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Introduction to Positive Psychology: Overview and Controversies

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Since his first formal address in 1998 by Martin Seligman, the significant growth and accomplishments of the positive psychology have been universally noted. Notable breakthroughs include the inception of the International Positive Psychology Association in 2007 and the First World Congress of Positive Psychology in 2009. However, much concern has also arisen in conjunction with the development of positive psychology. For example, Gable and Haidt (2005) argued that the assumption of a positive psychology implies the rest of the field must be negative psychology. These controversies are not only limited to the foundation of positive psychological principles and understanding the controversies is requisite to ensuring the correct implementation of positive psychology. In this regard, the authors first describe a fundamental tenet of positive psychology in the areas of positive emotion, positive traits, and positive institutions. Further details on controversies and challenges in each area of concern are discussed, leading to the conclusion that positive psychology is a reputable subdiscipline of psychology.

Keywords: positive psychology, character strengths, virtues, happiness, flourish

Introduction to Positive Psychology

The origin of positive psychology can be traced through history back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which explored the question of how people should best live. Aristotle wrote of *eudaimonia*, which is similar to what modern positive psychologists would describe as "authentic happiness," achieved by living a meaningful life as opposed to momentary happiness attained through hedonism or pleasure seeking (Fowers, 2005). More recently, positive

concepts can be seen throughout psychology literature, notably in the presidential address given by William James to the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1902, during which he discussed the limits of human energy and how this energy could be stimulated and used to its full potential (Froh, 2004). According to Froh (2004), humanistic psychology also believed in human goodness and potential, and focused on how to help people function at their best. Maslow (1954) continued in this vein and first used the term "positive psychology" in the last chapter of his book *Personality and Motivation*, writing:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side; it has revealed to us much about man's shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful

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jurisdiction, and that the darker, meaner half. (p.354)

Though the concepts of positive psychology have been scattered throughout various segments of psychology since the beginning of psychology as a science, the first formal introduction of modern positive psychology was made by Martin Seligman during the 1998 American Psychological Association (APA)'s Presidential Address, entitled "Building Human Strengths: Psychology's Forgotten Mission."

After devoting much of his career to researching how negative emotion has contributed to depression through concepts like "learned helplessness," Seligman (1999) surprised many by detailing the ways in which the field of psychology had come to focus primarily on a disease model of mental health instead of the factors resulting in joy and wholeness. He highlighted three missions in psychology as curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent, while explaining how the latter two goals had received considerably less attention (Seligman, 1999). Human thriving was to be a central focus for mental health problems to become manageable and even easily preventable instead of resorting to damage control with little regard to the overall flourishing of the individual (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). With this approach, psychology maybe useful to every person, whether they are experiencing mental distress or not.

In the intervening years, Seligman and other researchers have worked to build the field of positive psychology through books, articles, and other publications, culminating in the establishment of a journal devoted solely to positive psychology. Furthermore, there is now a Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, an annual Positive Psychology Summit, and many local positive psychology networks throughout the country. In 2007, the International Positive Psychology Association was founded to promote rigorous scientific research along with research-based application and further facilitate international communication. The First World Congress of Positive Psychology was also held in 2009 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During the past decade, the field of positive

psychology has made significant scientific gains in cross-cultural studies (see Biswas-Diener, 2006; Linley, et al., 2007; Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, & Peterson, 2006; Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) and it appears that the positive psychology movement is leading another paradigm shift in the history of psychology.

Obviously, the field of positive psychology is still emerging, yet its growth has been quite rapid. It posits that more attention needs to be paid to the positive aspects of human life rather than negative and pathology orientated understandings. However, despite its astonishing accomplishments, much concern regarding its theoretical basis has also been raised with the development of positive psychology. For example, according to Gable and Haidt (2005), one of the most important challenges related to positive psychology is the assumption that if there is a positive psychology, then the rest of psychology must be negative psychology. This question is particularly important since the intention behind the pathology focused approach is to help individuals move toward positive ends, meaning that the emphasis on a pathology model should not be interpreted as negative psychology.

It is true that positive psychology has rekindled a very important perspective in its aim to rebuild what we have known about humans as positive. However, without addressing ongoing controversies concerning the field of positive psychology, this shift may not benefit future learners. Rather, it may delude them into believing in its over-credulity of positive psychology. In this regard, this paper first attempts to provide a succinct but sufficient overview of the main components of positive psychology followed by a balanced presentation of the controversies regarding each content area.

Positive Psychology's Central Concerns: What is Positive psychology?

What is positive psychology? According to Seligman, it can be summarized as the "scientific study of optimal human functioning that aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Put simply, it is a

science of the positive aspects of human life such as well-being, happiness, and life thriving.

The study of the positive aspect of human life runs on three different levels: 1) subjective level; 2) individual level; and 3) group level. The focus of the studies on the subjective level is on positive emotions such as life satisfaction, happiness and joyfulness. At this level, the main focus of such a study does not seek to explain how people act in order to become a good person. Rather, greater emphasis is placed on the person's positive feeling itself. On the individual level, the focus of a study is to explain what to do to become a good person. Thus, much study on this level focuses on human being's virtues and character strengths such as forgiveness, courage, wisdom, and so on. At the group level, the focus is on how civic virtues such as altruism, tolerance, and social responsibility can contribute to the development of better citizenship and communities (Boniwell, 2006). In this regard, leaders in this field typically define positive psychology as "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, p.410). Thus, positive psychologists devote most of their resources to studying these three main "pillars" of positive psychology and this article focus on providing a summary of each content area and its related controversies in a balanced manner.

Positive Emotion

Introduction to the Study of Positive Emotion

Positive emotions are experienced subjectively and include happiness, gratification, pleasure, well-being, flourishing, and fulfillment. Just as Seligman described how a "downward spiral" of negative emotions may manifest into depression, prominent researchers in the area of positive emotions describe how an "upward spiral" of positive emotions may manifest relatively immediate emotional well-being for the individual and into the future. In Barbara Fredrickson's "broaden and build" theory, experiencing positive emotions encourages individuals to

develop new ways of thinking or acting, as opposed to negative emotions which in most cases narrow an individual's responses (e.g., fight or flight; Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). These new ways of thinking and acting lead to the building of physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social resources, which in turn lead to increased levels of lasting emotional well-being. Fredrickson (2001) described positive emotions as both measurable tangible markers and producers of well-being. These positive emotions act as a balance between the negative emotions of individuals and measured differences between the two have been shown to reliably predict subjective self-reports of well-being (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991; Kahneman, 1999).

Many research studies have been conducted on the role of positive emotion in human flourishing, including studies of positive emotion and longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001), emotional well-being and reduced risk of stroke in older adults (Ostir, Markides, Peek, & Goodwin, 2001), positive emotion and resilience (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Lemay & Ghazal, 2001; Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004), and daily mood and the experience of pain (Gil, Carson, Porter, Scipio, Bediako, & Orringer, 2004). Positive emotion defined in modern positive psychology is not merely having sensory pleasure or a positive mood. Although sometimes subjective experience of positive feeling includes physiological and sensory pleasures, positive emotion differs in that it requires cognitive appraisals, referring to direct, immediate and intuitive evaluations made on the environment in reference to personal well-being (Yap & Tong, 2009). In other words, this means that people will consider how an event affects their personal well-being and consider how they might cope with their situation. Thus, the experience of positive emotion can be enhanced through the practice of positive thinking that leads to an upward spiral explained in the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). The recognition of this upward spiral is a goal of cognitive therapy.

Positive emotion has also been studied in many different areas including subjective well-being, life satisfaction, flourishing, and life thriving. Diener is prominent in the

study of subjective well-being and life satisfaction, which factor in heavily to the way positive psychologists identify an individual's level of thriving. Consistent correlation exists between subjective self-report of positive experience and positive emotions (Diener & Lucas, 2000). Positive emotion has also been linked to longevity, as evidenced in "The Nun Study." Researchers from the University of Kentucky analyzed the diaries of nuns and found that those who had expressed positive emotion most frequently in their writings lived an average of 10 years longer than those who experienced fewer instances of positive emotion (Danner, Snowden, & Friesen, 2001). In other words, there was a stepwise decrease in the risk of mortality resulting in a 2.5-fold difference between the lowest and highest quartiles as the quartile ranking of positive emotion in early life increased. Similarly, researchers studied the yearbook pictures of college women and rated them based on expressions of authentic positive emotion, finding that the women who displayed authentic smiles were more likely to experience favorable outcomes in their marriages and personal well-being 30 years later (Harker & Keltner, 2001). Positive emotion has also been linked to positive job satisfaction in the workplace (Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994) and positive coping and health benefits (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Feldman, 2004).

Self-report and non-self-report methods of assessment are both utilized when measuring positive emotion. Some measures simply survey one broad positive emotion state, and others can run up to 132 items (Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist-Revised; MAACL-R; Zuckerman & Lubin, 1985). The scales with one item are brief and convenient, but suffer from low reliability. Since positive emotions are generally highly correlated, scales of as few as four to five items often show high reliability. These scales can be a "yes or no" response to whether or not the subject currently experiences a certain positive emotion or within a discrete period of time; a Likert scale which assesses for intensity or frequency of emotional experience; or a bipolar scale with two opposing emotions at the poles (e.g., happy vs. sad) in which the subject marks their current affective state on a continuum line. Generally, the time frame is of great importance; with many scales, subjects can be

instructed to indicate how they feel at that very moment, during that particular day, the past week or month, etc. This is an important factor when differentiating between emotions, moods, and temperament.

Non-self-report measures of positive emotion rely on the assumption that emotions are composed of multiple factors, some of which can be recognized by others. The most straightforward technique for non-self-report of positive emotion is observer reports in which a target subject's friends and family members are asked to rate frequency or intensity of the subject's emotional expressions. Research has shown that observer reports correlated over .50 with self-reports of positive emotion. (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). Another non-self-report method is facial measures, in which judges are trained to look for specific signs of emotional expressions in a target subject's face. Different systems allow raters to report a subject's emotion based on a coding system of facial expressions. Electromyography is another way to detect facial expressions through a computerized system that measures muscle change in the subject's face and can even detect muscle movements that human raters cannot detect. However, this system has limits in the range of subtle emotions it can identify and therefore can only be used to reliably measure general pleasantness. Other physiological measures such as heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, respiration, and others, have been able to distinguish positive and negative emotions, but they are limited in differentiating between more subtle levels of emotion (Diener, 2009).

Though there is evidence that emotions are more than just a subjective experience, self-report continues to be the easiest and most reliable way of measuring positive emotion. There are many different self-report positive emotion scales. The most widely used scales in this area include Positive and Negative Affect Scale Expanded (60 items and 11 subscales, PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1999), Intensity and Time Affect Scale (24 items and 6 subscales, ITAS; Diener, Smith, & Fujita, 1995), Affect Grid (two subscales, one spatial grid; Russel, Weiss, & Mendelsohn, 1989), the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and the four-item Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Controversies Regarding the Study of Positive Emotion

Regarding psychology, a main concern arises from what Seligman (2002) describes as “business-as-usual” psychology, or those subfields that address deficiencies and disorders in humans and how to address and prevent them. It seemed that in the beginning, the proponents of positive psychology were admonishing their colleagues because they represented a “negative psychology” (Lazarus, 2003; Held, 2004). The argument persists that if a subfield of psychology is necessary to solely address what is good about humans, than all other forms of psychology must be negative. Held (2004) draws attention to this separatist attitude in explicit fashion by exhibiting the “declaration of independence” described by Snyder and Lopez (2002; p.751) in the closing remarks in their handbook of positive psychology. The authors exhort that at that point, positive psychology had successfully positioned itself in opposition with the “pathology model” typically adopted in applied psychology. Held (2004; p.26), however, further describes how positive psychology seems to have a negativity about negativity itself and “the wrong kind of positivity.” Held (2004) again illuminates strong support in positive psychology within their own criticism of humanistic psychology and its failure to maintain an empirical orientation. Lazarus (2003) also laments how positive psychologists dismiss the same methodological issues that their humanistic predecessors did (cross-sectional longitudinal research) and place too high an emphasis on correlational implications as causal.

Another controversy is in its assessment of positive emotion. Cultivating positive emotion can have some very desirable benefits beyond just a momentary experience of pleasure. Therefore, it is important to be able to assess an individual’s experience of positive emotions. However, there are some methodological concerns for measuring positive emotion. First, the operational definition of positive emotion is difficult to establish. Some argue that positive emotions are simply those whose affect is pleasurable, but others argue that positive emotions must bring about behaviors in the individual (Diener, 1999; Ekman & Davidson, 1994). Another methodological issue exists

regarding the many approaches to structural models of positive emotion. Some researchers try to narrow down the large list of positive emotions into a smaller list of basic emotions while others try to understand the associations among different emotions; still others try to make a hierarchy of affect and emotion and then there are those who argue that positive and negative emotions are not opposite poles of a single emotional dimension, but are in fact separate dimensions altogether. Though these methodological complexities exist, researchers in the field point out that there are many similarities between definitions and models of positive emotion that make it possible to measure positive emotion in a variety of ways (Lucas, Diener, & Larsen, 2009).

Positive Traits

Introduction to the Study of Positive Traits

Positive psychology researchers have also focused a large portion of their energies on studying positive traits of human beings such as virtues and character strengths and their relationship with human flourishing. Individual traits are experienced subjectively but also systematically by individuals through behaviors that lead to positive experiences such as being brave, forgiving, or modest. Researchers reasoned that so much time and effort has been spent classifying mental disorders (e.g. the DSM) that certainly some benefit could be gained by creating a classification of strengths, what Peterson and Seligman (2004) have termed a “manual of the sanities.” These two most prominent researchers in the study of character strengths spent a great deal of time reviewing more than 200 religious and philosophical texts from a wide variety of cultures, from the ancient Greeks all the way to the Harry Potter books of today (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). They and a team of experienced researchers came up with lists of identified strengths and narrowed them based on their importance across cultures. Strengths identified as talents or abilities were removed (such as intelligence); some virtues were left out because they were not important

in all cultures (e.g. cleanliness, frugality, silence). The remaining strengths were subject to 10 rigorous inclusion criteria (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). After these criteria were applied, what remained were 24 character strengths identified as universal in six different virtue categories. In this classification, virtues are broad categories of positive human attributes which are comprised of the various character strengths associated with them. Positive psychologists theorize that a virtue can be achieved through the frequent practice of its component character strengths (e.g., achieving the virtue of humanity by being kind, loving, and socially intelligent; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The six virtues and their corresponding character strengths are: (a) wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective); (b) courage (authenticity, bravery, persistence, zest); (c) humanity (kindness, love, social intelligence); (d) justice (fairness, leadership, teamwork); (e) temperance (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation); and (f) transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, religiousness) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Positive psychologists tend to look at character strengths in terms of signature strengths and encourage the development of these strengths as independent characteristics.

One of the popular studies in this area is cross-cultural comparative analysis regarding the relative importance of character strengths. Much research has been to study the relationship between well-being and character strengths, not only in mainstream American culture but also in cultures and subcultures across the world. While the similarities between cultures are thus far proving to be great, there are also several significant differences that have been found. In a study published in 2007, Peterson, Ruch, Beerman, Park, and Seligman surveyed over 12,000 adults in the United States via the Internet, and around 450 adults in Switzerland using paper-and-pen surveys written in German. They found that hope, zest, love, and curiosity were highly linked to life satisfaction for both populations. Gratitude was a robust predictor of life satisfaction for the US sample, while perseverance was a strong predictor for the Swiss sample. A recent study used a Croatian sample of 881 individuals to

study character strengths and well-being, and compared their results to similar studies which used sample populations from the United States (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004), the United Kingdom (Linley et al., 2007), Switzerland (Peterson et al., 2007), South Africa (Van Eeden, Wissing, Dreyer, Park, & Peterson, 2008) and Japan (Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Their study supported the idea that the strengths such as zest, curiosity, gratitude, and hope are most closely associated with well-being, which is similar to the findings of the other studies mentioned. Similar results were found in a study on Japanese young adults, in which the Japanese respondents who had high levels of well-being also reported high levels of curiosity, zest, hope, and gratitude (Shimai et al., 2006).

Another trend in the research on virtue and character strengths focuses on life satisfaction and recovery from illness. In the early 2000's, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) used the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) to survey 5,299 adults over the Internet and studied the relationship between their character strengths and life satisfaction as a measure of well-being. Those who reported high levels of life satisfaction consistently reported high levels of hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity. Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2006) also explored the association between character strengths and previous episodes of illness or psychological disorder. They reported that appreciation of beauty, bravery, curiosity, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, humor, kindness, love of learning, and spirituality were more prominent among individuals who had recovered from a serious illness as compared to those who had never experienced a serious illness.

Other studies have also examined character strengths in various populations. Researchers conducted a large study on a sample of over 17,000 individuals from the United Kingdom via the Internet using the VIA-IS (Linley et al., 2007). The top character strengths for this cultural population were open-mindedness, fairness, curiosity, love of learning, and creativity. Overall, they found that women in their sample typically scored higher than men, specifically on the strengths of kindness and love, while men tended to score higher on creativity. On the rest of the top five character strengths, there was no significant

difference between genders. The researchers did point out that there were more similarities between genders than differences, and the effect sizes on the differences were small (.000 - .039), so the differences should not be overstated. These results were similar to the gender differences found in a study using a Japanese sample of young adults suggesting that men and women scored differently on the strengths of kindness, love, bravery, and creativity (Shimai et al., 2006).

A study on the validity of character strengths across cultures found many similarities but also several differences between cultural groups (Biswas-Diener, 2006). Over 120 Kenyan Masai, over 70 Inughuit in Northern Greenland, and over 500 University of Illinois students were surveyed using the VIA-IS. Respondents in each culture acknowledged the importance of all 24 character strengths, despite how vastly different each culture is from the other. However, the groups varied in which character strengths they considered most important within their cultures. In a study focusing on combat veterans, researchers studied the relationship of social anxiety and PTSD to well-being and character strengths (Kashdan, Julian, Merritt, & Uswatte, 2006). They found that veterans with social anxiety tended to report low levels of well-being and scored low on character strength assessments. And finally, Steen, Kachorek, and Peterson (2003) held group discussions with over 450 students from various high schools in Michigan to explore this age group's ideas about character strengths and their importance.

The Values-in-Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is the most widely studied measurement of character strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) created a classification of virtues and character strengths with empirical properties for the measurement of these constructs. An inventory was developed through the authors' classification of six virtues (wisdom, humanity, justice, courage, temperance, and transcendence) and their 24 corresponding character traits. The VIA-IS is a 240-item, self-report questionnaire allowing ten items for each of the twenty-four character strengths. All twenty-four subscales retain $\alpha > .70$ and test-retest reliability over a four-month period is $\alpha > .70$ for a sample of over 150,000 participants

(Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ruch, Proyer, Harzer, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2010; Peterson, 2006).

The VIA-IS has been growing in popularity, with over 1.3 million individuals assessing their character strengths worldwide. The strengths of the measure are easily accessible through their website and face validity is strong, making the scale understandable for many individuals. However, the applicability of this inventory within certain populations such as people with chronic illness and disabilities is lacking (Kim, Berven, Chan, Gonzalez, Miller, & Keck, 2010). For example, in a health-related study, individuals with spinal cord injuries or quadriplegia may find the 240-item survey too long and strenuous to provide accurate self-reporting and the meaning of character strengths would be inherently different when related to disability and illness. Furthermore, researchers disagree on the six-factor arrangement of virtues posited by the pioneering authors. Early factor analysis efforts mostly uncovered a five-factor model (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Van Eeden, Wissing, Dreyer, Park, & Peterson, 2008). Peterson (2006) later discovered a two-factor solution based on the analysis of ipsative data. Further evidence unveils four-factor, three-factor, and one-factor models (Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000; Dahlsgaard, 2005; MacDonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008; Park & Peterson, 2006; Shryack, Steger, Krueger, & Kallie, 2010). These findings show discrepancy in the effort to structure the virtue factor model and thus illuminate the need to further explore the inconsistent construct validity of the VIA-IS in order to better understand strengths of character across both general and diverse populations.

Controversies Regarding the Study of Positive Traits

Criticism of the classification of virtue argue that character strengths do not work independently from one another, and in order to truly flourish, individuals must employ character strengths that work together. Virtue psychologists have initiated this criticism, basing their theories on the idea that groups of character strengths work in accord to help individuals achieve well-being by making decisions and taking action toward the good in life. This

concept dates back to the Aristotelian idea of “practical wisdom” – the ability of an individual to make moment by moment decisions based on the context of the situation at hand, using judgment to employ the combinations of character strengths that will lead to the best outcome, especially in the long term (Fowers, 2005; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). While an individual may have signature character strengths, it is the harmonious interactions of these character strengths coupled with the practical wisdom to implement these strengths in various contexts which truly allow a person to thrive. For instance, if a person wants to pursue an intimate relationship as a way of flourishing in life, he or she must employ many different character strengths. A person may have the signature strength of love that plays a large role in his or her success in a relationship, but without the strengths of integrity, kindness, generosity, humor, and others working in conjunction with the capacity to love and be loved, a thriving intimate relationship hardly seems possible.

Kristjánsson (2010) has designated this generation of psychologists focusing on what leads to a thriving life as “third-generation,” describing Aristotelian theories as “first-generation” and the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers as “second-generation.” Most of the philosophical debate has surrounded the alleged connection between positive psychology and Aristotelian virtue theory (Fowers, 2008; Kristjánsson, 2010; Martin, 2007; Robbins, 2008; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Fowers (2008) states that any attempt to measure strengths of character and virtue cannot be accomplished while maintaining neutral values, which is typically the stance in psychological research. Furthermore, positive psychologists state that their empirical findings must not be prescriptive in nature (Seligman, 2002). In other words, they must describe what the good life is and not tell people how to live the good life. Virtue ethicists criticize this subjective outlook because the Aristotelian definition of happiness suggests individuals achieve a flourishing life by living by a moral and virtuous code. The positive psychology definition of happiness is under debate within the field. Robbins (2008) reports that if positive psychology should adopt the Aristotelian definition in any capacity, they must accept that this is a prescriptive notion

of living virtuously.

Most recently, Kristjánsson (2010) describes conceptual flaws to be the differing views between positive psychologists on the definition of happiness, the ambiguous nature of how individuals may be able to obtain happiness through behavior that would not be considered virtuous (happy criminals, etc.), and also the propensity that positive psychologists share in ignoring realistic contextual factors that may contribute to individuals’ uncontrollable lack of well-being.

It is also worth noting that studies dealing with the factor structure of the VIA inventory have not been able to confirm the existence of the six-factor virtue structure theorized by the authors of the inventory (Macdonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008; Van Eeden, Wissing, Dreyer, Park, & Peterson, 2008; Brdar & Kashdan, 2010). In general, the positive psychology community has accepted the six virtue factor structure of the VIA Inventory of Strengths. However, the very few studies which have analyzed this structure have not found sufficient support for the six virtue categories. Only three studies have been published on the factor structure of the VIA-S (Macdonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008; Van Eeden, et al., 2008; Brdar & Kashdan, 2010). Macdonald and colleagues (2008) found a four-factor solution with a large number of cross-factor loadings. Van Eeden and colleagues (2008) found support for a five-factor solution based on eigenvalues greater than 1.0, with no information provided on actual eigenvalues, factor loadings, or correlations among factors. Brdar and Kashdan (2010) found support for a four-factor solution with more than half of the variance explained by one large factor which they termed Interpersonal Wisdom. All together, while this inventory of character strengths is important and has research value, it still remains unclear as to how best to categorize these strengths as the empirical evidence appears to deviate from the original conceptual framework of the six-factor structure.

Positive Institutions

Introduction to the Study of Positive Institutions

The third domain of positive psychology is the study of positive institutions. According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), positive psychology at the group level is about the civic, communal, and institutional virtues that encourage and enable individuals to pursue a meaningful life. Civic virtue is irreducibly social and individuals can pursue civic virtue only through society. In other words, pursuing civic virtues means that people practice their strengths to achieve common goals valued by the society. The main concern in this area is, “What are the institutions that enable the best in human nature?” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). This inquiry reflects the belief that ongoing and continuous encouragement, mentoring, and belongingness provide the best context for individuals to cultivate positive emotion and traits.

In this regard, positive institutions refer to organized efforts toward social thriving and building and promoting systems in positivity such as family life, charitable organizations, educational institutions, businesses, communities, and societies. It was this recognition of function over dysfunction that continues to intrigue positive psychologists and drive research in the field (Park & Peterson, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002).

As a prime example of this third area, the VIA Institute on Character frames their efforts to expand the scope of their research and services around all three areas of focus in positive psychology. Schueller (2009) makes a strong case that positive psychology can learn much from community psychology. His argument is that the two subfields share goals to promote personal, organizational, and community well-being and that balancing individual wellness goals with the collective goals of the community helps to provide the necessary resources for individuals to flourish. Balancing individual wellness goals with the collective goals of the community can be complementary by helping to clearly define individuals’ roles within the community, supporting individual diversity, and fostering group cohesion (Schueller, 2009). Supporting autonomy and

empowering individuals are central tenets of positive psychology.

Social networks and community bonds are essential components of well-being in society (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Organizing communities beyond just a framework of economic vitality to include promotion of socialization helps to increase societal satisfaction. From a sociopolitical viewpoint, Diener, Diener, and Diener (1995) report that the promotion of human rights, democracy, and equality leads to an increase in the prevalence of institutions that promote individual and collective wellness. Specific methods have been proposed to learn more about what individual communities need in order to thrive. Empowerment evaluations can help to determine the specific needs of groups of individuals by assessing just how empowered community members feel regarding the role they play in meeting their individual and environmental needs (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2004). Similarly, Minkler and Wallerstein (2003) maintain that community-based participatory research acts as needs assessments and fosters collective autonomy of a community by fusing research efforts with specific developmental needs reported by the community. Superordinate goals of any community include autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Autonomy refers to both the individual and collective influence of a community and its members to achieve static levels of flourishing. Concurrently, competence is the sense of purpose and meaning individuals feel within their community. Connectedness includes the level of systemic socialization community members experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the most recent volume to explore the research of positive institutions, Biswas-Diener (2011) arranges the field into five distinct sub-areas: public policy, poverty, organizations and corporations, prosocial foci, and interventions. Public policy refers to political action toward the greater social good, public health and wellness, and ecological and cultural challenges. Poverty is posited to be where positive institution development should begin in a “bottom-up” approach as opposed to a “top-down” approach regarding socioeconomic effects of well-being (Biswas-Diener & Patterson, 2011). Organizations refer to

the study of workplace satisfaction and how companies are able to achieve high well-being among their employees. A prosocial focus outlines public altruism and promotes individuals to consider the perspective of others. Finally, interventions are essentially existing efforts and case studies on positive institutional development (see Biswas-Diener, 2011, *Positive Psychology for Social Change*, for further reference).

Controversies Regarding the Study of Positive Institutions

The last concern regarding the field of positive psychology is about positive institutions. As discussed above, positive psychology has accomplished a great deal of research in the first two domains of emotions and traits, but relatively much less in the third domain of institutions. The nature of positive emotion, virtues, and character strengths are essentially social and interpersonal and without linking positive psychology into positive sociology and community, positive psychology may not contribute to the improvement in the positive functioning of schools, communities, workplaces, and so on (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

Given that it has been established that the area of research regarding positive institutions is severely lacking in comparison to the other two pillars, Kristjánsson (2010) acknowledges this void in his criticism of positive psychology. He argues that positive psychologists have seemingly adopted an individualistic, Western approach to the study of character strength and presuppose the unique subjective experience of emotions and traits within individuals. This ideology runs counter to this third pillar of positive communal entities in Western society, where most positive psychology research is conceived and conducted. Scollon and King (2011) recommend more cross-cultural research in the area of positive institution for two main reasons: first, we can learn from countries and other areas of the world which experience higher levels of collective well-being and second, those differences between countries may help us to adapt our evolving understanding of subjective character strength and virtue.

Scollon and King (2011) also describe two other efforts

in research that may be beneficial in advancing knowledge in positive institutions. In existing frameworks of research conducted in positive emotions and positive traits, controlling for and measuring larger contextual variables may be telling about the larger structural scheme in a given proximity. Empirical and demographic information about how individuals construct their subjective conception of well-being could provide researchers with a new practical method for analyzing sociological factors. This information may slowly lead to development of positive political and communal structures. Last but certainly not least, a further exploration of the connection between wealth and well-being should be undertaken. Economic factors are a consistent and persistent contextual force across international borders and cultures. Recent research has shown a positive relationship between possession of wealth and life satisfaction and that spending money on others may lead to enhanced well-being (Lucas & Schimmack, 2009). Financial analyses of happiness, among other factors, may lead to a better understanding of the bigger picture of well-being across all pillars of positive psychology.

Future Direction and Conclusion

Positive psychology emphasizes on strengths, not on limitations and pathology, which is different from the mainstream psychology and many other health related professions. Although it may seem intuitive, recalibrating psychology toward an emphasis on the individual's strengths and well-being does not come without challenges as there are both supporters and detractors of positive psychology. Despite the extensive research on positive psychology (particularly on positive emotions and positive traits), the controversies and criticisms regarding positive psychology have not diminished. In addition to psychological circles, the extensive research in the development of positive psychology over the past ten years has captured the audience of academicians in philosophical, ethical, and moral educational disciplines. The controversies and criticisms regarding positive psychology may be discussed by way of each discipline; however, it should be

noted that the nature of positive psychology encourages interdisciplinary interest. In light of the controversies and criticisms, positive psychology continues to gain ground in the empirical validation of how positive emotions and positive traits contribute to social well-being. Accordingly, the classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) continues to evolve, improving our understanding of subjective traits leading to a flourishing life. Of particular interest, in a recent discussion on a positive psychology listserv spearheaded by Todd B. Kashdan (Electronic mail, January, 2011), an innovator in the study of curiosity, a discussion arose arguing that positive psychology would become a more legitimate and respected field once the term “movement” is removed from its moniker. With this in mind and with the extensive empirical validation of how positive psychology can contribute to social well-being, it would appear that the time has arisen to consider the removal of the term “movement” from its name, thereby, continuing to evolve and grow to become a subdiscipline of psychology.

Unlike positive emotion and positive traits, positive institutions outcomes may have the propensity to benefit the individual or the group/society as they cultivate positive emotion and traits. For instance, in the area of mentoring youth, one primary pathway of mentor influence on positive outcomes may be through intermediate improvements in youth’s social and emotional development that result from a close and positive interpersonal relationship. Youth who are able to better regulate their emotions and have positive temperaments or other engaging attributes may be primed for higher levels of civic involvement than peers who lack these attributes. In addition, youth with higher levels of social competence such as interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and coping and judgment skills tend to be held in higher regard by their peers and teachers (Morison & Masten, 1991). Also, Portwood and Ayers (2005) point toward the widespread belief that the presence of a mentor in the life of a young person not only supports healthy growth and development, but also serves as a protective factor against many of the risks facing today’s youth. Therefore, implementing positive institutions’ contributions to social well-being may benefit the individual, group, or

society. Lastly, Albee (1998) describes how ameliorating and transforming social institution not only addresses symptoms of social ills (e.g., delinquency, child abuse, and domestic abuse) but also fosters social autonomy and empowerment through social mentorship programs sponsored by communities. For instance, children and adolescents with volunteer mentors have been found to be less likely to take part in delinquent problem behaviors (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002) and are more likely to graduate high school and attend college (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Klaw, Fitzgerald, & Rhodes, 2003). Both of these results suggest the presence of a more positive future orientation in the identities of the mentored youths. In contrast, youths who are overwhelmed by social or behavioral problems tend to be less likely to benefit from mentoring; for example, mentoring relationships with youth referred for psychological treatment or sustained physical, sexual or emotional abuse were less likely to remain intact (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

The arena of positive social efforts holds the greatest capacity to promote both individual and collective thriving. Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006) articulate how increases in personal happiness contribute to collective satisfaction. With that said, improving human development is indeed a movement in the right direction, including a focus on education, humanities, health, and public policy. A focus on these entities effectively improves the prevalence of positive emotions and traits by using the resources within a community to promote engagement, meaning, and purpose. To illustrate, in recent years, there has been an increased focus on programs designed to facilitate both formal and informal mentoring relationships with practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and funding sources. These entities look toward mentoring as a promising form of intervention for youth. Popular national initiatives include America’s Promise, founded by Colin Powell in 1997, and federal legislation promoting mentoring, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act which provides funding for the Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program. Systemic changes in policy geared toward the social good is

best accomplished by utilizing the resources within a community as opposed to just telling individuals what they need (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Community resources contribute to life longevity and influence where individuals fall along the social gradient. The concept of a social gradient helps to structure how communities may effectively identify and utilize the resources they have to promote well-being. Marmot (2004) describes the social gradient as a continuum elucidating those groups of individuals whom thrive or struggle in their environment. In Marmot's (2004) exploration of this phenomenon, he found it to exist worldwide and also concluded that psychiatric disorders, diabetes, accidents, violence, and respiratory diseases all correlate with where individuals fall in the hierarchy. The lower an individual's societal rank, the more at risk the person is for social ills. Further research on creating positive institutions that contribute to collective well-being is essential as this area has not received much attention from positive psychology researchers.

In conclusion, the goal of this paper was to provide a foundational overview of positive psychology and related controversies. There has been extensive research in the areas of positive emotion and positive traits, while a lag has been demonstrated in the area of positive institutions. Despite the controversies and criticisms, positive psychology has flourished and provided a perspective on human development which differs from the traditional approach of psychology, which is focused on pathology and intervention. The continual growth and development of positive psychology may yet provide another piece to the theoretical framework to further understand the complexity and intricacies of human development and thus serve as the catalyst to earn its place as a reputable subdiscipline of psychology.

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