



Editorial: The Year to go Beyond

Lambert, L., & Warren, M. A.

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Abstract: It would be an understatement to say that 2020 was a stressful year. The COVID-19 pandemic has upended livelihoods in a way that few could imagine: from mental health issues, employment losses and academic disruptions, to growing poverty, political extremism and unrest. Just as focusing on the negative alone could never offer a full and meaningful life, so must positive psychologists examine the systematic factors that make it difficult for individuals to thrive as social beings towards the common good. In short, positive psychology must be harnessed to create more peaceful, stable, socially just and ethically led sustainable societies: the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the way forward. The attainment of the SDGs makes wellbeing easier to reach: the correlation between life satisfaction and the SDGs overall is .79. This relationship puts their attainment within the scope of researchers and practitioners and we urge both groups to become acquainted with the SDGs and what they entail and how these can be made a priority through the research, advocacy and practise work of positive psychologists.

ملخص: سيكون من التقليل قولاً إن عام 2020 كان عامًا مرهقًا. لقد قلب جائحة COVID-19 سبل العيش بطريقة لم يتخيلها سوى القليل: من قضايا الصحة العقلية، وفقدان الوظائف، والاضطرابات الأكاديمية، إلى تزايد الفقر، والتطرف و الاضطراب السياسي. مثلما لا يمكن للتركيز على السلبية وحدها أن يوفر حياة كاملة وذات مغزى، كذلك يجب على علماء النفس الإيجابي فحص العوامل المنهجية التي تجعل من الصعب على الأفراد الازدهار ككائنات اجتماعية نحو الصالح العام. باختصار، يجب تسخير علم النفس الإيجابي لخلق مجتمعات مستدامة أكثر سلامًا واستقرارًا وعادلة اجتماعيًا وأخلاقية: أهداف الأمم المتحدة للتنمية المستدامة (SDGs) هي الطريق إلى الأمام. إن تحقيق أهداف التنمية المستدامة يجعل الوصول إلى الرفاهية أسهل: الارتباط بين الرضا عن الحياة وأهداف التنمية المستدامة بشكل عام هو .79. تضع هذه العلاقة تحقيقهم في نطاق الباحثين والممارسين ونحث كلا المجموعتين على التعرف على أهداف التنمية المستدامة وما تتطوي عليه وكيف يمكن جعلها أولوية من خلال البحث والدعوة وممارسة عمل علماء النفس الإيجابي.

It would be an understatement to say that 2020 was a confusing, worrisome, stressful and eventful year. The COVID-19 virus has upended livelihoods in a way that few could imagine, and the damaging toll has not yet shown its full effect. From mental health issues, employment losses, academic disruptions at the individual level to growing poverty, political extremism, and unrest at the societal level, the role of positive psychology (and psychology overall) has never been more salient. While we navigate the coming months, if not years, 2020 will be remembered as the year it all changed - and hopefully, for the best.

Our mission in this year's *Perspectives* article (Lambert et al., this issue) is to make the case that for all of us to arrive at a better future in the coming years, attention to the broader picture is imperative. We propose that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) be the way forward. As



psychologists and positive psychologists in particular, we must go beyond the individual. Our strategies can only do half the job if we merely focus on helping individuals attain better versions of themselves. Importantly, many of the challenges we currently face may be experienced at the individual level (e.g., anxiety) but are caused because of problems at the societal level (e.g., social unrest). Just as focusing on the negative alone could never offer a full and meaningful life, so must we examine the systematic factors that make it difficult for individuals to thrive as social beings towards the common good. In short, positive psychology must be harnessed to create more peaceful, stable, socially just, ethically led, sustainable societies.

Topic Box: Global Emotions Report

Daily emotions in 145 countries are tracked by Gallup's Global Emotions Report (2020). It highlights which nations have thriving populations, and tracks both negative and positive emotional experiences.

The Negative Experiences Index is a score of individuals reporting anger, worry, sadness, stress, and/or physical pain the day prior. In contrast, the Positive Experiences Index is a score of individuals reporting feeling well rested, being treated with respect, smiling and/or laughing, learning something of interest, and experiencing positive emotions the day prior. Scores range from 0 to 100. Index scores reflect the mean of all "yes" responses to the items multiplied by 100. Higher scores indicate that positive or negative emotions are pervasive.

Nations reporting the greatest positive experiences on a daily basis can be found in Latin America (e.g. Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala), while those reporting the lowest negative emotional experiences include Estonia, Vietnam, Kazakhstan and Malaysia.

To illustrate our point, we take the case of Lebanon, specifically highlighted in Gallup's Global Emotions (2020) Report. From the period of 2018 to 2019, Lebanese nationals reported the biggest drop in positive emotion (down by 12 points), and biggest increase in negative emotion (up by 18 points) of 145 nations. They reported more than double their previous rates of sadness and anger, and new highs in worry, stress, and reports of physical pain. Only 4% said they were 'thriving'; that is, scoring 7 or more on positive views of their present life situation and, 8 or more on their positive views of the next five years. These rates are expected to worsen in the 2021 report when the effects of COVID-19, a dire economic and employment situation, even greater political instability and mass protests, as well as the aftermath of the Beirut explosion of August 4th are factored. To take a purely psychological approach to such distress would be to pathologize negative emotions and overlook its important structural causes.

The Report further describes the Negative Experiences Index, increasing globally since 2014. The country at the top of the list includes Iraq (51), which scores highest in the world for experiences of anger the day prior. As contributing factors, it also has the lowest approval ratings for its leadership among all nations (a slim 22% in 2018, which dropped to 13% in 2019). This was reflected in the record numbers of protests, with nine in 10 Iraqis identifying rampant government corruption as a major issue. Lebanon is next on the Negative Experience Index at 48, with Tunisia



(46), and Iran (45) trailing. The lowest scoring nations on the Positive Experiences Index also include Egypt and Yemen with scores of 56, Tunisia at 54, and Afghanistan at 38, with the latter dropping consecutively for the third year in a row. These nations are continuing to experience political and economic instability, with many severely underdeveloped, at war, and/or crumbling under the immediate and protracted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Admittedly, few psychologists or positive psychologists are acquainted with the SDGs, and many assume these are beyond the purview of our field. They are not. The United Nations proposed 17 sustainable development goals, many of which are directly or indirectly tied to the wellbeing of individuals and societies. The goals apply to all nations and include the reduction of poverty, improvement of gender equality, the provision of decent work and economic growth, climate action, peace, and justice. Better health and wellbeing (SDG3) is a goal in itself, as well as a precursor to, and outcome of the achievement of the other goals. Psychologists must step up and meet the social challenges that affect individuals, families, and communities the world over.

In this World Happiness Report, DeNeve and Sachs (2020) analyzed the relationship between the SDGs and wellbeing. Nations are measured on their progress towards meeting the goals according to the SDG Index and Gallup World Poll (GWP). Nations with high index scores do better on the six GWP determinants of wellbeing, i.e., social support, trust in government, income, generosity, freedom to live one's life, and health. The attainment of the SDGs makes wellbeing easier to reach: the correlation between life satisfaction and the SDGs overall is .79. This relationship puts their attainment within the scope of researchers and practitioners; sustainability makes everyone happier, and reciprocally, wellbeing makes the SDGs easier to attain.

The SDGs are not simply the lofty goals of naïve idealists; they are crucial to our very survival and not at some distant point in the future, but now. Even more important than the pandemic, the next coming wave of societal turbulence will likely be of an ecological nature. The number of climate refugees is growing at a rapid pace, and the links between climate change and emotional states like depression and anxiety are well established (Burke et al., 2018; Cianconi et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). Natural and political disasters are occurring with greater frequency and exacerbating a lack of access to water, food, education and employment, fueling further strife. While everyone suffers to a degree during disasters, those who are already vulnerable (e.g., those living in poverty, women), suffer even more (Wamue-Ngare et al., under review; Warren & Bordoloi, 2020). If there is one thing the pandemic has shown, a difficult yet recurrent lesson we continue to fail to grasp, is that wellbeing cannot properly take root and be maintained if it is not equally available, and distributed among all of us.

While some may consider the turn towards systemic issues less “positive” than what is normally within our scope, we argue, what can be more positive than creating a better and flourishing world? Psychologists around the world, as well as researchers in all fields are already pressing forward on these issues. Accordingly, and because it is in all of our interests, we urge readers to think more boldly and consider that helping individuals adapt themselves to a broken model is an inefficient and unsustainable way to work. It is not merely people that need our services; it is also that systems need changing. While a hard stop is indeed not what anyone wanted, might it be what propels us to finally make the right changes?



There is one more event I (Lambert) wish to highlight from 2020: the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement signed between the United Arab Emirates and Israel (and at the time of writing, Bahrain and Morocco). The nature of such an agreement has left many feeling anger and confusion. I speak entirely for myself and ask: can we nurture the principles of positive psychology, to which we have committed ourselves, and espouse a stance of curiosity in its place? May we use this Agreement as an opportunity to learn from one another's experiences (as painful as they may be), to understand one another's worldviews (as diametrically opposed as they seem) and find ways to constructively move ahead towards something better (even though they have failed in the past). It is in that spirit that I have invited Dr. Shiri Lavy (*Perspectives* section), fellow positive psychology and character strengths researcher, faculty member at the University of Haifa, co-editor of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, mother of three (+ a dog), and wellbeing advocate to this platform.

At last, take a tour of the articles we present in this issue, but do check back in a few weeks. As COVID-19 has thrown a wrench in many schedules, a few manuscripts are still being feverishly finalized; thus, a rolling 2020 issue will capture those shortly. Until then, we wish you much courage in taking the steps needed to create a better world - you are needed now more than ever.

Dr. Louise Lambert
and
Dr. Meg A. Warren

Editors of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology

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