

## **Foreword: The Psychology of Curiosity, Purpose, Flexibility, and More**

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Choosing to become a psychological scientist isn't a grand opportunity for monetary gain. The true allure? Intellectual freedom. What separates this path from others is mental liberation. Given the chance to delve into any aspect of human existence, the question becomes what will you explore? Some researchers are specialists, dedicating years to dissecting the physiology of panic attacks. Others, like Dr. Paul Wong, are generalists, immersing themselves in a broad spectrum of topics. From the psychology of curiosity and meaning in life to the study of stress, mental flexibility, and suffering, when I studied these topics, I was drawn to Dr. Wong's work.

### **Curiosities**

Curiosity has intrigued psychologists for over a hundred years. To unravel the nature, causes, and consequences of curiosity, three research traditions emerged. The first views curiosity as an intrinsically rewarding state, where knowledge and experiences are pursued for their own sake (Berlyne, 1971; Deci, 1975; Dewey, 1913). The second frames curiosity as a drive reduction state, a motivational push to delve into the novel, complex, or uncertain, with the aim of decreasing arousal (Berlyne, 1960; Hull, 1943) or closing an information gap (Loewenstein, 1994). More recently, a third approach integrates the previous two. The feeling of interest can be distinguished from a feeling of deprivation (Kashdan et al., 2018; Litman, 2005).

I raise this perfunctory review of the curiosity literature to address Paul Wong's contributions. In 1979, Paul Wong highlighted the overlooked role of frustration-based curious exploration. He suggested a U-shaped relationship between success and fulfillment, where too

little or too much success hampers curiosity and growth opportunities. He remarked how, “teaching coping skills and the constructive role of frustration in the learning process have not received due attention from educators” (p.141). His recommendation? Teach people how to better tolerate the anxiety that arises from mental challenges. This idea resonated with our team, leading us to explore Stress Tolerance as a dimension of curiosity in the workplace and life (Kashdan et al., 2018, 2020). The result? We were surprised to find that stress tolerance is the most important curiosity dimension in predicting outcomes as diverse as work engagement, innovation, mindfulness, and intellectual humility.

Paul’s work on curiosity (Wong, 1979; Wong & Weiner, 1981) underscores that discomfort, and even suffering, can lead to well-being (Wong, 2011). These concepts anticipated the idea of antifragility (Taleb, 2014), which suggests that stressors and other forms of disorder can be beneficial. Without these elements, an individual’s development might stagnate.

### **Meaningful Living**

Humans stand apart from animals not because of the pursuit of happiness, but the quest for meaning. Interestingly, research demonstrates that happiness and a meaningful life often stand at odds (Baumeister et al., 2013). Those who report high levels of meaning in their life experience both positive and negative events frequently, along with anxiety and worry; whereas the happier a person is, the less difficulties and struggles endorsed. While happiness seekers live in the present, rarely giving thought to their past or future, individuals seeking meaning often reflect on past hardships and future aspirations. People who associate their lives with happiness are more likely to see themselves as takers, leveraging opportunities provided by others, while those who find their lives meaningful tend to view themselves as givers, caring for others and

offering gifts. These stark differences highlight the need for scientists and practitioners to look beyond the cultural fixation on happiness and recognize the importance of meaning and purpose in life (Wong, 1997; Wong & Fry, 1998).

After studying Paul Wong's work on meaning-centered therapies (e.g., Wong, 1998, 2010), my research team explored this as an alternative to traditional cognitive-behavioral interventions for conditions like social anxiety disorder (Kashdan & McKnight, 2013). We found that individuals with social anxiety disorder reap greater psychological benefits on days marked by significant effort or progress towards their self-defined life purpose, compared to a group of healthy adults. These benefits include an enhanced sense of self-worth, a heightened sense of meaning, and an increase in positive emotions. Despite the potential of meaning-centered therapy, as proposed and refined by Paul Wong over the past three decades, there is a lack of studies on how this can be applied to help those suffering from emotional disorders. This is crucial, as humans who are suffering aspire to more than just being free of disorders or being happy – they want to harness their human capacity for seeking and creating meaning, to build or restore a sense of purpose (Wong, 2012).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Paul, a luminary in psychology, is not just a colleague but a close friend. His groundbreaking work has not just enlightened, but also emboldened me to challenge conventional thinking. Always ready to voice his disagreement, even if it meant publicly challenging influential figures (and me), Paul has remained true to his pursuit of a rich and meaningful existence. His unwillingness to mindlessly adopt popular, prevailing views has

garnered not just my respect, but the admiration of countless others who have benefitted from his writings.

Paul's contributions to psychology, especially the domain of positive psychology, often go unrecognized. Yet, they form the sturdy foundation upon which I've built my research on topics such as curiosity, purpose, mental agility, stress, and coping. His influence, both direct and indirect, has significantly shaped our comprehension of human potential and growth. I hope these words inspire others to find the same inspiration from his work that I continue to do.

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