



Editorial: The Tasks Remain as Important as Ever for Positive Psychology

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We have grown accustomed to global events shaping our lives and influencing our work; perhaps this is a good thing. As positive psychologists, we are continuously tasked with investigating tough questions and lending our scientific insights to them. Positive psychology has gained much recognition in the past two decades and made significant contributions to an understanding of individuals and social flourishing. These have successfully led to the development of numerous interventions and programs that enhance wellbeing and reduce suffering, including here in the Middle East/North Africa region, where the field continues to grow (see Basurrah & Al-Haj Baddar, this issue). Still, there is much to do and there are several challenges and opportunities that researchers and practitioners can address in 2023 to advance the field as well as promote wellbeing in individuals, communities, and nations as a whole.

At a basic level, positive psychology's main task remains one of expanding and diversifying its research foundations. Much of it stems from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) samples (Hendriks et al., 2019; Henrich et al., 2010), which are not often representative of the broader population. It is necessary to study diverse populations and contexts, and this includes studying people from different cultural, economic, and social backgrounds, including from different religious traditions. An area where this work is prolific is in the investigation of cultural differences in the experience and expression of positive emotions and wellbeing. While some aspects of wellbeing are universal, cultural and social contexts shape how people experience and express positive emotions and wellbeing, including if they choose to do so at all (see Lambert et al., this issue). Some cultures place greater emphasis on group harmony and social connectedness, while others may value individual achievement and autonomy. Researchers and practitioners need to be mindful of these differences and ensure their work accounts for these unique cultural contexts.

Another challenge is the need to integrate findings from other disciplines. Positive psychology is not the only field concerned with wellbeing and human flourishing. Other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, as well as the organizational sciences and education (see Mayworm et al., this issue) have relevant research on these topics. By integrating findings, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of wellbeing and develop more effective interventions, particularly given as individuals interact across several domains at once. An example of this work includes exploring the impact of climate change on wellbeing. A global crisis that poses



a significant threat to human health and social wellbeing, the consequences of climate change such as extreme weather events, loss of habitat and biodiversity, and resource scarcity are growing, are still divorced from questions of human and societal flourishing.

To develop a full understanding of the relationship between climate change and wellbeing, researchers must work closely with other fields, such as environmental psychology and sustainability science. It is a complex issue that requires a multidisciplinary approach to develop interventions that promote resilience and adaptation to the changing environment, as well as interventions to raise awareness of the need for climate action and what individuals, groups as well as organizations can do towards immediate remediation. The United Nations Climate Change Conference, Conference of Parties (COP27) was recently held in Egypt, and COP28 is planned in December 2023 in the United Arab Emirates. This is an excellent avenue for positive psychologists to talk about wellbeing and climate change on a broader scale and address it in their research agendas.

In recent years and particularly since COVID-19, political divisions have worsened, with people on different sides of the political spectrum holding negative views of those on the other. This phenomenon is not unique to any one country and has the potential to negatively affect wellbeing via increased violence on a regional and global scale. Leading to increased conflict and decreased social cohesion, positive psychology researchers and practitioners must explore ways to promote community and national dialogue and find ways to bridge understandings across political divides, as well as promote social cohesion despite political differences.

Relatedly, inequality is also growing and takes many forms, including economic, racial, gender, social and health inequality arising because of the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, powers and privileges among individuals and groups. Inequality can have negative impacts on wellbeing, as those who are disadvantaged experience more stress and other negative mental health outcomes. It can also lead to feelings of injustice, frustration, and hopelessness, with dire implications for governments. Affording greater acts of dignity is one way forward (see Tiliouine, this issue) and may serve to promote greater equality, fairness, and inclusivity across all dividing lines.

Finally, and in addition to these challenges, researchers and practitioners in positive psychology need to be mindful of the rapidly advancing field of artificial intelligence (AI) and technology. ChatGPT for example, is a state-of-the-art natural language processing system developed by OpenAI that can generate human-like text based on any given input. In fact, this very editorial was written by both the Editor of the MEJPP and ChatGPT. While AI and technology have the potential to revolutionize many aspects of our lives, they also raise important ethical and social questions that need to be addressed, like their role in academia as well as the production and ownership of knowledge. Researchers and practitioners can play a role in understanding the psychological and social impacts (as well as employment concerns) of AI and technology and developing interventions that promote the responsible use and development of these tools.

Overall, positive psychology has made major strides in understanding and promoting wellbeing, including here in the MENA region. However, there remain both significant challenges as well as stellar opportunities on the horizon for researchers and practitioners to address to advance the field and promote wellbeing in individuals and communities. In a world of instant and near universal connectivity, our work, no matter how small or singular, is noticed and matters. In 2023, let us use that visibility and voice for the good. A very happy new year to all!



References

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