



Developing an Indigenous Positive Psychology in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract: An indigenous positive psychology that addresses the human development needs of Emirati and expatriate residents in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is proposed. A positive psychology approach leverages inherent, yet often neglected, social, cultural, and religious strengths to mobilize growth. Yet, psychology practitioners and researchers frequently focus on ill-being and weakness. Further, many psychology practitioners are non-Emiratis who tend to employ traditional psychological models from the West, which are perhaps incongruous to the UAE context; hence our call for an indigenous positive psychology. Psychological models rooted in Western notions of secular individualism run contrary to the UAE's collectivistic and non-secular orientations. Moreover, focusing on the negatives, avoiding religion, and endorsing Western ideals of normality (disguised though they may be), can harm the psychological fabric of the UAE population. Although the field of psychology is expanding, a vision for practice and research is imperative; thus, the introduction of a framework for the development of an indigenous positive psychology that supports culturally appropriate strengths is relevant and timely. To do so, the tenets of positive psychology are reviewed, and steps necessary for the development of an indigenous version are proposed with the aim of facilitating the growth of the nation.

ملخص البحث: يقترح هذا البحث تأسيس علم نفس إيجابي محلي يتطرق إلى احتياجات النمو الإنسانية لمواطني ومقيمي دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. إن المقاربات القائمة على أساس علم النفس الإيجابي أهمية كبيرة لمكانم القوة الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية- والتي غالبا من يتم إهمالها- في تحفيز النمو الشخصي. إلا أن الباحثون يركزون بشكل كبير على مواطن الضعف والأحاسيس السلبية. إضافة إلى ذلك، فإن غالبية العاملين في هذا المجال ليسوا من مواطني دولة الإمارات العربية ويعتمدون مناهج ونماذج تقليدية قادمة من الغرب قد لا تتناسب مع الواقع المحلي. ومن هنا تتبع دعوتنا إلى إنشاء علم نفس إيجابي محلي. فنظريات علم النفس المتجذرة في مفاهيم غربية مثل العلمانية والفردية تتعارض مع ثقافة الإمارات العربية التي تتحو نحو الفكر الجماعي وغير العلماني. كما أن التركيز على ما هو سلبي و تجنب العامل الديني وتبني مفاهيم الحياة الطبيعية من المفهوم الغربي يمكن أن يضر بالنسيج النفسي لمواطني الدولة. ورغم أن مجال علم النفس ما فتئ يتطور، لا زالت هناك حاجة ماسة إلى تصور جديد على مستوى الممارسة والبحث في هذا الجانب. ومن هنا فإن بلورة إطار نظري لتطوير علم نفس إيجابي محلي يدعم عوامل قوة مناسبة للثقافة المحلية يعتبر ضرورة آتية وملحة. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، فإن هذا البحث يقوم بمراجعة أسس علم النفس الإيجابي، كما يقترح الخطوات الضرورية لعلم نفس محلي يساهم في نمو البلد.

Keywords: indigenous; positive psychology; Arab; religion; culture



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Mainstream psychology has, for much of its professional life, focused on disease, distress, and emotional illness to such an extent that it has become synonymous with ill-being, despite claiming the opposite (Bolier et al., 2013). However, a new field in psychology considers not ill-being, but, rather, well-being. Positive psychology focuses on the positive elements in life, such as those exemplified by the PERMA model of well-being (Seligman, 2011), which include positive emotions, meaning, engagement, character strengths, relationships, and achievement. The field is also geared towards the generation of scientific knowledge relevant to the enterprise of well-being, as well as the development of empirical strategies to increase positive emotions and experiences both curative of ill-being and facilitative of growth (Garland et al., 2010; Meyer, Johnson, Parks, Iwanski, & Penn, 2012).

How well-being is understood and how it can be achieved is a central focus in positive psychology (Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2014). A growing recognition is developing of the vital role that culture plays in conceptions and promotion of well-being (Joshani, 2013; Lambert, D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2014a). Yet, despite positive psychology's demonstrated efficacy (Bolier et al., 2013; Schueller & Parks, 2014; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), a caveat remains: the field is admittedly Western and thus, heavily culture-bound (Bermant, Talwar, & Rozin, 2011; Pandey, 2011; Wong, 2013a), prompting a need to explore, expand, and include non-Western views of well-being.

As Wong (2013b) declared, the next stage of development in positive psychology is to go global to consider the full richness of well-being from diverse cultural views. Regions like the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) currently suffer from a lack of academic scholarship (Brannan, Biswas-Diener, Mohr, Mortazavi, & Stein, 2013) as well as from negative media coverage that overlooks many positive developments (Zelizer, Park, & Gudelunas, 2002). Accordingly, this article introduces a framework for the development of a much needed indigenous positive psychology in the UAE. Although focused specifically on the UAE, much of what is gleaned herein may be also helpful to the development of indigenous positive psychologies in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait).

Positive Psychology

The founders of positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), argued that conventional psychology focused on the negative and provided little help to individuals who were not distressed. Arguably, a focus on illness, negativity, and the past is still the default position for many psychologists (Bolier et al., 2013; Layous et al., 2011). This mindset often drains available



resources away from an understanding of how individuals and societies can increase their levels of well-being (Bermant et al., 2011; Karwoski, Garratt, & Ilardi, 2006; Keyes, 2005). Positive psychology is a framework to study the processes and conditions that contribute to human flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Based on the assumptions (noted in Table 1) that distinguish it from traditional psychology, positive psychology is strengths oriented, forward looking, and skills based (Lambert D'raven, Moliver, & Thompson, 2014), and involves the deployment of various pathways of actions, thoughts, attention, and other intentional abilities by which greater states of well-being can be constructed.

One such pathway to well-being is explained by the Broaden and Build model (Fredrickson, 2006), which posits that experiences of positive emotion are beneficial for individuals because they serve to broaden perception, focus, and attention (Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2006). Increasing the breadth of thoughts and resultant behaviours (Johnson, Waugh, & Fredrickson, 2010) leads to increased creativity, robust physical health, and greater social connectedness (Hasson, 2010; Kok et al., 2013; Vacharkulksem & Fredrickson, 2012), which in turn, enables individuals to build immediate and long-term resources in health, cognition, psychological, and social domains. An upwards, self-perpetuating positive spiral ensues leading to sustained optimal functioning (Garland et al., 2011).

Psychology practitioners who use a positive psychology approach, help their clients to focus on increasing the experience of positive emotions by way of positive psychology interventions (PPIs), empirically derived cognitive or behavioural activities designed to increase well-being (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Examples include writing gratitude letters (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011), increasing optimism (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010), developing greater self-control (Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2014), using self-compassion (Neff, 2003), and visualizing an ideal future self (Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Aimed at increasing positive emotions, PPIs differ from interventions used in more traditional therapy, which tend to focus exclusively on the minimization of distress (Layous, Chancellor, Lyubomirsky, Wang, & Doraiswamy, 2011). The effectiveness of PPIs is well documented; two meta-analyses showed their reliability not only in improving well-being, but also in decreasing depressive symptoms over time (Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Indeed, some researchers (Schueller & Parks, 2014) suggest that, due to methodological issues and inclusion criteria, gains may be even greater than those demonstrated.

Positive psychology is skills-based and oriented towards growth; therefore, it is applicable not only in the clinical/counselling field (Magyar-Moe, 2009; Parks & Schueller, 2014; Wood & Tarrier, 2010), but also in the areas of business and organizations (Linley, Harrington, & Garcea, 2013; Subriana & Cooperrider, 2013), education (Green, Oades, & Robinson, 2011; Norrish, Williams, O'Connor, & Robinson, 2013; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009), and primary health care (Kahler, Spillane, Clerkin, Brown, & Parks, 2011; Lambert D'raven et al., 2014). An increasing number of fields are adopting a positive psychology focus. For example, governments are now incorporating well-being strategies into national policy, resulting in a variety of positive implications for health, education, social trust, safety, and governance (Diener & Tov, 2012; Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2013; Huppert & So, 2013; Sepulveda, 2013; Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, & Wangdi, 2012).



Table 1

Assumptions of Positive and Traditional Psychology

<i>Traditional Psychology</i>	<i>Positive Psychology</i>
Discussing problems is curative and eases symptoms (Fix what is wrong)	Building strengths and generating positive emotion is curative (Build what is strong)
People are victims of biological, social, or psychological forces, need help with disorder	People are self-motivated, growth-oriented, need skills to grow
Focus on repairing negatives as these are worth analysis and attention	Focus on positives to repair, promote, and prevent; positives are worthy of attention and analysis
Goal: reduce symptoms; make life less miserable	Goal: reduce symptoms, boost present well-being, prevent future problems; make life worthwhile
Absence of illness/problems = well-being	Absence of well-being = vulnerability for future problems, sign of impoverished present
Not appealing to clients; lose face, not motivating, potentially feel worse first	Appealing to clients; can save face, move forward, feel better quickly
Skill: accept, deconstruct, remediate, deal with the past (and present)	Skill: focus attention/memory to positives, build future, be led by it, enhance present moments
Past required to change; people revisit the past, they assume it is worthwhile	Past not required; people are pulled forward by future visions they create and plan

*Adapted from Rashid, T. (2008). Positive psychotherapy. In S. J. Lopez (Ed.), *Positive psychology: Exploring the best in people*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company.

Criticisms of Positive Psychology

Despite the differences in orientation between positive psychology and traditional psychology, they nonetheless attract the same criticisms. Although America represents less than 5% of the world's population, it is often used as the norm, or template, for psychopathology (Summerfield, 2008) and well-being alike; thus, much of psychology remains an American enterprise and reflects an Anglo-Saxon view (Bermant et al., 2011). Rooted in Western ideals of individualism, democracy, and Christianity (Giacaman et al., 2010; Joshanloo, 2013; Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009), psychology professionals and consumers alike have come to believe that normal functioning lies within these values. Self-development and self-realization, culture-bound concepts



in Western psychology, are considered immature and selfish in collectivistic societies (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Bermant et al., 2011; Lambert, 2008). Recipients of psychological services who do not ascribe to these values are often labelled as juvenile and irrational; their cultural experience and sense of identity is invalidated (Joshanloo, 2013; Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009).

Furthermore, comparisons between Western and indigenous cultures, often disadvantage local populations and marginalize their indigenous knowledge systems (Summerfield, 2008). In fact, in collectivistic societies, where decisions are frequently made by group members, the introduction of individualistic notions of positive functioning may create distress (Al-Darmaki et al., 2012). Western interventions, based on the norm of individualism, often neglect to systematically incorporate family and community supports, and can overlook or dismiss collective healing practices, thereby failing to acknowledge and utilize these culturally-relevant pathways and resources to promote well-being and resilience (Giacaman et al., 2010). Thus, a criticism of both mainstream and positive psychology is that they are based mainly on strengthening the individual self (Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009) with less regard to strengthening the community as a whole. This can be harmful to individuals in collectivistic societies, as this may be in direct conflict with cultural conceptualizations of well-being that are less focused on individual self-expression and improvement, and more focused on communal well-being (Boehm et al., 2011).

Positive psychology researchers acknowledge these shortcomings and criticisms; consideration and attention is now being given to 'other' versus 'self' focused activities (Boehm et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). For example, 'self' oriented PPIs include goal setting (Kee & Wang, 2008) and choosing one's life philosophy (Creswell et al., 2005), while 'other' oriented PPIs involve considering with whom and in what activity individuals can spend time (Aaker, Rudd, & Mogilner, 2011) and engaging in kind acts towards others (Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Nonetheless, Western approaches tend to be secular, at least when compared to the centrality of Islam in Arab nations where the tenets of the faith guide daily behaviours and interactions (Thomas & Ashraf, 2011). This secular view omits psychological and spiritual comforts as well as the security of moral codes, the promotion of positive self-perceptions, group identity, and the generation of positive emotions (Hamdan, 2009). Hence, researchers increasingly note the need for the development and inclusion of cross-cultural or indigenous positive psychologies (Joshanloo, 2013; Pandey, 2011; Wong, 2013a). Secular and non-secular individualists and collectivists view and seek well-being in different ways; therefore, research and practice assumptions made in secular and non-secular societies need to be examined in order to ensure that they complement culturally acceptable prescriptions for attaining well-being. Within a non-secular society, such as the UAE, it is imperative that researchers and practitioners are acutely aware that individualism is so pervasive in Western views that it is implicitly assumed to be the prevailing norm (Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008; Giacaman et al., 2010; Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009).

Another criticism of both traditional and positive psychology involves claims of cultural inclusion. For example, the *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (CSV; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) identifies and describes 24 character strengths which underlie six broad virtues that facilitate thriving. These virtues and strengths were selected based on their



ubiquity across global cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions. Admittedly, Peterson and Seligman noted not only that the structure of these virtues likely differs across cultures, but also that omitted virtues were still worthy of consideration and expressly stated their hope to examine such culture-bound virtues in future iterations of the CSV (p. 51). By and large however, this has not yet transpired. Wong (2013a) recently reiterated how, in the bid for positive psychology to establish commonalities, it has inadvertently overlooked unique cultural strengths. For example, hospitality, honour, and pride, all salient in the Arab and Islamic world, are not included among the 24 strengths (Biswas-Diener, 2013). Culture-bound strengths are but one example of a research area relevant to the MENA region that is lacking, yet ripe with opportunity for researchers to make meaningful contributions.

Psychology in the UAE and Arab World

Locally, the field of psychology faces many challenges (see Fatima Al-Darmaki's extensive work in the UAE). These include: a lack of clarity regarding the meaning of counselling; a need for a cohesive, recognized professional identity; a misunderstood role of psychology practitioners; stigmatization of users of psychological services; perceived irrelevance of such services; and the struggle of educational programs to develop culturally appropriate tools and to attract local talent (Al-Darmaki, Hassane, Ahammed, & Abdullah, 2012). Running contrary to psychology's Western values of having clients self-disclose and rely on an internal locus of control (Sue & Sue, 2013), clients in the UAE context often favour being told what to do and being shown skills, rather than being asked to delve into emotions and family dynamics that may invite shame (Al-Darmaki, 2011; Lambert, 2008). Exacerbating this issue, currently, the majority of psychology practitioners in the UAE are Western trained. The first, and to date, only, clinical psychology program in the UAE began in 2011 at the flagship national university and is a fully accredited, English-language program intended for Emirati nationals (Haque, 2012). Prior to this, interested nationals went abroad for training. Nevertheless, psycho-education about what psychology is and does remain predominantly Western; until further development of the field can be achieved, this articulation will likely remain so.

More broadly, a review of research practises across the Arabic-speaking world (Zebian, Alamuddin, Maalouf, & Chatila, 2007) showed that nearly 90% of researchers "adopted theories, concepts, and measures wholesale, without critique or adaptation" (p. 106), which resulted in repetitive, imitative, and irrelevant research to social problems. This type of research renders comparisons meaningless and scientifically wrong (Pandey, 2011), and produces limited utility in understanding or acting on problems and opportunities (Yang, 2012). Additionally, psychological publications in the Gulf countries (1989-2008) amounted to a mere 192 studies, constituting 1% of the biomedical research in the region (Osman & Afifi, 2010). Furthermore, among countries within the MENA region, Israel produces over 80% of the psychological research; the next most productive country is Iran, which produces 5% of publications in this field (Biglu, Chakhmachi, & Biglu, 2014).

Notwithstanding Israel, the UAE is still listed as a comparatively "high" research producer (Jaalouk, Okasha, Salamoun, & Karam, 2012); yet, a cursory search by the current authors



revealed that the existing literature is heavily focused on negative functioning. In fact, a recent book on psychological ‘well-being’ across the GCC countries actually focused on ill-being—addiction, eating disorders, and mood disorders; thus suggesting that well-being is still understood as the absence of ill-being. We could find only one article with an explicit articulation in positive psychology written by Arab authors (i.e., Al-Krenawi et al., 2011); this article discussed post-traumatic growth among Palestinian children. Otherwise, flourishing, self-actualization, meaning, strengths, social capital and the like remain seemingly unknown by Arab researchers. A focus on the positives and on well-being (as opposed to a focus on the negatives and ill-being) would help to counteract negative stereotypes of the region, develop greater efficacy, and possibly alleviate suffering and conflict, speed coping, and encourage greater compassion and forgiveness (see Dweck, 2012). One need not go far for justification for a focus on the positives and well-being. A recent Gallup World (2014) poll showed that the MENA region scores highest globally in the daily experience of negative emotions, with Iraq, Iran, Palestine, and Syria consistently scoring in the top 15 countries since 2006.

Despite evidence showing that interventions aimed at reducing distress do not inevitably lead to a state of well-being (Fleddurus, Bohlmeijer, Smit, & Westerhof, 2010; Provencher & Keyes, 2011), many psychology practitioners, not just those in the UAE, do not feel it is their role to promote well-being (Insel & Scolnick, 2006; Keyes, 2010). In the same way that studying the absence of autism does not inform the study of the gifted; the study of distress and ill-being does not inform the study of strengths and well-being. That is, ill-being and well-being are not endpoints of a continuum; rather, they are orthogonal and distinct constructs (Keyes, 2005). Building positive states has positive effects far beyond the absence of negative states. In fact, longitudinal studies have evidenced that an absence of flourishing mental health results in a 7-time greater likelihood of future mental illness (Keyes, 2005; Wood & Joseph, 2010); indeed, the absence of flourishing mental health increases the probability of mental illness (i.e., depression) ten years onwards by as much as 86% (Keyes, 2010).

Further, a focus on the positives and well-being is both necessary and timely for the MENA region, as studies and recent surveys show an increasing trend towards low-levels of concern for inequality and injustice (Oxford Strategic Consulting, 2014), and greater levels of self-entitlement (Al-Gergawi, 2008; Eide & Rosler, 2014) and materialism (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2011). Prioritizing monetary and other extrinsic goals—endorsing materialism—is particularly detrimental to well-being (Kasser et al., 2013). While money can buy meaningful experiences that can increase well-being (van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), correlates of well-being cannot be guaranteed by socio-economic status alone (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010).

Considering that these trends are not unique to the MENA region (Konrath, Foster, Keith Campbell, & Bushman, 2008; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2013), and in the face of rising extremism in many areas of the world, the importance of focusing on the positives and strengthening well-being cannot be overstated. The need for identity, social belonging, meaning, recognition, and validation among the vulnerable, not only in the UAE, but worldwide, must be addressed as a counter measure to rising political, religious, and social extremism (Stern, 2010; Venhaus, 2010).



The UAE

The UAE attracts expatriate workers from over 200 countries, with 84% of its residents counting as non-nationals (UAE Interact, 2013). With the world's second highest GDP per capita (United Nations Human Development Index, 2011), this stable and secure country is ranked first in the region as the preferred location in which to live for young Arab expatriates (The National, 2013). Recently, the UAE placed 14th (up from 17th) in the World Happiness Report, which measures wealth, economic activity, social relations, and public welfare (Helliwell et al., 2013), and 40th (out of 187 countries) in the United Nations Human Development Index, (UNDP, 2014), which measures life expectancy, years of schooling, and income. Oil revenues, tourism, finance, and manufacturing industries support human development initiatives, such as pensions, employment schemes, quality education and health care (Jabeen, Cherian, & Pech, 2012).

According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.), the UAE is defined as a collectivistic society that values hierarchy and distinct power roles. Scoring low on individualism, long-term commitment and loyalty to the social group from which individuals belong is evident; albeit today's Emirati youth appear to be more individualistic than earlier generations (Whiteoak, Crawford, & Mapstone, 2006). Commitment and maintenance of one's in-group status is demonstrated via adherence to cultural codes of conduct. Although the UAE is a country driven by competition and success, winning is defined by the success of the group rather than the individual. At the same time, the UAE is equally concerned with individual social welfare, care for the vulnerable, and protection of the less fortunate. A strong preference for avoiding uncertainty also suggests that conformity to orthodox behaviours and ideas is highly valued. The majority of the national population adheres to Islam (CIA Fact Book, n.d.; Simadi & Kamali, 2004); yet, very liberal views with respect to non-Muslims and codes of conduct in the country are evident (Findlow, 2000; Lambert, 2008).

Culture, Religion and Well-Being: An Indigenous Reflection

Culture is a positive force that shapes identity, guides action, and provides meaning; it is a foundational framework that emphasizes particular strengths that can be used to leverage social and individual growth (Eckersley, 2006). Culture also influences how individuals make sense of who they are, what psychological states they seek, and how they are to function (Diener, Oishi, & Ryan, 2013; Oyserman & Lee, 2008; Tsai, 2008). Collectivistic societies, like the UAE, are based on interdependence: social norms and obligations to family are emphasized and are rooted in the value placed on social connectedness (Uchida & Ogihara, 2012). This emphasis on interdependence results in perceptions of well-being that are focused on the group (Freire & Zaccagnini, 2009; Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Wissing, 2009). In contrast, individualistic societies emphasize individual wants and rights; individuals in individualistic societies see themselves as more independent and in greater control over with whom they enter into relationships than do those in collectivistic societies (Ahuvia, 2002; Uchida & Ogihara, 2012).

In Islamic cultures, well-being is also tied to religion (Abu-Ras, Gheith, & Cournos, 2008; Ismail & Desmukh, 2012) and manifested through the relationship one has with God. As such, one's duty is to worship, seek guidance, and live virtuously based on Islamic codes of conduct (Al-



Darmaki et al., 2012; Joshanloo, 2013). Thus, the gratification of individual desires does not define a state of well-being; rather, the rewards which stem from servitude to God and others generate well-being in this life and in the hereafter. Well-being is further derived from a state of obeisance to ritual and belief, and from living well with others. This involves a collectivity from which one derives social worth and identity (Joshanloo, 2013; Smither & Khorsandi, 2009). Indeed, when religious adaptations are introduced into the provision of psychological services, well-being increases (Smith, Bartz, & Richards, 2007).

Our recent studies (Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2014a, 2014b) confirmed the importance of family and religion in the UAE context. UAE university students revealed a strongly collectivistic orientation whereby well-being was considered a state generated through and with extended family, siblings, and friends, as opposed to being generated through the self. The importance of religion was highlighted by participants, such that adherence to moral codes, Islamic rituals, and prayer, as well as fulfilling social obligations towards family and community, also increased well-being. Further, in our survey of psychology practitioners and academics working with Emiratis (Lambert D'raven, Seraphim, & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015), several positive characteristics specific to the local UAE society emerged as salient: hospitality, family honour, respect for elders, emotional self-control, the use of and acceptance of third party mediators for social conflicts, and self-pride were mentioned. As such, given that well-being is influenced by social interactions, structures, and beliefs (Diener et al., 2013; Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013), an investigation of the cultural and religious strengths that reflect and support these are needed (Uchida & Ogihara, 2012).

Developing an Indigenous Positive Psychology

In general, an indigenous psychology emphasizes the development of a psychological paradigm using resources from within a cultural group that result in a discipline unique to that community (Allwood, 2011). With regard to an indigenous positive psychology, several routes towards this goal are suggested in Table 2. Many of these routes remain in their infancy, untapped, problem-oriented, or scattered across various academic traditions in multiple languages. A unified approach that focuses on the positive aspects of the UAE context and the strengths of its people would help to build a home-grown knowledge base from which future theory and more appropriate and effective forms of practice can be developed. A framework with which to study human flourishing within socio-cultural contexts that is locally developed and reflective of community norms would help to develop a “positive” indigenous psychology.

Developing new paradigms initially depends on the use of detailed qualitative, ethnographic, and interdisciplinary methods wherein local concepts are identified as starting points for exploration, triangulation, identification, and finally, validation. The building of culturally-relevant models, constructs, and theories can then be accomplished (Pandey, 2011; Summerfield, 2008; Zebian et al., 2007). For instance, to investigate the culture of hospitality, researchers could use a mixed-method approach such as interviewing Emirati hosts and their guests, engaging in behavioural observations, and developing a measure of character strengths to accurately represent local constructs. Other starting points in the mapping of cultural strengths include perusing the



Qur'an, and examining historical, religious, and sociological texts, as well as poetry, and government reports in conjunction with the scientific literature. Criteria for the definition of character strengths are similar to those proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), which involve the identification of a strength as a positive quality by others in the community, its personification by some but not all members, and its contribution to moral, ethical, and productive outcomes for the society's members. Strengths are also identified as the values and behaviours that are consistent with, and promoted by, culture, religion, and a society's institutions.

A note of caution is required with regard to these endeavours: researchers must avoid conflating indigenous knowledge, philosophy, and even religion with indigenous psychology itself. While informative and a starting point, indigenous knowledge must still be transformed into psychological constructs and empirically tested (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006). Still, these methods are useful when faced with poorly understood constructs with no cross-cultural counterpart, or when grappling with understudied yet highly valued and functional constructs that are implicitly entrenched in culture. Therefore, one of the goals in developing an indigenous positive psychology is to discover novel and culturally embedded psychological phenomenon which can be used to either enhance existing theory or to build new models, thereby adding to the existing psychological literature in a meaningful way (Joshani & Weijers, 2014).

Developing original theoretical frameworks is vital. Rather than retrofitting existing Western measures, concepts, or interventions, the development of culturally-relevant frameworks must be done by researching local concepts, such as honour or altruism, and then identifying valid means for investigation. This does not imply that all Western ideas are harmful; rather, the aim is to develop a psychology that meets the needs of communities and works within their worldviews, which may involve rejecting, adapting, or accepting Western models to some degree (Bermant et al., 2011; Yang, 2012). A good example is the work of Thomas and Ashraf (2011) on the congruency between cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and Islam. Thomas and Ashraf showed that, although CBT is Western, it is still compatible with an Islamic belief structure and can be successfully employed with minor adjustments. Other examples include Keshavarzi and Haque's (2013) model of psychotherapy for Muslim mental health, and Al-Thani's (2012) person-centered counselling using Islamic precepts.

Attention must also be paid to the development of indigenous forms of assessment that go beyond translations of existing instruments and include valid and reliable items that reflect Islamic and Arabic norms of Emirati society, as well as reflecting expatriate norms. Although English is the lingua franca in the region, psychology practitioners must be cognizant of the cultural ideologies and meanings imparted through language (Tanzer, 2005). It is important to recognize and understand that English-language assessments may include items that are not culturally relevant or norm referenced; and thus, will yield inaccuracies.



Table 2

Future Directions

Future Directions for an Indigenous Positive Psychology in the UAE

Investigate individual, social, cultural, and religious strengths in the Emirati population (students, youth, adults, elderly, military, parents, etc.) and develop positive psychology interventions to increase well-being

Map existing and potential policies conducive to greater well-being; offer recommendations based on local well-being research; partner with government agencies; capitalize on national developments as research opportunities like military service, Expo 2020, etc.

Determine organizational strengths in Emirati/expatriate workplaces; develop interventions to facilitate optimal working environments to boost productivity, engagement, competitiveness, and workplace wellness

Assess validity of established concepts, interventions, and measurement tools and adapt or develop others; identify gaps and opportunities for development or adjustments to reflect Emirati/expatriate norms

Develop research expertise in developing locally relevant methodologies (qualitative, mixed-methods, etc.) and encourage research into cultural concepts (*wasta*, culture of honour, hospitality, etc.)

Provide a forum for dissemination and discussion of indigenous positive psychology research in both Arabic and English in journals such as the *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology* or in local conferences (i.e., *IPCD: International Psychology Conference Dubai*)

Support/partner with local researchers to set a vision for a national research agenda in indigenous positive psychology; secure funding (i.e., National Research Foundation, university/private grants)

Mobilize UAE or regional psychological professional associations to develop greater awareness of psychology and positive psychology in particular with the inclusion of culture and cross-cultural views

Another investigative method is to develop a strengths map of various social contexts (i.e., individual, organizational, familial, governmental) and determine which strengths are salient and how these can be codified and used to develop interventions or guide policy. Partnering with relevant organizations and increasing research capacity is a benefit of such broad spectrum work. An anthropological strengths map can be developed by initially asking questions of service providers such as, “What strengths are frequently used by Emiratis/expatriates that allow them to flourish (Lambert D’raven, Seraphim, & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015)?” Delving deeper into concepts that are frequently mentioned (and less likely to be an artefact of bias) by asking individuals, “Do you do this? Why? How does it help you? Where does it come from? What else do you do?” can help to ensure greater validity of the hypothesized concept. Analyzing interviews, conducting



naturalistic observations of individuals in specific contexts (e.g., at home, school, or work), connecting these strengths to ethnographic or religious influences, and using UAE normed measures, can help triangulate and uncover constructs for future research.

Mapping strengths can also be done by identifying and interviewing noteworthy examples of Emirati citizens who have reached recognized states of leadership and excellence—that is, the outliers (Gladwell, 2008) who function beyond the margins of average and have set themselves apart in exceptionally positive ways. Learning about this population can inform the cultural expression of strengths and their unique configurations in the UAE society. Examples include Abdullah Al Shehhi (actor), Amna Al Haddan (Olympic gold medalist), Hussain Al Jasmi (popular singer), Mohammad and Peyman Al Awadhi (developers of Peeta Planet), and Dr. Maryam Matar (founder of UAE Genetic Diseases Association) among many others. Additional examples of excellence can include successful leaders, soldiers, families, students, athletes, family businesses, etc. Identifying these individuals and examining their strengths and how these were used can help in identifying cultural, social, and religious characteristics conducive to excellence. Identifying such individuals is also useful in developing mentoring relationships, given that the local community is small and relationships are more readily developed here than in larger, more individualistic societies and cultures.

A cultural strengths inventory can be generated to assess how national developments positively influence the national population. For instance, mandatory military service has been implemented for men aged 18 to 30 years of age (military service for women is voluntary). This policy offers a rich and complex research opportunity to determine if and how national service can affect self-regulation, self-efficacy, grit, resilience, health, national pride, or even civic participation. The resulting data could be used to design future government policies and determine which strategies are conducive to change and how they can be adapted to other settings. For example, can existing evidence that military training may decrease the high rates of type-2 diabetes in the local population (Reilly, 2014) be used to strengthen the case for the development of physical activity programs in schools?

Successfully integrated expatriates can also be studied to determine which strengths lead to positive social integration and contribute to the nation's development. An example of such an initiative is the Employee Thriving Index (The Talent Enterprise, 2012), which allows employers to hire, retain, engage, and promote employees based on their workplace strengths. The ETI is normed for local GCC populations as well as the expatriate population working in the Gulf and is firmly anchored in positive psychology. Learning about what makes individuals flourish and how to create these situations for nationals and expatriates meets the social development goals put forward in positive psychology, in addition to overlapping with cultural and religious aims to improve and strengthen individuals and their communities (Della Fave, 2013).

Finally, it is crucial to develop opportunities to have conversations about culture to discuss what people perceive the local culture to be and to understand in what ways it permeates psychological practice, attitudes, and actions. An open discourse on these matters would include exploring how cultural issues and norms relate to research questions being asked (or not asked), and how relevant research questions could most fruitfully be investigated. An unspoken chasm



exists between local and expatriate researchers and practitioners. This chasm must be acknowledged and bridged lest it worsen and perpetuate the use of an imported psychology in the region. Ignoring the chasm is likely to result, at best, in a slowly developing isolated psychology that struggles to define itself and be relevant to anyone. The *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology* aims to allow for this dialogue and offers a platform for intellectual exchange in both Arabic and English.

Practicing an Indigenous Positive Psychology

The development of an indigenous positive psychology cannot rely on the efforts of national or expatriate practitioners alone. To avoid complications, expatriate practitioners must identify the assumptions derived from their Western ideals and training in order to understand how this influences their work (Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009; Zebian et al., 2007). Currently, many practitioners avoid discussing religion with their clients. In the UAE, Islam is an integral part of Emirati culture and daily life (Abdulla, Djebarni, & Mellahi, 2011). Practitioners, therefore, have an ethical imperative to develop their knowledge of Islam. Avoiding religion when working with clients and focusing on secular interpretations of well-being may lead to a loss of rapport and misunderstanding. Being curious and asking “What does your faith say?” signals a desire to learn more about the client’s views and enables the practitioner to incorporate those views into the therapeutic process. UAE national practitioners must also challenge Western assumptions by assessing their dependence on Western psychological models and challenging themselves to adapt these models or develop more culturally-appropriate ones.

Although demographically in the majority, Western-trained practitioners must not impose their worldviews through what Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) called a “disguised ideology of individualism.” The onus is on practitioners to tailor or develop interventions to fit individuals and families, rather than attempt to fit individuals and families to the interventions. It is also the responsibility of practitioners and researchers to educate themselves about other cultures, including taking a critical view of their biases (Bushra, Khadivi, & Frewat-Nikowitz, 2007), and learning about other philosophies beyond simply skimming through the literature (Pandey, 2011). Rather than advancing the agenda of mainstream psychology or one’s own, partnering with Emirati researchers or organizations to undertake research to benefit local needs can contribute to building an indigenous knowledge base (Yang & Lu, 2007; Zebian et al., 2007).

The UAE’s professional psychological association must play a stronger role than it currently does. A professional association sets guidelines and standards for professional competency, licensure, practice, and ethics, and establishes the means to deal with public and professional complaints. At present, these standards do not exist, and there is little clarity as to whom and in what capacity the term ‘psychologist’ can be used; hence, the use of ‘practitioner’ in this article. Additionally, associations legitimize the field by raising awareness about what psychology is and what psychologists offer towards the development of individual and social capital across health, education, clinical, forensic, and other settings. Taking the lead in promoting an indigenous positive psychology that celebrates local values as well as the current demographic realities, the UAE psychological association also needs to delineate the parameters of a culturally



sensitive practice for all practitioners. Regular workshops, participation in practice advisory committees, and ongoing communication with practitioners can build capacity and set these parameters. Perhaps a regional body (i.e., Middle East Psychological Association) could effectively unify psychology across the region.

A strong cultural consciousness must be created and articulated so that it becomes an obligatory focus in practice and research (Yang, 2012). At the same time, it must be recognized that because of the exposure and use of Western psychology, the use of the English language to impart knowledge, and heavy reliance on expatriate labour to teach, practice, and influence what is considered “normal”, psychology in the UAE is already contaminated. The chance to develop a purely Emirati version of psychology has, unfortunately, been lost. Nonetheless, culture is always evolving (Allwood, 2011) and indigenous psychologies continue to develop in many non-Western countries, often led by Western-trained psychologists who reject mainstream psychological practices that do not fit with local norms (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006). Considering that over 80% of the residents in the UAE are a mix of international populations (Kapiszewski, 2006), an indigenous UAE psychology that is only reflective of Emirati norms may be incomplete if it does not address the experiences of its large expatriate population. Surmising where the UAE culture is headed in the future and contemplating how these changes could be navigated may be more important than knowing how psychology in the region has been understood in the past. Creating a progressive action plan for an indigenous positive psychology and fostering an environment where psychology practitioners can help families, communities, and individuals collectively develop and use their strengths towards a national state of flourishing is imperative.

Conclusion

Our goal was to introduce a framework for the development of an indigenous positive psychology, both in the UAE and across the MENA region, which encourages individual and national well-being while meeting current developmental and cultural needs. Positive psychology, a “scientifically informed perspective on what makes life worth living, [that] focuses on aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing” (The Journal of Positive Psychology, 2014), rests on the inherent social, cultural, and religious values that comprise the worldview of societies. In this regard, an indigenous positive psychology is congruent with prevailing norms, attitudes and behaviours, as well as with the goals set forth by those whom it purports to represent. Psychology practitioners, as well as ordinary citizens, can play a role in developing this new field by critically reflecting on matters of well-being and prioritizing its implementation for the development of this flourishing region.

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