

The Journal of Positive Psychology

Dedicated to furthering research and promoting good practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpos20>

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To cite this article: Tim Lomas , Lea Waters , Paige Williams , Lindsay G. Oades & Margaret L. Kern (2020): Third wave positive psychology: broadening towards complexity, The Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/17439760.2020.1805501](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1805501)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1805501>



Published online: 10 Aug 2020.



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Third wave positive psychology: broadening towards complexity

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ABSTRACT

The development of academic fields is often described through the metaphor of ‘waves.’ Following the instantiation of positive psychology (the first wave), scholarship emerged looking critically at the notions of positive and negative, becoming known as its second wave. More recently, we discern an equally significant evolution, namely scholarship that in various ways goes beyond the individual and embraces greater complexity. This includes going beyond the individual *person* as the primary focus of enquiry to look more deeply at the groups and systems in which people are embedded. It also involves becoming more interdisciplinary and multicultural, and embracing a wider range of methodologies. We submit that these interrelated ripples constitute a form of epistemological ‘broadening’ that merit the label of an incoming ‘third wave.’ This paper identifies the key dynamics of this wave, allowing appreciation not only of the field’s leading edge, but also its developmental potential into the future.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 March 2020
Accepted 24 July 2020

KEYWORDS

Positive psychology;
scholarship development;
wave metaphor; paradigms

It is over 20 years since Martin Seligman officially initiated the field of positive psychology (PP) in 1998 (in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association). With PP now moving into its third decade, it is an opportune moment to consider how the field has developed – and more intriguingly – how it might evolve from here. In delving into these issues, this paper will invoke the metaphor of ocean ‘waves,’ a common way of tracing patterns of development within scholarship (e.g., Hofmann et al., 2010). We begin by considering the wave metaphor itself, before briefly introducing the first two waves of PP. The paper then explores the dynamics of what appear to be an emergent third wave. We suggest that this new wave involves going ‘beyond the individual,’ and embracing greater complexity in various ways. More specifically, these ways constitute forms of epistemological broadening, both in terms of scope and methodologies. We therefore present these two aspects of the third wave over two sections: one pertaining to scope (featuring four examples of broadening) and one pertaining to methodologies (featuring three examples of broadening). First, though, we will foreground these sections by introducing the wave metaphor itself.

The metaphor of waves

We use the idea of ocean waves as an evocative metaphor to represent progress in PP. In contrast to formulations such as Wong’s (2011) notion of PP 2.0, which

suggests punctuated stages and stepwise change, waves represent dynamic fluidity. Much as we have been influenced by Wong’s pioneering work, we do not see the evolution of PP as having strict developmental phases with clearly delineated boundaries. Instead, we prefer to view the progression of the field in terms of overlapping yet separate waves, with each wave taking its own shape while still drawing from the same deep ocean. The metaphor furthermore lends itself to creative elaboration – as we explore below – which allows us to engage imaginatively with the field’s progress, thereby helping us better conceptualise and articulate its dynamics of development over the past two decades and into the future.

In physical terms, waves do not represent the horizontal movement of water per se, but rather energy pulses that pass through the water, moving it vertically. Let us imagine our culture – the field of psychology more narrowly, and the marketplace of ideas more broadly – as the body of water in which we humans psychologically ‘swim’. These energy pulses (i.e., waves) constitute ideas, animating the water and coalescing into visible rolling movement. Thus, people do not ‘belong’ to any particular wave, but rather may be energised by, and moved to contribute to, the passing waves. Some people, like swimmers or surfers, might choose to embrace and harness the dynamics of a given wave, whereas others might choose or be compelled to more passively be moved by the shifting waters around them.

Furthermore, people can contribute to and even help create these waves. As we play vigorously in the water of culture, our actions can energise passing waves. Those who make a big enough cultural splash might even create a wave themselves. The decision by Seligman and colleagues to instantiate the paradigm of PP could be deemed one such instance of wave creation. Considerable work and research on the good life already existed within academic waters, but the establishment of an official field created an energy pulse that generated the field of PP as we know it today. Others might not make an action that is large or significant enough to create a wave per se, but their contribution can yet make a ripple, which affects others and builds energy, cumulatively creating a wave. The second and third waves of the field are instances of the latter; no single figure, event, or moment has heralded either of these waves; rather they arise from the semi-co-ordinated and inter-linked actions of multiple people around the world.

Lastly, to add one final layer to the metaphor, beneath the surface phenomenon of waves, oceans also exhibit deeper, slower, and more durable forms of movement. These include the cyclical ebb-and-flow of tides, patterns of currents, and even – over much longer time frames – the changing shape of the ocean itself due to geological factors (e.g., tectonic shifts). In that respect, just as ocean waves are rather brief and fleeting, so too do academic waves span relatively short periods of time, measured often merely in years and, at most, decades. We can then appreciate that beneath these waves are deeper forms of movement operating over longer time frames, lasting centuries and even millennia. In considering the deep cultural context in which PP emerged, one might, for instance, point broadly to the post-Enlightenment age that has been gradually unfolding since the 17th century. This era has been characterised by increasing secularisation in many places (particularly the West), with gradual loss of faith in religious institutions and narratives, together with an erosion of belief in the possibility of achieving wellbeing through spiritual salvation (McMahon, 2006). The same period has also seen the emergence and eventual dominance of scientific methods and discourses, with these arguably replacing religion as the pre-eminent mode of understanding the world in many contexts, including with respect to phenomenon such as wellbeing (Ahmed, 2010). Such are the deeper currents of movement underlying the various waves discussed here.

We acknowledge that not all people in the field might appreciate this wave notion, perhaps fearing that it implies that new waves somehow de-value earlier waves. We do not see it this way however: one wave does not devalue or replace another, in our view; rather,

preceding waves create the conditions for the next. As such, earlier work provides the impetus for the next wave, whereby later waves do not negate previous work, but rather build upon and accentuate it. Each wave, after all, is part of the same deep ocean.

Indeed, in many cases, ideas found in later waves are the culmination of energy pulses set in motion by earlier waves. For instance, the idea that positively valenced emotions can sometimes be detrimental to wellbeing – a hallmark of PP's second wave, as elucidated below – was implicit in the field from its outset. For instance, Seligman (1990) argued that we must be wary of the 'tyrannies of optimism' and be 'able to use pessimism's keen sense of reality when we need it' (p. 292). However, in the initial phase of the field, this kind of nuanced critique of the 'positive' needed to remain only *implicit*, otherwise the field would arguably not have gotten off the ground at all. Then, once PP was accepted and substantiated, such ideas could be made more *explicit*. As that happened, a new wave of scholarship energised the field.

The Waves of PP

Given the above considerations, we'll begin by briefly outlining what we appraise as being the first two waves of PP, before then discussing in detail the emerging third wave. One way to understand the causal relationship between these different waves is in terms of Hegel's (1812/1969) influential analysis of dialectical change, which posits that development occurs through a process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Consider the development of ideas. An argument is advanced, say, that people are fundamentally good; this proposition is the thesis. People might subsequently discern flaws in this perspective, responding with the counterargument that people are inherently errant; this retort is the antithesis. However, this counterargument may then itself be found wanting. Crucially, this does not necessitate reverting to the original thesis. Rather, what may emerge is a subtle *synthesis* incorporating aspects of both arguments (acknowledging that people have the potential for good and bad), creating a higher unity that transcends yet preserves the truth of both original opposites (Mills, 2000). Moreover, the process does not rest there. This new synthesis in effect becomes a thesis that awaits its own antithesis, and subsequent synthesis ... and so on.

In this context, the impetus for PP's creation was disenchantment with the way 'psychology as usual' was mainly focused on disorder and dysfunction (apart from pockets of scholarship, such as humanistic psychology; Waterman, 2013). From a Hegelian perspective, one might call the

predominant focus on dysfunction the thesis. In response, Seligman and colleagues advanced what could be deemed its antithesis: the need for an area of psychology that specifically focuses on the positive. Seligman's opening address was the energy pulse that mobilised scholars and practitioners with this alternative focus: concentrating on the positive (versus fixing dysfunction). This move, then, is the first wave of PP: the formulation of the field itself, and the work that subsequently followed. Indeed, this wave continues still. Here our point about waves being impulses of energy that excite people comes into force. This first wave of scholarship is still energising scholars within and beyond the field (ourselves included), even if some have *also* been stimulated by the more recent second and third waves: the influences of the energy currents are not mutually exclusive.

In sum, the first wave is essentially characterised by a focus on positive phenomena (including emotions, traits, behaviours, cognitions, and organisations). In that respect, Pawelski (2016a, 2016b) delineated one inclusion criterion and five continuum criteria for identifying something as positive. The inclusion criterion is simply preference: a phenomenon is positive if its presence is preferred to its absence. The continuum criteria indicate the 'scale' of positivity, with positivity a function of: (a) relative preference (the strength of the preference for it over something else); (b) sustainability across time; (c) sustainability across persons; (d) sustainability across effects; and (e) sustainability across structures. Phenomena are deemed more positive to the extent that they are more preferable, longer-lasting, relevant to a greater number of people, have more positive flow-on effects, and are more scalable and transferable across organisational and cultural contexts.

The impressive progress made in this first wave of the field then set the foundation for people to think more deeply and critically *vis-à-vis* its foundational notion of the positive. For example, in accentuating the positive, PP could be seen as generating a polarising rhetoric, in which apparently positive qualities are regarded as necessarily beneficial and to be pursued, while negative phenomena are undesirable and to be avoided (Ehrenreich, 2009). However, critics from both inside the field (e.g., Wong, 2011) and outside (e.g., Held, 2004) began to show that the picture was more complicated. For instance, one can differentiate between positive and negative *valence* (whether something is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant) versus positive and negative *outcome* (whether something facilitates or hinders wellbeing). In doing so, one can find situations in which positively-valenced qualities can have negative outcomes, such as 'unrealistic' optimism being linked to risky health-related behaviours (Weinstein et al.,

2005), or attitudes of forgiveness potentially leaving a person more vulnerable in harmful relationships (Sinclair et al., 2020). Conversely, negatively-valenced qualities can sometimes have positive outcomes, such as anger motivating someone to act against an invidious situation that had been hindering their wellbeing (Tavris, 1989), sadness being reflective of prosocial attributes such as compassion, caring, and sensitivity (Lomas, 2018d), or boredom facilitating introspective insight and creative imagination (Lomas, 2017a).

Through such arguments, the initial premise of PP, defined by its focus on the positive, was enlarged such that an increased appreciation of the subtle dynamic interplay between positive and negative began to be more overtly considered. Thus, if 'psychology as usual' was the thesis (focusing on fixing dysfunction), and first wave PP its antithesis (emphasising the positive), this newer phase of scholarship constituted a form of synthesis. It is this synthesis that has attracted the label of 'second wave' PP – alternatively referred to by Wong (2011) as 'PP 2.0' – a phrase coined by Held (2004) and subsequently adopted by Ivtzan et al. (2015).

This second wave still focuses on the same meta-concepts that underpinned the first wave, such as flourishing and wellbeing. However, it is characterised by a more nuanced contextual approach to concepts of positive and negative, an appreciation of the ambivalent nature of the good life, and an understanding of the fundamentally dialectical nature of wellbeing (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016b). Overall it recognises, as Ryff and Singer (2003) put it, that flourishing involves an 'inevitable dialectics between positive and negative aspects of living' (p. 272). Rather than polarization, the second wave is reflected by 'dynamic harmonization' of dichotomous states, and 'balancing opposite elements into a whole' (Delle Fave et al., 2011, p. 199). Importantly though, to reiterate the point above, the waves are not mutually exclusive, but rather inform and complement each other in valuable ways. The first wave ignited hope and enthusiasm within psychology (and beyond), providing an alternative paradigm when narratives of dysfunction dominated; moreover, it is still energising scholars, practitioners, and laypeople worldwide, resulting in its positive perspective being incorporated into a growing range of disciplines, and the continued growth of the field. The second wave has then provided further nuance and subtlety that is serving to deepen the insights and impact made by the first wave.

The Nascent Third Wave

Now, even as the energies of the first and second waves are still pulsing, new forces are gathering – which this

paper attempts to identify. At present, some of these charges may be merely ripples, which may eventually dissipate and never become fully formed. Others conceivably will build and contribute to a third wave of the field. Recall that in the Hegelian process, any emergent synthesis becomes the thesis for a new dialectical movement. The second wave may be the synthesis of psychology as usual and first wave PP, but as it establishes itself, it then becomes a new thesis awaiting challenge from still newer antitheses. This is our focus here: to identify this third wave that may be forming. In that respect, the dominating feature of this new wave is a general movement of broadening 'beyond the individual', moving towards greater *complexity*. This includes complexity in terms of the: focus of enquiry (becoming more interested in super-individual processes and phenomena); disciplines (becoming more interdisciplinary); culture (becoming more multicultural and global); and methodologies (embracing other ways of knowing).

Overall, these different ways of embracing complexity can be characterised as various types of epistemological 'broadening.' By that, we do not simply mean expanding in size or scope, but also becoming more diverse, inclusive, complex, and 'hospitable' (e.g., new paradigms and ideas are generally welcomed into the field on their own terms, without having to unduly adjust or accommodate themselves to what is already there). These forms of broadening can be grouped into two broad classes. Epistemology refers both to what we can/should know, and how we can/should know it. Some forms of broadening refer principally to the former, such that the third wave involves an expansion in scope. Other forms of broadening relate more to the latter, such that the third wave also involves an expansion in methodologies.

In terms of broadening scope, we are talking about going beyond the individual *person* as the primary focus and locus of enquiry. This means looking deeply and critically at groups, organisations, and broader systems, and exploring the multiple socio-cultural factors and processes that impact upon people's wellbeing (from politics to economics). Of course, even in the first and second waves, scholarship could be found taking an interest in super-individual phenomenon like organisations (e.g., Cameron et al., 2003; Luthans, 2002) and communities (e.g., Lomas, 2015b). However, it is also fair to say that the foci of research and practice has remained primarily on the individual (Kern et al., 2019). One might argue that such trends reflect the broader tradition of individualism in cultures where PP initially developed, beginning in North America and spreading to other Western countries (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Similarly, PP's origin in the field of psychology also implicitly brought bias towards autonomous mental

processes and agentic action. But as the field has become more global, individualism and agentic control are becoming increasingly challenged, helping to shape the third wave in various ways.

Second, this new wave involves moving towards complexity in terms of methodologies (i.e., forms and ways of knowing). In establishing itself as a separate discipline, the founders of PP drew three clear boundaries around the field (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). The first was a large circle of inquiry encompassing the 'positive features that make life worth living' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). The second was to give prominence to the role that subjective experiences play in human flourishing, and bring these experiences inside the boundaries of science (Diener, 2000). The third was to assert that positivity and subjectivity, which were feared as being labelled lightweight, must be studied empirically using mainly quantitative designs (Held, 2004; Rich, 2017; Synard & Gazzola, 2013).¹ Thus, first wave PP was primarily situated within a positivistic paradigm, which shaped subsequent research. Indeed, a review of the field by Donaldson et al. (2015) revealed that quantitative designs account for 78% of the research. These positivist and post-positivist approaches certainly helped to establish the legitimacy and growth of PP (Donaldson et al., 2015; Rusk & Waters, 2013). Nevertheless, calls for other methodologies and epistemologies – including interpretivist/hermeneutic, constructionist, phenomenological, and action-praxis – are becoming louder (Hefferon et al., 2017; McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008; Rich, 2001, 2017), and are an important manifestation of this new third wave.

We have identified seven different manifestations of this broadening dynamic, which are grouped together below under two main headings: expansion in scope, and expansion in methodologies. The former is characterised by approaches that are contextual, system-informed, cultural and linguistic, and ethical. The latter is seen by greater use of qualitative methods, implicit methods, and computational science. One should add that these two headings overlap to an extent, with the various approaches each frequently offering both an expansion of scope *and* methodologies. For instance, a systems-informed approach is included below in the section on broadening in scope (since it is characterised by an expanded scope that focuses on systems), yet it also has significant methodological implications. Nevertheless, we have found this broad grouping a helpful way of bringing structure to the discussion. These different forms of expansion, together with the broader progression of first, second, and third waves of the field, are illustrated in [Figure 1](#) below.

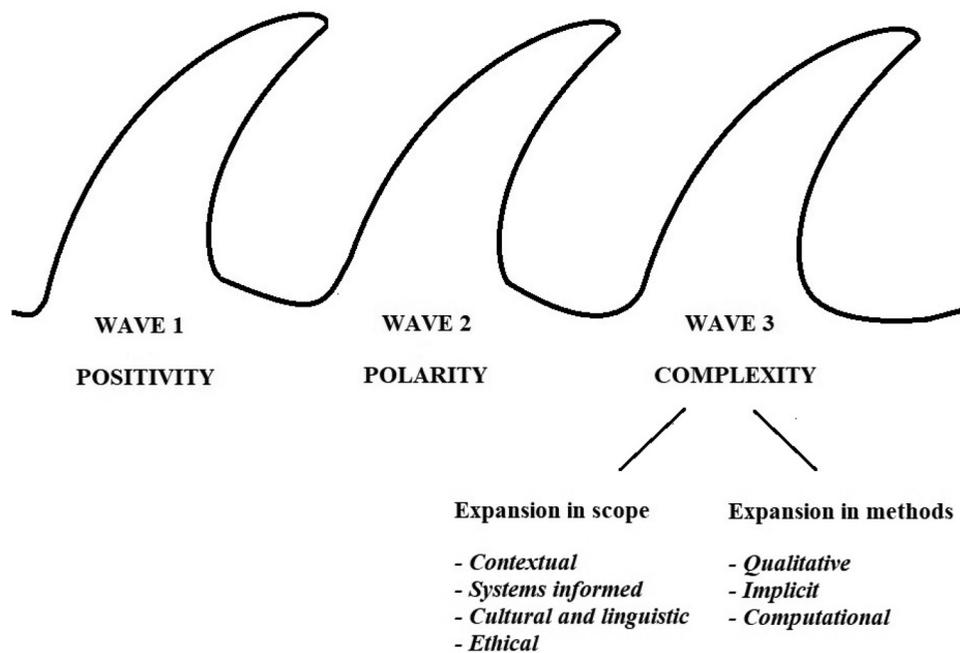


Figure 1. The three main waves of positive psychology, including details of the third wave.

Broadening of scope

The first set of broadening dynamics reflect an expansion in ‘scope.’ Specifically, this means going beyond the individual *person* as the primary focus and locus of enquiry, and exploring the manifold socio-cultural factors, systems, and processes that impact upon people’s wellbeing. That said, from the outset, proponents of PP did advocate for a broad perspective on flourishing, with a focus not only on individual level phenomena (e.g., positive subjective experiences and individual traits), but also collective phenomena (e.g., positive institutions and organisations). For instance, in their foundational article, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called for a study of positive institutions, recognising that ‘people and experiences are embedded in a social context,’ and that ecological factors play a key role in either enabling or hindering positive growth for an individual (p. 8). Despite that call, however, the field has been primarily concerned with wellbeing at the individual level (Donaldson et al., 2015). Relatedly, PP has been critiqued for an often reductive, over-simplified, and de-contextualised focus on individual lives (Brown et al., 2017), overlooking the significant intersectional challenges that people face in navigating various issues and barriers in their lives (Kern et al., 2019).

The limitations of this tendency towards focusing on the individual are increasingly recognized (e.g., Allison et al., 2020; Rusk et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2016). In that sense, we see signs of an epistemological expansion towards adopting more holistic, complex dynamic-

systems approaches to developing and implementing interventions (Lomas et al., 2015). These include: a better understanding of context (e.g., historic, social, cultural, and institutional) (Ciarrochi et al., 2016); systems-informed perspectives (Kern et al., 2019); greater inclusion of minority voices (Rao & Donaldson, 2015); and exploration of different cultural and linguistic approaches to wellbeing (Lomas, 2018a, 2020; Mouton & Montijo, 2017). Here we focus on four forms of broadening in scope: contextual; systems-informed; cultural and linguistic; and ethical.

Contextual approaches

We first consider work that has sought to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the environmental context of flourishing. This includes looking at how various interpersonal and ecological factors can be better understood to create nurturing environments and positive institutions. To date, such research has primarily focused on three key settings: workplaces, schools, and families.

PP research in the workplace has long incorporated a focus on situational context (i.e., environmental variables). Such literature is exemplified by Positive Organisational Scholarship (Cameron et al., 2003), which explores how organizations can be better shaped to allow employees to flourish (e.g., through relationships, practices, and leadership). For instance, the work of Dutton and colleagues on the social architecture of compassion is a quality example of how researchers

have taken compassion – traditionally conceptualised as an individual quality – and studied how workplace contexts activate or inhibit its expression, as well as how leaders can use structural and strategic approaches to enhance ‘compassion competence’ at the organisational level (Dutton & Workman, 2012; Dutton et al., 2014).

In schools, research in positive education is evolving beyond just mainly focusing on individual student wellbeing, moving towards contextually-oriented research. Positive education was initially criticized for its over-emphasis on interventions that concentrate on changing students’ inner experiences and resources at the expense of understanding the impact of context (Ciarrochi et al., 2016). However, there is growing adoption of ecological approaches that take into account school climate and classroom culture (Waters et al., 2010). For example, Allen et al. (2018) took the construct of school belonging – usually studied as a subjective, psychological appraisal situated within individual students – and applied Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1989) socio-ecological model to analyse the factors in the school environment that contribute to students’ sense of belonging. This research led to contextual guidelines that school leaders can implement to create environments that foster a culture of belonging.

A focus on context in families is exemplified by innovations such as family-centred positive psychology (Sheridan et al., 2004) and positive family therapy (Conoley et al., 2015). These have incorporated systems theory – discussed further in the next section – to extend the aim of PP interventions beyond changing individuals in the family (e.g., fostering mindfulness in parents) to interventions that also alter how relational family systems operate (e.g., changing communication and interaction patterns). Similarly, Waters (2020) took a contextual approach to design interventions that boost the wellbeing of the family as a whole (rather than only creating change within individual family members). Waters developed and tested two new family-based relational, strengths-based interventions, in which the whole family participated. Families who undertook the interventions reported higher levels of family happiness, thus shifting the contextual emotional context, or ‘shared affect’ (Barsade & Knight, 2015). Systems theory was likewise used by Waters to suggest how families can change their emotional contexts by tapping into their emotions and meaning-making processes (Henry et al., 2015), in turn triggering more frequent positive interactions that shift the family towards greater collective happiness.

Systems-informed approaches

The movement towards more complex understandings of wellbeing has also begun to be formalized and integrated in PP through the emergent paradigm of Systems Informed Positive Psychology (SIPP). This approach incorporates principles and approaches from the systems sciences into PP to enable human social systems and individuals within them to thrive (Kern et al., 2019). The systems sciences are an interdisciplinary area that studies the nature of systems (M’Pherson, 1974), and are necessary when problems are complex – as typifies the challenges and opportunities of life in the modern world (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Traditional PP approaches tend to be more reductionistic in nature, implicitly assuming that singular cause and effect relationships can be identified, resulting in specific interventions that can build wellbeing. By contrast, SIPP explicitly addresses the complexity of the world by incorporating systems principles such as complexity, dynamism, non-linearity, multiple perspectives, boundaries, and self-organisation. Drawing on a PP perspective, it moves beyond solving problems in unidimensional ways, to generate positive, often unimagined futures that can emerge collectively from within the system.

A SIPP perspective understands the individual as embedded within broader social systems; within these, there will be different perspectives about how goodness or wellbeing is defined, which outcomes are desired, and the processes that should be followed. Equally, within these interconnected social systems, there exist multiple layers of reality in operation at any one time. PP theory, research, and practice therefore need to develop more sophisticated approaches to allow for this. For instance, the expansion of boundaries leads to inclusion of a greater diversity of vantage points from which to observe the system. This means that minority voices and cultural diversity will be better included in the scientific endeavour (as addressed further in the next section).

Several implications arise from the SIPP perspective. For instance, before moving to action, rather than assuming that the system and different perspectives within it are already known and understood, practices are needed that help develop systems awareness. Scholars need to be explicit in defining their boundaries, whether at the level of the individual, or incorporating broader systems around the person (e.g., family, workplace, classroom, and local community). Close integration is needed amongst theory, research, and practice, rigorously identifying what works, how,

when, and with whom. It is vital to develop study designs, approaches to measurement, and analyses that are sophisticated and appropriately capture the complexity of the real world. Furthermore, commitment to transparency is important in the reporting of research; practitioners are encouraged to explicitly acknowledge the limitations of interventions, depending on the purpose, the individual, and their context. Finally, SIPP calls people to responsibility: wellbeing is a shared duty of individuals, institutions, and the systems in which they reside, with each having the onus for the factors within its control. As such, the purpose of PP is to create system conditions that support wellbeing, while providing individuals with strategies and motivation to change. Thus, SIPP can help the field develop a better understanding of the dynamic processes that influence individual and communal wellbeing, whilst motivating adaptive and sustainable changes.

By taking a systems approach to PP, boundaries are expanded, which can lead to the inclusion of different perspectives, including minority voices, as noted above. A systems approach does not privilege a single perspective of an observer of the system, because we are all seen as part of the system. Initially this may be viewed as only an epistemological point. But it also has significant conceptual, social, and practical implications. If the perspectives – i.e., vantage points – of non-Western cultures, for example, are included at an epistemological level, then our very definition of what constitutes PP, and wellbeing itself, may look very different.

Cultural and Linguistic Approaches

Following on from the need to include a wider range of perspectives, the third aspect of broadening in scope pertains to the inclusion of a greater range of cultural and linguistic perspectives. Mainstream psychology – including PP – has historically tended to be Western-centric, inherently influenced by the mostly Western contexts in which it has formed and developed. For instance, much of its empirical work has involved scholars and participants described by Henrich et al. (2010) as WEIRD (belonging to societies that are Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic). As a result, the field is biased towards Western ways of thinking and understanding the world, such as a North American tradition of expressive individualism (Izquierdo, 2005).

However, psychology is often unaware of, or unconcerned with, its situatedness – uncritically regarding itself as psychology *in toto* – with its cultural bias therefore having been described as a ‘disguised ideology’

(Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008). Thus, concepts, ideologies, priorities, and methods associated with American psychology have come to dominate the international scene. For instance, one aspect of this dominance is that (American) English is the default language for the field, meaning that most of its ideas and theories are structured around the contours of the English language. This linguistic bias is an issue, since the knowledge developed within the field is therefore to an extent provincial and culturally-specific, influenced by the values and traditions associated with the United States, from individualism to consumer capitalism (Becker & Marecek, 2008).

An important dynamic of the third wave therefore is (or will be) the inclusion of non-Western ethnopsychologies, and other forms of cross-cultural psychology (Berry, 2000) and indigenous psychology (Kim et al., 2006). PP already includes a decent range of research pertaining to non-Western cultures – as summarised by Lomas (2015a) under the rubric ‘positive cross-cultural psychology’ – including both work by Western scholars conducting research in those arenas, and by scholars from those cultures themselves. However, for the most part, such research is still often through the prism of constructs and methodologies developed in Western contexts (Lambert et al., 2020). For instance, comparisons between populations may be made using psychometric tools like the satisfaction with life scale (Diener & Diener, 2009), whether or not such comparisons are appropriate (Kern, Zeng et al., 2018).

As valuable and useful as such research is, it presumes that constructs developed in one cultural context (e.g., the US) can be readily transposed onto another. That may be true, to an extent, even if there is the thorny issue of how to translate such concepts and scales, and whether seemingly comparable terms mean the same thing in different languages – both of which are contentious propositions (Lomas, 2018a). In any case, one must tread cautiously, since a wealth of scholarship from fields like anthropology has shown that culture can profoundly influence people’s experience and understanding of the world, including at the most fundamental level, for instance, with relation to the perception of time (Arman & Adair, 2012) and the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As such, the third wave will likely involve a greater inclusion of input from non-Western psychologies and psychologists, bringing in constructs, theories, and methodologies conceived and developed in non-Western contexts. One example of this approach is an initiative by Lomas (2016; 2020) to create an evolving lexicography of ‘untranslatable’ words (i.e., without exact equivalent in English) relating to wellbeing. Such words indicate phenomena and insights which have not

been lexicalised in English, and hence tend to be overlooked by psychology, to its detriment. By analysing these words thematically it has been possible to augment the field's current conceptual 'maps' of various topics, including positive emotions (Lomas, 2017b), ambivalent emotions (Lomas, 2017c), prosociality (Lomas, 2018b), love (Lomas, 2018c), spirituality (Lomas, 2019a), eco-connection (Lomas, 2019b), and character (Lomas, 2019c).

Ethical approaches

The fourth form of broadening in scope concerns recent efforts to situate the applied elements of PP within a wider ethical framework. Such developments are timely. The speed and scale of the uptake of PP shows it has filled a real academic, personal, and professional need (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016a), affording it a place of increasing power as it reaches arenas such as education, business, and public policy (Rusk & Waters, 2013). However, alongside this privilege comes responsibility, and yet the field has hitherto been largely unregulated, with no formal standards or even ethical guidelines to inform applied practice until recently. Such issues are particularly pertinent now that PP is becoming a professional specialty. Initially, PP was more a 'collective identity' unifying people interested in 'the brighter sides of human nature' (Linley & Harrington, 2007, p. 4), open to scholars and practitioners in various established fields, such as educational psychology. However, recent years have seen PP also becoming a specific discipline, endowed with a distinct professional identity (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016a). Part of the impetus for this comes from the ever-expanding community of postgraduate Masters of Applied Positive Psychology courses, organically leading to graduates and scholars self-identifying as 'positive psychology practitioners' and even as 'positive psychologists' (though this label is legally contentious).

Such developments raise various ethical issues. For example, unless practitioners are affiliated to a particular profession, they may be operating outside the advice and provisions of any set of ethical guidelines. This is not to suggest malpractice; such people are likely to be aware of, and sensitive to, ethical considerations. But many will still be relatively unguided, reliant on their own judgement and intuitions. As such, there have been calls for the development of ethical guidelines (Handelsman et al., 2009; Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016a; Vella-Brodrick, 2011; Vella-Brodrick, 2014). These can help to: professionalise the field in a consistent way that is recognised internationally; provide a transparent structure for PP practitioners to develop their knowledge, skills, and

practice; enable 'customers' of such practitioners to understand different levels, specialisms, and types of qualification and applied practice; and create a solid foundation for the future development of the field.

To make the most of its privileged position and fulfil the responsibility that comes with it, PP needs clear structures, guidelines, and frameworks that will serve both those within the field and those wishing to engage with it. Fortunately, such efforts are underway. One such initiative has recently been led by Jarden et al. (2019). In collaboration with key stakeholders across PP, they developed a set of guidelines, drawing inspiration and incorporating ideas from established protocols in professional fields with whom PP shares conceptual and practical kinship, such as counselling and psychotherapy (see Lomas et al. (2019) for an account of the development of the guidelines). In broad terms, the guidelines are designed to ensure beneficence (do good to others) and non-maleficence (avoid potential harm). More specifically, the guidelines are based on the premise that ethical practice in PP should be guided by three inter-related moral components: values, principles, and personal strengths.²

The intention with the guidelines is that practitioners will not only strive to uphold the recommended values and principles, but also to remain up-to-date with emerging research findings and evolving practice, and engage in suitable professional development. In addition, the guidelines emphasise the importance of practitioners being aware of, and accurately communicating, the potential benefits and limitations of wellbeing science and their own knowledge base and professional scope, while also monitoring the wellbeing of their clients during service provision. Without such guidelines, applied PP risks becoming an industry rather than a profession through the lack of: barriers to entry; regulation; formal qualification framework; or accreditation process. PP has a significant opportunity to 'make life better' for many people in manifold ways as it becomes embedded in education, business, government policy, and beyond. Further development of such efforts towards better ethical practice will be an important aspect of this third wave.

Broadening of methodologies

Hand-in-hand with the broadening of scope outlined above comes an expansion of methodologies welcomed within the fold of PP. As noted above, the first wave instantiation of PP tended to embrace – with some valuable exceptions – a generally positivist or post-positivist paradigm (Donaldson et al., 2015). However, more recently, there has been an increasing openness

to, and even encouragement of, other methodologies and epistemologies, including interpretivist/hermeneutic, constructionist, phenomenological, and action-praxis (Hefferon et al., 2017). Here we touch upon three broad methodological trends that are making a particular impact in PP: qualitative and mixed methods; implicit approaches; and computational social science.

Qualitative and mixed methods

Exemplifying the shift in PP towards greater methodological diversity, qualitative inquiry – sometimes within a mixed methods design – is increasingly deployed to help us gain a better understanding of the complexity of optimal human functioning. The call for qualitative methods in PP has been around since the field's early days (Rich, 2017), but a special edition on qualitative research in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2017 heralded a turning point for the use of such methods (Hefferon et al., 2017).

This special issue showcased a range of qualitative methodologies for exploring PP topics, including: a grounded theory analysis on client-based perspectives of how hope develops during psychotherapy (Chamodraka et al., 2017); a case study uncovering inductive notions of wellbeing in a job loss context (Synard & Gazzola, 2017); interviews that explore the constructs of love, passion, and peak experiences across cultures (Mouton & Montijo, 2017); and a modified grounded theory analysis which surfaced the experience of purpose among marginalized, urban, lower income students, and furthermore offered suggestions for how organizations can better support and enhance positive development for disadvantaged youth (Liang et al., 2017).

By allowing for the development of bottom-up theories, qualitative approaches have been pivotal in introducing new areas of investigation in PP. For example, Brunzell's work on the meaning teachers form when working with traumatized students led to the Trauma Informed Positive Education model (Brunzell et al., 2018, 2016). Additionally, by asking different questions of established PP phenomena, qualitative research has extended our understanding of, and ways of working with, such phenomena. For example, Howells (2014) research on gratitude as an 'action' expanded existing quantitative approaches on gratitude as an emotion or a strength, thereby opening the door to a wider range of gratitude interventions.

This third wave shift towards greater use of qualitative approaches has encouraged further reflexivity about the role that PP researchers play in shaping (implicitly or explicitly) the process and outcomes of new knowledge (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Qualitative methods that situate

researcher and participant as co-collaborators in the formation of knowledge – including action research, collaborative inquiry, appreciative inquiry, and participatory action research – are gaining traction, and look to become an important feature of the third wave (Ebersöhn, 2014; Hefferon, 2012; Ludema et al., 2006; Smith, 2015). In that respect, qualitative methods have been invaluable in giving voice to the participants we engage with. The participatory paradigm used in qualitative research allows us to be in dialogue with minority and divergent voices (Rao & Donaldson, 2015), and empowers research participants in the research process, an approach that, in and of itself, is in keeping with the ethos of the field (Hefferon et al., 2017). Finally, further capturing the complexity of human experience, mixed methods paradigms are also increasingly embraced, providing opportunities to draw on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods, including accessing numeric summaries across larger samples while capturing the richness of qualitative inquiries (Plano Clark, 2017).

Implicit approaches

A second key area of methodological expansion pertains to techniques that go beyond the limitations of self-report measures (long the staple of psychological measurement). Many psychological phenomena of interest operate outside of conscious awareness and control, and people are limited in their ability to identify factors that influence their attitudes and decisions (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2002). Conscious reflection requires cognitive resources which, for knowledge-based high-cognitive-load work, can be limited (Johnson & Steinman, 2009). Moreover, self-report measures are hindered by desirability biases, and struggle to capture thoughts and feelings people are either unwilling or unable to report (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). For example, when self-report measures address socially sensitive topics, responses may be distorted by social desirability and self-presentation, such as in relation to political behaviour (Burdein et al., 2006; Nosek et al., 2010).

Thus, recent years have seen calls for the examination of non-conscious processes in PP through the use of paradigms such as 'implicit measures.' These capture the impact of psychological constructs that are thought to influence participants' responses in a somewhat automatic fashion, eluding awareness and self-control (De Houwer et al., 2009). Among the most well-known are the implicit association test (Greenwald et al., 1998), the evaluative priming task (Fazio et al., 1995), the extrinsic affective Simon task (De Houwer, 2003), the go/no-go

association task (Nosek & Banaji, 2001), and the affect misattribution procedure (Payne et al., 2005).

With implicit measures being adopted in many areas of psychology (Payne & Gawronski, 2010), they are likewise beginning to be harnessed in PP. For instance, Williams et al. (2016) found that both explicit and implicit attitudes influenced perceptions of organizational culture and employee work-related wellbeing. Moreover, explicit and implicit attitudes appeared to explain unique variance and were uncorrelated, replicating earlier studies in suggesting an additive influence of implicit constructs on outcomes of interest (e.g., Bing et al., 2007). One explanation is that implicit attitudes change more quickly and are less open to socially desirable responding (Roberts et al., 2006), possibly because they are processed in the automatic somatic and affective systems of the brain (Lieberman, 2007). This means that implicit measures may provide more timely reflections of attitude change, and so may be relatively effective in capturing the impact of interventions.

Computational Social Science

Finally, a related methodological advance that can be both qualitative and quantitative, as well as explicit and implicit, is the burgeoning use of computational techniques. These make use of the massive amount of data generated through modalities such as social media, electronic health records, search patterns, and mobile phone behaviours. With people increasingly purposefully and non-purposefully documenting aspects of their lives (Anderson et al., 2012), various forms of data – including text, pictures, behaviours, and more – are recorded each day by individuals all around the world. In that light, computer science and related fields have developed numerous approaches to collect and analyse such data. Considering the reach of mobile and online technologies, so-called ‘big data’ provides opportunities to move beyond small, often unrepresentative samples, generating insights into personal, social, cultural, and other aspects of peoples’ lives that impact individually and collectively upon wellbeing.

For example, using tweets collected from Twitter and data from nationally representative surveys, Schwartz et al. (2013) found that US regions with high levels of life satisfaction were more likely to express language on Twitter reflecting engagement, connection to nature, a sense of spirituality, and physical activity. Beyond that, analysis of language has included research on: the effects of power differentials on community engagement (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2013); personal values (Boyd et al., 2015); emotions (Bollen et al., 2011; Strapparava & Mihalcea, 2008); and psychological traits

(Guntuku et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2015; Park et al., 2015; Sagi & Dehghani, 2014). Other examples include geo-tagged search queries from mobile phones being used to predict health care visit and hospitalization (Yang et al., 2013), and search logs helping identify adverse drug reactions, providing timely enhancements to the US Food and Drug Administration’s adverse event reporting system (White et al., 2014). Such data can also reveal aspects of the social or cultural context that may be variously health promoting (Eichstaedt et al., 2015).

Still, such data bring numerous challenges, and while computational social science can complement other approaches, they do not replace them (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Kern, Williams et al., 2018; Iliev et al., 2014). To be useful, data have to be accessed, stored, and analysed – all of which involve processes that go beyond typical methodological training in PP. Exception and ecological fallacies can be made, in which conclusions about groups are made based on exceptional cases, or conversely conclusions about individuals made based on groups. Moreover, while large in nature, data are not necessarily representative. For instance, studies have used data available through Facebook and Twitter (e.g., Kern, McCarthy et al., 2019; Kosinki et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2013), but many people are not on these platforms or are unwilling to share their information. There are also numerous ethical issues that constantly must be negotiated. Still, big data and related computational approaches offer opportunities for capturing the complex dynamics emphasized by third wave perspectives.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to offer a bird’s eye view of the development of PP by using the metaphor of waves (a common motif for describing progress in academia and elsewhere). The instantiation of the field in the late 1990s represents the first wave. From the outset, with this emergent field immediately attracting considerable interest and enthusiasm, it began to develop and evolve. Per our metaphor, new ripples were constantly generated, with continual innovations in theory, research, and practice. For us, among these patterns of development, some are fundamental or foundational enough to warrant being deemed a new ‘wave.’ For example, scholarship that queried the conceptual basis of the field itself by looking critically at the notions of positive and negative was identified as the ‘second wave’.

More recently, we have discerned what appears to be an equally significant shift, one that challenges the second half of the phrase positive psychology (i.e., psychology). This refers to scholarship that, in various

ways, embraces complexity and goes beyond the boundaries of psychology to incorporate knowledge and research methodologies from a broad range of fields, thereby looking deeply at the groups, organisations, cultures, and systems in which people and their wellbeing are embedded. Taken together, we suggest these interrelated ripples constitute a significant ‘third wave’ of PP, reflecting a collective movement towards better capturing, understanding, and impacting upon the complexity of the real world.

Of course, this statement is something of a conjecture. It is possible that these ripples do not amount to a significant enough shift in the field to merit the label of a wave. Equally possibly, they may continue to gather strength and swell, where the notion of these as a wave becomes harder to dispute. Or, paradoxically, Gable and Haidt (2005) speculated that one consequence of the field’s burgeoning influence and reach is that it may actually cease to exist as a discrete field per se. That is, PP’s original mission was to bring attention and credibility to research on positive aspects of human functioning. It may be that the field succeeds to such an extent that psychology as a whole embraces this mission, thus rendering the need for a distinct sub-discipline of PP unnecessary. But even if that were to happen, PP would not disappear; its waters would simply have overflowed into the body of psychology more broadly, suffusing it with its positive energy. Whatever happens, given the energy that PP has unleashed in academia and in the culture more broadly, it is likely that new waves will continue to be generated, taking forward our understanding of wellbeing in ways we cannot yet even foresee. Whatever happens, these ripples and waves will have made their mark on the shoreline of human civilisation.

Notes

1. ‘Unscientific positivity’ was placed outside of the circle and, arguably unfairly, labelled as a humanistic approach (Held, 2004).
2. The values are: protecting the safety of clients and others; alleviating personal distress and suffering; ensuring the integrity of practitioner-client relationships; appreciating the diversity of human experience and culture; fostering a sense of self that is meaningful to the person(s) concerned; enhancing the quality of professional knowledge and its application; enhancing the quality of relationships between people; increasing personal effectiveness; and striving for the fair and adequate provision of counselling, psychotherapy and coaching services. The principles are: beneficence (or non-maleficence); responsible caring; respect for people’s rights and dignity; trustworthiness; justice; and

autonomy. The strengths are: honesty; fairness; social intelligence; teamwork; kindness; prudence; perspective; judgement; self-regulation; perseverance; and bravery.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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