

Evaluating Scientific Progress in Positive Psychology

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The positive psychology literature has grown by leaps and bounds over the past two decades. A Google Scholar search of “positive psychology” from 1999 to 2016 produces over 36,000 results. It has influenced research across most subareas of psychology, including clinical, social, personality, cognitive, developmental, health, organizational, neuroscience, environmental, forensic, consumer, community, cross-cultural, gender, sports, gerontology, and psychosomatic medicine. This research has appeared in top-tier psychology journals such as *Frontiers in Psychology*, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *Psychological Science*, *Psychological Inquiry*, and *Psychological Bulletin*; influential disciplinary journals such as *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and *Administrative Science Quarterly*; and journals that showcase positive psychology, happiness, and quality of life research, such as the flagship *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, and *Social Indicators Research*.

The positive psychology orientation has also extended far beyond psychology and is now witnessed in fields as disparate as education, sociology, philosophy, political science, economics, technology, engineering, law, public policy, criminology, military, medicine, oncology, psychiatry, pharmacology, epidemiology, biology, animal welfare, hospitality, religion,

music, linguistics, anthropology, fine art, design, and social work. Furthermore, research and scholarship linked to positive psychology have been published in a wide range of high-impact, prestigious scientific journals, including *Nature*, *Science*, and *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

As the field of positive psychology has grown and developed, particularly across the breadth of subareas within psychology, we found that the range of new theories, research, applications, and explorations were not reflected in the existing literature in the field. Therefore, we invited prolific senior leaders who are actively shaping what positive psychology looks like and the next generation of scholarship in their areas to provide a commentary on the history and progression of their subarea, to carefully examine and report the latest scientific advances, and to share their vision for the future.

Positive Psychology in a Nutshell

So what is positive psychology? Positive psychology has been described as the scientific, rigorous, and organized inquiry on the positive aspects of human behavior (Gable & Haidt, 2005). The premise of this body of literature is that positive attributes of life and what gives meaning to it are just as worthy of scholarly attention as human dysfunction (Peterson, 2006). The early efforts of the founders of positive psychology strongly influenced the research trajectories and its interactions with specific subareas of psychology, such as social, clinical, cognitive, and organizational psychology. In broad terms, Seligman (2011) defined positive psychology as the scientific pursuit of well-being. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) further conceptualized positive psychology as research organized around three main pillars: positive experiences and states of being, positive traits of individuals, and positive enabling institutions. Similarly, positive psychology has been described as a science that uses a unique interpretive lens to find out “what works, what is right, and what is improving” (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). In contrast, the theory and research that emerged in response to these early calls took on a range of interdisciplinary flavors, offering new interpretations of “the positive,” innovative theories, subdiscipline-preferred research methods, and applications in context. Positive psychology scholarship as it stands today has far outgrown the early visions of the first generation of positive psychology scholars. We refer to this expanded, inclusive perspective that encompasses a wide range of topics and interests, and is increasingly attentive to social issues, adversity, cultural nuances, and context as the next wave of positive psychology. The purpose of the current volume is to offer insight into some of the historical developments of positive psychology scholarship within specific

subareas, the meanings it has come to take on, the cutting-edge scientific research that characterizes this next wave of positive psychology, and directions for future research and application.

Evaluating Positive Psychology Contributions

Since its inception in 1999–2000, a wealth of scientific research and scholarship has accumulated on topics associated with positive psychology. In order to assess the extent of the positive psychology contributions, we (first¹ and third authors²) examined the large and growing body of research of over 1,300 peer-reviewed articles that explicitly identified with positive psychology from 1999–2013 (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015). Since then, scholarship in positive psychology has continued to grow exponentially. This volume samples from some of the most generative areas revealed through our review and takes an in-depth look at recent scientific advances that are shaping the future of the field.

In our review (Donaldson et al., 2015), we found that well-being was the most studied topic, alongside character strengths and gratitude. Therefore, for the current volume we invited senior leaders in the field to provide an in-depth review and analysis of these topics. It also includes the examination of positive affect, which is studied in the context of happiness and other positive emotions, and is what we found to be a popular subject of intervention studies. Further, Donaldson et al. (2015) in combination with another ongoing review of the empirical literature (Ackerman, Warren, & Donaldson, 2017) indicated that the domains with the most measurement and application were positive youth development, positive educational contexts, and positive organizational psychology. Therefore, this volume features in-depth reviews from prominent scholars and their visions for exciting future directions in these areas of application.

Although positive psychology has made important contributions to the study of happiness and flourishing, it has been criticized as being dominated by Western perspectives. In reviews that examined positive psychology in nonhegemonic cultural contexts (e.g., Kim, Doiron, Warren, & Donaldson, 2016; Rao, Donaldson, & Doiron, 2015), we found that positive psychology was often interpreted to include positive ways of coping and being triumphant in the face of adversity. In an effort to showcase an important topic of relevance in this pursuit, this volume includes a review of recent advances in posttraumatic growth.

Another criticism leveled against the field has been a lack of attention to issues relevant to gender, race, and ethnicity. In our review (Rao & Donaldson, 2015), we assessed the extent to which this was an accurate

reflection of the literature in positive psychology and found inadequate discussion of how the strengths and assets of marginalized groups could be harnessed to overcome adversity and how their positive qualities could be nurtured and preserved. Therefore, in this volume experts in cultural contexts and positive psychology share their most promising contributions in these areas and directions for future research.

Overview of Contributions

The foundational concepts in positive psychology are well-being and happiness. In Chapter 2, Shin and Lyubomirsky note that the positive psychology literature on happiness and well-being has been dominated by Western perspectives. They extend the prevailing literature and provide a refreshing take on subjective well-being from an Eastern perspective. The chapter begins by summarizing the historical roots of subjective well-being, dating back to Buddhist philosophies, and then compares interdependent versus independent cultures' (Eastern versus Western) constructions of happiness, well-being, and social support. They review the current research on self-administered interdependent positive activity interventions to increase happiness and well-being and provide future directions in this area. Shin and Lyubomirsky observe that in today's globalized world, the study of how positive activity interventions affect subjective well-being is incomplete until scholars include the development and testing of culturally relevant interventions appropriate for local contexts. They call for future investigations that go beyond Western ideas and values and fully incorporate socially oriented cultures in empirical research on well-being and happiness. This chapter sets the stage for the following chapter on positive emotions and foreshadows insights from the concluding chapter on cultural contexts.

Positive emotions, particularly, the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), has been a bedrock of positive psychology scholarship on positive subjective experiences and, as such, the research on positive emotions is what many might consider the crux of positive psychology. In Chapter 3, Shiota, Yee, O'Neil, and Danvers trace the theoretical and empirical advances in positive emotion research over the past 20 years. They suggest that although research on emotion has traditionally focused on the survival value of negative emotions, the 21st century has seen a substantial increase in research on positive emotions and how they play adaptive functions for the human species. The authors discuss three areas for applying positive emotions research in important real-world interventions: promoting health behavior change, supporting close relationships, and

helping troubled intergroup relations. Finally, they discuss recommendations for future research—examining when “positive” emotions are undesirable, measuring positive emotions, and investigating their downstream effects. Shiota and colleagues offer a bold vision for the future of positive emotion research and open the door for scholars to explore many new opportunities in this area.

In Chapter 4, Park, Barton, and Pillay delve into the topic of character strengths, another key pillar of positive psychology. The authors describe why character is important and how positive psychology and character strengths inform each other. They offer a comprehensive review of the scholarship on *Values in Action* (VIA) and offer deep insights on how character strengths function. Further, they share honest reflections on the shortcomings of the VIA and areas for clarification and growth in terms of measurement and applicability across contexts and cultures. The authors also discuss implications for practice, including how to cultivate character strengths and implement strengths-based approaches. They conclude by suggesting that future character strengths research should extend outward to hard outcome measures (e.g., health, work productivity, and educational achievement) and cultural differences. They recommend that positive psychology should take bold yet cautious steps in cultivating and sustaining a morally good life.

Gratitude is one of the prominent topics in positive psychology that has developed a considerable empirical evidence base. In Chapter 5, Watkins and Bell review the current research in the context of key theories of gratitude. They evaluate theories on the nature of gratitude (e.g., as an emotion and as a trait), the cognitive causes of gratitude, and how gratitude enhances well-being. A key contribution of this chapter is the development of a theory of appreciation. They discuss how gratitude must involve the psychological processes of appreciation and offer directions for future examination. The authors conclude with their candid perspective on the state of gratitude research. On one hand, they feel that some have an overly optimistic view of gratitude, particularly the popular press. On the other hand, the authors note that there has been an overwhelmingly pessimistic reception of gratitude by scholars who point out that gratitude is not always appropriate. They encourage a more balanced perspective with the hope that gratitude research can enhance happiness.

In Chapter 6, Tedeschi, Blevins, and Riffle review the history and development of posttraumatic growth (PTG) research. They outline the foundation of the PTG process (i.e., the assumptive world theory) and its role in how PTG is operationalized. They offer an overview of the most important measures of PTG and the empirical advances that have helped

construct a strong evidence base on the PTG process. The chapter provides empirically derived insights about the PTG process, such as challenging core beliefs, self-disclosure, event centrality, and cross-cultural and individual differences. They discuss some of the conceptual challenges of PTG and discuss future directions for PTG research, including the application of PTG interventions to trauma survivors. The authors argue that trauma is ubiquitous to the human experience and that research on PTG interventions can make impactful contributions to society. The chapter concludes with future directions of conceptual and empirical advancement of PTG with children and adolescents, as well as in relationships, groups and larger systems. Finally, they offer recommendations for future directions in longitudinal and intervention research.

The next three chapters focus on positive psychology in applied settings. In Chapter 7, Larson, Orson, and Bowers offer an overview of intrinsic motivation (IM) and socioemotional (SE) learning as the next major contributions of positive youth development scholarship. They draw from roughly 50 years of research on IM and present five conditions that facilitate its experience. They propose that IM is a crucial component to youth's socioemotional learning because when youth are motivated their learning processes are amplified. Further, they point to youth programs as rich contexts for developing IM while noting that IM is missing in many adolescents' school experiences. The authors describe two large longitudinal qualitative studies of afterschool and out-of-school youth programs and outline the SE learning processes among high school-aged youth. They share key insights from the case examples to demonstrate how IM amplifies learning processes. The chapter concludes with their perspective on synergies between IM and positive youth development for the 21st century and suggests directions for future research. The authors forecast that for adolescents coming of age in a complex society, opportunity for development of nuanced socioemotional learning skills and access to conditions for the development of IM will be key to providing youth with the skills they need to flourish.

Employees are among the most studied populations from the positive psychology perspective (Ackerman et al., 2017). In Chapter 8, Warren, Donaldson, and Luthans explore the history of the positive psychological orientation in work and organizations. The authors trace the history of positively oriented inquiry in the area of work and organizations and discuss three streams of scholarship: (a) positive organizational psychology, (b) positive organizational behavior, and (c) positive organizational scholarship. The authors present the five most generative scholarly contributions that have expanded theory and research on employee attributes and organizational processes, including happiness and well-being at

work, positive leadership, positive work relationships, psychological capital, and organizational virtuousness. Although these are important contributions to the field, the authors highlight the need for cross-pollination of research across the three streams and beyond. To reach this aim they propose a broad umbrella term for the positive orientation they call “positive work and organizations,” to encourage discussion among scholars who approach the workplace from a positive perspective. Lastly, the authors suggest that the future of positive work and organizational literature lies in attention to issues of diversity and relevance to marginalized groups. They call for more research in this area, and offer directions for future research that can support and strengthen marginalized groups.

Positive education has become one of the key vehicles for applying positive psychology principles. In Chapter 9, Waters addresses this alliance between positive psychology and education, also known as positive education. She offers a macro perspective of the area, leading into three arguments for expanding the field: (a) well-being is crucial to global policy, (b) positive education enhances student well-being, and (c) student well-being is related to academic outcomes. She suggests that positive education interventions are a promising approach for enhancing the well-being of not only students, but the entire population. She acknowledges the limitations of existing and past positive education programs and offers a new framework, Visible Well-Being (VWB), to overcome them. The key thesis of the VWB framework is to imbue positive education into teacher practice and make positive outcomes for students visible and measurable. This also opens the door for new cross-disciplinary research. Waters concludes with the argument that positive education is critical in the creation of a collective upward spiral that can make global well-being a reality.

The final chapter sets the stage for a more inclusive positive psychology of the future. In Chapter 10, Pedrotti and Edwards provide a snapshot of the multifaceted nature of culture in positive psychology. Social identity facets such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and social class are highlighted and measurement issues (i.e., conceptual, functional, metric, and linguistic equivalence across groups) are discussed. The authors highlight that culture is complex, and intersectionality (i.e., coexistence of multiple cultural facets in the same person) of these various social identity facets can shape culture in a number of ways. They provide an overview of the extant contributions of positive psychology on issues of race, gender, social class, disability, and sexual orientation. Pedrotti and Edwards call for future research to move away from a barriers-focused framing in multicultural populations and toward inclusion of both unique and shared experiences of individuals within these

various social identity facets. They offer therapeutic applications of a culturally sensitive positive psychology and recommend that future research integrate genetic underpinnings and cultural context to address societal concerns. They also suggest future research address researchers' self-awareness of their own biases to further understand how certain individuals have been included and excluded in the extant psychological literature. Pedrotti and Edwards assert that there is a promising future, and a great need, for culture-sensitive positive psychological research.

Final Thoughts

The contributions in this volume have surpassed expectations. One of the most exciting revelations from this volume is that there is growing interest in scholarship that is more inclusive, rich, and contextualized. For instance, we see from the progression in the study of happiness and well-being that scholars are beginning to engage with non-Western populations and cross-cultural comparisons of happiness interventions. Across chapters, we witnessed the growth of what we think is the next wave of positive psychology—a science that is culturally responsive, sensitive to adversity, and where inclusion and engagement with questions of diversity are encouraged as part of the mainstream dialogue, rather than a “special interest.” Positive psychology promises to offer a fresh, complementary perspective that enriches scholarly thinking about these issues. We invite students, faculty, scholars, practitioners, and curious-at-heart people from around the world to enjoy the chapters of this volume. For those seeking a handy introduction to the cutting edge of positive psychology, we hope you will benefit by mentally digesting these new approaches, learnings, and insights to human flourishing.

Notes

1. Rao, in all citations in this chapter, refers to the first author, Warren, who was previously Rao.
2. Donaldson, in all citations in this chapter, refers to the third author, Stewart I. Donaldson.

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