

1

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS: A SECOND CALL TO ACTION!

EDWARD C. CHANG, CHRISTINA A. DOWNEY,
JAMESON K. HIRSCH, AND NATALIE J. LIN

In 1999, renowned psychologist Martin Seligman invited several rising junior researchers to join him and a few senior colleagues in Akumal, Mexico, to engage in conversation about a new scientific discipline devoted to understanding and applying knowledge about positive psychological phenomena. The first author was one of those fortunate to have been selected to participate in what was the “first conference” on positive psychology, a key moment in this discipline’s development. Seligman’s aim was for us to collectively outline the theoretical contours and scope of action of the new field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). To put it simply, *positive psychology* can be defined as the application of scientific methods to identifying key antecedents, correlates, and consequences associated with living a good, full, and meaningful life. Thus, for example, positive psychology would be distinct from traditional positive philosophies that also focused on good living

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/14799-001>

Positive Psychology in Racial and Ethnic Groups: Theory, Research, and Practice, E. C. Chang, C. A. Downey, J. K. Hirsch, and N. J. Lin (Editors)

Copyright © 2016 by the American Psychological Association. All rights reserved.

(e.g., Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. 1925; Plato's *The Republic*, trans. 1948). For several days and nights in Akumal, we shared our hopeful thoughts of what a positive psychology could be. During these exciting, sometimes intense conversations under the hot Mexican sun, it was never questioned that positive psychology was going to be a good thing for the field of psychology and, more important, a good thing for the world. Now, more than 15 years later, it is clear that the fruits of those early discussions have had a strong impact on the field.

For example, highly regarded institutions of higher learning in the United States, including Harvard University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Michigan, were quick to begin offering formal courses on positive psychology to students. Likewise, the Positive Psychology Center was officially established at the University of Pennsylvania in 2003, and soon students could enroll in a Master of Applied Positive Psychology program. Moreover, new journals were developed to encourage and support the anticipated growth of high-quality research and theory associated with the new field of positive psychology (e.g., *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*). Even long-established journals (e.g., *American Psychologist*, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*) provided increasingly greater coverage to positive psychological topics like optimism, happiness, subjective well-being, and character strengths (e.g., McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Peterson and Seligman (2004) published *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, a monumental work represented a compelling and comprehensive alternative to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* published by the American Psychiatric Association. Whereas the DSM focused on presenting a “negative” classification system of pathologies that compromised functioning and well-being, Peterson and Seligman’s “positive” classification system focused on identifying globally recognized character strengths and virtues that made people happy, strong, and resilient. These are but some of the many examples of how positive psychology has found and maintained a niche in empirical and applied psychology.

Yet, despite the steady growth and progress that has been made in the field of positive psychology (Downey & Chang, 2014), we believe positive psychologists have not yet fully addressed two pressing and related challenges. First, positive psychologists have continued to take an essentialist view of human behavior by not carefully considering variations in what positive psychology may mean for individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although the Peterson and Seligman (2004) volume did reference works from around the globe and across historical eras in its assemblage of virtues, there was simply no way for this one work to depict such variation in depth. Many committed researchers have continued to explore these issues (several of whom

contributed chapters to the present volume), but there is much ground yet to cover. Second, and relatedly, the field of positive psychology has been slow to identify and validate positive psychological interventions that are designed to be culturally sensitive or meaningful to diverse groups. Such customization of technique would clearly be possible only with a sound understanding of how positive psychology manifests in diverse groups; it also requires knowing how one intervenes to maximize outcomes across these groups.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGISTS AND THE STUDY OF WEIRD AND MOSTLY WHITE INDIVIDUALS

Nearly three decades ago, Sears (1986) described a fundamental and ubiquitous problem in psychological research: Convenience sampling results in knowledge based largely on the study of young adults, most often college students. Years later, Graham (1992) expanded on this pressing concern by noting that studies in psychology are not only based on the narrow demographic of college students, but are usually based even more specifically on White middle-class college students. Because of such concerns, new journals were developed to expand and communicate research and scholarship on racial and ethnic minorities (e.g., *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Research*, *Journal of Latina/o Psychology*). Yet, such efforts themselves have been insufficient in fostering a professional culture that is mindful of diversity; the fact remains that psychological studies published in most mainstream journals have been, and continue to be, limited in their focus on issues of diversity. Indeed, in a critical appraisal of findings obtained from psychological research studies conducted around the world, Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) more recently argued that behavioral scientists have been making broad claims about human behavior that are based on a small and exceptional group of individuals: those characterized by being Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (what these authors referred to as WEIRD). What makes their analysis particularly important is that findings based on studies of individuals with WEIRD characteristics often differ markedly from those obtained from non-WEIRD people, with non-WEIRD people more often showing the statistically normative patterns of behavior. For example, although positive self-views or self-enhancement has long been considered in the West to reflect a fundamental aspect of being human (e.g., Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961), Henrich et al. noted that findings across studies involving non-Westerners typically show reduced levels of self-enhancement compared to Westerners; when studies included East Asians, researchers noted a “reversal” of self-appraisal tendencies. Specifically, East Asians, compared with Westerners, have been

found to report self-effacing rather than self-enhancing tendencies (Chang, 2007; Chang & Fabian, 2012). Such an example probably represents just one of a great many psychological phenomena that are assumed in mainstream psychology to be universal in nature, until investigations of diverse populations reveal otherwise. Thus, when one examines the predominant journals in psychology over the past several decades and finds that most of them continue to focus on studies of a very select group of privileged individuals of White or European descent (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2013; Nagayama Hall & Maramba, 2001), it becomes not only a pressing scientific problem (e.g., low external validity) but also a challenging social problem (e.g., bias, invisibility, discrimination; Sue, 1999).

ON MAKING EVERYONE HAPPY LIKE US: ARE WE DESCRIBING OR PRESCRIBING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO THE WORLD?

According to Prilleltensky (1989), a central problem among social scientists is that they often portray themselves as impartial observers whose primary objective is to describe accurately the complex operations of human behavior and then disseminate such insights to the general public. Yet, what may be initially proffered as a purely descriptive finding often can easily turn into an unintended and culturally dangerous prescriptive act. Consider the case of emotional intelligence (Grewal & Salovey, 2005). *Emotional intelligence* refers to the ability to appreciate one's own feelings and those of others, to discriminate between them, and to use this understanding to guide one's subsequent thoughts and actions (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). Findings from studies based on Westerners have pointed to the positive value of possessing high emotional intelligence (for reviews, see Mayer et al., 2008; Salovey & Grewal, 2005), linking greater emotional intelligence in adults to greater positive outcomes (e.g., leadership, achieving business goals) and to lesser negative outcomes (e.g., stress, deviant behavior, drug use). That is, individuals with high emotional intelligence tend to be happy and successful people. Do these findings imply that everyone requires emotional intelligence training? From a scientific standpoint, the pattern noted above provides no evidence for the usefulness or appropriateness of increasing emotional intelligence in non-Westerners. However, in the absence of alternative competing theories of happiness and success, it is not surprising that the theory of emotional intelligence easily stands out; as a result, individuals may mistakenly take past (descriptive) findings on emotional intelligence to represent a clear and compelling (prescriptive) path for achieving future happiness and success. Consequentially, it is perhaps not too shocking to find that the fruits of Western studies conducted on emotional intelligence have culminated in the application of emotional

training programs to facilitate happiness and success among non-Western individuals living on the other side of the world (Tatlow, 2014).

Perhaps, in the same way that Watters (2010) contended that American psychiatry, and the various industries associated with it, have worked to make everyone “crazy like us,” so too one might argue that Western positive psychology has resulted in a global campaign to make everyone “happy like us.” Such an effort, however, seems to be predicated on the notion that there are universal human processes that positively motivate us affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively. As a result, little attention has previously been placed on trying to identify useful assessment tools that may help scientists and practitioners to develop ethnically, racially, and culturally meaningful models of positive psychology theory and practice. In one of the few studies examining the cross-cultural validity of emotional intelligence measures, for example, factor structure, item loadings, and correlates of emotional intelligence differed in several ways between German (Western) and Indian (non-Western) samples (Sharma, Deller, Biswal, & Mandal, 2009). The authors speculated that such differences were driven by underlying cultural norms regarding individualism, collectivism, and social interaction. It is for this reason that unlike past works (Chang & Downey, 2012), we devote attention in this volume to the importance of culturally sensitive positive psychological assessments in bridging the link between positive psychology theory, research, and practice in diverse groups. We believe that assessment tools that reflect the questions we seek to examine, and often determine the answers we ultimately obtain, represent a critical point of intersectionality that can allow scientists and practitioners a means for not only testing the value of presumed universal positive psychology models in diverse groups (a top-down approach) but also for potentially identifying more nuanced models that also reflect the positive ways of living embodied by different racial and ethnic groups (a bottom-up approach; Betancourt & López, 1993).

OVERVIEW OF THIS VOLUME

This volume has five major sections. Part I focuses on a broad introduction to positive psychology and situates it within the context of race and ethnicity. In Chapter 2, Jeglic, Miranda, and Polanco-Roman offer a thoughtful and thorough discussion of positive psychology in the context of race, ethnicity, and culture. These authors contend that although positive psychology may have emerged with an emphasis on identifying universal strengths (e.g., optimism, self-esteem), findings from recent studies involving diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups point to a compelling need to also consider culture-specific strengths (e.g., ethnic identity, biculturalism).

Part II focuses on reviewing positive psychology theory and research in various racial and ethnic groups. In Chapter 3, Zhang Bencharit and Tsai provide a critical appraisal of positive psychology theory and research involving Asian Americans. These authors explore important considerations that need to be taken into account when we seek to conceptualize and study optimal functioning in Asian Americans. For example, they draw implications from findings of cultural differences in notions of the self: The presumed universal benefits of being optimistic, and universal costs of being pessimistic, may not apply as well to Asian Americans as it does to European Americans. In Chapter 4, Castellanos and Gloria provide a compelling emic-based model of positive psychology for Latina/os. Drawing on a growing body of Latina/o research and scholarship, these authors argue for the repositioning of earlier misguided pathological models of Latina/o culture, to highlight the growing need to consider and appreciate strength-based models that holistically encompass the interconnectedness between mind, body, and spirit within Latina/o culture. In Chapter 5, Mattis, Grayman Simpson, Powell, Anderson, Kimbro, and Mattis provide a thoughtful and thorough discussion of positive psychological development for understanding African Americans. Appreciating the ahistorical and acontextual nature of current models that have dominated the field of positive psychology, these authors borrow insights garnered from multiple sources of research and scholarship, from cultural studies to anthropology, to help us articulate the potential for developing an African-centered positive psychology. In Chapter 6, Morse, McIntyre, and King make a compelling case for the positive inclusion of American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) people. Specifically, these authors challenge past theory and research that has tended to focus on weaknesses among the diverse AI/AN people and reframe the ways in which they have managed to exert resilience and grow in the face of adversity.

Part III focuses on positive psychology assessment in different racial and ethnic groups. In Chapter 7, Yu, Chang, Yang, and Yu provide a useful review of some of the many common and culture-specific assessment tools that have been used to study positive psychological processes in Asians and Asian Americans. These authors argue that despite the value obtained from existing tools, it will be important to continue to identify and develop culturally informed instruments that better tap into the wide range of psychological processes that are relevant to Asian Americans. In Chapter 8, Gonzalez and Padilla provide a thoughtful review of key measures that have been used to study psychological strengths in Latina/os. These authors point to the need not only for more authentic and culturally informed assessment tools but also for more informed approaches to assessment. For example, in contrast to using conventional approaches whereby a researcher typically conducts an interview on or with a subject, the authors discuss the value of approaches that are more collaborative in nature, and thus, affirming the values of family

and community commonly supported within Latina/o culture. Chapter 9, by Kohn-Wood and Thomas, focuses on positive psychological tools that can help us assess for the many strengths embodied among African Americans. Their careful review underscores the potential value of using existing tools to measure strengths like hope and coping among African Americans, but they also raise concerns about the scarcity of positive psychology assessment tools; available tools remain limited in tapping into the wide range of strengths manifested by African Americans. In Chapter 10, King provides a cogent discussion of the context of assessment within AI/AN people, beginning with an acknowledgement that in order to understand how to meaningfully assess positive psychological dimensions among AI/AN people, we must begin with a historically informed appreciation of the rich range of beliefs, customs, and lifeways of AI/AN people living within their communities. The author points out, for example, that contrary to some of the common assumptions held within mainstream positive psychology, Native values do not assert that one must experience positive emotions in order to live well.

Part IV focuses on positive psychology interventions in working with different racial and ethnic groups. In Chapter 11, Fu and Vong focus attention on the ways in which happiness may be fostered within the Asian American context. Following a review of existing work on positive psychology in Asian Americans, these authors offer an integrative model of positive practice in working with Asian Americans that centers on the cultivation of Asian strengths such as gratitude and a careful consideration of other therapeutic factors when working with Asian Americans (e.g., level of acculturation). In Chapter 12, Perera, Yu, Chia, Yu, and Downey review important psychological concepts and ideas that are likely to play a central role in articulating culturally meaningful positive practices when working with Latina/os. These authors suggest that apart from leveraging the power of culturally embodied concepts like *familismo*, there is a need to carefully consider how other concepts like *fatalismo* may also impact the facilitation of positive practice when working with Latina/os. In Chapter 13, Eshun and Packer discuss ways in which Africentric cultural values (e.g., unity, collective responsibility, faith) can and should be used to inform positive practice in working with African Americans. However, they caution that such efforts made by practitioners when working with African Americans must also be informed by an appreciation of the rich and often challenging historical, spiritual, and cultural context within which African Americans lead their lives. In the final chapter in Part III (Chapter 14), Garrett, Garrett, Curtis, Parrish, Portman, Grayshield, and Williams provide a critical discussion of the value of positive practice in working with Native Americans. Borrowing from research on positive practice, the authors begin with an appreciation for the potential utility of applying aspects of established positive techniques (e.g., identifying signature strengths within the individual, mindful and

communal ways of knowing) when working with Native Americans. To build more meaningful approaches, however, they point to situating the individual in a broader context of Native American life (e.g., family, tribe, spiritual belief system). Thus, positive practice in working with Native Americans must respect the intricate and complex ways in which the self holds multiple identities and boundaries at any given time.

In the final chapter in the volume, we discuss what the future may hold in developing a meaningful and useful positive psychology that is inclusive to diverse racial and ethnic groups. We summarize several major themes emerging across the present volume, including the recurrent identification of resilience as a culturally relevant positive psychological phenomenon. We proceed to offer a critical examination of the concept of resilience in past research, noting problems with how resilience has been defined at various times as an individual trait, a characteristic of one's environment, or a transactional process involving personal traits and associated coping approaches. We then introduce a two-dimensional model of experiences of adversity, focusing on safe versus risky coping with adversity, and positive versus negative life outcomes, which when combined may or may not lead to what can be considered resilience in various individuals and groups.

FINAL THOUGHTS

More than a decade ago, the first call to establish positive psychology was made. Since then, great advances have been made toward developing the field of positive psychology, but these have largely been based on a narrow group of individuals, namely, White Americans. With the many thoughtful contributions offered in this volume, we hope to inspire, if not declare, a second call to action for scientists and practitioners alike to foster the development and maturity of not one, but many positive psychologies that capture both the common and distinct aspects of the diverse racial and ethnic groups that make up our rich and ever-changing society. As editors of this volume, we adamantly believe that for positive psychology to grow, it must be psychology that is positive for all.

REFERENCES

- Betancourt, H., & López, S. R. (1993). The study of culture, ethnicity, and race in American psychology. *American Psychologist*, 48, 629–637. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.48.6.629>
- Chang, E. C. (2007). Introduction to self-criticism and self-enhancement: Views from ancient Greece to the modern world. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Self-criticism*

- and self-enhancement: *Theory, research, and clinical implications* (pp. 3–15). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Chang, E. C., & Downey, C. A. (Eds.). (2012). *Handbook of race and development in mental health*. New York, NY: Springer. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-0424-8>
- Chang, E. C., & Fabian, C. G. (2012). Introduction to adult psychopathology in Asians: From nomothetic to idiographic approaches. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Handbook of adult psychopathology in Asians: Diagnosis, etiology, and treatment* (pp. 1–11). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Downey, C. A., & Chang, E. C. (2014). Positive psychology: Current knowledge, multicultural and ethical considerations, and the future of the movement. In F. T. L. Leong, L. Comas-Diaz, G. C. Nagayama Hall, V. McLoyd, & J. E. Trimble (Eds.), *APA handbook on multicultural psychology: Vol. 2. Applications and training* (pp. 133–149). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Graham, S. (1992). “Most of the subjects were White and middle class”: Trends in published research on African Americans in selected APA journals, 1970–1989. *American Psychologist*, 47, 629–639. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.47.5.629>
- Grewal, D., & Salovey, P. (2005). Feeling smart: The science of emotional intelligence. *American Scientist*, 93, 330–339. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1511/2005.54.969>
- Hartmann, W. E., Kim, E. S., Kim, J. H. J., Nguyen, T. U., Wendt, D. C., Nagata, D. K., & Gone, J. P. (2013). In search of cultural diversity, revisited: Recent publication trends in cross-cultural and ethnic minority psychology. *Review of General Psychology*, 17, 243–254. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0032260>
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33, 61–83. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>
- Maslow, A. (1962). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York, NY: Van Nostrand. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/10793-000>
- Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P., & Caruso, D. R. (2008). Emotional intelligence: New ability or eclectic traits? *American Psychologist*, 63, 503–517. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.6.503>
- McCullough, M. E., & Snyder, C. R. (2000). Classical sources of human strength: Revisiting an old home and building a new one. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19, 1–10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2000.19.1.1>
- Nagayama Hall, G. C., & Maramba, G. G. (2001). In search of cultural diversity: Recent literature in cross-cultural and ethnic minority psychology. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 7, 12–26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.7.1.12>
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press.
- Prilleltensky, I. (1989). Psychology and the status quo. *American Psychologist*, 44, 795–802.

- Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Salovey, P., & Grewal, D. (2005). The science of emotional intelligence. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, 281–285. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00381.x>
- Sears, D. O. (1986). College sophomores in the laboratory: Influences of a narrow data base on social psychology's view of human nature. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 515–530. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.51.3.515>
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology. An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5–14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5>
- Sharma, S., Deller, J., Biswal, R., & Mandal, M. K. (2009). Emotional intelligence factorial structure and construct validity across cultures. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 9, 217–236. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1470595809335725>
- Sue, S. (1999). Science, ethnicity, and bias: Where have we gone wrong? *American Psychologist*, 54, 1070–1077. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.12.1070>
- Tatlow, D. K. (2014, May 7). More hugs please, we're Chinese. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/07/more-hugs-please-were-chinese/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=1
- Watters, E. (2010). *Crazy like us: The globalization of the American psyche*. New York, NY: Free Press.