Positive Psychology Research in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract: Since the original call by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) for a new science of happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning, there has been considerable momentum in the research in positive psychology. A systematic review of the literature explicitly linked to the positive psychology movement assessed the extent of authorship, empirical and theoretical publications, and engagement of local samples in the indigenous research emerging from the Middle Eastern and North African region. An in-depth review of these articles (n = 53) was conducted to examine the trends in publication, author locations, sample locations, topics, research approaches and findings from exemplary articles that attend to key issues. Highlights from cross-national comparisons, cross-cultural validations and replications, research on positive constructs, and research on issues particular to the Middle East and North Africa are reviewed. Finally, unique trends of the research emerging from the Middle Eastern and North African region and five pathways for future research directions are discussed.

ملخص البحث: منذ أن أطلق سيليغمان وسيكزينتميهالي (٢٠٠٠) نداءهما لتأسيس علم جديد للسعادة والتميز والأداء الإنساني الأمثل، شهدت الأبحاث المتعلقة بعلم النفس الإيجابي طفرة هامة. وتقوم هذه الدراسة بتقييم الأبحاث النظرية والعملية التي تمت في الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا من خلال مراجعة منهجية للأدبيات المتعلقة بحركة علم النفس الإيجابي. في هذا الإطار، أخضعت المقالات المنشورة (مجموع ٥٣) لدراسة معمقة من أجل معرفة التوجهات الغالبة في البحث وموطن المؤلفين والباحثين والمناطق التي تغطيها الأبحاث والمواضيع الأساسية التي تم التطرق إليها والمقاربات التي تم اعتمادها في البحث وما توصلت إليه هذه الأبحاث. كما تمت مراجعة ما صدر من مقارنات بين السياقات الوطنية والثقافية ومن بحث في المفاهيم الإيجابية وفي كل المواضيع ذات أهمية بالنسب للشرق الأوسط. وفي ختام هذه الدراسة، يقوم الباحث بتحليل التوجهات الغالبة في الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا واستشراف الاتجاهات المستقبلية التي سيأخذها البحث في هذه المنطقة.

Keywords: positive psychology; happiness; well-being; Middle East and North Africa; integrative review

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The positive psychology movement was first introduced at the 1998 American Psychological Association convention during the presidential address by Martin Seligman. Seligman noted that the social sciences, particularly psychology, had been historically operating primarily from a deficit-based worldview, which suggested that the predominant human condition was fraught with ill health and tribulations, and the role of the expert was to treat disease and solve problems. While he acknowledged the significant contributions that this focus had made, he urged psychological researchers to also devote attention to organized inquiry about the positive aspects of human existence that make life worth living.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) amplified that call to action in a special issue of the *American Psychologist* on *'Happiness, Excellence, and Optimal Human Functioning',* and outlined a framework for a new science of positive psychology that would more deeply investigate topics such as subjective well-being (Diener, 2000), optimism (Peterson, 2000), self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000), wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), creativity (Simonton, 2000), states of excellence (Lubinski & Benbow, 2000), and positive youth development (Larson, 2000), among others. The underlying focus of such an organized inquiry was on employing a unique interpretive lens and worldview that actively sought to find out "what works, what is right, and what is improving" (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2011; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). It was hoped that such an organized shift from a "preoccupation with mainly repairing the worst things in life, to a more balanced perspective including improving the understanding of how to build positive qualities" would foster the development of new ways of addressing some of the critical issues confronting our societies (Donaldson et al., 2011, p. 5).

A basic tenet that undergirds and drives the conceptualization and research in positive psychology is that the end goal of humans is to lead meaningful, happy, and good lives. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) envisioned positive psychology as a science that strove to systematically understand, examine, and enhance positive subjective experience, positive traits, and positive institutions as means to achieving that end goal. Consequently, this focus has driven research around new topics of investigation, inspired new approaches, and stimulated new ways of thinking about existing constructs within the scientific study of human behaviour (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2014). The resulting orientation has inspired research across multiple areas and applications in a variety of contexts including schools, communities, work, and family life. The *International Positive Psychology Association* (http://www.ippanetwork.org) has developed a brief statement to articulate the field's nature, goals, and potential applications:

> Positive psychology is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. Positive Psychology has three central concerns: positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions. Understanding positive emotions entails the study of contentment with the past, happiness in the present, and hope for the future. Understanding positive individual traits consists of the study of the strengths and virtues, such as the capacity for love and work, courage, compassion, resilience, creativity, curiosity, integrity, self-knowledge, moderation, self-control, and wisdom. Understanding positive

institutions entails the study of the strengths that foster better communities, such as justice, responsibility, civility, parenting, nurturance, work ethic, leadership, teamwork, purpose, and tolerance.

Further, some of the goals include building a science that supports families, schools, workplaces, and communities to flourish.

In the 16 years that have followed the first call, the field of positive psychology has witnessed unprecedented growth in research and practice (Donaldson et al., 2014). This field has provided a fresh lens through which to examine human behaviour in various aspects of work and non-work life across the entire human lifespan, and such an organized positive orientation has branched out into disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, education, sports, public health, social and human services, economics, political science, neuroscience, organizational sciences, and technology, among others (Donaldson et al., 2011).

Although the movement first started with the APA address in the United States of America, it has fuelled the development of scholarship and practice including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, grants, awards, conferences, and a growing number of professional associations around the world. While the peer-reviewed literature has been published predominantly (i.e., over 75%) in English-speaking Western countries, new frameworks and principles inspired by the positive lens have been developed, studied, tested, and applied in a range of social and cultural contexts and knowledge has been locally produced in 46 countries (Donaldson et al., 2014).

Study Purpose

As witnessed with the development of this new journal, the *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, the positive psychology movement is growing strong roots in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. The purpose of the current review was to investigate the extent to which peer-reviewed literature in positive psychology has emerged from the MENA region, to synthesize the nature of and trends in the research, and to set the stage for new research directions.

Method

A systematic review of the peer-reviewed literature published in positive psychology was conducted to analyze the knowledge produced since the inception of the field in 1998 until 2013. The search term 'positive psychology' was used to extract 1336 English-language peer-reviewed evidence-based articles from the electronic databases, Academic Search™ Premier, Business Source Premier®, ERIC®, PsycINFO®, and PsycARTICLES® to create a positive psychology literature database (for a detailed review of the methods see Donaldson et al., 2014). Within this database, all articles were examined for location of the authors and location of empirical study samples and a smaller dataset was developed for in-depth examination of literature relevant to the MENA region. The countries included in this analysis were Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. A total of 53 articles were extracted because they met either or both of two key criteria: 1) at least one author of the article was located in a MENA country, 2) at least one sample in an empirical study was located in one of

these countries. A combination of frequency, descriptive, and content analyses were conducted to assess the number and types of empirical and non-empirical articles, the methods and samples used in empirical studies, the main topics investigated, conceptual contributions and key findings that have emerged from the literature.

Results

Overall Findings

Number and type of publications. Out of the larger positive psychology database of 1336 articles, a total of 53 articles were extracted and examined for this study. The first publication produced in the region was in 2004, and the trends indicate a sharp spike in the last couple years of the period examined in this review (i.e., 2012 and 2013).
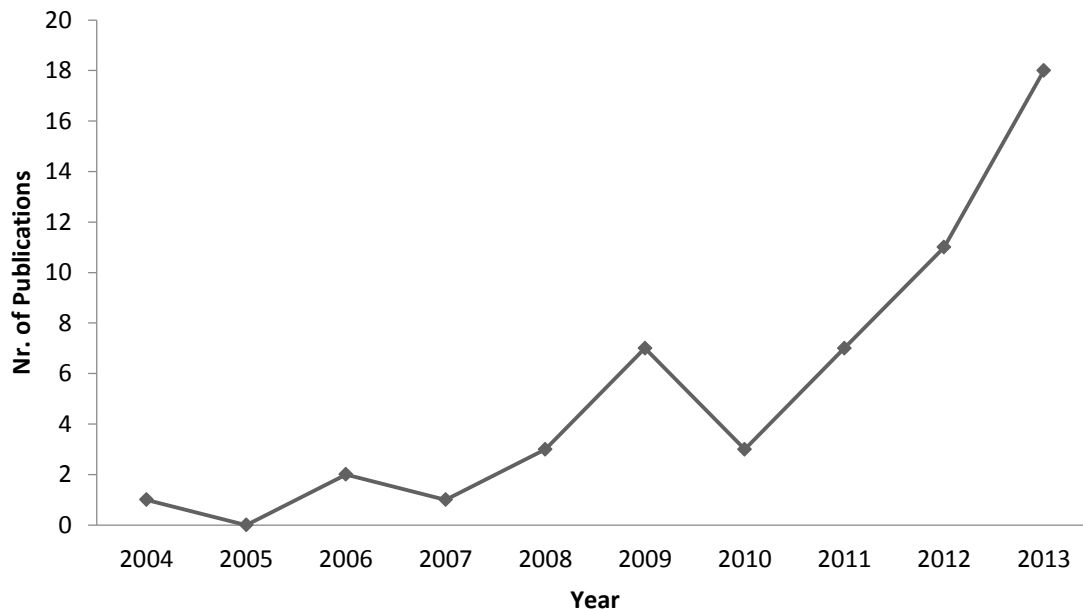

Figure 1
Trends in Publications

Contrary to trends in the broader positive psychology literature (Donaldson et al., 2014), the literature emerging from the region is heavily empirical. A total of 46 articles were based on empirical studies, while seven conceptual articles were produced in this region. Out of the 46 empirical articles, a total of 33 used quantitative methods, eight used qualitative methods, and five were based on mixed methods approaches.

Author locations. One of the determinants for inclusion of articles in this dataset was the location of the authors. The country with the most authors publishing positive psychology research was Israel. A total of 23 1st authors, 17 2nd authors and eight 3rd authors identified Israel as the country of their institutional affiliation. The country with the second most authorship was Iran.

About seven 1st authors, four 2nd authors, and three 3rd authors identified as being affiliated with an Iranian institution. The country with the third most authorship was Turkey, with three 1st authors, three 2nd authors, and one 3rd author who had published on positive psychology topics.

Sample locations. Next, the empirical articles produced in this region were examined for distribution of the sample locations. As shown in Table 1, 25 empirical studies (54% of the total empirical studies) were based on samples located in Israel, 11 studies (24%) were based on samples from Turkey, and seven studies (15%) were based on samples from Iran. It is also interesting to note that a total of 9 articles had included at least one sample from the MENA region, although none of the authors were located in this region. This suggests that there may be some beginning interest among researchers from outside of the region in exploring and including the MENA region in cross-cultural positive psychology research, even in the absence of collaborators from this region. Conversely, about six other empirical articles had a 1st, 2nd or 3rd author located in the MENA region who have published positive psychology research but did not engage MENA samples. This indicates growing exposure to positive psychology among researchers located in the MENA region.

Table 1

Locations of Samples of Empirical Studies

Country	Frequency
Israel, Gaza, West Bank, East Jerusalem	25
Turkey	11
Iran	7
Algeria	1
Egypt	1
Jordan	1
Kuwait	1

Key topics. Similar to the trends in the overall field of positive psychology, the most popular topic of interest was found to be subjective well-being (n = 23), including its cognitive sub-component, i.e., life satisfaction, and its affective sub-component, e.g., happiness (Donaldson et al., 2014). The predictors of well-being studied most often included spirituality and religion (n = 5), and family and social support (n = 5), which collectively represented about 22% of the total empirical publications from the region. This is a relatively distinctive direction of the literature emerging from this region that is not reflected in broader positive psychology trends. Further, the most popular topics studied in the broader positive psychology literature such as character strengths, hope, gratitude, resilience, and growth (Donaldson et al., 2014) did not emerge as trends in this database. This points to a distinctive character of the research emerging from the cultural values of the MENA region.

Research approaches. Analysis of the literature revealed two main approaches that have been used to conceptualize and conduct positive psychology research. One involves the

development and study of constructs that focus on building positive qualities or improving the quality of life of individuals and communities, while the other involves the application of positive constructs to aid coping with or overcoming adversity. Analysis revealed that the number of articles that focused on quality of life (*n* = 38) was about 2.5 times the number of articles that focused on coping with adversity (*n* = 15). For instance, one study that explicitly focused on building positive states involved the investigation by Warren, Etcoff, Wood, Taylor, and Marci (2009) on the social contagion of laughter and smiles among children in war-torn Afghanistan. Although adversity was clearly a predominant reality of the situational context of the population, the focus of the study was not on coping with adversity, but on understanding and energizing an existing positive aspect. Using the other approach, Bekhet, ElGuenidi, and Zauszniewski (2011) examined feelings of alienation among nursing students in Egypt and the role of positive cognition in aiding coping. These two main pathways to approaching the framing of investigations provide a set of balanced perspectives and enrich the range of research produced in positive psychology.

Key Findings

A fair amount of the empirical research engaged in cross-national comparisons (*n* = 10) of a broader topic of interest, such as well-being, or life satisfaction. In comparison, few articles focused on topics and contexts specific to the region such as youth exposed to war (*n* = 1), or gender roles in the MENA region (*n* = 1). Some of the key findings from and implications of the seminal work that use a variety of conceptual frames, theoretical motivations, and methods are discussed below.

Findings from cross-national comparisons. Historically, while psychological research has been primarily Western-centric, some early cross-cultural explorations across psychological specialties ventured into African countries (Brislin, 1983). In the last couple of decades, there has also been a growing interest on East-West differences (e.g. Chang et al., 2011; Niu & Sternberg, 2002). However, in comparison, the MENA region has received lesser attention in the broader literature, although this region is characterized by distinct cultures with particular cognitive, emotional, and behavioural implications. Some of the studies in the current database attempted to break new ground in attending to this gap from a positive psychological perspective. For instance, the relationship between social support and well-being has been well-documented in Western populations, and cross-cultural studies have considered Asian populations. Brannan, Biswas-Diener, Mohr, Mortazavi, and Stein (2012) expanded this work to the MENA region, and found that perceived family support predicted life satisfaction, reduced negative mood, and increased positive mood (the three components of subjective well-being) in the U.S., Jordan and Iran, while perceived friend support did not predict subjective well-being in Iran, although it did predict some of the components of well-being in the U.S. and Jordan. This provided empirical support to the observation that in contrast with individualistic societies, in more collectivistic cultures the family is afforded higher importance than other social relationships and carries strong implications for one's sense of subjective well-being. In another cross-national study comparing affect in Iran and Sweden, positive affect predicted flourishing among Swedish students, while flourishing among Iranian students was predicted by a balance of positive and negative affect (Kormi-Nouri, Farahani, & Trost, 2013). This contextualizes the common myth about the universality of positive affect

being desirable and negative affect being undesirable, and supports the need for exploration of more nuanced understandings of affect. Thus, cross-national comparisons help situate the value of certain concepts across cultures, thereby illuminating culturally-influenced nuances and destabilizing monolithic and overly simplistic conceptual models.

  Findings from cross-cultural validations and replications. Some studies have attempted to translate and validate scales of positive constructs developed in western contexts, or replicate findings in MENA contexts. For instance, Abdel-Khalek and Snyder (2007) translated the Snyder Hope Scale into Arabic and validated the Arabic Hope Scale for use in MENA contexts. In another study, Kuppens, Realo, and Diener (2008) conducted a comparison of participants from 46 countries, including Iran, Kuwait, and Turkey, on the relationship between affect, life satisfaction, and culture. Negative affect was found to be more negatively related to life satisfaction in individualistic cultures, while positive affect was more positively related to life satisfaction in cultures that prized self-expression. Such cross-cultural validation and replication studies facilitate the translation and understanding of the relevance of constructs across cultures. While this is an important contribution, the focus is on assessing the relevance of Western concepts in the MENA region. A particularly valuable area of research is an additional focus on the exploration of new positive constructs that cover new ground.

  Findings on positive constructs. Some of the most cutting-edge empirical contributions focus on developing new constructs and exploring new relationships between constructs. For instance, Bouskila-Yam and Kluger (2011) developed a Strength-Based Performance Appraisal process that combined ideas from traditional performance appraisal practices with positive psychology, using strengths and reflective best-self exercises to find ways to become extraordinary, while using negative feedback only for prevention of future behaviours. Ghorbani, Watson, and Hargis (2008) developed and validated the Integrative Self-Knowledge Scale using samples from Iran and the United States, which shows that it is relevant in both cultures. In another interesting study, Simsek and Yalmcetin (2010) developed a scale to measure personal sense of uniqueness, which is expected to lead to higher self-esteem, autonomy, and extraversion.

  Other studies have explored new relationships between previously examined constructs. For instance, past research has linked insecure attachment orientations to lower life satisfaction (Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Priel & Shamai, 1995), and other studies have shown that character strengths such as love, gratitude, hope, and zest are associated with higher life satisfaction in American and European samples (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Lavy and Littman-Ovadia (2011) drew from and extended this work to the Middle East and found that love, gratitude, hope, and zest mediated the relationship between attachment avoidance and life satisfaction, while curiosity, perspective, and hope mediated the relationship between anxiety and life satisfaction. These studies have made important contributions to the literature and such research helps draw greater international attention to the MENA countries as the producers of basic and applied positive psychological research.

  Findings on issues particular to the MENA region. Some particularly interesting studies have attempted to engage positive psychological approaches to investigate topics that emerge indigenously from the specific cultural, social and political contexts of the MENA region. Hobfoll and colleagues (2009) conducted a longitudinal study on resilience, resistance, and chronic distress

among both Arabs and Jews in Israel during a period of terrorism and violent attacks in 2004-2005. They found that resistance and resilience were predicted by less psychosocial resource loss, majority status, high socio-economic status, and social support. Similarly, Hobfoll et al. (2012) studied engagement in life tasks for Palestinians chronically exposed to violence and trauma and found that psychosocial resource loss was associated with lower engagement, while social support, education, age, and religiosity predicted greater engagement in life tasks. However, interestingly, the relatively high overall engagement in life tasks including among those experiencing high psychological distress, and the absence of a statistically significant relationship between psychological distress and engagement suggested that even in the face of trauma, individuals strive toward being able to survive and function. In another study, Shrira, Palgi, Ben-Ezra, and Shmotkin (2011) examined the relationship between subjective well-being and meaning in life among those situated in a highly hostile environment (operationalized as experiencing perceived or actual threats to one's mental or physical health). The relationship between subjective well-being and meaning was strengthened as hostility of the environment increased and as lifetime cumulative adversity increased. Studies such as these have made important strides in examining issues particular to the political and social contexts of the MENA region and the relevance of positive constructs in this region.

Discussion

The positive psychology movement has grown tremendously over the last 17 years. In the early years, the founding leaders had made a call for exploration of what made life worth living. Over the years, the positive movement has attended to this call and translated it into concrete, rigorous, scientific, evidence-based research and practice. Furthermore, this research has taken on a distinct character, and in particular, some of the regional contributions have shaped the positive psychological research and literature in unforeseen ways. The conceptual frames and approaches, types and range of topics and methods now witnessed in the extant literature produced across several countries have helped the field develop and grow strong roots. The objective of this article was to review the contributions of the research from the MENA region and it was revealed that the emergent positive psychological literature has particular characteristics.

To begin, the literature is heavily empirical. While the presence of strong empirical evidence-based research indicates dedication to developing the field in the region, this also suggests there is more scope for conceptual work, particularly with an indigenous focus. Furthermore, several types of research including qualitative inductive research, new theory development and testing, research that falsifies myths around positivity, and research that explores new types of positive topics and constructs relevant to the particular cultural, social and political contexts of a region can greatly advance the scientific progress of the field in the region.

Interestingly, while the desire for well-being remains a key topic and driver of positive psychology research emerging from this region, the predictors of interest are spirituality, religion, family and social support. On the other hand, commonly studied predictors of well-being (i.e., character strengths, hope, gratitude, resilience, and growth) in the positive psychological research emerging from western and other regions (see review Donaldson et al., 2014), have very little presence, if any, in the research emerging from the MENA region. This is a distinct direction and

characteristic of the research that may reflect the cultural value of these constructs. Further growth of research in topics emerging indigenously holds much promise for developing the field in a manner that is relevant to cultural nuances of particular environments.

Another observation that emerged from this review was that the approaches to positive psychological research could be organized into two main categories. One reflected a focus on building positive states and qualities, and improving quality of life. The other focused on engaging positive constructs as a method of coping and overcoming adversity. Each of these approaches to research were observed even in broader situational contexts characterized by adversity and hardship. This is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that the presence of adversity does not preclude research on building positive aspects and improving quality of life. Further, it destabilizes the myth that positive psychological research on living a good, pleasant, meaningful life is relevant mostly to those who have the wealth and power to afford a good life.

A fair amount of research conducted in this nascent stage of the field focuses on cross-national comparisons, cross-national validations and replications. Undoubtedly, this is an important type of contribution that serves to make sense of and translate research conducted elsewhere and test for relevance in the region. While this approach is important for inspiring research in regions unfamiliar with positive psychology, some of the most relevant and interesting research is often that which attends to topics and concerns that emerge indigenously from within the regions in question.

Finally, the review reveals some path-breaking studies that focus attention on new constructs and topics emerging indigenously and from contexts based on issues on the ground. These seminal works are serving to lay an important foundation for the growth of the field. A particularly interesting observation is that some of this literature is serving to decenter positive psychology as a Western concept. For instance, Eloff, Achouri, Chireshe, Mutepfa, and Ofivwe (2008) interviewed psychologists in six nations (including Algeria) across Africa to assess the impact of application of key positive constructs in their daily work. Interestingly, several participants linked positive psychological constructs to indigenous practices, rather than Western knowledge. This suggests that positive psychological constructs developed from the grassroots can help acknowledge and tap into local knowledge, and provide answers to society's issues in ways that are relevant, relatable, and practical.

Strengths and limitations. The purpose of this review was to survey the peer-reviewed English-language literature linked to positive psychology produced in the MENA region. This is a first review of its kind that examines the nature, extent and characteristics of such research. However, it is advisable to consider this review in the light of certain key limitations. It is important to note that there is considerable broader psychological literature focused on outcomes or topics that are also studied in positive psychology. However, given the methodology of the data collection process of this archive, these may not have been captured by the search term 'positive psychology' if they do not explicitly state their connection to the movement. As the purpose of the current systematic review was to identify the research and scholarship that is explicitly linked to the positive psychology movement, only literature that self-identified as being associated with positive psychology or situated itself in relation to the positive psychology movement was included in this review. Another limitation was that the study does not include studies published in Arabic,

Persian, French, Kurdish and other regional languages. In general, considerable research in the MENA region is published in these languages. However, since this review does not include literature published in languages other than English, the prevalence, nature, and impact of positive psychological literature published in regional language journals remains unknown. Future reviews would benefit from broadening the scope to also include literature published in Arabic and other languages in the MENA region.

Despite these limitations, this review has provided a detailed and textured review of the theory and research developed in positive psychology from the MENA region. Although the field is still in a nascent stage, important strides have been made in scoping out and developing some of the important directions of theory, research and applications and these have sown the seeds for future research.

Future Directions

In a recent review of the psychological research and practice in the MENA region, there was a call for a revitalization of the field through a new form of psychology that emphasized cultural relevance, focused on managing "multiple systemic contexts and issues to facilitate positive change", and urged Arab psychologists to "transform the societies in which they live" (Amer, 2014, p. 32). We suggest that positive psychology, with it particular focus on positive change and transformation, improvement of quality of life, and facilitation of thriving and flourishing, can provide a unique perspective and serve as a powerful lens in navigating complex systems and drawing out their strengths for examination, enhancement, and replication. In order to aid in systematically developing such research and application of positive psychology in the MENA region we explore a few approaches.

Since the inception of the field of positive psychology and through its development over the years, the definition and scope of positive psychology research have been constructed by scholars in a variety of ways. Now, in an attempt to look back in order to look forward, we trace the origins of the field and revisit some of the key definitions and constructions. Further, we review and draw lessons from a few exemplary articles that break new ground in conducting positive psychology research from a culturally and contextually sensitive perspective to envision and discuss potential paths for future research in positive psychology in the MENA region.

Positive aspects of the lived experience. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) seminal article on positive psychology pointed out that the prevailing deficit-based perspective of the social sciences involved a preoccupation with fixing problems. In contrast, the field of positive psychology undertook the systematic study of the positive aspects of human experience. In application of this perspective, one potential path for future research is to engage organized inquiry into the uncovering of the positive aspects of the lived experience in the MENA region. For instance, empirical studies indicate that some of the positive features that predict well-being and mental health in the MENA region include religiosity (e.g. in Egypt and Kuwait; Abdel-Khalek, 2012), and family and social support (e.g. in Lebanon; Merhi & Kazarian, 2012). More focused research on these elements would help understand the antecedents, mechanisms and nuances of what is enriching and life-giving in the MENA region. Moreover, examining aspects of religious and cultural values from a positive lens may foster resilience against psychological issues related to

modernization and influx of foreign lifestyles (Thomas, 2013). Further, extending this research to identifying aspects of the MENA cultures that could benefit from being preserved and nurtured could enable cultural continuity and community strengthening.

Along similar lines, positive psychological research on topics such as strengths emerging at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, low socio-economic status and other diverse categories and related lines of research would help identify aspects of experiences of marginalized groups that would serve as protective factors (see Rao & Donaldson, 2015; Wilder, Rao, & Donaldson, forthcoming). For instance, in Turkey, high expectations at home and school, caring school and peer relationships, as well as positive self-perceptions, high educational aspirations, and internal locus of control have been found to serve as protective factors for impoverished students (Gizir & Aydin, 2009). Similarly, investigation of factors that would enable preservation of identity among Coptic communities in Egypt (for discussion of Coptic identity see Haddad, 2013), or empowerment experiences of rural-to-urban migrant women in poor families in Turkey (Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, & Rittersberger-Tiliç, 2002), for instance, would enable minority groups to find ways to thrive.

Positive psychology constructs in the context of the MENA region. Positive psychology research has been organized predominately around three main pillars – positive experiences and states of being, positive traits of individuals, and positive enabling institutions (Peterson, 2006). Using this frame, examination of positive states, traits, and institutions with a focus on how they play out in the particular socio-political and cultural contexts of the MENA region would help build from previous positive psychological research conducted globally without "importing" them. For instance, study of happiness and positive affect in the context of the MENA region may serve to shed light on culturally variant perspectives such as fear of happiness (Joshanloo et al., 2014), or high dispositional positive affectivity intensifying the negative relationship between job satisfaction and frustration and intention to quit (Shaw, Duffy, Ali Abdulla, & Singh, 2000). These studies help to contextualize the value of constructs that are studied in positive psychology for MENA populations. On the other hand, studies such as the role of sense of coherence, and physical activity on affect among Turkish adolescents (Öztekin & Tezer), parenting styles and mental health of gifted Arab adolescents (Dwairy, 2004), and organizational justice and innovation in UAE (Suliman, 2013), add the MENA perspective to the literature on positive psychology. Furthermore, research focusing on identifying strengths and assets that emerge among groups undergoing particular adversities such as examination of the role of psychosocial factors on quality of life among people living with HIV/AIDS in Lebanon (Abboud, Noureddine, Huijer, DeJong, & Mokhbat, 2010), health-related quality of life, and spiritual well-being among Arab Muslim cancer patients (Lazenby & Khatib, 2012), and social support and health among older adults in the MENA region (Tajvar, Fletcher, Grundy, & Arab, 2013), can help identify resources and opportunities to empower them.

Positive lessons from the MENA region. Positive aspects of unique experiences, in particular, cases of moral exemplars, and stories of successes and triumphs have the potential to teach invaluable lessons. For instance, the Arab Spring provides a rich avenue to more fully examine strength, resilience (Hamdy, 2012), hope, efficacy, optimism, civility, trust, concerted action, spontaneous organization and collaboration (Youssef, 2011), empowerment, positive peace,

agency (Ali & Macharia, 2013), courage, altruism (Guterres, 2012), and other positive individual and collective qualities. Furthermore, application of a positive lens to the in-depth inquiry and documentation of developments such as the online women's movements during the Arab Spring (Al-Rawi, 2014) have the potential to dispel myths and stereotypes such as those about Arab women, and provide lessons to empower those in adverse conditions by illuminating new opportunities and directions.

Re-envisioning existing research from a positive lens. Many areas of research currently being conducted across various disciplines in the MENA region undertake the study of concepts that are aligned with a positive lens, although they may not identify as such. For instance, constructs such spiritual well-being, interconnectedness, fostering positive intergroup relations, religiosity, family relationships, positive social change, empowerment, organizational justice, and similar other topics, inherently engage a positive lens. An organized program of research that draws from, contributes to, and otherwise interacts with theoretical, conceptual, and empirical frameworks and the evidence-base in positive psychology has the potential to encourage sharing of advancements across areas that can foster deeper understanding, more holistic development, and enriched application of knowledge pertinent to the MENA region.

Evaluating applications and interventions from a positive lens. An important aspect of positive psychological research is the use of a unique interpretive lens and worldview that actively seeks to find out 'what works, what is right, and what is improving' (Donaldson et al., 2011; Linley et al., 2006; Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). Using this framework, strengths-driven evaluation (see Rao, Donaldson & Porter, 2014) of policies, programs, and practices, such as evaluation of effects of empowerment programming on developmental assets and behavioral difficulties of out-of-school youth in Jordan (Morton & Montgomery, 2012), assessment of efficacy of high performance work practices in Algerian firms (Ramdani, Mellahi, Guermat, & Kechad, 2014) can potentially lend fresh perspectives on the strengths of these programs and initiatives, and provide insights into the underlying mechanisms that promote success. Further, they can highlight ways to leverage these strengths and replicate successes for further growth.

Conclusion

Although the positive psychology literature in the MENA region is still in its infancy, the movement has begun to establish deep roots across the region. Further, the seminal work being conducted is important in setting the tone and framing future research. While important contributions have been made through cross-national comparisons and cross-national validations and replications, some of the trailblazers have focused on development of new theory and research, and investigation of topics that are particular to the cultural, social and political contexts of the MENA region.

In addition, the seeds for more organized inquiry using a positive psychological approach are being planted by scientific presentations, workshops, special interest meetings and the like at recent academic conferences such as at the International Psychology Conference Dubai (IPCD), and HR Employee Engagement Forum, Dubai, among others. Similarly, research on the relevance of positive psychology in the MENA region by seminal articles (see Al-Krenawi et al., 2011 for review of trauma and positive psychology and Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015 for

review of the PERMA model in United Arab Emirates) are spurring widespread interest on positive constructs. In addition to inspiring research in positive psychology, these conferences and seminal publications have also served to reflect, unpack, and document the rapidly growing applications of positive psychology in workplace interventions, sports, psychiatry, education, public policy, and other domains in the MENA region. This trend is also witnessed by an increased focus on positive psychology in public discourse (e.g. Swan, 2009), course offerings in positive psychology (see Bahrain Olympics Committee, 2015), and graduate student dissertations and theses at several regional universities, among others. More theory development, inductive exploration of pertinent topics and concerns, and rigorous basic and applied research, as is being encouraged with the creation of this new *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology* holds the promise of a deeper scientific understanding and evidence-based practice of elements that can facilitate individuals, institutions, and communities to thrive.

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