

Expanding Opportunities for Diversity in Positive Psychology: An Examination of Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

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Positive psychology has been criticized for ignoring issues relevant to disenfranchised populations. This article presents the results of a 17-year review of the current state of theory and research in positive psychology with respect to issues related to gender, race, and ethnicity, representing an effort to evaluate the extent to which these criticisms are true and to explore how the field can be more inclusive in the future. A systematic review of the literature in positive psychology since the inception of the field in 1998 through 2014 was conducted, and content analyses were used to assess how issues of gender, race, and ethnicity have been examined. The findings reveal that although women are overrepresented as participants in empirical studies, they are underrepresented as first authors, and discussions of issues relevant to women and gender are relatively scarce. Further, empirical research studies conducted across the world are based largely on White samples, and there is little research focused on race and ethnicity or individuals at the intersections of gender, race, and ethnicity. More organized research is needed to develop a diverse science of positive psychology. To conceptualize possible future directions for research and explore opportunities for diversity, key definitions of positive psychology are revisited and lessons are drawn from exemplary articles attending to issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. Four pathways for conducting future research are recommended as ways to expand opportunities for engaging diversity in positive psychology.

Keywords: well-being, optimal functioning, disenfranchised groups, underrepresented, literature review

In their seminal article introducing the field of positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) observed that the social sciences had been operating from a deficit-based perspective in which researchers and practitioners had been primarily concerned with what goes wrong in human affairs and how to remedy problems and ameliorate dysfunction. They recommended a shift from the “preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life” to a more balanced perspective that includes improving understanding of how to build “positive qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). It was hoped that a scientific focus on thriving or optimal functioning would suggest “new ways to address some of the most pressing issues facing today’s societies” (Donaldson, 2011, p. 5).

Positive psychology, an organized area of inquiry that emerged as an antidote to psychology’s dominant focus on pathology and problems, is a young field, having been in existence for only 17 years. In its short history, its recognition of the value of attending

to the positive aspects of the human condition has inspired the imaginations of scholars across a variety of disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry, education, technology, public health, social and human services, economics, political science, neuroscience, and organizational sciences, among others (Donaldson et al., 2011). Consequently, the literature in the field, particularly in its first decade, was heavily focused on conceptualizations of positive psychology and its relevance in various subdisciplines and topics, philosophical discussions of its value, and new theory development (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015). Although such conceptual work on expanding the field continues to grow, the empirical testing of theories and new construct development has increasingly outpaced the conceptual literature in the last 7 years (Donaldson et al., 2015). Although this organized focus on the positive was initiated in the United States by Seligman’s American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Address in 1998 (see Fowler, Seligman, & Koocher, 1999), over the years it has engaged the interest of scholars and practitioners across the world. Positive psychology frameworks and principles are being studied, tested, and applied in a range of social and cultural contexts, and knowledge is being locally produced in over 46 countries (Donaldson et al., 2015). Further, the positive lens (i.e., strengths-focused perspective) on human affairs is emerging as a dynamic framework to drive positive social change in dealing with a host of social issues such as poverty alleviation, low-wage labor, health care, and environmental sustainability, among others (Golden-Biddle & Dutton, 2012).

Despite these notable achievements, however, positive psychology has attracted the ire of critics. In particular, just as proponents of gender, racial, and ethnic equity have expressed

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concern about mainstream psychological research ignoring disenfranchised groups, critics of positive psychology have been concerned that it too marginalizes the voices of disenfranchised groups. Some have pointed out that positive psychology research has not sufficiently explored issues faced by underrepresented populations such as women (Matlin, 2010). Along similar lines, in his provocative comments on the special issue of the *American Psychologist* on positive psychology in 2000, Bacigalupe (2001) accused positive psychology of being only White psychology, referring to the lack of discussion in positive psychology about “the histories, courage, challenges, and success of people of color” (p. 83) and the lack of attention to issues of social justice, such as disparities in wealth, power, and privilege from a positive lens. Similarly, other critics have charged positive psychology with a myopic focus on Western European values to define and construct the standard for optimal human functioning (Constantine & Sue, 2006), ethnocentrism and individualism (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008), and elitism on the basis of a considerable focus on investigating and enhancing the happiness of those fortunate to be surrounded by idyllic circumstances (Fineman, 2006).

Now, 17 years after the inception of positive psychology, as it continues to inspire conceptual innovations and empirical investigations, this article investigates the extent to which charges against positive psychology concerning gender, race, and ethnicity are true and how the conceptual and empirical literatures in positive psychology fare in engaging issues of diversity. In conclusion, it draws lessons from the current state of research to explore opportunities for expansion of research that is more inclusive of gender, race, and ethnicity.

Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

Historically, psychological research on issues of diversity such as gender, race, and ethnicity grew from a recognition of a lack of attention to phenomena particular to disenfranchised populations. For instance, proponents of research on social issues recognized that mainstream social psychological research often focused on examining prejudice and discrimination but neglected to attend to victims of prejudice and discrimination, the study of their consequences, or the coping strategies of victims (Swim & Stangor, 1998; Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Others noted that mainstream research did not include underrepresented populations in its conceptualization of studies or consider how key psychological phenomena played out outside of hegemonic contexts. For instance, psychologists studying issues of gender have expressed concern that, historically, considerable research has been based on male participants and predominantly engaged male voices, has excluded topics focused on issues relevant to women (Grady, 1981), and has mostly been conducted and authored by men (Gannon, Luchetta, Rhodes, Pardie, & Segrist, 1992). To correct such trends and develop a more rigorous psychological science, over the last few decades, psychological research on social issues has sought to examine questions of health, poverty, and access to resources, particularly through gendered and raced lenses. Pedrotti and Edwards (2010) recommended application of a positive psychological approach in attending to social issues by shifting away from a portrayal of disenfranchised groups as victims of their

culture and poverty and, instead, focusing on harnessing their strength and resilience. This article examines the extent to which positive psychology scholars have addressed these issues in their research and how they have reinterpreted them as opportunities for positive transformation. Accordingly, we have systematically reviewed the literature linked to positive psychology and analyzed issues pertinent to gender, race, and ethnicity.

Gender

Historically, gender experts have critiqued psychological research that demonstrated a strong androcentric bias in particular ways (Gannon et al., 1992; Yoder & Kahn, 1993). Their arguments were centered on three main concerns that were used as guiding frameworks for the analysis of the positive psychology literature.

Research design. The first concern was that historically, considerable research did not report gender characteristics of participants, and when it did, studies were found to be based on male participants and to predominantly engage male voices. For instance, Grady (1981) observed that men appeared as participants twice as often as women and that substantial research was based on single-sex designs with only men as participants. However, this trend has shifted dramatically over the last few decades. Littleford et al. (2010) noted that a substantial number of psychological studies have been based on data collected from college students from psychology departments, and as women now earn about 78% of the undergraduate degrees in psychology, women are often overrepresented in these studies. Consequently, the current study aimed to evaluate the extent to which empirical research designs in positive psychology have reported gender characteristics and engaged female participants.

Authorship. The second aspect that gender experts have historically expressed concern about is inadequate authorship by women (Gannon et al., 1992). McSweeney and Parks (2002) conducted a review of authorship, first authorship, and participation on editorial boards by women in social, developmental, cognitive, and general peer-reviewed psychology journals. They found that although the percentages of female authors and first authors were lower than those for male authors and first authors—particularly in social, cognitive, and general psychology—the trends showed an upward trajectory for authorship and first authorship by women from 1978 to 1997. As the active presence of women scholars across some disciplines has shifted over time, the current study sought to investigate the extent to which the literature in positive psychology has had first authorship by women.

Research topic. Finally, the third concern expressed by critics of mainstream research is that, historically, there has been inadequate inquiry into issues relevant to women’s lives (Grady, 1981). They have noted that psychological research has suffered from unexamined assumptions about the sexes, and that male participants have been used as the standard in conceptualization of hypotheses in the study of human behavior (Grady, 1981; McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze, 1986). Consequently, the current study used in-depth content analysis to investigate the extent to which issues relevant to women have been studied in positive psychological research.

Race and Ethnicity¹

As mentioned earlier, there have been criticisms against positive psychology for lack of attention to issues of race and ethnicity. However, the inclusion of race and ethnicity has been a reason for concern in psychological science for a long time (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005).

Research design. Past reviews of mainstream psychological literature revealed that empirical research has neglected to report racial and ethnic characteristics of participants and that, when it has done so, it has failed to adequately include participants from disenfranchised racial and ethnic groups (see Cauce, Ryan, & Grove, 1998; Jones, 1983; McLoyd & Randolph, 1985). For instance, Delgado-Romero, Galván, Maschino, and Rowland (2005), in their 10-year review of race and ethnicity in counseling psychology research, found that only 57% of the empirical literature reported racial and ethnic characteristics of participants. Further, compared with the overall U.S. population, Whites and Asian Americans were overrepresented, and other racial and ethnic groups were underrepresented. Therefore, the current study aimed to examine the extent to which positive psychological literature reported racial and ethnic characteristics of participants and included participants from racial and ethnic minority groups.

Research topic. Sue (1999) noted that the quality and quantity of research on ethnic minority groups has been inadequate in past scientific psychological literature. Similarly, Graham (1992) conducted a content analysis of six mainstream APA journals in the publication period from 1970 to 1989 and found declining representation of empirical research on African Americans. Further, she found that only 3.6% of the literature explicitly emphasized issues of or conducted separate analyses by race and ethnicity. Consequently, the current study sought to explore the extent of discussion of racial and ethnic concerns in positive psychology.

Intersectionality

A critical element in the study of diversity is the examination of issues from an intersectionality perspective—that is, unpacking the interdependent and interconnected nature of multiple social identities in shaping minority experience (Shields, 2008). For instance, Reid and Kelly (1994) argued that women of color are often underrepresented in studies that focus on women's issues because women of color do not typify the "average" woman, making it difficult for researchers to identify similarities common to all women. Consequently, their unique experiences emerging from their multiple minority identities remain neglected in empirical psychological research. The current study aimed to examine the extent to which empirical research in positive psychology has engaged issues emerging at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Study Purpose

The research in positive psychology has grown rapidly over the last 17 years; however, it has been criticized for its lack of attention to issues of diversity. This study assessed the extent to which these criticisms hold true by evaluating the literature specifically linked to positive psychology, providing an in-depth review of the conceptual and empirical positive psychology re-

search focused on issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. Further, we draw from the findings of this review to explore opportunities to expand research attending to issues of diversity.

Method

Procedure

A systematic review of the literature in positive psychology was conducted to analyze the knowledge produced in the field from its inception in 1998 until 2014. Past reviews of the field have defined the scope of positive psychological literature in various ways, and there seems to be a lack of consensus on the boundaries of positive psychology. For instance, Rusk and Waters (2013) identified 18,000 documents linked to topics that are related to positive psychology. However, many of these did not explicitly refer to positive psychology and were published by authors who may not have known about, much less identified with, positive psychology. Although this was useful in assessing the broadest scope of literature that may include aspects that are positive, it did not provide an evaluation of the research that shapes the core of positive psychological science. The integrative review by Donaldson et al. (2015) used tighter inclusion criteria and examined literature that specifically identified with positive psychology or situated its work in relation to it. Consequently, their inclusion criteria restricted the scope to those peer-reviewed publications that intentionally contribute to the discussion of positive psychology.

In line with Donaldson et al. (2015), the search term *positive psychology* (in quotation marks, with no Boolean operators) was used to extract a total of 1,628 English-language peer-reviewed academic articles from the electronic databases Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PsycARTICLES to create a positive psychology literature data set (henceforth referred to as the *data set*; for a detailed review of similar methods, see Donaldson et al., 2015; Donaldson & Ko, 2010). The articles in the data set included theoretical, conceptual, empirical, meta-analytic, and review articles published in peer-reviewed journals.

All articles that emerged from this search were screened and coded by a team of seven well-trained graduate student raters.

¹ The three frameworks that guided the analysis of gender were research design, authorship, and research topic. For race and ethnicity, analysis only included research design and research topic. Race and ethnicity of authorship was not examined, because identifying and estimating the racial/ethnic identity of the authors was extremely problematic. One option considered was linguistic analysis of surnames. However, Fiscella and Fremont (2006) observed that linguistic analysis is less accurate for women and people of higher socioeconomic status because of intermarriage, name changes, and adoption. Close to half of the authors in our data set were women, and given that most authors are academics, it would be reasonable to assume that they were middle to high socioeconomic status, thereby compromising accuracy through linguistic analysis. Further, surname analysis is not accurate for identifying African Americans (Fiscella & Fremont, 2006). It is also important to note that surname analysis would not be relevant for authors outside of the United States, Canada, and few other racially and ethnically diverse countries. In other contexts, the accuracy of surname analysis is strengthened by combining it with geocoding (Fiscella & Fremont, 2006). However, we did not have access to geographical data of the neighborhoods of residence for the authors considered in this study to conduct such an analysis. Given these practical difficulties, neither race nor ethnicity of authors was investigated.

On screening, articles were excluded if they were (a) book reviews, commentaries, or editorials; (b) not explicitly related to positive psychology in any of the content; (c) not available in full text despite several attempts at procurement; and (d) not in English. Further, any duplicates were excluded, resulting in a data set of a total of 1,628 unique, English-language peer-reviewed journal articles. Next, for all articles included in the review, coders closely examined titles, abstracts, and keywords and used a systematic coding scheme to capture key information. Further, they conducted an in-depth content analysis of the hypotheses, methods, sample characteristics, analyses, results, and discussions of each empirical study. Primary codes were used for frequency analysis to analyze trends in the field. The coding process was iterative, with refinements made as ambiguities and concerns were addressed. An interrater reliability analysis was conducted on a sample of 36 empirical articles for the most complex, ambiguous, and critically relevant categories. Each article was assigned to two coders for independent coding. Their interrater reliability was found to be 90.1%. This percentage of agreement provides a conservative estimate as it does not include categories that are likely to be 100% unanimous among all coders (e.g., author's name, year of publication, title of journal).

Analysis

Gender. The data set of 1,628 articles was analyzed through a gendered lens. Further, content analyses were conducted to investigate specific concerns. The coding for content analyses for gender-specific items was conducted by two coders, and interrater reliability was 100%.

Research design. To find out how positive psychology fared in engaging female participants in empirical studies, all articles that reported sex composition were examined. The participant samples across these archived articles were aggregated (i.e., sum of participants in all the empirical samples in the data set that reported sex), and the proportion of women in the samples (i.e., proportion of sum of women in all samples to sum of participants in all samples) was calculated. For multistudy articles, the participants from each of the study samples were included in the aggregate, and the proportion of women was calculated.

Authorship. The second aspect that was examined was authorship by women. Past reviews of psychological research have used analysis of first authorship as a reasonable estimate to assess extent of authorship by women (see Gannon et al., 1992). Using a similar process, authorship was assessed in the positive psychology literature by coding for sex of the first author of all 1,628 articles in the data set. This information was extracted and coded on the basis of the self-identified sex of the authors from publicly available author biographies, author descriptions, and faculty websites. Further, nationality of authorship of articles on women's and gender topics was also assessed on the basis of location of the author's institutional affiliation.

Research topic. The third aspect that was examined was the discussion of gender and feminist topics in the theory and empirical research. The titles and abstracts of all articles in the data set—1,628 in total—were systematically reviewed to identify those that focused on gender studies and feminist issues.

The abstracts were reviewed to identify and code articles focusing on women or gender, and only those that clearly put women or gender issues at the center were included in the analysis. Inclusion was determined on the basis of the article meeting at least one of the following criteria: (a) The title of the article dealt with a women's or gender issue, (b) the abstract clearly addressed a gender studies issue, (c) the abstract clearly dealt with marginalization of women, (d) the abstract discussed gender as an element of diversity, or (e) the abstract addressed gender or sex differences as its main objective. Finally, in-depth analysis of this subset of articles was conducted to examine (a) types of women's or gender topics and (b) positive psychology constructs studied in the context of women's or gender issues.

Race and ethnicity. Next, we examined the data set with a racial and ethnic lens. Two coders conducted a content analysis for race- and ethnicity-specific items, and the interrater reliability was 100%. The specific content analyses conducted are described in the following sections.

Research design. The first aspect investigated was the racial and ethnic composition of the samples in the published empirical articles. The racial and ethnic composition of samples was aggregated across all empirical articles that reported racial and ethnic characteristics of participants. This was done by calculating the sum of all participants in all studies for each racial/ethnic group—for example, the aggregate of all Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. Further, this was used to calculate the relative proportion of participants—that is, the sum of participants of a particular race or ethnicity relative to the total number of participants aggregated across all empirical samples.

Research topic. The second aspect of investigation involved content analysis of the research on issues related to race and ethnicity. The titles and abstracts of all 1,628 articles were closely examined to identify those that focused on issues of race and ethnicity. Only those articles in which race or ethnicity was central to the research question were included in the analysis. Articles were screened and included in content analysis if they met at least one of the following criteria: (a) The title of the article dealt with a race or ethnicity issue, (b) the abstract clearly addressed a race or ethnicity issue, (c) the abstract clearly dealt with marginalization of individuals on the basis of race or ethnicity, (d) the abstract discussed race or ethnicity as an element of diversity, or (e) the abstract addressed race or ethnicity differences as its main objective. In-depth content analysis of whole articles was conducted for those that met at least one of these criteria. These articles were also coded for (a) topics related to race and ethnicity and (b) positive psychology constructs studied in the context of racial and ethnic issues. It is important to note that racial and ethnic issues are constructed differently across the world. Therefore, only those articles that were clearly framed as dealing with issues that were racially or ethnically relevant in their context were included in the analysis.

Intersectionality. Finally, another aspect of interest was the examination of topics studied at the intersections of race and ethnicity and gender. Accordingly, the literature that engaged issues of race and ethnicity was closely examined for including discussion of gender issues or analyses of sex differences.

Results

Gender

The articles on positive psychology were analyzed to assess the engagement of women in empirical samples and in first authorship. Further, discussion of issues relevant to women was analyzed.

Research design. Out of a total of 1,628 articles, 972 articles were empirical, of which 796 articles reported the sex composition of the samples. Analysis revealed that, in aggregate, 60.2% of the total sample was female. Further analysis of sex distribution in each empirical article revealed that out of the 796 articles, 647 reported having more than 50% female participants. Thus, 81.3% of the empirical research that reported sex composition included more female than male participants. Thus, the empirical literature in positive psychology is overrepresented by female participants.

Authorship. Next, all 1,628 articles were assessed for gender of the first author. Analysis revealed that a total of 710 articles (43.6%) of the published literature had a female first author. Thus, a little less than half of the literature had female first authors. Further, for the articles on gender topics, the first authors of about 43% of the articles indicated institutional affiliations located in the United States; about 13% were from the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada; and about 44% were from other countries. This indicates that about 56% of the literature in positive psychology that addressed gender issues was produced in English-speaking Western countries.

Research topic. Out of 1,628 articles, 82 (5.04%) met at least one of the inclusion criteria discussed earlier.² Analysis revealed that out of the 82 articles, only 37 (i.e., 2.3% of the positive psychology data set) dealt with topics relevant to women's issues, and only 13 (<1%) had a feminist orientation—that is, dealt with marginalization or oppression of women or addressed women's position in society. Other articles, such as [Wiley, Srinivasan, Finke, Firnhaber, and Shilinsky's \(2013\)](#) article on positive portrayals of feminist men, discussed feminism from a positive lens or engaged in an analysis of sex differences but did not deal with a specific women's issue.

In-depth content analysis indicated that articles dealt with three main gender issues—reproductive, physical, and mental health of women; issues related to parenthood; and the victimization of women. However, the approach to confronting, preventing, or coping with these issues was influenced by positive psychology. As shown in [Figure 1](#), the most popular positive psychology constructs studied in the context of gender were well-being, coping, benefit finding or posttraumatic growth, and positive development of young girls.

Race and Ethnicity

Next, the current study analyzed the positive psychology literature through a racial and ethnic lens. The analysis was conducted to assess the racial and ethnic composition of participants in empirical research studies, research on topics relevant to issues of race and ethnicity, and research conducted from an intersectional perspective (i.e., studies that examined questions at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender).

Research design. With respect to the engagement of racial and ethnic minorities as research participants, analysis revealed

that out of the total of 1,628 articles, of which 796 were empirical, only 295 articles reported the racial and ethnic composition of the participants. For those articles that had more than one study, at least one of the studies reported race and ethnicity composition. A total of 265 articles reported that their participants included Whites; 186 articles included Blacks, 158 included Asians, 131 included Hispanics or Latinos, and 45 included indigenous groups.

Next, the proportion of participants across races and ethnicities was assessed. An aggregation of participants along racial/ethnic lines across all studies that reported race and ethnicity revealed that 56.6% were White, 12% were Black, 6.1% were Asian, 7% were Hispanic or Latino, 0.6% were from indigenous groups, and 17.8% were others. It is relevant to note that in case of articles that had more than one study, samples from all the studies were included in the aggregate.

Thus, 37.1% of the empirical articles reported race and ethnicity information, of which 89.8% reported having Whites in their samples, whereas 63% reported having Blacks, and fewer reported including other races. Further, over half of the research that reported race and ethnicity was based on White participants.

Research topic. Next, we examined article titles and abstracts for inquiry into discussions on issues of race and ethnicity. Out of a total of 1,628 articles, 45 (2.8%) engaged in discussion of race and ethnicity. Some of the themes that emerged in positive psychology topics studied in these contexts were well-being and life satisfaction ($n = 6$), hope ($n = 5$), resilience ($n = 4$), and positive emotions ($n = 3$). Some of the other topics studied included character strengths, forgiveness, mental health, positive behavior support, positive education, family strengths, coping, positive organizing, positive identity, positive perfectionism, positive youth development, positive parenting, and stress-related growth.

Although some articles focused solely on examining the relevance of positive psychology constructs in the context of specific racial or ethnic groups, others engaged positive psychology constructs as interventions, mechanisms, or end goals in dealing with particular racial and ethnic issues. Some of the racial and ethnic issues addressed using a positive lens included education among indigenous ethnic groups ($n = 6$), stress ($n = 3$), and racial and ethnic identity ($n = 2$). Another theme that emerged was comparative studies between racial or ethnic groups ($n = 4$). Other articles focused on discrimination, cultural trauma, social justice, and suicide risk.

Intersectionality

Of the 1,628 articles in the data set, only seven addressed issues at the intersections of race and gender. These articles studied a wide range of gender, racial, and ethnic issues from a positive lens: culturally responsive positive feminist therapy for Chinese women ([Tzou, Kim, & Waldheim, 2012](#)); emotional disclosure, forgiveness, and racial discrimination among African American men ([Hammond, Banks, & Mattis, 2006](#)); positive youth development programs for African American adolescent girls ([Kuperminc, Thomason, DiMeo, & Broomfield-Massey, 2011](#)); the impact of control over work on health among African American husbands and wives ([O'Neal, Wickrama, & Bryant, 2014](#)); gender differ-

² A detailed list of the studies included in this review can be obtained by contacting Meghana A. Rao.

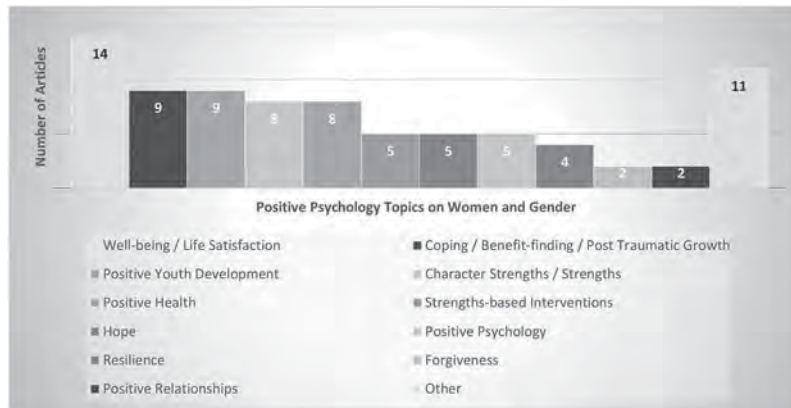


Figure 1. Positive psychology topics on women and gender.

ences in character strengths among women and men from the Maasai ethnic group from Kenya and the Inghuit ethnic group from Greenland (Biswas-Diener, 2006); gender differences in eating disorders and perfectionism among Malaysian Chinese (Choo & Chan, 2013); and content analysis of research at the intersections of sexual minorities, gender minorities, and racial/ethnic groups in positive psychology (Vaughan et al., 2014).

Discussion

Over the last 17 years, the scholarship in positive psychology has grown substantially, influencing research across a variety of domains and subdisciplines. Despite its popularity, however, it has attracted many criticisms, particularly in relation to its neglect of issues relevant to disenfranchised populations. The current study was the first of its kind in seeking to investigate these claims by conducting a systematic review of the state of the field and assessing the extent to which positive psychology has been inclusive of gender, race, and ethnicity.

Gender

Research design. The first concern investigated was the extent to which sex composition was reported and the degree to which women have been included as participants in empirical research. The current review found that 81.9% of the published empirical articles reported sex composition, which is an improvement over earlier reviews of the psychological literature. For example, only 65% of the empirical articles published in four educational psychology journals between 1985 and 1999 reported sex composition (Holwerstott et al., 2002), and only 70% of the articles in 26 APA journals in 1990 reported the sex of the participants (Ader & Johnson, 1994). Surprisingly, Gannon et al. (1992) found that the reporting of sex of participants had declined over the years. Many authors have noted that these trends are problematic, because failure to report sex makes it difficult to determine whether research is relevant across sexes. Thus, although trends in other areas have historically shown decline in reporting participants' sex, the positive psychology research seems to have fared relatively well in this regard.

For articles in which the sex of participants was reported, more female than male participants served in positive psychological

empirical studies overall. A total of 60.2% of the total sample was female, and 81.3% of the articles included more female than male participants. Whereas past reviews have indicated a preponderance of male participants in sports psychology (Wann & Hamlet, 1995) and organizational research (Jarema, Snyckerski, Bagge, Austin, & Poling, 1999), the positive psychology literature shows the opposite pattern. Inasmuch as authors have expressed concern that a bias toward use of more male participants in sports and organizational research compromises the generalizability of findings, the same criticism (though favoring women) might be leveled against positive psychology. However, a bias toward using female participants is not unique to positive psychology. Indeed, Henry's (2008) review found that over two thirds of the empirical studies in top-ranked social psychology journals—*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*—used college sophomores as participants. Further, Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, and John's (2004) review of studies published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2004 revealed that women accounted for over 70% of the participants in studies that used traditional college sophomore samples. Interestingly, in positive psychological research, only 39% of the empirical studies used college samples; 35% used nonstudent adults, 16% used children and adolescents, and 10% failed to report the age of participants (Donaldson et al., 2015).

To summarize, contrary to trends in other areas of psychology, the research in positive psychology shows a low reliance on college samples yet has an overrepresentation of women as participants. Further post hoc examination of the data set revealed two possible explanations for this phenomenon. One explanation is that studies that use college samples tend to have larger samples than those that use other sources for participants. Thus, although there are fewer studies that use college samples compared with trends in other areas of psychology, the overrepresentation of women in these may factor heavily in the overall calculation. Another explanation may be that in the last few years, the use of Internet-based methods for recruitment such as use of social media and online advertisements as a way to recruit large samples has grown. Further, considerably more women than men tend to respond to these calls for participation based on the study descriptions provided in the online advertisements. It is unclear at this time whether this trend is consistent in other areas (for

reviews, see Cassese, Huddy, Hartman, Mason, & Weber, 2013; Gosling et al., 2004). Regardless, given the relatively high report of sex composition, it is reasonable to conclude that the overrepresentation of women is an accurate trend, indicating that representation of women as participants in positive psychology research is not an area of concern.

Authorship. The findings from the current review reveal that in positive psychology research, about 44% of first authors are women. Historically, reviews have been concerned about the underrepresentation of women as first authors in psychological research. For example, McSweeney and Parks (2002) found that in the period between 1993 and 1997, women were underrepresented as first authors in four social psychology journals (32.75%), four cognitive psychology journals (29.75%), and four general psychology journals (22%). Similarly, in articles published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management* in 1997, 43% of first authors were women (Jarema et al., 1999). However, the trends were better in developmental psychology (55.2% from 1993 to 1997; McSweeney & Parks, 2002) and educational psychology (54% in 2008; Fong, Yoo, Jones, Torres, & Decker, 2009). Thus, the representation of women as first authors in positive psychology research seems to be at the mid-to-upper end of the range of what is normative in other areas of psychology.

Research topic. An in-depth content analysis of the types of topics studied in positive psychology research revealed that the focus on issues of gender is still underdeveloped. Only 5% of the literature engaged in any discussion of gender, issues of relevance to women, or analysis of sex differences. For those articles that directly engaged issues relevant to women, the main themes that emerged were health (reproductive, mental, and physical), victimization of women, and parenthood. Further, there was a strong focus on well-being and life satisfaction as the end goal of the research. Another common theme was coping with adversity, posttraumatic growth, and benefit finding in the context of hardships such as dealing with a history of childhood sexual abuse (Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007). Yet another topic that is gaining popularity is the study of positive youth development of girls. Thus, the findings suggest a small but growing interest in dealing with women's issues of health, motherhood, and victimization from a positive lens and facilitating positive development of young girls with the goal of increasing short- and long-term well-being. However, more than half of these small bursts of interest seem to stem from English-speaking Western, industrialized nations. Therefore, there is a need for more global attention to the conduct of positive psychology research on issues relevant to women.

Race and Ethnicity

Research design. Another area of analysis was the assessment of the extent to which the empirical research was inclusive of racial and ethnic diversity in terms of study participants. Findings revealed that 37.1% of the empirical studies reported race and ethnicity of participants, which is lower than what has been found in other reviews of psychological research conducted in the United States. Further, in aggregate, about 57% of the participants were White, 12% were Black, 6% were Asian, 7% were Hispanic or Latino, 0.6% were from indigenous groups, and 17.8% were identified as others, which is an improvement over other reviews

of psychological research. For instance, Cundiff (2012) conducted a study examining the racial and ethnic composition of participants in research published in eight prominent journals in 2007, spread across social psychology, developmental psychology, abnormal psychology, consulting and clinical psychology, and cognitive neuroscience. She found that 52.2% of the articles reported participant race and ethnicity and that, in the U.S. context, Native Americans, Blacks, and Hispanics were underrepresented as compared with the racial and ethnic composition of the population in the United States. Similarly, in a review of 104 studies published between 1960 and 2010 on psychodynamic psychotherapy treatment research, Watkins (2012) found that 75% of the literature did not report race and ethnicity information, and of those that did report such information, in aggregate, 75% of the participants were White, 21% were Black, and 4% were identified as other. Thus, the current analysis represents an improvement over other reviews but reflects the general trend that there is a low rate of reporting of race and ethnicity information of participants and that, globally, the published research is predominantly on White participants.

Research topic. The findings indicate that specific literature focused on issues of race and ethnicity in positive psychology is scant. Analysis revealed that 2.8% of the positive psychology research focused on racial and ethnic issues. These findings, although disappointing, are not unsurprising and mirror the trends in other areas of psychology (Brown, Shriberg, & Wang, 2007; Hartmann et al., 2013). The most popular positive psychology constructs studied in these contexts were hope and resilience, often as predictors and mechanisms, and well-being and life satisfaction as outcomes. Further, some articles used interventions framed from a positive lens to address racial and ethnic issues around education among ethnic groups and racial and ethnic identity. This treatment is similar to the treatment of issues of women and gender, in which positive psychology constructs are being used to cope with adversity and develop interventions in the pursuit of improved quality of life and increased well-being.

Intersectionality

The intentional conduct of research from an intersectionality perspective was extremely scant in the positive psychology literature. Only one article in the data set intentionally pursued such an objective (Vaughan et al., 2014). However, a few articles attended to both the gender and racial or ethnic identities of their participants as part of their research agenda. Along lines similar to other areas of psychology, the intersectionality perspective in positive psychology research remains a largely unexplored area.

Summary

The findings reveal that women are underrepresented as first authors, disenfranchised racial and ethnic groups are underrepresented as participants, and deep engagement and organized inquiry from a positive psychological lens into concerns of women and disenfranchised races and ethnicities are still scarce. The current review also supports other reviews (see Rao, Donaldson, & Doiron, 2015) indicating that investigations situated in non-Westernized contexts are particularly sparse. Thus, the positive psychology research largely mimics trends in other areas of psychology. This is unsurprising given that the field has been devel-

oped mostly by academics whose broader professional identities are as personality, clinical, developmental, or social psychologists engaged in basic research who, consequently, may carry over common practices from their subareas of psychology into positive psychology research (Peterson, 2006).

On the brighter side, women were overrepresented as participants, despite a relatively low reliance on college samples and possibly due to an interest in responding to web-based calls for participation in studies on positive psychology topics. This has the potential to open up new opportunities for further exploration. Further, Donaldson et al. (2015) found that the topics most studied in positive psychology are well-being, life satisfaction, happiness, resilience, and growth, among others. This suggests that a significant portion of the research in positive psychology that involves the study of constructs that are inherently enabling, empowering, and focused on improving quality of life also has a strong basis in the voices of women as research participants. Therefore, positive psychology frameworks carry a strong potential to inform research that can be empowering and of relevance to women. In addition, although the number of articles that explored issues of gender, race, and ethnicity was small, of those that did, most focused on enhancing well-being despite adverse circumstances. Further, there was a growing interest in the application of positive psychology constructs in dealing with issues of victimization and oppression. This indicates that, in response to the charges of critics, some researchers are viewing the positive psychological lens as a tool to enhance the well-being of not only those who are fortunate to afford a good life, but also those who are coping with adversity and thriving despite it. Similarly, there have been initial contributions on studying collectivistic values from a positive lens. More inclusion of underrepresented groups and organized lines of inquiry into specific issues relevant to these groups have the potential to uncover new pathways for improving group members' quality of life.

Strengths and Limitations

The purpose of this review was to survey the English-language peer-reviewed literature linked to positive psychology that was inclusive of gender, race, and ethnicity. This is the first review of its kind to examine the extent and characteristics of such research in positive psychology. Further, this systematic review was conducted by extracting relevant literature from very large electronic databases. Therefore, it is expected that the findings provide a fairly reliable estimate of the state of research in the discipline. However, it is important to view the present findings in light of the study's limitations. The search involved the use of specific terms—namely, *positive psychology*. There may be considerable psychological literature focused on positive outcomes or topics that are also studied in positive psychology that was not captured by this restricted search. However, as the purpose of the current systematic review was to identify the scholarship that is explicitly linked to the positive psychology movement, only literature that self-identified as being associated with positive psychology or that situated itself in relation to the positive psychology movement was included in the review. A search for positive constructs such as *well-being*, *happiness*, *resilience*, and *strengths* would have undoubtedly produced more hits. When this possibility was tested, however, in most cases the articles returned engaged with similar

concepts but were not linked with the positive psychology movement and, therefore, may not have tapped into the unique resources, perspectives, and approaches offered by the research in positive psychology.

Another set of limitations is related to the methodological challenges in specific items of analysis. The examination of gender of first authorship was based on coding of publicly available information and, as such, may have been subject to error. Accuracy of analysis of race and ethnicity of participants was also limited as a result of variability across cultures. Many articles published in countries with more racially and ethnically homogenous populations, such as those emerging from Asian countries, did not report participant race and ethnicity. Further, the particular issues around race and ethnicity can be varied and complex in different countries. Therefore, it is difficult to comment on research topics on race and ethnicity without in-depth knowledge of the well-being of disenfranchised groups in each country's particular cultural context.

Despite these limitations, however, this review provides a fairly reliable overview of the organized research on gender, race, and ethnicity that situates itself within the positive psychology literature. In the following section, we draw from the findings of the current review to explore opportunities and propose future directions for how more organized research on issues of diversity can enrich the science of positive psychology.

Future Directions

Over the years, the field has developed in a variety of ways, and scholars have constructed the scope of positive psychology research using various definitions. Now, to conceptualize possible future directions, we revisit some of the key definitions and constructions, review and draw lessons from a few exemplary articles that have broken new ground in conducting positive psychology research from a gendered and raced perspective, and propose pathways to expand opportunities for future diversity research in positive psychology.

Positive Aspects of the Minority Experience

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) seminal article on positive psychology recommended a shift from the prevailing deficit-based perspective of the social sciences to the systematic study of the positive aspects of the human experience. Emerging from this perspective, one potential path for positive diversity research, therefore, is to engage organized inquiry into the uncovering of the positive aspects of the minority experience. For instance, Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky and Strong's (2008) inquiry into the positive aspects of having a gay or lesbian identity revealed key factors such as creation of families of choice, opportunity to serve as positive role models, deep personal insight and sense of self, freedom from gender-bound roles, and involvement in social justice and activism, among others. The investigation of unique strengths that emerge at the intersections of gender, race, and other minority categories such as sexual orientation (see Wilder, Rao, & Donaldson, in press) and the examination of positive lived experiences unique to these disenfranchised groups would help to identify experiences worth protecting, preserving, and nurturing. For instance, connectedness and awareness of connectedness have emerged as culturally based protective factors among Native

Americans (Mohatt, Fok, Burket, Henry, & Allen, 2011) that it would be useful to preserve and foster. A critical aspect of conducting such organized research is that it avoids the problem of the “add-[diversity]-and-stir” approach to including diversity issues in mainstream research. Rather than just adding samples of minority groups to mainstream empirical research, it engenders the use of a positive lens at the grassroots level to pay focused attention to identifying and drawing out strengths embedded in disenfranchised communities and contexts.

Positive Constructs in Disenfranchised Populations

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) conceptualized positive psychology as research organized around three main pillars—positive experiences and states of being, positive traits of individuals, and positive enabling institutions. Using this frame, diversity research can involve further study of these topics in the context of disenfranchised groups, such as developing resiliency among adolescent girls (Johnson, 2003), the effect of cognitive reappraisal on psychological functioning of Latinos in the context of multiple oppressions (Soto et al., 2012), coping strategies for women who experience violence (Oosthuizen & Wissing, 2005), and stress-related growth among racial and ethnic minority adolescents (Vaughn, Roesch, & Aldridge, 2009), among others. Further, research focusing on identifying strengths that emerge among disenfranchised groups, such as cultural factors that affect well-being among African American students (Wilson, Moore, Boyd, & Easley, 2008) or the impact of spiritual well-being on long-term psychological and behavioral outcomes among homeless women (Douglas, Jimenez, Lin, & Frisman, 2008), can help to identify new resources and opportunities to enable disenfranchised groups to thrive.

Reinterpreting Marginalized Constructs From a Positive Lens

Some constructs that have been devalued and pushed to the periphery because of socialization may have a chance to reemerge as valuable when viewed through a positive lens. Many of the popular areas studied by positive psychology scholars—including quality of life, emotions, relationships, and similar other topics—are those that have been historically viewed by a patriarchal culture as the domain of women or as “feminine” topics (Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968). Similarly, many emotional and interpersonal constructs—such as kindness, love, nurturance, compassion, forgiveness, mercy, humility, modesty, social intelligence, and prudence—that are typically viewed as feminine or “soft” constructs are considered to be character strengths in the VIA Institute on Character’s (2013) character strengths framework. Although cross-cultural analyses of the VIA character strengths have found cultural and gender differences in how they are valued and expressed (Biswas-Diener, 2006; van Eeden, Wissing, Dreyer, Park, & Peterson, 2008), research based on the VIA strengths highlights that these constructs are desirable by indicating that their presence is likely to be predictive of well-being, life satisfaction, and growth (Donaldson et al., 2015). This suggests that positive psychological research has the potential to investigate, validate, and bring back into focus topics that have historically been marginalized or considered inferior to more “masculine” topics such as aggression, dominance, and power.

Along similar lines, feminists such as Hartsock (1983) have suggested that patriarchal institutional structures are marked by a valuing of and preoccupation with power through causing or preventing death. In contrast, some of the prominent theoretical and empirical contributions in positive organizational scholarship have focused on what is life giving and generative in institutions and have found that these approaches and lenses are associated with a range of positive organizational outcomes (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Donaldson & Ko, 2010; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Stephens, Heaphy, Carmeli, Spreitzer, & Dutton, 2013). These theories have the potential to be extended to uncover and reinforce what is energizing and life giving in broader societal contexts.

Thus, the positive psychology perspective is uniquely positioned to take on the task of drawing out historically marginalized and devalued constructs and using rigorous scientific research to unpack their value, benefits, and strengths. Further systematic research can provide empirical grounding and supportive interventions to enable disenfranchised populations to own, develop, and harness their assets, rather than underplay them, so as to achieve positive outcomes. Further, in valuing what has been previously marginalized without necessarily taking away from others (i.e., moving away from a win–lose model to a win–win model), there is the potential to engage the powerful as much as the powerless in shifting the power imbalance toward creating more socially just environments.

Reenvisioning Diversity Studies From a Positive Lens

Positive psychology has been described as a science that uses a unique interpretive lens to find out “what works, what is right, and what is improving” (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216; see also Donaldson et al., 2011; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). Using this framework, positive psychological research and strengths-driven evaluation (see Rao, Donaldson, & Porter, 2014) of empowerment practices—such as gender-equity initiatives, affirmative action policies, minority mentoring programs, advocacy efforts, and the like—can potentially provide fresh perspectives on the strengths of these programs and insights into the underlying mechanisms that promote success.

Moreover, many areas of diversity research—including gender studies, race studies, queer studies, multicultural studies, and so on—investigate concepts that are aligned with a positive lens. For instance, constructs such as empowerment, positive social change, valuing differences, fostering positive intergroup relations, affirmative cultural socialization, interconnectedness, and multiple ways of knowing inherently engage a positive lens (Harrell, 2014). An organized program of interdisciplinary research bridging positive psychology and diversity studies has the potential to encourage sharing of advances in theoretical and conceptual frameworks that can foster deeper understanding, more holistic development, and enhanced application of knowledge pertinent to disenfranchised populations.

As Peterson (2006) noted, well-being and suffering are not disconnected; deliberate interventions that promote happiness also alleviate suffering. Likewise, using a positive lens to view issues of diversity may aid in the development of interventions that encourage flourishing and optimal functioning, and as a byproduct it may simultaneously ameliorate problems.

Conclusion

Positive psychology as a field branches away from mainstream psychological research and foci in its examination of positive aspects of the human condition and strengths and assets of individuals and groups rather than the traditional focus on pathology. This has the potential to provide unique perspectives to research on social issues, including those related to disenfranchised groups. However, critics have charged the field with neglect of disenfranchised populations and, particularly, a lack of inclusiveness of gender, race, and ethnicity. The current review was the first of its kind in systematically conducting a 17-year review of the positive psychology literature in terms of how it has dealt with inclusion of gender, race, and ethnicity. The findings from this systematic review reveal that, thus far, the explorations of gender, race, and ethnicity in positive psychology have been mostly tentative, and the concerns raised by the critics are largely supported by the literature. This, however, follows a trajectory similar to that found in other areas of psychology. Further, some of the current scholarship shows promise for engaging positive frameworks in the future to contribute to critical concerns facing today's societies.

In the spirit of fueling this area of investigation, we recommend that future theory and research focus on the development of a broader definition of positive psychology that is committed to being more inclusive. Such a construction of positive psychology could provide criteria that define the field in a way that gives scope for and stimulates research on issues of relevance to disenfranchised populations. Some of the seeds for such a renewed focus have been planted by seminal scholarship described in this article and in volumes and publications such as *Positive Psychology as Social Change* (Biswas-Diener, 2011) and *Using a Positive Lens to Explore Social Change and Organizations: Building a Theoretical and Research Foundation* (Golden-Biddle & Dutton, 2012). The new APA journal *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, published by Division 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues), recently published a special section dedicated to positive psychology (Vol. 1, Issue 4, December 2014), in which several articles focused on the relevance of positive psychology among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer populations. Similarly, the APA journal *Asian American Journal of Psychology* is slated to publish a special issue on Asian Americans and positive psychology. Apart from peer-reviewed publications, new bursts of energy and attention to issues of diversity have been witnessed in keynote addresses and presentations by the leaders and eminent scholars in the field at recent conferences such as that of the Western Positive Psychology Association (September 2014). Given these developments, we are optimistic that scholars dedicated to building a diverse science of positive psychology can provide fresh perspectives and stimulate new energy toward creating a more inclusive field. Further, we hope that such inclusive research will support the creation of empowering environments in which all individuals can thrive and flourish.

Résumé

La psychologie positive a fait l'objet de critiques selon lesquelles elle fait fi des questions pertinentes pour les populations vulnérables. Cet article présente les résultats d'une revue de la litté-

rature, couvrant 17 ans, sur l'état actuel de la théorie et de la recherche en psychologie positive en ce qui a trait aux questions relatives au genre, à la race et à l'ethnicité, en vue d'évaluer la mesure dans laquelle les critiques sont justifiées et d'explorer de quelle façon le domaine pourrait être plus inclusif. Une revue systématique de la littérature de la psychologie positive depuis sa création, en 1998, jusqu'en 2014, a été réalisée. Des analyses de contenu ont été effectuées en vue de déterminer comment y ont été examinés le genre, la race et l'ethnicité. Les résultats ont révélé que, si les femmes sont surreprésentées comme participantes aux études empiriques, elles sont sous-représentées en tant qu'auteurs principaux, et que la discussion sur les dossiers concernant les femmes et le genre est relativement rare. De plus, les recherches empiriques réalisées à l'échelle internationale sont en grande partie basées sur des échantillons de sujets de race blanche, et très peu d'études ont porté sur la race et l'ethnicité ou encore sur les recoupements entre le genre, la race et l'ethnicité. Il faudra d'autres recherches formelles en vue de diversifier la science de la psychologie positive. En vue de conceptualiser les éventuelles orientations des recherches futures et d'explorer les possibilités de diversification, on a revu certaines définitions de base de la psychologie positive et tiré des leçons d'articles exemplaires portant sur les questions concernant le genre, la race et l'ethnicité. Quatre voies sont ainsi recommandées pour les recherches futures en tant que façons d'élargir les possibilités de diversité en psychologie positive.

Mots-clés : bien-être, fonctionnement optimal, populations vulnérables, sous-représentation, revue de la littérature.

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