Cross-Cultural Positive Psychology

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Introduction

Cross-cultural Positive Psychology refers to research on and applications of the main themes of Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2011; Wong, 2011) from cross-cultural or multicultural perspectives. This chapter will outline some of the arguments and findings that Positive Psychology (PP) is culture-bound, perhaps more so than other sub-disciplines of psychology, because what is positive requires a priori value judgments based on social norms and cultural context. Consistent with the emerging wave of cross-cultural psychology as a major force in mainstream psychology (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006; Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004; Triandis, 1994), the next stage of development of PP is focus on the cultural context

There is overwhelming evidence that culture, defined "as a common heritage of a set of beliefs, norms, and values" (US, DHHS, 1999), influences us in numerous and significant ways. It influences how we think (Nisbett, 2003), what we value (Hofstede, 1980; Leong & Wong, 2003), how we behave (Brislin, 1999) and how we cope (Wong & Wong, 2006). In sum, culture influences the perceptions, construals, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of its members (Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004). The American Psychological Association (2003) has recognized that it is not possible to maintain the position of cultural blindness in light of the massive research evidence on the influence of race and culture in psychology. I propose that a truly cross-cultural PP seeks both psychological universals and the cultural specific characteristics; it needs to incorporate human agency, meaning and cultural context in its research methodololgy (Chirkov, Ryan, & Seldon, 2011; Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006).

Culture Free vs. Culture Determinism

There are two main approaches to cross-cultural PP. One approach posits that the science of PP is similar to the science of biology or chemistry in that its constructs and scientific findings can "transcend particular cultures and politics and approach universality" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5). However, such confidence in the objectivity of research methods in positive psychology is unwarranted because the very selection of research questions and research methods is influenced by the researcher's own training, ideology, preferred research paradigms, and cultural values.

While there may be some validity to this culture free view, it is naïve to believe that cross-cultural PP research can be advanced simply based on the translation of instruments developed by American positive psychologists without considering the problem of construct equivalency, sample equivalency, and contextual variables. This culture free approach ignores the mounting evidence that values of positivity and negativity are inherently tied to cultures. For example, there is increasing evidence that cultural values and cultural beliefs influence such matters as what constitutes the good life and optimal functioning (Haidt, 2005; Leong & Wong, 2003; Lopez, Edwards, Magyar-Moe, Pedrotti, & Ryder, 2003; Snyder & Lopez, 2005). To the extent that basic psychological processes are colored and shaped by culture, the position that positive psychology is culture free becomes untenable.

The second approach is cultural determinism or indigenous psychology (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006). Cultural determinism is also known as cultural relativism (Hatch, 1983). According to this approach, the psychological characteristics of individuals are completely dependent on social, cultural, and linguistic structures (Chirkov, Sheldon, & Ryan, 2011).

However, this approach also has limitations because certain psychological needs such as happiness and autonomy are universal (Seligman, 2000; Chirkov, Ryan, & Sheldon, 2011).

I agree with Chirkov, et al. (2011) who recognize that there are merits to both the culture free and culture determinism positions. Chirkov (2011) proposes a dialectic relationship between the two. Certain human needs are almost universal, but the expression, the attainment, and ways of fulfilling those needs are culture-specific. I believe that this balanced and integrative approach to cross-cultural PP is most reasonable and productive. To continue to debate the culture free vs. culture determinism controversy is as pointless as debating the nature vs. nurture issue because both positions are true.

The Interactive Approach to Cross-Cultural PP

I propose that all people, regardless of their cultural background, have basic human needs—the needs for meaning (Baumeister, 2005; Wong, 2012), virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Waterman, 2008; Taylor, 1989), self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000), happiness and the good life (Seligman, 2011). However, research has also shown that the expression and attainment of these universal needs can also be culture-bound

Meaning. Using an implicit theories approach to study what constitutes the meaningful or good life, I (Wong, 1998) have discovered that there are eight sources of meaning. Further research has shown that indeed there are factors common to both the indigenous and Western cultures. There are also, however, factors unique to indigenous cultures. For example, I have conducted cross-cultural research on the meaning of life with Koreans (Kim, Lee & Wong, 2005), Japanese (Takano & Wong, 2004) and Chinese (Lin & Wong, 2006); the results support both the culture free and culture specific positions.

Self-determination. Ryan and Deci (2000) have demonstrated that the human capacity and needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are near universal and serve as the basis for well-being and personal growth across cultures. Chirkov (2011) concludes that "human autonomy is a cross-culturally universal human a capability even though it is dependent on Culture (capital 'C') for its emergence and complete functioning" (p. 81).

Virtues. There has been increasing support for the idea that a good life (eudaimonia) is a virtuous one (Waterman, 2008; Yu, 2009). This contrasts the position of defining the pursuit of happiness purely by the individual without any regard for the cultural norms of what the good life is. Thus, the virtuous life is always a moral one according to some objective standard. Human flourishing (eudaimonia) is impossible without virtue. The armor of virtue offers us the best protection against temptations and corruptions which can shipwreck one's life. It takes people with good character and integrity to create positive institutions and societies. For Chinese people, virtues are primarily based on morality and ethics rather than personal signature strengths (See the next Section

Happiness and a good life. Each culture has its own belief systems, values, and concepts regarding the nature of happiness and the good life. For example, the research agenda of promoting personal happiness and optimal functioning based on signature strengths is based on Western societies' individualistic cultural values, whereas, an Asian PP research agenda would likely focus on good relationships, family/harmony, positive schooling, and opportunities for education for their children.

There are well-established findings on cultural differences in values and beliefs (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Javidan & House, 2001; Leong & Wong, 2003; Rokeah, 1973). Cultural context determines which strengths are valued and how they are developed**.** It also determines terminal

and instrumental values (Rokeah, 1973). For example, Americans value achieving a comfortable (prosperous) life through working hard, while fundamental Muslims may value salvation through being obedient to Allah and mullahs.

Values and worldviews regarding happiness and good life are socially constructed from culture and life experiences over a lifetime. What constitutes happiness also varies from culture to culture. In a consumer society, hedonic happiness predominates; in a religious society, eudaimonic happiness, contentment, inner serenity and spiritual happiness predominate. Additionally, there are also cultural differences in assumptions about the nature of the person or self. In the West, self is a self-contained, embodied entity; in the East, self is an integral part of relationships.

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The Influence of Chinese Culture on PP

The study of Chinese PP (Wong, 2009) serves as an example of how cultural values and worldviews can impact the pursuit of happiness and a good life. Chinese people everywhere share in common at least three things: They are descendants of the Chinese race, bearers of the burdens of Chinese history, and recipients of some fundamental Chinese cultural beliefs. Being the largest nation with the longest history also gives Chinese people a sense of national pride and individual dignity. The collective history of having endured and survived numerous natural disasters, oppressive regimes, and foreign occupations has endowed Chinese people with the character strengths of endurance and patience. The Chinese cultural beliefs, which stem from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, have provided the wisdoms to cope with the complexity and vicissitudes of life. These factors together shape Chinese Positive Psychology.

Confucianism. Confucius taught that educated gentlemen should practice the following five virtues in order to live a happy and harmonious life:

1. *Yen* is the virtue of benevolence, kindness, compassion, and humanity.

2. *Yi* is the virtue of righteousness and uprightness. Yi also encompasses *zhong* (faithfulness, loyalty and conscientiousness) and *shu* (forgiveness, altruism and consideration of others.) This virtue incorporates the Golden Rule, "What you don't want yourself, don't do to others."

3. *Li* is the virtue of propriety, politeness and good manners. It dictates what constitutes correct behavior in different kinds of relationships and filial piety for children towards parents. It also prescribes proper behaviors for ceremony and worship.

4. *Zhi* is the virtue knowledge, prudence and wisdom, which can be acquired from studying classics and learning from others.

5. *Xin* is the virtue of faithfulness and integrity, which inspires trust.

It is worth noting that except for the virtue of *zhi*, all others of the four virtues are essential for maintaining stable and harmonious relationships. The PP of world peace, a stable society and harmonious families begins with cultivating one's character according to the five cardinal virtues, which are ultimately concerned with the well-being of others and the greater good. In sum, the good life consists of finding one's proper place in society and dutifully performing one's role. Confucianism discourages the self-centered pursuit of individual happiness and success, because such pursuit will disrupt social order and harmony.

Taoism. Taoism advocates the ideal of returning to the simple and natural way of life as a way of coping with the hardships and uncertainties in life. One of the profound insights of Lao Tze, its founder, is the duality of nature. All things in nature exist in duality or polarity. The two

opposites complement each other and make the existence of each other possible. Goodness does not exist without evil. Happiness does not exist without unhappiness. One of the common Taoist beliefs is that: "Fortune owes its existence to misfortune, and misfortune is hidden in fortune" . Personal problems occur because of our ignorance of the way of nature. Understanding how the positives and negatives support one another leads to a peaceful and integrated life" (Ajaya, 1997, p.45). According to this dualistic view, one's strength may contain the seed of self-destruction, while strength may be hidden in one's weakness. It is never wise to exclusively focus on developing one's signature strengths or maximizing positive experiences. Duality is one of the principles of PP 2.0 (Wong, 2011)

Related to duality is the ubiquitous pattern of change. Things in nature are cyclical – day and night, change of seasons, life and death, etc. Everything reverses to its opposite. Reversals of fortune are the way of nature. Therefore, we should not be overjoyed when times are good or depressed when times are bad. To know the principles of duality and change is the key to adapting effectively to the vicissitudes of life. The wisdom of being flexible and accepting setbacks enables one to takes things in stride.

Taoism teaches us not only how to be free from worries, but also how to achieve happiness, which comes from contentment. Craving for happiness and success leads to moral depravity and personal destruction, while contentment leads to happiness and health. Contentment involves overcoming craving when times are good and overcoming worries when times are bad; thus, contentment is always there regardless of reversals of fortune. Contentment leads to humble, selfless devotion to the well-being of humanity.

Following the natural way of life also means learning the wisdom of "do nothing". Learn to be like the birds in the sky or fish in the river, free from worries and free from striving. If we

learn to let go of our striving and craving, surrendering our own impulse to control and strive for gain, things will take care of themselves. The art of "do nothing" comes from meditation and learning the wisdom of the Way. Leaning the Way is the ultimate guarantee of happiness and contentment.

Buddhism. The basic tenets of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths: 1) The Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*) – Life is full of suffering; 2) The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (*Tanha*) – Suffering comes from craving for happiness and aversion of pain; 3) The Truth of Liberation from suffering (*Nirvana*) – We can be liberated from suffering by transforming our craving and aversion through enlightenment; and 4) The Truth of the Eightfold Path (*Magga*) – Liberation through enlightenment can be achieved through the eightfold path. The eight disciplines can be grouped into the categories of Morality (right speech, right action, right living, right effort), Meditation (right mindfulness, right meditation), and Wisdom (right thought, right understanding).

According to the Buddhist framework, the positive psychology of pursuing positive experiences and avoiding negative experiences is counterproductive, because the very focus on happiness contains the seed of unhappiness and suffering; both of these psychological mechanisms are rooted in primordial ignorance and delusion about life (Chen, 2006). Healing and happiness are the byproducts of enlightenment and compassion rather than worldly success.

Chinese Cultural Beliefs

Indigenous Chinese PP emphasizes that the cultural beliefs unique to the cultural heritages and historical experiences of the Chinese people are responsible for the Eastern ways of surviving and flourishing. The following five cultural beliefs that are most widespread and dominant in the traditional Chinese way of thinking are 1) uncontrollability of the world, 2)

ubiquity of change, 3) fatalism, 4) dualism, and 5) collectivism. These beliefs are key influences on the Chinese approach to PP.

Uncontrollability of the world. People perceive the external world as largely beyond their control. Individuals are not able to prevent or control powerful cosmic, natural disasters and political forces that impact their lives. Historically, Chinese people rarely had the freedom to select their government through voting. Realizing that the world is a dangerous place beyond one's control challenges one to accept the harsh reality and learn to transform one's thoughts and behavior in order to maintain a sense of equanimity and contentment.

Ubiquity of change. To the traditional Chinese people, the world is not only uncontrollable but also unpredictable. Since individuals have no control over most events and situations in their lives, they have no way to predict how life will turn out. Therefore, they are mentally prepared for reversals of fortune and unexpected tragedies.

Fatalism. Since the world is uncontrollable and unpredictable from the perspective of individuals, belief in fatalism seems inevitable. Fatalism recognizes the limits of personal autonomy and self-determination. However, fatalism often co-exists with the belief that there is always the opportunity of prevailing over fate through persistence and personal virtues. One benefit of a belief in fatalism is that it makes unexplainable adversities more bearable. When one attributes suffering to karma, fate, or bad luck beyond one's control, then one is freed from shame and guilt.

Duality of nature. Chinese PP posits the duality hypothesis – the optimal positive outcomes can be achieved not by accentuating the positive and avoiding the negative but by embracing and integrating both the positive and negative. A strengths-only approach is deficient,

because any individual is only as strong as the weakest part. Eventually, one will pay a high price for turning a blind eye to one's Achilles' heel.

Collectivism. Collectivist beliefs place group interests above self-interests. Thus, instead of seeking optimal functioning and happiness for the individual, collectivism seeks optimal harmony and benefit for the group, whether it is one's family or company. Loyalty to family and friends is highly valued (Wong, 2004a). While the expressing of gratitude is considered by American PP as an exercise to increase individual happiness, it is considered by Chinese PP as essential for maintaining good relationship. Collectivism contributes to social capital and psychological resources, thus increasing the likelihood of survival in the face of overwhelming adversities.

American PP vs. Chinese PP

Unlike American PP, Chinese PP begins with the assumptions that normal life is mostly negative and beyond our control. The roots of Chinese PP were developed in a historical period of civil wars and social unrest rather in an age of peace and prosperity. The worldviews and assumptions that led to the development of virtues and strengths in traditional Chinese people are not commonly found in Western societies; some examples are the traditional Chinese virtues are loyalty (including filial piety) (Wong, 2004a), acceptance (Wong 2012), contentment (Wong, 2004b), and moral character (Wong, 2005).

Here are some major differences between American and Chinese PP:

1. The American dichotomous view of negative and positive vs. the Chinese dualist view as symbolized by YinYang;

2. American Individualism vs. Chinese collectivism;

3. The American value of personal happiness before social responsibility vs. the Chinese value of social responsibility before personal happiness;

4. American materialistic worldview vs. the Chinese transcendental and existential worldview;

5. American PP favours positivist paradigm vs. Chinese PP is holistic and embraces different paradigms of knowledge claims.

Conclusion

To advance cross-cultural PP, research and applications need to consider both universal psychological principles as well as culture-specific characteristics. Chinese PP serves as a case in point that indigenous psychology makes unique contributions to understanding Chinese people's resilience, strong family ties, and capacity for developing deep relationships.

I also concur with Chirkov, Ryan, and Sheldon (2011) that cross-cultural PP needs to pay attention to the dialectic relationship between universal human capacities and needs and cultural influence on the expression and fulfillment of these needs. They have made a compelling case that the universal capacity and need for autonomy and happiness does not deny the role of culture, as a symbolic and linguistic environment, in shaping the expression and fulfillment of the need for self-determination..

In sum, a truly cross-cultural PP embraces both psychological uiniversals and indigenious psychology. We need a research agenda and an applied PP based on the interactions between these two perspective. Wong's Positive Psychology 2.0 (2011) presents a vision of the good life that recognizes moral imperatives, contextual factors and the need to embrace life in totality. The ultimate objective of PP is to make life better for all and create a better future for self and others in spite of human weaknesses and inevitable sufferings. The definition of a balanced PP is to bring out the best and heal the worst by preventing the excesses of character strengths and

developing the positive potential in personal weaknesses. This kind of PP is applicable to both developed and developing countries and to individuals in both positive and negative territories. More importantly, PP 2.0 can contribute to sustainable development and social justice.

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