

IS THERE A SOCIETAL NEGATIVE BIAS? IS IT CHANGING FOR THE BETTER?

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Bernard Haldane included an important message about societal negative bias in the Orientation piece of the basic workshop for articulating Dependable Strengths™. He suggested that this negative bias was influenced or caused by our training and our upbringing. He also urged participants to overcome or transcend this negative bias by focusing on their Dependable Strengths™.

When Bernard initiated these efforts to overcome negative bias he was a pioneer (Forster, 2003). Fortunately, the *positive psychology movement* flourished as we moved into the 21st century, and while much evidence now exists to support the idea that there is a negative bias, there is some evidence that human beings are gradually overcoming this negative bias.

First, what does the positive psychology literature say about the existence of negative bias? Many of these authors describe the bias towards negativity as being more pervasive and deeper than a bias that is caused by our training and our upbringing. Roy Baumeister and his colleagues (2001) authored "Bad is Stronger than Good," the most comprehensive article addressing this topic. These authors suggested that those things in life that can be characterized as "bad" appear to hold greater power in human lives than the things that are "good." They review the literature showing that the bad wields more impact than the good counterparts when emotions and feedback are involved. Similarly, information that is bad appears to be processed more completely than good information. We also form bad impressions easier than good ones. Bad stereotypes form more quickly than good ones and these bad stereotypes are more resistant to being disconfirmed. The authors built a solid case for the idea that "bad is stronger than good."

Snyder and Lopez (2007) interpreted the phenomenon of "bad being stronger than good" by suggesting that *fear* is behind most of what is experienced as bad, and *hope* is the primary feeling connected with good. They say that fear is aimed at protecting life and preserving things the way they are. Fear has many connections from the limbic (affective) system. They point out that fear limits cognitive processing and generally amplifies our human tendency to avoid risk. In contrast, good feelings are more likely to be connected to future-directed thinking and the feeling of hope. Hopeful, or future-directed thinking, focuses attention on possibilities, rather than what might go wrong.

By contrasting the bad with the good, or fear with hope, I am not suggesting that we should strive to always focus on the good or hopeful, and never focus on the bad or feared. In real life, each person must, at times, pay attention to what is negative and what is positive. I am simply suggesting that we should try to pay more attention to the positive than we typically do. It is a matter of degree, and recent research suggests that humans have paid too much attention to negative matters and not enough to what is positive.

Are we evolving towards less negative bias?

Various social commentators have studied the evolution of human beings in terms of the cultures that humans have developed. Several have assembled cases to show that humans are becoming more evolved in terms of how they interact and how they solve problems. Robert Wright, the author of the acclaimed book, *The Moral Animal*, has offered a solid case. In his 2000 book, *Nonzero: The logic of Human Destiny*, Wright finds directionality in history, which he characterizes as cultural evolution. He builds the case that human societies have grown more complex over time by retaining technologies, political systems, and religious beliefs that foster internal coordination and cooperation. He shows how history naturally weaves people into ever more vast webs of interdependence. It can be inferred that negative bias, or focus on what is bad, decreases as people become more interdependent, cooperative, and collaborative. Wright's ideas about cultural evolution pick up on the degree to which humans focus on "bad" compared with the "good." His ideas of cultural evolution fit very well with the change of focus from fear to hope, which was identified by Snyder and Lopez.

If we go back to the earlier eras of the human species, we can imagine cavemen and cavewomen struggling to survive in a world where they are low on the food chain; Those humans who survived long enough to reproduce in those days were the ones who were constantly aware of potential dangers. They were well tuned to the "bad," the dangers that could mean their destruction. It is little wonder the survivors were individuals who were constantly fearful and on guard for what might go wrong. Genes and DNA passed on by their surviving ancestors programmed people to be wary and threat-sensitive. However, humans did have the potential for developing language and cognitive abilities that surpassed those of other predatory animals and creatures. Gradually, humans rose to the top of the food chain. More recently, humans often form complex organizations that depend on subtle nuances in relationships and the ability to negotiate new agreements. Slowly, abilities to communicate, cooperate and collaborate have become more important for thriving and surviving. These collaborative relationships benefit from being able to identify with other people and developing positive agreements. Gradually, individuals who could see new possibilities for joint activities have become the most successful survivors.

Even though new abilities contributed to survival, the genes for attending to "bad" dangers that might threaten survival continued to be passed on to offspring. For example, such tendencies are of great importance to soldiers currently fighting in Iraq. Attending to problems and potential dangers remained useful in societies characterized by cultural evolution, although these tendencies have become less valued and helpful for survival. In the complex cultures of modern human societies, the value of focusing on "good" possibilities for future development has become more evident. The positive psychology movement came into being after more and more people recognized such phenomena as "the optimistic advantage," and the value of focusing on the positive (Scheier et al. 2002). More people recognized that it is neither pleasant nor productive to deal with negative people in small-group interactions. Others recognized that negotiations and collaborations worked better when participants were not fearful, but instead open to new possibilities that could be enhanced by cooperation.

The Dangers of Negative and Fear-based Leadership

In earlier stages of our cultural evolution, survival was enhanced by the ability to detect dangers and threats in the environment. As cultural evolution progressed, fear-based reacting and planning continued to foster the *us-vs-them* mentality that led to continual strife and warfare. Problem solving continues to be hampered by the desire to protect the old ways of dealing with

issues. Awareness of global warming is still denied and new wars, including wars on terrorism, continue to be initiated. Collaborative problem-solving methods, such as diplomacy, are resisted in order to continue the status quo. Meanwhile, the technology and tools for destroying others are expanding. Overpopulation and greed are over-taxing our environment and global warming is moving beyond our control. It is possible that cultural evolution will not proceed in a way that allows the human species to survive. It is possible that the human species will become extinct if the old tendencies to be fearful and warlike expand, and hopeful possibilities for new development are stifled.

Research and theories emanating from the positive psychology enthusiasts suggest that cultural evolution can continue in a more positive direction. This can happen if more people recognize the value of focusing on the positive and work together in collaborative, problem-solving organizations. More people will need to focus on strengths and give up fear-based approaches that separate people and pit them against each other. Leaders are needed who can facilitate more focus on strengths and cooperative interactions. Leaders are needed who know how to help others articulate their strengths and interact with others in terms of mutual strengths.

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is an approach that optimizes a person's ability to articulate and communicate his or her own strengths. The ability to facilitate this process for others is a valuable strength that is sorely needed in today's society. Awareness of the importance of focusing on the positive and on strengths, combined with the ability to encourage others to focus on strengths, may be crucial leadership qualities in the future. Such leadership qualities may keep our cultural evolution moving in the direction necessary to avoid destructive outcomes and possible extinction. Your contributions, through your work with Dependable Strengths, may help your great, great grandchildren live in a culture that is evolving towards love and hope.

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