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Applied Positive Psychology: Progress and Challenges

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Positive psychology is the study of human flourishing. It is an applied science, and a number of behavioral interventions in the field have been shown to increase subjective well-being. Despite this progress a number of challenges remain for positive psychology in the future. These include a shift in focus from individual happiness to group level well-being as an intervention outcome, a greater focus on contextual factors related to interventions, and the need to better synthesize research information. These topics are discussed in this article and specific recommendations for the field are made.

Applied positive psychology: Progress & challenges

Positive psychology is the study of human flourishing and, over the last decade, it has been a topic of increasing interest. Since its formation in the late 1990s, positive psychology has been the focus of international conferences, an academic journal, a growing number of graduate education programs and a number of popular books. The enthusiasm for this subject can also be seen in the proliferation of undergraduate university courses on positive psychology. By some counts, there are dozens of such courses taught in North America, Australia and Europe (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Although positive psychology is the scientific study of positive human phenomena such as optimism and happiness it has, from its inception, been an applied science (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). This means that there has been a heavy emphasis placed on interventions, assessments and the basic “usability” of the scientific results of positive psychological study. Positive psychology has been used in psychotherapy (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006), coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2009), public policy (Diener & Diener, 2011), and organizational consultancy (Garcea & Linley, 2011).

As an applied science positive psychology continues to improve in sophistication. Early progress in the field was marked by two primary factors—the primacy of happiness as a desirable outcome measure and the testing of discrete “interventions.” Among the early contributions of scientists to the field of positive psychology was a targeted investigation of the benefits of frequent positive affect (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener,



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2005), the optimal level of life satisfaction (Oishi & Diener, 2007), and the health benefits of happiness (Pressman & Cohen, 2005; Diener & Chan, 2011). On this last point, researchers have found a number of health benefits associated with the experience of positive affect; findings which justify the need for the happiness-enhancing interventions of positive psychology. Researchers employing controlled experimental designs have found, for example, that cheerfulness predicts more robust immune function (Pressman & Cohen, 2005), that positive emotions accelerate cardiovascular recovery from emotional distress, and that positive mood among certain clinical populations is associated with lower rates of same-day pain and health care visits (Gil et al, 2004). Diener and Chan (2011) find the results of studies on health and happiness compelling enough that they conclude by saying: “It is perhaps time to add interventions to improve subjective well-being to the list of public health measures, and alert policy makers.... (p. 32). Taken together these studies suggest that happiness does not just feel good but is also highly desirable in that cognitive and emotional positivity is associated with better health and longevity, more sociability, and higher achievement.

Another major advance of positive psychology to date has been the establishment of applied interventions. These are cognitive and behavioral techniques for which there is evidence of a connection to human flourishing, particularly increases in happiness. Among these

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interventions are expressing gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) and savoring (Bryant, Smart & King, 2005). The most highly cited publication on the topic, by Seligman and colleagues (2005), used a randomized control design to demonstrate the efficacy of identifying and using strengths as well as expressing gratitude. In more recent times, researchers have aspired to take such interventions to a new level of sophistication by emphasizing the need for person-activity fit (Sin et al, 2011) and a need for more sustainable interventions that have the possibility of longer-term benefits (Vaughn et al, in press).

Despite the recent attention on improving positive psychology interventions the field struggles to rise to this call to action. Many practitioners of positive psychology continue to anchor their practice in discrete intervention techniques with little regard for contextual factors or the emergence of new research findings that might improve quality (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan & Minhas, 2011). For example, expressing gratitude is generally positive, and has received research support as a happiness enhancing intervention (e.g. Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Unfortunately, we know very little about the differences in happiness that might be derived from verbal, written, or merely imagined expression of appreciation. Similarly, we know little about the ways in which specific types of relationships (e.g., friends, colleagues, spouses) might impact the emotional benefits derived from expressed gratitude. As a result, I offer three critiques here with regards to improving the practice of positive psychology in the future. These include: A) a change from a focus on individual to group level well-being, B) a shift in emphasis toward understanding personal and situational factors that might affect the effectiveness of interventions, and C) the need for greater synthesis of various levels of research information.

A change from individual to group-level well-being.

Recently, Martin Seligman, the founder of the modern positive psychology movement, made a call for positive psychologists to take an active hand in improving quality of life for the world's population (Biswas-Diener, 2011). This call is representative of an increasing understanding that positive psychology cannot simply be about individual happiness. Because subjective well-being (SWB) makes for a sensible outcome measure many of the interventions within positive psychology have used SWB to establish their outcome effectiveness (e.g. Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). It may be that one unintended consequence of the large body of research on SWB is that it has focused practi-

tioner attention on an individualistic pursuit of happiness (Biswas-Diener, Linley, Govindji & Woolston, 2011). By contrast, some interventions, such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), work on the group level. For positive psychology to fulfill its own potential we must create and test new interventions that are specific to group, rather than individual level well-being. This should include interventions targeting families, workplaces and communities. The development and implementation of such interventions will also necessitate a shift in focus away from happiness as an outcome to include other desirable outcomes such as intimacy, increased social capital, or group level empowerment (Biswas-Diener & Patterson, 2011).

A shift in emphasis toward understanding contextual factors (personal and situational) that might affect the effectiveness of interventions.

Although progress has been made to establish a variety of positive psychology interventions most of the research has employed controlled laboratory studies (e.g. Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). There is increasing recognition, however, that positive psychology interventions need to be better ensconced in an understanding of personal and situational factors that might affect their effectiveness. Sin and colleagues (2011) argue that factors such as duration of intervention, continued practice, person-activity fit, and motivation—among others—can affect the overall effectiveness of interventions for individuals. Similarly, Biswas-Diener, Kashdan and Minhas (2011) argue that many positive psychology concepts such as strengths can best be understood in the context of individual interests and values, as well as within the context of situations. Linley (2008) offers the counter-intuitive advice that strengths, in particular, should sometimes be used less rather than more as might be appropriate to situations. As a profession, we are ready to take the examination of interventions beyond the laboratory and test them in more nuanced ways. Future interventions, then, need to be thought of in terms of regulation and flexibility rather than as “one size fits all” techniques.

The need for greater synthesis of various levels of research information.

The integration of various levels of research information is an issue that confronts the entire field of psychology. As advances are made in the study of neuropsychological processes, for instance, we are called upon—as a profession—to synthesize information from the studies of brain function with more complex, real-world social behavior (Rothbart, Sheese & Posner, ►

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2007). A good example of this within positive psychology is Haidt's (2007) synthesis of research to present a new, more comprehensive understanding of morality that includes neuroscience, animal models and evolutionary theory, as well as social psychological study. Increasingly, practitioners are calling for a similarly increased integration of neuropsychological, social and personality sciences (Rock & Page, 2009). Future positive psychology interventions must include attention to neurological and physiological dimensions as research and technology on these topics improves.

Conclusion

As positive psychology advances it is important that we continue to anchor interventions in empirical science and that this science represents the best synthesis of available levels of analysis, technologies and statistics. In addition, it is important to continue to improve interventions so that they can be employed with attention to personal and situational factors that might affect their effectiveness. This will ensure that positive psychology does not stagnate intellectually or clinically.

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