



## Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice: An Interview with Dr. Joanne Hands

Hands, J.

**Citation:** Hands, J. (2017). Views on wellbeing research, policy and practice: An interview with Dr. Joanne Hands. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(1), 24-27.

**Abstract:** In this volume of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, we explore the views, hopes, and current research agendas of those working to advance knowledge and practise in the field of positive psychology or aspects of culture and religion relevant to it. We uncover their thoughts on the current status of knowledge as well as what opportunities and pitfalls exist. Here, we discuss with Dr. Joanne Hands, President of the Middle East Psychological Association, her thoughts on the role of positive psychology in the Middle East/North Africa region, as well as the need for greater professional standards and oversight in the region, especially as it concerns this developing area of psychology.

ملخص: في هذا المجلد من مجلة الشرق الأوسط لعلم النفس الإيجابي، نستكشف وجهات النظر والأمال، والأجندات البحثية الحالية لأولئك الذين يعملون على النهوض بالمعرفة في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، أو الذين يبحثون جوانب الثقافة والدين ذات الصلة به. نكتشف أفكارهم حول الوضع الحالي للمعرفة وكذلك عن الفرص والصعوبات الموجودة. هنا، نناقش مع الدكتورة جوان هاندز، رئيس جمعية الشرق الأوسط النفسية أفكارها حول دور علم النفس الإيجابي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا، فضلاً عن الحاجة إلى المزيد من المعايير المهنية والرقابة في المنطقة، خاصة وأنها تتعلق بهذا المجال الذي يتطور في علم النفس.

**Keywords:** psychology; positive psychology; professional association; ethics; Middle East

**About the Author:** Dr. Joanne Hands is the current Kuwaiti based elected President of the Middle East Psychological Association, as well as a Psychologist and Marriage and Family Therapist. A member of the American Psychological Association, American Counseling Association, and Venezuelan Federation of Psychologists, she graduated with a PhD in Psychology from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology (Chicago, USA). Dr. Joanne has 23 years of experience working with individuals in private practice as well as in educational and corporate settings.

**Address all correspondence to:** Dr. Joanne Hands, Al Hamra Business Tower, 19<sup>th</sup> Floor, Sharq, Kuwait City, Kuwait, Tel. +965 2535 6444. E-mail: [president@mepa.me](mailto:president@mepa.me)

**MEJPP:** As the President of the Middle East Psychological Association, your role and current mandate of the Association is to promote the field of psychology across the region. How do you see positive psychology evolving within the Association?

**JH:** Let's start with psychology in general. The field of psychology is considered relatively new within the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, and even more so in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) nations. As a result, MEPA was created with the goals and mission of raising



awareness among the Arab community on what psychology is about, what practitioners in the field do (and should not!), as well as find ways to reduce the stigma attached to the field and those that use its services. Furthermore, there is an evident lack of professional ethical standards currently in place across several Arab countries which does not help the field and contributes to the lack of credibility and recognition of psychology as a legitimate science in this region. Thus, it is crucial to educate both the lay community as well as government bodies and other relevant stakeholders about what psychology can offer, how it operates, by what practises it is governed, its expected benefits, and the fact that as a profession, psychology, just like dentistry, law, medicine, or engineering, requires the development of, and adherence to a strong ethical code to create trust and confidence in its practise. This was also discussed at length by previous MEPA President, Dr. Susannah-Joy Schuilenberg (2016) and colleagues, who argued that greater regional leadership under the patronage of MEPA in partnership with MENA governments as well as local practitioners was needed to reach this goal.

In the meantime, the field has continued to grow and with it, the introduction of positive psychology has made its way to the region. MEPA intends to embrace this opportunity and serve as an umbrella organization for all mental health practitioners within the MENA region by creating different divisions of psychology (i.e., Positive Psychology, Organizational Psychology, Health Psychology, Clinical Psychology, etc.), much like the American Psychological Association (APA) currently does. This organizational oversight not only protects the integrity of the practise and helps develop practitioners in these domains by exposing them to varied techniques, theories, research findings, and practise developments, but serves a public point of reference for the community at large, who will benefit from a more structured and systematic approach to professionalizing the field, by offering them a place to inquire about what practises are considered standard, whether practitioners are officially recognized and licensed, as well as offer them a means to share their needs and concerns.

**MEJPP:** Psychology, as a discipline, is struggling in the region to achieve professional legitimacy, government recognition, and community acceptance. How do you see positive psychology faring in the face of these challenges?

**JH:** In my opinion, positive psychology can serve as a vehicle to the growth of the field of psychology in general within the Middle East. It is less stressful and shameful for people to inquire about, adopt and practice techniques from a less stigmatized field that does not specifically target people with mental health issues, but the average person struggling with average issues, or not struggling at all, but simply wanting to become better versions of themselves. Al-Krenawi (2005) noted that people in Arab countries have the tendency to express psychological problems in terms of physical or medical symptoms as a means to avoid the psychological (or even psychiatric) labels or stigma that are associated with serious mental illness, or milder forms of mental distress experienced by many. For this reason, it is important to focus on what will work and perhaps less on what should work from a professional view. We should be thinking about what might benefit the community and reach out to them in ways that are less threatening and which allow them to save face. I think positive psychology is being received and accepted much more easily than traditional branches of psychology as many of their interventions are practical, easy to understand,



and do not require a pre-existing mental health diagnosis or psychiatric label for the consumer to use. Nonetheless, there is scope for both, traditional and positive psychology, as there will always be people who need specialized help as well as mere guidance and both fields can go hand in hand and complement each other. Yet, I stress to remind everyone that the need for professional standards, whether in positive psychology or traditional psychology in general, remains crucial.

**MEJPP:** There is much talk and debate about the fact that positive psychology seems to operate with fewer restraints than the traditional field of psychology overall. In fact, a recent article by Lomas and Ivztan (2016) argued that for the field of positive psychology to be taken as seriously as the rest of psychology, that is, less associated with commercially driven smiley faces and more with a serious and scientific view on wellbeing, it would need to act more like traditional psychology where practitioners are regulated by, and accountable to a professional association with an enforceable code of ethics and professional standards. What is the response of MEPA to this?

**JH:** I would completely agree. One of the unfortunate drawbacks of positive psychology is that many practitioners (skilled, trained or otherwise), focus on the word “positive” and leave behind the word “psychology.” Just because the field is focused on positive human experiences (versus negative), it is no less of a psychological science and it too, must abide by the scientific method and be practised according to existing professional standards. The domain of “positive” psychology should be treated no differently than “cognitive” or “behavioral” psychology. We don’t see the same type of critics or annotations in those areas of specialization because people consider those domains part of psychology, and not apart from it.

I encourage everyone to read Todd Kashdan’s (2014) LinkedIn article on this; he strongly cautioned against people getting credentials in positive psychology alone, and ignoring psychology altogether. Psychology is a unified whole and one cannot understand positive emotions without a clear understanding of the negative ones too, or even happiness without an appreciation of misery either. The human experience is influenced by and involves behavior, cognition, physiology, emotions of all kinds, social dynamics, culture, religion, environmental contexts and so many other factors. These factors are not ignored when people come for service. Hence, only learning about the positive will leave any practitioner short-sighted and with few tools to work with indeed. Further, without an appreciation for, and understanding of research, using the positive indiscriminately can also do harm. There are increasingly more studies showing that using positive psychology interventions in certain populations makes them worse and have negative consequences in certain contexts (Ford & Mauss, 2014; Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011; McNulty, 2010; Sergeant & Mongrain, 2011; Tan & Forgas, 2010; Warren, 2011). So, yes, positive psychology will also become part of the professional association and its practitioners will be called upon to follow the same professional guidelines and code of ethics given that they are using the psychologist’s title. This is normal practise and required from any psychological division in order to maintain the credibility and reliability of the field.

**MEJPP:** What are some issues, opportunities, or areas of society that are currently underserved where positive psychology could potentially play a beneficial role?

**JH:** Based on my private practice and professional experience, I would say that positive psychology can be helpful when working with cases of anxiety and depression which are common



globally, but to this region as well. Positive psychology focuses on helping people discover and embrace positive aspects of life, as well as reach and understand their potentials to live a happier and healthier life too. I think positive psychology can also be useful when it comes to parenting and there are increasingly more practitioners using those techniques in that realm. But, most importantly, I also think many local communities have developed pessimistic worldviews – for a variety of very legitimate reasons, such as in response to trauma, civil unrest or war, or various social or political restrictions around culture, gender, religion, or other factors that are perhaps less functional or relevant today as regional societies are all evolving and becoming more stable, safe, and open to the world. Positive psychology can help them create a more optimistic worldview to reach greater wellbeing and life satisfaction not only as individuals but at the community and national level as well. At MEPA, we look forward to being part of this professional movement and using psychology overall, positive as much as traditional, to effectively bring about change in the region and give psychology and its practitioners its deserving place and due credit in society.

#### References

- Al-Krenawi, A. (2005). Mental health practice in Arab countries. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 18(5), 560-564.
- Ford, B., & Mauss, I. (2014). The paradoxical effects of pursuing positive emotion. In J. Gruber & T. Moskowitz (Eds.), *Positive emotion: Integrating the light sides and dark sides* (pp. 363-382). Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online.
- Gruber, J., Mauss, I. B., & Tamir, M. (2011). A dark side of happiness? How, when, and why happiness is not always good. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6, 222-233.
- Kashdan, T. (2014, November 24). *Should you get a degree in positive psychology?* Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20141124150635-11631560-should-you-get-a-degree-in-positive-psychology/?trk=v-feed>
- Lomas, T., & Ivtzan, I. (2016). Professionalising positive psychology: Developing guidelines for training and regulation. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 6(3), 96-112.
- McNulty, J. K. (2010). When positive processes hurt relationships. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 19, 167-171.
- Schuilenberg, S., Warren, M. A., Crookes, A., Al Serkal, A., Donaldson, S. I., & McBride, D. (2016). Professional psychology associations in the GCC: Positive institutions whose time has come. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2(1), 61-78.
- Sergeant, S., & Mongrain, M. (2011). Are positive psychology exercises helpful for people with depressive personality styles? *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(4), 260-272.
- Tan, H. B., & Forgas, J. P. (2010). When happiness makes us selfish, but sadness makes us fair: Affective influences on interpersonal strategies in the dictator game. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, 571-576.
- Warren, S. (2011). What's wrong with being positive? In P. Linley, S. Harrington, & N. Garcea (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology and work* (pp. 313-322). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.