

Psychology: the Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society

Vol 25, No 1 (2020)

Special Issue - Positive Psychology in Greece: latest developments



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doi: [10.12681/psy_hps.25346](https://doi.org/10.12681/psy_hps.25346)

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To cite this article:

Kordoutis, P. (2020). DISCUSSION - Positive Psychology: Small steps towards renewing and expanding the sound tradition of subjectivity. *Psychology: The Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society*, 25(1), 207–212. https://doi.org/10.12681/psy_hps.25346

ΣΥΖΗΤΗΣΗ | DISCUSSION

Positive Psychology: small steps towards renewing and expanding the sound tradition of subjectivity

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KEYWORDS

happiness,
Positive Psychology,
subjectivity,
objectivity,
well-being

ABSTRACT

The basic tenets of Positive Psychology derive from the philosophical traditions of Utilitarianism, Virtues, and Eudaimonia theorizing, and Hedonism. However, its unique and original contribution to Psychology lies in empirically operationalizing the definition of well-being. Moreover, it has proposed a theoretical framework consisting of, also, operationally defined socio-psychological processes associated with well-being: (a) interacting within social relationships and contexts, (b) developing traits (e.g. personal strengths), (c) pursuing states of existence (happiness, pleasure) and (d) experiencing seamless functioning (e.g. meaning). These processes concern and render with theoretical cohesion most of the research and interventions within Positive Psychology. Nevertheless, and even though social and relational contexts have been an integral part of the cohesive model of Positive Psychology from the outset, rarely are they reflected in pertinent research in a way other than that of subjective representations. The six papers presented in this journal fall into the aforementioned fourfold cohesive theoretical approach of Positive Psychology and nearly all, respond to the above criticism by taking into account relational or social contextual factors and by employing different strategies for their representation or actual estimation.. All papers in this special issue are good examples of how evidence-based understanding can support and feed into effective intervention planning and applications, a goal that follows steadily Positive Psychology since its inception.

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Since its formal birth in 2000 as an applied Psychological perspective, Positive Psychology (Seligman & Cskiszentmihalyi, 2000) has flourished at multiple levels. It has developed theoretically, yielded accumulating empirical research both in Psychological journals and journals of the social and life sciences, and has attracted substantial research funding! Scientific associations and journals bearing the masthead “Positive Psychology” have been established across the globe and relevant applications, interventions, and ideas have been extensively disseminated to the public. Frequently, Positive Psychologists are invited by state authorities, organizations, communities, and groups as consultants in designing social policies. It is not an exaggeration to say that Positive Psychology has had world-wide appeal in a very short time (e.g. Linley et al., 2007; Meyers et al., 2013; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019).

Positive Psychology’s appeal is founded upon its ambitious aim to scientifically study well-being and the individual potential of improving own human condition, while integrating, recasting, and reinventing known concepts, methods, and findings of almost all other theoretical and applied Psychological fields, be it Developmental, Social, Cognitive, Health or School psychology. This does not imply that new concepts

and tenets have not been developed within the framework of Positive Psychology (e.g. Neff & Costigan, 2014), rather it points out that Positive Psychology draws upon the tacitly ingrained into all Psychological fields philosophical traditions on the conception of man and his/her needs; on how is he/she to be defined and on what constitutes his/her well-being. Such questions underlie psychological thinking since the very birth of Psychology as a discipline (Brennan, 2003). Positive Psychology has set out to “simply” turn these fundamental philosophical questions into a cohesive psychological field of empirical investigation. More specifically, the Utilitarian philosophical tradition, the theorizing on Virtues, Hedonism and Eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Carlisle et al. 2009; Lambert et al., 2015) have all dealt with the human condition, life-meaning, well-being, and happiness. Humanistic psychological theories from Adler, through Rogers and Maslow, were celebrated offsprings of these philosophies (Brennan, 2003). However, none attained a level of operational conceptual definitions required to answer specific empirical questions and design evidence-based interventions for the benefit of the individual and his/her community. More effective to that end, but far from the scope, predictive effectiveness, and applicability of Positive Psychology, were theories of Psychological Well-being (Ryff, 1989), Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and the Social well-being approach (Keyes & Shapiro, 2004).

Although claims of an independent Psychological field are yet to be seen, basic tenets of Positive Psychology such as Authentic Happiness, PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Good Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) and Flourishing, have received enough theoretical elaboration and empirical support to justify independent theory building with well-defined operational concepts for empirical hypothesis testing. Moreover, from an epistemological perspective, research on these three tenets seems to yield a cohesive and intuitively valid understanding of human well-being: *it is viewed as the outcome of more or less meaningful and pleasurable seamless functioning, based on personal strengths and virtues as well as engagement in relationships, social networks and institutions* (Seligman & Cskiszentmihalyi, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004, Carlisle et al., 2009).

Thus, there can be a clear theoretically constructive and cohesive orientation for ongoing research on well-being within Positive Psychology. Indeed, some work focuses on (a) social relationships and social networks, other on (b) traits and personal qualities, whereas a significant part examines (c) transient or more stable states of existence (pleasure, happiness, sense of well-being) and (d) conditions of functioning in the social milieu such as the meaning of life and flow. These four pieces of the puzzle are meant to put together the grand picture of the human condition. Nevertheless, we also need a higher-level theory to connect the puzzle pieces in terms of psychological functioning. In our search for understanding well-being, we have the “what” answers (feelings, thoughts, experiences), but we seem to have less of the “how” (processes) and “under what circumstances” ones (situations, contexts, social or other). For instance, how are social relationships and social networking associated with character strengths and life-meaning? What is the exact mechanism? Theoretical work that is not falling, namely, within the realm of Positive Psychological approaches, but shares with Positive Psychology the concern for individual “eudaimonia” (e.g. the Self Determination Theory of Ryan & Deci, 2000) has given us a good idea, of a model connecting virtues (e.g. personal efficiency), with life meaning (a sense of autonomy, believing that one has choice and control) and relatedness (belongness with others). Research in Positive Psychology needs to capitalize on already significant exemplary work pointing to that direction, within its own framework (e.g. Seligman, 2002; Diener & Diener, 2011).

A point of concern and at the same time of further theoretical elaboration for Positive Psychology, is that despite the emphasis placed on the “hardware” part of the equation of well-being, that is social

relationships, groups, organizations, institutions, and social networks the individual operates in (Seligman, 2002), not a lot of attention has been paid to the fact that (i) nearly all of the subjective factors, in PERMA or Flourishing and Authentic Happiness, have an objective social audience, that approves or disapproves, accepts or rejects and that some subjective qualities may lack an audience altogether, (ii) that there might be an interaction between such objective situational factors and the more subjective factors. In fact, subjective factors are overwhelmingly studied as “main effects” or mediated phenomena and objective factors such as relationships tend to be studied as cognitive representations or perceptions. Similarly, although perceived relationships are psychologically meaningful as variables indirectly affecting action and a legitimate object of study, they are not to be equated with actual relationships and their effects. These remarks point to areas of amendment and expansion of Positive Psychology research. Indeed, it has often been suggested that collective well-being and social-situational factors cannot be merely treated as the background of individual well-being but as a part of it. Indeed, future Positive Psychology research could unveil the exact psychological mechanisms by which social ills undermine the flourishing of individuals (Biswas-Diener et al. 2011; Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009; Yen, 2010).

Recent criticism (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019) focusing on the social policy consequences of Positive Psychology ideas has capitalized on the lack of systematic work connecting objective factors to subjective ones, arguing that overemphasis on subjective factors in accounting for individual well-being, such as on Authenticity, Flourishing, Positive Emotions, Engagement, Meaning and Accomplishment, (a) actually places full responsibility on the individual for failing to attain well-being, (b) works against social change, as it encourages individuals to change themselves rather than work to change their social environment. However, as we noted above, theory and research in Positive Psychology need not be limited to the study of subjective factors. It is true, that the comparatively brief tradition of Positive Psychology reflects positive experiences, a life well lived and easily rendered to subjective interpretation and justification (Lambert et al., 2015). Albeit, this strong and cohesive foundation of subjectivity has allowed the onset of an ongoing paradigm shift, that is, the broadening of the scope of attention in studying well-being to include along with individual, community factors, the study of community well-being per se (Biswas-Diener et al. 2011; Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009; Yen, 2010).

The articles presented in the current journal represent the successful history of the 20-year-old Positive Psychology research tradition in Greece. At the same time, they reflect research along with the basic theoretical tenets of Positive Psychology (Authentic Happiness, PERMA, and Flourishing) within a more or less subjective, cognitive representational framework and the trend to move towards research questions implicating more objective social factors such as dyadic relationships and cultural contexts. Four articles fall in the latter category as they are concerned with the question of how actual or perceived relating to significant others are associated with individual well-being or PERMA factors related to well-being; these articles do not signify a paradigm shift towards studying both subjective and objective factors in lieu with well-being but do demonstrate the understanding that both should be included in a compatible to the Positive Psychology approach way. We are referring to the papers by (1) Antigoni Mertika, Paschalia Mitskidou, and Anastasios Stalikas, (2) Kostas Kafetsios and Evangelos Kateris, (3) Michael Galanakis, Theodore Kyriazos, Tsofi Sofia and Stalikas Anastasios, and (4) Evangelos Karademas and Christoforos Thomadakis.

Mertika, Mitskidou, and Stalikas, attempt to identify in the literature the characteristics of relationships associated with well-being. Kafetsios and Kateris, consider cultural orientation, a social factor, along with the representational relational factor of state adult attachment. Galanakis et al., in

introducing a new psychometric tool for Eudaimonia, include positive relationships with family and friends. Karademas & Thomadakis, examine actual couples and propose a method for examining the effect of the dyadic interaction upon well-being. The latter article is probably the more daring one in terms of theory building as it does not attempt to fit the objective factor of dyadic interaction into a subjective cognitive-representation mode compatible with the usual methodology of Positive Psychological research.

The article by Eirini Karakasidou, Georgia Raftopoulou, and Stalikas Anastasios falls in the more traditional subjective cognitive-representational tradition of Positive Psychology, albeit, it deals with a relatively new concept, “self-compassion”. The concept is proffered as a valid tool for further designing effective interventions to improve well-being. Giapraki, Moraitou, Perzikianidis, and Stalikas, demonstrate and experimentally evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention to enhance positive affect and well-being in a group of older adults.

All articles are an excellent showcase of contributions to theory building and intervention planning in Positive Psychology. The evidence-based understanding provided by empirical research supports and feeds into effective intervention planning and targeting for change appropriate to specific populations’ psychological variables. Most importantly, however, the articles demonstrate how small cautious steps of paradigm-shifting can expand and renew an already sound tradition.

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Θετική Ψυχολογία: μικρά βήματα προς την ανανέωση και διεύρυνση της στέρεας παράδοσης της υποκειμενικότητας

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| ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ | ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ |
|---|---|
| <p>Αντικειμενικότητα, ευημερία, ευτυχία, Θετική Ψυχολογία, υποκειμενικότητα</p> | <p>Οι βασικές θεωρητικές ενατενίσεις της Θετικής Ψυχολογίας προέρχονται από τις φιλοσοφικές παραδόσεις του Ωφελιμισμού, τις θεωρίες περί Αρετών, Ευδαιμονίας και Ηδονισμού. Εν τούτοις, η ιδιαίτερη και πρωτότυπη συνεισφορά της στην Ψυχολογία, έγκειται στην εγχειρηματοποίηση του ορισμού της έννοιας «ευημερία». Πέραν αυτού, πρότεινε ένα θεωρητικό πλαίσιο αποτελούμενο από επίσης εγχειρηματικά οριζόμενες κοινωνιοψυχολογικές διεργασίες συνδεδεμένες με την ευημερία: (a) την αλληλεπίδραση εντός κοινωνικών σχέσεων και περιβαλλόντων, (b) την ανάπτυξη προσωπικών χαρακτηριστικών (π.χ. προσωπικές δυνάμεις), (c) τη επιδίωξη καταστάσεων του είναι (π.χ. ευτυχία, ευχαρίστηση) και (d) την εμπειρία της αδιατάρακτης λειτουργικότητας (π.χ. νόημα). Οι διεργασίες αυτές απασχολούν και προσδίδουν θεωρητική συνοχή στο μεγαλύτερο μέρος των ερευνών και παρεμβάσεων της Θετικής Ψυχολογίας. Παρόλα αυτά και παρά το γεγονός ότι τα κοινωνικά και σχεσιακά πλαίσια απετέλεσαν αναπόσπαστο μέρος του συνεκτικού μοντέλου της Θετικής Ψυχολογίας εξ αρχής, σπανίως αντανακλώνται σε σχετικές έρευνες με άλλον τρόπο πλην της υποκειμενικής αναπαράστασής τους. Τα έξι άρθρα που παρουσιάζονται στο τεύχος αυτό του περιοδικού, εμπίπτουν στην προαναφερθείσα τετραπλή συνεκτική θεωρητική προσέγγιση της Θετικής Ψυχολογίας και σχεδόν όλα αποκρίνονται στην παραπάνω κριτική υιοθετώντας διαφορετικές στρατηγικές για την αναπαράσταση των σχέσεων ή του κοινωνικού περιβάλλοντος ή για την πραγματική εκτίμησή τους. Όλα τα άρθρα αποτελούν καλά παραδείγματα του τρόπου με τον οποίο η βασιζόμενη σε εμπειρική τεκμηρίωση κατανόηση μπορεί να υποστηρίξει και να τροφοδοτήσει αποτελεσματικές παρεμβάσεις και εφαρμογές, στόχος που συνοδεύει σταθερά την Θετική Ψυχολογία από την σύλληψή της.</p> |
| <p>ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ ΕΠΙΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑΣ</p> | |
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