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Is there a Place at the Adult Education Table for Positive Psychology?: Theorizing from the Literature

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to address the potential relationship that could be established between adult education and positive psychology by understanding the foundation, possible contradictions, and concerns of positive psychology.

Introduction

Adult education has a commitment to helping adult learners understand the outcomes of learning that have occurred throughout their experience of education. Positive psychology has a commitment to the study of human strengths, how they are fostered, and how they influence individuals and groups. The purpose of this paper is to address the idea that the two fields could enter into a beneficial dialogue with each other and through this dialogue perhaps develop new and interesting insights in adult education and positive psychology.

The potential relationship that could be established between adult education and positive psychology is located within the potential for human strengths to benefit the individual and sub-topics such as: hope, self-efficacy, creativity, self-determination, life satisfaction, wisdom, and resilience, which are all crossover concerns for adult education. This paper will address the contributions and concerns of positive psychology, possible contradictions such as the unaddressed negative side of positive psychology, the Western perspective accompanied by cultural exclusion and the exclusions of others from the field. Finally, a discussion of potential benefits of positive psychology and its potential for informing adult education research and practice will be considered.

The Emergence of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a relatively new field with its origins beginning around the late 1990s (Compton, 2005). Martin E. P. Seligman is considered to be the founder of positive psychology, although many of the foundational structures can be traced back to humanistic psychology and the work of Abraham Maslow (1971) and Carl Rogers (1961). However, Seligman and others do not generally recognize this lineage, instead contending that positive psychology is a new science aimed at studying human strengths as opposed to human weaknesses.

There is not a single clear definition of positive psychology to use as a guide to concisely summarize the field. Therefore, it is important to understand some of the various ways in which positive psychology has been defined in order to gain a more holistic perspective on the concept. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) have defined positive psychology as the study of human strengths with a focus on subjective experiences (e.g., well-being, happiness, satisfaction, flow), individual traits or

dispositions (e.g., forgiveness, patience, humor, creativity, spirituality, wisdom, hope, love), and interpersonal/group areas of virtues (e.g., sense of community, civility, altruism). Similar definitions of positive psychology are offered by Gable and Haidt (2005) as “the study of conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (p.104). Sheldon and King (2001) propose positive psychology focuses on “the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” (p. 210). Finally, Compton (2005) defines positive psychology as using “psychological theory, research, and intervention techniques to understand the positive, the adaptive, the creative, and the emotionally fulfilling elements of human behavior” (p.3). It is worth noting that Mollen et al. (2006) argue that “without a clear and consistent definition, scholars and researchers, in essence, may be examining very different concepts- all subsumed erroneously under the ‘umbrella term’ positive psychology” (p.307).

Because this is such a new field, the researchers working within positive psychology are still developing. Some of the key people who have been identified, either directly or indirectly, with the positive psychology movement include: Lisa Aspinwall, William Compton, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Albert Bandura, Howard Gardner, Edward Deci, Daniel Goleman, Jonathan Haidt, Alex Harris, Ellen Langer, Shane Lopez, David Myers, Christopher Peterson, Richard Ryan, Karen Reivich, Carol Ryff, Barry Schwartz, Martin Seligman, Robert Sternberg, and Ursula Staudinger. Some of the major institutions that have offered positive psychology as an area of study as a course or for a degree program include Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Gallup Organization. The *Journal of Positive Psychology* was recently founded in 2006 and continues to grow in size and scope with articles addressing the subtopics in positive psychology more in-depth.

Concerns and Contradictions of Positive Psychology

There is much energy and excitement in the current positive psychology movement. At the same time, in our reading of this area, there are several areas of concern that warrant a closer examination. These include: the reluctance of positive psychology to recognize the importance of humanistic psychology as an underlying foundation to the field; an overemphasis on quantitative research methods and the dismissal of other approaches as “legitimate” modes of inquiry for positive psychology; the mindset of the United States as dominated by a need for positive emotions; the Western perspective of positive psychology; and the extent to which scholars in related fields, including adult education, are “welcome” at the positive psychology table. By addressing both the concerns and possible contradictions of positive psychology a more developed understanding of how the field could provide new insights into adult education research and practice could be established.

Influence and Originality

One of the first areas of concern is the idea that positive psychology seems reluctant to recognize the importance of the humanistic psychology movement in relation to its field. This concern over who originated the study of human strengths should not to be taken lightly. The humanistic foundations of Rogers and Maslow offer clear links to the ideas of human development, self-realization, peak experiences, functioning, maturity, and positive mental health (Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1961). However, Seligman

and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) dismiss the influence of humanistic psychology stating, “Unfortunately, humanistic psychology did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base, and it spawned myriad therapeutic self-help movements” (p.7).

This concern has led other researchers to address this lack of recognition head on. Taylor (2001) challenges the view that humanistic psychology is not scientifically based and Bohart and Greening (2001) emphasize that humanistic psychology has a different approach to research that is open to other points of view and includes a philosophy of inclusiveness. This view of a disconnect between positive psychology and humanistic psychology results in positive psychology being stripped of its history since most of the early research on positive mental health is never mentioned. This could contribute to an air of intellectual dishonesty in relation to positive psychology and more adverse reactions could surface over time. Of course, there is also the chance that new researchers eventually enter into the dialogue and more recognition will be granted to the other researchers who worked hard to address the same topics in the 1950s. Most recently, Peterson (2006) has taken a more moderate position, stating that the initial criticisms of humanistic psychology may have been overemphasized.

Approaches to the Study of Positive Psychology

Another concern for positive psychology is that to date, those studying positive psychology have generally emphasized the use of quantitative research methods and the direct or indirect dismissal of other approaches. By this we mean the focus on only empirical, quantitative methods over qualitative methods. Perhaps again this has more to do with issues of funding than other concerns, but it merits investigation into the present sides of the controversy at hand.

Due to the tension in positive psychology over the use of qualitative research in humanistic psychology, it is not surprising that some scholars believe it is necessary to place a distance between the two from a positive psychology standpoint. However, Taylor (2001), Bohart and Greening (2001), and Compton (2005) have presented what we believe is a more open-minded approach to research methods in which it is important to consider the qualitative perspective from the influences of John Dewey, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow because it adds introspective information from personal experiences that can offer a deeper understanding of concepts and not only generalized surface overviews.

The Negative Side of Positive Psychology

A third area of concern is what Held (2002) refers to as a “tyranny of the positive attitude” (p.12). By this she means that the current popular mindset is saturated with the view that we must be happy, do things that make us happy (e.g., sometimes without concern for others), and transcend our pain no matter what the circumstance. This view is not always the best foundation for the masses to accept as their own philosophy because feelings of guilt, being defective, not having the “right” attitude in all situations, being let down by oneself, and a negative self image could result from trying to be positive all the time and ignoring or suppressing our fears, frustrations, and negative feelings.

Positive psychology sends out a mixed message by stating that positivity is good and negativity is bad (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, life is not based on a ‘one size fits all’ circumstance and there needs to be a balance to the entire range of psychological factors for a holistic view to be better comprehended. Most of the research in positive psychology has developed from previous research done on negative

presumptions. We believe that positive psychology should not focus its agenda on promoting only positive thoughts, emotions, and experiences, but rather it should present an understanding of such occurrences in a totality of the psychological phenomena by addressing the negative and positive balance.

Western Perspective and Cultural Exclusion

One of the more troubling aspects of positive psychology is the dominance of a Western perspective on the topic. Almost all the research that has been conducted in the field focuses on Caucasian, middle class populations of the United States. This can lead to a mistaken understanding of the generalizability of the findings across cultural and social contexts. The limited perspective of positive psychology is different from other psychological areas including humanistic psychology where the holistic approach includes addressing cultural values, beliefs, and understandings as part of the research. Unless something changes within this field, positive psychology through its own narrow perspective of what is researched, how it is researched, and who the audience is focused on may lose some creditability in the long run.

Related to the above concern, it has been difficult to find articles that explore relationships between positive psychology and other fields, domains, or areas of study. Mollen et al. (2006) point out that positive psychology has also excluded time as a possible factor in their research. By this they mean that the research presented today needs to be considered in context. They ask, “This highlights the question of whether positive qualities are temporal in nature: Would the construct’s components, likely valued as positive in the 1950s (e.g., conformity, respect for authority), be similar to the contemporary components of positive psychology (e.g., leadership, open-mindedness)?” (p.307).

If positive psychology is not temporal in nature, then how is it inoculated against changing times, and if it is accounted for as contextual then how are they going to go about addressing the issues to cultural, social, and temporal questions? Mollen et al. (2006) and Harris et al. (2007) both address concerns that the positive psychology movement has excluded the clinical and counseling psychologies out of any possible dialogue. Their articles state the need for more crossover research applications and joint research venues between the disciplines to promote positive psychology within the overall psychological field. If these issues are being raised within psychology, perhaps there may not be room for adult education or other outside fields entering into the dialogue, which is a concern.

A Place for Adult Education?

There are important contributions to psychological science being made and the efforts of both Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi to address the topic of human strengths instead of only focusing on human weaknesses should be applauded, despite the numerous concerns that have been expressed in the positive psychology movement. Positive psychology’s focus on human strengths could benefit adult education’s goals for helping learners to develop deeper understandings of their learning experiences and themselves. One such example is the area of self-directed learning where as Knowles (1980) has stated that learners begin “in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning and choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p.18).

Since self-directed learning is the most frequent way adults learn (Merriam & Brockett, 2007), the impact on positive comments that address an individual's self-determination, self-efficacy, resilience, creativity, and hope could all factor into his or her development as a self-directed learner (Brockett, 2007).

In adult education it is fundamental to not minimize our interactions with learners in terms of understanding how we impact and influence them both intentionally and unintentionally. It is important that we establish more awareness of how our feedback affects our adult students and positive psychology can offer some insight into those areas. By increasing the prominence of fostering human strengths in our feedback we could create a balance between encouragement, academic regulations or requirements and student's self-efficacy. This change could affect their motivation, creativity, and self-determination within an adult educational program.

By identifying students' strengths and using more positive language to explain negative feedback an educator can have a profound effect on a student's learning. It is possible to reframe perceived weaknesses as strengths and highlight the strengths that are often embedded in problematic defenses within students as well. The research that promotes positive psychology within adult education begins to address this topic. Ruthig et al. (2007) recently found that students who were more optimistic in their views had more adaptive and controllable attributions for their academic outcomes and outperformed their non-optimistic counterparts. Carr (2007) notes, "Positive behavior support is a great and worthy idea predicted on the notion that creating a life of quality and purpose, embedded in and made possible by a supportive environment, should be the focus of our efforts as professionals" (p. 3).

There are several ways educators could begin to introduce more positive approaches into their facilitation. One way is to address both negative and positive feedback in a manner that allows the student to see the thought process of the critique. By this we mean going further than typical comments addressing that there is a need to improve or strengthen a section on a paper, and rather to take the time to offer clear advice and positive reinforcement that the student was 'on the right track' and showed potential in their concern for the topic. Not simply addressing the negative aspects or only the areas that need improvement is another approach for educators to consider.

Another example of how to incorporate positive psychology's ideas into adult education could be promoting the awareness that notions of strengths and weaknesses are personally and culturally constructed that exist within specific contexts. This awareness coalesces aspects of adult education's focus on transformational learning where becoming aware of your own assumptions, questioning them and suspending them is important for the construction of new knowledge. This is important because as the world becomes more culturally diverse within university and college settings, what one person could perceive as a strength could be interpreted as a weakness by another. Open dialogue with students is also critical in terms of bringing about change and understanding in adult education.

If a balance between positive and negative comments toward learners is influential to motivation, self-efficacy, and self-determination within an educational context, then it could be beneficial for adult educators to take a closer look at positive psychology and draw from the research being conducted. Overly positive feedback needs a balance with negative feedback or else it can be construed as fluffy or insincere in the

learner's mind. All of these factors could begin to offer a more open approach to linking adult education and positive psychology. However, these are only meant to be starting points and are not all inclusive of the direction of a relationship between the two fields.

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