

WHAT IS EXISTENTIAL POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

PAUL T. P. WONG, PH.D.

President, International Network on Personal
Meaning and International Society for Exis-
tential Psychology and Psychotherapy.

dr.paul.wong@gmail.com

Positive psychology (PP) with its focus on what is good and right with people is Pollyannaish, because it ignores the bleak reality of human existence. Existential psychology (EP) with its focus on death anxiety, meaninglessness and alienation is dark, because it does not pay enough attention to the joy of living. Positive psychology without existential insights and phenomenological analysis is full of adolescent exuberance but lacking in depth. Existential psychology without rigorous research on human strengths and positive affects is full of wisdom but lacking in youthful vitality. Therefore, it makes sense to bring these two separate domains of psychology together, resulting in existential positive psychology (EPP) or positive existential psychology (PEP), depending on one's preference. The Journal of *IJEPP* is home to all kinds of articles related to EPP.

There are signs that positive psychology has come full circle to its existential-humanistic roots. (King, 2001; Wong, 2009). PP is intrinsically and inescapably existential, because it is concerned with the fundamental questions about human existence such as: What is

the good life? What makes life worth living? How can one find happiness? However, these existential questions cannot be fully addressed through a positivistic approach, because these profound and complex issues cannot be reduced to a set of test scores. A maturing PP, secure of its future of mainstream psychology, can now return to its existential-humanistic roots to rediscover the richness of lived experience (Schneider, Bugental, & Pierson, 2001) and the many pathways to meaning in life (Wong & Fry, 1998; Wong, in press).

There are also encouraging indications that existential-humanistic psychology is ready to embrace its younger sibling, in spite of their methodological differences (Friedman & Robbins, 2009; Robbins, 2008; Robbins & Friedman, 2008). Simply put, existential psychology is about human existence and the human drama of survival and flourishing in spite of suffering and death. It is inherently positive, because it emphasizes the courage and responsibility of confronting existential anxieties and living an authentic life. Unfortunately, much of the scholarly work of existential psychology is cloaked in philosophical terms and the popular existential literature tends to focus on the darker side of the human condition. The end result is that most people fail to recognize the creative, positive aspects of existentialism. Existential psychology can learn from positive psychology's scientific methods and its clarity in communication.

Existential positive psychology (EPP) or positive existential psychology represents a natural amalgam between PP and existential

psychology. This editorial discusses the 6 ultimate questions about human existence which deserve psychological investigation.

1. **Who am I?** What defines me? Who am I when everything is stripped away from me and I am reduced to a naked lonely soul? Is there anything unique and special about me?

2. **How can I be happy?** Why am I bored? Why am I so dissatisfied with life? What is the good life? Why is happiness so illusive? Is this all there is to life?

3. **What should I do with my life?** How should I then live? How could I live in a way that my life counts for something? What is my calling? To what should I devote the rest of my life?

4. **How do I make the right choices?** How do I know that I am making the right decision regarding career and relationships? How can I tell right from wrong? What do I know what is the responsible thing to do in complex situations with conflicting moral demands?

5. **Where do I belong?** Why do I feel so alone in this world? Why don't I feel at home in this planet earth? Where is my home? Where do I belong? How can I develop deep and meaningful relationships? Where can I find acceptance?

6. **What is the point of striving when life is so short?** Why should I struggle to survive when life is transient and fragile? What is the point of building something only to see it swallowed up by death?

All of these questions are related to the human quest for existential understanding. It is the spirit of asking tough questions and rejecting pre-packaged easy answers that characterizes existential psychology. EPP is open to insights, wisdoms and research on all aspects of the human existence from all sources regardless of the paradigm of knowledge claims, thus, providing a richer research agenda. In short, EPP broadens the definition of PP as **“the qualitative and quantitative study of what enables people to survive and flourish individually and collectively in the totality of life circumstances.”** What qualifies EPP as positive psychology is its emphasis on the uniquely human capacities for resilience and positive change.

Yalom (1980) has identified four existential anxieties: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. How to resolve these existential givens is related to the courage and creativity we can muster and the relationships we can develop. I have just added two more existential questions related to personal identity and the pursuit of happiness. These 6 issues are the recurrent themes of human existence, even though at times they may remain unconscious or latent in some individuals.

From identity crisis to the quest for authenticity

Identity crisis (Wheeler, 1958) is not limited to adolescents. It can be an ongoing struggle to define and redefine ourselves when we go through major life transitions or upheavals. The search for identity requires self knowledge. The ancient Delphic injunction carved into the lintel at the Temple of Apollo: *“Know Thyself”*, still resonates with the post-

modern generations. Without a clear sense of self-knowledge, we can go through life without ever knowing who we are and what we really want in life.

The discomfort of identity crisis is necessary for initiating the quest for authenticity. However, defense mechanisms often keep identity anxiety at bay and the social pressure of conformity and enculturation provides an easy escape from this existential quest. The dehumanization in a competitive capitalistic society further narrows people's vision to defining one's self-worth in material gains. As a result, people are confused about their true identity in the larger scheme of things. Thus, the quest for authenticity remains a challenging and poignant task in a consumer culture.

Authenticity has been a recurrent theme in the existential literature. Heidegger (1962) differentiates between the non-authentic and authentic mode of living. The non-authentic people give up their individuality and responsibility for the security of being part of a herd. In contrast, the authentic people assume responsibility to live in a way that is consistent with their true nature and core values. They strive to become what they were made to be in spite of the anxiety and risks involved.

There are no short cuts to authenticity. Test scores on personality, vocational interests and signature strengths can be helpful, but there is no passion in cold numbers, no inspiration in formulas. The process of authentication often begins with a moment of awakening, a deepening of conviction about core values, and a felt sense of one's true identity (Bugental, 1976). It is the discovery of an inner vision about one's uniqueness and singularity that

endows life with deeper meaning (Frankl, 1986).

But this is just the start. The pathway to authenticity entails risks, setbacks and suffering, especially when it is contrary to social norms. In many instances, the quest for authenticity means persecution and death, because those who dare to march to a different drum and challenge the status quo are likely to be maligned, marginalized and even martyred. Thus, the quest for authenticity and meaning is not always compatible with the pursuit of happiness and the good life (King and Napa, 1998). To live an authentic and meaningful life means that one cannot deny one's true nature and calling even if it means death. Jesus is a case in point. So is Socrates.

From an existential perspective, authentic happiness flows from the authentic mode of living. Authentic happiness is possible, only when we have confronted our personal mortality and decided to switch from the mode of **optimal performance** to the mode of **authentic being**. Quoting Albert Camus's rhetorical question, "But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads?" Schumaker (2007) comments: "Existentialist Albert Camus gets to the heart of happiness when he equates it with harmony of living" (p.83). According to Schumaker, this harmony can be achieved not just by doing what one is best at, but also by living like human beings who need social connection and spirituality. Research on authentic happiness can miss the boat altogether without grasping the profound existential insights of authenticity.

From the crisis of discontent to the quest for happiness

At the heart of our quest for happiness is some kind of discontent with life as it is – this is more than a cultural phenomenon; it may be related to human yearning for personal growth. For those who are already enjoying swimming in the stream of life, the question “Am I happy?” may not even arise. But even in best of circumstances, there is always something nagging about whether this is all there is to life and whether something better maybe lying beyond one’s horizon.

The tension between contentment and discontentment constitutes a familiar existential crisis. While total contentment means optimal life satisfaction, it may also spell entropy and death, because there is nothing more to strive for. EPP does not endorse the ideal of maximizing happiness or optimizing life satisfaction, because such a goal is unrealistic and contrary to our best interest as human beings.

Discontentment is a double-edged sword; it automatically distracts from life satisfaction, but also provides an opportunity for personal growth and social reform. Dissatisfaction with where we are motivates us to advance to where we want to be. EPP recognizes that discontentment is an essential part of human nature, but distinguishes healthy and unhealthy discontent. Personal greed and blind ambition represent the destructive type of discontent, while striving for higher values and greater virtues represents healthy discontentment. Those who seek perpetual positivity and lasting happiness fail to recognize that

discontentment with that status quo can be an impetus for positive change.

At present, the happiness craze is sweeping across the Western societies. Schumaker (2007) laments that many psychologists and coaches have become merchants of happiness, promising people the moon: instant transformation, success and happiness. They mass market their happiness prescriptions like any other feel-good commercial product. Existential psychologists would feel very uncomfortable with such commercialization of easy happiness. They agree with Frankl (1986) that the single-minded pursuit of happiness has the opposite effect of driving it away, but happiness comes through the backdoor as a byproduct when we pursue meaning and authenticity.

Existential philosophers and psychologists have long discovered that authentic happiness rises from embracing suffering as the essence of the human condition. They see life as a series of paradox, predicament and problems. Life is also full of striving, questing and victories. The dynamic interplay between dualities is one of the hallmarks of EPP. The duality hypothesis states that positives cannot exist apart from negatives and that authentic happiness necessarily grows from pain and suffering. This hypothesis reflects Albert Camus’ (1968) insight that “There is no joy of life without despair” (p. 56) and Rollo May’s (1981) observation that “The ultimate paradox is that negation becomes affirmation” (p. 164).

Many people are awash with information and images of happiness, and yet still drowning

in a sea of misery. The reason for this paradox is that they fail to avoid suffering, sugarcoat negative emotions, and seek an express highway to a Disney Land-type of happiness. Such superficial happiness may actually prevent them from personal growth and make them vulnerable to depression. In contrast, EPP advocates the following three types of mature happiness: (a) authentic happiness which flows from being an authentic person, (b) eudemonic happiness which comes from being good and doing good, and (c) chaironic happiness which arises from our spiritual nature.

“Chaironic” comes from the Greek root, “denoting a spiritual gift.” It is a kind of spiritual blessing or a gift of happiness that is bestowed on us independent of our circumstances and talents. The calm joy of Zen Monks and the ecstasy of Christian mystics (e.g., Saint Francis of Assisi) are examples of chaironic happiness. Both eudemonic and chaironic happiness may not be differentiated from hedonic happiness simply in terms of subjective well-being (SWB) measures, but they may have different psychological correlates and may behave very differently when measured by more sensitive outcome measures than SWB.

From meaninglessness anxiety to the quest for meaning and purpose

The most enduring question in philosophy, religion and psychology is regarding the meaning of life. At some point in life, the question for meaning may be triggered by a personal encounter with death, a sudden reversal of fortunes, a tragic event, a major crossroads, disillusion with the emptiness of

www.ExistentialPsychology.org

success, or simply feelings of boredom. Since we only go through this life once, we have reasons to wonder how to make the most of it. The worse fear is not death, but the discovery that we have never really lived when the time comes for us to die. We all have the urge to desire to live fully, to do something significant, and to make a difference, so that we don't have to dread the death-bed realization that we have squandered away our precious life. Therefore, we dread a meaningless life as much as we dread the terror of death.

Meaninglessness may also be the most pervasive existential anxiety that negatively impacts every aspect of our lives. Paul Tillich (1952) thinks that meaninglessness anxiety is about the loss of an ultimate concern, which leads to the questioning of the meaning of one's existence and everything one does. Frankl (1986) emphasizes that the existential vacuum or meaninglessness is responsible for many of the mental and societal problems, while a clear sense of meaning and purpose is the key to positive mental health.

Therefore, one of the major concerns of EPP is to focus on the quest for meaning and purpose. Frankl (1986) has identified three values of meaningful living. (1) Creative value – we give of our selves to the world through creative efforts, (2) Experiential value – we receive something from the world, such as love and beauty, and (3) Attitudinal values – we adopt a positive attitude towards negative situations beyond our control. These three values cover the whole spectrum of our experiences of meaning.

Wong (1998) has discovered seven major sources of meaning: Achievement, Acceptance, Relationship, Intimacy, Religion, Self-transcendence, and Fairness through the implicit theories methodology. Subsequent cross-cultural research has found that these sources of meaning are important to several Asian countries as well. This line of research demonstrates that the quest for meaning is not a solitary enterprise – it needs social support and a just society.

Finally, Wong has developed the PURE model as a framework for individuals to discover and create meanings for their lives. This is basically a self-regulatory model, which allows trials and errors and constant adjustments to align actions to one's core values and life calling. The "P" stands for purpose and life goals, "U" stands for understanding the demands of each situation and life as a whole, "R" stands for responsible actions and reactions consistent with one's purpose and understanding, and lastly, "E" represents the constant need for evaluation to ensure authenticity and efficacy. The PURE model has been effectively applied to counseling and coaching.

From isolation anxiety to the quest for community

We were all born into this world alone and we will leave this world alone. Our attachment to others is at best impermanent, because people do change and they do leave us through separation or death. Displacement and alienation in an impersonal and competitive world will only further increase our sense of isolation and loneliness. The unraveling of social institutions such as family and community is contrary to human nature, because we

are wired for relationships and we are meant to be social animals.

EPP emphasizes the need for building authentic relationships and for belonging to a supportive community. The good life is inherently relational. We live through relationships. Buber's (1955) model of the "I-Thou" existential encounter represents one of the promising ways to open up authentically and build bridges across the abyss that separates us.

Community is a powerful antidote to isolation anxiety. There is a deep-seated longing in human nature to belong to a place where we can call home – a safe and supportive place, where we are accepted as a significant member (Adler, 1938). This place may be a family, a church, an organization or a neighborhood. This is where we learn how to care for each other and grant each other grace; this is where we learn how to live and work together by placing group interests above egotistic desires.

However, community is a fragile ecosystem, which can be easily disrupted by selfish and inconsiderate acts. It takes empathy, kindness, tolerance, and self-sacrifice to build a positive community. A collectivist orientation is needed to balance our individualist tendencies. Community building involves civil virtues, social activism and collective coping (Wong & Wong, 2006). Once we have achieved a genuine community, our individual lives will be enriched in proportion to the vitality and harmony of the group. Here is the final caveat. Even when we have established an intimate network of social support and derived a great deal of satisfaction from it, we

remain solitary beings. EPP accepts isolation anxiety as an existential given, but recognizes that it is through our loneliness that we seek community and intimacy as major sources of personal meaning (Wong, 1998).

From freedom anxiety to the quest for responsibility

Freedom poses a problem for people. On the one hand, too much freedom can be overwhelming. On the other hand, too little freedom can lead to despair and fatalism. However, even in Nazi concentration camps, the most restrictive and oppressive system on earth, Frankl (1963) maintains that one can still maintain attitudinal freedom by taking a heroic and defiant stance.

Freedom implies responsibility, because we are responsible for the consequences of the choices we have made according to our own accord. Fear of responsibility drives us to escape from freedom (Fromm, 1941), while denial of responsibility drives us to abuse our freedom. There are also problems associated with assuming too much responsibility, because this may either crush us with too much work or paralyze us with too many worries. EPP is concerned with how to strike a healthy balance between freedom and responsibility.

In the Western world, there is too much emphasis on freedom but not enough on responsibility. Frankl (1986) has repeatedly warned that freedom without responsibility leads to chaos and anarchy. He points out that conformity, fatalism and collectivism can all seduce us to avoid personal responsibility. Blind allegiance to any organization or ideol-

www.ExistentialPsychology.org

ogy requires us to suspend our critical faculties and undermine our authenticity.

From death anxiety to the quest for death acceptance and self-transcendence

Death anxiety poses a problem for contemporary American positive psychology, because it falls outside the parameters of positive traits, positive experiences and positive organizations. For the expanded EPP, death anxiety constitutes an impetus to personal and spiritual growth.

Death is the only certainty for all living organisms. However, human beings alone are burdened with the cognitive capacity to be aware of their own mortality and to fear what may follow after death. Furthermore, their capacity to reflect on the meaning of life and death creates additional existential anxiety. The inevitability of death makes its presence felt in every arena of human existence. How we react to the prospect of personal death will have an impact on how we live and the meanings we attach to death have important implications for our well-being.

In the past forty years, the psychology of death has been dominated by death anxiety (Neimeyer, 1994). However, in recent years, Wong and his associates (Gesser, Wong & Reker, 1987-88; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994) have emphasized the existential quest for death acceptance. They have developed the Death Attitude Profile, which identifies three distinct types of death acceptance: (1) Neutral death acceptance means facing death rationally as an inevitable end of every biological life and attempting to make the most of this present life through creative works, (2) Ap-

proach acceptance is rooted in transpersonal religious/spiritual beliefs in a desirable after-life, and (3) Escape acceptance means considering death as a better alternative to a painful existence. Life and death are two sides of the same coin. There is no life without death and there is no death without life.

Wong's Meaning Management Theory

(MMT) (2007) recognizes that death anxiety can have either a negative or a positive impact, depending on how one reacts to it. We can never escape from the reality of death, but we can always use our capacity for meaning, spirituality and narrative construction to transform death anxiety. If we regard death as a reminder of our own mortality and the need to live authentically, then death anxiety will not only facilitate death acceptance, but also encourage self-actualization and self-transcendence. Paradoxically, we need to confront and embrace death in order to live meaningfully and vitally (Frankl, 1984; Kuhl, 2002; Wong, 2007, Yalom, 1980).

Conclusion

This paper provides an existential conceptual framework for an expanded vision of PP. It shows that all six types of existential anxieties are essential for human flourishing. The main message is that people not only need to confront these negative existential givens, but they can grow as a result of such encounters. Properly understood, existential psychology is about the resilience of the human struggle for happiness and significance in the midst of suffering and death.

EPP is intended for all people, especially the suffering masses, with its emphasis on integrating negative experiences with positive ones (Wong & Hart, in press). EPP highlights the painful human strivings, which Western societies' consumer culture wants us to ignore. EPP stresses that it is only through struggle and fortitude that we grow psychologically and spiritually. It is only through embracing life in its totality and wrestling with ultimate concerns that we can uplift humanity and improve the human condition.

REFERENCES

- Adler, A. (1938). *Social interest: A challenge to mankind*. J. Linton and R. Vaughan (Trans.). London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Buber, M. (1971). *I and Thou*. New York: Free Press; 1st Touchstone Edition.
- Bugental, J. F. T. (1976). *The search for existential identity: Patient-therapist dialogues in humanistic psychotherapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Camus, A. (1968). *Lyrical and critical essays* (E. C. Kennedy, Trans.). New York: Knopf.
- Frankl, V. (1986). *The doctor and the soul: From psychotherapy to logotherapy*. New York: Second Vintage Books.
- Frankl, V. (1963). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Friedman, H. & Robbins, B. D. (2009). Special issue: Positive psychology and methodological pluralism. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 37(1).
- Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Rinehart & Co.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Basic Books.
- King, L. A. (2001). The hard road to the good life: The happy, mature person. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 41, 51-72.
- King, L.A., Napa, C.K. (1998). What makes a life good? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 156-165.
- Kuhl, D. (2002). *What dying people want: Practical wisdom for the end of life*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada.
- May, R. (1981). *Freedom and destiny*. New York: Norton.
- Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.). (1994). *Death anxiety handbook: Research, instrumentation, and application*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Robbins, B. D. (2008). What is the good life? Positive psychology and the renaissance of humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 36, 96-112.
- Robbins, B. D. & Friedman, H. (Eds.) (2008). Special issue: Positive psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 36(2)
- Schneider, K. J., J. F. T. Bugental, & J. F. Pierson (Eds.), (2001) *The handbook of humanistic psychology: Leading edges in theory, practice, and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 625-634
- Schumaker, J.F. (2007). *In search of happiness: Understanding an endangered state of mind*. United Kingdom: Praeger Paperback.
- Tillich, P. (1952). *The courage to be*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wheelis, A. (1958) *The quest for existential identity*. New York: Norton.
- Wong, P. T. P. (1998). *Implicit Theories of Meaningful Life and the Development of the Personal Meaning Profile*. In P.T.P. Wong & P.S. Fry (Eds.), *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2007). *Meaning management theory and death acceptance*. In A. Tomer, E. Grafton, & P. T. P. Wong (Eds.), *Death attitudes: Existential & spiritual issues*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Wong, P. T. P. (2009). Positive existential psychology. In S. Lopez (Ed.), *Encyclopedia*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wong, P. T. P. (Eds). (In press) *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications*. N. Y. Routledge Publishers.
- Wong, P.T. P., & Fry, P.S. (1998). *The Human Quest of Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wong, P. T. P. & Hart, K. (In press). Towards a balanced international positive psychology: a Canadian perspective. Special section on Positive Psychology. *Canadian Psychology*.
- Wong, P.T.P., Wong, L.C.J. (2006). *Handbook of Multicultural Perspectives on Stress and Coping*. Langley, B.C.: Springer Science+Business Media, Inc.
- Wong, P. T. P., Reker, G. T., & Gesser, G. (1994). Death Attitude Profile – Revised: A multidimensional measure of attitudes toward death. In R. A. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Death anxiety handbook: Research instrumentation and application* (pp.121-148). Washington, DC: Taylor and Francisco
- Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.