



## Future Horizons in Positive Psychology: Challenges and Prospects

*Bodhraj Kumkaria<sup>1</sup>, Himalaya Tiwari<sup>2</sup>, and O.P. Sharma<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Guest Faculty, Department of Psychology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan 302004, India. [bodhrajcumkaria@gmail.com](mailto:bodhrajcumkaria@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Faculty, Institute of Applied Sciences and Humanities, GLA University, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh- 281406, India.

<sup>3</sup>Professor and Head, Department of Psychology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan 302004, India.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0524.1340>

### ABSTRACT

Positive psychology, a dynamic sub-discipline of psychology, has significantly broadened its scope since its inception in 2000, permeating various fields such as neuroscience, architecture, and even criminology. This paper explores the promising trajectory and the intricate challenges that positive psychology faces in today's complex world. We identify seven grand challenges, including the replication crisis, methodological limitations, and cultural biases, that shape the discipline's future direction and scientific integrity. Furthermore, the emergence of the "Third Wave" of positive psychology underscores a pivotal shift towards addressing global challenges like inequality, poverty, and climate change through multidisciplinary approaches. This paper proposes establishing a dedicated section within \*Frontiers in Psychology\* to focus on these challenges and encourage more inclusive, culturally diverse research. Through critical examination and proposed strategic directions, this paper aims to fortify positive psychology's framework and expand its contribution to societal well-being, emphasizing its potential to address pressing societal issues with rigor and innovative perspectives.

*Keywords:* cultural bias, global challenges, multidisciplinary approaches, positive psychology, replication crisis

### Introduction

Positive psychology has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sub-disciplines of psychology (Donaldson et al., 2021; Martín-del-Río et al., 2021), establishing itself as a truly transdisciplinary science (Lomas et al., 2021). Its applications span diverse fields from neuroscience to architecture and from climate change to criminology (Greene and Seligman, 2016; Sander et al., 2019), flourishing in the scientific examination of positive states, traits, and behaviors that enhance quality of life (Bohlmeijer and Westerhof, 2021). This paradigm shift towards studying "what's right" rather than "what's wrong" has led to the emergence of various focus areas such as positive risk management, positive health, and positive coaching (Van Zyl et al., 2020; Richter et al., 2021), along with positive organizational psychology (Donaldson and Ko, 2010), positive artificial intelligence (da Silva, 2020), and positive computing (Jeong et al., 2020). Through collaborative efforts involving academics, journals, professional societies, practitioners, and the public (Ng et al., 2021; Worthington and Van Zyl, 2021), positive psychology has expanded our comprehension of the components contributing to wellbeing and the factors that undermine it. This collective endeavor has given rise to groundbreaking theories, methodologies, frameworks, and approaches aimed at understanding and fostering conditions for individual thriving, community flourishing, and societal prosperity (Lomas et al., 2021), offering innovative solutions to complex individual, organizational, and societal challenges (Worthington and Van Zyl, 2021).

Despite its growth and impact, positive psychology encounters challenges. Since its formal inception in 2000, numerous scholars have raised questions regarding the distinctive contribution of the paradigm and the validity of its theories, methods, interventions, and philosophical foundations (Brown et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2017; Compton and Hoffman, 2019; Van Zyl, 2019; Yakushko, 2019). Wong and Roy, (2017) has also made similar criticism.

These critiques have challenged the scientific credibility and public perception of positive psychology (Van Zyl and Ten Klooster, 2022). However, within these critiques lies the opportunity to guide future growth and development of the discipline. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the criticisms is essential to navigate future directions in positive psychology. This paper aims to examine seven grand challenges confronting positive psychology and explore potential avenues for future research.

### Criticisms and Critiques: Addressing Challenges in Positive Psychology

In our increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, individuals, organizations, communities, and societies encounter unique challenges (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Wieners et al., 2021). These challenges arise from growing social tensions among groups, strains on the natural ecosystem, discontent with capitalism, and economic volatility (Bhattacharya et al., 2020), leading to perceptions of inequality, poverty, and unemployment that impact global prosperity. Conventional approaches to addressing these issues appear ineffective (Bhattacharya et al., 2020), necessitating innovative or alternative approaches. The emergence of the "Third Wave" in positive psychology, as highlighted by Lomas et al. (2021),

emphasizes the need for concerted efforts to understand the positive states, traits, and behaviors that enhance human functioning and global prosperity. This call positions positive psychology uniquely to drive global change directly. To achieve global impact, positive psychology must venture into new areas and domains tailored to the challenges posed by this VUCA world. However, for the discipline to expand, it must address both these challenges and the significant criticisms and critiques it has faced in the past decade. What are the current challenges facing the discipline?

Although not comprehensive, we posit that the primary challenges for positive psychology can be encapsulated within seven broad themes.

1. **Measurement and Assessment:** One of the foremost challenges in positive psychology is the development of accurate and reliable measures to assess various positive psychological constructs. This includes creating instruments that can effectively capture aspects like happiness, well-being, resilience, and character strengths, among others.
2. **Cultural and Contextual Adaptation:** Another significant challenge involves adapting positive psychology interventions to diverse cultural and contextual settings. What works well in one cultural context may not be as effective or appropriate in another, necessitating a nuanced understanding of cultural nuances and adapting interventions accordingly.
3. **Integration with Other Disciplines:** Positive psychology intersects with numerous other disciplines such as neuroscience, economics, sociology, and public health. Integrating insights and methodologies from these diverse fields presents a challenge in terms of creating a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to understanding and promoting human well-being.
4. **Long-Term Sustainability:** Ensuring the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of positive psychology interventions is a critical challenge. It involves exploring factors that contribute to lasting positive change and designing interventions that can be maintained and integrated into individuals' lives beyond the initial intervention period.
5. **Ethical Considerations:** Ethical issues related to the practice and research of positive psychology require careful attention. This includes considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, potential conflicts of interest, and ensuring that interventions are implemented in an ethical and responsible manner.
6. **Individual Differences:** Recognizing and understanding how positive psychology interventions may vary in their effectiveness based on individual differences is another challenge. Factors such as personality traits, cultural background, socioeconomic status, and life experiences can influence how individuals respond to interventions, necessitating personalized and tailored approaches.
7. **Public Perception and Stigma:** Overcoming public perception barriers and reducing stigma associated with seeking help for mental well-being is a significant challenge. Encouraging a positive view of mental health and well-being, promoting help-seeking behaviors, and addressing misconceptions about psychological interventions are essential aspects of this challenge.

Several challenges confront positive psychology, shaping its trajectory and prompting critical reflections for future directions.

1. Firstly, the replication crisis looms over the discipline, as attempts to reproduce the effects of popular interventions have yielded inconsistent results (Efendic and Van Zyl, 2019; Khanna and Singh, 2019; Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews, 2019; Krifa et al., 2021). Moreover, positive interventions may not always yield unequivocally positive outcomes and could even cause harm (Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews, 2019).
2. Secondly, the discipline's response to null findings and unreplicated hypotheses raises concerns about its self-correcting nature and its inclination to rely on contextual justifications (Parks and Schueller, 2014; Friedman and Brown, 2018). This lack of self-correction impedes the refinement of theories and interventions.
3. Thirdly, an over-reliance on statistical quantification may narrow the scope of inquiry within positive psychology (Friedman and Brown, 2018). This emphasis on quantitative methods overlooks the potential insights that qualitative and mixed-method approaches could offer (Lomas et al., 2021).
4. Fourthly, cultural biases inherent in positive psychology limit its applicability across diverse contexts (Hendriks et al., 2019). The discipline's predominantly Western orientation neglects the cultural, historical, and societal foundations of positive states and behaviors, hindering its universal relevance (Marecek and Christopher, 2018).

Van Zyl and Olkers (2019) pointed out in a study that addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of intervention efficacy, commitment to self-improvement, openness to diverse methodological approaches, and recognition of cultural diversity in conceptualizing well-being, which is supported by another study (Van Zyl & Ten Klooster, 2022). This recognition can promote the development of more inclusive and contextually relevant positive psychological theories, methods, and interventions.

Based on the preceding discourse, Positive Psychology confronts a spectrum of philosophical, methodological, and conceptual hurdles. These grand challenges not only present unique prospects for expanding the discipline but also offer avenues to address societal concerns with rigor and insightful perspectives. To this end, we advocate for the establishment of a dedicated section to positive psychology within *Frontiers in Psychology*. Through this initiative, we aspire to serve as a platform for research aimed at tackling these grand challenges and leveraging their inherent opportunities. Thus, we call upon the positive psychology community to focus their efforts on addressing these grand challenges and broadening the discipline across six key focus areas:

5. 1. Addressing complex and ambiguous issues such as inequality, poverty, and climate change, prioritizing societal well-being over individualism (Bentley and Toth, 2020). Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches are crucial for addressing such challenges (Lonka, 2018), ensuring the retention of diversity and breadth in an increasingly specialized landscape (Epstein, 2019).
6. 2. Conducting studies across both WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts to reflect diverse societal values and socio-political realities (Gelfand et al., 2017). Ensuring representation from minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups is imperative, given the link between well-being and sociodemographic factors (Ryff, 2022).
7. 3. Integrating positive and negative experiences to understand how individuals cope with stressors (Ryff, 2022). Exploring the co-activation of positive and negative emotions is essential for comprehensive understanding.
8. 4. Fostering flourishing, sustainable institutions, and societies, emphasizing the critical interplay between individuals and their contexts (Ungar et al., 2020; Van der Klink, 2019). Research on "good organizations" contributes to the promotion of socially responsible and productive entities ([www.goodorganisations.com](http://www.goodorganisations.com)). Furthermore, understanding care dynamics for self and others across diverse populations is pivotal (Ryff, 2022), urging positive psychologists to contribute expertise to individual and community well-being (Poortinga, 2021).
9. 5. Promoting social justice, fairness, and inclusion in institutions and societies through multidisciplinary approaches such as the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017; Van der Klink, 2019), which elucidates the capabilities and functioning of individuals across different contexts (Prillentsky and Prillentsky, 2021).
10. 6. Developing and validating psychological measures suitable for cultural and disadvantaged groups (Ryff, 2022), with a focus on promising methodologies.

In sum, addressing these challenges and embracing these focal points will advance positive psychology's contribution to both scholarship and societal well-being.

---

## Conclusion

While our grand challenge paper cannot address every criticism and debate its scientific validity, we stress the importance for the scientific community to devise solutions or responses to these challenges. These obstacles, while significant, offer exciting prospects for the discipline to expand into unexplored domains. Therefore, we trust that this consolidated perspective on the primary challenges and opportunities for positive psychology will motivate researchers to advance the discipline and foster its growth as a science.

## References

---

- Bentley, T., & Toth, L. (2020). *Exploring Wicked Problems: What They Are and Why They Are Important*. Archway Publishing. ISBN: 9781480889446.
- Bhattacharya, S., et al. (2020). Grand Challenges for Positive Psychology: Future Directions and Their Global Role in Maintaining Mental Health. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 567982. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.567982>
- Bohlmeijer, E. T., & Westerhof, G. J. (2021). A new model for sustainable mental health: Integrating well-being into psychological treatment. In J. N. Kirby & P. Gilbert (Eds.), *Making an Impact on Mental Health: The Applications of Psychological Research* (pp. 153–188). New York: Routledge.
- Brown, N. J. L., Sokal, A. D., & Friedman, H. L. (2014). The complex dynamics of wishful thinking: The critical positivity ratio. *American Psychologist*, 68(9), 801-813. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032850>
- Compton, W. C., & Hoffman, E. (2019). *Positive Psychology: The Science of Happiness and Flourishing* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. ISBN: 9781071931073.
- Da Silva, A. (2020). Editorial: Facilitating the Third Wave of Positive Psychology. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01922>
- Donaldson, S. I., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Nakamura, J. (2021). *Positive psychological science: Improving everyday life, well-being, work, education, and societies across the globe*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295379>
- Donaldson, S. I., & Ko, I. (2010). Positive organizational psychology, behavior, and scholarship: A review of the emerging literature and evidence base. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(3), 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2010.516763>
- Efendic, E., & Van Zyl, L. E. (2019). On reproducibility and replicability: Arguing for open science practices and methodological improvements at the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology. *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 45, Article a1647. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v45i0.1647>
- Epstein, R. (2019). Dispelling myths about sex addiction. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sexual-intelligence/201909/dispelling-myths-about-sex-addiction>
- Friedman, H. L., & Brown, N. J. L. (2018). Implications of debunking the "Critical Positivity Ratio" for humanistic psychology: Introduction to special issue. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 58(3), 239-247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167818762221>

- Gelfand, M. J., Aycan, Z., Erez, M., & Leung, K. (2017). Cross-cultural industrial organizational psychology and organizational behavior: a hundred-year journey. *American Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102, 514–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000186>
- Goodman, F. R., Disabato, D. J., Kashdan, T. B., & Kauffman, S. B. (2017). Measuring wellbeing: a comparison of subjective wellbeing and PERMA. *Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 13, 321–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2017.1388434>
- Greene, J. D., & Seligman, M. E. (Eds.). (2016). *Positive neuroscience*. London, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199977925.001.0001>
- Hendriks, T., Warren, M. A., Schotanus-Dijkstra, M., Hassankhan, A., Graafsma, T., Bohlmeijer, E., et al. (2019). How WEIRD are positive psychology interventions? A bibliometric analysis of randomized controlled trials on the science of wellbeing. *Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 14, 489–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1484941>
- Jeong, S., Alghowinem, S., Aymerich-Franch, L., Arias, K., Lapedriza, A., Picard, R., et al. (2020). A robotic positive psychology coach to improve college students' wellbeing. In *Proceedings of the 2020 29<sup>th</sup> IEEE International Conference on Robot and Human Interactive Communication (RO-MAN)* (pp. 187–194). Rome, Italy. <https://doi.org/10.1109/RO-MAN47096.2020.9223588>
- Khanna, P., & Singh, K. (2019). Do all positive psychology exercises work for everyone? Replication of Seligman et al.'s (2005) interventions among adolescents. *Psychological Studies*, 64, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-019-00477-3>
- Krifa, I., Hallez, Q., Van Zyl, L. E., Braham, A., Sahli, J., Nasr, S. E., et al. (2021). Effectiveness of an online positive psychology intervention among Tunisian healthcare students on mental health and study engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Applied Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12332>
- Lomas, T., Waters, L., Williams, P., Oades, L. G., & Kern, M. L. (2021). Third-wave positive psychology: broadening towards complexity. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 16, 660–674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1805501>
- Lonka, K. (2018). *Phenomenal Learning from Finland*. Helsinki: Edita.
- Marecek, J., & Christopher, J. C. (2018). Is positive psychology an indigenous psychology? In N. J. L. Brown, T. Lomas, & F. J. Eiroa-Orosa (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology* (pp. 84–98). Oxfordshire: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315659794-8>
- Martín-del-Río, B., Neipp, M. C., García-Selva, A., & Solanes-Puchol, A. (2021). Positive organizational psychology: a bibliometric review and science mapping analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(10), 5222. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18105222>
- Mongrain, M., & Anselmo-Matthews, T. (2019). Do positive psychology exercises work? A replication of Seligman et al. (2005). *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 68, 87–99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21839>
- Ng, W., Tov, W., Veenhoven, R., Rothmann, S., Cambel, M. J., & Van Zyl, L. E. (2021). In memory of Edward Diener: reflections on his career, contributions, and the science of happiness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 706447. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.706447>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061200>
- Parks, A. C., & Schueller, S. (Eds.). (2014). *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Positive Psychological Interventions*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Poortinga, Y. H. (2021). *Concept and Method in Cross-cultural and Cultural Psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Prilltentensky, I., & Prilltentensky, O. (2021). *How People Matter: Why it Affects Health, Happiness, Love, Work, and Society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Richter, S., Van Zyl, L. E., Roll, L. C., & Stander, M. W. (2021). Positive psychological coaching tools: a systematic literature review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, Article 667200. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.667200>
- Robeyns, I. (2017). *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0130>
- Ryff, C. D. (2022). Positive psychology: Looking back and looking forward. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 840062. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.840062>
- Sander, E. L. J., Caza, A., & Jordan, P. J. (2019). Psychological perceptions matter: Developing the reactions to the physical work environment scale. *Building Environment*, 148, 338–347. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2018.11.020>
- Ungar, M., McRuer, J., Liu, X., Theron, L., Blais, D., & Schnurr, M. A. (2020). Social-ecological resilience through a biocultural lens: a participatory methodology to support global targets and local priorities. *Ecology and Society*, 25(3), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-11621-250308>
- Van der Klink, J. J. L. (2019). *Cutting Stone or Building a Cathedral*. Tilburg: Tilburg University.

- Van Zyl, L. E. (2019). Enhancing scientific credibility: an open science strategy for the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 45, Article a1768. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v45i0.1768>
- Van Zyl, L. E., Olckers, C. (2019). The mental health continuum-short form in organizational contexts: factorial validity, invariance, and internal consistency. *European Journal of Mental Health*, 14, 230–259. <https://doi.org/10.5708/EJMH.14.2019.2.2>
- Van Zyl, L. E., Roll, L. C., Stander, M. W., & Richter, S. (2020). Positive psychological coaching definitions and models: a systematic literature review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 793. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00793>
- Van Zyl, L. E., Ten Klooster, P. M. (2022). Exploratory structural equation modeling: Practical guidelines and tutorial with a convenient online tool for Mplus. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 13:795672. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.795672>
- Wieners, L., Radstaak, M., Van Zyl, L. E., & Schotanus-Dijkstra, M. (2021). To whom should I be kind? A randomized trial about kindness for strong and weak social ties on mental wellbeing and its specific mechanisms of change. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 11(4), Article 1489. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v11i4>
- Wong, P. T. P., & Roy, S. (2017). Critique of positive psychology and positive interventions. In N. J. L. Brown, T. Lomas, & F. J. Eiroa-Orosa (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology* (pp. 142–160). Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315659794-12>
- Worthington, E., & Van Zyl, L. E. (2021). The future of evidence-based interventions in temperance. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 707598. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.707598>
- Yakushko, O. (2019). *Scientific Pollyannaism: From Inquisition to Positive Psychology*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15982-5>