Joy: A reply to the replies
Matthew Kuan Johnson

Department of Philosophy, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT
In what follows, I express my deep gratitude for the thoughtful and incisive contributions from the respondents. In my reply, I focus on offering some brief reflections on some of the most important topics upon which these responses converged. First, I identify what emerged as the most pressing research priorities for future work in the science of joy, including: (1) mapping the conceptual space for joy, (2) developing a standard technique for joy induction, and (3) studying joy across a wider variety of populations and contexts. Next, I discuss two additional areas of research for joy: pathologically afflicted joys and differences in individuals’ reported frequencies of joyful experience. Finally, I draw upon and echo the arguments of many of the articles in this issue, which suggest that the science of joy should be a major priority for researchers, both for its importance to academic psychology as a discipline and also for its potential cultural impacts related to the broader social good.

The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. -Simone Weil (1951, p. 37)

I am profoundly grateful for the thoughtful articles of the respondents, which are generative, incisive, and even deeply moving. Their excellent work has made this special issue on joy not only an extremely fruitful resource for the future study of joy, but also (as Weil illustrates in the quote above) an occasion for it. Indeed, the respondents in this issue provide the groundwork and guidelines needed to potentially catalyze and launch the emerging field of the psychology of joy. The work of this volume and future developments in this area will potentially have broad interest and impact: King (2020) and Underwood (2020) suggest that more work on the science of joy may have larger cultural effects ( ‘Research specifically on joy has the capacity to shift the popular focus from what we can do to increase our happiness, which has dominated much of the popular press recently as well as many of the research studies, to a greater focus on joy’ (Underwood, 2020). Additionally, many of the contributions here encourage psychologists studying joy to work more closely with religious studies scholars and religious practitioners, such that the developments in this field may be of interest to scholars outside of the discipline of psychology (Casioppo, 2020; Cloninger & Cloninger, 2020; Davis, Gazaway, & McLaughlin, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Strawn, 2020; Van Cappellen, 2020; Watkins, 2020). My deepest thanks go out to these respondents for their contributions to this issue, and to Robert Emmons for putting this special issue together; I eagerly await the developments that will spring from the work done here.

The contributions in this issue have brought up a number of critical points. In the space that follows I will be unable to address all of them, so I will turn these concluding remarks to areas in which several common threads converge. I will begin by discussing what seems to have emerged as the most pressing objectives for the science of joy’s research agenda. These include: (1) mapping the conceptual space for joy regarding the different intentional objects it can take and its relationship to (and differentiation from) other related concepts, (2) developing a standard technique for inducing joy, (3) studying joy across a wider variety of populations. I will then discuss two areas of further research into joy that, while perhaps less urgent than the first three points, are no less crucial areas of study. The first regards pathologically afflicted joys, and the second involves the finding reported by Underwood (2020), that while many individuals report frequently experiencing certain forms of joy, there is a sizeable proportion of individuals for whom such experiences are rare. I suggest possible lines of investigation into what may be driving this effect. Finally, I echo some of the arguments of both my original article and the response articles for why the study of joy should be a major priority for researchers: it is important for both academic psychology as a field and for human flourishing and the social good, more globally.
Mapping the conceptual space

Firstly, the contributions here suggest a wide variety of possibilities for what joy is. Roberts (2020) suggests that joy is a basic positive emotion that comes in a variety of forms (e.g., hope, gratitude, relief, etc.), which are differentiated by the intentional object they take. Joy, as with all emotions on Roberts’ account, does not always have to involve an affective (i.e., the feeling) component. Joy does, however, contain two cognitive components in its appraisal structure: an evaluative one (‘something good is happening’) and a volitive one (‘I want this to be happening’). Watkins (2020) provides an account of joy in direct tension with that of Roberts’ account. Watkins presents some of their own work using factor analysis, which reveals that joy is clearly distinguished from other positive emotions (such as gratitude, calm, interest, etc.), and suggests, contra Roberts, that joy is ‘not a general positive response to any event deemed as good’, since some positive emotions may occur without joy occurring. Instead, Watkins argues that joy specifically involves the construal of a situation as bringing the individual into closer connection with some entity that is of value to that individual. Van Cappellen (2020) provides an account that has some similarities with both Roberts’ and Watkins’ accounts, in suggesting that joy is a momentary emotion that results when one experiences one’s current circumstances as being positive. By contrast, other contributions suggest that joy may actually be better thought of as a virtue (King, 2020; Strawn, 2020).

Consequently, one of the most pressing areas for future work for the science of joy is to map out the different forms joy can take and to study joy alongside related constructs, in order to more clearly delineate and map out this conceptual space (for guidelines for such a research program, see Davis et al., 2020; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2020; Underwood, 2020; Watkins, 2020). In other words, it will be crucial for future work to study the intentional objects that joy takes, in order to discover the appraisal structure for joy, and how it is related to (and different from) other positive emotions. Mapping out a distinct space for (and definition of) joy amidst these other, related concepts will be foundationally important for studies on joy that use self-report paradigms: it may be the case that participants are operating with different understandings of what joy means, so having a clear definition will be important for future studies utilizing such paradigms. Indeed, Underwood (2020) discusses a question from the General Social Survey, on the self-reported frequency of joyful experience, but it could be the case that participants answering this question were operating with very different understandings of the definition of joy.

Standard techniques for joy induction

Davis et al. (2020) point to the importance of developing some analogue of what gratitude journals and letters did for the science of gratitude, for the science of joy. They note that since gratitude journals and letters functioned as a means of inducing joy, it enabled researchers to be able to test causal hypotheses (by running experimental designs utilizing this technique), and also enabled a greater enmeshing between the research and applied work. Underwood (2020) suggests that art may be able to function in this capacity, and Casioppo (2020) mentions various mindfulness and embodied techniques that may induce joy. In sum, identifying activities and techniques that can induce joy will be another of the key research objectives for the emerging science of joy.

Cross-cultural studies and beyond

Finally, one other particularly urgent objective for the burgeoning science of joy’s research agenda will be to conduct research across more varied populations. In my original article, I pointed to the importance of cross-cultural studies, which is echoed by many of the other respondents (King, 2020; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2020; Strawn, 2020; Van Cappellen, 2020). Underwood (2020) provides examples of their own cross-cultural studies on joy, with the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), as do Cloninger and Cloninger (2020), with their cross-cultural study on the Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI) and genotypes. Additionally, Strawn (2020) argues that cross-cultural studies on joy should involve researchers from that culture, in order to utilize the perspectives of both those within and outside of that context to identify and study the habitus of that context, which is necessary in order to understand the experience of joy in that setting. Similarly, King (2020) suggests that joy is given its meaning by the narrative in which it is situated; consequently, it will be important to understand the narrative milieu surrounding those instances of joy (they argue that individualistic, communal, or divinized narratives will be among the most important context differentiators). Krumrei-Mancuso (2020) helpfully points out that future work should not just happen cross-culturally and across the lifespan, but also look at joy in those with a range of mental abilities (including verbal and non-verbal), spiritual and non-spiritual individuals, privileged individuals and oppressed individuals, etc. Similarly, Strawn (2020) argues that how these differences are combined, via contextualization and intersectionality of issues and identities (e.g. race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status), will be of crucial importance to investigate. Krumrei-Mancuso also draws attention to how my original article, at times, seems to operate with an
understanding of joy that involves a fairly high degree of emphasis on cognitive construal, which they worry may rule out preverbal and non-verbal individuals (see also Watkins, 2020 for a discussion of how this kind of cognitive construal does not always require linguistic ability).

Pathologically afflicted joys

Many of the other contributions connect joy with one’s core identity, the true self, and one’s ultimate desires. For example, Van Cappellen (2020) describes how, ‘Joy is elicited by the appraisals that an event aligns with who we truly are, with what we value, what we strive for, what we live for. Joy is the emotion that makes life worth living in the moment because it resonates with our core identity’ (see also Casioppo, 2020; King, 2020). Roberts and Watkins, as aforementioned, also connect joy to appraising something as good. This raises the question, however, as to whether or not one can take joy in something that is not aligned with one’s core identity, one’s true self, or one’s ultimate desires, or that one does not appraise as good (at least in some ultimate sense). It seems possible that one could take joy in something that is in tension with one’s core identity or true self (schadenfreude, which I mentioned in my original article, may sometimes be an example of this) or that one could take joy in something that may be proximally desired or proximally appraised as good, but which is not desired or appraised as good in some ultimate sense (an addict giving in to their addiction, in the moment, may be an example of such a joy). Further research is certainly needed, but I suspect that it may be the case that joy will turn out to be longer lasting and more intense in those instances in which the joy is more closely connected to one’s core identity, true self, or ultimate desires, while ‘pathologically-afflicted joy’ (see Johnson, 2020) may be less intense in form and less long-lasting. Furthermore, it is likely that since individuals typically conceptualize the true self as being fundamentally moral (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014), the ‘deeper’ (i.e. longer lasting/more intense) joys will often typically be connected with moral behavior. We may, however, wonder about the implications of a case such as the one posed by Milton’s Satan, who famously proclaims in Paradise Lost, ‘Evil be thou my Good’ (Milton 1667/2000, see IV: 110). The seeming conceptual possibility of Milton’s Satan (i.e. one who inverts the entirety of their core identity, true self, and ultimate desires to be the exact opposite of moral, prosocial behavior), may pose a puzzle as to what their joy might be like (although it is worth mentioning that Milton’s Satan, during this monologue, goes through a series of emotions including fear, anger, envy, and despair, but none of them are joy, see IV: 115). The conceptual possibility of Milton’s Satan (although for an account on which Milton’s Satan may not be conceptually possible, see Cloninger & Cloninger, 2020), and the existence of pathologically afflicted (or ‘counterfeit’) joys reveals the need for more research into these questions.

Disparities in frequency of joyful experience

Underwood (2020) presents data from a set of Americans which show that while many of the participants report the frequent experience of certain forms of joy, there is a sizeable percentage of those participants for whom those experiences are rare. This finding raises some interesting questions as to why some report fewer experiences of certain types of joy. Is it the case that, as aforementioned, these participants were merely operating off of different understandings of the definition of joy? Is it the case that there are ‘set points’ for joy, and some individuals are disposed to experience joy less frequently and intensely (Johnson, 2020)? Or might it be the case that joy itself can be aversive, or that the subsequent loss of joy is aversive as joy fades, and so some numb their capacity for joy in an attempt at emotional self-regulation (Johnson, 2020). The theologian and mystic, Thomas Merton, seems to point to this phenomenon, ‘…we carry a scar over the place where that joy exulted for a moment in our hearts. The scar burns us. The sore wound aches within us, and we remember that we have fallen back into what we are not, and are not yet allowed to remain … ’ (Merton, 1949, p. 151). Davis et al. (2020) identify and explain this phenomenon of numbing oneself to joy through stress-and-coping theory. Conversely, Underwood (2020) suggests that suffering may increase one’s capacity for joy (describing it this way, ‘suffering carves valleys that then can be filled with joy’), providing another possible explanation for the reported differences in frequency of joy experiences: perhaps those who report more infrequent joyful experience have not suffered as much as those who report more frequent joyful experience, making them less primed for joy.

The science of joy’s broader cultural importance

Finally, the contributions in this issue have provided a variety of arguments for why joy is such a critical issue to which psychology ought to turn more of its attention. Firstly, many of the articles have argued that although joy is likely one of the most foundational and important emotions, the literature on joy is highly disjointed and not in dialogue with itself, resulting in the psychology of joy being one of the most neglected areas in the discipline (Casioppo, 2020; Davis et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2020; Van Cappellen, 2020; Watkins, 2020). Davis et al. (2020) and Watkins (2020) relate how the study
of other emotions (notably gratitude) were in similar positions in recent decades, but underwent course corrections, catalyzing those sub-fields. One hopes that the efforts in this issue and future developments will lead to similar developments with the science of joy.

A catalyzation of the study of joy may also have broader cultural effects, as King (2020) and Underwood (2020) relate how a greater research focus on joy may have, ‘the capacity to shift the popular focus from what we can do to increase our happiness, which has dominated much of the popular press recently as well as many of the research studies, to a greater focus on joy’ (Underwood, 2020). King (2020) argues that our world is faced with increasing ideological pluralization and polarization, and also with unprecedented change due to technology and its broader impacts, and that pursuing joy may provide a better guide to human flourishing and the life worth living than would pursuing happiness. I suggested something similar at the end of my original article (Johnson, 2020), that joy may have certain self-expansive, contagion, and motivational effects that make it especially conducive to human flourishing and social bonding, especially in our contemporary context. Particularly critical for this endeavor then, will be to chart ways that do not involve simply ‘flee[ing] to Pollyanna joy’ (Strawn, 2020) or numbing ourselves to joy in the pursuit of mere pleasure (Davis et al., 2020; Underwood, 2020), but allow for the possibility of finding joy amidst the uncertainties and adversities of life (Casioppo, 2020; Davis et al., 2020; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2020; Underwood, 2020).

In sum, such a shift from a focus on happiness to joy may have positive cultural effects for the social good, which King (2020) describes as follows: ‘As such pursuing joy may offer a timely corrective to the current culture that has been hijacked by happiness and other individual pursuits’. I am reminded of the warning issued to us by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in which he predicts that mankind’s progress will be halted once mankind becomes primarily preoccupied with happiness (these will be what he calls ‘the last human beings’).

> Then the earth has become small, and on it hops the last human being, who makes everything small . . . ‘We invented happiness’ – say the last human beings, blinking. (Nietzsche, 1891/2006, p. 10)

It is my deep hope that the work of this issue and the efforts of those who will build off of it in launching the burgeoning science of joy may show how joy can be developed and cultivated and why it is worth pursuing, and in so doing, help us to avoid the fate of Nietzsche’s last human beings. Joy may have been one of the most neglected topics within psychology up until now, but it may hold the secret for human flourishing in an increasingly complex and unpredictable world. Indeed, while the last human beings focus predominately on happiness and blink as they make the earth and everything in it small, perhaps a research agenda focused on joy may, with eyes wide open to the challenges outlined in this issue, make everything big (of lasting significance) again.

**Notes**

1. I am grateful to Robert Roberts for a helpful conversation about his article and related topics.
2. I am grateful to Julian Perlmutter for this passage and to the members of the Desire Seminar at the University of Cambridge for a helpful discussion on it.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**ORCID**

Matthew Kuan Johnson [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4768-9875](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4768-9875)

**References**

Casioppo, D. (2020). The cultivation of joy: Practices from the Buddhist tradition, the use of character strengths, and yogic philosophy. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Cloninger, K. M., & Cloninger, C. R. (2020). The psychobiology of the path to a joyful life: Implications for future research and practice. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Davis, D., Gazaway, S., & McLaughlin, A. (2020). Cautionary (and blessed) tales from the perils of the measurement phase. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Johnson, M. K. (2020). Joy: A review of the literature and suggestions for future directions. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. King, P. E. (2020). Joy distinguished: Teleological perspectives on joy as a virtue. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Krumrei-Mancuso, E. J. (2020). Reflections on the science of joy: Current challenges and future directions. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Merton, T. (1949). *Seeds of contemplation*. Norfolk: New Directions Publishing. Milton, J. (1667/2000). *Paradise lost*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. Newman, G., Knobe, J., & Bloom, P. (2014). Value judgments and the true self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(2), 203–216. Nietzsche, F. (1891/2006). *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. (A. Del Caro, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Roberts, R. (2020). Comment on Matthew Johnson’s literature review on joy. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Strawn, B. D. (2020). Contextual, embodied and clinical joy. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. 
Underwood, L. G. (2020). Refining research on joy. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*
Van Cappellen, P. (2020). The emotion of joy: Commentary on Johnson. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*

Watkins, P. C. (2020). Appraising joy. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*

Weil, S. (1951). *Waiting for God*. (E. Craufurd, Trans.). New York, NY: Routledge.