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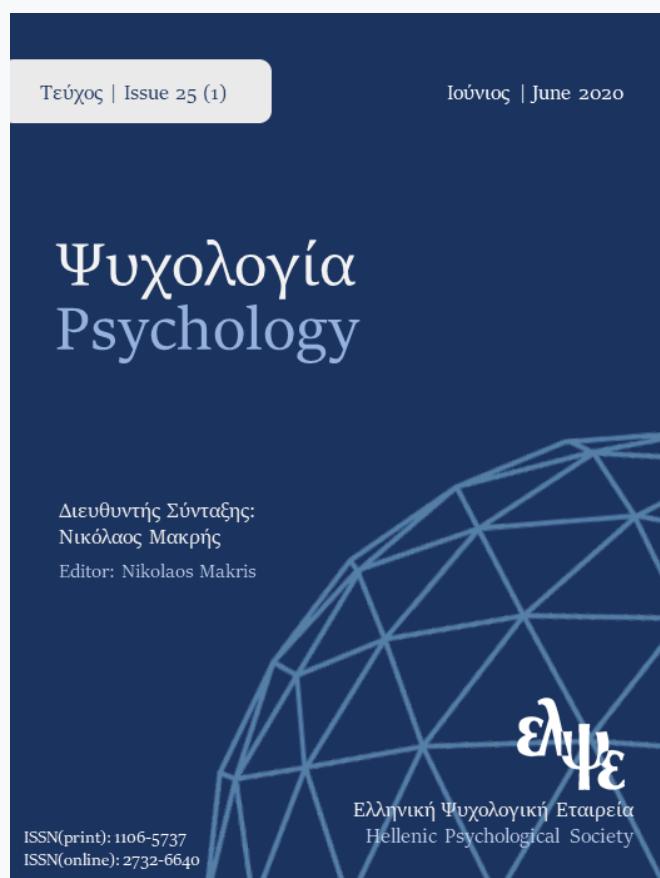
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Positive psychology in Greece: latest developments

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Having been invited to serve as a discussant of this issue and on the positive psychology research conducted in Greece, I decided to start with a quick summary of the so far short but impressive story of positive psychology theory and research, showing its very rapid development over the last twenty years. Suffice it to say that between 2000 and 2010 almost 1,000 related articles were published in peer-reviewed journals (Azar, 2011).

Positive psychology has been best described as: "...nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues. Positive psychology revisits "the average person" with an interest in finding out what works, what's right, and what's improving. It asks, "What is the nature of the efficiently functioning human being, successfully applying evolved adaptations and learned skills? And how can psychologists explain the fact that despite all the difficulties, the majority of people manage to live lives of dignity and purpose?" . . . Positive psychology is thus an attempt to urge psychologists to adopt a more open and appreciative perspective regarding human potentials, motives, and capacities" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216).

The term "positive psychology" appeared for the first time in Abraham Maslow's book "*Motivation and personality*" (1954). He used the term to describe the fully functioning person but also to stress how excellent human growth and development can be achieved. The term evolved again in 1998 with Seligman's inaugural address on positive psychology as president of APA and Frederickson's paper "*What good are positive emotions?*" (1998). Seligman defined positive psychology as "the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural and global dimensions of life" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.13), and opened the way for studies over eternal values such as bravery, optimism, hope, joy, honesty, altruism, perseverance, equity.

Initially thought of as the science of happiness it has reached today scientists' recognition as the theoretical approach studying the optimal human functioning which focuses on the investigation and promotion of factors allowing people and communities to thrive. Terms such as empathy, resilience, compassion, gratitude, and subjective well-being gained rapidly increased interest among social scientists.

In his initial theory on positive emotions, Seligman (2002) proposed three types of happy life: pleasant life, engaged life, and meaningful life. In 2004 Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman published a handbook on character strengths and virtues in an attempt to measure and come up with 24 character

traits that make the good life possible, contrary to DSM and ICD which describe what goes wrong with people. In 2004 Barbara Fredrickson published "*The Broaden and Build Theory*", in which she supports that some positive emotions (joy, interest, contentment, and love) broaden a person's momentary thought-action repertoire (Frederickson, 2004). Frederickson believes that positive emotions can build our physical, intellectual, and social abilities. In her book on "*Positivity*" (2009) she defines positivity as consisting of "a whole range of positive emotions.... including the positive meanings and optimistic attitudes that trigger positive emotions..." (p.6) Positivity –contrary to negativity- can improve health, enhance relationships and well-being. A few years later, in his book "*Flourish*" (2011), Martin Seligman broadened his positive emotions theory to include two more elements of positive life: namely, positive relations, and accomplishment, coming thus to his five-element model of wellbeing based on character strengths and virtues: the PERMA Model, standing for Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Seligman considered these five-elements core in psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

Some basic themes studied by positive psychology scientists during the last twenty years include happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, compassion, flourishing, motivation, positivity, sustainable happiness, gratitude, mindfulness, creativity, and humor, among others. More recently new constructs have been added to the positive psychology research bibliography: savoring, mindfulness and self-compassion.

Having thus set the ground at the beginning of the 21st century, positive psychology started flourishing and is constantly flourishing since, having its own Section at the APA Division of Counseling Psychology: the "Section n Positive Psychology".

The International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) was founded in 2007 for positive psychology researchers and practitioners to promote the science of positive psychology and its research-based applications.

In 1998, almost parallel to Frederickson and Seligman's work, a group of Greek positive psychology scientists and researchers espousing positive psychology theory started running their own research and in 2011, founded the Hellenic Association of Positive Psychology, a nonprofit scientific organization aiming at promoting Positive Psychology not only in Greece but also internationally. Its members initiate and participate in research projects, organize workshops, and teach the principles and methodology of positive psychology. They have published a plethora of relative research articles in Greek but also in international journals and books. The articles in the present issue are a sample of the present focus of Greek positive psychology research.

Many positive psychology scales have been translated into Greek, as, for instance, the Hope Scale (Moustaki & Stalikas, 2011), the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Labropoulou & Hatzichristou, 2011), the Resilience Scale (Moustaki & Stalikas 2011); the Psychological Well-Being Scales-Short Scales [PWBS] (Leontopoulou, 2011); the Savoring Beliefs Inventory (SBI) (Benetou, 2014); and the Values In Action-120 (VIA-120) inventory of strengths (see Perzirkianidis et al., article in the present issue) among others, to help conduct relevant research studies addressed to Greek populations.

Greek research studies indicate the beneficial effects of goodwill and positive emotions in human behavior. For instance, a positive mental state seems to be related to increased creativity and higher mental skills (Galanakis & Stalikas, 2007); research on resilience showed the effect of self-efficacy and social support on mental health (Leontopoulou, 2013); positive emotions have been found to correlate significantly with higher levels of resilience (Karampas et al., 2016). Also, results seem to indicate that

positive emotions help people cope with occupational stress (Galanakis et al., 2011). Curiosity has been found to be related to satisfaction with life and the experience of positive emotions (Avroustaki et al., 2009). Other studies have focused on the efficacy of positive psychology interventions in psychotherapy and the therapeutic value of positive emotions in generating change (Fitzpatrick & Stalikas, 2008).

In recent years several researchers started questioning the "euphoria" of positive psychology. It became soon evident that negative emotions and negative experiences can also be beneficial to well-being (see also Yotsidi's paper in this issue).

Based on the belief that positive psychology led to a polarized positive-negative dichotomy, several scholars started arguing that the emphasis only on positive emotions failed to appreciate the complexity of human emotions (Held, 2004). There are situations where positive emotions can be counterproductive; on the other hand, negative emotions may act as a motivational force under certain circumstances. Such critical arguments led to the development of the "second wave positive psychology" (SWPP), which recognizes that well-being involves an interplay of positive and negative phenomena (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Wong (2011) had initially called it "positive psychology 2.0" referring to a balanced, interactive model of good life synthesizing the positive and the negative.

In order to experience certain positive outcomes in life, it is necessary to balance positive and negative emotions rather than eliminate the negative ones. Jung and Maslow were among the first to support the notion that "a truly healthy self-regard is possible only through recognition and integration of both positive and negative attributes" (Compton, 2005, p. 244).

Certainly resilience, empathy, compassion, gratitude, and subjective well-being all affect health and improve the quality of life but certain so-called "negative" emotions may at times motivate the person to act against situations hindering their happiness (Held, 2004; Schneider, 2001). The research literature seems to indicate that negativity can play an important role in a person's positive mental state (Held, 2004). Research outcomes stress the necessity to integrate positive and negative emotions into a broader conceptualization of well-being and good life (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003).

The five articles included in this issue present a varied picture of the recent research developments of positive psychology in Greece. Two articles explore the application of Seligman's theories and measurements in Greece (Leontopoulou; Pezirkianidis et al.). They focus on the efficacy of specific and universal positive psychology interventions aimed at raising positive feelings, cognitions, and behaviors. Leontopoulou's is an exploratory study testing the multidimensional theory of the PERMA model, character strengths, and well-being in a sample of emerging adults. The study explored the usefulness of the PERMA model for measuring well-being during the economic crisis that Greece has been experiencing in the last ten years. It seems that all five elements of the PERMA theory of well-being (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) can protect against negative emotions enabling thus young people to develop positively. The results of this study showed that although the crisis affected youth negatively it also influenced them in a positive way. We have here an indication of the motivating force of stressful situations in people's growth and development.

The study by Perzirkianidis, Karakasidou, Stalikas, Moraitou and Charalambous examined the conceptual framework of character strengths by exploring the factor structure of the Greek version of the Values In Action-120 (VIA-120) inventory of strengths. Their study indicated that the VIA-114GR is a reliable and valid psychological instrument. Results showed a slightly different profile of Greeks compared to that from people of other cultures. It seems that the positive character profile follows a unique conceptual structure in the Greek cultural context.

The paper by Motti-Stefanidi, Pavlopoulos, Papathanasiou, and Mastrotheodoros focuses on one of the major strengths of the positive psychology model, resilience. Resilience, being one of the major strengths which positive psychology nurtures in people's pursuit of happiness and well-being, includes qualities such as happiness, optimism, faith, self-determination, creativity, and self-control, among others (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Resilient qualities help people recover from adversities (Richardson, 2002). It is a reaction to stressful life events resulting in growth, and strength.

The review of the relative literature seems to indicate that resilient adaptation is consequential for the well-being of refugees and for the prosperity of receiving societies. The paper attempts to answer the question of which factors promote refugee youth adaptation in receiving societies. The article focuses and points out the contextual complexity of emotional outcomes in refugee populations. The authors argue that immigrant and refugee youth resilience must be conceptualized in terms of an integrative framework considering three levels of context: the societal, the interaction, and the individual level. Refugees are faced with several aversive conditions followed by several negative emotions. Every situation is appraised depending on the context in which it occurs. Young refugee experiences involve both positive and negative elements when they enter their host country. The second-wave positive psychology talks about co-valence referring to this ambiguity. However, these phenomena complement each other leading to the evolution and maturation of positive feelings and well-being (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016).

In the paper by Stasinou, Hatzichristou, Lampropoulou, and Lianos, a relatively new concept in the realm of positive psychology is introduced: covitality, a concept describing the co-occurrence of basic positive psychology constructs, such as belief in self, belief in others, emotional competence and engaged living and how they are associated with psychological well-being.

Their research paper studied adolescents' perceptions of covitality and academic performance, emphasizing the critical role of a positive school climate. Covitality "is conceptualized as the synergistic effect of positive mental health resulting from the interplay among multiple positive psychological building blocks" (Furlong et al., 2014, p. 1013). Results indicated the importance of a positive school climate in the advancement of academic performance and student's subjective well-being despite other risk factors such as father's unemployment.

Finally, Yotsidi's article reviews the conceptual trajectories of positive psychology in the clinical domain during the last twenty years. One of the main goals of Yotsidi's paper was to present evidence supporting the integration of positive psychology interventions in clinical settings through adaptation of a balanced approach between positivity and negativity. Her article focuses on the effectiveness of positive psychology's interventions in psychotherapeutic settings arguing about the necessity to approach human issues placing emphasis on both protective and risk factors of mental health (second wave clinical research and practice) in understanding a person's emotional and behavioral difficulties and promoting well-being. Based on clinical research evidence it stresses the role of well-being and self-determination in mental health.

The papers of the present issue, offer a glimpse to some relative research currently conducted in Greece. The authors of this issue, as well as other colleagues of the positive psychology group, have been mostly involved in research studying the effect of different positive constructs on people's well-being. Few advances have been made to approach human issues placing emphasis on both protective and risk factors of mental health. Research studying the role of resilience and other positive emotions in difficult situations is mandatory and will help establish programs to help people in difficult times.

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Positive changes occur, for instance also in experiences of traumatic events. Studies looking at natural disasters show that activities designed to promote safety and befriending reduce incidents of PTSD and promote "post-traumatic growth". These are positive psychological changes that happen in response to a traumatic event, and they include increased resilience, self-confidence, greater empathy, and improved subjective wellbeing (Harris, 2020). Therapists are asked to consider psychological interventions in society which will enhance people's well-being during periods of crisis.

The present pandemic provides an excellent opportunity to empower human strengths by looking at how emotional and behavioral difficulties can promote well-being. Currently, at the present time of writing these words, the world is faced with the Covid-19 pandemic. How will this pandemic affect people's mental health and what can the role of positive psychology be in it? Will positive emotion interventions help lift people's spirits? Can they help people overcome the stress they are experiencing? These are some questions positive psychology is invited to study and give answers to. I am certain that many new research articles studying the influence of the present pandemic on people's mental health will shed light on the importance of resilience, optimism, faith, self-determination, creativity, and self-control to help overcome difficulties and help people find their way to a hopeful life again.

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