

# A Psychoecocultural Perspective on Positive Psychology and Well-Being

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“Positive psychology is the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive”  
(International Positive Psychology Association website, n.d.).

Contemporary positive psychology aims to provide an umbrella under which those who are interested in optimal human functioning can engage in the cross-fertilization of ideas and methods. Although early reactions to this “new” field included some criticism, there has been increasing effort from within positive psychology to more explicitly honor its ancestors and articulate its roots in multiple fields within the larger discipline of psychology. As a result, there have also been increased efforts in various areas of psychology (e.g., counseling, humanistic, community, developmental) to join in the energy of the positive psychology “movement” and identify areas of shared interest where the envisioned cross-fertilization can occur. However, while the cross-cultural comparative approach has received some attention, contributions from multicultural psychology do not yet have much visibility within the positive psychology universe.

## A psychoecocultural perspective

The psychoecocultural perspective approaches the study of the human experience and behavior as manifestations of the ongoing transactions within and between interconnected psychobiological (“psycho”), ecosystemic (“eco”), and multicultural (“cultural”) processes (Harrell, 2013). The psychoecocultural perspective is best exemplified in the areas of multicultural psychology and community psychology, distinct disciplines which share a common emphasis on human diversity, social justice, and attention to the role of contextual factors in human behavior.

Community psychology is the study of human behavior in its multiple and layered contexts from microsystems and organizations to communities and macrosystems. Central to community psychology are applications to the promotion of well-being, the prevention of dysfunction, the liberation of oppressed peoples, the greater inclusion of historically marginalized groups, and the facilitation of empowerment. Preventive interventions and an emphasis on wellness promotion through the facilitation of strengths and mobilization of resources has been a defining feature of the field (Cowen, 1991; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006).

Multicultural psychology is the psychological study of issues and topics relevant to the sociocultural and sociopolitical experiences and identities of people from diverse sociodemographic groups (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religious, disability). One of loudest rallying cries of the early multicultural psychology movement was that “difference does not equal deviance” which cautioned the field to be aware of a pathologizing approach to the study of diverse populations. Similar points have been made from feminist psychology and LGBTQ psychology where,

along with racial-ethnic group psychologies, the dominance of white, male, heterosexual views of human behavior have been challenged. From within each of these diverse groups, there has been a longstanding and consistent call for an emphasis on strengths, assets, and resources of historically oppressed and stigmatized cultures and communities (Lopez et. al., 2005).

The emphasis of positive psychology on thriving is very consistent with both multicultural and community psychology. However, the relative absence of these voices from the positive psychology movement suggests that there is something fundamental in the “culture” of positive psychology that has not attracted those in the larger discipline of psychology whose work emphasizes socioecological and multicultural content. Critiques have pointed out the Euro-American ethnocentric bias, as well as the predominance of white male voices as the leading authors in the field (Bacigalupe, 2001; Christopher & Hickinbottom (2008); Constantine & Sue, 2006; Pedrotti, 2011). It is suggested here that a psychoecocultural perspective, emphasizing theory, research, and applications relevant to human diversity and social justice, would be an important enhancement to the field. The psychoecocultural perspective would also require positive psychology to critically examine its own cultural context and ways that the sociopolitical dynamics of power and privilege operate in its own backyard.

## Positive psychology, human diversity, and social justice

With respect to human diversity, positive psychology has been intentional about being international in its scope. Most of this research takes a cross-cultural approach where the focus has been primarily on examining similarities and differences on happiness and well-being across nations (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). However, the majority of these cross-cultural (etic) studies use constructs, measures, and frameworks that have been developed within the United States and western Europe to compare people from diverse nations. Wong (2013) makes the important point that positive psychology is highly culture-bound given that social norms and values play a significant role in defining what is considered positive, healthy, and optimal. He is among those who have recommended that positive psychology research needs to more significantly incorporate consideration of cultural constructs, meanings, and contexts (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Sandage et al, 2003). A multicultural psychology approach would place greater emphasis on the identification of constructs that emerge from within a particular group of interest (emic). Rather than starting with presumably universal concepts, a multicultural approach prioritizes an “insider” perspective on what is important and the meanings of life experiences.

With respect to social justice, positive psychology research, to date, has paid little attention to “positive” concepts and processes such as empowerment, liberation from oppression, bridging differences, equality, loyalty, social interest, and collective identity. While international research is important, issues relevant to racial-ethnic minority groups within nations,

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intergroup relations, and the sociopolitical dynamics of power and privilege are largely invisible in the positive psychology literature. In addition, it has been recommended that greater attention be placed on cultural strengths, those ways of living optimally that emerge within a particular cultural context (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Sandage et. al., 2003).

It has also been pointed out that positive psychology has a decidedly individualistic bias (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Seligman and Csikszentmihaly (2000) grounded the emerging field as having three central concerns: positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions. While positive psychology has given some attention to creating and building positive organizations (e.g., appreciative inquiry), it is the work on “positive emotions” and “positive traits” that have been dominant in both scholarly and lay publications. More-



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over, discourse within the field has largely stayed at the individual level of analysis with less attention to the significance of the multiple ecosystemic factors that influence “the pursuit of happiness”. This is reflected in the conceptualization of strengths as decontextualized phenomena that can be enhanced through individual psychological interventions focusing on gratitude, hope, forgiveness, etc. However, it is noteworthy that there has been significant progress in broadening the worldview of positive psychology as reflected in recent edited volumes by Biswas-Diener (2011) and Marujo and Neto (2013), among others.

One of the earliest issues facing the field was the question of the universality of positive psychology concepts such as positive emotional experience, well-being and character strengths. Pedrotti (2011) provides a useful and clarifying framework offering a distinction between “culture-free” and “culturally-embedded” views of positive psychology concepts. The culture-free view is reflected in the writings of the “founders” of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, 2000) and suggests that the objective and robust nature of science supported the existence of universal strengths that transcend culture. The culturally-embedded view, endorsed by Pedrotti, as well as by leading positive psychology scholar Shane Lopez, is fundamentally concerned with the issue of construct equivalence. This view contends that while particular concepts (e.g., courage, happiness) may be universally relevant, how they are experienced, manifested, and valued are embedded in, and will vary with, culture.

As an empirically-based field, consideration of culture and context in research is paramount for positive psychology. Thus, as an example, the remainder of this article will describe a new assessment tool for well-being that attempts to address the individualistic and culture-bound nature of most positive psychology research.

## The Multidimensional Well-Being Assessment (MWA)

The construct of well-being has been central to research in the area of positive psychology. Well-being has generally been conceptualized in two broad categories: hedonic and eudaimonic. The former focuses on positive emotion and cognition, the latter emphasizes a meaningful life and self-actualization. Other conceptions operationalize well-being as satisfaction with various content areas of life such as social, family, finances, employment, and intimacy. Each of these approaches has led to the development of measures that reflect its respective conceptual foundation. (Harrell et al., 2013).

Grounded in the psychoecocultural perspective, this author has developed The Multidimensional Well-Being Assessment (MWA) with a primary purpose of being more inclusive of aspects of well-being that may be particularly relevant to historically oppressed and stigmatized groups. The MWA includes dimensions of well-being that emerge from the literature in multicultural psychology where themes of collectivism,



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spirituality, and overcoming adversity are prominent. The initial version of the MWA contains 160-items within five primary domains each comprised of two to four dimensions of well-being. These include *Psychological Well-Being* (Emotional, Functional, Awareness, and Transformational dimensions), *Physical Well-Being* (Physical Health, Physical Environment, and Safety dimensions), *Relational Well-Being* (Prosocial Behavior and Relationship Quality dimensions), *Collective Well-Being* (Sociocultural Identity, Community Connectedness, Civic Participation and Engagement, and National Context dimensions), and *Transcendent Well-Being* (Meaning-Purpose-Flow and Spiritual-Religious dimensions). Preliminary psychometric data is strong with alpha reliabilities ranging from .70-.94. In addition, the pattern of statistically significant validity coefficients reflects hypothesized relationships with measures of similar constructs (Harrell et. al., 2013).

These results are promising and provide an example of utilizing a psychoecocultural approach towards the development of a more inclusive positive psychology. Both multicultural psychology and community psychology have a strong tradition of identifying and promoting strengths, as well as a core commitment to a non-pathologizing position. A strengths-based orientation is indeed central to the identity of both fields. There is tremendous potential for the cross-fertilization envisioned for positive psychology to more meaningfully include fields consistent with a psychoecocultural perspective on human experience. ■

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