

Preface

Psychology has had a somewhat uneasy relationship with cross-cultural research. On the one hand, the more biologically and cognitively oriented scholars have little interest, understandably, in cross-cultural data. As their focus is on the workings of the brain, and the brain does not seem to vary from one continent to the next, comparative studies between different cultural or national boundaries are not very relevant. On the other hand, anthropological psychologists (and psychological anthropologists), who are more interested in the mind than in the brain, get fascinated not only by large differences between human groups but also by minute variations in the way people in different cultures think and behave. At both extremes, it is easy to miss the forest for the trees.

Positive Psychology, in the short dozen years of its existence, has been producing important and intriguing findings that avoid either extremes. It is clear to researchers in this field that basic emotions like joy, cheerfulness, happiness, elevation, and contentment are quite universal, regardless of culture, and that the conditions producing such emotions are also reasonably constant. At the same time, we also know that in different social and cultural contexts the conditions that affect positive emotions often vary drastically, thus moderating the quality of subjective experience that is readily available.

Currently there are two centers of research in Positive Psychology that have developed a special focus on cross-cultural research. The oldest one was started at the University of Milan by Professor Fausto Massimini. He and his students visited many different cultures, from Angola to Nicaragua, from the Navajo Nation to northern India, interviewing and surveying the local populations with a view of establishing the parameters of optimal experience. Nowadays the Milan group continues this work under the leadership of Dr. Antonella Delle Fave and, in a different unit of the University, of Dr. Paolo Inghilleri. (The Milan psychologists are unusual in that they all have medical degrees in addition to PhDs.)

The second center that has distinguished itself in doing cross-cultural studies of Positive Psychology is the one whose work is collected in the present volume. Marié Wissing, the animating force of this group, is one of the earliest and most

stalwart pioneers of this new approach to psychology. The research that she and her colleagues have assembled gives a fascinating glimpse into human groups that few psychologists have heard of, let alone studied. The composition of South African society, where different layers of African cultures coexist with different groups descendent from European colonial nations, provides what amounts to a unique natural laboratory for comparing an enormous range of cognitive and emotional adaptations to the challenges of existence. Saint Augustine might have been right in that one can see the entire universe in a grain of sand, or a drop of water, but how much more can we learn from a human group that covers such a huge gamut of languages, habits, values, and specialized adaptations!

The contributors to this volume have more than lived up to the opportunity given them by their location. Each chapter opens up a new vista to ways of experiencing life that most of us have never imagined. Some of the conditions described are difficult to envision by those who have only lived in "first-world" environments. Yet each chapter adds to our understanding of the wealth of potentialities hidden in the human condition. It is only to be hoped that this volume will inspire psychologists from all over the world to record the wisdom of passing cultures and the ways they have found to adapt to their environments. For a long time, this volume will serve as a trusted map to those who will take up that challenge.

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