

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Scholarly interest in positive psychology has grown explosively over the past several years (Hart & Sasso, 2011; Jarden, 2012a; Waterman, 2012; Wong, 2011; Yen, 2011), and has moved from describing the nature and dynamics of well-being to also exploring and evaluating the ways in which well-being can be achieved (e.g., Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Mazzucchelli, Kane, & Rees, 2010; Proctor et al., 2011). Positive psychology has expanded from a focus on subjective well-being, satisfaction with life, and hedonic happiness, to a focus on meaning and other facets as understood from an eudaimonic well-being perspective, as well as currently also attention to the integration of hedonic and eudaimonic facets (Henderson & Knight, 2012). Positive psychology has also broadened its' scope to now include—apart from positive aspects of human functioning—negative experiences that are inherently part of being human (Park, 2011; Ryff, 2012; Uchida, 2011; Ungar, 2011; Wong, 2011). However, most of the research conducted in positive psychology and reported in mainstream journals was from a Western perspective, focused on individuals, assumed individualistic cultural orientation and value systems, and neglected contextual influences (Bermant, Talwar, & Rozin, 2011; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Marks, as cited in Jarden, 2012b; Slife & Richardson, 2008).

Although some studies indicated the important role of culture and cultural differences in the understanding and expression of well-being (e.g., Christopher, 1999; Diener & Suh, 2000; Iwasaki, 2008; Oishi, 2010), and some indicated differences between collectivist East Asian and individualistic Western expressions of well-being (e.g., Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009), very little is known about well-being in a more collectivistic African and multicultural South African context. Eastern and African

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collectivism cannot be assumed to be the same because the expression of well-being seems to be more ‘sunny’ in the African context, whereas Eastern expressions are more tempered (Wissing & Temane, 2008). Studies conducted in East Asia and Africa often have focused on the evaluation of Western concepts and theories of well-being within these specific contexts, and only recently have more developed indigenous concepts of what well-being entails, how it is expressed, and how it can be enhanced have come into focus. Therefore, this volume on well-being research in South Africa will focus on mainstream positive psychology research as conducted in South Africa, but will also specifically show what this means in an African context, and will highlight the contributions made from an African and a multicultural context to a deeper understanding of positive psychology within this cultural context.

The unreflective exportation of Western notions of well-being to all contexts disregards and undermines other cultural traditions and meaning-making systems, as already indicated several years ago by researchers such as Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, and Misra (1996). The latter authors argued strongly for a multicultural psychology that takes into account the rich multiplicity of indigenous conceptualizations along with the use of a variety of methods. This also applies to knowledge generation and application in positive psychology. The multicultural South African context provides, in this regard, many opportunities and challenges. Taking language as an indicator of culture, it can be said that a richness of cultures coexist within South Africa. South Africa has 11 official languages, as the following percentages of language groupings in the 2001 census data indicate: Zulu=23.8 %; Xhosa=17.6 %; Afrikaans=13.3 %; Northern Sotho=9.4 %; Tswana=8.2, English=8.2; Sotho=7.9 %; Tsonga=4.4 %; Swati=2.7 %; Venda=2.3 %; Ndebele=1.6 %; other languages=0.5 %. This multilingual, multicultural context poses a wonderful opportunity to explore the meaning and manifestations of well-being in a great variety of cultural contexts (which share many other potentially confounding socioeconomic and environmental variables) in order to understand similarities and differences, but also the opportunity to explore what well-being means in a multicultural context (which is different from comparing understandings and manifestations across specific cultures). Of course, language is not the sole criteria for culture, which can also be conceptualized in terms of patterns of associations over time and place, shared experiences and values, religious practices, residential habits, and broader socioeconomic and global dynamics.

The role of culture in mental illness and pathology has long been explored in an African and South African context (e.g., Aina & Morakinyo, 2011; Ngubane, 1977; Swartz, 1998), but studies on well-being and optimal functioning had been lacking, as had been the case elsewhere. Initial research on both well-being and quality of life in South Africa developed at the same time, with little integration. Spearheading research on quality of life was conducted by Møller and colleagues (e.g., Møller, 1997a, 1997b, 1998; Møller & Schlemmer, 1989; Schlemmer & Møller, 1997), who focused strongly on sociodemographic and contextual variables. Early work in South Africa that specifically focused on psychosocial well-being and optimal functioning started in the 1980s and 1990s, and linked to the views of Rogers on optimal

functioning, Antonovsky's conceptualization of sense of coherence, and various other perspectives on personality functioning, such as those of Fromm, Jahoda, Allport, Maslow, and other approaches in humanistic psychology (e.g., Strümpfer, 1990, 1995, 2005; Strümpfer, Viviers, & Gouws, 1998; Strümpfer & Wissing, 1998; Wissing, 1986, 1998, 2000; Wissing & van Eeden, 1997a, 1997b, 2002). Initial empirical studies were conducted among others in the work domain (e.g., Cilliers & Wissing, 1993; Strümpfer & Mlonzi, 2001) and on the link between facets of neuropsychological functioning and optimal psychological health (e.g., Wissing & Guse, 1991; Wissing & Sander, 1993). The emerging scientific field was then named *Psychofortology* (i.e., the science of psychological strengths; *forté*=strength; Wissing & van Eeden, 1997a, 1997b), and was viewed as a new subdiscipline in psychology. The name *positive psychology* was not yet coined—that was done in Seligman's famous presidential speech at the APA in 1998, where he announced his vision for a research focus on what is well with people, rather than what is wrong with them. Further research in South Africa in psychofortology/positive psychology focused, to a great extent, on the clarification of the nature and patterns of psychological well-being, the validation of well-being measures, the prevalence of levels of well-being, and the enhancement of psychosocial well-being in a South African context, as well as on coping and resilience, optimal functioning in a work context, and diversity and culturally contextual factors, and finally, on well-being's dynamics and biological correlates. In more recent years, some integration between research on quality of life and psychosocial well-being have begun to develop (e.g., Higgs, 2007; Neff, 2007).

This volume reflects basic as well as applied well-being research in the multicultural South African context, as conducted in various contexts and with a variety of methods and foci. Theoretical, review, and empirical research contributions are made, reflecting positivist to constructivist approaches, and include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches. Chapters report on well-being research conducted in the domains of education, work, health, and family, and in clinical, urban vs. rural, and unicultural vs. multicultural contexts. These studies span the well-being of adolescents, adults, and older people, and topics include resilience in individuals, families, and groups, as well as measurement issues and coping processes. Additional topics include the role of personal and contextual variables, and facets such as hope, spirituality, relational importance, self-regulation, and interventions.

Each chapter in this volume deals with a specific facet or overview and evaluation of findings from larger research programmes, and are, as such, exemplary of well-being research in the multicultural context of South Africa. The included studies are only examples, as many new projects are being developed, and many postgraduate students are currently conducting research on various facets of bio-psychosocial health in various domains of life and age cohorts. The development and implementation in South Africa of postgraduate courses in positive psychology and bio-psychosocial health contribute not only to advanced training and to a broader knowledge base in positive psychology, but specifically, to focused basic research in positive psychology and evaluation of applications in practice in order

to build an evidence-based basis for preventive and promotive interventions to enhancement of well-being, from the individual to groups and communities. In a concluding chapter, challenges, gaps, and paradoxes in well-being research in general, and specific in the South African context, will be highlighted, and challenges for further research will be suggested.

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