Editorial: New Vistas for Second Wave Positive Psychology

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This Special Issue is devoted to the proceedings of the 9th Biennial International Meaning Conference, held July 28-31, 2016 in Toronto, Canada. The conference theme was on “Spirituality, Self-Transcendence, and Second-Wave Positive Psychology.” Some of the presentations have been summarized in Vos et al. (2017). Articles will continually be added to this special issue as soon as the review process is completed.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Gordon Medlock for co-editing this special issue.

Second Wave Positive Psychology (PP 2.0) Summit

The PP 2.0 Summit was a historical first. Some of the most creative minds in positive psychology attended the summit to chart the course of the future of PP 2.0, including Carol Ryff, Michael Steger, Itai Ivtzan, Piers Worth, Pninit Russo-Netzer, Veronika Huta, and Roger Tweed, with Gordon Medlock and Paul Wong serving as the moderators.

Wong opened the Summit with the following definition of PP 2.0: “PP 2.0 is concerned with how to bring out the best in individuals and society in spite of and because of the dark side of human existence through the dialectical principles of Yin and Yang.” Panel members were asked to address any of the following questions in their presentations based on their own research:

1. How does PP 2.0 contribute to psychology and society beyond PP 1.0 in terms of research and interventions?
2. How does dialectical thinking provide new insights in one’s area of research?
3. What advantages are there in incorporating the negative or undesirable aspects of life in PP 2.0?
4. What benefits are there in integrating positive psychology and humanistic-existential psychology in advancing mainstream psychology and well-being?

Several themes emerged from the panel presentations and ensuing dialogues. There was considerate agreement that PP 2.0 is oriented towards meaning rather than happiness. There was also a distinct shift in emphasis from individual happiness and signature strengths to the humanistic value of bringing out the best in people for the common good.

The following assumptions capture the ethos of PP 2.0, as revealed during both the PP 2.0 Summit and the paper session based on the PP 2.0 Wright Foundation Student Scholarship Contest:

1. Human nature has the potential for both good and evil; thus, self-control of selfish and destructive instincts is a necessary part of cultivating the “better angels of our nature.”
2. Dialectical principles can best integrate positive and negative factors in different contexts.

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3. Meaning offers both the best protection against adversities and existential concerns as well as the best pathway to achieve the good life of virtue, significance, and happiness.

4. Just as physical health can only be maintained in recognition of the fact that one lives in an environment infected with bacteria and viruses, so the promotion of positive mental health and optimal human functioning must recognize the inevitable dark side of human existence.

5. Individual well-being is connected with the common good of humanity.

The Centrality of Meaning

The conference theme of “Spirituality, Self-transcendence, and Second Wave Positive Psychology” implicitly recognizes that people are bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings. This holistic and noble view of human beings means that they cannot be reduced to animalistic or mechanistic terms.

The theme also explicitly acknowledges the linkages between these three important research areas, with meaning as the common underlying factor. Michael Steger, in his keynote, proposed that meaning is essential in order to create “a common fabric among disparate elements” and to “provide a very different foundation for PP 2.0.”

The scope of meaning-centered research is very broad, ranging from meaning-making in palliative care to the sense of being fully alive; from transcendental meaning to becoming a fully functioning person. Here, I only want to highlight one key area that has not received much attention from meaning researchers—the role of global beliefs and end values in the good life.

Several speakers highlighted that, ultimately, meaning is shaped by what one values as significant and worthwhile and how one perceives the world. For example, Jordan Peterson provided an insightful exposé of how we construct a hierarchy of values in order to move towards the good and perceive the world as meaningful enough to justify tragic experiences. Thus, global beliefs and values play an important role in living the good life.

Veronika Huta’s research showed that fundamental worldviews are related to well-being and the experience of meaning. For example, eudaimonia is associated with the global belief that the universe and people exist for a purpose. This “eudaimonic mindset” is very similar to Wong’s (2012) conceptualization of the meaning mindset and represents a unique way of processing information which shapes us to live a meaningful life.

Paul Wong emphasized that both the meaning mindset as a global belief and self-transcendence as an end value are important for well-being, altruism, and personal transformation. Future research may show that these fundamental variables have a more lasting and pervasive impact on how we live than traditional positive psychology variables.

It is most gratifying to see how meaning plays a key role in positive education. Shu-mei (Suemay) Chang, recipient of the INPM’s Lifetime Achievement Award at the conference, described the national life education in Taiwan, which was “consistent with Wong’s (2011) PP 2.0.” In contrast to the positive education that focuses on the science of happiness, Taiwan’s approach to positive education “focuses on how to be a responsible citizen and a good and wise person as the pathway to meaningful living and human flourishing.”
The Positive Psychology of Suffering

“Positive psychology has nothing to do with suffering,” opined one of the reviewers of my conference grant application to the John Templeton Foundation. This happened more than ten years ago.

How the times have changed! How refreshing it was to hear so many presentations at this conference provide empirical evidence of the benefits of suffering and adversity, from post-traumatic growth to personal transformation. Carol Ryff, who was honoured with the INPM’s Lifetime Achievement Award at the conference, emphasized that self-knowledge and meaning-making could be deepened through personal encounters with adversities.

Itai Ivtzan was just as emphatic in concluding that embracing painful human experiences could provide a potential pathway towards “healing, growth, and personal transformation.” He also believed that research on suffering could generate “cutting edge theories, research, and practices.”

A major variable in overcoming suffering and fear is the courage to do the right thing or to do what is responsible. Frankl (1985) named such moral courage “the defiant power of the human spirit”—Wong (2014) recognizes it as the essence of true grit. Without moral courage, grit would be rather limp in the face of danger and suffering.

That is why I was particularly pleased to see Cynthia Pury’s presentations on courage. She argued that courageous actions depend on the meaning of the goal and the perceived risks. She identified three main components of courage: intentional action, personal risk, and the pursuit of a noble and worthwhile goal. Thus, when one has a life goal that is worth dying for, one will be willing to risk everything, including personal safety, in order to pursue such a worthwhile goal.

Conclusion

It is indeed exciting to witness the creative energy and new research findings under the big tent of PP 2.0. Thus, I want to summarize the mission and challenges of PP 2.0 as follows:

1. To better the lives of all people and nurture their potentials, regardless of their circumstances and cultural backgrounds.
2. To repair the worst and bring out the best in people, with a focus on the human potential for growth.
3. To integrate negatives and positives to optimize well-being.
4. To study how global beliefs and values affect people’s eudaimonic well-being and human functioning.
5. To minimize or transform the downside of the bright side as well as optimize or transform the upside of the dark side.
6. To cultivate the capacity for meaning-seeking and meaning-making.
7. To study how death awareness can contribute to personal transformation.
8. To develop objective measures of both short-term and long-term well-being for individuals and society.
9. To enhance well-being throughout the lifespan, including the end-of-life stage.
10. To identify and research a host of variables related to both Yin and Yang.
11. To contain and transform evil to serve the common good.
12. To cultivate inner goodness and develop valid measures of goodness as an outcome.
References


