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# Reclaiming Positive Psychology: A Meaning-Centered Approach to Sustainable Growth and Radical Empiricism

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## Abstract

The future of humanistic psychology lies in reclaiming themes of personal growth, self-actualization, authentic happiness, optimal functioning, and human flourishing. This article proposes that a meaning-centered holistic approach within the larger context of existential givens complements the molecular approach of research on specific components of positive psychology.

## Keywords

self-actualization, personal growth, optimal functioning, flourishing, meaning, existential givens, meaning-centered approach

On the 50th anniversary of *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, it is high time to reflect on past achievements and ponder future directions. There has been much hand-wringing about the declining fortune of humanistic psychology and nostalgia about its heydays (Hoffman, 1999; Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1995). How do we recapture the energy, creativity, and idealism of humanistic psychology as we look into the future? Some have called for a return to its

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counter-cultural roots (O'Hara, 1996) and the major themes of the founders (Taylor, 1999). There is also a movement afoot in humanistic psychology to reclaim positive psychology as its rightful owner (Robbins, 2008; Schneider, 2011; Wong, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012).

Seligman's positive psychology movement has preempted many of the traditional themes of humanistic psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2002) by emphasizing empirical research. We maintain that a fragmented approach of emphasizing specific strengths and emotions is less effective in facilitating human flourishing than a holistic approach toward understanding the fully functioning person within the context of existential givens.

## **Creating a Meaning-Centered Positive Psychology**

Elsewhere, I have documented the centrality of meaning in well-being, resilience, and optimism (Wong & Fry, 1998; Wong, 2011, 2012). Here, I want to highlight the importance of developing a meaning mind-set that embraces the negativity and paradoxes of human existence. A mind-set is a frame of reference consisting of assumptions, beliefs, and values.

A single-minded pursuit of personal happiness and success is not sustainable—ultimately, it will lead to despair, disillusion, and other psychological problems (Schumaker, 2007). Schumaker advocates the creation of a society that will “attach greater value to the achievement of a meaningful life” (p. 284).

May (1950, 1967) and Schneider (1999) have emphasized that anxiety, paradoxes, and dilemmas are inevitable; these existential givens need to be embraced with courage as a necessary tension for creativity and personal growth. Wong's (2011, 2012) dual-system model of meaningful living exemplifies a dialectical, interactive approach of managing paradoxes.

The meaning mind-set focuses on the person (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1995) as meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. It also capitalizes on the human capacity for reflection and awakening (Wong, 2007). It is built on the importance of the PURE way of living. PURE stands for purpose, understanding, responsibility, and enjoyment (Wong, 2010c). The meaning mind-set also involves understanding the structure, functions, and processes of meaning (Wong, 2010b, 2011, 2012).

Without a personally defined meaning and purpose, life would be like a ship without a compass. An enduring passion for living comes from commitment to a higher purpose. Understanding refers to making sense of the self, life, and one's place in the world, as well as the mysteries of life. The ability to articulate one's worldview and assumptions enables us to make positive

changes. A sense of responsibility ensures that the individual will behave as an instrumental and moral agent. Joy comes from living meaningfully and authentically, relatively free from circumstances and fleeting emotions.

A meaning mind-set also means living a balanced life, because meaning comes from several sources, such as achievement, relationships, altruism, spirituality, and justice (Wong, 1998). The challenge is to provide both road signs and practical tools for individuals to facilitate their quest for personal transformation and fulfillment. I have already developed comprehensive tools and guides for meaningful living (Wong, 2010c, 2011, 2012).

All great reformers, visionaries, or missionaries have a meaning mind-set rather than a happiness mind-set, for example, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Hudson Taylor. If we could educate people and teach people to embrace a meaning mind-set, then our society would be better.

## **Creating a Research Culture of Radical Empiricism**

I believe that we can make huge progress and capture the imagination of researchers as well as society if we are willing to systematically test some of the profound ideas from humanistic existential psychology.

Just witness the power of scientific research on growth mind-set (Dweck, 2007), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and the human quest for meaning (Wong, 1998, 2012). These are just some examples of how a few concepts originating from humanistic psychology can lead to systematic research and increasing impact.

I agree with Taylor's (1999) emphasis on William James's (1912) radical empiricism, which emphasizes that all empirical data are incomplete apart from the subjective meanings of conscious experiences. The strength of radical empiricism is that it bridges the split between subjective and objective, qualitative and quantitative, and achieves the best of both worlds to gain a greater understanding of the person and the human condition.

Many of the key concepts and themes in humanistic psychology provide a gold mine for research and theorizing. For example, engagement is the key to happiness and the good life (Seligman, 2002). From our humanistic existential perspective, engagement means that we are fully and passionately engaged in life even when it hurts and evokes anxieties and tensions. The persistence of life engagement in adverse conditions reflects the degree of our commitment and our resilience.

A meaning-centered approach to scientific research is holistic and broad enough to embrace all available research paradigms to discover the truths

relevant to both human and societal concerns. Such radical empiricism would also examine all recorded human activities, from history, anthropology, literature, and religion to shed light on the human condition and the person.

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## Bio



**Paul T. P. Wong** received his PhD from the University of Toronto. He has held professorial positions at various universities, such as Trent University, the University of Toronto, and Trinity Western University. He is a registered clinical psychologist in Ontario. He is the President of the International Network on Personal Meaning ([www.meaning.ca](http://www.meaning.ca)), and International Society for Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy ([www.existentialpsychology.org](http://www.existentialpsychology.org)). He is also editor of the *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*.

The second edition of his edited volume, *The Human Quest for Meaning: Theory, Research and Applications* will published by Routledge in 2011.