Chapter 19
A Final Reappraisal: Do We Really Need to Develop Positive Psychology Around the World?

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Contributors to this volume have illustrated the global reach of the positive psychology movement through highlighting hundreds of researchers striving on virtually every continent to better understand and apply scientific knowledge of the life well lived. These authors have connected the accomplishments of researchers throughout each region to aspects of shared history, language, culture, economics, education, government, and science within each region and nation that have shaped the development of positive psychology in that part of the world; and, where national experiences or differences were relevant, distinguished those factors within regions as well. What has resulted is a massive and diverse picture of positive psychology's adherents and advocates, which nearly every author admitted was but a skim of the surface of work being done throughout each geographic area.

Our objective in assembling this volume, of course, was not only to catalogue what has been done, but also to promote a greater commitment to the growth of positive psychology throughout the world. It is our belief that national investment in positive psychology brings symbolic gains as well as practical ones. Regarding practical benefit, nations abuzz with research, teaching, and practice activity in positive psychology are reaping the rewards of commitments to higher education,

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scientific exploration, and development of human capital that are surely bringing tangible returns through greater health, security, and economic growth and innovation. Basically, if a nation or region is investing in positive psychology, that region necessarily is manifesting a high priority on supporting the many institutions and systems within the region where positive psychology is done, and which demonstrably contribute to greater well-being. The symbolic benefit, in addition, can come in the form of communicating to one's own population and to the world at large an awareness that *lived well-being matters*—that despite macro-level cycles of growth and stagnation, and of security and volatility, the everyday experience of individual people and their social networks remains the foundation of a nation's capacity to flourish. In times when individuals can all-too-easily feel forgotten or used by societal institutions, this message can help to shore up national and regional faith that human beings can work together through social structures to advance our goals. If the potential for applications of positive psychology to improve outcomes is really "almost unlimited" (Wong, 2011, p. 69), then it seems to go without saying that the present decade proceeding into the 2020's is when we must begin to truly tap that potential.

In 1997, noted historian of psychology Kurt Danziger related a personal anecdote that we feel is relevant to the endeavor of this volume, and to the goal of using positive psychology as a venue for global investment in quality of life. He described how he had once had the experience of traveling to Indonesia to meet with a fellow researcher and professor of psychology, with a goal of co-designing a course that would overview the discipline of psychology from each of their cultural frameworks. Each went into the negotiation assuming that certain crosswalks would have to be built among concepts, and understood that their different native languages might have some influence on the sense and reference of their respective terminology. However, as they began to discuss the concepts that each believed their shared course would cover, they discovered to their mutual confusion and dismay that the overlap in what they each considered within the purview of psychology was surprisingly slight. Danziger offered the example of motivation as one of their areas of disconnect. To Danziger (and Western psychology generally) the idea there exist certain "forces" that drive behavior and are uniquely worthy of study is broadly accepted—even taken for granted as basic, unquestionable fact. In contrast, Danziger's Indonesian counterpart did not consider "motivation" a coherent, comprehensible phenomenon at all, let alone a thing that can and should be studied empirically by psychologists. No matter how much Danziger attempted to explain and defend the concept, his peer resisted; and likewise, his peer suggested a range of concepts that held absolutely no meaning or importance to psychology as understood by Danziger. Eventually, they agreed to call the project itself a bust. Danziger reflected at length on this experience, concluding that (1) it behooves us to be aware that different cultures do not draw the same boundary lines among the components of "mind," (2) that validation of one's own framework as inherently superior to that of others is impossible; and (3) psychological study itself cannot be conducted without a set of a priori understandings regarding what the mind is, as those understandings determine the questions of interest and the appropriate

methods of inquiry (Danziger, 1997). As we have asked researchers around the globe to follow our guidelines for sharing the accomplishments of their most influential positive psychologists, it is crucial that we acknowledge how our request itself imposed a certain structure upon this extremely diverse group of scholars. This, of course, is symbolic of how the predominance of the Western conceptualization of psychology risks narrowing our ability to understand and appreciate how members of various cultures have thrived over centuries.

With that caveat (to which we will return in the closing section of this chapter), we would like to identify and expand upon some observations we made, stimulated by the collective work of our contributors. This "universalist" approach should not be seen as ignoring important issues in positive psychology that are more localized to specific regions, and admittedly is prone to the biases that we bring to our analysis of what they have presented. However, we do wish to make an effort to offer our perspective in the service of promoting the advancement of positive psychology throughout the world.

Broad Attention to Positive Experiences and Traits, with a Tendency Towards Highlighting Comparisons Where They Are Known to Exist

As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted in their seminal paper, the "new" discipline of positive psychology was conceptualized as dedicated to understanding "valued subjective experiences [...] positive individual traits [...] (and) the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship" (p. 5). Indeed, a great many of our contributors reviewed research on subjective experiences such as happiness, well-being, hope, and optimism, frequently noting the various ways in which these experiences are interpreted within the culture, are measured in their regional populations, and how the typical frequency or intensity of these experiences compare to that of other regions and cultures. Similarly, positive traits such as character strengths, courage, and capacity for positive relationship-building appeared with some frequency in this volume's writings, with different authors often relating specific cultural practices and values to findings regarding the typicality and exhibition of certain positive traits in their populations. Where such traits had been compared empirically across cultures, findings were often noted as well.

Even so, can we be certain we are comparing "apples to apples"? Matsumoto and Yoo (2006) described an evolution in cross-cultural psychological research from basic assessment and recording of differences between cultures, to more recent work that also includes integrative theorizing on findings on differences into a broader model of how culture may or may not predict and explain certain aspects of diverse experience and behavior. These authors lauded this shift as overcoming a number of theoretical and methodological problems of previous research; for example, a shift

from simply describing differences to developing common dimensions of difference (such as individualism vs. collectivism) increased the predictive power of later research. To continue this evolution, these authors advocated for what they called "linkage studies," empirical investigations of not only the phenomenon that is thought to differ among cultures, and the dimensional models those phenomena relate to, but also proposed mechanisms at play that create those dimensional differences among cultures. For example, what socialization processes may underlie a culture's tendency towards individualism vs. collectivism? How can we measure those processes empirically?

At each step along this evolutionary process in cross-cultural research, there are greater opportunities to discover differences in understandings of phenomena, which is a main strength of this approach. However, the overview of work offered in the present volume depicts global positive psychology as not having progressed far on this continuum as of yet. With positive psychology developing at vastly different paces in different areas of the world, this is not surprising—but an integrative international positive psychology is a far-flung dream at present. Therefore, as researchers from more areas of the world take advantage of opportunities to engage with one another and compare positive experiences and traits, and begin more focused work on developing more dimensional and integrative approaches to understanding regional differences, it may actually result that the basic phenomena themselves operate so differently as to make the first-level comparison problematic. That is, at a certain point in proposing and investigating a possible model of cultural difference, we may have to conclude that the things we are comparing are so different in nature that the initial comparison itself becomes less, rather than more, meaningful.

Relatively Less Understanding or Clarity Regarding the Civic Virtues and Institutions

Throughout this volume (and perhaps in positive psychology more generally), less attention appeared to be given to the so-called "civic virtues and institutions" that help people engage more positively and productively with their communities, such as responsibility, altruism, and moderation (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These aspects of psychological life are necessary to develop in ourselves and others, as they support each of us in navigating our complex social worlds in positive ways. In addition, understanding the circumstances within which these tendencies develop—especially situations of pain, loss, hardship, and challenge—may actually provide us a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the virtues themselves (Wong, 2011; Wood & Tarrier, 2010). While a number of authors referred to the concept of *eudaimonic happiness* in their narrative (which can include the idea that contributing to others is an important part of happiness and its durability, though this aspect of the definition is not universally recognized; Disabato et al., 2016), few

chose to (or were able to) share empirical findings on how members of their culture actively develop this type of happiness in others. This is by no means to say that none of our authors shared descriptions of effective programs and interventions that were found to improve well-being. Indeed (and this may reflect some cultural values or opportunities), some authors elected to most strongly recognize scholars from their region who had dedicated themselves to developing, delivering, and studying positive psychology interventions. However, the relative under emphasis in this volume and others on this prosocial aspect of positive psychology is worth careful consideration, especially given the impacts that important societal-level variables such as cultural history, economic conditions, and political environment have had on regional development of positive psychology. If positive psychology researchers have generated less in this category of the discipline than in the other two, what is driving that and what are the consequences?

Regarding causes of this disparity, it may be that the civic virtues category is itself a higher-level category of positive phenomena than experiences and traits. That is, one must first understand what the individual experiences as positive, and then exhibits habitually as positive, before one may knowledgeably explore how the individual develops the positive and then cycles it back out into one's community. If we are still in the earlier stages of documenting basic positive phenomena in cultures throughout the world, then the relative lack of findings on civic virtues and processes may be yet to come as the field continues to grow and mature. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) offered the model of clinical psychology to buttress their argument for the basic need for a positive psychology, but they may also have previewed this developmental progression through the mental illness metaphor. After establishing what constitutes mental illness, rigorous investigations into cause were initiated, and eventually examinations of prevention were undertaken. International positive psychology might simply be young at present.

It may also be the case that the categories outlined by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) and adopted at the start of this section are themselves somewhat contrived, and that the distinction between experiences and traits vs. civic virtues in particular is arbitrary and itself subject to cultural bias. For what does it mean in practice for one to have hope, or optimism, or courage? Presumably, at least part of each of those concepts includes the actions that one takes in the world that are relevant to those ideas. To be hopeful is not only to "feel" hopeful in an emotional sense, but also to do things that reflect positive expectations of oneself, one's surroundings, and one's future. This is in fact the framework that underlies Snyder et al.'s (1991) model of hope as composed of a sense of *agency* (e.g., self-efficacy, effectiveness) and planning of *pathways* (e.g., action steps, goal achievement) to future progress. In another example, the Values in Action character virtues model (Seligman et al., 2005) in some ways bridges between traits and positive social engagement, as individuals are thought to show trait-like stability in some interpersonal tendencies that are identified as virtues (such as kindness, leadership, forgiveness, and social intelligence).

Broadly writ, if "good works" are essential to being able to claim as one's own certain "good experiences" and "good traits" (even if some of the specific works go

unmeasured), then perhaps most of what was reviewed in this volume advances well-being in communities and institutions by their very nature. When we act positively, we both manifest our positive experience and traits, and leave a positive impact on our world. Cultural bias might come in the form of seeking to distinguish these categories from one another, studying them as if they are distinct (which given accepted distinctions among thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in Western psychology, may be more common in individualistic cultures), or in giving primacy to individually-centered vs socially-centered phenomena (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). In more collectivistic cultures where the self is experienced as more embedded in one's context, a distinction between one's "experiences" and one's "actions" might accord less with one's worldview (Uchida et al. 2004). And of course, another cultural bias could be at work in assuming that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) intended for these concepts to be considered separate categories at all!

Regardless of these (almost philosophical) complexities, it did appear to us that one could perceive some differences across regions in regard to engagement in intentional interventions for enhancing positive functioning. To return to one of our early comments, such differences across regions may reflect disparities in resources, shared cultural beliefs and practices, and/or convictions of those in power that result in generally well-off regions of the world gleaning greater benefit from the applied potential of positive psychology than less-well-off regions do. Thus positive psychology may not be immune to the same types of cyclical processes that recapitulate inequality in other areas of human functioning (such as physical health, mental health, education, economic opportunity, and the like). While this may seem discouraging, it should give researchers greater incentive to consider testing new interventions in relatively-underserved regions of the world with greater frequency. It would seem reasonable to assume that testing appropriately-designed interventions in underserved areas would afford the researcher a greater chance of demonstrating an effect than in areas that are already doing relatively well. Where the floor is low, there is much room to grow. Indeed, interventions that have been attempted in well-served areas may have been hampered by limited opportunity for incremental validity of the intervention to be found; and/or, by inadequacies in the evaluation methodology itself (a problem that has been discussed specifically in regard to positive psychology interventions elsewhere; Wood & Tarrier, 2010). We therefore encourage researchers wishing to test new interventions to think broadly about what their goals are, and in what setting they might implement new programs to more efficiently and effectively examine their potential.

A Need to Attend to Context in What Is "Positive" or "Negative"

In assembling this volume, we observed rather few examples of different authors discussing the same phenomena, but with the opposite—or even a very different—valence. For example, happiness was approached as a positive experience wherever it appeared; there were no authors who provided a discussion of happiness that asserted it to be a harmful experience in any region of the world or culture. There were some discussions of differences in how happiness is conceptualized, perceived, or pursued by people from different cultures (in a notable example, the prototypical Russian approach to happiness was described as including a certain skepticism, resignation, pessimism, or suspicion compared to various other cultures), but for the most part happiness itself was taken to be a mostly good thing. Perhaps with the particular example of happiness, there is nothing surprising about this—it may well be an ontological issue. If 'happiness' is the word we use to denote positive feeling, it may by definition be good. However, Gruber et al. (2011) point out that the "dark sides" of happiness may actually be misunderstood. In a unique review of literature, they ask many important questions about the "critical boundary conditions to the benefits of happiness" such as, "Is there a wrong degree of happiness? Is there a wrong time for happiness? Are there wrong ways to pursue happiness? Are there wrong types of happiness?" (p. 223). In their review, these authors note a number of findings that do seem to show that there can be such a thing as too much happiness, ill-timed happiness, and the like, including examples from cross-cultural research indicating that certain groups may differ in consequential ways in their approach to happiness. Other researchers, such as Furnham and Christoforou (2007) and Morris (2004) have also offered specific examinations of how happiness is conceptualized and measured, attempting to determine whether happiness has maladaptive dimensions. (One must ponder whether such research on happiness counts as "positive psychology" or not.) The contributors to our particular volume showed little awareness of, or additions to, such work in their particular regions—but that does not mean the issue is not important to understand from an international perspective.

Separate from happiness, one can generate a great list of other phenomena that do not beg the 'positivity' question in this manner, and yet were generally treated in this volume as known goods. Hope, optimism, self-esteem, and kindness might be examples of such concepts. Past scholars, however, have raised concerns that simply taking certain phenomena as unquestioned goods ignores the fact that in certain contexts (such as in situations of clear threat or where others should not be trusted), these experiences or traits might confer risk or harm (McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Pedrotti et al., 2009; Sandage et al., 2003). And what if a character trait typically taken to be a "virtue" is applied in the pursuit of negative goals? One may have exceptional strengths in self-assurance and pathways thinking (meaning they have high "hope"), but have an objective to harm others. Are fascist leaders high in "grit"? Do we want to foster "optimism" in the sociopath? As of now, many of these constructs make certain assumptions about a moral and ethical code being followed

as a baseline for the "good," but such unstated norms are all-too-easily discarded by those with ill aims. We are not ready to state that positive psychology is negligent at present in regard to these questions, but we do wonder whether enough scholars are approaching such contextual issues responsibly enough. It may be worthwhile for leaders in this discipline to begin discussing how to situate these constructs more clearly, such that possible abuse of research findings is unlikely to pass any muster.

If there is broad agreement that certain phenomena are "mostly good," how worried should we be about a general lack of controversy on those constructs? It seems to us that the many apparent similarities across cultures in how various phenomena are approached could represent two very different processes at play. First, it may be that Western assumptions about which psychological phenomena to reify and study has permeated work globally and set certain bounds on how positive psychological concepts are approached. Such "psychological colonialism" might confer the benefit of a shared language for positive human experience, but also serve to crowd out traditional understandings that do not correspond to the dominant model. In addition, an unacknowledged motivation to preserve the status quo might make fair investigations of the downsides of "the good" less likely to be undertaken. In an age when being "woke" regarding issues of privilege is gaining greater traction, it is important to plumb such possibilities in a serious manner and engage diverse voices in dialogue about the direction of the field.

Second and alternatively, however, the coalescence of multiple cultures around the goodness of hope, forgiveness, and the like may mean these actually are more good than bad for humankind. As the Values in Action (Seligman et al., 2005) research team demonstrated, for example, a careful search for character traits that appear in treasured, long-standing texts around the world, have connections to diverse cultural traditions, and are viewed within multiple cultures as desirable to both exhibit personally and to develop in the young, has revealed certain cognitive/affective/behavioral tendencies that appear to be valued universally (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005). While the exact understanding, expression, and relative value of these traits differs across cultures, their appearance on the battery affirms that they are endorsed in a diverse range of societies.

We cannot offer a single resolution to this debate, but we do believe that it is important as international positive psychology progresses for researchers to more consistently seek to take a complex look at circumstances within which certain positive experiences, traits, or virtues may actually have a "shadow side." As elaborated by other scholars (i.e., McNulty & Fincham, 2012), positive psychology is vulnerable to criticism as disregarding the realities of human hardship if there is not evidence of awareness that even "the good" can have disadvantages in the right (wrong?) circumstances.

Circling Back to Danziger (1997)

So, do we need to develop positive psychology around the world; and if so, how should we go about that? The answer from our contributors to the first question is a resounding *yes*—every author made a compelling case for the benefit already incurred, and the future potential envisioned, in broader and deeper investment in positive psychology within each region and nation discussed. Many traced the growth of positive psychology within specific areas, from (for example) a single university course offering or conference hosting, to larger and more ambitious endeavors that had left meaningful impact upon various constituencies. We cannot disagree with the final assessment that positive psychology should be advanced throughout the world. Their evidence is clear.

The more difficult question, of course, is how this should be done. Good intentions and strong convictions are not sufficient to the task. Danziger (1997) and his Indonesian colleague shared a vision for a teaching experience that they both anticipated would be rich, invigorating, and valuable to themselves and their students. Still, try as they might, they ultimately did not succeed in bringing their shared seminar to fruition, as the very thing they wanted to depict to students (their differing cultural understandings of psychology) was what proved impossible to organize into a single coherent framework. We do not believe that the lesson to be learned here is that an international, multicultural, integrative, complicated positive psychology cannot be created or should not be pursued with vigor. Instead, we hope that volumes such as this help to stimulate more conversation among the best minds in the discipline about how the challenge of this work can be approached as its strength. To do this well, we must commit ourselves to patience, tolerance, curiosity, focus, and courage. In these pages are new threads of connection waiting to be tied between researchers, institutions, nations, and cultures. We hope you will be inspired to pluck one and pull, and see where the thread leads.

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