

Paul T. P. Wong: Visionary, Teacher, Researcher, and Collaborator Extraordinaire

Gary T. Reker, Ph.D.¹

¹ Department of Psychology, Trent University

In the fall of 1972, I was invited to join the psychology department at Trent University as a post-doctorate fellow. In that year, I was given the opportunity to co-teach a course on Personality Theory and Individual Differences with Professor Paul Wong. Paul was also new to the department but he was already an established teacher and researcher. During that year we learned a lot about each other and I benefitted greatly from Paul's guidance and mentoring. The following year, Paul played a significant role in my successful endeavour to secure a position as an assistant professor in the psychology department. In my mind, the co-teaching experience and Paul's endorsement of my candidacy provided the seed that later developed into a very productive research collaboration spanning some 15 years.

Paul is a strong theoretical analyst, a clear conceptual thinker, a prolific writer, and an extraordinary visionary. In our early collaboration, Paul served as a valuable mentor to me. I vividly remember him offering advice on how I could sharpen my writing skills by encouraging me to express my thoughts more concisely. Moreover, when it came to exploring new theoretical ideas and moving them forward, Paul would be quick to emphasize the need to "strike while the iron is hot". As a keen advocate of multivariate statistics and experimental research design, I was able to bring significant technical expertise to our collaboration. I have always held the opinion that if one mastered the measurement, the design, and the statistical methodology of a science that one could investigate any content area of interest. Thus, the theoretical/conceptual skills of one and measurement/statistical skills of the other came together.

A definitive highlight of our collaboration was our success in securing a relatively large research grant to study the profile and processes of successful aging (Wong & Reker, 1982-85). Paul was instrumental in bringing the Ontario Successful Aging Project to fruition. We presented our findings at annual scientific conferences, accepted invitations to author several book chapters, and published our work in respected scientific journals. We had successfully established a formidable research team that explored the positive side of the human experience through the study of well-being (Reker & Wong, 1984; Wong & Reker, 1985), personal optimism (Reker & Wong, 1985), stress and adaptive coping (Wong & Reker, 1985, 1986); Wong et al., 2005), death attitudes (Wong et al., 1994) and meaning and purpose in life (Reker et al., 1987; Reker & Wong, 1988). All of this work was achieved well before the concept of positive psychology became popular in North America.

I sometimes reflect on the question of what it was about our relationship that made the collaboration so successful. In his personal life, Paul is a man of faith, a deep spiritual thinker, and very passionate about his religious beliefs. I recall when a colleague of mine from the philosophy department openly wondered how Paul, as a man of faith, was able to reconcile his strong religious belief with the scientific study of human behaviour. The philosopher posed the question, "Aren't faith and science inherently contradictory by nature?" Perhaps, but Paul was able to maintain a strong separation between the two, practising his faith in his personal life and pursuing his science in his academic life. Throughout our collaboration, I personally benefitted immensely from our extensive interactions and sharing of opinions and ideas on a variety of topics. While we did not always agree on things, Paul's responses were always constructive noting that alternative perspectives were equally worthy of further consideration.

As in any relationship there are bound to be personality differences and tensions that can be disruptive to ongoing, effective collaboration. Paul loved playing with new ideas and the relationships between them. Once played out he was ready to move on to the next new idea. The downside of that is that the ideas rarely get to the next stage of operationalization so important for scientific inquiry. I was frustrated by this and my stubbornness and impatience led to comments and actions that really hurt Paul more than I realized at that time. Consequently, our many years of collaboration came to a halt and we pursued our interests independently on the construct of meaning and purpose in life. Paul focused on the applied/counselling side of personal meaning in British Columbia while I remained at Trent to continue my research agenda on meaning and purpose in life. Although our formal collaboration had ended, we did not sever our ties completely. We would run into each other at talks and conferences and shared polite exchanges. A few years later, Paul invited me to co-author an unfinished chapter on coping that we had worked on at an earlier time (Wong et al., 2005). I accepted this initiative and might even have apologized for my prior unacceptable behaviour. If I did not, then I do so now.

So here we are today. Paul and I continue to pursue our own interests in positive psychology (e.g., Reker & Chamberlain, 2000; Reker & Wong, 2012; Wong, 2012). During our collaboration we acquired and shared a great deal of knowledge about the power of personal optimism, the genesis of personal meaning, and the secrets of successful aging. We remain committed to the pursuit of common goals that focus on sound scientific inquiry and the application and dissemination of knowledge to the scientific community and the general public. In summing it all up and taking into account the highs and lows in our productive relationship, the Paul Wong and Gary Reker “research team” stands as the most rewarding and meaningful

collaboration of my entire academic career. Paul, I thank you for your wisdom, your support, and your undying passion for teaching and research.

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