A Call for the Positive: Why Young Psychological Scientists Should Take Positive Psychology Seriously

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Although there are benefits to studying the faults in airplanes that cause crashes, would it not be better to study the mechanisms that allow flight? Sonja Lyubomirsky, a positive psychology pioneer, introduced this analogy at the 5th World Congress on Positive Psychology in Montreal, Canada: Consider that humans are like airplanes. Traditionally, psychological science has favored studying the factors that cause "crashes," holding an apparent bias toward studying what goes wrong with the mind and behavior. The new 20-year-old field of positive psychology is growing up to meet this negative bias with a focus on the positive, flourishing, happiness, and well-being — essentially, what happens when airplanes fly. As young psychological scientists, we need to recognize and understand the benefits of supporting and embracing this perspective shift.

History

Positive psychology has roots in humanism; it was first mentioned by Abraham Maslow in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*. In 1998, APS William James and James McKeen Cattell Fellow Martin E. P. Seligman suggested that clinical psychology focused too much on dysfunction and neglected normal and above-average functioning. Since then, the field has become a well-supported scientific discipline that seeks to understand the mechanisms that allow individuals and communities to flourish.

A New Way of Helping People

For those who work with individuals in applied settings, positive psychology offers a novel and effective method of helping people live better lives through the study of positive psychological interventions (PPIs). Researchers define these interventions as empirically supported activities that cause a positive change in a population (e.g., increased prosocial behaviors) by targeting positive variables (e.g., kindness or empathy; Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). PPIs are usually simple, quick to complete, and easy to comprehend, with immediate and often long-lasting effects (e.g., researchers have demonstrated that writing and delivering a gratitude letter can increase happiness for the following 6 months; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Although PPIs target a wide range of positive variables, seven domains in the literature stand out as being reliable, relevant, and well-researched. These domains include expressing gratitude, using strengths, finding meaning or purpose, being optimistic, participating in acts of kindness, engaging in empathy, and savoring moments or experiences. These kinds of PPIs have the potential to increase positive affect, prosocial behaviors, social connectedness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and post-traumatic growth. They also can decrease depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and attempts, and negative affect (see Stone & Parks, 2018, for a review). Additionally, many PPIs are effective in different countries and cultures, although the benefits may be dissimilar because of differences in the

determinants of happiness (e.g., self-esteem is more important to well-being in Western cultures; Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011).

Promising for Research

The field needs empirical studies to further delineate the nature of positive psychology phenomena and how they relate to other psychological constructs. This demand means ample, highly publishable research opportunities for graduate students. In 2000, PsychInfo cataloged 39 papers with the words "positive psychology" in the title. In 2005, that number jumped to 131; then to 320 in 2010 and 550 in 2017. This pattern is found with similar search terms such as PPIs (0, 0, 8, 140), happiness (70, 84, 174, 194), well-being or wellbeing (334, 497, 910, 1,598), life satisfaction (45, 96, 134, 246), and positive emotions or affect (30, 53, 86, 152). The growing demand for positive psychology research is evident.

For their theses and dissertations, students should consider several notable concerns within the field that need further examination. First, less popular domains of PPIs (e.g., forgiveness or positive empathy) require additional empirical testing. Individuals can investigate how engaging with these domains affect variables such as happiness, passive suicidal ideation, or social connectedness. Second, individuals should assess new methods of realistic dissemination of positive psychology educational materials and interventions. For example, individuals could test the effectiveness of delivering interventions through mobile devices (e.g., Happify) or self-help books (e.g., *The How of Happiness*). Third, researchers should examine how sex and gender affect the experience, expression, and benefits of positive variables (e.g., are men or women more likely to express gratitude?). Finally, there is a need for longitudinal or cross-sectional studies to assess the long-term effects of practicing happiness.

Promoting Student Happiness and Well-Being

Happiness is practicable and changeable. According to twin studies, the factors that determine long-term happiness are 50% genetics and 10% circumstance (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). The remaining 40% is determined by learned techniques and active efforts to promote happiness, which is important for the experience of frequent positive emotions and life satisfaction because of *hedonic adaptation* (i.e., the Hedonic Treadmill; Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Hedonic adaptation occurs when, despite positive or negative events, healthy individuals tend to return quickly to a relatively stable emotional baseline. By studying the field of positive psychological science, one can learn the empirically supported techniques and skills that, when practiced, may lead to more frequent experiences of happiness beyond one's affective baseline.

Such techniques can be implemented immediately. First, research suggests that doing five novel acts of kindness (e.g., buying someone a coffee) in 1 day will result in higher levels of well-being than doing one act per day in the course of a week (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & Sheldon, 2004). It is important that the acts are novel: For example, if one always holds doors open for people, one is unlikely to benefit from holding doors as an act of kindness. Second, the Three Good Things activity (i.e., counting blessings) involves noting three good things in your life once a day. This activity can lead to a decrease in negative affect that remains for 6 months (Seligman et al., 2005). Last, one can complete a character strengths assessment (e.g., the VIA Strengths Assessment). Using one's strengths in a novel manner may lead to a decrease in depressive symptoms and an increase in happiness, even at a 6-month postassessment follow-

up (Seligman et al., 2005).

Pollyannaism: What Positive Psychology Is Not

Pollyannaism characterizes an overly optimistic demeanor and an irresponsible negligence or disregard for the bad. Some might argue that positive psychology shares this philosophy — conversely, those working in the field understand that not experiencing or ignoring negative stimuli may be as harmful to happiness as excessively experiencing or attending to the downsides of life. One does not need to be free of negative emotions to be happy or flourish. In fact, research suggests that negative and positive emotions exist on separate spectra (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Instead, positive psychologists are focused on increasing our knowledge of how positive variables (e.g., savoring experiences) affect functioning, thereby discovering what makes individuals and communities flourish.

Conclusion

Psychological science graduate students should take advantage of the increasing demand for positive psychology information that drives the field's rapid applied and theoretical growth. We should recognize that, as students, we are in a unique position: We are able to study positive psychology while it is a relatively young field. In the next several decades, the field will mature and expand; we have a great opportunity to get involved while the field is still young and needs support. Put simply, happiness and well-being are desirable, worthwhile, and relevant pursuits. As a result, psychological science is changing and accepting the idea that the study of happiness and well-being is a necessary component to developing a better understanding of the human experience.

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