Contributions of Positive Psychology to Peace

Toward Global Well-Being and Resilience

J. Christopher Cohrs  
Daniel J. Christie  
Mathew P. White  
Chaitali Das  
Jacobs University Bremen  
Ohio State University  
University of Exeter  
Queen’s University Belfast

In this article, we analyze the relationship between positive psychology and peace psychology. We discuss how positive emotions, engagement, meaning, personal well-being, and resilience may impact peace at different levels, ranging from the personal and interpersonal to community, national, and global peace. First, we argue that an individual’s positive experiences, personal well-being, and personal resilience, as defined in current positive psychology, may in fact contribute to personal and interpersonal peace but can also entail detrimental consequences for other individuals, communities, and nations. Second, we describe how peace psychology contains traces of positive psychology, especially with its focus on the pursuit of social justice. Third, reviewing and extending the concept of community resilience, we outline directions for further conceptual and empirical work in positive psychology inspired by peace psychology. Such work would do well to transcend positive psychology’s current bias toward individualism and nationalism and to conceptualize well-being and resilience at the level of the “global community.” This extended “positive peace psychology” perspective would have important implications for our understanding of how to overcome oppression and work toward global peace.

Keywords: positive psychology, peace psychology, well-being, resilience, social justice

Positive psychology is concerned with positive human experiences such as happiness, hope and optimism, fulfillment, positive relationships, and more generally with what makes life worth living (e.g., Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000a). It focuses its research endeavors on “the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). As such, positive psychology seems naturally well positioned to inform a psychology of peace. Peace is arguably an important condition, as well as a reflection, of positive human experience. According to a study conducted in Italy on social representations, peace is associated with terms such as serenity, harmony, happiness, freedom, love, and wellbeing (Sarrica, 2007). In more peaceful societies (as defined by the Global Peace Index; see http://www.visionofhumanity.org/), people tend to find more value in harmony and report higher levels of satisfaction with life (Floody, 2012). In societies characterized by greater “nurture” (defined as relative spending on education, acceptance of refugees, and percentage of women in parliament), people report more positive emotions (Basabe & Valencia, 2007). Resonating with the aim of positive psychology to “catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000b, p. 5), peace has been defined not only as the absence or minimization of violence but also as the presence or development of harmonious relationships (Anderson, 2004) and social justice (Galtung, 1969). Thus, there are some straightforward links between positive psychology and peace. On the one hand, peaceful conditions in society may be a prerequisite of, or at least facilitate, positive human experiences; and on the other hand, positive human experiences may increase the chances of peace actually occurring (see also Diener & Tov, 2007).

However, the relationship between positive psychology and peace is more complex. In this article, we analyze this relationship from various angles. First, we ask how far the principles derived from positive psychology may actually go in contributing to peace at different levels—ranging from personal, inner peace to interpersonal, intergroup, community, national, international, and finally global peace (Anderson, 2004)—and whether they could also be detrimental to peace. Second, we examine how much of positive psychology already exists in peace psychology, the field of study concerned with the psychology of peace. Finally, based on our analysis of the first two questions, we suggest how positive psychology could be extended to become...
better suited to truly contribute to “better relationships among all people” (Seligman & Fowler, 2011, p. 86) and, thus, to peace that reaches beyond the personal, interpersonal, and community levels to global peace. Before we examine these three questions in detail, we briefly summarize our understanding of positive psychology and peace psychology that forms the basis of our argument.

Positive psychology is a movement inaugurated by former American Psychological Association (APA) president Martin Seligman’s keynote address to the 1998 APA convention (Seligman, 1999) as well as by a special issue of the American Psychologist published shortly thereafter (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000a). The declared aim of this movement is to address an imbalance identified in much of psychology, namely, the predominance of a “disease model” of human nature that focuses on negative phenomena such as human deficits, flaws, disorders, problems, and so forth, resulting in a relative neglect of positive phenomena such as human strengths and assets, capabilities, talents, and flourishing.

The research program of positive psychology is characterized by investigations into “the pleasant life,” “the engaged life,” and “the meaningful life” (Seligman, 2002) as well as the conditions that are conducive to these. These conditions include “positive” subjective experiences, “positive” individual traits (virtues and character strengths), and “positive” or “enabling” institutions (e.g., families, schools, workplaces) that facilitate the development of positive individual traits and subjective experiences (Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2002). On the basis of a review of religions, philosophies, and moral teachings from around the world, Peterson and Seligman (2004) argued that there are six “virtues” that are universal across time and space: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Moreover, in terms of their structure, each of these virtues is said to include several character strengths (see further below). These individual traits together enable positive experiences and well-being, as reflected in the pleasant, engaged, and meaningful life.

Although positive psychology focuses on positive experiences and emotions and, in particular, on well-being and happiness, it is not ignorant of the importance of negative experiences and emotions. However, it shifts the traditional focus of trying to alleviate such emotions to one in which they can be used to promote personal growth and positive adaptation. This is the core of the process of resilience (Masten & Reed, 2002). Some of Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) character strengths can be seen as personal resources that facilitate resilience (e.g., open-mindedness, persistence, vitality, self-control, spirituality). Additional personal resources include optimism, faith, a sense of meaning, self-efficacy, flexibility, impulse control, empathy, and close relationships (Masten & Reed, 2002). Positive psychology also speaks more directly to issues of peace, though its main focus to date has been on inner peace or “peace of mind” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Peace psychology is the scholarly field concerned with the psychology of peace. Most centrally, it seeks to (a) mitigate and prevent episodes of violence and, borrowing from the transdisciplinary field of peace and conflict studies (Galtung, 1969), to (b) promote the ongoing pursuit of social justice (see Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001). The first aim is related to negative peace: the absence of harm to human beings caused by the intentional use of force. The second aim is related to positive peace: the absence of harm to human beings caused by unjust structures, or the promotion of political, social, and economic structures that enable humans to flourish and fulfill their potentials. Thus, peace psychology, in a normative sense, favors the pursuit of “peace by peaceful means” (Galtung, 1996); in other words, the nonviolent pursuit of social justice. Cohrs and Boehnke (2008) further elaborated on negative and positive peace by identifying psychological constructs that are “obstacles” (i.e., factors contributing to violent episodes and/or to social injustice) and “catalysts” (i.e., factors contributing to the mitigation and prevention of violent episodes and/or to the promotion of social justice).

**How Positive Human Experiences and Resilience May Impact Peace**

Based on the principles of positive psychology, Seligman and his colleagues have developed interventions that aim to increase positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and resilience across various populations: in school children (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009) and, more recently, American military personnel (Seligman & Matthews, 2011). Although they do not offer any evidence or elaborate on how this might be achieved, they are hopeful that increases in positive emotions, virtues and character strengths, well-being, and resilience across different populations might contribute to “better relationships among all people” (Seligman & Fowler, 2011, p. 86). Can we really expect this? That is, can these intended outcomes help promote peace not only at the intrapersonal level but also at the interpersonal, community, national, and, ultimately, global levels?

In attempting to answer this question, we can draw on a range of suggestive research findings. Positive emotions have been shown, at least under certain conditions, to counteract the outgroup homogeneity effect (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005), enhance affiliation (Isen, 2000), and motivate volunteering (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) reviewed research suggesting that positive emotions can lead to success in multiple life domains, including marriage and friendship. In the context of organizations, “an individual’s experience of positive emotions can reverberate through other organizational members and across interpersonal interactions” (Fredrickson, 2003, p. 163). Consistent with this notion, at the community level, a 20-year longitudinal research program in Framingham, Massachusetts, has shown that happiness can spread in social networks, such that people will be influenced positively by their friends’ happiness and even (to a weaker extent) by their friends’ friends’ happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Furthermore, well-being has been found to be associated with stronger support for democracy and greater tolerance toward immigrants and
of relationships (Diener & Tov, 2007). In sum, happier individuals can enhance well-being and promote peaceful relations at the interpersonal and community levels.

Moreover, research on the role of emotions in conflict resolution suggests that positive affect reduces contentious tactics and competition while increasing the likelihood of concessions and cooperation (Baron, 1990; Carnevale & Isen, 1986). Other research, using a false-feedback manipulation to induce good or bad moods in negotiators, found that happy negotiators were more likely than sad negotiators to plan to be cooperative before actual negotiations, to use more cooperative strategies during negotiations (based on postnegotiation self-reports), to achieve better outcomes, and to honor agreements after negotiations (Forgas, 1998). More broadly, positive affect has been shown to have a desirable influence on decision making and problem solving by enlarging the “array of thoughts and actions that come to mind” and broadening “thought-action repertoires” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 220) and by enhancing flexibility, innovation, thoroughness, and efficiency (Isen, 2001). In sum, positive emotions may contribute usefully to conflict resolution.

Some virtues and character strengths, such as transcendence and temperament (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), may also contribute to peace. For example, the importance people attach to self-transcendence values that focus on universal humanity has been found to correlate negatively with support for war and military interventions (e.g., Cohrs, Moschner, Maes, & Kielmann, 2005) and positively with support for human rights (e.g., Cohrs, Maes, Kielmann, & Moschner, 2007) and nonviolent dispositions and involvement in peace activism (Mayton, 2009). Temperance, according to Peterson and Seligman (2004), includes the character strengths of forgiveness, mercy, humility, prudence, and self-control: concepts that also figure in peace psychology as they are associated with reduced reactivity to negative events, reduced aggression, and reconstruction of relationships (e.g., Kalayjian & Paloutzian, 2009). These character strengths seem to be key factors in what Seligman and colleagues aim to foster to promote resilience in their “Comprehensive Soldier Fitness” program (Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011; Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011).

Despite these suggestions of how positive emotions, experiences, and individual traits may contribute to peace, researchers have also become aware of their potential negative consequences. With regard to interpersonal peace, a review of “the dark side of happiness” documents outcomes detrimental to the self (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011). For example, too high a degree of happiness may lead to undesirable outcomes such as more rigid behavioral repertoires, more engagement in risky behavior, and less concern about important threats and dangers. Perhaps the most striking examples of this relate to episodes of mania among people with bipolar disorders (Gruber, Johnson, Oveis, & Keltner, 2008). More broadly, scholars have long recognized the ephemeral nature of happiness and cautioned against striving too hard to achieve it since one is likely to fall short and be disappointed (Frankl, 1946/2006). Evidence for this can be seen, for instance, in reduced levels of happiness among U.S. American graduates who fail to achieve their desired incomes (Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003). Importantly, though, striving for happiness seems to be more pervasive, and thus more damaging when not achieved, in individualistic than in collectivist cultures (Eid & Diener, 2001; Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008). Moreover, irrespective of goal attainment, merely striving for happiness can undermine one’s social relations because one tends to focus on the self rather than interpersonal relationships (Mauss et al., 2012).

These findings raise two issues. First, irrespective of how the virtues and strengths framework was developed, several authors have argued that positive psychology’s roots are still predominantly embedded in Western, mainly U.S., cultural values (Boniwell, 2006; Nettle, 2005). There has been little work to date to ascertain whether these concepts, and the scales used to operationalize them, are universally applicable. Second, and relatedly, if positive psychology is to aid the development of peace, there needs to be a greater understanding of what well-being and happiness mean for different cultures, in particular with regard to the importance of personal growth and positive emotions as compared to positive social relations and collective outcomes.

A further issue that extends beyond interpersonal peace is interpersonal or group trade-offs and spillover effects. That is, one person’s flourishing or optimal functioning might have negative consequences for other persons, just as the flourishing or optimal functioning of one group or institution may have negative consequences for other groups or institutions. Accordingly, Becker and Marecek (2008b) wondered whether “some segments of the population may ‘flourish’ at the expense of others” (p. 596). For example, if people feel autonomous and competent and derive strong social bonds from engaging in street car racing, this may well enhance their own well-being but reduce that of others around them (and of the environment; Dolan et al., 2006). Such negative consequences for others may occur especially whenever there is some form of negative interdependence (i.e., a competitive, zero-sum relationship) between persons or between groups or institutions. For example, if school children who are more resilient and persevering in fact outperform their classmates, this could have negative consequences for their peers. If enterprises that adopt the insights offered by “positive organizational scholarship” (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) in fact become more efficient as intended, they may outperform other enterprises, potentially with negative consequences for their competitors’ employees. And finally, members of a terrorist organization could well show resilience, feel good about themselves and their organization, show high levels of engagement, and see meaning in their aims—obviously to the detriment of their “targets.” In other words, just as there is no necessary connection between personal well-being and the well-being of the social and natural environment (Dolan et al., 2006), there is also no necessary connection between achieving “authentic happiness” and being peaceful beyond the in-
trapepersonal level. Seligman (2002) was aware of this dilemma when he asked,

Imagine a sadomasochist who comes to savor serial killing and derives great pleasure from it. Imagine a hit man who derives enormous gratification from stalking and slaying. Imagine a terrorist who, attached to al-Qaeda, flies a hijacked plane into the World Trade Center. Can these three people be said to have achieved the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life, respectively? The answer is yes. (p. 303)

Potentially, then, resilience, positive emotion, engagement, and meaning may be beneficial for peace in some ways but detrimental to peace in others.

Having analyzed what positive psychology has to offer to enhance our understanding of peace, we now adopt a complementary perspective: how much positive psychology already (explicitly or implicitly) exists in peace psychology.

How Much Positive Psychology Exists in Peace Psychology

Peace psychology emerged as an area of scholarly inquiry in Australia, Europe, and the United States (US) during the Cold War, a period when the United States and its allies sought to contain the Soviet Union’s influence around the world (Gaddis, 1982). The Cold War and the attendant nuclear arms race ignited a backlash among psychologists who were critical of the conduct of U.S. foreign policy (see, e.g., White, 1986), in part because the doctrine of deterrence created a security dilemma in which efforts to reduce the security of one’s adversary resulted in reducing one’s own security (Glaser, 1997). Even after the Cold War, efforts to secure peace have continued to be pursued though military strength at the national level. One might think that contemporary peace psychology could offer an alternative. However, like the field of psychology as a whole, peace psychology has not been immune to the forces of a disease model that portrays violence as the condition that needs to be treated, rather than emphasizing a proactive approach that puts the development of peaceful conditions in the foreground, as would be recommended by a positive psychology approach (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000b). Instead, peace psychology has developed a number of interventions that aim to prevent or react to episodes of violence.

To illustrate the work of peace psychologists, Figure 1 depicts the order of three phases in an episode of violence. The arrows indicate the direction of influence and imply that a violent episode can be repeated, forming a cycle of violence.

Following the convention of conflict theorists and practitioners, the “nonviolent intergroup conflict” phase is conceptualized as a period when the parties to a conflict have differences in interests, views, or goals that are real or imagined (Deutsch, 1973). Overt forms of violence do not occur during the conflict phase. However, if differences are not managed effectively, the next phase of “organized intergroup violence” can result. When organized intergroup violence ends, a “post violence” phase occurs, which will engender nonviolent intergroup conflict that may, in turn, lead to another cycle of violence if the conflict is not managed effectively (Christie & Louis, 2012; Christie et al., 2008). While some concepts such as positive intergroup contact play an important role in all three phases (Al-Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013, this issue; Wagner & Hewstone, 2012), peace psychologists have developed approaches specific to each phase.

First, a set of approaches in peace psychology emphasizes research and practice on prevention: by managing and, when possible, resolving the “nonviolent intergroup conflict” phase rather than waiting and reacting during the violence or postviolence phase. Conflict theorists and practitioners generally recognize that the nonviolent conflict phase can present opportunities for the conflict parties to constructively manage the conflict, engage in complex reasoning, arrive at mutually beneficial outcomes, and go beyond cutting a deal to building a relationship (Kriesberg, 2007; Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Efforts aimed at the constructive and nonviolent management of conflict fall within the rubric of preventive diplomacy and include a range of actions such as unilateral initiatives, confidence building measures, third-party mediation, grassroots antiwar movements, arbitration, and adjudication (Lund, 1996). Conflict analysis, communication, and cooperative problem solving are important skills that can support such efforts (Shapiro, Bilali, & Vollhardt, 2009). An important distinction in the preventive diplomacy literature is between proximal and root causes of violence. Proximal causes are recent triggers or precipitating events, while root causes refer to underlying structures that create fault lines in a society or divisions between those who have power and resources and those with few resources and political influence. To create conditions for a sustainable peace, both proximal and root causes of violence must be addressed (Ackermann, 2003).

Second, when conflicts lead to “organized intergroup violence,” a host of reactive approaches may take place in an effort to draw down the violence. Research focused on
this phase has been aimed at identifying political conditions that lead to ripeness: the decision by one or both conflict parties to deescalate tensions and engage the other (Coleman, Hacking, Stover, Fisher-Yoshida, & Nowak, 2008; Zartman, 2000). According to Zartman (2000), ripeness depends on two core motives of the parties in a conflict: the degree of pain and opportunities to escape the pain. Coleman et al. (2008) have identified many additional conditions conducive to ripeness by using a grounded theory approach with 17 expert scholar-practitioners who had experience working on protracted conflicts. Experts identified a total of 30 different motives that promoted constructive engagement. Although ripeness typically has been viewed as a political construct, Pruitt (2012) examined some of its psychological features. In particular, three interacting psychological components have been discerned: motivation to escape the conflict, optimism about the possibility of reaching a mutually acceptable agreement through negotiation, and pressure to negotiate exerted by powerful third parties. In turn, each component of ripeness is determined by a host of perceptual and affective variables. Other efforts to deescalate violence have focused on the role of unofficial diplomacy, a process that typically brings together unofficial but influential members of the parties to a conflict. These members engage in intergroup empathy, jointly analyze the conflict, test the veracity of assumptions, redress biases, arrive at insights, and craft constructive policies that, under ideal conditions, will be adopted by policymakers (e.g., in Cyprus: Fisher, 2001; in Israel/Palestine: Kelman, 1995). In addition to examining ripeness and unofficial diplomacy, a number of other empirically based approaches aimed at de-escalation during the organized intergroup violence phase have been identified (Christie & Louis, 2012).

Third, regarding the postviolence phase of a cycle, the work of psychologists was initially focused narrowly on the problem of posttraumatic stress disorders, partly because of the potential for the intergenerational transmission of trauma, which, if left untreated, could spark further cycles of violence (Volkan, 2001). In recent years, broader and more socially inclusive interventions have been developed that focus on a range of problems such as grief and depression along with key psychosocial issues such as family separation, interpersonal and intergroup distrust, and the destruction of community resources (Wessells, 2006). The development of intergroup trust, cooperation, forgiveness, reconciliation, and social cohesion are also key areas for intervention in order to interrupt cycles of violence (Kalyanjian & Paloutzian, 2009; Staub, 2011, 2013, this issue).

While all these approaches deal usefully with the prevention and mitigation of violent episodes (i.e., promoting negative peace), how has peace psychology, in the spirit of positive psychology, gone beyond this “negative” focus and contributed to promoting social justice (i.e., positive peace; Galtung, 1969) and the well-being of individuals and groups that face oppression? What does peace psychology have to offer when considering how the political, social, and economic structures can be transformed in such a way that human beings can realize their full potential?

How an Extended Positive Psychology Could Contribute to Community, National, and Global Peace

In our analyses of how positive experiences may impact peace and how much positive psychology exists in peace psychology, we identified two main (and related) problems with current positive psychology. First, with its focus on personal well-being and personal resources for resilience as well as intrapersonal peace, it tends to neglect possible negative consequences for others in the broader social (and natural) environment; and second, it has so far said little about how it could be developed to promote social justice and the well-being of people who face oppression, within nations as well as globally (see also Becker & Marecek, 2008a, 2008b).

To envisage a positive psychology that is well suited to contribute to peace not only at the intrapersonal (and
possibly interpersonal) level but also at levels beyond it, we now return to the concept of resilience. Following the individualist focus of current positive psychology, so far we have mentioned only personal resources that facilitate resilience. However, this view of resilience has been criticized by Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000):

Any scientific representation of resilience as a personal attribute can inadvertently pave the way for perceptions that some individuals simply do not ‘have what it takes’ to overcome adversity. Besides being misinformed and unwarranted, such perspectives do little to illuminate processes underlying resilience or to guide the design of appropriate interventions. (p. 546)

Instead, resilience is widely viewed as positive adaptation that unfolds as a dynamic developmental process determined by the interaction of risk and protective factors (Das, 2011; Luthar et al., 2000; Waller, 2001). Risk factors are factors that, singly or in combination, increase the probability of poor outcomes and limit people’s ability to thrive and flourish; protective factors are factors that increase the likelihood that exposure to adversities can be resisted or recovered from (Newman & Blackburn, 2002). Both risk and protective factors can reside within the person or in the environment. It is thus the combination of internal and external resources that facilitates resilience (e.g., Jack, 2000; Newman & Blackburn, 2002; Vance & Sanchez, 1998). Larger family systems, ecological networks in communities and organizations, historical contexts, and broader macro systems and institutions can all affect resilience through their influences on risk and protective factors (Buchanan & Ritchie, 2004; Das, 2009; Luthar et al., 2000).

Personal protective factors enhance resilience partly because they increase the likelihood that an individual can access environmental protective factors. For example, communicative, friendly, and humorous personalities make it more likely for children to access support from those around them (Hetherington, 2003). Extending this notion, in their analysis of “social resilience,” Cacioppo, Reis, and Zautra (2011) identified more specific individual competences that allow individuals to make better use of protective factors in the social environment. These include (see Cacioppo et al., 2011, Table 1) the capacity and motivation to perceive others accurately and empathically, feelings connected to other individuals and collectives, communicating caring and respect to others, perceiving others’ regard for the self, values that promote the welfare of self and others, the ability to respond appropriately and contingently to social problems, expressing social emotions appropriately and effectively, trust, and tolerance and openness.

Cacioppo et al. (2011) also recognized the importance of external resources in an individual’s environment. For example, they mentioned collaborative ties, reciprocity, fairness, justice, impartiality, and leadership as important resources at the level of groups or communities and, accordingly, suggested that interventions be aimed at “fostering community development and sustainable and inclusive social networks” (Cacioppo et al., 2011, p. 48). Similar to notions of “bonding” social capital (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 2000), these factors go beyond building resilience for individuals and move to the level of communities. As such, they speak already to issues of positive peace.

Indeed, Cacioppo et al.’s (2011) framework appears related to earlier research on community resilience. Community resilience is “the ability of a community to establish, maintain, or regain an ‘expected’ or ‘satisfactory’ level of community capacity in the face of adversity and positive challenge” (Bowen, quoted in Van Breda, 2001, p. 152; see also Bowen, 1998). Adverse contexts examined in this line of research have included natural and man-made disasters (Cutter et al., 2008; Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008; Ride & Bretherton, 2011; Walsh, 2007), political oppression and deprivation (Chris-tie & Montiel, 2013, this issue; Kirmayer, Sehdev, Whitley, Dandeneau, & Isaac, 2009; Sonn & Fisher, 1998), and health inequalities (R. Davis, Cook, & Cohen, 2005). Findings suggest that resilient communities provide individuals and families with support, opportunities, and resources to cope with adversity and foster well-being, such as through services and institutions (R. Davis et al., 2005; Ganor & Ben-Lavy, 2003; Kimhi & Shamai, 2004). They also tend to be more able to withstand internal conflict, in part through the successful use of mediation (Sonn & Fisher, 1998), and to enable collective decision making, empowerment, and action (Norris et al., 2008; Pfefferbaum, Reissman, Pfefferbaum, Klomp, & Gurwitch, 2005). In resilient communities, social networks enable awareness raising, a sense of community and belonging, engagement, new ways of viewing one’s community and position in a system, as well as sharing information and communication (R. Davis et al., 2005; Halpern, 2005; Kirmayer et al., 2009; Norris et al., 2008). Additional protective factors supporting community resilience are located in the economic conditions (equity and vulnerability, diversity and volume; Norris et al., 2008), the built environment (infrastructure; R. Davis et al. 2005), the treatment of resources (Cutter et al., 2008), and other structural factors (race relations, employment, marketing and advertising practices; R. Davis et al., 2005).

Two interrelated questions that arise out of this research on community resilience and well-being are (a) what effects community resilience might have on intercommunity, international, and global processes and (b) whether the concept of community resilience could be extended to the national and global levels. Groups and communities engage in relationships with other groups and communities, nations engage in relationships with other nations, and these relationships are consequential for the well-being not only of one’s own group, community, or nation but also for that of other groups, communities, or nations. Cacioppo et al.’s (2011) concept of social resilience as well as much of the research on community resilience still seem to fall short of the aim to contribute to “better relationships among all people” (Seligman & Fowler, 2011, p. 86; emphasis added) because the consequences of social or community resilience for the broader political, economic, and social environment in which groups, communities, or nations live are
not explicitly taken into consideration. Thus, just as the individualistic focus of positive psychology neglects potential negative consequences of personal well-being and resilience for other individuals, a narrow focus on community resilience (or a nationalistic focus on “national resilience”) would neglect potential negative consequences for other communities (or nations). We therefore propose an extension of the current theoretical focus to intercommunity, international, and global levels. In this we echo Linley et al. (2006), who suggested that the phenomena of interest to positive psychology are not limited to positive experiences, and the communities and institutions enabling them, but also include the “political, economic, and environmental policies that promote harmony and sustainability” (p. 8).

How can positive psychology be extended to include these additional levels of complexity to help promote peace beyond the personal, interpersonal, and community levels? We suggest, first, that there should be greater consideration of national and global-level well-being in positive psychology, and second, that the concept of community resilience, while useful, should also be considered with respect to the global community. Such a vision of “global resilience” would include a concern for the well-being and thriving of others: individual families, groups, communities, and nations and, in particular, the well-being and thriving of those people and groups who face oppression. First, although positive psychology—like most aspects of psychology—tends to focus on individual-level well-being, other disciplines as well as policymakers already tend to consider well-being in much broader terms (Dolan & White, 2007). Economists, for instance, have traditionally used gross domestic product (GDP) as a proxy for national-level well-being under the rationale that wealth enables choice and choice enables individual preference satisfaction. But the problems with a focus on income as a measure of national well-being have long been recognized. Against the backdrop of Vietnam, Senator Robert Kennedy (1968) lamented that GDP includes “napalm and . . . nuclear warheads ( . . .) and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children” (para. 22).

In response to these problems, several theorists have developed alternative indicators that attempt to account for the true costs of growth and development and are thus said to better reflect national (and international) levels of well-being (e.g., the Genuine Progress Indicator; Lawn, 2003; Max-Neef, 1995). Although encouraging, these indices still focus on objective measures of social “bads” such as crime statistics and environmental degradation, neglecting the more subjective aspects of well-being that positive psychology is interested in. Acceptance of the need to incorporate subjective indices into national-level accounts of well-being is growing (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009), and perhaps the work of Prilleltensky (2012) could offer some insights into how research in positive psychology could be “scaled up” to the national and global levels.

Specifically, Prilleltensky (2012) argued that at the community level, which can be applied to regional, national, or international communities, the concept of well-being comprises six key domains: economic prosperity, health promotion, effective and meaningful functioning, freedom, equality, and participation and inclusion (Graham, 2009; Inglehart, Fou, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Across these domains, community well-being would be reflected in economic opportunities and hope for the future; fairness in the health system and availability of health information; efficacy and transparency of government; safety and protection from crime; freedom to express political opinions; respect and fairness in dealings with authorities; inclusion and belonging; and respect for cultural diversity—in each case objectively as well as in the form of socially shared perceptions and feelings (Prilleltensky, 2012). Incorporating these kinds of measures into national-level indices certainly would seem to fit with the positive psychology agenda.

Income inequality, in particular, is a challenge positive psychology needs to address if it is to broaden its horizons to peaceful communities at the national and global levels. There is now a considerable body of research to suggest that countries, and regions within a country, where income differentials between the poorest and the richest members are large have poorer well-being in terms of health, life expectancy, educational achievement, self-reported happiness, and social cohesion (Verme, 2011; Wilkinson, 1992; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007). Moreover, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) provided evidence that such inequality is bad not just for those at the bottom of the distribution but also for those at the top. Echoing earlier work into relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966), their cross-national analysis, as well as analysis across different states within the United States, found that economically divided societies tend to be less happy, more quarrelsome societies. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argued that it is not enough to teach people to be happy with their lot. We must instead tackle the root causes of widespread unhappiness and alienation through considering how resources are distributed within and across societies.

Second, an extension of the concept of community resilience to global resilience would examine global adversities (e.g., economic recession, threats induced by climate change, impact of globalization, terrorism) as well as risk and protective factors (see also Ride & Bretherton, 2011). Extrapolating from the literature introduced above, global resilience could be facilitated by protective factors such as global social capital (including “bridging social capital,” i.e., social support networks that span different communities or, in this case, nations; Putnam, 2000); a sense of global community, belonging, and engagement; a sense of global efficacy; global information and communication networks (e.g., which can provide transparency); equitable global economic development (e.g., mechanisms to deal with global issues such as poverty); effective global decision-making structures; awareness of the position of one’s group, community, or nation in the global system; physical environments; and sustainable treatment of natural resources (e.g., sustainable means of production and consumption). Of course, international structures or institu-
tions (e.g., the European Union, the United Nations) do not automatically represent protective factors.

At the level of individuals, certain personal competencies could operate as protective factors to enable such “global resilience.” These could include virtues and character strengths that explicitly refer to the welfare of all people (e.g., humanity, transcendence, temperance; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and resources for social resilience that are potentially important for relating to all people (e.g., perspective taking, generosity, empathy, values that promote the welfare of self and others; Ciocioppo et al., 2011). Additional protective factors could be conflict analysis, communication, and cooperative problem-solving skills (Shapiro et al., 2009) and the concepts identified by Cohrs and Boehmke (2008) to be relevant to catalyzing positive peace (i.e., nonviolent dispositions, support for democracy and human rights, and moral courage). The development of a sense of global community and an awareness of the interconnectedness of all communities and nations seems crucially important. To this end, we welcome initial research examining the correlates of global knowledge as well as globalism as an orientation toward the welfare of others and an identification with all humanity (McFarland, 2010; McFarland & Mathews, 2005; McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2012). Although social categorization seems to be ubiquitous in humankind and, in particular, national categories are reproduced subtly and constantly (Billig, 1995), this does not mean that humans cannot identify, empathize, and support others across group boundaries (e.g., Buchan et al., 2011; M. H. Davis & Maitner, 2010; Dovidio, Gaertner, Shnabel, Saguy, & Johnson, 2010) and help other groups to challenge oppression (Iyer & Leach, 2010).

Conclusion

In concert with other disciplines, psychological research and practice aimed at understanding and creating conditions that favor peace across different levels are eminently important to challenge oppression and promote peace. We believe our framework, inspired by positive psychology, will facilitate this. Although there is no guarantee that enhancing individual flourishing will lead to community, national, and global flourishing and peace, positive psychology may have the potential to build better and more peaceful societies. However, to understand the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions for promoting peace, the interdependence between individuals, communities, and nations, in particular with regard to power differentials, needs to be taken into account. One of the key challenges for positive psychology, if it is truly interested in the well-being of all, will be to enhance its understanding of these interrelations and its conceptualization of global, in addition to individual and community, well-being and resilience (see also Marsella, 1998).

Building on these ideas, we hope that future research in positive psychology, in global partnerships, will address questions such as the following: How can personal pleasure, engagement, and meaning coincide with a concern for the well-being of others? What can we learn from people, from different areas of the world, who have managed to integrate the “pleasant life,” “the engaged life,” and “the meaningful life” with social concern and global awareness? How can positive psychology contribute to the empowerment of people and communities who face oppression? How can well-being and resilience be understood at different levels, and what factors operate as risk and protective factors at the global level? Finding answers to these and similar questions may help to substantiate the claim made by Cairns and Lewis (2003) that “peace psychology and positive psychology together represent a powerful force for building better societies” (p. 143).

REFERENCES


October 2013 • American Psychologist 597


Johnson, K. J., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2005). We all look the same to me: Positive emotions eliminate the own-race bias in face recognition.