Positive Psychology and Cultural Sensitivity: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract: This paper aims to address the cultural sensitivity of positive psychology. In 2000, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) developed positive psychology, which focuses on individuals' strengths, in an attempt to move away from the emphasis on pathology within psychology. While the field attempts to capitalize on people's strong points, it does not portray all definitions of happiness and well-being that vary across cultures. A review of the literature shows that cultural differences exist in terms of peoples' values, emotions, and how they define the self. Careful review of the literature has provided evidence to support the lack of culturally based content within the field. As a result, the authors conclude that positive psychology is not culturally sensitive.

Within the field of psychology, it is imperative for professionals to be knowledgeable of individuals' cultural backgrounds in order to fully understand the sources of people's behaviors and worldviews. The lack of understanding of others' backgrounds may lead to misconceptions about the causes of their behaviors. In a society where the ideology of individualism prevails, it is only logical for professionals within the field to have a tendency toward attributing the responsibility of behavior to the individual, without fully taking into account the effects of the environment surrounding them. Therefore, individuals who do not subscribe to an individualistic framework may be negatively affected by theories that are based on such ideology. One consequence may be the unintended labeling of those individuals as possessing characteristics that are less than desirable, and engaging in behaviors that are deemed unproductive, and possibly unhealthy.

One new discipline within psychology that takes the overarching focus off of emphasizing people's weaknesses and treating psychopathology is referred to as positive psychology. In general, positive psychology aims to study individuals' strong points, and their attainment of happiness and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Although one may view this new field as opening up the possibility to cross-culturally address the positive characteristics of all individuals, positive psychology has been accused of upholding an individualistic framework, which has effected how researchers study well-being in all persons. In order to assess whether positive psychology is culturally sensitive, it is necessary to define the concept of cultural sensitivity.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

The aspects of cultural sensitivity consist of knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect, and tailoring (Foronda, 2008). In order for one to be culturally sensitive, one must have knowledge of cultural differences and values of other individuals (Center For Effective Collaboration and Practice, 2002). Cultural sensitivity also comes from the understanding that one's background, values, and biases must be initially considered so one is able to recognize how these may affect their perceptions of others (Al-Krenaw & Graham, 2000). The third essential aspect of cultural sensitivity is that an individual must understand the importance of another's beliefs and experiences (Guberman & Maheu, 2004). Respect refers to the appreciation and regard that one shows for the experiences and values of another human being. The last attribute of cultural sensitivity is tailoring, which encompasses the idea that a change or adaptation of one's worldviews to consider another person's or to meet someone else's needs is essential in becoming culturally sensitive. In other words, one may have to tailor his or her own beliefs in order to see the perspective of another's (Foronda, 2008).

FRAMEWORK OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology, founded by Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is a relatively new field that has emerged with the focus of emphasizing the strengths of individuals (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This perspective aims to shift away from the disease model, which has dominated the field of psychology since the end of World War II. The disease model concentrates on treating pathologies within human functioning rather than acknowledging positive characteristics that individuals possess. Within positive psychology, it is just as vital to ask "What is right about people?" as it is to ask "What is wrong with people?" (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

Within the field, four basic personal traits are recognized as contributing to positive psychology: subjective well-being, happiness, optimism, and self-determination (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Subjective well-being refers to what people think and feel about their lives. Subjective well-being is a scientific term for what people typically refer to as happiness. Optimism is seen as a character trait that mediates between external events and people's perceptions of them. Individuals high in optimism have been found to have better moods and be more physically healthy. Self-determination applies to the need for individuals to feel competent, to feel that they belong, and to be autonomous. Furthermore,

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positive psychology seeks to explore valued experiences on the subjective level encompassing an individual's past, present, and future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Positive psychology breaks down subjective experiences and assesses: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction in the past; flow and happiness in the present; and hope and optimism for the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The founders of positive psychology identified specific positive traits within individuals which include: "the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5). Another aspect of positive psychology places individuals in a societal context and focuses on their position within the community. These desirable traits include: "responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5). After addressing the main concepts within the field, it is apparent that the framework is based on strengthening the self. Although this seems like a groundbreaking and necessary addition to the field of psychology, it has arrived with mixed reactions. The main criticism of the discipline is that it does not take into account how the self is defined in other cultures. If people from all backgrounds are to benefit from the findings in the field, then the structure of the field cannot be built upon theories that are only supported within European American culture. This is just one of the criticisms that will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

MULTICULTURAL IMPLICATIONS FOR POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) scrutinized positive psychology, stating it was founded on ethnocentric ideals and an individualistic framework. There are many aspects that appear to contribute to the framework of positive psychology, such as promoting the independent self, happiness and positive emotions, and core values. The overarching problem of this foundation is that not every culture views these facets of life with the same perspective. The entire structure of positive psychology is founded on Western assumptions that are thought to lead to a better life. Therefore, if one does not embody the characteristics of individualism and self-efficacy, he or she may not meet our Western conceptualization of happiness.

The Self across Cultures

Positive psychology is based on the issue of developing the self, but the self does not hold the same meaning across cultures. In Western societies, the self is seen as independent and autonomous; whereas the self in collectivistic cultures is seen as interdependent and dutiful. For example, a revered individual in East Asian societies would be dutiful to their parents and elders, which would show that he or she possessed a high level of maturity and good character (Hoshmand & Ho, 1995). On the other hand, an individual from Western societies would view duty and obedience as a restraint to reaching one's potential (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). The ideology of individualism is so engrained in the minds of Westerners that it is assumed that other nations idealize independence and autonomy as well. In fact, individualistic societies only account for about 30 percent of the world's population (Triandis, 1989). Reaching self-efficacy in Western cultures is seen as a pathway to the fundamental goal of happiness (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008).

Emotions across Cultures

Delving deeper into happiness and what it means, it is not only important to ask how one attains happiness, it is necessary to ponder if happiness is a priority in every culture (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). In Western cultures it is implied that everyone is in the pursuit of happiness, but this goal is not culturally universal. Ahuvia (2001) posited that "Westerners tend to see individual happiness as the ultimate motivation underlying all action" (p.77). In fact, most citizens of collectivistic cultures value and act in accordance to social expectations and honor to their elders more than they seek individual happiness (Ahuvia, 2001).

Along with the emotion of happiness, individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in their views of positive and negative emotions (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). For example, Western cultures view self-criticism in a negative light, while several collectivistic cultures use self-criticism positively to strengthen character and align with societal expectations (Heine et al., 2001). Chang (1996) conducted a study that examined optimism and pessimism in Asian Americans and Caucasians. In the study, the results showed that Asian Americans were significantly more pessimistic than Caucasians, but there was no difference between levels of depressive symptoms. Therefore, the author concluded that pessimism does not necessarily relate to depression in Asian cultures as it does the Caucasian culture. Overall, a number of negative emotions in Western cultures are perceived positively in East Asian cultures; these

emotions are viewed as a catalyst for improvement and growth (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). It is evident that emotions are not universally positive or negative, which leads to strong implications for the utilization of positive psychology across cultures.

Values across Cultures

It is clear that emotions do not have the same universal meanings, and the same argument can be made for valued personal traits. According to Peterson & Seligman (2004), there are six universal virtues that all cultures hold in high regard: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence. Of these six virtues, the authors created a subset composed of 24 sought after strengths, known as the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths. Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) questioned these "universal" strengths by positing that commonalities can be found if that is what one is seeking. They criticized the fact that Peterson and Seligman only looked for commonalities – the creators of the VIA Classification of Strengths identified common values, but ignored the understanding of the values. Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) conclude that instead of providing a better understanding of different cultures, Peterson and Seligman oversimplified them. They stated that the 24 desirable strengths may include other cultures, but the meanings of the strengths are still Western-oriented.

MULTICULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) made the bold statement that "positive psychology is doomed to being narrow and ethnocentric as long as its researchers remain unaware of the cultural assumptions underlying their work" (p.565). To attend to this issue, researchers and practitioners are slowly making shifts in order to decrease the egocentrism of the positive psychology approach and develop a more culturally sensitive model (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). The theory of positive psychology is inherently based on Western views and ideologies, which is a problem needing to be addressed. However, as Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) stated, a deeper problem lies within the researchers (and practitioners) themselves. The people that embody the field of positive psychology need to be put under a microscope just as much as the theory itself does.

Taking a closer look into the approaches of positive psychologists, it is vital to examine how the professionals view culture in relation to positive

psychology research and practice. Snyder and Lopez (2007) described an ongoing debate among positive psychology professionals that has yet to be resolved. The debate surrounding culture asks the question if positive psychology is culture-free or culturally embedded. Professionals supporting the culture-free mentality believe that positive psychology is objective and universal. Therefore, culture is not seen as an issue and it does not play a role in their research or practice. Positive psychologists subscribing to this approach consider happiness as the guiding force in the lives of people everywhere. While many positive psychologists are advocates of this model, there are many other professionals that think otherwise.

Professionals guided by the culturally embedded perspective believe that it is unwise to ignore cultural influences and values (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). The culturally embedded approach takes into account that not every culture values the same strengths or follows the pursuit of happiness. Also, professionals following this model realize that researchers and practitioners conduct their work based on cultural values and assumptions. Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) exemplified this point by stating that no form of psychology is free of either culture or values. Christopher (2005) insists that ethnocentric conclusions can be prevented if professionals think in a culturally sensitive manner, instead of denying the existence of cultural differences. Christopher also stresses that professionals in the field of positive psychology should recognize their own values and moral visions in order to understand perspectives from other cultures. Suggestions for positive psychologists, researchers, and practitioners to become more culturally sensitive are stated a great deal in many forms of literature, but it is necessary to examine whether these suggestions are being utilized.

CONCLUSION

While it is clear that the theory of positive psychology is innovative and ground-breaking, the values and ideologies of the field need to be examined more closely. Western ideologies and assumptions underlie the entire foundation of positive psychology, which makes research and practice almost impossible to transcend to non-Western cultures. Different cultures define the self in various ways, experience emotions differently, and have an array of diverse values. Positive psychologists have attempted to put the field in a multicultural context, but the field is still far from attaining cultural sensitivity. There are aspects within the field of positive psychology that can be adjusted to include non-Western cultures, but the main problem of cultural sensitivity lies within the positive psychology professionals.

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While there are many professionals in the field of positive psychology that consider culture when they are in practice or conducting research, there are a significant number of professionals that subscribe to a culture-free approach. Denying cultural perspectives can be detrimental; it is ignorant to think that culture does not play a role in values or ideologies. The field needs to implement aspects of cultural sensitivity, but this sensitivity needs to start with the professionals first. As stated earlier, Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) emphasized that researchers are at the heart of the cultural sensitivity issue. Professionals need to be aware of their cultural assumptions, because ultimately those assumptions will influence their work. Furthermore, if individuals from all cultures are able to benefit from the findings of this field, professionals are obligated to alter the framework in order to incorporate all cultures' viewpoints on happiness and well-being.

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