

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON CARING RESEARCH: RESEARCH ON WELL-BEING AND RESEARCHER WELL-BEING

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Abstract

Caring research is a new concept that is discussed and defined from two supplementary perspectives: (1) as research aiming at promoting well-being and (2) as a caring research community that cares for the researcher well-being and reciprocal relationships between colleagues and between supervisors and students. These dimensions are discussed in the light of the latest findings and theories of positive psychology as well as based on the authors' studies in the field. The caring research ideology contributes a comprehensive viewpoint to the world of academic research because it also pays attention to the actual research process within the research community. This well-being focused approach can serve as a means to flourish within the ever-increasing demands of the academic world.

Key words: *caring research, positive psychology, researcher well-being, supervision, well-being at work.*

Introduction

Many of us involved in research have faced the current tendency in the academic world: competition for research funding between universities and individual researchers and research groups, prompt graduation and study processes among university students, and demands on high-quality yet the-faster-the-better publication of research results among graduates and researchers are characteristics that seem to determine the way research is conducted in these days. “[A]lmost all academic research I had known is funded through tedious grant requests, annoying peer reviews, officious bureaucracy, unconscionable delays, wrenching revisions, and then rejection and heart-stopping budget cuts”, Prof. Seligman said about the state of academic research in his preface of *Flourish* (2011, p. 6).

Indeed, high pressures for measurable results have been described, for example, by Roth (2002) who used the term “publish or perish” when referring to professors’ careers. Publishing should be international, too, because these “seafarers” produce much more funding to universities than “islanders” who prefer working within the borders of their own nation (Kubiatko, 2013). Likewise, reading and citing readings in grant proposals or reports are considered crucial (Tenopir, Mays, & Wu, 2011). At the same time, universities compete for talented applicants and many universities have to think about methods to increase their attractiveness in the eyes of students, their future researchers in order to stay competitive (Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014). How to do that if the message mainly delivered tells about tightening pressures, competitive atmosphere, and pure self-interest among researchers?

Likewise, new kinds of expectations are targeted to research, too. Today’s societal changes, globalization, and uncertainty about the future shaken the well-being of people and communities (Diener, 2009). Research should provide answers to how to face the future without people losing trust in their own abilities to survive and solve threats of well-being (e.g., Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). People have always looked for happiness and success in their lives, and this goal has not become any less significant in the lives of modern people.

Problem of Research

The aforementioned two current challenges made us think about the concept of caring research. The concept was born based on (1) the authors' research work after being involved in positive psychological research for several years and (2) collaboration in the authors' research team: the mutual support, encouragement, and productivity even within a current competition situation stirred interest in us and we decided to analyze it further. The purpose of this study is to discuss: what is caring research and how to define it?

In the authors' researcher team, many researchers had to choose research themes that pursue enhancing good quality of life humanly and socially; in other words, themes illustrating mutual care and concern that provide the foundation for well-being in individual people and communities. Wish to influence positively and trust in human strengths also reflected on the interaction within the research group. The researchers showed that feeling positive emotions toward work produced not only a quantitative improvement by increasing efficiency, but also a qualitative one by making a better outcome that results from the virtue of pride, belief, and commitment to one's job.

Research Focus

How to reach satisfaction and optimal performances and quality research by enhancing positive feelings and states at universities (see also Isen & Reeve, 2006; Winter & Sarros, 2002) is the question viewed through the concept of caring research.

Caring Research*Positive Psychology as the Basis of Caring Research*

Caring research is viewed here based on the ideas of positive psychology. Gable and Haidt (2005) briefly define positive psychology in the following terms: "Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (p. 104). The aim of positive psychology is to study the reasons why people feel joy, show altruism, and create healthy families and institutions.

Research themes such as well-being, happiness, quality of life, and positive feelings have been introduced by positive psychology, which has provided research concerning not only positive characteristics and feelings, but also the institutions that enhance the discovery of positive feelings and strengths (Seligman et al., 2005). The branch of positive psychology is concerned with facilitating good lives and enabling people to be at their best (see, e.g., Achor, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener, 2009; also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015) – research that aim at positive influence (see also Beveridge, 2005; Seligman, 2009).

In addition to its positive purposes, caring research can be defined as a positively-perceived research process constituting of supportive and trustful interaction and relationships, illustrating positive organizational behaviors (e.g., Luthans, 2002; Rego, Ribeiro, Pina, & Jesuino, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013a). These dimensions will be defined next.

Dimensions of Caring Research

What is caring research, then? It is possible to understand the concept as follows: (1) caring research as research aiming at promoting well-being and (2) caring research as research work manifested by mutual support, encouragement, and collaboration between researchers. The former focuses on themes promoting a good quality of life and well-being. This kind of

research is interested in, for example, discovering elements of reciprocal care and help among human beings, structures of positive development, and opportunities to use human strengths and draw from positive resources, as well as the bases of flourishing communities and societies. However, as the latter element suggests, caring research is not just about caring the research target. As we see it, caring research is conducted by researchers who share the interest in and enthusiasm about positive influencing and mutual care. Thus, caring research appears as the joy and opportunity to do research together in an open and supportive academic environment. Caring research comes true in respectful collaboration between researchers, supervisors, students, and other experts at every phase of research work.

When the aforementioned two viewpoints are put together, the caring research approach covers all aspects of a research process. Next, we will discuss in detail what these dimensions of caring research entail. We will present examples of caring research themes as well as of caring research community.

Caring Research Themes

Caring research wants to promote the well-being of people and communities. This interest can be further discussed as several research themes. Next, some important well-being-focused themes are discussed, such as resources in the human lifespan and positive development, positive emotions as the source of well-being, well-being after crises and adversities, as well as resources in work and professional development, and organizational well-being. The following themes are based on the authors' studies and interests in the field of positive psychological research.

Resources as the Foundation of Positive Development and Achievements

Lifespans of people who could be considered positive examples from whom we could learn and benefit others (e.g., Magnusson & Mahoney, 2006). It is, therefore, relevant to analyze whether the lifespans of positively acting people differ from those of others, and, if they do, to find out how (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015). This kind of research pursues determine the elements of positive development along human beings' lifespans.

For example, child research can be defined (see Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013b) as research about, with, and by children (see Alderson, 2001; Mayall, 2008), and especially, for children (Prout, 2005). Questions of how to enhance children's growth and development, and for example, their discovery and use of signature strengths (Seligman, 2011) illustrate approaches in which researchers' interests are in positively-focused research for children. Actually, the need for such research is recognized and well-justified: according to Seligman (2009), it would function not only as a buffer against malaise and depression but also increase life satisfaction and well-being, promote learning quality, academic success, and creative thinking, enhance the emergence of supportive adult-child and peer relationships, and increase tolerance of diversity (see also Huebner et al., 2009; Schreiner, Hulme, Hetzel, & Lopez, 2009; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

This approach as caring research and well-being promoting research is to study how people can reach achievements and succeed by using positive resources. Some examples of positive strategies and courses of lives in individuals are introduced by studies about straight-A students' lives (Salmela & Uusiautti, 2013), female leaders' career developments (Hyvärinen, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2015), long-lasting marriages (Määttä, Anglé, & Uusiautti, 2014), awarded top workers' lifespans (Uusiautti, 2008; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015), and in lifelong learning (Purtalo-Nieminen & Määttä, 2011).

Positive Emotions as the Source of Well-being

Sixthly, positive emotions also make an important research theme and connect caring research with well-being. “Moods and emotions, which together are labeled affect, represent people’s on-line evaluations of the events that occur in their lives” (Diener et al., 1999, p. 277). For example, Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden-and-build model of positive emotions explains why the propensity to experience positive emotions has evolved into a ubiquitous feature of human nature and how positive emotions might be tapped to promote individual and collective well-being and health. According to Isen (2003; see also Isen & Reeve, 2006), positive feelings sustain intrinsic motivation and help with successfully performing pleasing work tasks and new challenges as well as enjoying them. Positive emotions serve as markers of flourishing or optimal well-being (Fredrickson, 2001), and research on experiences can be useful for measuring well-being (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Kahneman et al., 2004).

In educational contexts, joy of learning (see, e.g., Lähteenmäki, 2013; Rantala & Määttä, 2011) has been a topical research theme. Similarly, in Finland (Keskitalo, Uusiautti & Määttä 2013; Uusiautti & Määttä 2014) and abroad (e.g., Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2006; Purdie et al., 2000; Sandage, Seminary, Hill, & Vang, 2003) positive psychological approaches have been used for finding means to enhance indigenous peoples’ well-being and flourishing. Our perspective is bound to educational and psychological research paradigms. However, we believe that whatever the paradigm, genuine aspirations to conduct ethically sustainable and positively-toned research naturally aim at benefitting the research target or phenomenon.

Well-being after Crises and Adversities

Caring research does not close eyes from difficulties, hardships, or crises. Instead, it is relevant to study how people can overcome these kinds of challenging situations and crises and what the role of positive strategies and strengths are in these events and processes (see e.g., Ryff & Singer, 2003).

Special topics can be named with quite a wide range: surviving with various states such as anorexia (Savukoski, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2014), narcolepsy (Karjalainen, Nyrhilä, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2013), or other illnesses and health problems (e.g., Aspinwall & Tedeschi, 2010; Tugade, Fredrickson, & Feldman Barrett, 2004); surviving with various developmental disorders, such as autism (Kangas, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2012) or reading difficulties (Vanninen & Määttä 2013); and surviving with various events and situations in life, such as bullying at school (Hoisko, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014), grief and death (e.g., Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Stein, Trabasso, Folkman, & Richards, 1997), war (e.g., Ai, Tice, Whitsett, Ishisaka, & Chim, 2007; Hobfoll et al., 1991), and crimes (Davis, Hoffman, & Quigley, 1988; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Äärelä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014).

Organizational Well-being and Professional Development

Work forms a major part of most people’s daily lives, and therefore, it is important to study flourishing at work and opportunities to develop professionally so that work could become a source of satisfaction and self-fulfillment in life. Examples of such positive studies related to work are analyses of awarded Finnish top workers and their positive development (Uusiautti, 2008) and the success of enterprises (Uusiautti, 2015) as well as continuing education among the unemployed (Pietilä-Litendahl & Uusiautti, 2014). We have also studied the professional development of vocational teachers (Koski-Heikkinen, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2014), early childhood education teachers (Happo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2012), elementary education teachers (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013c, 2013d), and special education teachers (Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014; Sipilä & Määttä, 2011).

At an institutional level, it is equally important to study how institutions can enhance human beings' positive behaviors and development, and well-being by caring. Organizational psychological constructs can either increase or impede the experiences of positive emotions and subjective well-being (e.g., Diener, Oishi, & Lucas 2009). Numerous studies focus on finding out positive organizational behaviors, leadership processes, and well-being promoting activities and work arrangements (e.g., Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007; Syväjärvi et al. 2014; Uusiautti, 2013).

A Caring Research Community

The second viewpoint to caring research is related to the conductors of the research and to the research community. There are many ways of approaching this issue.

Psycho-social Dimensions of Research Work and Community

Turner, Barling, and Zacharatos (2002) illustrated the psycho-social elements of a work community with a theory called "the Healthy Work Model" (HWM). Healthy work systems require good external environments and develop strategies for good work practices (e.g., autonomy, teamwork, and leadership) that enhance positive psychological processes and other mechanisms (e.g., trust, perceived control, and organizational commitment) in order to increase healthy outcomes (e.g., well-being and proactivity). Likewise, according to Rego et al. (2011), fostering organizational virtuousness (e.g., through honesty, interpersonal respect, and compassion) improves workers' affective well-being and promotes a more committed workforce. When considering caring research, it is, however, worth noticing that while research work per se can be the most motivating and satisfying, the work environment includes numerous agents and elements that need to be considered (see e.g., Houston, Meyer, & Paewai, 2006; Winter & Sarros, 2002).

The caring research approach can, thus, be identified within the research on positive organizational behavior (POB) (see Luthans, 2002; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Luthans (2002) defines POB as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace" (p. 59).

Collaboration among Researchers

The support and encouragement from colleagues can be of irreplaceable value not only for a worker's own success and well-being at work, but also for the well-being and success of the whole work unit or work community. However, an academic community does not always represent such a positive work environment as described above. Competition, self-interest, and belittling of other's achievements lead to hostile academic work environment and suspiciousness between researchers (see e.g., Kramer, 1999). It is difficult to build co-operation between the research staff when the situation has already gotten out of hand and mistrust is the dominating attribute of the community.

Ferres, Connell, and Travaglione (2004) point out, how at its best, working together, helping each other, and pursuing shared goals can provide researchers' with a sense of meaning that we referred to already in the introduction of this article. Perceived meaningfulness covers positive outcomes in one's own and co-workers' well-being (Liu, Siu, & Shi, 2010). Perceiving this positive outcome can act as a significant component of common good and well-being alongside the positive achievements in research work. Indeed, perceived meaningfulness is connected with a sense of meaningful doing, often manifested as flow that is an autotelic experi-

ence, total feeling of becoming absorbed by one's doing and that contributes to one's perception of satisfaction with life (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

Positive Atmosphere in Research Teams

There are numerous studies that discuss ways to alleviate the tense atmosphere in workplaces. The caring research approach draws from the positive. For example, Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2006) have listed factors that are associated with individuals' experiences of spirit at work. Factors vary from inspiring and supportive leadership practices to shared vision and purpose as well as an intention to contribute to the overall good of society, and from positive workplace culture to positive connections between all members and a sense of community in the organization, not forgetting opportunities for members to pursue professional and personal growth and to fulfill their own personal mission through work, and appreciation and regard for the contributions made by its members (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006, pp. 290-291)

According to the study of Winter and Sarros (2002) in Australian universities, an academic work environment is motivating when roles are clear, job tasks are challenging, and supervisors exhibit a supportive leadership style. They suggest that in universities, "a crucial leadership challenge for heads of departments is to assign job tasks efficiently and effectively (managerial values) while recognising and maintaining the importance of professional job growth and collegial relations (academic values)" (Winter & Sarros, 2002, p. 255) and conclude that "[b]y demonstrating support for staff motivation, leaders can establish a context whereby academics feel more inclined to help the university reach its goals" (Winter & Sarros, 2002, p. 256). According to several studies (see, e.g., Egan et al., 2009; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Mayya & Roff, 2004), good and supportive atmosphere makes research work seem meaningful and inspiring.

Writing and Publishing Together

According to Kramer (1999), mutual trust has a number of important benefits for organizations and their members, and this applies to the academic communities as well. A good practical example of the open-minded collaboration in the sense of caring research is writing and publishing together with colleagues about one's own or the team's joint research and related findings (see also Uusiautti, 2014). In the field of educational sciences, research work often represents itself downright a one-man-effort, working alone in a researcher's chamber with a laptop as the only company. Writing research articles tends to follow this pattern of lonely toil; the mistrust between researcher colleagues and fear of someone stealing your ideas being not the least of worries inhibiting collaboration (cf. e.g., Kramer, 1999; McAllister, 1995). However, co-writing can be very beneficial. First, your own analyses and conclusions can become more profound than if you were writing along. Overall, having a trustworthy colleague read your text is beneficial. Within a team, you can find possibilities in your data that can lead to true innovations, new concepts, theories, and illustrations, or even new fields. Likewise, teamwork can ease the pain of working with the paper after getting reviews; sharing the work makes the work seem lighter. It is also wise to reflect on the reviewers' comments and their aptness with your co-authors: the criticism may not be that crushing when you do not have to wonder them by yourself. Finally, if and when the paper becomes accepted, the joy becomes doubled when writing in team. Happy events are experienced more positively with other people (Seligman, 2011) due to human beings' social nature (Bercheid, 2003).

Supervision

Changes in the university education also necessitate special attention to the training of PhD students (Enders, 2005). Caring supervision is important both in doctoral research and post-doctoral research. Frank Pajares claimed already in 2001 that construct drawn from positive psychology can well explain student achievement and overall positive self-confidence and optimism: he also pointed out that “such students are more likely to regard themselves and to show regard to others” (Pajares, 2001, p. 34). According to Kezar and Kinzie (2006), quality begins with an organizational culture that values high expectations and shows respect for diverse learning styles, and where instruction builds in active learning, assessment and prompt feedback, collaboration, adequate time on task, and out of class contact with faculty.

University-level studies are demanding and students need special support and guidance (Egan et al., 2009). In her studies on the supervision of doctoral theses, Määttä (2012) represented that the supervisor’s resources can be divided into four dimensions of Will, Knowledge, Actions, and Proficiency, each contributing to the supervision relationship. Will means the supervisor’s commitment to supervision, whereas knowledge refers to the substance knowledge and/or the mastery and ability to comprehend the overall structure. Actions are to ensure that the contents meet the scientific quality requirements. Proficiency comprises positive and supportive supervision methods and personality. A supervisor can emphasize different features depending on his or her own style and on the student’s work habits and needs (see Richardson, 2005). Supervision is not likely to succeed if one of the aforementioned resources is completely missing.

The caring research approach covers all phases of supervision, but only if supervisors are willing to adopt the caring attitude drawing from the recognition of human strengths and well-being. Supervision can develop in the positive direction if university teachers and professors evaluate their own development as supervisors (Emilsson, 2007), reflect on and diversify supervision practices (McCallin & Nayar, 2012), and plan supervision together with students to enhance their inspiration and opportunities to succeed in research (Manathunga, 2005).

Based on her practical experience and research, Määttä (2012) has introduced the pedagogy of supervising doctoral thesis and pointed out that during the dissertation process, the relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student changes and varies. A supervisor has to help a PhD student discreetly in a constructive and respectful manner. How to be a critical but safe mirror for a PhD student who struggles with his or her research? Along with the research process, the ability to supervise and to be supervised becomes constantly challenged, too (Määttä, 2012).

But, as the supervision relationship is reciprocal, it is also important that the PhD student thinks of thanking the supervisor for good guidance (Määttä, 2014). Mutual gratitude and appreciation are likely to increase the sense of well-being in the partners of the supervision relationship (see, e.g., Otake et al., 2006), which we argue to be one of the important factors of caring research.

Caring Research is an Attitude and a Way of Action Needed in Today’s Research Work

In research, a healthy and fair competition is good and necessary for the development of science itself (e.g., as competition for research funding through evaluation of research plans), but the pressures for finding funding, publishing, and reaching achievements can turn against themselves easily. Rigorous peer-reviews, critical expert evaluations, and strict funding application processes cannot mean that they have to be devastating, embarrassing, and partial—quite the opposite (Uusiautti, 2015). There are, for example, certain ethical rules that Benos

et al. (2003) call “the etiquette of review” that every scientific referee, regardless of academic discipline, must strictly follow, including, for example, an honest, critical assessment of the research; confidentiality about the existence and substance of the manuscript; avoidance of any conflicts of interest; and a collegial, constructive manner of giving feedback (Benos et al., 2003). The academic community should follow these principles more widely in research collaboration, not just regarding reviews of article manuscripts. Caring research is, therefore, about mutual respect and positive elements in researcher interaction, such as honesty, trustworthiness, confidentiality, and constructiveness that are not only connected with better relationships at the work unit and higher engagement, but also with high-quality work outcomes (see Ferres, Connell, & Travaglione, 2004; Schofield, 1998; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015), high-quality research in this case.

This leads us to the conclusion of how the caring research approach affects the quality of research. Caring research does not adopt any particular methodology or data collection technique, but critically questions and reflects on all aspects of the research process (cf. also Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schillerp, 2005), including research ethics (e.g., Knapp & Vandecreek, 2006). We suggest that researchers should develop a set of strategic values that guide their decision and action as researchers (see also Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). It is necessary to contemplate how to find suitable ethical working methods for the research. There is not just one exact answer to this question: all depends on the research context, target, and select method (Creswell, 2009). Naturally, the authors’ viewpoint is based on research work in educational and behavioral sciences, and especially, in positive psychology. This orientation has influenced the way the concept of caring research is discussed here. However, it has also provided a very important approach to view research in general, namely the one seeing research as an arena of caring, flourishing, cooperation, and well-being.

Eventually, caring research is merely about an attitude that one adopts when acting as a part of the academic community than any approach typical of one specific field of research. The conclusion is that caring research means profoundly quality research because this approach covers not only the research work targeted to investigate a phenomenon or target, but also the wider context where the research is conducted, especially referring to the well-being producing potential that lies in the collaboration between researchers (including students and supervisors) – if only we are brave enough to trust each other and indulge in the joy of doing research together.

This idea is based on the finding that positive experiences about one’s own doing make for one of the most central dimensions of good performance (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015; see also Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000). Thus, caring research does not shun achievements, competition, or struggle, but reminds the academic community of the possibilities of positive collaboration (see also Achor, 2010; Myers & Diener, 1995). Indeed, Quick (1999) has also pointed out the connection between feeling good and high performance, and their contribution to high levels of well-being. At its best, caring research can become a means to find well-being and to increase well-being through research.

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