COMMENTARY

Synergy between Positive Psychology and Indian Psychology? Reflections on Barriers and Pathways

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Abstract There are points of convergences between Positive Psychology and Indian Psychology. But we do have to cross many barriers and travel some distance on converging pathways for the potential synergies between these fields to manifest. There are indicators in the global literature that Positive Psychology is maturing as an approach but this is yet to become very evident in the Indian research on Positive Psychology. Systematic efforts at discovering convergences between Indian Psychology and Positive Psychology can go a long way in enriching our understanding of well being.

The paper by Dr K. Ramakrishna Rao not just traces the roots of Indian Psychology (IP) and evolution of Positive Psychology (PP) but also raises several issues worth discussion and debate. The paper aims at (a) highlighting the convergences between IP and PP and (b) urging the psychologists working in these fields to collaborate and thereby strengthen the process and outcome of knowledge generation.

There certainly are points of convergences between IP (as described by Dr Rao in terms of a system of psychology derived from classical Indian thought) and PP. Several themes being discussed and researched upon in PP (e.g. nature of happiness, pathways to happiness, and determinants of well being) can be enriched when seen from the lens of IP. Similarly, emergent understandings in PP (e.g. role of gratitude as a life orientation, potential high costs associated with certain kinds of positive affect such as pride) are also in line with the teachings and learning based on Indian philosophical thought.

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I too think that IP concepts are probably more likely to receive attention in this era marked by the PP zeitgeist. The PP scholarship may gain a lot from IP. However, many things need to take place for this to happen. There are several hurdles that need to be crossed. One of the hurdles is to do with the observation that PP and IP use different 'languages' and that leaves a lot of scope for lack of understanding, misunderstandings or sheer mutual inattention. Dr Rao is aware of this and highlights the need to initiate a serious and sustained dialogue and collective reflection on this topic.

Concepts and frameworks of relevance to psychology and especially to PP are interspersed throughout various Indian texts. But for these to become readily usable by the community of psychologists, there is a need for mining them. This is especially important in view of the fact that many of us have had insufficient exposure to/grounding in Indian philosophical thought.

I tend to agree to some extent with the observation that PP research, at times, is characterized by conceptual confusion and ambiguity. A few scholars are pointing out the pitfalls of PP, in the manner in which it has shaped itself so far. I share some of these concerns about the destiny of PP. I believe that it has a long way to go and much to unlearn (and not just to learn) so that it either matures as a subspecialty of psychology or merges with the overall field of psychology after having served the purpose for which it was born as a movement, i.e. to redress the imbalanced focus on pathology and dysfunction.

Dr Rao notes the need for PP to move away from a narrow hedonistic conceptualization of happiness in terms of subjective well being. This is already happening with growing global research literature that falls under the rubric of eudaimonic approach. There is some evidence that PP as a field has begun self- correcting at least some of the imbalances that have arisen in the frenzy of its exponential growth as a movement. A few of such imbalances that are being addressed include (a) ignoring the complex relationships between negative and positive phenomena (Grant & Schwartz, 2011),(b) a

predominance of de-contextualized focus on the individual or on individual positive traits (Fowers, 2008), (c) distancing from evaluative positions and attempts to adopt a value - neutral position (Kristjansson, 2010), and (d) ignoring the possibility that under some conditions happiness and its pursuit might be maladaptive (Gruber, Mauss and Tamir, 2011). As far as the Indian research in PP is concerned, we are lagging behind in terms of a critical perspective that is currently gaining ground in the international discussions and I tend to think that we are perhaps even being swept away in the flurry of PP movement that seems to be in full force at the moment within the country (Mehrotra and Tripathi, 2011). Unfortunately, we as PP researchers are paying insufficient attention to critically examining the Western concepts, measures and methods before adopting them to the Indian context. I think the time has come to slow down and even pause- to think collectively about how we wish to and can make unique contribution to PP.

A few concrete steps that may have some utility are enumerated below:

1. Scholars working on the concepts from Indian philosophical thought, 'polish' (see Bhawuk, 2010) them and present in a reader friendly fashion for an audience consisting of psychology professionals who are naïve to varying extent about IP. I would wish to particularly emphasize the phrase 'reader friendly' as a lot of good and potentially enriching material would be lost because of the form in which it might reach the psychologists trained primarily in the Western models and methods. This process can be greatly facilitated by utilizing one or more of the four very valuable approaches for building theoretical models as outlined by Bhawuk (2010).These include: (a) discovery and polishing of existing models to fit with the relevant literature, (b) development of models through content analysis of relevant texts using key words, (c) recognizing what works in the Indian culture and tracing its origin to scriptures and traditional wisdom and (d) developing models through questioning Western concepts in the light of Indian wisdom and insight. He asserted that universal psychology could be developed through synthesis of such models with existing theories. Bhawuk (2010) also highlighted how ideas can remain disconnected when compartmentalized into Western and Eastern categories despite seemingly evident connections.

2. Creating forums for dialogues between philosophical thinkers and spiritual practitioners and psychologists in order to gain clarity about certain relevant philosophical/spiritual concepts and enhance mutual understandings.

3. Undertaking research that explores the lay beliefs as well as experiences of the common man with respect to certain relevant IP concepts as well as research that attempts to uncover and document the experiential realties of those primarily committed to the spiritual path in term of investment of their efforts and energies.

4. It would perhaps be also useful exercise to explore and uncover common misconceptions in the two fields and disentangle rapidly growing pseudo scientific 'pop' literature from PP and IP. This does not mean that lay wisdom is to be considered inferior to the scientific discourse. I merely wish to highlight that the frenzy of PP movement as well as the market forces are at times resulting in beliefs that can be potentially detrimental (e.g. equating of PP with putting on a constant mask of smiles or propagation of the idea that negative emotions 'must not' be experienced etc.). Similarly, Misra and Kumar (2011) spoke about the misconceptions "which dub Indian psychology as inner-directed, spiritual and otherworldly and, therefore, irrelevant to everyday affairs".

5. Including IP at various levels of courses in Psychology in a form which is seen as less de-contextualized and more relevant to applications in our day to day life. Exploring the voices of faculty and students of psychology led Misra, Prakash and Verma (1999) to identify the need to change the context of psychology teaching by making it experientially oriented and open to other disciplines. This observation seems to hold good for IP and PP too.

6. Continuing to engage in carrying out well-being intervention research based on IP (Mehrotra & Tripathi, 2011) but examining its potential positive outcomes in a systematic and rigorous fashion and over longer term while exploring the moderators and mediators of such outcomes.

7. Organizing of programs that push us psychologist, including positive psychologists, to apply critical thinking to help take PP in the country to the next level of maturity. This would mean that we pay careful attention to the following questions: What are the questions we are asking in our research? How are we seeking the answers to such questions? How do we understand the answers that we may be discovering? How are we discovering newer questions from the answers we are discovering? How are we making use of the answers we may be discovering? J.B.P.Sinha (1993) almost a decade ago lamented that the bulk of Psychology research in India remains replicative and imitative but this also seems to ring true (at least to some extent) about the current scene with respect to PP in India which has long strides to take towards maturing as a field of inquiry.

To conclude, I cannot but agree with Dr Rao's assertion that as far as the linkages between IP and PP are concerned, 'the challenges are too compelling and the opportunities are too obvious to overlook'.

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