

## **GRIT AND GROWTH: MEASURING RESILIENCE IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Positive Psychology offers novel insights and perspectives into traditional psychological approaches. It provides an opportunity to the larger field of psychology to learn from its limitations and determine an approach and solution to mental health illnesses. This paper examines the historical progression of positive psychology with the help of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's research. It attempts to explore the need for traditional modes of psychology in low socioeconomic groups with the aid of developmental psychologists.

### **Introduction**

Psychologists, psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and other mental health practitioners have demonstrated immense progress towards elucidating upon, and working towards solving a multitude of psychological disorders over the last few decades (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). This has also led to an investigation into the "negative effects of environmental stressors" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 6) - focusing on the aspect of negative experiences on the overall wellbeing of an individual. While this investigation has been successful in its endeavors, the notion of wellbeing has sometimes been pushed to the sidelines. Positive psychology, through its inherent reliance on valued subjective, as well as group experiences, focuses on the positive traits of an individual.

At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance,

altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 5).

Positive psychology has been successful in putting the aspect of wellbeing to the forefront on societal as well as individual levels. However, is positive psychology inclusive in its approach? This question is pertinent in a country such as India, where the socio-economic gaps are such that the notion of positive traits differ for each group and individual. How does someone from an underserved community have access to similar positive traits, experiences and institutions as someone from a privileged background? Do traits such as forgiveness, future mindedness, spirituality and wisdom hold any significant value for people from low socio-economic backgrounds? This paper will examine positive psychology in the Indian context to comprehend the 'gate-kept' nature of the same. It will essentially provide answers to if positive psychology, within low socioeconomic backgrounds, provides multidimensional growth, or only grit.

### **Background**

Within the field of positive psychology, the aspect of the individual's , and the self's positive traits and experiences are given precedence over environmental stressors. However, how effective is this field if the 'self' itself is missing from these experiences? Studies have shown that when people and groups are viewed differently from their own, especially when it is an individual or group from a low socioeconomic background, they are viewed as "less human and more bestial, than their own" (Loughnan et al 2014, p. 54). The authors of this particular study state how pervasive this phenomenon has been since the advent of European colonialism - the colonised have been viewed as a people who belong to an inferior race and possess an inferior culture, the opposite being true for the colonisers who saw themselves as far more civilised and superior than the other (Loughnan et al 2014).

This negative stereotyping of low socioeconomic groups at large, and the individuals within these groups, is the consequence of a perception of the poor as people who lack warmth and competence (Fiske et al 2002) - essentially viewing the group as incapable of holding social value or good. Further, when it is perceived that certain groups and individuals hold no social value or good, they are looked at as a liability to society - "they generally involve condescension more than hatred: "dehumanization" may be a better label" (Loughnan et al 2014, p. 55).

An important example of this dehumanisation is the manner in which African-American people have historically been viewed (Goff et al 2008). This negative stereotyping, as a means to dehumanise and condescend the group even further, has been adopted by popular culture to maintain these attitudes. For instance, the metaphorical implications of the ape in the American

film *King Kong* (1933), and its subsequent remakes over the years. The ape in the film has been described by multiple sociologists and film theorists over the years as one that is an allegory to the African American population of the country (Blay 2017). The fictional Skull Island in the film and its inhabitants have over the years been understood to be African or Asian (Rabin 2017). The constant othering and stereotypical representation of groups from low socioeconomic backgrounds has essentially dehumanised them. This further dismisses these groups as not being in possession of the positive traits that people from high socioeconomic backgrounds possess, and therefore, the role of positive psychology renders itself valueless within these societies.

### **Discussion**

In the previous section, it has been postulated that individuals belonging to low socioeconomic groups are susceptible to negative stereotypes concerning the absence of positive personality traits in their being. The standards set by society with reference to positive traits are influenced by groups of high socioeconomic status who determine which traits can be classified as positive, and which traits can be classified as negative. However, where do these stereotypes arise from? Is there any truth to these stereotypes which justify this perception? If yes, then the exclusionary role of positive psychology is more extensive than one would originally expect. If individuals from low socioeconomic groups do not possess the 'positive' traits that are determined by high socioeconomic groups, then the field of positive psychology could be inferred as one that does not aim to serve an inclusive population, and hence, could be termed as gate-kept.

In a 2011 study, researchers set out to examine the association between low socioeconomic groups and the personality traits they possess. This study was motivated by the correlation between low socioeconomic groups and poor physical health, hypothesising what role this association plays on personality traits and characteristics. For the purpose of this study, a total of 233 African Americans and Caucasians - both male and female - were examined using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), to study traits such as "neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness" (Jonassaint et al 2011, p. 13). At the end of the study, it was revealed that if the participants' parents - more so fathers - had a high educational background, and therefore, belonged to a higher socioeconomic group, they had more positive personality traits than low socioeconomic groups. Whereas if the participants' parents had a low educational background, and therefore belonged to a low socioeconomic group, they had more negative personality traits than their white counterparts.

This confirms that this harsh stereotyping that low socioeconomic groups are subject to erupts from an understanding of the distinction between positive and negative traits that are determined by high socioeconomic groups (Jonassaint et al 2011). People from disadvantaged backgrounds, since witnessing harsher environments, are more likely to demonstrate traits that are not considered positive by people from privileged backgrounds. This asserts that the role of positive psychology, in groups where 'positive' traits are rare, is insignificant in ameliorating the wellbeing of individuals.

In another study, it was found that adolescents who belong to low socioeconomic backgrounds suffer from low self-esteem due to factors such as personality, mental health, and social support (Veselska et al 2010). For the purpose of this study, 3694 elementary school children from Slovakia filled out five questionnaires and forms, one of them being the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI). This questionnaire measures the primary five personality domains "using the common stem 'I see myself as'...extroversion (2 items), agreeableness (2 items), emotional stability (2 items), conscientiousness (2 items) and openness to experience (2 items)" (Veselska et al 2010, p. 648). Ultimately, the researchers concluded that the personality of people from low socioeconomic groups may have serious implications on their self-esteem (Veselska et al 2010), and therefore, may have different visions of positive as well as negative personality traits. This reiterates that positive psychology, and its understandings of the implications of wellbeing can be differently imagined by high and low socioeconomic groups.

The conclusion in the previous study confirms the hypothesis laid out by this paper. However, this specific study only referred to the personality traits of adolescents and young adults. This previous research has been carried forward by researchers in the context of India among older adults, where 9181 older adults took a cross-sectional survey in 2011 - the answers to which were used to analyse psychological distress among the participants, using Logistic regression and decomposition models (Srivastava et al 2021). Through a random sampling process, this

survey gathered information on various socio-economic and health aspects of the aging population from households of those aged 60 years and above. Seven major regionally representative states were selected for the survey with the highest 60+ years (Srivastava et al 2021, p. 3).

It was inferred that an individual's socioeconomic status has immense implications on the mental health of older adults in India - which further postulates that tools of positive psychology may not be the most effective for these groups. The study suggests that these statistics may be a result of the fact that these older adults "were not able to get treatment for their poor mental health

status or psychological distress” (Srivastava et al 2021, p. 12). This results in a wide and deep disparity in the mental health of low and high socioeconomic groups, owing to factors such as socio-culture, demography, and economic status. Further, this study also proposes that “preventive measures for psychological disorders need to be considered as an integral part of public health at local and national levels” (Srivastava et al 2021, p. 13).

With such grave inequalities within the domain of mental health and the needs of different communities within this domain, the introduction of a field such as positive psychology acts as an exclusionary tool. Wellbeing can only be achieved once the basic needs of an individual or a group have been met. Under the Maslow Hierarchy, this first refers to physiological needs which can only be met when an individual has access to basic provisions such as food and shelter. If these basic needs are not met, the role of positive psychology can be negligible in ameliorating the mental health and wellbeing of individuals and groups who do not have access to these basic needs. Therefore, one can assume that positive psychology as a field may only show significant potential if people belong from high socioeconomic groups. It is only when an individual’s basic needs are met that they can afford to consider a field such as positive psychology to improve their overall wellbeing. At the most grassroot level, low socioeconomic groups require immediate psychological and psychiatric interventions, unlike a tool such as positive psychology.

### **Conclusion**

Positive Psychology, born in the year 2000, “does not replace business-as-usual psychology but instead complements and extends it” (Peterson 2009 p. 4). It revisits the primary role of psychology as one that makes life more fulfilling (Witmer 1907), an alternative to contemporary modes of psychology which solely focuses on the notion of psychological and psychiatric disorders. While positive psychology is a progressive attempt to expand the field of psychology and research within the field, it adopts exclusionary tools to facilitate this expansion.

In nations where there is a grave shortage of mental health practitioners, and a widening and deepening disparity on socioeconomic lines, a field such as positive psychology is gate-kept and serves the high socioeconomic groups within the country. Positive psychology in India can only produce grit but no substantial and effective growth.

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