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Positive Psychology, Ethnocentrism, and the Disguised Ideology of Individualism

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Abstract. This article aims to examine critically the attempts by positive psychologists to develop a science of happiness and positive human functioning that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries. Current efforts in positive psychology are deconstructed to reveal an adherence to the dominant Western conception of self and its accompanying vision of the good life as personal fulfillment. It is argued that in failing to recognize the tacit cultural and moral assumptions underlying their investigations, positive psychologists not only distort the outlooks of cultures that do not subscribe to an individualistic framework, they also insulate themselves from reflecting critically on their work. Alternative forms of inquiry are offered to assist positive psychology in overcoming these limitations.

Key Words: collectivism, conceptions of selfhood, cross-cultural differences, identity, indigenous psychology, individualism, positive psychology

At work in a theory of social science is a vision of life, and it is only when this vision is made manifest and analyzed that the merits and demerits of the theory can be fully recognized. (Fay, 1987, p. 1)

When positive psychology was introduced in the journal *American Psychologist* (Seligman & Csikszentmihályi, 2000a), it was met with mixed reactions. While most psychologists agreed that the discipline should examine the brighter aspects of human functioning, many (e.g., Ahuvia, 2001; Bacigalupe, 2001; Brand, 2001; Compton, 2001; Walsh, 2001) expressed concern that the proposed science seemed ethnocentric and narrowly focused on the values of Western culture. In response to these allegations, positive psychology's founders Martin Seligman

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and Mihály Csikszentmihályi (2001) assured their critics that 'we do not intend to form an exclusive movement. … We are, unblushingly, scientists first. The work we seek to support and encourage must be nothing less than replicable, cumulative, and objective' (p. 89). They further argued that 'our common humanity is strong enough to suggest psychological goals to strive for that cut across social divides' and that both 'the accusation of cultural, ethnic, political, and gender bias' and 'the label of "prescriptive" rather than "descriptive"' (p. 90) can be avoided by

> … classifying only the strengths that every major subculture in America today values positively. If a reliable taxonomy and stable and valid measurement strategies ensue, we will have a use scientific fulcrum. More ambitious scholars can then attempt to expand this to other times and places, *and perhaps even to all times and places.* (p. 90, italics added)

Two important points are revealed in this response. First, there is a sincere interest on the part of positive psychologists to develop a universal science of human flourishing that extends beyond specific cultural interpretations of the good life. Reflective of this interest is the recently published *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which purports to have identified positive traits that transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. Its authors claim that the effort to include only universally valued traits was motivated by the 'worry we would create a list of characteristics that reflected only our own take on the good life' (p. 20), and that the six virtues (courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence) identified as ubiquitous, if not universal, provide a 'non-arbitrary basis for focusing on certain virtues rather than others' (p. 51).

Second, positive psychologists seem to believe that the adoption of naturalist epistemologies will enable them to discover the objective truths necessary to achieve their goal of inclusion. This belief is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the seminal work introducing the field, in which Seligman and Csikszentmihályi (2000b) contend that the utilization of empirical methodologies not only distinguishes positive psychology from previous examinations of human flourishing (e.g., the humanist movement of the 1960s), but also renders it superior to all other attempts to determine the sources of optimal human functioning, as history and philosophy are 'too subjective ... dependent on faith or ... dubious assumptions; they [history and philosophy] lacked the clear-eyed skepticism and the slow cumulative growth that I [Csikszentmihályi] associated with science' (p. 7). Such statements imply that psychological science is somehow immune from 'dubious assumptions' and that the founders of positive psychology are convinced that the utilization of empirical methodologies will allow them to achieve what Nagel (1986) described as 'a view from nowhere.'

We believe that both the emphasis on human flourishing in positive psychology and the attempt to study it in a culturally sensitive manner are

warranted and long overdue. But it is our contention that positive psychology is doomed to being narrow and ethnocentric as long as its researchers remain unaware of the cultural assumptions underlying their work. Philosophers and social theorists (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gadamer, 1960/1975; Giorgi, 1970; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Kuhn, 1970; Taylor, 1985) have long recognized that researchers in the human sciences are never separate from the phenomena they investigate. Rather, the concerns that motivate social science inquiry, and the understandings derived from such inquiries, arise from the socio-cultural and historical traditions in which the researchers are embedded. Thus, the pursuits of social scientists always reflect the values of their culture. There is, quite simply, no such thing as a value-neutral, culture-free psychology.

In this article we attempt to articulate the cultural and moral assumptions underlying positive psychology. By examining the unacknowledged Western ideologies on which positive psychology rests, and by exploring the ways in which these ideologies set limits on what human flourishing is taken to be, we seek to demonstrate that positive psychology, as it is currently being carried out, risks becoming a form of disguised ideology that perpetuates the socio-political status quo and fails to do justice to moral visions outside the dominant outlook. To be clear, in conjunction with the following article in this special issue, by Becker and Marecek (2008), our purpose is not to attack the investigation into the kinds of questions that occupy positive psychologists, but rather to highlight the ways in which alternative forms of inquiry, which take seriously the need to critically examine underlying assumptions and to consider the merits of views that contradict our own, can overcome many of the field's current limitations. We lay the groundwork for this aim by demonstrating that despite the best of intentions and efforts to be culture-free and descriptive, not prescriptive, positive psychology is pervaded by Western cultural values and assumptions.

Western Conceptions of Self and Identity in Positive Psychology

Positive psychology clearly is concerned with the development and enhancement of the self. But what kind of self is the subject of positive psychology? Numerous scholars (e.g., Baumeister, 1987; Gergen, 1973; Guignon, 2004; Sampson, 1988) have argued that conceptions of self vary within and across cultures and over time, and that the boundaries of identity (i.e., how we define the self) shape how we think about the good person and the good life. In particular, historians and philosophers (e.g., MacIntyre, 1984; Taylor, 1989) have articulated important distinctions between ancient, pre-modern, modern, and postmodern understandings of self and their accompanying visions of the good life, while cross-cultural and cultural psychologists (e.g., Kağitçibaşi, 1997; Kim, Triandis, Kağitçibaşi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Marsella, DeVos, & Hsu, 1985; Triandis, 1995; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988;

Waterman, 1981), often in conversation with psychological anthropologists, distinguish between individualistic and collectivistic selves (or independent and interdependent selves) and their differing notions of what it is good to do or to be.

So what is the self of positive psychology? It is our contention that, as is the case with mainstream psychology more generally (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999), positive psychology is based largely on dominant Western, and particularly American, ideologies of 'individualism' or 'liberal individualism.' Encompassed within these terms is: (a) a Cartesian distinction between an internal subjective world of values, experiences, beliefs, and meanings and an external objective 'real' world of abstract facts; (b) a notion of a fixed, essential self that is separate from others and the world it inhabits; and (c) a moral outlook in which it is presumed that because meanings and values are subjective, persons should be free to determine both the meaning of and the means to pursue the good life, or 'happiness,' in whatever manner they choose so long as they do not interfere with the ability of others to do the same. Within Western culture, variants of individualism (e.g., utilitarian, expressive, biblical, and republican strands; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) constitute moral visions that shape our understandings of both what the self is and what the self should be or become (Christopher, 1996, 2004; Christopher, Nelson, & Nelson, 2003; Christopher & Smith, 2006).

Below we will demonstrate the ways in which this particular conception of self and the moral vision it entails animate the various projects pursued by positive psychologists. But for the moment we want to explore in greater depth the meaning of the individualistic conception of self and how it differs from those in other worldviews. This preliminary task demands attention because for many Westerners the notion of a fixed essential self that can turn inward to determine the good through natural sentiment or reason is so deeply entrenched it is often presumed to be a natural, universal, and unquestionable truth. As philosopher Charles Taylor (1988) states, we tend to believe 'we have selves as we have eyes, hearts, or livers' (p. 299). However, unlike eyes, hearts, or livers, selves lack substantive essence and are constituted by interpretations shaped by the traditions and practices in which they are embedded. In other words, any given culture's understanding of what a self is and should be is a reflection of its most deeply held assumptions. Consequently, when we look to other times and places we find our Western atomistic and interiorized self is not a universal truth, but rather an interpretation based on little more than faith in the Cartesian assumption that grants epistemological priority to an 'I' that thinks. Moreover, we find that the assumptions on which our Western interpretation of self rests enjoy limited popularity. In contrast to versions of collectivism, for instance, individualism has been estimated to be the dominant outlook in only 30 percent of the world's population (Triandis, 1989). Similarly, historical research (e.g., Berger, 1979; Brinton, 1987; Foucault, 1982/1986; Guignon, 2004; MacIntyre, 1984; MacPherson, 1962;

Morris, 1987; Randall, 1940; Rose, 1990; Ullmann, 1966) suggests the idea of a self that can determine the good through inward reflection would be incomprehensible to residents of ancient and pre-modern societies.

The variation in assumptions and interpretations of selfhood is so vast it leads one to wonder exactly how did these differences arise. Charles Taylor's (1989) analysis of the emergence of the modern Western identity provides a particularly compelling answer to this question. According to Taylor, prior to the modern era, Westerners, like many citizens of other cultures today, subscribed to a *two-tiered vision of the world* that encompassed, first, a broad cosmological framework that imbued the world with meaning and value, and, second, an understanding of ordinary life that derived meaning from these broad frameworks. For example, Hannah Arendt (1958) points out how the ancient Greeks distinguished between *zen* (the life of necessity), the domain of the home where chores and tasks necessary for biological survival took place, and *euzen* (the good life), which was the public life, the life of the citizen situated in the *polis* where one could go beyond the necessities required for physical existence and cultivate those attributes that are uniquely human.

In contrast, the dominant secularized view associated with modern Western societies focuses only on a single tier. Scholars (e.g., Berger, 1977; MacPherson, 1962; Richardson, 1989; Taylor, 1975; Weber, 1978) have suggested that this *one-tiered vision of the world* emerged as a consequence of the various political, social, and intellectual movements (e.g., the Protestant Reformation, the American and French Revolutions, the Enlightenment and scientific revolution) that railed against the oppression and inequalities inherent in pre-modern hierarchical frameworks. By pushing against such inequalities, these scholars argue, Western society essentially collapsed the traditional two-tiered system, in which frameworks were considered necessary for meaning, into a one-tiered system that views such frameworks as optional, arbitrary, or relativistic.

This shift from a two-tiered to a one-tiered system has had radical consequences for self-understandings. This is because, as Charles Taylor (1985) states, '[t]o define my identity is to define what I must be in contact with in order to function fully as a human agent, and specifically to be able to judge and discriminate and recognize what is really of worth or importance, both in general and for me' (p. 258). In a two-tiered system, one must be in contact with an external source (e.g., God, the natural order, the social order) to know what it is right to do and good to be. In contrast, from the modern perspective, 'the horizon of identity is an inner horizon' (Taylor, 1985, p. 258). Within this one-tiered view, the individual alone is responsible for determining the nature of the good life, often through doing nothing more than being his/her 'real' self (Guignon, 2004), and any attempt to prescribe norms or standards to define happiness, or what we might in our current age call psychological well-being, is met with suspicion.

Charles Taylor (1985) offers a glimpse into exactly how contemporary Western inwardness differs from societies that subscribe to a two-tiered vision of the world through his description of the pre-modern sense of self, in which the individual was an 'element in a larger order' (p. 258) and identity was known through one's place in the social hierarchy. He states,

> On my own, as a punctual existence outside of it, I should be only a shadow, an empty husk. The order in which I am placed is an external horizon which is essential to answering the question, who am I? I could not conceivably answer the question with this horizon shut off. If I try to occlude it, I fall into a kind of nullity, a sort of non-existence, a virtual death. (p. 258)

This description helps us to understand why ancient punishments of exile and banishment were such powerful deterrents. Without the referents provided by living within a hierarchical social and cosmic order, the pre-modern citizen would be helplessly set adrift. In contrast to our modern age, where there is a imperative to 'move out' and choose our lifestyle and values, Berger (1979) contends that in the pre-modern era people lived in a 'world of fate' (p. 18) and those attempting to choose their own worldview were branded as heretics.

By considering the variances in boundaries of identity and the distinctions between one-tiered and two-tiered visions of the world, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of how different cultures develop different conceptions of the good life. If the horizon of identity is within, as it is in Western society, an emphasis upon freedom, autonomy, and self-expression as markers of maturity, well-being, and mental health are understandable. However, if identity is defined in a more extended or inclusive manner, as it is and has been for most of the world, the prized indicators of the good person tend to be interpersonal. In many East Asian societies, for instance, the Confucian virtue of filial piety – being a dutiful son or daughter through respect and obedience to one's parents and elders – has traditionally been regarded as the most distinguishing feature of good character and the primary way of demonstrating maturity (Hoshmand & Ho, 1995; King & Bond, 1985; Munro, 1969; Wei-Ming, 1985). In contrast, in Western society, duty, obligation, and social expectations are often thought of as constraints that impede the fullest expression of human potential. Supporting these claims, Smith, Türk Smith, and Christopher (2007) found that while respect was endorsed as the most important characteristic of the good person among students in such collectivistic societies as Turkey and Belau, American students ranked it at a lowly 35th.

Different forms of identity also encompass different notions about the cause of suffering. For many non-Western folk and indigenous psychologies, the kind of separate sense of self that is taken for granted and promoted in Western cultures is seen as illusory, limited, and the source of suffering (Malalasekera, 1968; Paranjpe, 1998; Paranjpe, Ho, & Rieber, 1988; Rubin, 1996). Indigenous psychological traditions like Buddhism, Yoga, and Taoism elaborate in extensive detail how identification with the ego or self leads to attachment, sin, and destructive emotions. The autonomous, bounded masterful self at the center of

both contemporary American folk and academic psychology is seen by these non-Western psychologies as ultimately limited and an impediment to spiritual growth. These traditions instead posit that it is by learning to identify with ever-greater communities or wholes (or, conversely, with nothing, in the case of some schools of Buddhism) that we find equanimity, peace, and well-being. Chuang Tzu, a Taoist sage, repeatedly urges 'identify yourself with the infinite' (cited in Loy, 1988, p. 34; see also Sundararajan, 2008). Within many Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions, followers are encouraged to identify with the will of God and practice spiritual surrender, as for instance in the common biblical phrase 'May thy will be done and not mine' (Cole & Pargament, 1999). For such groups the centrality of the bounded masterful self in the social sciences, and psychology in particular, causes them to view psychotherapy with considerable wariness, if not aversion.

While some positive psychologists (Oishi, Diener, Napa Scollon, & Biswas-Diener, 2004; Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999; Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) might argue that cross-cultural examinations of happiness and character strengths tap into these differences, we will demonstrate below that the allegiance to the one-tiered view of Western individualism leaves positive psychologists ill equipped to capture the full depth of cultural differences and distorts understanding of cultures that subscribe to a two-tiered view. Two broad areas will be considered: (1) conceptions of the good life; and (2) the search for decontextualized universals. Again, our goal here is neither to question the value of learning about human flourishing, nor to challenge the application of psychological findings to the prevention of pathology and the betterment of human lives. Rather, we seek to draw attention to the assumptions underlying positive psychology and the ways in which these assumptions narrow the scope of its inquiry. By challenging positive psychology's deepest assumptions, we hope to establish, along with the other authors of this special issue, a stronger foundation for research and theory on the brighter aspects of human functioning.

Conceptions of the Good Life

Because positive psychology is focused on human flourishing, it is inevitably concerned with questions about the nature of the good life. A review of current literature reveals that positive psychologists generally conceptualize the good life in one of two ways: (1) emotional satisfaction; and (2) authentic happiness. Each of these conceptions will be examined in turn.

The Good Life as Emotional Satisfaction

In the preface to their state-of-the-art tome on well-being, Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz (1999) note that while the 'question of what makes for a good life

can be studied at many different levels,' the 'experience of pleasure and the achievement of a subjective sense of well-being remain at the center of the story' (p. x). Until recently, most of the research traditions drawn under the umbrella of positive psychology shared this view. For instance, Shelly Taylor and colleagues' research on positive illusions (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000) and George Vaillant's (2000) studies of adaptive defenses both assume that emotional well-being is more important or desirable than an accurate perception of reality. Similarly, Green, Oades, and Grant (2006) contend that the primary aim of positive psychology 'life coaching' should be to enhance well-being, and Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) maintain that positive affect instigates other desirable outcomes associated with the good life, such as a good income, good health, and a good marriage.

Based on the descriptions of one-tiered and two-tiered visions of the world discussed above, it is evident that the conception of the good life as emotional satisfaction or subjective well-being (SWB) in positive psychology coheres with Western ideologies that ascribe primacy to the individual in determining the nature of the good life. If we look at rating items on measures of SWB, such as 'In most ways my life is close to my ideal' and 'So far I have gotten the important things I want in life' (Pavot & Diener, 1993), it is clear that respondents are required to evaluate the extent to which they meet their own self-chosen criteria for the good life.[1] As noted above, many Westerners believe that this is exactly how it should be. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that despite the repeated contentions of positive psychologists (e.g., Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihályi, 2000b) that their research is descriptive, not prescriptive, there is little concern about the many attempts by positive psychologist to prescribe findings aimed at increasing SWB. For instance, Diener (2000) suggests that an index composed of various measures of SWB be designed in order to 'track happiness over time' (p. 40) so that psychologists can 'determine which segments of society are least happy and perhaps fashion policies to aid them' (p. 40). More recently, Diener and Seligman (2004) have argued that such an index be used to inform the development of economic policy. Clearly such efforts contradict the claim of positive psychologists to be descriptive, rather than prescriptive. We believe this contradiction arises because the individual pursuit of happiness is so ingrained in liberal individualism and the socio-political structure of American society that it is taken for granted as the bedrock of human nature. That is, individual fulfillment is taken to be a natural desire that all persons would gladly pursue if only they were not so oppressed or unenlightened.

When other worldviews are taken into account, it becomes evident that this notion of the good life is not a value-neutral fact, but rather a consequence of dominant Western ideologies that privilege the individual with respect to questions of the good life. While positive psychologists, such as Csikszentmihályi (1999), claim that happiness (defined as positive emotions) is a 'fundamental goal of life' (p. 821), the story is not quite so simple. Happiness, thus defined,

is part of a moral vision that sits squarely in the midst of Western socio-cultural and historical traditions. This is not to say that people from other times and other places have not enjoyed and pursued emotional satisfaction. Such a claim is absurd. Rather, it is to point out that throughout history and across cultures, individual satisfaction has generally taken a backseat to the goals, purposes, and priorities of larger collectives and that when emotional satisfaction has been experienced it is often of a different kind, derived not from internal positive emotions, but from living in accordance with a social order typically situated within a broader cosmological framework.

The difference between life in a one-tiered versus a two-tiered system means that cross-cultural studies of happiness, in Western terms of individual satisfaction (e.g., Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001; Biswas-Diener, Vitterso, & Diener, 2005), can seriously distort the experience of non-Western people. In Bali, for example, reality is thought to consist of two realms: *sekala,* the ordinary realm of everyday life; and *niskala*, the spiritual world, a deeper level of reality that is invisible to the untrained but ultimately determines what occurs in everyday life. It is not possible for the Balinese to talk or think about the self, emotions, illness, well-being, or the good life without reference to Hinduism and a shared understanding of *niskala* (Christopher & Christopher, 2008; cf., Connor, 1982; Connor, Asch, & Asch, 1986; Eiseman & Eiseman, 1990; Howe, 1984; Jensen & Suryani, 1992; Wikan, 1989). The presence of this second realm or tier, which makes reference to karma and reincarnation, has immediate intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences for the Balinese. One example communicated to Christopher and Christopher (2008) in their fieldwork was of a villager who drank excessively, was argumentative, and failed to provide properly for his family. The general response to this individual by the village was pity, compassion, and gentleness because in the context of *niskala*, the second tier of life, this individual was a less evolved soul. This example demonstrates that second tiers function to situate life and experience within a shared framework of meaning and purpose. Within the Balinese cultural framework, personal satisfaction as a value is trumped by the value of conducting proper ritual and ceremonial offerings, maintaining harmonious relationships with our 'four siblings' (other aspects of the person that exist only in *niskala*, the spiritual plane), fulfilling obligations of the *banjar* (village community), and so on. It is not only difficult to imagine how attempts to explore subjective well-being and happiness cross-culturally in terms of life satisfaction (see Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001; Biswas-Diener et al., 2005) could adequately capture the experience in cultures, such as Bali, that subscribe to a two-tiered vision of the world, but it is also quite easy to see how, by ignoring the second tier, positive psychologists risk distorting the experience of cultures that hold moral visions different from our own.

Another area in which positive psychologists working from a Western viewpoint might misrepresent non-Western experience is in the realm of interpreting the meaning of life satisfaction. For instance, members of the Apsáalooke

(Crow) tribe report experiencing satisfaction by helping others. But this satisfaction is derived not from the feeling it gives them, but rather from the belief that their lives are intertwined with the lives of their family and tribe members, and that the right thing to do is help others, whether or not it is personally satisfying or of any benefit to them as individuals (S. Christopher & S. Doyle, personal communicaton, June 24, 2006). Similarly, Miller and Bersoff (1995) found that while European Americans often experience individual satisfaction as antithetical to duty, Hindu Indians 'not only consider it more desirable … to respond to the needs of family members in situations involving high cost, but also indicate that they would experience such behavior as more satisfying' (Miller, 2004, p. 127). Because mainstream psychologists tend to take for granted the universality of the Western emotional experience when assessing emotional states, there is a tendency to presume that the kind of satisfaction reported here is essentially the same as ours and that it is just achieved in different ways according to different self-selected obligations. But such emotions are not the private, internal products of a 'deep self.' Rather, they are emotions that are interpersonally shared or participated in as they are in many collectivistic cultures (Lutz, 1988; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Smith, 1995; Smith & Tkel-Sbal, 1995; Türk Smith & Smith, 1995).

Not only do collectivistic, interdependent cultures experience a different kind of emotional satisfaction, they often hold alternate frameworks for understanding and appraising emotions altogether. Russell (1980) has demonstrated that Western emotions are generally represented in a two-dimensional space defined by pleasantness (pleasant vs unpleasant) and activation (active vs passive). Anger, for instance, is high on both the unpleasant and active dimensions. In some non-Western cultures, such as Japan, this two-dimensional space is supplemented by a third dimension that distinguishes between ego-centered and other-centered emotions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). An example of a widely studied other-centered emotion is *amae,* a Japanese term that conveys 'the sense of, or the accompanying hope for, being lovingly cared for and involves depending on and presuming another's indulgence' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 237). Researchers (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1999; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000) note that there is often no Western counterpart for these other-centered emotion terms, and other-centered emotions are often valued more than personal or subjective emotional experiences. Among the Ifaluk in Micronesia, for instance, the ability to experience *fago,* a combination of compassion, love, and sadness for others, is the mark of maturity and mental health (Lutz, 1985, 1988).

It is also important to note that Western and non-Western cultures categorize positive and negative emotions very differently. In Western culture, it is commonly thought that negative emotions are something to be avoided and controlled. In line with this, there has been little value accorded to negative emotions in positive psychology (Held, 2002, 2004; Norem & Chang, 2002; Woolfolk, 2002). However, many of the emotions Americans seek to

avoid are valued in non-Western cultures as a consequence of their social functions. Christopher and Smith (2006) describe how for a Japanese international student caught between her own pursuits and the values of her parents, feeling *zai-aku-kan*, a negative emotion somewhat similar to sin and guilt, was a sign of virtue; a marker of how she was *appropriately* affected by hurting significant others. Similarly, self-criticism and its attendant 'negative' emotions are thought of in many collectivistic cultures as positive ways of monitoring social expectations (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Heine et al., 2001; Kitayama & Markus, 2000). Such research indicates that East Asians experience events Westerners typically would construe as being negative as positive when they lead to learning and improvement or invite sympathy. Other research indicates that some non-Westerners, such as the Chinese, exhibit dialectical reasoning which contributes to a greater tolerance for negative emotions and less need to resolve ambivalence and incongruity (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004). These findings appear in part to be related to outlooks such as Taoism and Buddhism, which encourage finding a 'middle way' instead of attempting to maximize or accumulate positive emotions, which are seen as ephemeral by nature.

Beyond problems of distortion and oversights in cross-cultural research on well-being, the adherence to a tacit and unacknowledged position of individualism serves to insulate positive psychologists from the kind of critical reflection that might be afforded by cross-cultural and historical inquiry. For example, despite finding that the meaning of subjective well-being varies across cultures, that people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to consult norms for whether they should be satisfied and also consider the appraisals of family and friends in evaluating their own lives, in contrast to people in individualistic nations, who consult their affect (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998), and that a strong correlation ($r = .77$) exists between SWB and individualism (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995), the framework in which emotional satisfaction is the yardstick of the good life is never questioned. Rather, it is blithely assumed that the desire for individual emotional satisfaction is a natural predisposition that persons from other times and place would gladly pursue if they were only free to do so.

This view of personhood is not only deeply ethnocentric; it is potentially quite limited. A number of seminal Western personality theorists had reservations about a more tightly construed individualistic sense of identity. To address what was seen as the one-sidedness of Western views of the person, Allport (1955) encouraged what he termed *ego-extension* to include all of humanity and Erikson (1968) appealed to what he termed a *world-wide identity*. Bakan (1966) stressed that our typical focus on *agency* needs to be complemented by what he saw as the equally important need for *communion*. Cooley used the metaphor of a citadel to describe the self and observed that it can either be closed or open. As he wrote:

> … self feeling may be regarded as in a sense the antithesis, or better perhaps, the complement of that disinterested and contemplative love that tends to obliterate the sense of divergent individuality. … But if love closes, the self contracts and hardens: the mind having nothing else to occupy its attention and give it that change and renewal it requires, busies itself more and more with self-feeling, which takes on narrow and disgusting forms, like avarice, arrogance and fatuity. (Cooley, as cited in Paranjpe, 1998, p. 84)

And Adler (1979; see also Bickhard & Ford, 1976) maintained that *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, or social interest, which is the only communitarian-oriented Western theory of mental health and well-being, ultimately requires a sense of identification with the larger communities of which one is a part.

These notions of identity potentially have important implications for moral and ethical development and how we think about the good person. For instance, Maslow (1954) described the relationship between self-actualization and ethical transformation in terms of social interest:

> This word [*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*], invented by Alfred Adler, is the only one available that describes well the flavor of the feelings for mankind expressed by self-actualizing subjects. They have for human beings in general a deep feeling of identification, sympathy and affection. … Because of this they have a genuine desire to help the human race. It is as if they were all members of a single family. (p. 217)

Despite these early concerns about the limits of the individualistic framework, there has been little interest in contemporary mainstream psychology with the role of the extended sense of identity or social interest. For instance, in moral development theory and research, which curiously has not been included under the umbrella of positive psychology, the view of self as essentially skin-encapsulated and self-interested can lead to ethical systems like Kant's and moral development theories like those of Kohlberg, Turiel, and Eisenberg in which morality, as a corrective to this self-interest, is solely other-regarding (Campbell & Christopher, 1996a, 1996b). This is problematic with respect to cross-cultural examinations in positive psychology because morality and flourishing in other cultures is often understood in terms intimately related to the cosmic and/or social order. For instance, in contrast to the Western approaches to ethics and moral development that presuppose a dualistic ontology in which the individual is set over and against others and morality serves to rein in self-interest and prevent a kind of Hobbesian chaos, many non-Western views presume that ultimately all beings are interrelated, and that if we can come to recognize our true identity, we will naturally treat others in an ethical manner. This view is reflected in the *Analects*, in which Confucius states,

> At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right. (Waley, 1938, p. 88)

Similarly, within the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy, *ahimsa* or nonviolence is an ethical principle that naturally flows out of a monistic metaphysics based on recognition that one's self is ultimately inseparable from the rest of life (e.g., that Atman, the individual soul, equals Brahman, the absolute single principle of reality or the Godhead). Embracing *ahimsa* is seen as a form of self-interest when one comes to consider one's true identity is all of existence.

Throughout the literature now being subsumed under the aegis of positive psychology are a number of important concepts, theories, and research findings (e.g., the experience of flow, the importance of volunteering and joining organizations, the limits of materialism and hedonism) that have implications for the role of certain kinds of identity in contributing to positive psychological ways of being. To consider such concepts more fully would require looking more seriously at the notion of identity. For instance, in the state of flow one's sense of identity often seems to be transformed such that one feels a profound sense of connection with the environment and an absence of self-consciousness. Drawing out and exploring these implications may help prevent the concept of flow from simply being appropriated into positive emotion, or what Kierkegaard (1843/1959) critiqued as an aesthetic experience. Such consideration may also help to integrate the concerns with social conditions that have arisen in positive psychology. For instance, concerns about materialism might be profitably examined, as Cushman (1990, 1995) has in terms of the futile attempt to fill an 'empty self' (see also De Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2001), by critically evaluating the concept of the person that underlies much of Western psychology

One consequence of this line of thought that questions the individualistic and dualistic presuppositions regarding the self that underlie Western psychology is in the realm of socio-political conditions. Psychology has for the most part ignored socio-economic and political factors in looking at both well-being and psychopathology (Cushman, 1990, 1995; Prilleltensky, 1989, 1994; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). Positive psychology has taken important steps to reverse this trend. For instance, there is considerable concern in positive psychology about the impact of materialism, and the limitations of hedonism and the blind pursuit of money. We believe that positive psychology needs to broaden these concerns and address such questions as: What kind of a person is satisfied given the current state of the world? Where do we draw the boundary around the socio-political issues a positive psychology should address? What is our moral responsibility regarding the focus of the field when as many as half the children in the world go to bed hungry at night and dysentery is the leading cause of death? What is the role of positive psychology in cultivating outlooks, values, and lifestyles that are environmentally sustainable and stem the ongoing search for ever cheaper labor markets to exploit? In the following article, Becker and Marecek (2008) develop these issues more fully. We conclude this section by noting that the failure to realize how identity can vary is likely to limit the global relevance of positive psychology.

Authentic Happiness: The Good Life as the Meaningful Life

Although much of the work in positive psychology has conceptualized happiness in terms of emotional satisfaction, more recent efforts have focused largely on Seligman's (2002) conception of the good life as 'authentic happiness' which is constituted by: *the pleasant life,* which involves fleeting positive moods and immediate experiences of comfort and pleasure; *the good life*, which arises from exercising talents and virtues or 'signature strengths' and is characterized by engagement or flow; and *the meaningful life*, which is dedicated to something larger than oneself.

On first blush, it appears that Seligman has tapped into something deeper than emotional satisfaction by emphasizing the role of virtue, meaning, and others in the achievement of happiness. However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that authentic happiness differs little from the previous view. The components of authentic happiness are not grounded in any broad ethical theory or conception of the good life, but rather they are framed as 'different orientations' to happiness that derive value through their ability to produce individual satisfaction. Moreover, despite defining the meaningful life as 'using skills and talents in the service of greater goods' (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005, p. 26), the greater good is held to be whatever the individual chooses. A typical assessment of the meaningful life, the Orientations to Happiness Measure (Peterson et al., 2005), asks respondents to rate the extent to which they agree with items such as 'My life serves a higher purpose,' 'I have spent a lot of time thinking about what life means and how I fit into its big picture,' and 'I have the responsibility to make the world a better place.' Yet, like measures of SWB described above, respondents are left to interpret the meaning of these items themselves and the simple endorsement of these items is considered a sign of good living.

Again, the problem that arises here is that such measures relativize the matter being studied. By studying meaning, or happiness, in a decontextualized manner, positive psychologists presuppose that the source of personal meaning is irrelevant. All that matters is that you have some. This approach is flawed in at least two respects. First, people who adopt ways of living that are morally reprehensible often find meaning in their action and experience. Consequently, the assessment approach described above would not, for instance, be unable to weed out ways of living, like terrorism, that we generally deem unacceptable. Second, by perpetuating a Western-oriented means–ends relationship to life, psychologists are left studying means relationships (in this case the degree to which one has meaning or not) but are silenced when talking about ends. Therefore, it is questionable what this approach really contributes towards understanding human flourishing.

So what accounts for the inability of positive psychologists to move beyond conceptualizing the good life in terms of individual satisfaction despite their concerns about the limitations of doing so? We believe the answer to this question

again lies in the adherence to an unacknowledged moral position of liberal individualism. Quite clearly, with the proposal of authentic happiness, Seligman (2002) recognizes what many philosophers have known for centuries. That is, some ways of being are better than others. However, by subscribing to the dominant Western moral vision, which ascribes primacy to the individual with respect to questions of value, positive psychologists like Seligman are confined to discussing this point in vague terms such as a 'meaningful life' without saying anything about exactly what a meaningful life entails. The difficulty inherent in this state is acknowledged by Seligman himself. He states, 'I also hunger for meaning in my life that will transcend the arbitrary purposes I have chosen for myself' (2002, p. 14). Here Seligman and colleagues run into a problem that the social sciences, as well as philosophy, have faced historically: namely, the language of individualism hampers the ability to advocate convincingly for those goods one sees as better (Bellah et al., 1985; MacIntyre, 1984; Sandel, 1984, 1996; Selznick, 1992; Sullivan, 1986; Taylor, 1985).

The Search for Procedural, Decontextualized Universals in Positive Psychology

To navigate the Scylla of attempting to say something meaningful and the Charybdis of not taking a moral position, positive psychologists have sought to uncover aspects of positive human functioning that transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. It is generally believed by mainstream psychologists that commonalities in human action and experience are reducible to biological substrates or evolutionary adaptations. Thus, for many psychologists, a description of commonalities seems to fit within the requirements of the naturalist framework that demand neutrality and are concerned with uncovering objective truths.

Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman's 816-page tome *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (2004) represents the most comprehensive attempt by positive psychologists to identify the universal ingredients of human flourishing. Its authors describe the process by which its contents, the Values in Action (VIA) classification, were derived as follows. First, a select group of eight scholars brainstormed a tentative list of human strengths. The list was then presented to others for feedback and compared against historical and contemporary lists of virtues and strengths, as well as popular sources such as song lyrics, greeting cards, and Norman Rockwell paintings. This procedure generated a list of six core virtues (i.e., courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom) that were then compared to virtues endorsed by other traditions and cultures to assess levels of convergence. Repeatedly, positive psychologists engaged in this task (see also Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005) state that it yields a 'surprising amount of similarity across cultures and strongly indicates a historical and cross-cultural convergence of six core virtues' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 36).

But is it really so surprising to find commonality where one looks for it? After all, it is one thing to look at other cultures and to try to understand them on their own terms, it is quite another to develop a list and then check off similarities. This latter approach, which has been referred to as the 'transport and test' method of studying cultural universals (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992), is problematic in several ways. Most notably, it fails to consider indigenous, folk, or local accounts of specific virtues or the frameworks within which these virtues are organized. For instance, Chinese philosophical thought revolves around five core values: role fulfillment, ties of sympathy and concern due to metaphysical commonalities, harmony, culmination of the learning process, and co-creativity with heaven and earth (Munro, 1985). Such a typology is clearly distinct from the one forwarded by Peterson and Seligman, and the distinction is not just semantic. Rather, it entails fundamental ontological differences in conceptions of personhood. To their credit, Dahlsgaard et al. (2005) do note that

> … to say that certain virtues, *across traditions*, converged into a core virtue likewise does not mean that we found a one-to-one mapping of virtue across cultures. Certainly an abstraction such as justice means slightly different things—and is valued for somewhat different reasons—from one culture to another. (p. 204)

However, given that none of these authors are specialists in the traditions they are attempting to synthesize, we wonder about their qualification to say 'slightly different.' For instance, they discuss the centrality of humanity in Confucian virtues and transcendence in Taoist virtues but there is no discussion in either case of the shared goal in these two traditions of finding harmony and alignment with the natural order. Failure to mention this is yet another example of the Western tendency to deny or ignore the second tier and collapse everything into the first. The result is a number of major misinterpretations of non-Western views. For instance, Dahlsgaard et al. (2005) quite wrongly maintain that Confucius' 'focus was clearly on the secular and rational aspects of human functioning, not the cosmic or spiritual' (p. 206). The authors similarly distort Hinduism when they write that 'the emphasis is on personal virtues, such as self-denial and renunciation' (p. 207). This statement is indicative of the tendency of Western psychologists to impose culturally laden interpretations, in this case dualistic, in their cross-cultural investigations. This is problematic when considering Hindu thought, which relies on a monistic metaphysics that posits there is no fundamental difference between the individual soul (Atman) and the Absolute or Godhead (Brahman), and as a result any sense of separateness is ultimately considered an illusion (*maya*; Bhattacharyya, 1968; Dasgupta, 2006; Zimmer, 1951). So while there is concern among Hindus with minimizing negative karmic consequences and cultivating the soul's evolution, these matters cannot accurately be regarded as strictly 'personal virtues' because Hindus do not subscribe to the kind of ontological separateness that 'personal' implies.

Despite these critiques, we agree with positive psychologists that a number of moral goods approach universality. What we question is the value of looking only at commonalities. Many scholars (e.g., Barrow, 1979; Hunter, 2000; MacIntyre, 1984; Sandel, 1996; Taylor, 1989; Walzer, 1987) point out that moral goods become compelling only when they are understood against a background of historical and socio-cultural traditions and practices. The strategy of determining the common denominator serves to strip such goods of these particularities. The result of such a strategy is not a richer understanding of the good life. On the contrary, it is a simplification (Guignon, 2004). After all, it may be the case that all major civilizations value ideals such as courage and justice, but it does not follow that we all understand these ideals in the same way (Smith et al., 2007).

If we look at the world of the ancient Greeks, for instance, we see many commonalities between their views and ours. Plato, for example, believed that reason or wisdom was key to the good life. A number of positive psychologists (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) have picked up on this commonality to espouse wisdom as a ubiquitous virtue. However, the Platonic notion of wisdom is nothing like the description of wisdom offered by positive psychologists as 'cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge (e.g., creativity, curiousity, judgment, and perspective)' (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005, p. 205). This is because the Greeks subscribed to a two-tiered vision of the world, or a theory of ontic *logos*, in which knowledge resided in the natural order of things. Consequently, when Plato speaks of reason he is referring not to an internally driven, cognitive process, but rather to the capacity to turn the soul in the proper direction to see the external order of the cosmos. This substantive view of reason, in which meaning is *found*, stands in stark contrast to our modern, Lockean, procedural notion of reason, in which meaning is *made*. Plato's classical view relies on a two-tiered system, in which contact with cosmological frameworks is necessary to understand life and how it functions to give meaning to everyday experiences. In contrast, our modern procedural notion of reason relies on a one-tiered view in which meaning is a process of individual discovery that one should find in order to maximize well-being.

Indeed, there are a number of goods that, despite being shared across temporal and cultural boundaries, are understood or interpreted very differently. For instance, self-reliance is important in both Taiwan and the United States, but its meaning varies dramatically and is dependent upon a whole host of underlying presuppositions about the nature of the self and the good life. In the United States, self-reliance stands as a marker of autonomy, maturity, and of having developed appropriately as an individual (Bellah et al., 1985). In Taiwan, the primary value of self-reliance is that it enables one to avoid being a burden on others (Christopher, 1999). As another example, the cardinal virtue of caring present in character education programs is subject to considerable cultural variations in interpretation in the presumed object to be cared

about (self, in-groups, out-groups, nature), why we should care, and how we should care (Christopher et al., 2003).

Some may say such distinctions are merely semantic. But given that the moral domain is an interpretative domain, and that moral goods gain their strength through articulation, interpretative distinctions are not trivial. On the contrary, clarifying these distinctions and developing thick descriptions of moral goods (as opposed to operational definitions) is the most important task in developing a full understanding of what human flourishing entails. In addition, glossing over these distinctions obscures important differences. To say, for instance, that philosophers throughout the ages have agreed on the requisites for human flourishing minimizes the very real tensions between the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Mill, and so forth. More importantly, to say such distinctions are minor trivialities ignores the very real-world implications of these differences. It may be true, for example, that early Americans valued justice and humanity. But the existence of slavery and the oppression of women's rights suggest they subscribed to vastly different interpretations of these ideals. Such examples reveal that cultural evolution is not so much the creation of entirely new ideals as much as it is a process of re-interpreting, re-evaluating, and re-prioritizing ideals that already exist (see Fowers, 2008). To negate these interpretative differences in order to make morality fit the requirements of a narrowly conceived understanding of social science denies us the opportunity to engage in continuous negotiation of the meaning of our most cherished ideals.

Conclusion

It has long been recognized by philosophers of science that there can be no universal, ahistorical psychology. Our research questions, the methods we use to answer them, and the interpretation of data we find are all shaped by the cultural traditions and practices in which we are embedded. All research takes place from a particular perspective. This is not a problem, *per se*; it is simply the nature of the beast (Richardson & Christopher, 1993; Richardson et al., 1999). What is problematic, however, is that mainstream psychology's exclusive methodological faith in empiricism, whether quantitative or qualitative, and commitment to its underlying ideals of objectivity and neutrality result in a discipline that is unable to account for, or address, its own ontological assumptions and moral commitments (Slife & Williams, 1995). Relying increasingly on technical inferential statistics and other empirical methods, mainstream psychology has failed to cultivate the conceptual tools required to place current theory, research, and practice in historical and cross-cultural perspective.

What is most troubling about this faith in methodology is that it leaves psychology unable to engage in critical self-reflection beyond examining flaws in methodology and statistics (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Hickinbottom, 2007; Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). As such, psychologists often fail to recognize

and question the assumptions and values underlying their work, assumptions that are, in Charles Taylor's (1989) words, inescapable. Relying on decontextualized and procedural understandings of psychological goods and virtues only compounds the problem as the seeming lack of context is actually filled in by our own implicit cultural outlooks. Consequently, these assumptions and values operate as a form of 'disguised ideology' (Bernstein, 1978). When such a psychology is applied locally, it runs the risk of perpetuating the status quo (Prilleltensky, 1989, 1994). When it is applied across cultures, it is culturally disrespectful, often resulting in psychological imperialism, or what cross-cultural psychologists refer to as an imposed etic (Poortinga, 1997).

When indigenous frameworks are ignored, glossed over, or appropriated into frameworks like Values in Action that originate in the West, we distort the experiences of those from other cultures. Moreover, we fail to engage in the kind of authentic encounter with the other that allows us to become more aware of our own presuppositions. As a consequence, we foreclose the possibility of critical self-reflection and simply perpetuate the status quo.

Positive psychology requires a philosophy of social science that is robust enough to handle ontological, epistemological, and ethical/moral issues and move beyond both objectivism and relativism. We believe the necessary conceptual resources can be found in philosophical hermeneutics and in Mark Bickhard's interactivism (see Christopher & Campbell, 2008). Such metatheories provide conceptual tools for: (1) critiquing the assumptions and values that shape psychological theory, research, and practice; (2) moving beyond the false dichotomies underlying Western thought and the individualistic perspectives that arise from such dichotomies; and (3) enabling ways of thinking interpretatively about cultural meanings and discerning their specific manifestations. A number of the other articles in this special issue attempt to develop these alternative approaches (Christopher & Campbell, 2008; Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008).

In conclusion, we want to state that we believe positive psychology is critical to the well-being of 21st-century psychology. However, it will require vigilance to ensure that positive psychology does not become yet another form of disguised ideology that perpetuates the socio-political status quo and fails to do justice to the moral visions of those outside the reigning outlook. We believe that by paying attention to our underlying assumptions, learning about the assumptions that animate the moral visions of other cultures and eras, and thinking critically about the merits of these assumptions, we can avoid prematurely rushing to ethnocentric conclusions that fail to take full measure of the wisdom of non-Western traditions and our own past.

Notes

1. For a more detailed critique of subjective well-being and psychological well-being, see Christopher (1999).

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