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Towards a dynamic and sustainable view of happiness

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Towards a dynamic and sustainable view of happiness

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Well-being Culture Harmony Balance Sustainability	The complexity of the current global situation calls for new models of mental health and well-being. The predominant Western worldview, focused on happiness as an individual goal to be attained at the highest possible level, must leave room to the conceptualization and operationalization of well-being as a multifaceted and dynamic construct, that undergoes changes according to individuals' life stages, social roles, and cultural norms and values. The recent evidence of harmony and balance as core dimensions of happiness, at both the intrapsychic and interpersonal levels, shed light on the potential of promoting well-being as a sustainable and co-constructed process, rather than a self-centered goal. This view is especially relevant today, as it is substantially aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, aimed at counterbalancing inequalities and resource depletion derived from the maximization trend, through the promotion of a more balanced interaction of humans with their natural, social and cultural environment.
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The quest for happiness and well-being has been characterizing religious, moral and philosophical traditions throughout millennia, but only during the last few decades was it scientifically endorsed as a core goal by different disciplines. Within social sciences, well-being research is primarily focused on quality-of-life, societal resources granting fulfilment of human rights, and related inequalities across groups and countries. In the psychological domain, it has evolved into a comprehensive set of theories, constructs and measurement tools, referred to as positive psychology.

The present paper provides an outline of the contributions of positive psychology to the study of optimal human functioning, specifically focusing on the recent formalization and investigation of the constructs of harmony and balance. Their philosophical roots across different cultural traditions, and their connection with models and phenomena explored in arts and life sciences will be briefly described. Finally, the pursuit of harmony and balance, rather than maximization of happiness and well-being, will be proposed as a sustainable view of happiness. This view is consistent with the United Nations' promotion of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, designed to counterbalance the current global trend towards increase of inequalities and planet resource depletion.

A brief history of positive psychology

The fast and pervasive spreading of concepts and models of well-being in a variety of scientific domains, professional applications and divulgation settings has characterized the first two decades of the 21st century. The official launch of Positive Psychology at the beginning of the new millennium, through the January 2000 issue of the *American Psychologist* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) brought to mainstream theoretical

and empirical contributions previously developed in the fields of psychology, economics, sociology, health and education.

The identification of well-being and happiness as an independent research topic is not new; it can be traced back to the origins of human civilization, from the elaborated contributions of ancient Asian and European philosophers to the traditions of indigenous populations in Africa, Americas and Australia-Oceania. Its systematic, scientific and cross-disciplinary study is, however, much more recent; it can be related to the urgency for establishing peaceful and respectful relationships among peoples and nations after World War 2, substantiated by the Declaration of Human Rights and the foundation of international agencies, grounded in the shared commitment to improve the lives of individuals and communities around the globe.

In the domain of psychology, Viktor Frankl's focus on meaning-making, Carl Rogers' view of "optimal functioning" and Abraham Maslow's motivational model, culminating with self-actualization, paved the way to the subsequent contributions. During the Seventies and Eighties of last century, research on constructs such as self-efficacy, flow experience, intrinsic motivation and self-determination, and positive emotions fostered the development and operationalization of two comprehensive well-being models: subjective or hedonic well-being (Diener, 1984) and psychological or eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 1989). These can be considered as the pillars on which most of the research advancements produced by positive psychology have been built (see Delle Fave & Negri, 2018, for an overview). Despite representing a very young research domain, positive psychology itself went through different developmental stages, that have been described as "waves" (Lomas et al., 2021; Wissing et al., 2021). The first wave (2000-2010) was aimed at establishing positive psychology as a scientific research domain, focused on the study of the positive aspects of human functioning through empirically solid instruments and methods, based on strong theoretical frameworks. During the second wave (2010-2020) researchers acknowledged two major issues to be tackled: the first issue concerned the need to consider the interaction and coexistence between dimensions of positive and negative functioning, rather than treating them as opposite and mutually exclusive poles of a continuum (Wong, 2011; Bassi et al., 2014). The second issue regarded the need to understand and investigate wellbeing through the lens of different cultural contexts and traditions (Knoop & Delle Fave, 2012; Uchida & Ogihara, 2012). The third and current wave of positive psychology research is aimed at offering a broader, systemic perspective, encompassing exchanges with social and natural sciences, as well as endorsing complexity and interconnectedness as fundamental features (Kern et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2021). Just to provide some examples of the usefulness of these exchanges, economic research showed that life evaluations fall by less, in response to crises, in those communities with high levels of social engagement, regardless of their general individualistic or collectivistic features (Helliwell, Huang, & Wang, 2014). Medical research highlighted that physical activity is not necessarily good for biopsychosocial health, its outcomes depending on the practice setting - specifically, work vs. leisure (Temporelli, 2021). Information exchange across disciplines may allow researchers, practitioners and policy makers to better understand human behaviors and related experience, and to develop more appropriate intervention programs.

The discovery of harmony and balance as happiness

The hedonic, eudaimonic and integrated models of well-being and mental health designed and tested during the first wave of positive psychology included a variety of constructs, primarily derived or evolved from previous research. No attention was however paid to the meaning and use of related terms in different natural languages, and only scattered evidence was available about cross-cultural differences and indigenous formulations of happiness and well-being. A small international group of researchers decided to address these



issues by designing a mixed-method instrument, the Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness Inventory (EHHI), and collecting data among adults living in urban areas of five European countries, South Africa, and Australia (Delle Fave et al., 2011). The first, open ended question of the EHHI invited participants to provide their own definition of happiness. The results were surprising: while, as hypothesized, contextual definitions primarily referred to family and close relationships, the psychological definitions of happiness brought to light a previously neglected dimension: inner harmony and balance, which accounted for 25.4% of the answers, followed by positive emotions with a remarkably lower percentage (16.6%). Life satisfaction, often used as a synonym with happiness, was reported in only 6.5% of the answers.

This study opened a new avenue of research, leading other scholars and groups to investigate harmony and balance through quantitative instruments, such as the Harmony Scale, that was developed to investigate perceived harmony in life, with the aim of complementing the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Kjell et al., 2016). Additional data were subsequently collected through the EHHI in a much larger sample, involving adults from five continents; the findings corroborated the primacy of inner harmony and balance, which accounted for almost 30% of the answers referring to psychological definitions of happiness, across nations and continents (Delle Fave et al., 2016). These results were further replicated among Italian persons with multiple sclerosis and their family caregivers (Delle Fave et al., 2017) and in a large group of Brazilian teachers (Pereira, Araujo, & Delle Fave, 2025). More specific dimensions closely related to harmony and balance, such as inner peace, serenity, emotional stability, equipoise, and contentment, were grouped in the same category. Other scholars, in the meantime, were exploring alternative models of happiness, besides the well-established ones, paying attention to suggestions coming from different cultures. Authentic/durable happiness, a eudaimonic and processual construct, was juxtaposed to the hedonic, momentary condition of fluctuating happiness; both constructs were assessed through scaled items (Dambrun et al., 2012). Authentic/durable happiness was uncorrelated to self-enhancement values and positively associated with self-transcendence values, while the opposite pattern emerged for momentary/fluctuating happiness. Several items included in the authentic/durable happiness scale, such as inner peace, serenity, tranquility, and fullness, were aligned with the definitions of happiness classified in the harmony category in the EHHI studies. Another related concept developed in the same period was the quiet ego (Wayment et al., 2015), a condition characterized by a balance between concerns for the self and for others, which includes perspective taking, inclusive identity, detached awareness, and growth mindedness. More recently, items about perceived harmony and balance were included in the Gallup Poll 2022, a vast international data collection summarized in the yearly World Happiness Report (Lomas et al., 2022). Personal and social harmony will also be investigated in the wellbeing module of the European Social Survey, Round 12; the data collection will take place in 2025/2026 across more than 30 countries (European Social Survey, 2025).

Harmony and balance: European and Asian roots

The long neglect of harmony as a core dimension of well-being in psychological research is quite surprising, if we consider its pervasive presence in philosophy, science and arts, across cultures and over the centuries.

Harmony in philosophy and ethics

In the European context, Harmony originally appeared in the ancient Greek mythology as a goddess; she was the daughter of Aphrodite (the goddess of love) and Ares (the god of war), thus representing the unifying principle between two opposite entities, and specifically the archetype of mutual love, trust and reciprocity. Born in Greece, she connected West with East, as her husband Cadmus was a Phoenician prince (Calasso,

1988). In Latin her name was translated as *Concordia*, reflecting the Greek meaning of reciprocal agreement and understanding.

In the ancient Greek philosophy, harmony and balance were recurrent concepts across most philosophical views; Pythagoras described harmony as the basic ontological feature of the cosmic order. Subsequently, inner harmony and balance were primarily referred to ethics: Epictetus and the Stoics focused on evenness and detachment as the key features for achieving inner freedom, especially under circumstances that cannot be directly controlled by the person; Plato defined the just man as characterized by a balance between reason, spirit and appetites; Epicure praised ἀταραξία as the ability of maintaining inner balance and serenity in both enjoyable and challenging times. In his treatise on virtues, Aristotle highlighted the need to avoid excess and preserve balance in exercising and implementing any virtue in daily practice, based on the assumption of μέσον τε καὶ ἄριστον (for an overview see Michalos & Robinson, 2012). Balance, self-control, and moderation were also described by Plato in the Dialogue *Χαρμίδης* (Reale, 2015) as the essence of mental health, evident in the corresponding term Σωφροσύνη, a composite word including σῶς = whole, sound, saved, and φρήν = mind. Notably, the opposite term is ὕβρις = pride, overconfidence.

The view of balance and harmony as positive psychological features was anciently endorsed by other philosophical traditions. In Hinduism, Anāsakti or non-attachment is a condition of mental balance and equanimity in dealing with both positive and negative life events, without being emotionally affected by their features and consequences. It implies to act with dispassion, without concerns for failure or success (Pande & Naidu, 1992). It is substantially aligned with the conceptualizations formulated by the Greek philosophers described above. Consistently, in Ayurveda - the traditional Indian system of medicine - the definition of health comprises balance of functions, tissues and metabolic processes, but also a contented and balanced mind (Bhishagratna, 1907). The healthy person is described as Swastha = being grounded in the Self (which also includes a spiritual component). Recently, a scale on Anāsakti was developed and compared with well-being measures (Singh & Raina, 2015). Multicomponential in nature, it comprises six dimensions: faith in God/higher Power, empathy, outcome (in)vulnerability, persistence/fortitude, tolerance to frustration, and emotional equipoise. Based on the scale structure, this construct shares psychological similarities with both inner harmony (especially its components of balance and emotional stability), and authentic/durable happiness (Dambrun et al., 2012). Positive correlations were detected between Anāsakti and measures of positive mental health and positive affect, at the same time indicating the divergent and specific contribution of Anāsakti to the understanding and conceptualization of wellbeing from an emic, culture fair perspective.

In the Chinese philosophical traditions, harmony lies at the core of well-being in four different forms: intrapersonal harmony, interpersonal harmony, social harmony, and harmony between humanity and the cosmos (Lun, 2022). In Taoism, Yin and Yang are the complementary cosmic forces governing life through their dynamic interplay. Beyond the spiritual perspective, often predominating in a superficial interpretation, a formal Yin-Yang bipolar dynamic logic (BDL) was recently proposed as an equilibrium-based and harmony-centered, holistic and integrative formal system, which subsumes, but does not exclude the truth-based logical thinking typical of the Western view (Zhang, 2016). This approach assumes a bipolar dynamic nature and organization of reality, in which opposite tendencies are ceaselessly at work and harmony can be described as a dynamic equilibrium condition, at both the individual and social levels; this view was substantiated by empirical evidence (Huang, 2016), and led to the development of a scale assessing Peace of Mind, considered as specifically suited for Asian participants (Lee et al., 2013). In Confucianism, harmony is primarily valued at the collective level, but it is subordinated to the higher-level goals of benevolence and righteousness.



Maintaining positive social relationships is prominent over the achievement of individual goals, as detected in several cross-cultural studies (Leung et al., 2011).

Harmony in science and art: The Golden Ratio

Ancient mathematicians from Europe, India and Egypt probably discovered and used independent of each other what was later called Golden Ratio or Number (= 1.618, also referred as the letter Φ), represented on a line partitioned into two segments (L and S) with unequal lengths, so that $L / S = (L+S) / L$.

Studies conducted by scientists over the centuries in a variety of disciplines showed the prevalence of the Golden Ratio (also called “divine”) across most physical and biological structures, from crystals to plants and animals; the most recent studies, based on advanced microscopic, functional and imaging techniques, have detected its recurrence during morphogenesis, in the human gait, in mammalian skull and heart structure (Iosa, Morone, & Paolucci, 2018; Tamargo & Pindrik, 2019).

The Golden Ratio was a reference formula for artists and scientists across centuries and cultures; it was used to represent the beauty of nature’s proportions in paintings and sculptures; it was reproduced in built artifacts and in music compositions. Leonardo da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man” was drawn based on the Golden Ratio, to represent the symbolic union of art, science and the universe through perfect human body proportions inscribed in the circle (symbolizing the Heaven) and the square (symbolizing the Earth). The harmonious fit of the human body in both figures indicates the resonance and tuning between macrocosm and microcosm.

The reason why seeing forms and listening to melodies based on the Golden Ratio generates a feeling of harmony and balance in the observer is a highly debated issue still today, and neuroimaging studies have not provided any final answer yet. A study comparing the evaluation of aesthetic stimuli in naïf participants and art students across four perception domains (color, shape, spatial location, and music) detected a substantial agreement between the two groups in the ratings of perceived harmony, whereas group differences emerged in preference ratings, more influenced by specific art knowledge and training (Palmer & Griscom, 2013).

Towards a post-disciplinary perspective in well-being research

Recently, a fourth, post-disciplinary wave of positive psychology was called for (Wissing, 2022), adopting a critical stance towards some core but unwarranted metatheoretical assumptions on which positive psychology research is grounded. These assumptions encompass both conceptual models of well-being and empirical approaches to assess them.

At the conceptual level, contextualized worldviews are rarely considered in designing theoretical models, despite the expansion of studies involving participants from different cultures, subcultures, and nations (Delle Fave, Wissing, & Brdar, 2023). Contextualization of well-being often refers to a generic and abstract idea of “culture”, neglecting the relationship of each person’s experience with natural, socio-economic, educational, health, and spiritual conditions and environments; to properly address this issue, researchers should consider not only contributions from other disciplines, but also different investigation approaches and conceptual frameworks (Delle Fave, 2016).

At the measurement level, positive psychology is characterized by a predominant reliance on quantitative data, collected through scaled instruments containing items about abstract concepts, without considering the way participants understand and contextualize both the items and their answers. As often happens in psychological research, instrumental effectiveness, related to tools and analytical techniques, is considered more important than research goals (Fowers, 2010); the experiences of individuals (devoid of their multiple contextual dimensions) are handled as aggregated points and evaluated against an external standard; as a

consequence, statistically presented reality (assumed to be true, as it is evidence-based) replaces real life (Danziger, 1990; Wissing, 2022).

These problems, together with other ones recently summarized in a thought-provoking review (van Zyl et al., 2023), are not specific to positive psychology; they are shared by most scientific disciplines grounded in the positivistic, quantitative and atomistic view of reality that characterizes Western tradition. However, research evidence from life sciences ceaselessly challenges this deterministic and fragmented view, raising issues that need to be seriously considered to advance science.

At the level of moment-by-moment functioning, besides focusing on cells or organs, anatomists and clinicians have paid increasing attention to the role of the interstitium (Benias et al., 2018), the micro-context in which cells are immersed, which represents a complex multicomponential structure actively interacting with cells, regulating their exchanges, influencing their behavior, and contributing to both health maintenance and disease spreading. Based on the analogy between cells and individuals, the daily micro-context (in its active interplay with the person) is a still neglected dimension in research dealing with human participants.

At the broader, evolutionary level, epigenetic variations endow living systems with impressive plasticity; compared to genetic mutations, these non-casual and much more frequent events occur in relation to specific environmental pressures, and they promote faster and more efficient adaptation to contextual challenges (Lind & Spagopoulou, 2018). Plasticity is a major strength in humans as well: it promotes lifelong learning; it allows individuals to develop vicarious functions in the face of a disabling disease; it supports creativity and innovation; over the millennia, it led to the development of the variety of languages, cultural rules and collective behaviors that distinguish human communities from each other. Studies in cultural neuroscience showed that the brain patterns detected through neuroimaging techniques are the result of the ceaseless interaction between the individual and the environment, rather than the mere product of genetics (Sasaki & Kim, 2017). Besides biology, culture – the macro-context – shapes the brain, as highlighted by a variety of comparative studies involving participants from different cultural backgrounds (Ishii et al., 2014). Even more striking, differences were detected in the brain structure of individuals with high socio-economic status – an intermediate context between the micro and macro –, compared to the average population belonging to the same culture (Lewinn et al., 2017).

The pervasive contribution of culture in shaping humans and their environment – through micro- to macro-manifestations – is substantiated by the increasingly growing anthropogenic mass, which refers to the number of human-made artifacts disseminated below and above the earth surface. During the last century the anthropogenic mass doubled every 20 years, gradually overcoming the biomass of all living entities; nowadays, the mass of artifacts produced in one week equates humans' weight (Elhacham et al., 2020). This ceaseless process brings about radical and often irreversible changes in the ecosystem.

In the current situation, with the planet and all its inhabitants facing alarming challenges, primarily caused by culturally driven human behaviors, a truly holistic, structurally contextualized, and post-disciplinary approach is necessary in any scientific field dealing with the present and future well-being of living systems (Smith et al., 2025). The need for broadening the view in positive psychology research, overcoming the 3rd wave towards the 4th wave outlined by Wissing (2022), has been recently endorsed by scholars proposing new perspectives, such as regenerative positive psychology (Steger, 2024) and sustainable well-being (Lomas, Pawelski, & VanderWeele, 2025). These new perspectives are, however, not operationalized in research yet. Their proper practical implementation implies the adoption of multi-faceted approaches to data collection and analysis, the active involvement of thinkers and scholars from non-western cultures, and a shift in the hierarchy of goals researchers in positive psychology aim to pursue – from quantity



to quality of results, from cross-cultural and polarized to contextually embedded and multi-componential interpretation of findings (Delle Fave et al., 2023).

Sustainable development as balance and integration

The need for an integrated, holistic approach to address the current planetary challenges is endorsed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, launched by the United Nations in 2015, during the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Organization (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The broad vision guiding the agenda, through an action plan, is to build a better world, through the promotion of human communities characterized by equality, peace, safety, prosperity, inclusion, safeguard of the natural ecosystem, and sustainability. This vision was articulated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), covering multiple aspects of the related action process, all of them interconnected and integrated.

Most SDGs are based on the principle of sustainability, indicating gradual progression towards desirable outcomes through a balance across different needs, rather than their complete fulfilment: for example, SDG1 refers to “Efforts to end poverty”; SDG 10 concerns “Reduction of inequality”; the following two goals regard sustainability of city/communities (SDG 11) and production/consumption (SDG 12). Other goals are instead presented as key requirements to be fully achieved, without emphasis on their sustainability and graduality: for example, “Zero hunger” (SDG 2), “Health and well-being for all” (SDG 3), “Gender equality” (SDG 4) and “Peace” (SDG 16).

The process leading to the achievement of SDGs necessarily implies a systemic as well as post-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approach, in which the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development are indivisible and interdependent of each other. Related interventions must be integrated as well, through coordinated work in complex contexts, with multiple partners involved in multiple network configurations. Harmonization and complementarity between these different components are critical requirements to achieve positive outcomes (Carugi & Bryant, 2020).

The same systemic and unifying vision inspires One Health, a collaborative initiative involving the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH). One Health is an integrated approach aimed at sustainably balancing and optimizing the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants and the wider environment, considered as closely linked and interdependent. The related action plan is focused on tackling threats to health and ecosystems, by addressing global challenges such as the emergence of infectious diseases, antimicrobial resistance, and food safety, and promoting the health and integrity of all ecosystems. One Health systemic strategy and related actions can and should be implemented at the community, subnational, national, regional and global levels; they rely on shared and effective governance, communication, collaboration and coordination. Having the One Health approach in place makes it easier for people to better understand the co-benefits, risks, trade-offs and opportunities to advance equitable and holistic solutions.

Harmony and balance as sustainable happiness: Research and policy implications

The brief outline provided in this paper elicits reflections and suggestions for future directions in research and policy. The global challenges that characterize the present historical period call for a more equal, ecologically appropriate, and sustainable use of the planetary resources, as declared and implemented through the SDGs and the OneHealth initiative. The same approach needs to be adopted in well-being promotion, as highlighted by a recent report (Gallup, 2023). Maximization of well-being is not an option anymore (Krys et

al., 2024), as it leads to inequalities, discrimination, privileges for few and misery for many. Only through the harmonization of resource distribution, the attainment of a dynamic balance between needs/goals and resources (Sirgy, 2019), the search for solutions to global problems shared across cultures and communities (Smith et al., 2025), the attention to the complexity and multidimensionality of reality from an integrated perspective (Wissing, 2022; Steger, 2024) will humans move towards a more harmonious future.

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Προς μια δυναμική και βιώσιμη θεώρηση της ευτυχίας

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ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ	ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ
Ευημερία Κουλτούρα Αρμονία Ισορροπία Βιώσιμη ανάπτυξη	Η πολυπλοκότητα της σύγχρονης παγκόσμιας κατάστασης καθιστά αναγκαία την ανάπτυξη νέων μοντέλων ψυχικής υγείας και ευημερίας. Η κυρίαρχη δυτική κοσμοθεωρία, που εστιάζει στην ευτυχία ως έναν ατομικό στόχο προς επίτευξη στο υψηλότερο δυνατό επίπεδο, χρειάζεται να δώσει χώρο στη σύλληψη και την επιχειρησιακή αποτύπωση της ευημερίας ως ενός πολυδιάστατου και δυναμικού κατασκευάσματος, το οποίο μεταβάλλεται ανάλογα με τα στάδια ζωής των ατόμων, τους κοινωνικούς τους ρόλους και τα πολιτισμικά πρότυπα και αξίες. Τα πρόσφατα ευρήματα που αναδεικνύουν την αρμονία και την ισορροπία ως κεντρικές διαστάσεις της ευτυχίας, τόσο στο ενδοψυχικό όσο και στο διαπροσωπικό επίπεδο, φωτίζουν τη δυνατότητα πρόωθης της ευημερίας ως μιας βιώσιμης και συν-κατασκευαζόμενης διαδικασίας, και όχι ως ενός αυτοαναφορικού στόχου. Η οπτική αυτή είναι ιδιαίτερα επίκαιρη σήμερα, καθώς ευθυγραμμίζεται ουσιαστικά με τους Στόχους Βιώσιμης Ανάπτυξης των Ηνωμένων Εθνών, οι οποίοι αποσκοπούν στην αντιστάθμιση των ανισοτήτων και της εξάντλησης των πόρων που απορρέουν από τη λογική της μεγιστοποίησης, μέσω της πρόωθης μιας πιο ισορροπημένης αλληλεπίδρασης του ανθρώπου με το φυσικό, κοινωνικό και πολιτισμικό του περιβάλλον.
ΕΠΙΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ	
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