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An Introduction to Positive Psychology
Part I: Individuals

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This article is an introduction to the field of positive psychology, its theory, history, and growth. Positive psychology is a fast growing area in Social Science research. It overlaps with educational, social and economic issues. Below, three of the more prominent research areas of self-efficacy, learned optimism and subjective well-being are reviewed at both the individual and cross-cultural levels. In a future article, I hope to discuss group and societal levels of research, education and public policy in positive psychology.

Keywords: Positive Psychology, individual/group/cross-cultural research.

In the following article, I will introduce positive psychology and its theory, history, and growth. Positive psychology has become, in the past decade, one of the more prominent research areas in the psychological sciences. Positive psychology is an attempt to bring a more balanced approach to the study of individuals, social groups, and institutions.

In this first article, I will also introduce some of the leading constructs now being researched in positive psychology, as well as research in individual differences. A construct is a latent variable or psychological model. In a follow-up article, I hope to discuss research in areas of group and institutional public policy from a positive psychology perspective. Because both articles are of a general introductory nature and because this is an emerging field of research, I will not discuss in detail Japan specific research. However, I will provide some brief examples from cross-cultural research which include Japan.

Positive psychology takes a decidedly different approach from the more traditional defect model that has guided research in the psychological sciences (Flores & Obasi, 2003). One of positive psychology's stated goals is a "scientific and applied approach to uncovering people's strengths and promoting their positive functioning" (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 3).

In the words of one of the pioneers of positive psychology: "We have discovered that there is a set
of human strengths that are the most likely buffers against mental illness: courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, work ethic, hope, honesty, and perseverance. Much of the task of prevention will be to create a science of human strength whose mission will be to foster these virtues in young people” (Seligman, 1998, para. 8).

In other words, one of the goals of positive psychology is that of helping people to achieve “optimal” performance in which they utilize their strengths in order to overcome weaknesses. This is a decidedly different and more balanced scientific approach than efforts in the field of psychology prior to the emergence of positive psychology (Simonton & Baumeister, 2005). A research driven focus on developing educational and public policy interventions and guidelines based on positive psychology may generate controversy, but may also generate benefits as well.

The basic principle that guides research in positive psychology is a deliberate, conscious effort to reconceptualize and overcome the past research overemphasis on the negative areas of cognition and affect (mind and body/feelings). Positive psychologists see the paradigmatic defect model that has guided scientific research in psychology in the past as being too focused on fixing what is "wrong" rather than building upon what is "right" with people (Snyder & Lopez, 2007) and are attempting to restore a more balanced, scientific approach to the study of human individual and social behavior.

A Short Overview and History of Positive Psychology

Early concerns with the positive functioning of individual human beings, society, and society's organizations can be traced back to the influential work and thought of William James. In his work Varieties of Religious Experience, James expressed the idea of "healthy mindedness" and happiness as primary life goals (1902). Further efforts and interests in researching positive human traits after James were the efforts of Allport in the late 1950s and Maslow’s advocacy for a humanistic psychology in the late 1960s (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

However, lack of a thorough research base and lack of interest in methodology led to the failure of these early efforts, which were eventually pushed to the edges of the field of psychology (Simonton & Baumeister, 2005). Furthermore, the early interests of psychology in curing pathologies and mental illness were unquestionably much more important given the need to help those who are suffering psychologically.

Nonetheless, for the first time in the history of psychology, a large assemblage of researchers, theorists, and psychologists have come together to pursue research to redress the overemphasis on a defect model of the mind. To date there is still relatively little research in areas of human strengths. However, three guidelines of what is valuable, positive, and worth studying in the human condition (Diener & Suh, 1997) and three guiding principles for establishing positive psychology have been suggested (Seligman, 2002).
Three Guidelines for Positive Psychology

Three criteria for guiding decisions about what is positive, according to Diener and Suh (1997), follow. First, the decisions that people make can be a behavioral indicator of value. In other words, what people choose or the goals that they choose to pursue in regular behavioral patterns are likely to demonstrate that, at least for them, such pursuits have value. Second, people are capable of adjudicating to what degree an object, goal, outcome, process, or event is satisfying for them. Finally, judgments can be evaluated in reference to normative behavior in a given culture or a value system within a given culture. In other words, given enough information about cultural beliefs of good and bad, researchers can determine the appropriateness of participants’ goals and judgments and therefore determine appropriate interventions and policies.

Three Principles of Positive Psychology

The "three pillars" of positive psychology according to Seligman (2002) are positive subjective experience, positive individual characteristics (i.e., virtues and strengths), and positive institutions and communities. A few examples from each level are given below.

Positive subjective experience is concerned with research into past subjective experience such as well-being and satisfaction, present subjective experience such as flow, joy, happiness, and future-oriented subjective experience such as optimism. At the individual level are individual characteristics such as interpersonal skills, perseverance, forgiveness, and originality. Finally, in terms of positive institutions and communities, psychologists in this area of the field study such areas as civic virtues, responsibility, altruism, tolerance, work ethic, and civility. The general goals of research in these three areas is to identify and strengthen positive human traits, to increase individual and group facility at reality negotiation, and to promulgate public and private institutions that impart those strengths from one generation to the next (Seligman, 2002). Next I will give examples that characterize the rapid growth within the past decade of positive psychology.

The Recent Growth of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is growing into an active area of research in the human sciences. Below is a brief review of examples that demonstrate the growth of positive psychology as an area of research.

For example, the first International Positive Psychology Summit was held in 2002 (Simonton & Baumeister, 2005). Furthermore, two peer edited journals with articles dedicated to issues concerning positive psychology were issued (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Snyder & López, 2002). Also a number of textbooks (Snyder & López, 2007) and handbooks (Snyder & Lopez, 2005; Ong & van Dulmen, 2007) now exist. At
the institutional level, an abbreviated list of laboratories and research bodies include: the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania in the USA, the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, and the European Network of Positive Psychology. Though this research movement is still relatively young within the psychological sciences, it has gained momentum within the past decade and appears to be sustaining headway.

Example Constructs

Next, I will discuss in brief detail some of the more prominent constructs being investigated now. Again, the focus of this article is upon individual differences. I will take up a discussion of these variables and others for social and institutional groups in a later article. I have chosen three prominent constructs to review as examples. I will primarily focus on the individual level for this article but, where relevant, also give a brief discussion of cross-cultural and group/national level aspects of a particular construct.

Self-Efficacy

Let us start with, perhaps, the most well researched construct in positive psychology: self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 2008). For the purposes of this article, I will primarily focus my review of self-efficacy for the individual level. I will treat collective (group) self-efficacy in a separate article.

Self-efficacy is the belief that a person has in their capacity to create a desired result based on their own actions. Maddux defined it as "self-efficacy is not perceived skill; it is what I believe I can do with my skills under certain conditions. It is concerned not with my beliefs about my ability to perform specific and trivial motor acts but with my beliefs about my ability to coordinate and orchestrate skills and abilities in changing and challenging situations" (2002, p.278).

The Importance of Self-efficacy for the Individual

Self-efficacy is important for individuals for a number of reasons. First, it plays a primary role in psychological health and adjustment. Second, it plays a major role in physical health. Third, it plays a major role in self-regulation.

Low self-efficacy has been linked with depression (Bandura, 1997), high anxiety levels, and avoidance behavior (Bandura, 1997; Williams, 1995). In contrast, people with higher levels of self-efficacy are confident in their ability to handle challenging, difficult circumstances (Maddux, 2002). Self-efficacy can be an important psychological buffer and enabling factor in protecting and maintaining psychological health and helping people to choose healthy environments and restructure less desirable ones.
An Introduction to Positive Psychology

In terms of physical health, a high individual level of self-efficacy has been associated with a reduction in unhealthy actions and increases and maintenance of healthy behaviors. It also impacts stress management neurotransmitters and blood pressure as indicated by neurobiological and experimental research. Finally, current research also indicates that it influences levels of pain endorphins, susceptibility to infections, and immune functioning (Snyder & López, 2007).

Finally, self-regulation has three interlocking facets. These factors are goals, self-evaluative reactions, and self-efficacy beliefs. According to self-efficacy theory, the goals that we choose give us the “standards against which to monitor our progress and evaluate both our progress and our abilities” (Maddux, 2002, p. 282).

Self-evaluative reactions can be hampered or helped by an individual’s assessment of progress towards their goals. This assessment creates either negative or positive emotions. Subjective evaluation of lack of progress creates anxiety or even stronger emotions such as depression. Positive evaluations create an emotional state that facilitates adaptation and self-regulation.

Moreover, though goals may, to a certain extent, act as guidelines for self-efficacy, a person’s level of self-efficacy, in a particular situation, will also determine the level and types of goals that people are willing to attempt. Furthermore, how long an individual persists at goal attainment, how much agency they devote to the task, and how they view disparities between ongoing performance and goal attainment are also predictable from levels of self-efficacy.

Additionally, an individual’s problem-solving and efficient decision-making behaviors can be predicted from levels of self-efficacy. Higher self-efficacy leads to better answers to problems and greater levels of achievement in populations studied thus far (Maddux, 2002).

Furthermore, when conducting task or work analyses of a difficult situation, people with low self-efficacy tend to become self-critical and shift their focus to a review of their own defects. In contrast, those with high self-efficacy tend to focus on solutions to the problem. Additionally, those with high self-efficacy seem to be better at cognitive resource management (Maddux, 2002).

Finally, cross-cultural research has found replicable, similar, patterns of self-efficacy behavior in both individualist and collectivist (such as Japan) cultures (Bandura, 2002). In other words, a person with high levels of self-efficacy exhibits the same problem-solving and self-regulatory behaviors, apparently, regardless of culture. For example, previous research has shown that, “women both in the United States and Japan have a high sense of efficacy for quantitative activities embedded in stereotypically feminine activities, but low perceived self-efficacy when the same activities are embedded in scientific pursuits” (Bandura, 2002, p.279).
Optimism

Next, I will review learned optimism, as it is currently researched within the field of positive psychology. Learned optimism is essentially how an individual attributes meaning to or explains negative events (Seligman, 1991).

Pessimists tend to attribute failure to themselves. This appears to be trait-like behavior for pessimists and they seem to make these attributions in a global manner (i.e. they blame themselves for failure, regardless of the actual cause or situation).

Learned optimists, on the other hand, tend to explain failures not just by blaming themselves but by also taking into account the influence of other people and events. They also tend to attribute the negative event to situational factors and limit the negativity to one skill or area of performance. In other words, learned optimists do not fault themselves in entirety, rather they tend to see a negative result as a lack of a particular strength or skill that can be improved with the passage of time. They also take into account the possible influence of other events and factors and do not globally ascribe negative meaning to every event, situation, lack of skill, or failure.

In conclusion, learned optimism has been found to be a powerful predictor of better athletic and academic performances, greater interpersonal relationship satisfaction, more productive work records, better coping skills with life stressors, less risk of depression, and better physical health (Snyder & López, 2007).

Subjective Well-Being

A final construct I will introduce is subjective well-being (Diener, 2000) because it has also generated a great deal of research both in the USA and cross-culturally. Subjective well-being (SWB) simply put in layperson’s terms means “happiness”. More specifically, subjective well-being “includes experiencing pleasant emotions, low levels of negative moods, and high life-satisfaction” (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002, p. 63). In the following brief review, I will discuss current research findings, cross-cultural research findings, and research for subjective well-being in the economic arena.

Current research findings suggest that relatively stable, cross-situational, individual patterns in affect (emotions) exist. For instance, stable correlations between work, recreation, and social situations have been found which suggests that individuals have trait-like emotional responses to a plethora of life situations (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002). Longitudinal research studies confirm the aforementioned (Costa & McCrae, 1988).

Cross-cultural research investigating the relationship of subjective well-being and wealth has
found that, in general, higher incomes for individuals and higher levels of national wealth influence life-satisfaction up to a certain point. Both Japan and the USA are notable for their stability of SWB.

Research investigating SWB cross-culturally indicates three important findings. First, it would appear that individualistic cultures express greater “happiness” than collectivist cultures. Second, psychological attributes such as self-esteem and self-consistency seem to have less meaning in collectivist cultures. Third, self-evaluation of happiness appears to be shaped and expressed differently across cultures (Suh & Oishi, 2002).

Individualist cultures have higher support for individual rights, freedoms and individual pursuit of goals and aspirations. In a collectivist culture, in-group (such as family) needs and norms tend to take precedence over personal pursuits (Suh & Oishi, 2002). On the other hand, global research based on cultural differences aside, in terms of individual differences, “personality is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of subjective well-being” (Diener, et al., 1999, p. 279). Thus, it is probably better to investigate the nature, structure, correlates, and outcomes of SWB from a variety of approaches rather than from a single cause alone.

**SWB and Economics**

Four main areas of research that investigated the relationship of SWB and income are reviewed below. These areas are: (a) between-nation correlations of national wealth and subjective well-being, (b) within-country correlations of SWB and income, (c) resultant changes in SWB for individuals who underwent income loss or growth, and (d) resultant trends in subjective well-being during phases of national economic growth (Diener, et al., 1999). I will discuss each in turn below.

**Between-country relationships**

According to research, Gross National Product and SWB have a correlation of .50 for the 39 countries studied (Diener, et al., 1993). These results were replicated with a second study (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). However, the authors noted that other factors such as the higher levels of democracy and egalitarianism that wealthy nations enjoy may inflate the correlation between SWB and national wealth.

**Personal income within-nation relationships**

Small correlations from .12 for the USA or .17 (on average, within countries) have been found thus far for subjective well-being and personal income (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984).

**Individual changes in income**

It would appear that within-country increases in income at the individual level do not necessarily result in greater SWB. One possible answer is that people adapt to changes in income levels by adjusting
their expectations of what they can do with the amount of money that they now earn. However, previous research has also shown that increases in income may yield increases in stress levels (Thoits & Hannan, 1979).

**National level income changes**

A pattern of stability similar to individual changes in income has been found for SWB at the national level. Specifically, regardless of the dramatic growth of the French, Japanese, and US economies from 1946 to 1990, SWB did not exhibit any mean level increases. Perhaps people’s expectations of living standards adapt to income change at the aggregate level as well as the individual level. However, keep in mind, that people living in wealthier nations also enjoy benefits not available in less wealthy nations and that these benefits may mediate the relationship between subjective well-being and income at the individual and national levels. Further research may clarify these relationships.

**Conclusion**

I have introduced positive psychology, its theory, history, and growth. I have also introduced individual level research for three prominent constructs, namely self-efficacy, learned optimism, and subjective well-being (happiness).

I also discussed some of the intriguing, seemingly, universal and culturally specific evidence which has been discovered by researchers working in these three areas. In future introductory articles to positive psychology, I hope to take up a discussion of group/institutional level research (e.g. collective self-efficacy), research methods at the core of positive psychology, public policy and educational considerations.

With the growth of positive psychology it would appear that a scientific pursuit of the positive and good is actually the scientific pursuit of balance through objective research. Much exciting future research awaits us.

**References**


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