

## What Can Counseling Psychology Contribute to the Study of Optimal Human Functioning?

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*In their reaction to the Major Contribution, the authors outline four specific research areas where counseling psychologists could make particularly important contributions: (a) the study of multicultural aspects of optimal human functioning, (b) self-efficacy and well-being, (c) positive interpersonal relationship processes, and (c) meaning in life.*

We very much appreciate the opportunity to comment on this Major Contribution regarding positive aspects of human functioning. As is often noted, focusing on strengths and positive adaptation is a central aspect of counseling psychology's identity. Given the renewed interest in positive psychology in the broader field of psychology, which has been driven largely by psychologists in other subfields (e.g., clinical, social), it is important to reflect on the unique contributions that counseling psychologists have made and can make to the study of optimal human functioning.

The content analysis of positive psychology research in counseling psychology journals (S. Lopez et al., 2006 [this issue]) provides a very useful starting point for assessing where counseling psychology has made—and in some cases, has failed to make—important contributions to our knowledge about optimal human functioning. Although S. Lopez et al. (2006) offer recommendations for counseling psychology practitioners and researchers to focus more on strengths, the list of 59 positive psychology constructs and processes is a bit daunting.

Therefore, our goal is to further the Major Contribution's agenda—namely, to encourage counseling psychologists to contribute to the science of optimal human functioning—by offering some more specific recommendations regarding where counseling psychologists might focus their efforts. Specifically, we highlight four research topics that seem particularly fruitful either because of counseling psychologists' unique strengths or because of

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the construct's centrality in the field of positive psychology. Specifically, these research topics include (a) multicultural aspects of optimal human functioning, (b) self-efficacy and well-being, (c) positive interpersonal relationships, and (d) meaning in life. For each, we describe the reason for choosing the topic, highlight contributions counseling psychologists have already made, and suggest future research directions. We wish to stress at the outset that this list is by no means exhaustive but is meant to illustrate some areas where counseling psychologists could make particularly important contributions.

### **AREAS OF STRENGTH IN COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY**

We highlight the first two topics—multicultural aspects of optimal human functioning and self-efficacy—because of our strong research traditions in these areas. For example, the study of race, ethnicity, and culture has been central to the science and practice of counseling psychology for more than 25 years. Similarly, self-efficacy is the second-most-studied positive construct/process in counseling, according to the analysis of S. Lopez et al. (2006). These are obvious places to start when thinking about how counseling psychology can contribute to the study of optimal human functioning.

#### **Multicultural Aspects of Optimal Human Functioning**

The vital role of race, ethnicity, and culture in understanding and developing optimal human functioning remains a relatively neglected line of inquiry in the emergent field of positive psychology. Constantine and Sue (2006 [this issue]) suggest that this may be linked to a persistent tendency to view human development as universal and culture free and cogently argue that the development and manifestation of optimal functioning occurs within a cultural context. Drawing on ethnic-minority research, they also propose a model of optimal multicultural functioning that includes cultural assets and strengths.

We do not dispute the essential features of Constantine and Sue's (2006) model. However, we feel that it is important for counseling psychology as a field to move beyond simply identifying cultural assets and strengths. In addition, our models must consider that studying cultural assets and strengths and their relations with well-being is a complex and rapidly evolving field and that much of this work is being done outside counseling psychology. We strongly believe that a theoretically nuanced and methodologically rigorous approach is necessary to substantiate the claims that these assets and strengths are relevant to optimal functioning, particularly for people of color. Toward this end, we highlight some of the complexities revealed

in recent research on ethnic-minority issues that can inform positive psychology, and we suggest some potential research directions that test the theoretical assumptions underlying the relations among cultural assets and strengths and optimal functioning. Specifically, of the various cultural assets and strengths that Constantine and Sue identify, we focus on individualism-collectivism, racial and ethnic pride, family relationships and support, and bicultural flexibility because they have been among the most researched in counseling psychology, as well as in the broader field of ethnic-minority psychology.

Constantine and Sue (2006) state that “many people of color in the United States are viewed as having higher communal or collectivistic value orientations relative to their adherence to more individualistic value orientations” (p. 232). Yet a recent meta-analysis on individualism and collectivism found that people from traditionally individualistic and collectivistic nations do not differ on these two dimensions as once perceived (Oyersman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). This finding suggests that either the characterization of Asians as collectivistic is outdated in an age of transnationalism and globalization or the null findings reflect methodological variance (Oishi et al., 2005). Using a pairwise-comparison approach, in contrast to the typical Likert-rating approach, Oishi et al. (2005) found expected cross-cultural differences in individualism and collectivism using the pairwise approach but not the Likert approach. Moreover, they found unique patterns in horizontal and vertical dimensions of individualism and collectivism. This more nuanced methodological strategy highlights cross-cultural similarities and differences that may be overlooked by essentialized characterizations of cultural groups. As counseling psychology seeks to identify cultural assets and strengths, such as individualism and collectivism, that promote optimal human functioning, it remains important to avoid essentialized distinctions between cultural groups and take into account the method of assessing cultural constructs.

Counseling psychologists and others have long regarded racial and ethnic pride as an important protective factor against the deleterious effects of discrimination and racism (Constantine & Sue, 2006). Empirical evidence to support this claim is generally drawn from studies that find a positive correlation between racial and ethnic identity and self-esteem (Phinney, 1990). Recent research on the measurement of racial and ethnic identity and its relevance to well-being, however, challenges this assumption. First, racial and ethnic identity is best conceived as a multidimensional construct, with ethnic pride (i.e., private regard) being only one aspect of identity (Lee & Yoo, 2004; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Second, there actually is mixed support for the claim that ethnic identity operates as a protective factor. Lee (2005), for example, recently found that ethnic pride

appears to exacerbate the association between perceived discrimination and psychological distress in a sample of Korean American college students. By contrast, Romero and Roberts (2003) found ethnic pride to buffer the association between discrimination and self-esteem in a sample of Mexican middle school students.

To advance our understanding of the role and relevance of racial and ethnic identity, counseling psychologists need to critically examine these basic theoretical assumptions and to empirically test the possible reasons for mixed study findings. In some cases, discrepant findings may be due to method variance, such as differences in ethnic-identity and discrimination measures and in study samples (Lee, 2005). In other cases, different psychological mechanisms or cultural contexts may explain the discrepancies. Yoo and Lee (in press), for instance, have found that problem-solving coping and cognitive-restructuring coping exacerbate the association between discrimination and distress for Asian Americans with high ethnic identity. The cultural socialization experiences of people of color, such as ethnocultural empathy (Quintana, Castaneda-English, & Ybarra, 1999) and culture-specific parenting practices (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & the International Adoption Project Team, in press), may help to explain the discrepant findings regarding the protective features of racial and ethnic identification. This research, in turn, can inform interventions that promote a positive racial and ethnic identity and well-being.

Some have also advanced bicultural flexibility, otherwise known as *biculturalism*, as a cultural strength (Constantine & Sue, 2006). Rudmin's (2003) review of the early acculturation literature, however, challenges this viewpoint. Rudmin specifically critiqued Berry's (1992) early research on acculturation's four typologies (assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization), noting that the research did not support the claim that integration (akin to biculturalism) is most related to well-being. In fact, assimilation was found to be as beneficial as integration. Lee and Davis (2000) similarly found bicultural and assimilation orientations to be equally beneficial strategies for Asian American college students. Moreover, most research on acculturation and enculturation today has shifted away from typologies of acculturation and toward bilinear, multidimensional aspects of acculturation and enculturation (Kim, Li, & Ng, 2005; Lee, Yoon, & Liu-Tom, in press). Future research, then, needs to examine which aspects of bicultural flexibility function as psychological strengths in the context of racism and discrimination.

Our point in raising these issues is to not dispute the importance of cultural assets and strengths to optimal functioning. Rather, we encourage counseling psychologists to recognize the complexity of the roles of race, ethnicity, and culture in well-being. Cultural factors may be a relative asset or strength for

some people and a relative risk or vulnerability for others, depending on the conditions and contexts. Like Constantine and Sue (2006), we encourage counseling psychologists to study more fundamental questions about the nature of optimal functioning across different cultural contexts, both internationally and domestically. As Ryff and Singer (1998) point out, “phenotypic manifestations” of the good life will vary according to cultural groups. In short, we believe that counseling psychology can significantly contribute to the growing field of positive psychology by taking a more critical look at the literature of ethnic-minority psychology and, more important, by testing hypotheses with rigorous methodologies. In doing so, we move beyond reasoned rhetoric and concurrently establish the science of counseling psychology at the forefront of the study of cultural assets and strengths and optimal functioning in people of color.

### **Self-Efficacy**

As mentioned, self-efficacy research is another tradition on which we can build in contributing to the study of optimal human functioning. An examination of self-efficacy articles published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology (JCP)* and *The Counseling Psychologist (TCP)* showed that roughly two thirds have focused primarily on career and academic self-efficacy. The lion’s share of the remainder focused on counseling self-efficacy. Research on self-efficacy has also addressed the role of this important construct to life satisfaction more generally. Specifically, two recent articles in *JCP* exemplify how we can use our knowledge about the self-efficacy construct to contribute to the broader study of optimal human functioning. In the first article, Lent (2004) summarized and integrated two philosophical approaches to understanding well-being. The hedonic approach has typically emphasized happiness and pleasant affect, whereas the eudaimonic approach has typically emphasized growth, meaning and purpose in life, and self-actualization. His unified model of well-being acknowledged and, to some degree, remedied a common criticism that positive psychology neglects the important fact that many people, and certainly most clients of counseling psychologists, are struggling to overcome some form of adversity. Building on this theoretical base, Lent et al. (2005) presented two studies that tested the relation of social-cognitive variables to overall life satisfaction and satisfaction in specific life domains. Both academic (Study 1) and goal-related (Study 2) self-efficacy were directly and indirectly related to well-being and goal-progress variables.

This research is especially pertinent to counseling psychologists because it involves investigating modifiable and dynamic processes related to well-being as opposed to less modifiable traits. In contrast to research detailing the

relation between personality traits such as extraversion and well-being, self-efficacy work offers some clear directions for future work on intervening to increase well-being. Generating and testing the effects of interventions that modify people's perceived self-efficacy on well-being are important ways that counseling psychologists can contribute to positive psychology.

### CENTRAL CONSTRUCTS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

In the previous section, we highlighted research on optimal human functioning to which counseling psychologists could uniquely contribute because of our strengths and research traditions in those areas. However, to ensure that our research is relevant to and incorporated in the positive psychology literature, it also seems important to draw on the broader positive psychology literature in choosing where to focus our energies. For example, in their comprehensive review of research on optimal human functioning, Ryff and Singer (1998) concluded that the two factors most central to positive health are having a sense of meaning and purpose in life (see also Seligman, 2002) and having positive interpersonal relationships (see also Ryan & Deci, 2001). Interpersonal relationships are also an important part of individuals' environmental contexts (see Neufeld et al., 2006 [this issue]). Both interpersonal relationships and meaning in life are commonly addressed in counseling. In the following sections, we briefly review what counseling psychology has—and has not—contributed to our understanding of these two central aspects of optimal human functioning.

#### Interpersonal Relationships

To assess the extent to which counseling psychologists are contributing to the understanding of positive interpersonal relationships, we chose four constructs from the list of 59 (S. Lopez et al., 2006) that seemed most closely related to interpersonal relationships: adult attachment, love, intimacy, and empathy. Following S. Lopez et al. (2006), we looked for research on interpersonal relationships in *JCP* and *TCP* that had a positive focus and that addressed the development, definition, manifestation, and/or enhancement of interpersonal relationships. The positive focus is important in that factors fostering positive relationship processes may not be the same as those decreasing negative relationship processes (Reis & Gable, 2003). Our analysis suggested that research on the enhancement of personal relationships is rather scarce in the primary counseling psychology journals.

Adult-attachment research is now frequently published in *JCP*, although much of the current research does not appear to have a particularly positive

focus in that it tends to address the negative effects of having an insecure attachment style (e.g., the relation between attachment anxiety and depression; Wei, Mallinckrodt, Larson, & Zakalik, 2005) rather than the benefits of having a secure attachment style. An article by F. Lopez and Brennan (2000), which used attachment theory as a framework for understanding the healthy and effective self, is one exception to that trend. One way that counseling psychologists could greatly contribute to our understanding of positive relationship processes is by investigating the development of secure attachment beliefs during counseling (see, e.g., Travis, Bliwise, Binder, & Horne-Moyer, 2001). We are uniquely positioned to study stability and change in attachment processes that are central issues in basic research and theory on attachment.

As S. Lopez et al. (2006) note, research on love and intimacy is scarce in counseling journals. There is somewhat more research on intimacy than on love, but it generally focuses on intimacy problems or on intimacy within the counseling process rather than on the development or effects of intimacy in close relationships outside the therapy context. Isolated studies that examine love or intimacy exist, but we found little evidence of programmatic bodies of research on developing or maintaining these positive relationship processes.

Finally, and not surprisingly, of the four constructs we examined, the most research was on empathy. However, it mostly dealt with counselor empathy rather than with the development of empathy or its role in well-being. Notable recent exceptions include a measure of empathy toward people of racial and ethnic groups different from one's own (Wang et al., 2003) and a measure of awareness and acceptance of similarities and differences among people (Miville et al., 1999). These contributions reflect counseling psychology's strengths in multiculturalism, measurement, and individual differences.

The lack of focus on the development of positive relationships is not unique to counseling psychology, as psychology generally has focused more on negative than on positive relationship processes (Gable & Haidt, 2005). However, research on positive relationship processes does exist. For example, a search for research on relationship enhancement yielded 254 hits but none in *TCP* or *JCP*. We also are aware of several lines of research in clinical and social psychology that address positive relationship processes, such as the positive consequences of sharing positive events with others (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004); felt security and relationship-enhancement processes (Murray & Derrick, 2005); goal strivings, personal growth, and exploratory behavior in close relationships (Feeney, 2004); and intimacy and positive affect (Laurenceau, Troy, & Carver, 2005). In our own work, we are exploring how adolescents can learn relationship skills and grow and change in positive ways following relationship breakups (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003), consistent with a counseling psychology focus on prevention and develop-

ment. We believe counseling psychologists could be making much greater contributions to research on positive relationship processes, which at this point is being conducted primarily in other subfields.

### **Meaning and Purpose in Life**

As mentioned, most well-being theorists accord meaning in life a central role in optimal human functioning. *Meaning in life* is generally used as an omnibus term referring to an individual's sense that her or his life is significant and comprehensible, with important goals and purposes and a *raison d'être*. Research has consistently supported meaning's importance through a wide body of studies establishing positive relations between meaning and positive affect, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, in press). Although counseling psychologists have noted the importance of meaning to well-being (Lent, 2004), psychotherapy (Gelso & Woodhouse, 2003), and career counseling (Savickas, 2003), meaning has received scant research attention in counseling, appearing on neither S. Lopez et al.'s (2006) list of variables studied in counseling journals nor their list of variables considered but not found in counseling journals.

Although meaning has been found to be associated with several positive outcomes, the lack of good measures has hampered research on meaning. Meaning measures have been criticized for being unwieldy to use, having poor discriminant validity, incorporating extraneous constructs like depression or positive affect (Frazier, Oishi, & Steger, 2003), and lacking in structural validity (Steger, in press). Without good measures, it is impossible to fully understand the benefits of having meaning in life. To address this problem, we have attempted to contribute to the field by developing a new measure of meaning in life with better discriminant and structural validity (Steger et al., in press).

Because counseling psychologists have applied experience with those overcoming trauma or loss, we also are ideally positioned to advance understanding of how people make meaning from trauma. A renewed sense of meaning and an increased appreciation for life are relatively common adaptations to trauma (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). Despite our practical expertise, research on resilience in the face of distressing circumstances is poorly represented in counseling journals. Future research should focus on the ways that meaning develops, both from ordinary life and in the face of adversity.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, counseling psychology can contribute to positive psychology in many ways. However, this potential remains largely unrealized in several domains. We have tried to outline some areas in which we are particularly well positioned to contribute and hope this Major Contribution spurs us on in this endeavor.

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