



Conference Review:

Thoughts on the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) Congress (July 18-21, 2019), Melbourne Australia

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About the Author: Ashley Green is a primary teacher from Scotland who expatriated to the Middle East almost 10 years ago. With a passion for wellbeing for all in the school community, she embarked on a master's degree in applied positive psychology and coaching at the University of East London whilst teaching and developing wellbeing in her school, JESS Dubai. Through her studies, she has created many resources to promote wellbeing, such as guided meditations on her website, www.mindfulteachinguae.com, and character strength cards which are currently being used by staff and students alike across Dubai.

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This congress, held by the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), promised to be bigger and better than previous years and as a delegate undergoing a masters in applied positive psychology and coaching (MAPPCCP) whilst teaching in the Middle East, I was not disappointed; this event gave it all in spades. Professor Lea Waters, a Melbourne native, delivered the record-breaking statistics of this year's event, which drew 1600 delegates to Australia from over 60 countries. This is no small feat; however, neither is the long list of achievements read aloud when introducing the most recent IPPA president – Professor Lea Waters, who is best known globally for her work in strength-based parenting (Waters, 2017). She promised to present us with a vast selection of keynotes, workshops, symposiums, presentations and posters which would include the most recent, exciting, scientific research in positive psychology (PP) from around the world. All of these offerings brought everyone together which was extremely apt given the main theme permeating the congress; relationships.

We were reminded by many speakers that the late and greatly missed, Dr. Christopher Peterson championed the importance of relationships, coining the term, “other people matter” as being at the heart of humanity. Many PP interventions are conducive to individual flourishing. However, the world will benefit when the transition from ‘me’ turns to ‘we.’ The always anticipated, Dr. Martin Seligman reiterated the theme of relationships alongside his wife, Mandy during his keynote. After taking us on a journey through the successful epochs of humanity,



Seligman declared that we now live in a time of material prosperity and emotional poverty. One only has to look at statistics from the World Health Organisation to confirm the rise of anxiety, depression, anger and suicidal thinking not only in adults but in young people. Possible reasons for this include the deterioration of relationships. Mandy Seligman proceeded to offer the solution of family units, whatever they might consist of, in an effort to 'bolster and buffer' one another, deepening relationships and transitioning from 'I' to 'we' in preparation for the future of humanity which according to Seligman is 'turning for the better and we shouldn't just observe this, but help turn the world.'

With a huge amount on offer, it was tricky as an eager attendee to choose which session to visit but a few heavyweights in the field were not to be missed. Dr. Sonia Lyubomirsky (The How of Happiness, 2007) revisited her famed happiness pie chart and comically reinforced the approximation of the pieces which over the years have been held to their hard numbers in many citations. Lyubomirsky shared recent research from her lab, focusing on moderators and mediators that underlie the success of well-being promoting strategies. For example, when measuring dosage as a moderator during kindness interventions, researchers found more changes in happiness from participants who carried out a kind act in a single day compared to those who carried out multiple acts on different days; interesting statistics for delegates to take back to their personal contexts.

With decades researching work engagement and beyond, Dr. Wilmar Schaufeli outlined the 'psychologization' of modern work with reference to the increased importance of mental capital and an engaged, motivated workforce. An important clarification was the difference between work engagement and workaholism - food for thought - and the call for more organization and workplace interventions.

Any PP event would not be complete without Dr. Barbara Fredrickson (Love 2.0, 2013), whose broaden and build theory and research on positive emotions is highly regarded in the field. Titled 'Other People Matter, 2+2', Fredrickson shared two new measures and two new studies of positivity resonance being carried out in her lab in the University of North Carolina, one of which found that empathic people become more important in social networks. With positive resonance being thwarted by text-based communication in current society, Fredrickson emphasized the need for micro interventions, such as putting down one's phone in the presence of others, and prioritizing small connections on a daily basis.

As a MAPP CP student and teacher keen on bringing positive psychology to the school community, there were some personal stand-out moments. With a particular interest in character strengths, the pre-congress workshop with Dr. Ryan Niemiec was invaluable. The session explained the benefits of strengths use for greater wellbeing and offered easily applicable, practical activities and ideas which could be applied to the school context. These can be useful in supporting those who have only just taken the VIA survey which lists one's strengths in order, and include for example, having cues around campus as reminders to employ one's signature strengths more often or in different contexts, as well as 'sea' strengths in others; that is, Spot, Explain, and Appreciate. David Kolpack from St. Peters Collage in Adelaide also offered a session on his school's character strengths journey. As a teacher, it was inspiring to be given a glimpse of the



blueprint which could be amended and applied to different school contexts. Kolpack also explained that 92% of their Year 6 students could name and define all 24 strengths after the integration of strengths into the curriculum!

The Middle East was also well represented at this year's congress, with many speakers establishing their place in the field of PP including the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) who shared best wellbeing practices and governmental changes to education within Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The audience was keen to learn about the student wellbeing survey that was used to measure overall student wellbeing in the Emirate over the last two years. KHDA also offered a teacher's workshop on how to utilise the data effectively, hopefully making adaptations and improvements to personal, social, health education programmes within schools. Dr Louise Lambert, Editor of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, led a thought provoking panel that led to much discussion and raised the question of adapting positive psychology interventions (PPIs) to be culturally appropriate to Islamic culture and traditions or whether the region should be striving to create their own PPI's as an extension of traditional Islamic psychology? It is an exciting conversation to be having in the respect that it highlights that the roots of positive psychology are finding their way in the soil of Middle East, and although growth is needed, much has been achieved in a short space of time.

In sum, the event's energy was high; being part of a group of people 1600 strong, one couldn't help but imagine the ripple effect within the 60 countries delegates travelled from. It is indeed an exciting time to be part of positive psychology when the field is growing at an accelerated rate, where established and up and coming researchers, including students are contributing to this growth. What I found most valuable as a classroom teacher was hearing other educators share their journeys; practical advice with which to embed positive psychology into the daily ecology and ethos of schools. The congress, my ongoing MAPPCP and work in the classroom, make for an exciting mix of opportunity. The next 2021 IPPA conference is in Vancouver, Canada where the Middle East, and hopefully myself, will have a plethora of exciting offerings to bring to the table.

Editor's note:

Several regional abstract presentations were given at the IPPA Congress. These included:

Hajra Hussain (American University of Sharjah, UAE): "Can you really switch off to switch on? Social Media and Addiction" (#231). Social media has become an integral part of our everyday lives. It has enabled individuals to create a sense of belonging and redefine their way of being. Numerous platforms have allowed users to create a community wherein individuals share their daily activities, and much more, with people across the globe, at any given time. This community is growing at great speed, the number of social media users worldwide is approximately 3.196 billion – this increase is 13% year-on-year (Global Web Index, 2018). There are numerous benefits to social media usage – despite this, there is a dark side. For many, we don't realize how much time we spend scrolling through digital feeds, photos and walls. Increasing concerns have been raised about the negative impact on the excessive use of social networking sites on users health and wellbeing, especially that of young people, who are enthusiastic users of this technology. There are now many issues that are correlated with social media, such as the development of



Social Media and Social Anxiety Disorder, as well as low self-esteem. So, how can we protect ourselves from these potential issues? The question is how can we embrace and engage with social media in a positive way?

Milad Hadchiti (Humanship, Beirut, Lebanon): “Positive Media: Bringing Positive Psychology to the Masses” (#61). The awareness of mental health issue is rapidly increasing, and hence, healthcare professionals are now striving to lower the stigma and provide comprehensive care in Lebanon. Additionally, in a small country like Lebanon, with a massive load of political, social and economic crisis, not only the Lebanese citizens are mentally suffering, but also the millions of refugees who migrated due to war-related problems. As a positive psychology coach and TV host, Milad Hadchiti has used media to enhance people’s wellbeing through prime time TV with a show entitled the “The Moment”. This show included social experiments, techniques, interviews and guides on how to achieve resilience and emotional agility, as well as stories of empowerment from well-known public figures and movie stars in Lebanon. Moreover, the response to the show was highly positive as it was trending on social media with high engagement from the audience, due to the effect it had in them. The moment was able to provide comfort and happiness to its audience with positive messages and heartfelt stories.

Milad Hadchiti (Humanship, Beirut, Lebanon): “The Impact of War in the Middle East on Journalists: Navigating Compassion Fatigue, Resilience, and Constructive Media” (#346). Compassion fatigue has gone unnoticed by journalists in the Middle East as they are exposed to high levels of war and violence. They are amongst the highest rate of burnout in their profession. Unfortunately, due to their fieldwork, they rarely have the opportunity to express their emotions which has become challenging in recent times and created a lessening of compassion and moral dilemma depending on the conflict stimulus. We conducted three workshops for 30 journalists in two geographical areas in Lebanon. These sessions focused on strength-based resilience, mindfulness, emotional awareness, self-regulation and self-care. These sessions aimed at helping journalists identify compassion fatigue and learn how to avoid it through various methods. The effectiveness of the session was notable among the journalists who expressed the importance of such topics in their training. Compassion fatigue should be a part of the journalism curriculum to prepare future journalists on the different traumatic events they may encounter; this may eventually enhance their wellbeing and professional quality of life.

Nada Salha (Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), UAE): “Improving Wellbeing in Schools in Dubai: Through Measurement and Collaboration” (#768). Aligned with the aim to be the world’s happiest city, the Government of Dubai’s Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) has embarked on a large-scale agenda of measuring and improving the wellbeing of students and staff at its 200+ private schools. In November 2017, KHDA commenced a five-year project of an annual wellbeing census of its middle year students, in collaboration with the South Australian Government. Senior students were added in the second year of the Census. In response to school staff requests, KHDA commenced an adult wellbeing survey in November 2018, based on the PERMAH survey of Dr Peggy Kern and Michelle McQuaid. This poster presents the results of the first two years of the Dubai Student Wellbeing Census and the first year of the Adults@School Wellbeing Survey. In its second year, about



100,000 students participated in the Census making it one of the largest youth wellbeing surveys in the world. Significant differences have been observed across Dubai's students, reflecting variances in cultural background, gender and age. The poster will also reflect on collaboration across the school community with schools sharing ideas, challenges and successes for improving the wellbeing of students and staff.

Abdulla AlKaram (Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), UAE): “Changing Minds, Changing Hearts” (#58). It might seem like a daunting task to motivate private schools to support a shared vision for positive education, particularly when that sector is made up of 17 disparate curricula and students from 182 nationalities. Yet, through the lens of wellbeing, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai is doing just that. Through this lens, the purpose of education has become to prepare students for the tests of life, rather than a life of tests. Through this lens, positive education is no longer just an optional extra, but the foundation of high quality teaching and learning. KHDA's latest projects - Dubai Student Wellbeing Census and the Adults@School Wellbeing Survey are further steps in a wellbeing journey that began more than five years ago. Together, these two initiatives measure the wellbeing of 120,000 students, teachers, principals and school administrators in Dubai, providing the world's largest cross-cultural data set of wellbeing in education. During this talk, Dr Abdulla will share what KHDA has learned in trying to institute behavioural change at scale, and how the most effective form of change is the type that we make to ourselves.

Sutapa Bridgman (Speakfluence, UAE): “Future Proofing through CIQ and VI Formula” (#445). Communication Intelligence quotient (CIQ) is a key success skill to future proof any practice or business. The best strategy to acquire this skill is the development of Communication Intelligence as “a practice or habit” that requires daily mindful, intentional effort and scheduled priority. To differentiate ourselves, we must maximize our human skill of communication. In this workshop, learn the science of verbal and non-verbal communication, proven methodology and "formula" on how to advocate with persuasion using the power frequency of words and apply practical methods that will bolster your ability to speak with impact for personal success.

Hommaira Kabir (Muscat, Oman): “Addressing Implicit Beliefs for Greater Gender Diversity at the Top” (#165). Numerous studies suggest that despite the time, money and effort invested in women's leadership development programs, the numbers at the top have stayed largely stagnant over the past decade. This workshop will suggest why this may be so by differentiating between two overtly similar but largely different constructs of high self-esteem - Optimal Self-Esteem (OSE) and Fragile Self-Esteem (FSE). It will bring a new perspective on why the current programs are ineffective, or building the latter at best. As a result, many high-achieving women know they are competent, but fear speaking up or taking risks and shut down with failure or criticism. The workshop will then outline an approach to build implicit feelings of confidence that is largely absent in most professional development programs. It will translate the research on OSE into practical strategies that women can take to show up with greater authenticity, an essential need of women in the mid to later stages of their careers. Diversity at the top is an urgent need of our times. As such, this workshop will be about connecting cognitive models with affective models in order to bridge the gap at the top and help build a pipeline of strong female leadership.



Aisha AlHammadi (Qatar University, Qatar): “Promoting Well-Being Through Character Strength-Based Intervention at Qatar University” (#508). This study evaluated the effectiveness of a strengths-based psychological intervention specifically tailored for use with university students in Qatar. The intervention involved a cross-cultural adaptation of Character Strengths interventions to target cognitive and affective dimensions of well-being. The sample consisted of 131 participants from Qatar University (93 females and 38 males). From these, 43 participated in two intervention groups (individual counselling intervention and group counselling intervention) and 88 were enrolled in four non-intervention groups. The instruments used in this study were: The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), and the Global Assessment of Character-Strengths-24 (GACS-24). Participants in the individual counselling intervention attained the highest posttest mean scores in the SWLS and Positive Affect Schedule, and they were noted to be the only group whose posttest mean score in the Negative Affect Schedule decreased as compared to the pretest mean score. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) showed a significant effect related to the Intervention Type on the SWLS Pretest Score. No main effects were noted for either age or gender. For investigating the impact of the intervention, a series of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) analyses were conducted.

Louise Lambert (United Arab Emirates University, UAE): “PPIs Boost Wellbeing, but What Else? Visiting Questions of Culture” (#644). Wellbeing has become an increasingly important priority worldwide. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), much research and financial investment is being committed to increasing wellbeing. However, in science and practice, what constitutes wellbeing and how it is construed by individuals is not yet completely understood and can lead to wasted resources when taken for granted. In particular, fear of happiness and beliefs in its fragility challenge dominant Western views that happiness is desirable and actively pursued by all. How these lay beliefs impact individuals’ levels of happiness has not been well-explored. Accordingly, we sought to determine the relationships between mental health functioning, positive emotion, flourishing, cultural beliefs in the fear of happiness and fragility of happiness, boosters of physical health like physical activity and levels of reported sleep as well as demographics such as age and gender. Using a sample of 834 Emirati university students in the UAE, fear and fragility of happiness were used to develop wellbeing profiles. We found three distinguishable profiles: ‘unstable, moderate wellbeing,’ ‘fearful, moderate wellbeing,’ and ‘stable, high wellbeing.’ This is one of few studies to show that both beliefs in the fear and fragility of happiness are related to lower subjective wellbeing and tend to cluster with other behavioural and attitudes factors, such that physical health indicators like physical activity and sleep were associated with greater subjective wellbeing and more stable wellbeing profiles.

Louise Lambert (Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, UAE) and **Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi** (Texas, USA): “Developing a Middle East Positive Psychology” (#167). The move towards greater global wellbeing is growing at a rapid pace. Most recently, this move has witnessed the development of two research centers in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. An academic journal continues to thrive in the region, while a new positive psychology textbook was recently launched specifically geared towards the region. These developments, among many, are not only promising for the continued growth of regional wellbeing research from which we can learn about the



contributing factors to a life well lived; they can also inspire the development of a regional positive psychology that incorporates aspects of culture and religion, as well as issues of national development. In this panel, multiple guest speakers discuss, explore and push the envelope of the next necessary steps to developing a regional positive psychology. We explore initiatives in commercial happiness, positive education, Islamic positive identity, Islamic character strengths and virtues, as well as national and organizational accounts of wellbeing currently underway. We conclude with future aims and discuss with some of the barriers to our work and how these can be addressed as a positive psychology community.