogues. The theoretical coverage of FIH may have the potential to both address some of the fragmentation in positive psychology and to provide a new framework for 1) synthesizing disparate findings from different subdisciplines of positive psychology and 2) deriving theory-driven hypotheses that can guide new research (e.g., that new measures of FIH will relate in predictable ways to other positive psychology concepts). Thus, while empirical work is necessary, there is also value in an attempt to outline a broad theory that can explain and guide positive psychology.

***Potential concern 4: Is too much FIH a bad thing?***

Individuals with too much trust are vulnerable to betrayal and manipulation (e.g., McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Thus, practitioners may be hesitant to promote FIH, and academics may be unwilling to value FIH.

In response to this concern, both ourselves and Preston-Roedder (2013) distinguish FIH from blind trust—those high in FIH focus on the positives and work to build these but are aware of and will often take steps to protect themselves from the flaws in those around them. We have purposely selected the term ‘FIH’ as opposed to ‘trust in humanity’ not only to be consistent with Preston-Roedder’s prior discussion but also because the word ‘trust’ carries a stronger connotation of making oneself vulnerable; it could be ethically irresponsible to give a society-wide recommendation that people should be more trusting, thereby making themselves more vulnerable to the whims of others (Schneier, 2012). That recommendation to trust could be particularly problematic if those people encouraged to be more trusting live in unstable environments. FIH is not the opposite of cynicism (belief that people are bad) and is closer to being the opposite of borderline-type splitting, which is the perception of each person as bad or good and not a mix of both (Gould, Prentice, Ainslie, 1996). FIH, as defined by Preston-Roedder (2013), and as adapted for positive psychology by us, recognizes that people are flawed, so caution in relations is warranted.

***Potential concern 5: Does FIH promote political complacency?***

Saguy (2018) argued that positive attitudes towards powerful others hinder motivation for social change, and one could reasonably wonder whether FIH will similarly promote political complacency. Perceiving positives in one’s opposition may, in fact, drain energy from efforts to fight for a cause and may cause one to neglect a need for social change. We accept this possible limitation and recognize that further research on that issue may have merit. Motivation for political change may sometimes rely on anger and in those cases may reach its peak when thinking is simplified and FIH is limited. Nonetheless, we also suggest that once motivation and action emerge, uncompromising negative characterization of one’s opponent, though common (Van Boven, Ehret, & Sherman, 2018; Tetlock, 2003), might often achieve less than collaboration with and recalibration of perceptions of opposing groups (Kahane, 2017; Sherman, 2011, Staub, 2019). There may not always need to be a dichotomy between promoting societal change and promoting FIH. Perhaps FIH will speed positive social change in some contexts but hinder it in others. The impact of FIH on societal change is an empirical question and thus could be explored further.

***Potential concern 6: What about the lacunae?***

Arguably, some domains within positive psychology are not encompassed by FIH. For example, self-compassion and mindfulness (with the exception of loving-kindness mindfulness), self-esteem, and time perspective are not explicitly encompassed by FIH. Two considerations deserve attention here. Firstly, if FIH is extended to include attitudes toward the self as human, more of these constructs are encompassed. Secondly, even if FIH is not expanded in this way, a concept need not explain everything to have explanatory power or to increase coherence within a field. Consider that evolutionary psychology does not explain all of social psychology, and Einstein’s general theory of relativity does not explain all findings of physics, and neither the Big 5 (McCrae, 2002), nor McAdam and Pals’ (2006) larger framework explain all of personality, but each still has cohesive and explanatory power. We suggest that FIH can bring together many (but not all) disparate topics of positive psychology, while increasing theoretical parsimony in the field.

***Potential concern 7: What about resistance to the terminology and related view of human nature?***

The term ‘faith in humanity’ may create resistance within some groups. Some may presume the term implies something religious and may resist for that reason. Others may believe faith should only be placed in a deity. Others may question the view of human nature implied by the term. We realized the term can create misunderstandings, and we struggled to find a brief name that engenders fewer misunderstandings, but in the end decided to take the term as received (Preston-Roedder, 2013) and resolved instead to carefully explain the meaning and provide qualifications. Nonetheless, in cases of resistance, alternative terms might help clarify the concept. The term ‘enacted belief in humanity’ may clarify the concept for groups who want to avoid the sound of a religious concept. ‘Enacted belief in imago dei’ may create more openness for those with a traditional western orientation, and possibly ‘faith in human yang’ may work for a Chinese context. Creative adaptation may have merit.

Also, admittedly, the term does imply a somewhat positive view of human nature. The current manuscript is not focused on the accuracy of that view of human nature, and much of the argument contained herein about the pervasiveness of FIH within positive psychology could be accurate even if that view of human nature is mistaken. Nonetheless, positive psychologists, as argued above, have often implicitly presumed a somewhat positive view of human nature. Furthermore, a number of researchers, many of them not explicitly positive psychologists, deserve credit for clarifying the extent to which positive perceptions of others can be justified. A number of authors (e.g., Crocker, Canavello, & Brown, 2017; Fowers, 2015; Hare, 2017; Keltner, Kogan, Piff, & Saturn, 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010; Tomasello, 2016, 2019) provide important support for this anticipation of positive traits or positive potential among others. As Keltner and others have suggested, prosociality seems to be “(a) intuitive, (b) widespread, and deeply engrained in human behavioral tendencies” (Keltner, Kogan, Piff, & Saturn, 2014). Furthermore, a number of these same scholars, such as Fowers and Tomasello have also provided helpful theories about evolutionary selective pressures favoring kindness and other prosocial tendencies.

If that somewhat positive view of human nature is correct, FIH may provide a helpful corrective to common views of human nature and to views of the readiness with which many people will demonstrate positive traits. The hypothesized need for a corrective is consistent with the Helliwell and Wang (2011) wallet drop analysis. People were asked what would happen if lost wallets containing \$200 were found by strangers. The respondents evinced a relatively negative view of human nature by estimating that 25% of the wallets would be returned. In fact, when wallets were purposely left to be found by a stranger, those wallets were returned 80% of the time. This misestimate suggests that, in at least some contexts, FIH may provide a corrective that increases the accuracy of views of human nature. Admittedly, however, humans are complex and vary, so a truly nuanced discussion of the positives and negatives of human nature would require much space and would exceed the scope of this manuscript.

The FIH perspective adds to some prior work on human nature by not merely recognizing that positive traits are widespread in humans, but by recognizing the extent to which recognition of this fact inhabits many constructs associated with well-being and also permeates a number of aspects of positive psychology. The current paper thereby extends beyond arguments about human nature to a focus on how humans are perceived. These topics overlap but are distinct. Yet even if that research on human nature was not accurate, the rest of this manuscript illustrates the way in which FIH, nonetheless, pervades much of positive psychology. Going beyond the

empirical work on positive human tendencies, at a meta-theoretical level, we argue that an acknowledgment of this pervasiveness could serve to highlight coherence in positive psychology.

### **Conclusion**

We have argued that faith in humanity (FIH) functions as an implicit but seldom mentioned theme within positive psychology. We have also clarified that FIH is distinct from trust and distinct from the belief that all people are good. The importance of this theme is evident in all the domains of positive psychology reviewed here: each of the original domains (positive states, positive traits, positive institutions), second wave positive psychology, and the behavior of positive psychologists. Some disciplines have been revitalized by recognition of a theme linking the findings of various practitioners and generating a new set of theoretically driven hypotheses (e.g., the Big Five in personality psychology, evolutionary theory in social psychology, and relativity in physics). Positive psychology as a discipline is far from any impending doom, but some problems exist. Within positive psychology, there exists a disparate set of findings regarding causes of well-being, but little discussion of what some of these causes share in common. Related criticisms could be made for research on strengths, positive institutions, second wave positive psychology, and the behavior of positive psychologists in their coaching and therapeutic interventions. Our discussion suggests that FIH is central to all the domains of positive psychology and thereby provides a linking theme, and provides a conceptual rather than topical tie, and it may generate new hypotheses.

This work was supported by a Kwantlen Polytechnic University Chancellor's Chair award. The authors have no conflict of interest.

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