

## RESEARCHING PERSONAL STRENGTHS FOR CREATING POSITIVE LIVES AND ENVIRONMENTS: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

### INVESTIGANDO LAS FORTALEZAS PERSONALES PARA CREAR VIDAS Y AMBIENTES POSITIVOS: UNA PERSPECTIVA INTERNACIONAL

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In today's world, we face a barrage of difficulties in multiple life spheres. While previous times were not without their challenges, these were often restricted to our own personal, geographically localized worlds. Today, news and social media expose us to never-ending reports of traumatic events and interpersonal violence, making us

question human nature and our resiliency. Increasing technological advancements have brought forth new challenges, not only in our relationships with technology, but in how we live our daily lives. Financial uncertainty at both the individual and global level raises doubts about our abilities to afford basic necessities. Climate change is wreaking havoc on the environments we call home.

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Changing interpersonal dynamics present new challenges to personal, social, and group relationships, often resulting in conflict or isolation. Adolescents and young adults are thrust into this confusing world, often lacking the proper resources to understand and cope with these challenges. Adults facing life's demands also experience extreme stress, with adverse consequences both at the present as well as later life in the form of physical and mental health issues. Furthermore, we have a tendency to direct attention to our individual weaknesses, exacerbating our experience of difficulties. It is therefore no wonder that psychology as a discipline, which seeks to understand the human experience, tends to focus on the deficiencies in our lives. However, as stated by Sheldon and King (2001), it is important for psychologists to deviate from this 'negative bias', and instead concentrate on positive human qualities and the promotion of what Maslow (1943, 1987) termed growth needs. This focus is the crux of positive psychology.

In Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) seminal review of positive psychology, Csikszentmihalyi discussed his experience growing up through the dark period of World War II. He described witnessing adult men and women becoming shells of themselves as their social supports, careers, and meaning in life were stripped away. This observation was remarkably similar to Seligman's (1975) research on learned helplessness. But what fascinated Csikszentmihalyi was not the loss of dignity, purpose in life, or capacity to flourish – it was those few individuals who managed to maintain their 'sense of self' during hopeless times. Therein lay the fundamental questions of positive psychology: what characteristics enable human beings to become their strongest, wisest, most thriving selves, and how do we move beyond pathology into the study of prevention and growth? The scientific study of personal strengths has thus been a central line of inquiry in the field. Broadly speaking, personal strengths can be defined as traits and competencies that have protective effects for human beings. Peterson and Seligman (2004) posited that they are inherently desirable and ethically valuable, orienting individuals towards fulfillment and increasing the wellbeing of both themselves and their communities. It was our aim in this special issue to showcase empirical research on personal strengths for the betterment of lives.

Given the increasing demands, difficulties, and stressors in today's world, research examining the effects of positive psychology is more significant than ever. This special issue integrates a broad spectrum of research examining relationships between personal strengths and a variety of outcomes. The papers that form this special issue utilized a number of methodologies. Analyses range from classic correlation and prediction studies, to exploring when and why relationships occur using moderation and mediation analyses, to more advanced multivariate analysis and multilevel modeling. A portion of these studies examined how personal strengths protect against negative life outcomes. For instance, Merhi and colleagues were interested in the contribution of academic personal strengths, such as resilience and motivation, on academic engagement and burnout. Similarly, Martinez and Alcalde examined what specific personality factors related to burnout in a sample of supermarket workers. Lastly, the protective aspect of low trait anger and the risk factor of high trait anger were explored in relation to parenting styles, social skills, and aggression by Alcázar-Olán and colleagues.

On the other hand, many of the studies in this special issue explored the relationship between personal strengths and positive outcomes, such as subjective well-being and satisfaction with life. Ruvalcaba-Romero and colleagues were interested in which virtues and strengths significantly predicted life satisfaction in male and female college students, while Lau explored the moderating effects of meaning in life on the relationship between resiliency and satisfaction with life. This was also of interest to Freitas and colleagues, who predicted meaning in life would mediate the relationship between personal growth initiative and subjective well-being. The mediating effects of self-esteem on the relationship between hope and life satisfaction in three different cultural groups were examined by Bernardo and colleagues. Finally, Feher and Tremblay used multilevel modeling to explore the individual and country effects of relationship enhancing traits and individual attitudes on life satisfaction across 24 countries. The articles contributing to this special issue represent research conducted by authors across a number of different cultures, in locations including Canada, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. The extent of factors examined provides a broad overview of some of the many

benefits of studying positive psychology and the important influence these positive characteristics have on our lives. Hence, these contributions add to the growing literature that the building of capacity and personal strengths offers a positive way for promoting and enhancing the well-being of all persons.

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