

Advancing Positive Psychology in South East Asia: The Importance of Culture

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Abstract

Interest in the field of positive psychology has been overwhelming. This can be observed from the number of academic conferences and journals attributed to this field. Similar patterns can be observed in Asia where more and more research are concentrating on investigating constructs deemed as important within the field of positive psychology. However, comparable to other fields within psychology, positive psychology cannot ignore the importance of culture. This is especially true in South East Asian context when culture is arguably distinct from the American/European traditions in which positive psychology was originated from. Culture is likely to play a significant role in determining how human strengths are being conceptualized and nurtured and eventually determined a person's well-being and success as experienced within that particular society. Based on some findings from a research of adolescent's happiness and well-being in Malaysia, this paper highlights the importance of culture in advancing positive psychology in Asia. More specifically, findings from this research demonstrated the importance of positive psychology in understanding and improving quality of life for certain groups of people in a particular society and illustrated several significant cultural and subcultural differences that can potentially enrich our understanding of positive psychological constructs. Findings also indicated the importance of culturally embedded constructs such as family relations and spiritual elements in contributing to happiness. Finally findings from this study suggested the need to unpack more general constructs such as positive relationships and meanings of life as they are contextualized within a specific culture and the call for further exploration on other constructs related to human positive attributes and strengths.

Keyword: positive psychology, wellbeing, culture

Introduction

Positive psychology is often referred to as the scientific study of strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to grow and thrive. Interest in the field of positive psychology has been overwhelming. This can be observed from the number of academic conferences and journals attributed to this field. Similar patterns can be observed in Asia where more and more

research are concentrating on understanding constructs deemed as important within the field of positive psychology. However, comparable to other fields within psychology, positive psychology cannot ignore the importance of culture. This is especially true in South East Asian context when culture is arguably distinct from the American/European traditions in which positive psychology was originated from. Yet, culture is

likely to play a significant role in determining how human strengths are being conceptualized and nurtured and eventually determined an individual's functioning and success within that particular society. Based on findings from a research of adolescent's happiness and well-being in Malaysia, this paper focuses on an attempt to highlight the importance of culture in advancing positive psychology in Asia. More specifically, findings from this research demonstrated 1) The importance of taking a positive psychological approach in understanding adolescents in Asia 2) the importance to focus on significant cultural and subcultural differences, 3) the importance of family relations and spiritual elements in contributing to adolescent's happiness, 4) the need to unpack constructs such as positive relationships and meanings as contextualized within a specific culture and 5) the call for further exploration on more constructs related to human positive attributes and strengths.

The study

This study was conducted to further explore positive psychological constructs within the context of Malaysia. More specifically, this study assess subjective well-being, happiness, events leading to happiness, meaning in life and positive relationships among a group of adolescents from all over Malaysia. This paper focuses on highlighting key findings that have important implications to development of positive psychology as a field in Malaysia and Asia.

Method

Participants

Total participants were 1766 adolescents from 20 secondary schools in Malaysia. 657 were males and 776 were females. Mean of age was 15.97 (SD .614).

Procedure

Data collection began with identifying schools to represent urban and rural areas from 14 states in Malaysia. For urban areas, the process began with identifying a school representing urban area by selecting one school from each capital city of every state in Malaysia. This was followed by the identification of rural school by selecting the school categorized as rural by the Malaysian's Ministry of Education. However, the school selected by is relatively near to the urban school to minimize the travelling cost. Once schools were selected, permissions were obtained from three different relevant departments namely Ministry of Education, Department of Education for each state and finally the schools. Due to time constraints (e.g. examinations and up-coming school holiday) a few schools denied permission and a few data collection sessions had to be cancelled. Finally, out of 28 selected schools, data collection sessions were successfully carried out at 20 schools.

Upon gaining permission, a data collection date was selected and on the day, researchers distributed questionnaires to 50-120 form four students. Informed consents were obtained from the students during the session. Permission from parents was obtained post-data collection. During data collection, a letter was addressed

to every parent/guardian informing about the study and the channel to inform if they object to their child participating in the study. Data was only used if students agreed to participate and researcher received no objection from parents within certain period of time. No objection was received at any point. Description of the questionnaire is as followed.

Measures

To minimize fatigue and ensure quality responses, participants from each school were divided into two groups and each group responded to two different sets of questionnaires. For the purpose of this paper and this presentation, only relevant measures were described below:

Background information

This section tapped into the socio-demographic assessment of the respondents. These include age, gender, ethnicity and religion, previous academic achievement and parental's education and income.

Oxford Happiness Scales

This is a 29-version of Oxford Happiness Scales' that has been translated into the Malay language.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) is a 5-item scale that measures the global life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The scale has also been translated into the Malay language.

Open-ended section on event leading to happiness

In this section, participants were requested to identify events that made them happy in the last

six months. Based on the responses, coding was created to identify patterns.

Meaning in life

This section was based on Meaning in life Questionnaire (MLQ). It is a 10-item questionnaire measuring two dimension of meaning in life 1) existence of meaning and 2) search for meaning. The scale has also been translated into the Malay language.

Relationship with parents

This section consists of the satisfaction with parents. The 22-item was adapted from Armsden and Greenberg (1987) as a self-report instrument to be used with adolescents to assess satisfaction with mothers and fathers independently. However, in this study the assessment for fathers and mothers is combined. There were three sub-scales measured by this instrument; trust, communication and alienation. The scale has also been translated into the Malay language.

Discussion

The importance of taking a positive psychological approach in understanding adolescents in Asia

This study indicates several important factors that can have an impact on subjective well-being and happiness of adolescents. For example, household income, parent's educational level, father's income and number of sibling all have impacts on adolescent's happiness. Participants with more highly educated parent, came from family with higher household income, reported higher level of father's income, reported higher

score on previous academic performance and have lower number of siblings reported higher level of happiness. Other factor like meaning in life also correlates positively with happiness of young people.

Findings from this study suggest the importance of understanding young people in Asia not only by investigating issues that make them unhappy but also by understanding things that make them happy. Yet, many empirical studies, particularly in Malaysia, tend to focus more on negative aspects of young people's lives including aggression, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, stress and behavior misconducts. While these studies are important, they do not offer a complete picture. They especially do not offer a complete picture of Malaysian adolescents. The new wave of positive psychology has some impact where more studies focusing on more positive aspects of young people. Similarly more studies focusing on human strengths and positive attributes should be conducted on other groups within a society. These groups include a particular gender such as working women or single mothers, a particular age group such as elderly people or a particular member of society such as employees within a particularly organization.

Culture and subculture differences

Findings from this study indicated there are differences between certain subcultures in Malaysia. For example, respondents of Chinese origins and Buddhist reported lower level of happiness compared to other ethnic or religious groups. This finding highlights the need to unpack further culture and subculture differences. This

findings somewhat supported differences found in UNICEF's comparative study on child well-being in rich countries in 2012. In that study, although there is a generally high level of life satisfaction among children in rich countries, the research team also found variations among the nations in which the Netherlands scored highest where 95% of children reported high level of life satisfaction. Romania scored lowest with less than 75% of the children reported high level of life satisfaction. United States scored relatively low and was in the bottom third of life satisfaction level across different countries. Clearly, more research needs to be conducted to fully understand the experience of adolescents or any other children within certain culture that tends to report lower level of well-being or happiness. In Malaysian experience, a closer examination need to be conducted to understand how certain cultural groups may have been providing different experience for the children thus affecting their life satisfaction. In a study on Malaysian's women wellbeing, Noor (2006) suggested that roles play an important role in determining well-being. Perhaps an attempt to understand happiness and well-being difference across different culture needs to look at the kind of roles people play within a particular culture that can somehow determine their happiness and well-being.

The importance of family and spiritual

Malaysian adolescents in this study reported family and spiritual domains as important in determining their happiness. For example, spending time with family and friends is one

of the most frequently observed responses. For school, the events were mostly achievement-oriented in which happiness is more likely to be associated with getting good grades or success in a sporting event. They are also related to self concepts in which then things identified as making the participants happy were those leading to positive self perceptions such as recognition and acceptance. What is more interesting is that spiritual also appears to be important where respondents describe religious-related events as bringing happiness to them. The finding is somewhat consistent with the findings by Haque and Hasking (2010) who examined emotionally charged autobiographical memories among Malaysians and found that events associated with happiness were those related to close relationships (e.g. getting married) and religion (e.g. Eid celebration and pilgrimage to Mecca). While close relationships have been well-cited to be associated with happiness, spiritual or religious-related events appear to be more of Asian or Malaysian phenomenon. Obviously more work need to be conducted to understand the role of religion and religious activities or events that can potentially induce happiness. Gratitude for example has been recognized as contributing to positive affect. In this case, gratitude to God, another spiritual construct, may be a particularly important element in Asian or Malaysian culture and therefore must be more closely examined.

The need to unpack “positive relationships” and “meaning in life”

This study explored relationship between positive relationships with parents, meaning in life and

happiness and life satisfaction among Malaysian adolescents. We found happiness and life satisfaction to be associated with more positive relationships with parents. This is somewhat related to findings by UNICEF’s comparative study on child well-being in rich countries where more than 83% of the children reported ease to talk to their mother and 67% reported ease to talk to their fathers. While our findings is important in highlighting positive relationships with parents, more work need to be done to understand how positive relationships are being fostered and encouraged within a particular culture. While respect and trust can be important elements in a positive relationship, it is equally important to understand how respect and trust are being expressed within a certain culture.

Similarly, meaning in life has a positive correlation with happiness and life satisfaction in which adolescents who reported more meaningful and more search for meanings also reported higher level of happiness and life satisfaction. However, at this point, the general assessment of meaning without looking into specific content only gives a less than comprehensive picture. We need to know not only whether adolescents think their life is meaningful and whether they are searching for life, we need to know the kind of meaning they are attaching to their lives. It is likely that spiritual aspect again plays a role in determining the kind of meanings adolescents in Asia are attaching to their lives.

Tavernier and Willoughby (2012) explored the association between meaning-making and psychological well-being among Canadian adolescents and found that adolescent who

engaged in meaning-making (i.e. “process by which individuals make sense out of their turning points”) during significant events of their life reported better psychological well-being. They also suggested the need to be more cautious before generalizing findings on culturally diverse group. Tavernier and Willoughby’s study (2012) provides evidence to further explore “meaning-making” exercise and the need to consider cultural differences in assigning meanings to specific events or to life in general.

Exploring new constructs

This study explores several important positive psychological constructs including happiness and subjective well-being, meaning in life and positive relationships. On the other hand, the field of psychology can be divided into subjective, individual and group level (Seligman, 2002). At the subjective level, the field of positive psychology is about positive subjective experiences and these include well-being, contentment, pride, and satisfaction (in the past); happiness, flow, the sensual pleasure, joy (in the present); and optimism, faith, trust, and hope (for the future). At the individual level, the field is about positive personal traits such as compassion, the capacity for love, forgiveness, creativity, integrity, courage, interpersonal skill, perseverance, future-mindedness, originality, and wisdom. These human strengths are what allowed for positive experiences to occur. On the other hand, there is a group level where the field of positive psychology emphasizes on positive institutions such as families, schools, businesses, communities, and societies as well as civic

virtues such as altruism, responsibility, civility, tolerance, moderation, and work ethic (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman argued that these institutions encourage positive traits and consequently positive experiences (2002). Similarly more constructs can be discovered, particularly those that are more relevant in Asian culture. At individual level and concentrating on positive subjective experience, several constructs can become important and they are particularly related to religious constructs such as redha (acceptance of God’s will), tawakal (submission to God’s power) and takwa (faith in God). On the other hand, positive personal constructs may include elements such as respects and politeness while Haj may be considered as part of positive institution that can potentially promote well-being and happiness.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights several pathways that can be taken to further advance positive psychology within Asian culture. Particularly, it highlights the need to continue taking a positive psychological approach in understanding specific groups within our society here in Asia. It also implies the important to closely examine cultural and sub-cultural difference, particular in identifying more constructs that can be important within a particularly culture. Future research need to explore more cultural differences that can increase our understanding of existing positive psychological constructs. On the other, there is need to unpack currently general constructs in order to further understand

their specific meanings and applications. Future research in positive psychology in Asia also needs to identify more constructs that can allow for unique Asian contribution to the field. At this point, the potential is unlimited and the future looks bright.

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