Beyond Happiness: The Three Waves of Positive Psychology and the Future of Wellbeing

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This editorial explores the evolving landscape of positive psychology by tracing its development through three major waves and outlining emerging discussions toward a potential fourth. The first wave, launched in the late 1990s, emphasized individual strengths, positive emotions, and subjective wellbeing—largely shaped by Western epistemologies and dominated by quantitative, empirical methodologies. While foundational to the field, this wave has been critiqued for neglecting complexity, cultural diversity, and ethical concerns. In response, the second wave introduced a more dialectical understanding of wellbeing, integrating both positive and negative experiences and recognizing the transformative potential of adversity. This phase embraced contextual sensitivity, methodological pluralism, and cross-cultural considerations, fostering a more nuanced view of human flourishing. Building on these earlier developments, the third wave of positive psychology adopts a systems-level and interdisciplinary approach. It emphasizes interconnectedness, ecological and cultural contexts, spiritual dimensions, and social justice. This wave views wellbeing as a dynamic, relational, and ethically grounded phenomenon that transcends individual psychological states. Researchers increasingly engage in post-disciplinary collaborations, employing diverse methods to understand how flourishing unfolds across individuals, communities, and ecosystems. The editorial also highlights initial proposals for a fourth wave that aligns wellbeing science with global challenges such as sustainability, equity, and public health—framing flourishing as a shared responsibility in an interconnected world. Ultimately, this editorial calls for a reimagining of positive psychology as a science not just of personal happiness but of collective and sustainable wellbeing. By embracing complexity, humility, and global perspectives, future directions in the field can better serve the diverse needs of humanity and foster flourishing at both individual and societal levels.

Keywords: Positive psychology, wellbeing, flourishing, subjective wellbeing, hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing

The pursuit of happiness and wellbeing has historically been a central concern for philosophers, theologians, and, more recently, psychologists—particularly within the field of positive psychology—leading to diverse perspectives on its nature, sources, and cultivation. Over recent decades, scholars and practitioners have sought to conceptualize not only happiness but also wellbeing (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011a; Jarden & Roache, 2023), and more recently, flourishing (VanderWeele et al., 2025), to highlight their critical role in promoting psychological functioning, physical health, and mental wellbeing. Despite its widespread use and growing importance across disciplines and public discourse, wellbeing remains a contested and multidimensional concept. As Jarden and Roache (2023) note, wellbeing is both an ancient concern and a modern buzzword, embraced by fields ranging from psychology and education to economics and public policy. However, consensus on a precise definition remains elusive, with substantial differences between academic models and lay understandings.

While subjective wellbeing—a scientific term used to describe happiness—is typically defined through cognitive evaluations (such as life satisfaction) and emotional experiences (positive and negative feelings) related to one's life (Diener et al., 1999), wellbeing is a broader, dialectical meta-construct. It includes, but is not limited to, happiness and is often characterized by multiple dimensions of meaningful, connected, and healthy living (Renshaw & Arslan, 2016; Ruggeri et al., 2020). Wellbeing is widely conceptualized through both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions, assessing individuals' psychological, social, and emotional functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Diener, 2000). A recent conceptualization by Arslan and Coşkun (2025) highlights that eudaimonic wellbeing is a profound existential fulfillment that arises when individuals find meaning in their lives through alignment with their inner values, accept themselves in their entirety, and view life as a continuous journey of learning and transformation. This state of wellbeing is nurtured through the development of deep, meaningful relationships, engagement in activities that enrich one's life, and the cultivation of

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inner wholeness. Here, wellbeing is not merely about "feeling good," but about being in harmony with oneself and with life. In contrast, hedonic wellbeing refers to a state of experiential pleasure that arises when an individual experiences peace, joy, and emotional balance. This form of wellbeing involves appreciating the present moment, feeling alive and present, recognizing beauty in everyday life, and remaining open to positive experiences while accepting emotional ups and downs. The sense of happiness here is not superficial; it is nourished by sensory awareness and emotional depth, fostering a genuine joy in living.

Scholarly frameworks often emphasize meaning, relationships, and purpose, lay perspectives typically focus on mental health, feeling valued, and inner harmony. These divergences—along with cultural, generational, and disciplinary variations—complicate efforts to define, measure, and promote wellbeing in a unified manner (Jarden & Roache, 2023). Empirical evidence has also suggested that positive outcomes associated with happiness, wellbeing, and flourishing include improved academic functioning (Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Proctor et al., 2010), increased longevity (Danner et al., 2001), enhanced resilience in the face of adversity (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), reduced antisocial behavior (Demeter & Rad, 2020), healthier lifestyle choices (Proctor et al., 2010), greater prosocial behavior and more positive social relationships (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), as well as lower levels of psychological distress (Proctor et al., 2010). These findings collectively highlight the broad and multifaceted benefits of cultivating wellbeing across various domains of life.

With recent developments, this evolving and increasingly complex understanding of wellbeing has catalyzed the emergence of new directions in positive psychology—most notably, a third wave that seeks to move beyond the individual. This contemporary approach embraces greater complexity by broadening both the scope of wellbeing and the methodologies used to study it, placing increased emphasis on cultural context, systemic interdependence, and the ethical dimensions of human flourishing. The following section outlines the evolution of the three waves of positive psychology, highlighting their unique conceptual and methodological features.

First Wave: The Scientific of Strengths and Happiness

Positive psychology (PP) has emerged as the scientific study of the good and happy life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), aiming to understand and cultivate the psychological and contextual resources that contribute to human thriving (Arslan & Wong, 2022; Seligman, 2011b). Such an approach represents a shift away from the traditional focus of psychology on mental illness, abnormal behavior, and negative states (Arslan & Allen, 2020; Keyes, 2003). Rooted in the humanistic philosophies of Rogers and Maslow (Waterman, 2013), PP emphasizes happiness, wellbeing, and a sense of purpose. With this movement, researchers and practitioners began a systematic investigation into the factors that enable individuals and communities not only to endure adversity but to flourish (Wissing et al., 2022).

Initially, positive psychology—the first wave of the movement (PP 1.0), often referred to as the science of happiness—focused on positive emotions, character strengths, and to a lesser extent the institutions that cultivate them (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Officially inaugurated by Martin Seligman in his 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association (Seligman, 1999), this wave called for a renewed scientific focus on "what is right with people" rather than merely what is wrong (van Zyl & Salanova, 2022). The early foundations of this wave were laid with a special issue of American Psychologist in 2000, guest-edited by Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which brought together empirical work on positive emotions, character strengths, and life satisfaction (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Notably, the first wave was deeply rooted in an individualistic worldview, largely reflecting Western psychological traditions (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Wong, 2011). The first wave focused predominantly on internal traits, subjective experiences, and person-centered interventions. Despite debates around whether PP constituted a new discipline or paradigm, the movement rapidly gained momentum and empirical legitimacy (Rusk & Waters, 2013).

Early publications laid the conceptual foundation of this wave. Researchers focused on scientifically studying constructs such as life satisfaction, positive emotions, hope, character strengths, and gratitude (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). At this stage, subjective wellbeing (SWB)—often referred to as hedonic happiness—was a central concept (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999). Later, the field expanded to incorporate eudaimonic wellbeing, emphasizing meaning, purpose, and optimal functioning (Disabato et al., 2016; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). A defining feature of the first wave was its commitment to quantitative, empirical methods modeled after the natural sciences. There was a strong preference for experimental and statistical designs aimed at uncovering objective truths. This methodological stance largely ignored worldview assumptions, metatheoretical reflection, and alternative ways of knowing (Hamling et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2021; Wissing et al., 2022). The dominant epistemology was positivist, favoring data-driven insights over interpretive or contextual understanding. Hamling and colleagues (2020) warn of what they call an "epistemological fruit-salad," where methodologies from different paradigms are mixed without critically engaging their underlying assumptions. They argue for contextualized, paradigm-sensitive approaches in positive psychology to ensure interventions and understandings of wellbeing align with participants' worldviews and lived contexts.

Over time, research evolved from merely identifying the nature of wellbeing to examining its underlying mechanisms (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow; Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory) and developing interventions to enhance it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fredrickson, 2004). The work of scholars like Lyubomirsky, Seligman, Kashdan, Cameron and Sheldon contributed to evidence-based practices in education, society, and organizational settings. Despite its empirical rigor, the first wave of PP was limited by its epistemological assumptions. The movement largely neglected metatheoretical reflection, cultural diversity, and ethical considerations (Wissing et al., 2022). Research was dominated by quantitative methods, with a strong preference for experimental designs aimed at establishing causality and generalizability—often at the cost of contextual sensitivity (van Zyl & Salanova, 2022). For example, van Zyl et al. (2024) examined current critiques of positive psychology, suggesting that it: (a) lacked conceptual clarity and adequate theorizing; (b) faced

measurement and methodological issues; (c) was perceived as pseudoscientific, with poor replication and insufficient evidence; (d) lacked novelty and remained isolated from mainstream psychology; (e) represented a harmful, decontextualized neoliberal ideology; and (f) was driven by capitalist interests. Moreover, the field operated under unacknowledged worldview assumptions rooted in individualism, positivism, and the belief in objective, value-free science. As such, mainstream positive psychology research has largely been conducted within WEIRD contexts—Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic—thereby overlooking the voices, needs, and perspectives of the global majority (Hendriks et al., 2018).

In summary, the first wave of positive psychology can be characterized as follows (Wissing et al., 2022):

- A strong emphasis on strength-based, individual-focused inquiry.

- The prioritization of subjective and eudaimonic wellbeing constructs.

- The dominance of quantitative methodologies and natural science models.

- Minimal attention to culture, context, ethics, and pluralism.

- A tendency to ignore or isolate other parallel approaches (e.g., humanistic psychology, quality of life research).

While this wave laid a crucial foundation for the science of wellbeing, its limitations eventually led to critical reflection and the emergence of more integrative and context-sensitive approaches in the second and third waves of positive psychology.

Second Wave: The Dark Side of Human Nature

The first wave has been criticized for neglecting the more complex and painful dimensions of human experience—such as suffering, loss, and existential concerns—that also play a crucial role in psychological growth and wellbeing (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; P. T. P. Wong, 2011). In response to these critiques, the second wave of positive psychology (PP 2.0) emerged, integrating both positive and negative dimensions of life. Drawing on the dialectical principles of *yin* and *yang*, PP 2.0 seeks to highlight the positive potential inherent in confronting life's challenges (Wong, 2019). Thus, the second wave arose as a response to both external and internal critiques of the first wave's uncritical celebration of the "positive" at the expense of the "negative". This second wave marked a turning point by explicitly recognizing that both positive and negative experiences are essential to understanding wellbeing (Lomas et al., 2015). Scholars such as Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014), Lomas and Ivtzan (2016), and Wong (2011) emphasized that human flourishing is not the absence of adversity, but often arises through the dialectical interplay of light and shadow—joy and sorrow, success and suffering.

This second wave brought contextual sensitivity into the field, asserting that the meaning and value of psychological constructs—like forgiveness, self-esteem, or optimism—are not universal but culturally and situationally bound. For instance, forgiveness may promote healing in healthy relationships but be harmful in abusive

ones (Reed & Enright, 2006). Similarly, positive self-esteem is celebrated in Western contexts but may be less central or even problematic in collectivist cultures, such as Turkish and Chinese (Joshanloo et al., 2014; Kagitcibasi, 2017; Wang & Ollendick, 2001). The second wave of PP also moved away from rigid dichotomies of good versus bad traits and emphasized the complexity and ambiguity of human experiences. This wave acknowledged that wellbeing could involve ambivalence, paradox, and mixed emotions (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Wissing et al., 2022). Researchers increasingly adopted constructivist, interpretive, and qualitative methodologies alongside traditional quantitative approaches, reflecting a shift in epistemological and metatheoretical assumptions. Holistic models like Wong's dual-systems theory (Wong, 2012) and Lomas et al.'s LIFE model (Lomas et al., 2015) exemplified this integrative spirit, offering frameworks that accommodate complexity, meaning-making, and cross-cultural validity.

Wissing et al. (2022) summarized the characteristics of the second wave of positive psychology as follows:

- A dialectical view of positive and negative experiences as intertwined and mutually informative.

- A focus on cultural, situational, and linguistic contexts in shaping wellbeing.

- A turn toward holistic and multidimensional models of human flourishing.

- Methodological pluralism, including mixed methods and qualitative inquiry.

- A recognition of multiple worldviews and the value-laden nature of psychological science.

Overall, this wave did not discard the achievements of the first wave but rather deepened and refined its understanding of wellbeing—laying the groundwork for the broader, systemic vision of the emerging third wave.

Third Wave: Broadening Towards Complexity and Systems

Recently, many researchers have suggested that we are currently in the third wave of positive psychology ([PP 3.0]; Lomas et al., 2021; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2020; van Zyl & Salanova, 2022). Rather than discarding the gains of its predecessors, this new phase builds upon two first waves by widening the lens even further. Third-wave approaches emphasize contextualism, interdisciplinarity, systems, and cultural sensitivity (Lomas et al., 2021). These approaches consider not only individual traits and internal processes but also the socio-ecological and spiritual contexts in which people live.

The third wave of positive psychology represents a further evolution of the field, building upon—but also moving beyond (Lomas et al., 2021)—the first wave's emphasis on strengths and happiness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and the second wave's dialectical inclusion of suffering (Wong, 2019). This new third wave highlights contextualization, interconnectedness, and epistemological openness. Wellbeing is no longer viewed as a purely individual or psychological state, but as a multi-layered, relational, and systemic phenomenon shaped by ecological, spiritual, cultural,

and political forces. A defining feature of PP 3.0 is its commitment to complexity: the recognition that wellbeing is "woven together" with biological, psychological, social, environmental, and spiritual domains (Lomas et al., 2021; Wissing et al., 2022). This phase also integrates concepts such as social justice, ecological sustainability, spirituality/transcendence, and ethics of care into the very fabric of wellbeing theory and practice.

Researchers and theorists in this wave argue that previous assumptions of value-free, universal models of wellbeing are insufficient. Scholars such as Martino et al. (2018), Lomas (2018) call for a cos-modern and relational ontology, where human flourishing is understood as deeply interwoven with others, the natural world, and the transcendent. The third wave further acknowledges the moral and philosophical underpinnings of wellbeing—drawing on virtue ethics, contemplative traditions, and indigenous worldviews. Further, methodologically, PP 3.0 favors pluralism: qualitative methods, mixed-method designs, participatory and action-based research, and transdisciplinary collaboration are embraced (Hamling et al., 2020). Psychology no longer works in isolation but in concert with fields such as philosophy, sociology, environmental studies, theology, and public health (Lomas et al., 2021; Wissing et al., 2022). Therefore, wellbeing is increasingly framed from an interdisciplinary perspective as a shared endeavor involving mutuality, participation, liberation, and justice.

Similar to the first and second waves, Wissing et al. (2022) emphasized the following characteristics of the third wave of positive psychology:

- A systems-level understanding of wellbeing that includes individuals, communities, institutions, and ecosystems.

- Integration of spirituality and transcendence as core dimensions of flourishing.

- A shift toward ethical, contextual, and relational worldviews, replacing individualistic and decontextualized models.

- Advocacy for multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary approaches.

- Emphasis on post-disciplinary collaboration, methodological diversity, and epistemological humility.

By embracing the complex, messy, and dynamic nature of human life, the third wave expands the mission of positive psychology—making it more inclusive, culturally responsive, and attuned to the global challenges of our time.

Building on the complexity, systems, and contextual sensitivity emphasized in the third wave, emerging discussions are beginning to envision a fourth wave of positive psychology. Mangelsdorf (2024) introduces the notion of "globality" as the defining theme of this wave. This emerging paradigm seeks to bridge positive psychology with urgent global challenges, including ecological, health, and humanitarian crises. Mangelsdorf argues that while positive psychology initially emerged from an individualistic and Western framework, its evolving mission now includes supporting personal and collective development in service of broader systemic change. By aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and incorporating the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), this fourth wave could position

wellbeing not only as a personal pursuit but also as a lever for global transformation. Such a direction points to a more ethically grounded, sustainability-oriented, and socially responsive vision of flourishing.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

The current editorial set out to examine the evolving landscape of positive psychology, with the aim of tracing its development across three waves and advocating for a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded science of happiness, wellbeing, and flourishing. By revisiting the foundational assumptions of the field, this editorial has highlighted both the achievements and the limitations of the first and second waves, while emphasizing the emerging contours of a third wave that embraces complexity, pluralism, and global relevance. Over the past two decades, the study of happiness, wellbeing, and more recently flourishing within positive psychology has evolved significantly—from an initial focus on strengths and optimism to a broader engagement with meaning, context, and social justice. The first wave emphasized empirical rigor and the pursuit of happiness as an individual experience; the second wave introduced critical nuance through dialectical thinking, acknowledging the interplay of light and shadow in wellbeing. Now, the third wave challenges us to adopt systemic, ethical, and relational perspectives. Although not yet fully established, a potential fourth wave has been proposed, envisioning a concerted effort to bridge the gap between pressing global challenges and the research and practice of positive psychology.

This progression signals a maturing science—one that moves beyond simply asking, "How can we be happier?" toward the more complex question, "How can we flourish, sustainably, together?" In a world marked by inequality, uncertainty, and ecological fragility, third wave positive psychology calls for an expanded lens—one that embraces complexity, systems, humility, and care. The future of happiness, wellbeing and flourishing research and practice depends not only on what we study, but also on how we study it—and for whom. The third wave reminds us that happiness is not a fixed formula but a dynamic, evolving pursuit—deeply embedded in our histories, cultures, relationships, and collective aspirations for a better world. Therefore, it is essential to understand wellbeing within its contextual settings and globally and to shift the focus from the *Minority World to the Majority World* (i.e., populations outside of Western countries), to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how happiness and wellbeing are measured and promoted.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

being and its societal foundations helped establish happiness as a credible and vital topic in both academic and policy contexts.

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