

Guest editorial: Positive careers research: where do we go from here?

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It has been close to 25 years since Seligman's call for a focus on "the science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). This call has been heard within the careers literature as represented in research on work as a calling (Duffy *et al.*, 2012, 2018), job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) and career counseling (Magyar-Moe *et al.*, 2015). Yet, there is still room to extend how positive psychology can expand our knowledge of careers. For instance, a career can be understood as a lifespan construct with several life stages, such as early, mid-life, late and post-retirement phases (Jiang *et al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, the lifespan focus is seldom considered in theorization and empirical examination of career scholarship (Jiang *et al.*, 2019). Others have called for a focus on career experience rather than outcomes (Hall and Las Heras, 2012). Similarly, positive psychology has established fruitful advances in our collective understanding rooted in strengths-based approaches (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and positive traits (Fredrickson, 2001), yet we know little about how these approaches can support and advance our understanding of contemporary careers.

This special issue is intended to expand the viewpoints used to study careers and explore how positive psychology supports new directions for this work. The various papers in this special issue respond to the calls above, extend our knowledge and suggest pathways for future research. In this editorial, we organize these various paths into a framework that can be used to guide deeper integration of the careers' literature and positive perspectives.

Positive psychology and careers

Positive psychology emphasizes the importance of healthy functioning, positive experiences, well-being and thriving instead of surviving (Robertson, 2018). Scholars argue that positive psychology is a movement rather than a sub-field aimed to balance out psychology's bias towards dysfunction (Robertson, 2018; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Moving away from a deficit-based or scarcity mindset to an abundance approach supports our understanding of human potential and optimal functioning (Linley *et al.*, 2010). Through the lens of positive psychology, we begin to understand the conditions under which potential is maximized and individuals can flourish.

Employment and work-related activities are central to our individual and collective experiences in modern society (Donaldson and Bligh, 2006). At the center of this conversation, a career is a transformative series of work experiences over one's life course (Arthur *et al.*, 1989). As an integral function within one's life, positive experiences at work, or a positive career experience is part of building a "good life" (Rath and Harter, 2010). In the domain of careers, positive psychology helps us to understand the individual differences, environmental factors and organizational practices that support a range of process-oriented experiences such as purpose, meaning and fulfillment. For example, the connection between meaning at work and careers has been well established.

Meaningfulness is broadly defined as the extent to which individuals view their work experiences as valuable and worthwhile (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). Research evidence suggests the role of meaningfulness in fulfilling one's basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence and relatedness (Martela and Riekk, 2018; Nikolova and Cnossen, 2020). Meaningfulness is pivotal to individual functioning and well-being (Park, 2005). Both scholars and practitioners have emphasized the significance of one's work as more than a source of generating income but a means to extracting meaning and purpose. In fact, research has demonstrated that meaningfulness can sometimes surpass the value of monetary rewards (Cascio, 2003; De Hauw and De Vos, 2010; Hurst *et al.*, 2016). Meaningfulness at work is



shown to enhance job engagement (Chaudhary and Panda, 2018; Jung and Yoon, 2016), performance (Allan *et al.*, 2016), creativity (Cohen-Meitar *et al.*, 2009), organizational identification (Pratt *et al.*, 2006) and organizational commitment (Jung and Yoon, 2016). The concept is also integral to scholarship in understanding work as a calling (Duffy *et al.*, 2012; Hirschi, 2011). Perceiving work as a calling is linked to an increased sense of meaning and satisfaction in one's career (Duffy *et al.*, 2018). In this way, meaning can alter and change our relationship with the tasks we perform as part of employment, elevating their importance in our lives.

While the relationship between meaning and work outcomes is well established, we know less about the process of seeking meaning in one's work or career (Chaudhary, 2022). In their paper on this issue, Shin *et al.* extend our understanding of the conditions that support meaningfulness at work through the lens of task, variety, social support and innovative behavior.

A critique of current work on positive psychology is that it ignores issues relevant to disenfranchised groups of people (Rao and Donaldson, 2015). Employment has long been perceived as a means by which individuals meet their financial needs and economic goals (Gill, 1999; Jahoda, 1982). The economic function of employment becomes more defined with rising financial demands (Brief and Aldag, 1989; Brief *et al.*, 1995), further emphasizing the role of one's choice of job and career in one's day-to-day living (Romney *et al.*, 2024). Research across the globe has shown the correlation between one's finances and subjective well-being, with this trend being more defined for individuals with lower income (see Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002). By extension, individuals with lower socio-economic status are more likely to view work from an economic lens (Romney *et al.*, 2024) than as a means of extracting purpose, calling or meaning. This further strengthens the existing research that money can only enhance happiness to the point where it meets general human needs (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt, 1995), suggesting that individuals' financial situation affects how much they can extract meaning from their work (Romney *et al.*, 2024).

Career describes how a person's work experience evolves over time (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). In essence, individual experiences are subject to their sensemaking, suggesting that a career reflects the course of one's vocational behavior; it is not vocational behavior (Savickas, 2002). As a result, individuals' subjective and objective financial well-being can drastically impact their career trajectories.

Contemporary careers reject the idea of a singular career path and identify the series of transformations individuals are expected to undergo throughout their professional lives to shape their career identity (De Vos *et al.*, 2019). These career transformations may entail acquiring new skills, abilities and knowledge that help individuals carve a more complex yet idiosyncratic and fulfilling career. Resultantly, today's worker is construed as the central actor in their career trajectory (De Vos *et al.*, 2019), actively contemplating their own criteria for a successful career and how it can be achieved (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). Scholars have noted the scarcity of research on examining the role of context when studying the dynamics around individuals shaping and carving out their careers (e.g. Tims and Akkermans, 2020).

Career crafting captures the proactive efforts one deploys toward fulfilling one's career goals (Tims and Akkermans, 2020). Like job crafting, which enables individuals to modify tasks and relationships on cognitive and behavioral domains to produce a better fit for the individual (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001), career crafting is conceptualized on proactive career reflection and proactive career construction (Tims and Akkermans, 2020). In particular, "individuals who proactively reflect on their career motivations and skills, and who proactively try to advance their careers by networking, may be more likely to achieve careers they find fulfilling" (Tims and Akkermans, 2020, p. 180). Nonetheless, these mechanisms are silent on the prevalence of emerging artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace. The current issue addresses this gap by featuring Tang *et al.*'s (2024) work on career crafting in the context of envisioned future selves along with the awareness of AI at work. The research further considers development human resource management (HRM) practices as antecedent to these dynamics.

Finally, career well-being is growing in importance as a concept, representing a unique contribution of positive psychology to careers research (Dik *et al.*, 2013; Magyar-Moe *et al.*, 2015; Robitschek and Woodson, 2006). The construct speaks to the subjective cognitive and affective experiences underlying one's assessment of satisfaction with one's career. As an emerging construct within this literature, career well-being holds promise in offering precision and specificity to our understanding of positive outcomes beyond general well-being, satisfaction or positive affective responses.

While this brief review is not intended to be exhaustive, we have highlighted how meaning, job crafting and career well-being represent both significant and promising streams where positive psychology supports the careers literature. This editorial aims to provide a way of understanding the contributions made by the papers in this series and to support future research. In the following section, we offer additional ways to merge the careers and positive psychology literatures, drawing attention to an existing framework useful for organizing future research paths.

In this issue and beyond

The early criticisms of positive psychology include a rigid focus on the individual without consideration for context (Kern *et al.*, 2019). Since then, scholars have developed models that guide how to consider important features of the social context and the broader environment. In their positive human resourcefulness and management (PHRAME) model, Gruman and Budworth (2022) provide guidance for examining positive psychology at various levels. While their model is focused on HR policies and practices, the basic tenets of the model apply across domains. In considering individual mechanisms that support positive outcomes, we should consider affective, cognitive and motivational processes. At the group level, these processes include a fourth mechanism, social. These mechanisms are sequential mediators that follow from well-being to support positive outcomes that, in turn, enhance well-being in a reciprocal manner. In this way, PHRAME encourages us to treat constructs from positive psychology as multi-level processes. Although we do not provide a comprehensive model in this special issue, we follow this guidance in the current framework for examining how positive psychology can contribute to careers.

Individual considerations

A career is fundamentally the experience of the individual. At the core of our model is the need to deepen our understanding of how individuals experience careers in ways that support positive processes and outcomes. Positive processes include meaning-making and job crafting but have the potential to be extended into other domains, including other features of intrinsic motivation, namely competence and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2001), passion (O'Keefe *et al.*, 2022) and calling (Duffy *et al.*, 2012, 2018), among others. Career and well-being represent an important contribution to our understanding of positive outcomes. Expanding our understanding of this and related constructs sets an encouraging path for how we might better define fulfilling careers.

Similarly, there is still a need to explore how individuals experience and approach their career objectives from a positive perspective. In this issue, Harrison and colleagues use a between-person approach by focusing on the expression of trait positive affectivity of job seekers on LinkedIn. By inference, this could be extended to other individual differences. Additionally, future research might examine how individuals can use positive perspectives to understand how people experience features of their identity influence how they approach their career objectives. The field of positive psychology has been criticized for its lack of demographic diversity in both its theorizing and empirical research (Rao and Donaldson, 2015).

As noted above, work is needed to understand career over one's lifespan (Jiang *et al.*, 2019). Emerging work on career sustainability has acknowledged the importance of a longitudinal

perspective (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). Woerkmom, in this issue examines the development of strengths as a feature of career as one ages. Many paths for potentially fruitful research are outlined, encouraging us to broaden our theoretical and empirical career perspectives to include time. Through the lens of positive psychology, this signals the potential to understand how positive processes unfold or develop based on experience. There are unique contributions to be made in areas that are particularly sensitive to time, such as resilience (Youssef and Luthans, 2007).

Career resilience is a construct that has received some attention in the careers literature (Mishra and McDonald, 2017). Although there is no consistent agreement on the definition, it is based on Luthans' work on resilience and explores how individuals rebound following setbacks. This construct has been examined at one point in time, cross-sectionally or retrospectively, and would benefit from exploring how it unfolds over time. Career resilience holds promise in helping us to understand how people move through rewarding and satisfying careers, despite common negative experiences (e.g. layoff, economic decline).

Another construct that is examined in the careers literature is that of passion. Following one's passion is popular career advice and has received research attention, particularly from a Western viewpoint (O'Keefe *et al.*, 2022). Vallerand (2024) offers a model for understanding passion and its limits. He distinguishes between harmonious passion, where one's passion is under one's own control, versus obsessive passion, where the passion controls the person. In this line of research, obsessive passion has been linked to stress and burnout (Vallerand *et al.*, 2010). Less is known about the processes that support harmonious passions within careers. How do individuals identify, develop and maintain careers that create experiences of harmonious passion? What are the related processes and outcomes associated with passion and career?

In summary, when examining individual-level constructs within the careers literature, there is an opportunity to explore both the well-being outcomes and the resulting mechanisms of well-being that contribute to positive results such as optimal performance and thriving. Various positive constructs have been identified as holding promise within this literature. There is still the potential to explore how these processes unfold over time and integrate these constructs into a larger model of career well-being.

Interpersonal experiences

In today's workplace, much of the work is completed by groups through collaboration and coordination of skills and expertise. Understanding the implications of this work structure for careers is important, as work is conducted in concert with others, and individual objective and subjective career success is tied to complex social processes (Spurk *et al.*, 2019). As a result, these social processes are integral to developing one's career.

Social capital has been identified as a major theme in the careers literature (Varma *et al.*, 2022). This viewpoint has been important in guiding our understanding of how people benefit from the exchange of opportunities and resources from others within their social networks. Theories from positive psychology have augmented and supported our understanding of interpersonal resources. In particular, the work of Dutton and colleagues on high-quality connections provides a positive lens for understanding relationships in work psychology (Stephens *et al.*, 2001). Stephens *et al.* (2001) provide insight into the cognitive, emotional and behavioral exchanges that support positive outcomes such as engagement and high functioning.

In this issue, Anazodo *et al.* explore how special interest working groups support collaboration, learning and career development, ultimately creating conditions for thriving at work. Their qualitative study follows a diverse group of professionals focused on equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives within a healthcare setting. There are interesting lessons on how collaboration-related experiences can enhance intrinsic motivation. This study marks an intersection of EDI, careers and positive psychology, addressing a notable gap in the literature.

Positive psychology has long been criticized for its lack of attention to groups who have been historically marginalized, including women and racialized people (Rao and Donaldson, 2015).

This is true at the intersection of positive psychology and careers. As such, there is potential for future research to understand how positive frameworks such as high-quality connections can help us to explore and understand the social processes that support careers of individuals who are typically underrepresented in particular domains. Herein, there are applications to mentoring, sponsorship and networking research. How can positive psychology advance our understanding of how social processes such as mentoring or sponsorship support career outcomes for racialized individuals? How can positive perspectives examining relationships at work help us to understand the conditions under which various identity groups thrive and flourish?

Environmental factors

Careers belong to the individual, span organizations, and are particularly susceptible to societal changes. In this way, there is a complex relationship between career and the broader economic and social environment. For instance, work by [Donald et al. \(2024\)](#) advances their theory of sustainable career ecosystems to include AI. While the careers literature is rich in exploring these relationships, there is much to be gained by looking at these issues through a positive lens. What are the factors that support flourishing in one's career? How can we understand emerging trends using positive approaches?

In this issue, two papers examine important environmental advancements that significantly affect careers, namely AI and social networking platforms (LinkedIn). The benefit of the positive lens is that we can examine these broad, large-scale changes through the ways in which they can be understood to support or enhance careers. As mentioned earlier, [Tang et al. \(2024\)](#) explore the relationships between job crafting in the context of emerging AI and its implications for future careers. They also examine the role of the organization's HR policies in supporting the development of careers. Meanwhile, [Harrison et al.](#) explores the trait of positive affectivity and its relationships to networking on the digital platform LinkedIn and the resultant outcomes for job seekers in terms of building connections and probability of employment outcomes. The benefit of the positive lens allows us to analyze broad technological shifts and understand how they can support and enhance careers.

In addition to the trends identified in this special issue, many other organizational and societal factors need exploration. This includes hybrid and remote work arrangements. How can positive psychology help us to understand the considerations under which careers can thrive and flourish when work is organized this way? More broadly, how can we use positive models to examine the organization's policies and practices and understand career implications (e.g. [Gruman and Budworth, 2022](#))?

Opportunities and additional considerations

Many opportunities for future research lie at the intersection between careers and positive psychology. This editorial is intended to provide some context for the articles in this series and offer some insights into how we might continue to develop this line of inquiry. We propose that there are rich avenues for understanding careers from the individual's perspective, as part of a series of social connections, and within broader organizational and environmental contexts. Theories and models in positive psychology exist at all levels and can be used to support our understanding of thriving and flourishing within careers.

There are notable gaps in the literature that are addressed by articles in this series and would benefit from additional attention. For instance, there is a need to respond to calls and need for positive psychology to turn attention to underrepresented groups in this literature. This includes racialized individuals, women and individuals holding low socioeconomic status. How can we understand positive career experiences and outcomes for a diverse range of identities and social experiences? Similarly, there is a need to understand how careers unfold over time. Positive psychology offers theories and tools to examine how careers unfold over

time. Finally, we advocate for the exploration of careers across various levels. In this way, we can understand the individual, social and environmental factors that support flourishing and optimal functioning.

At the same time, we share Gruman and colleagues' call for balance in positive psychology research (e.g. [Gruman and Choi, 2020](#); [Gruman et al., 2018](#)). In order to represent a comprehensive understanding of careers and career processes, the full spectrum of experiences need to be explored. It is our view that positive psychology offers balanced frameworks. For example, Vallerand's view of passion described above distinguishes between obsessive and harmonious passions. It is by understanding how the common advice of "following one's passion" can lead us astray that we gain clarity into how passion can support fruitful and beneficial career outcomes. So, while we present a viewpoint focused on the positive perspective, it is not intended to ignore related negative or neutral processes or outcomes.

Conclusion

A career lies at the center of one's life. Positive psychology provides a lens that encourages us to examine human experiences in ways that support well-being, engagement, optimal performance and flourishing. At the intersection of careers and positive psychology lies the opportunity to contribute to understanding of how we can support thriving within the work domain. This special issue is intended to acknowledge existing work in the positive psychology of careers and energize the field around related research opportunities. In addition, each of the papers in this series shares implications for practice. There is much to be gained in practice from a richer understanding of the conditions under which people thrive in their careers.

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