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# Defining a Positive Citizenship; Wellbeing for Emancipation

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# Defining a Positive Citizenship; Wellbeing for Emancipation

## **Abstract**

Positive psychology as a field has made substantial advances when it comes to understanding positive experiences and positive traits, yet there is a deficiency in theory, research, and application of how to build and enable positive institutions. This paper argues that positive psychologists and practitioners need to focus on how positive psychology can support and contribute to macro level community wellbeing, specifically focused and concerned with justice. At the origins of this nation's history is dehumanization and oppression of certain populations, denying citizens full participation in our democracy. This paper asks, what allows people to be psychologically ready to participate and what is society's responsibility in cultivating conditions that lead to participation? Defining a positive citizenship describes where there is potential to cultivate positive citizenship and highlights the current conditions that threaten the concept of citizenship as fundamental to wellbeing. Positive citizenship embodies Freire's belief that one cannot experience being fully human, or true emancipation, without the ability to impact and transform themselves and the world.

## **Keywords**

Citizenship, Mattering, Positive Psychology, Positive Institutions, Community Based Organizations, Self Determination Theory, Purpose

## **Disciplines**

Civic and Community Engagement | Other Psychology

Defining a Positive Citizenship; Wellbeing for Emancipation

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Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Scotney D. Evans, PhD

August 1, 2016

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### Abstract

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Disciplines: Community Psychology, Positive Psychology

### Acknowledgements

I wrote this paper in the summer of 2016. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the context of what is happening at this time. Ironically, I found myself diving into this concept of positive citizenship during a hot summer, both literally and metaphorically. It was the summer when Beyoncé dropped *Lemonade* and her and Kendrick were shouting “Freedom! Freedom! Where are you?”, and I was bumping the *Hamilton* soundtrack on repeat singing, Hey, yo I’m just like my country I’m young scrappy and hungry and I am not throwing away my shot.” Meanwhile, we were in the midst of electing our next President, as our first African American First Lady, Michelle Obama, reminds us that every day she wakes up in a house built by slaves.

At this same time the media was vividly reminding us that black men are most prominently worthy of their airtime when their bodies are associated with violence. We witnessed footage of the two consecutive deaths in two days of black men at the hands of police (that entered into mainstream, I am sure there were more). Then there was the death of police at the hands of men who served our country, but didn’t feel that their lives mattered. It seemed like every morning we awoke to news of a terrorist attack in a different country, France, Germany, Turkey, and of course right here at home in Orlando. It certainly feels like the world is on fire. A rhetoric of fear seems pervasive, yet I refuse to *not* believe that love is the answer. If there was ever a time to reimagine a different way to see each other and live together I believe that time is now. I hope this ignites a fire in your belly, as it does in mine.

First, I would like to acknowledge those who came before me and have paved the way for me to do this work. This includes Isaac Prilleltensky. Thank you for graciously sitting down with me for hours to flush out and make sense of my thoughts and the beginning of my work around positive citizenship over dinner. For your construction of my theory and helping my instinct

come to life and of course for introducing me to my advisor, Scot Evans.

Thank you Scot for your patience with me as my ideas were formed and built word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Thank you for letting me have autonomy in my ideas, even when they weren't that clear or developed. Thanks for believing the foundation was strong and providing me with the materials I needed to build.

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Lastly, this is dedicated to my fellow citizens, past and present. Especially those whose names will never be said. Those who toiled, fought, loved and thrived to the best of their ability, in the best way they could, because there was no other option under oppressive conditions. Before there was a word for resiliency or grit or any buzzword from positive psychology, you possessed and embodied human potential. It was the legacy and contribution of slaves that built this country. I hope that we can do better as a country because of the pain and sacrifice you had to endure. You matter.

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## **Introduction**

This paper will explore how positive psychologists and practitioners can move beyond positive therapy or positive counseling, focused on micro level change, to thinking about positive citizenship, creating enabling conditions, that support and contribute to individual and communal wellbeing.

It aspires to do this by addressing the gap in research dedicated to learning about what contributes to positive institutions. The approach to this topic is rooted in justice and fairness, which are required in order to construct positive institutions that serve and benefit all people and are sustainable over time. Moreover, it outlines and describes the historical emergence of citizenship and second class citizenship within the United States and the barriers to having it fully realized and applicable to all who reside here and call this country their home.

This paper describes where there is potential to cultivate positive citizenship and highlights the current conditions that threaten the concept that citizenship as fundamental to wellbeing. It proposes that all people within the United States, are citizens (regardless of legal citizenship) because citizenship is about one's participation in society. Therefore, the purpose of citizenship is to fulfill a greater purpose, not just for one's own subjective wellbeing, but in service to advancing the greater good of all. This paper seeks to make the case that by enacting conditions that support positive citizenship through intentional mediating structures of engagement will enable citizens to participate in their own practice for liberation. This reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship between society and the individual allows communities to collectively transform as each citizen transforms. This process of truly adhering to and fostering one's calling, and being able to do so because of conditions that recognize the humanity and

dignity of citizens, demonstrates that wellbeing can lead to true societal and psychological emancipation.

### **Introduction to Positive Psychology**

When newly inducted president of the American Psychologist Association (APA), Martin E.P. Seligman addressed his peers in 1999 he proclaimed that the field of psychology had not done enough to understand and promote human strengths and flourishing, and had moved away from its original intention, which was to “make the lives of all people more fulfilling and productive” (p.559). It can be inferred that the mission of psychology is imbued with a sense of social justice and social responsibility.

Seligman (1998) called this initiative to focus on the positive qualities of individuals, such as optimism and future-mindedness, positive psychology. During World War II psychology had adapted to the context of the times, moving towards a focus on pathology and healing, using a disease model to attend to human functioning (Seligman, 1998). Seligman (1998), being a counter-establishment leader, took a stance as president, declaring that the field had abandoned its mission to make the lives of people better. Although the disease model and focusing on pathology had made significant contributions to those who suffered, it was not sufficient. During the time of Seligman’s (1998) address he was concerned about the rising cases of depression, ten times more serious than the previous four decades, particularly emerging amongst teenagers, when it was typically a disorder that showed up in middle aged adults. He called this the major paradox of the 20th century, as we were at a time in our country with the most technological advances and quality of life, yet depression was rising and affecting young adults for the first time (Seligman, 1998).

Seligman (1998) saw this as an opportune time to reorient the field of psychology, both research and science, as well as practice and application, around strengths and what makes life worth living. Although psychology should be concerned with treating mental illness, at the time of Seligman's induction as President of the APA, the field was focused on pathology, not as concerned with preventive psychological health and was not focused on how to cultivate a healthy-mindedness, or optimism, within individuals (Pawelski, 2003).

Shortly after Seligman's inaugural statement to the APA, Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi published an introduction to positive psychology in the millennial issue of the *American Psychologist* journal devoted to this new science (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Again, a bold assertion was made by these two well-known psychologists that their field had neglected what contributes to wellbeing and thriving for the majority of the population (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000.) They saw the role of positive psychology as the science of three related topics: positive subjective experience, positive individual traits and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Peterson, 2006.) In the past fifteen years since that article was published the field of positive psychology has grown exponentially. Chris Peterson (2006), an original member of the Positive Psychology Steering Committee and colleague of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, wrote about how there have been substantial advances in the first two components of positive psychology, positive experiences and positive traits, yet a deficiency in theory, research, and application of how to build and enable the third focus on positive institutions. There has been an emergence of positive organizational scholarship (POS), which is not a single theory, but focuses its studies on positive outcomes, processes and attributes of both the organizations and the individuals who work there (Cameron,

Dutton & Quinn, 2003). However, POS does not adequately address Seligman's original concern for social responsibility, which has been omitted from recent positive psychology literature.

Seligman (1998) wrote to the APA, "We can show the world what actions lead to...a just society...Ideally, psychology should be able to help document...what policies result in the strongest civic commitment" (p.560). He admonished his peers that if the United States continues to value material wealth over human need, that increased selfishness and a widening gap between the rich and poor, will lead to chaos (Seligman, 1998). Given the popularity and acceptance of positive psychology in mainstream culture, it seems as if this notion of positive psychology's role in creating a just society has been abandoned. Perhaps this has to do with the field's reluctance to acknowledge the role that justice plays in wellbeing, therefore there is not a common definition, nor understanding, for scholars or practitioners to adhere (Prilleltensky, 2011). In his now infamous speech, Seligman (1998) did not provide a description of what a just society would look like. This lack of clarity makes enabling sustainable, positive institutions and communities seem elusive.

Creating a just society would seem to be an important area of growth for a field that prides itself on the direct practice of research in order to promote wellbeing. The field as a whole falls short in expanding this concept from micro application to macro. As indicated above, the primary focus in positive psychology has been mainly on individual flourishing. These positive psychology principles have mostly been dispersed, utilized and benefited those who can afford it. This is contrary to the goal of psychology that Seligman (1998) attested to. The mission of the field should be oriented to better the the lives of all people. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2001) say that positive psychology is not meant to be an exclusive movement. Yet, critics of their work question the ability to deliver on that claim. Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008)

bring attention to the fact that social science researchers have inherent cultural biases that influence their work due to their own socio-cultural upbringing. This unintentionally impacts their work and inquiry (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Although Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi state that psychology is value and culture free, Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) assert there is no such thing without acknowledging your own assumptions and limitations. Western ideology and values infiltrate positive psychology, and influences its effort to remain prescriptive, rather than descriptive (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Christopher & Hickinbottom (2008) argue that the inability for positive psychologists to examine cultural differences severely limits the extent to which researchers can ask relevant questions and conduct research that furthers the goal of human flourishing for all. In addition, positive psychologists focus on subjective wellbeing is narrow, again concerned with self-interest and an emphasis on the individual (Stetsenko, 2012; Ehrenreich, 2009; Prilleltensky, 2011). This minimizes the notion that humans develop “in their sociocultural contexts and within relation to others” (Stetsenko, 2012, p. 146). The concentration on subjective wellbeing ultimately undermines what Chris Peterson preached, that “other people matter” (2006). If positive psychology as a field, and the scholars and practitioners, do not understand the cultural biases that they bring to the work the field is going to encounter limitations to positively impact and demonstrate that “other people matter” (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008).

Positive psychology has been focused on giving individual people dignity through strengths. How can the field use its own classification of strengths and virtues to reflect on its underuse and overuse in order to truly accomplish its purpose to make the lives of all people better (Seligman, 1998)? How can this be goal be accomplished without attending to systemic issues that enable or hinder conditions for flourishing? If scholars and practitioners within the

field of positive psychology would exhibit the courage to demonstrate humility and curiosity, there is the opportunity to deepen our understanding of wellbeing and meaningfully impact the trajectory of society through collective human potential.

### **The Creation of an Underclass and Second Class Citizenship in the United States**

This paper seeks to equip the reader with adequate information as to what has led to a second class citizenship within the country, and who is identified as a part of the underclass (Wilson, 1994). In order to develop positive institutions, positive psychologists must have a broader contextual understanding of the construction of our democracy, communities and societies, all which have been classified by Seligman (2002) and Peterson (2006) as positive institutions. This knowledge of the country's founding hopefully leads to a deep appreciation for the complexity and nuance that citizenship was built on.

Similarly, in order to even consider, enact and reimagine citizenship, it is critical to understand the history of citizenship. Many of our country's citizens have been left out of, or historically experienced citizenship negatively, suffering oppression by those in power. Peterson's (2006) description of the role of a positive institution is to "facilitate the development of positive traits, which in turn facilitate positive subjective experiences" (p.20). Unfortunately, there are many institutions that have been created to have the opposite effect. A prominent example within the history of the United States, which is closely tied to the concept and the practice of citizenship, is the institution of slavery. Slavery, and its detrimental and lasting effects, have influenced the subjective wellbeing of black citizens within our country. The establishment of slavery was not solely that of horrific violence and physical oppression against enslaved blacks, who were not even considered human, but, there was a psychological manifestation of abuse and oppression, as to whose humanity was valued, whose lives mattered.

Prilleltensky (2014) has identified mattering as a psychological construct, imperative to one's subjective wellbeing. Mattering falls on a continuum and can elicit an imbalance that impacts both personal and collective wellbeing (Prilleltensky, 2014). Too much recognition can create a sense of entitlement and privilege for some, while rendering others invisible (Prilleltensky, 2014).

African Americans in the United States have been systematically oppressed and racism has been pervasive since white Americans in Virginia first enforced chattel slavery in 1661 (Wilson, 1994; Gellman & Quigley, 2003; Smith, 1997). Maryland shortly followed thereafter in 1663, where blacks were legally enforced to a hereditary lifetime in bondage (Smith, 1997). Blacks were stripped of their humanity and became subject to white owners as property and black slavery became an institution within the United States so despicable that even the highest common law court in England forbade it (Smith, 1997).

The shameful and immoral history with slavery in the United States and the perception of African Americans as things, instead of human beings, was justified through legal codification in order to maintain a hierarchy of white political power (Smith, 1997). White Americans enforced and enacted repressive laws and codes out of fear of retaliation by both free and enslaved blacks (Smith, 1997). The divide along racial lines was a way to discourage white lower class members to side with poor blacks. In Virginia, in the eighteenth century, white indentured servants were required by law to be given food, money and a gun, by their masters, as well as a discounted poll tax (Smith, 1997). Edmund Morgan, an American historian, saw these types of policies as a way to delay class conflicts, where both poor blacks and whites would band together in an effort to revolt against their masters. These types of laws fortified racial identity over class identity (Smith, 1997).

The historical oppression of African Americans, and marginalization of low income citizens, has persisted up to the present day. Our country's founding policies have promoted mattering for some, while diminishing others ability to contribute and exercise autonomy. Racial exclusion and inclusion have been reinforced and supported by laws. As United States Senator Cory Booker proclaimed in his speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, our founding documents were not perfect. In fact, "they were saddled with the imperfections and even the bigotry of the past. Native Americans were referred to as savages, black Americans were referred to as fractions of human beings, and women were not mentioned at all" (Drabold, 2016).

The United States has a large population of disadvantaged and marginalized groups of people of color and poor people that can be traced back to labor laws and practices, and the classification and distribution of what was considered property during our country's founding (Wilson, 1994). Joblessness has caused an increase in poverty and the concentration of poor people in particular communities (Wilson, 1994). Wilson (1994) refers to this population of people as the underclass. van Steengbergen (1994) suggests that the more appropriate term would be second class citizens. Prilleltensky (2014) warns that feeling invisible, forgotten and neglected by society has detrimental implications on a citizen's wellbeing, that should be considered a violation of a psychological human right. van Steengbergen (1994) concurs that the mere existence of a second class citizenship is immoral as it violates the values of citizenship.

### **T.H. Marshall's Concept of Citizenship**

British sociologist T.H. Marshall wrote a seminal essay called "Citizenship and Social Class", in which he implied that all men were born free and therefore, privy to a body of rights. He states that citizenship at its core is the principle of equality (Marshall, 1950). Although there



are various well deserving critiques of Marshall's conceptualization of citizenship that will not be fully examined in this paper, his theory is fundamental when exploring the idea of citizenship.

Looking at Marshall's description of citizenship in the context of the United States, African Americans born into slavery were considered property of their master, therefore they are not eligible to the rights of citizenship because they were not born free. Considering the laws outlined in the section above that were designed to exclude African Americans, in conjunction with the long lasting impact of the perspective and sentiments towards African American citizens by white citizens and those who held political office, it would not be unreasonable to state that African American citizens are not born free or are born with a limitation on their freedom given the historical context. African American citizens do not experience the same embodied freedom that white Americans are born into. Hence, there are confines on black citizens' experiences of citizenship.

Marshall (1950) outlined three forms of citizenship; civil, political and social. He stated that civil citizenship encompasses the rights of individual freedom including freedom of speech, faith, the right to own property and the right to justice (Marshall, 1950). How does the United States reconcile that black people were considered property for a substantial period of time?

In addition, Marshall (1950) himself stated that a right to something is not about the protection of the property itself, but a right to obtain it. He also made the case that one can have the right to free speech, but how can one act upon and benefit from that right without access to education (Marshall, 1950)? It is these nuances in language and within the historical social context, which can be a guide to understanding how, over time, laws can be enacted and designed specifically to protect and maintain power by a dominant group, while giving the illusion of equity and access to rights. Marshall (1950) distinguishes political citizenship as the

right to participate and exercise political power, as both a voter eligible to elect a candidate into a position of authority or an individual elected with the responsibility to govern. One must draw again upon Marshall's distinction that a right to something, does not within itself guarantee that the right is bestowed upon citizens, nor does it ensure that it will be taken advantage of.

Marshall's (1950) final stage of citizenship is referred to as social citizenship, which is a concept of citizenship within the United States that is the most antithetical to capitalism and the pervasive rhetoric of individualism. Citizens who are members of the underclass, people who are traditionally dependent on government social supports for survival, have little protection of their social rights in American society, unlike Western European countries (Wilson, 1994). In a report published by ideas42, they reported that 45.3 million Americans live below the poverty line (Daminger, Hayes, Barrows, Wright, 2015). 16 million of those are children below 18 years old (Daminger, Hayes, Barrows, Wright, 2015). In comparison with other developed nations the United States' poverty rate is not even considered average, even though America has the highest net national wealth. To be constituted as average would mean there would be 19 million fewer American citizens living in poverty (Daminger, Hayes, Barrows, Wright, 2015). Liberals and conservatives have divergent and opposing points of views on the role of social services and social rights of citizens in the underclass. Conservatives tend to condemn the values of poor people as cause for their circumstances (Wilson, 1994). Liberals are more inclined to value fairness and care (Haidt, 20012), yet are slow to adapt social policies that would, for example, integrate upper and middle class white suburban schools (Thompson, 2005). Liberals have only recently been acknowledging, thanks to the work of the Black Lives Matter movement, that institutional white privilege is embedded into our society and how policy change can dismantle this supremacy.

Social citizenship, or social responsibility, states that all members of a society are entitled to justice (Fraser & Gordon, 1992). Prilleltensky (2014) differentiates between justice, as a principle, and fairness as a practice. Citizenship not only represents participation, but requires it (van Steenbergen, 1994). A sociological definition of citizenship is the relationship between an individual and society (van Steenbergen, 1994). This paper concentrates primarily on participation in public, rather than political life (van Steenbergen, 1994).

### **Constructing a Theory of Positive Citizenship**

The French meaning of the word “citoyen” connotes and embodies dignity (Fraser & Gordon, 1992). In 1789 France, this word represented equality between all people. For example, instead of being greeted as “madame” or “mademoiselle,” women were greeted as “citoyenne,” the female version of “citoyen” (Fraser & Gordon, 1992). The term itself symbolized the power of being seen and the power of being equal. A citizen is someone who matters.

Prilleltensky (2014) would equate the power of being seen to his main research topic of mattering. Mattering is feeling valued and having the opportunity to add value (Prilleltensky, 2014). Mattering is a large part of my definition of positive citizenship, a term I use repeatedly throughout this paper. To me, positive citizenship is the reciprocal relationship that is needed between the individual and civil society in order for citizens to experience existential wellbeing. My theory of positive citizenship is that if society nurtures each citizen’s pursuit of their highest purpose and calling in the interest of the greater good, then they will be able to experience true liberation and freedom. Furthermore, based on what I have learned in this program and in the field, I believe certain conditions within society can promote or inhibit positive citizenship.

### **Conditions for Positive Citizenship**

Positive citizenship involves encouraging societal conditions to take hold which support the psychological emancipation of individuals so that they can achieve existential wellbeing, which is defined as mattering, the ability to be self-determining, self-efficacious, and living out one's greater purpose (Taylor & Turner, 2001).

If democracy, society and communities are institutions that Peterson (2006) and Seligman (2002) identified as having the potential to function as positive institutions, perhaps, it is time to revisit both the social responsibility of an institution and an institution's role to be fair and just, while also examining how to cultivate conditions that lead to individual participation. For the purpose of this paper, I'm defining participation as, being able to contribute one's unique gift, their calling or their purpose, in service of the greater good of the civic health of one's community and society.

What allows people to be ready to participate? How can positive citizenship be created, by drawing upon the principles and concepts of positive psychology? What if citizenship was viewed as fundamental to wellbeing? What if the role of society was to nurture a citizen's ability to pursue their highest purpose or calling in the interest of the greater good? How can the practice of citizenship embody liberation and thriving?

**Mediators of positive citizenship.** Society, democracy, and communities are encompassing institutions that consist of smaller institutions. Therefore, there must be intermediaries that establish and reinforce the conditions needed to facilitate engagement as a means to achieve wellbeing and existential wellbeing. The literature on wellbeing and existential wellbeing will be more thoroughly defined and examined below. It is important to highlight that existential wellbeing is a component of wellbeing, but existential wellbeing is central to making

sense and meaning as to why, as humans, we are here (Keyes, 2011). Community organizations have the possibility of being the intermediaries and create conditions for positive citizenship, as they are often the “mediating structures” for engagement between citizens. In this paper engagement is defined as high quality connections (HQC), which are moments of connection that are life giving, energizing, and leave people feeling more alive (Dutton, 2003).

A critical part of positive citizenship is high quality connections. HQC not only lead to a sense of engagement in society, but facilitates connection, mutual respect and meaning among citizens in a reciprocal way. Dutton (2003) defines high quality connections as a connection that is “marked by mutual positive regard, trust, and active engagement on both sides. In high quality connections people feel more engaged, more open, and more competent” (p. 2). High quality connections fuel physical and psychological health. Dutton (2003) focuses on HQC in the workplace, but her research is applicable across contexts. There are four pathways to build HQC, which are, 1) playing, taking part in activities with the intention of having fun, 2) respectful engagement, interact with another person that conveys their value and worth, 3) task enabling, setting another person up for successful implementation so that they feel efficacious and 4) trusting, communicating in a way with another person by both actions and words (done or not done) that sends the message that they are capable of meeting expectations and reliable (Dutton, powerpoint slides, 04/02/2016). High quality connections are the key to constructing positive institutions. The creation and sustainability of positive institutions depends on leadership practices and a fortified culture in order to support the pathways and practices for high quality connections to exist.

Engagement or HQC, by default, requires that we must “see” people for their inherent dignity. Engagement creates conditions for participation and mattering, as it allows for agency and encourages people to both give and receive (Prilleltensky, 2014).

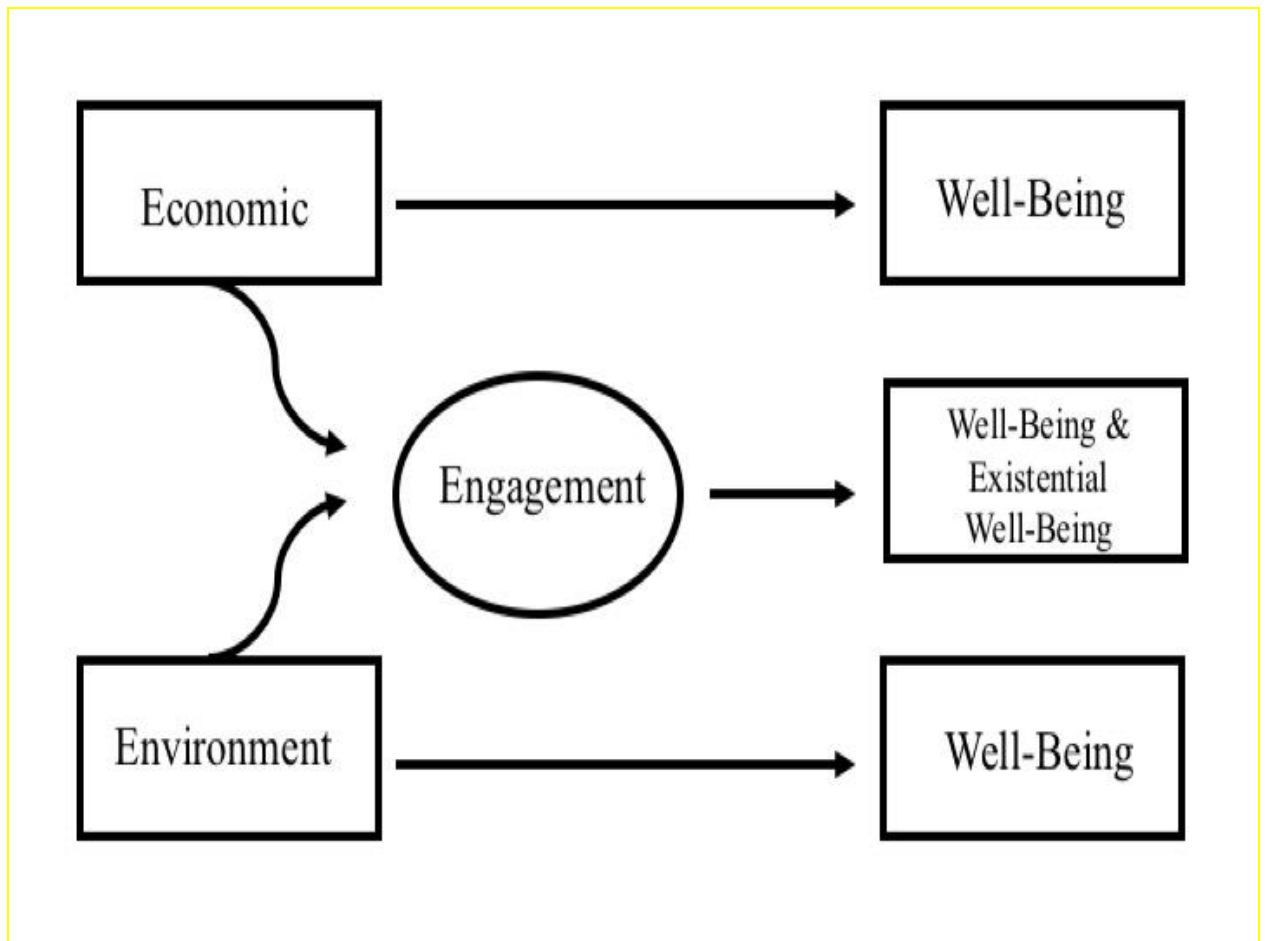
In order for the concept of positive citizenship to take root, institutions must be concerned with how, and be required, to create opportunities in which citizens thrive in public life, rather than merely the political or civil aspects of citizenship.

**A two-tiered vision of the world: past to present.** Existential wellbeing can be explained using Charles Taylor’s (1989) explanation of two-tiered vision of the world. Dominant Western ideology today is primarily concerned with the first tier, although prior to the current modern era, Westerners subscribed to the two tier vision (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Both of these tiers are necessary for meaning making. The first tier offered meaning and value, while the second tier offered an understanding of the world, where one could derive value from being a part of something larger. For example, the ancient Greeks valued *zen* (the life of necessity), where the care of the home was seen as central for survival (Arendnt, 1958). Whereas the public life, or *euzon* (the good life), was one where citizens could go beyond their physical existence, to explore the essence of what made them uniquely human (Arendnt, 1958; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Scholars suggest that this two tier system collapsed in the Western world due to social, political, and intellectual movements (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Now society functions primarily in a one tiered system (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008).

A two tiered system requires that an individual must be in touch with something outside or larger than themselves (i.e. God, social order, -.) “to know what is right to do, and good to be” (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008, p.567). Christopher & Hickinbottom (2008) state that

positive psychology in its current form, is primarily a one tiered system, concerned with individual, subjective wellbeing. Hence, the need to reinstate an emphasis on existential wellbeing, in conjunction with wellbeing. In order to experience positive citizenship a citizen must have wellbeing and existential wellbeing to be emancipated.

Figure 1



In order to experience positive citizenship a citizen must have wellbeing and existential wellbeing in order to be emancipated.

There are preconditions to wellbeing, such as economic and environmental resources, which can facilitate wellbeing outcomes, but those are not sufficient to foster existential

wellbeing. In order to promote existential wellbeing, engagement must be the mediator, because meaning making involves understanding one's place and function in the world in relationship with others.

One can experience wellbeing and existential wellbeing without sufficient economic and environmental resources, as abundant resources may not be sufficient for wellbeing or existential wellbeing. Seligman (2002) states that the wealthier a nation grows, so do people's shortcuts to pleasure, such as drugs and television. Seligman (2002) refers to the epidemic as a paradox in wellbeing. The United States is experiencing a decrease in subjective wellbeing and an increase in depression (Seligman, 2002). I proposed a critique examining positive psychologists focus on subjective wellbeing in the introduction of this paper. Figure 1 offers an explanation as to why, with these preconditions in place, citizen's wellbeing would suffer because of a lack of meaning making that happens in relation and connection with others.

Seligman (2002) argues that some indicators of objective wellbeing are purchasing power, amount of education, nutrition, etc. These can also be considered as preconditions for wellbeing. If these were sufficient to achieve wellbeing then would depression be on the rise in every wealthy nation (Seligman, 2002)?

The role of individualism in our country is detrimental to wellbeing (Seligman,1990). Seligman writes, "Individualism and selfishness present a wholly parallel situation" (1990, p.288). Seligman believes that the root of depression is "an over commitment to the self and an under commitment to the common good" (p.288). He asks, in a time where we have more education, books, and wealth why is depression on the rise (Seligman, 1990)?

**Conceptual groundings of positive citizenship.** This construction of positive citizenship evolved from Freire's (1990) theoretical contribution in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which



stated that all individuals' pursuit of their ontological vocation is a method of liberation. Ontological is the philosophical study of being and existence. Vocation is one's calling or purpose. True liberation can only be experienced when one is allowed to pursue their highest purpose and their existential needs are met. Freire's (1990) theory aligns with the research that has emerged from positive psychology, that meaning-making and mattering are universal, psychological needs of all people (Prilleltensky, 2014).

Freire (1990) also talks about how fear of freedom keeps men psychologically oppressed and to be truly liberated one must develop a critical conscious to enable a radical awakening. Comparably, Seligman constructed a theory of learned helplessness. During his years as a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, Seligman and his colleague Maier, demonstrated that it is possible to learn helplessness and that internal thoughts can influence one's ability to take action, which can ultimately contribute to depression (Seligman, 1990). An individual's internal thoughts are conditioned through their experiences, which can teach them to become passive when their attempt at action does not yield results. When this happens enough times and an individual attempts to exert control, but their actions prove to be useless, people then, in turn, learn to be helpless. In connection with Freire (1990), when individuals see themselves as victims of injustice, that nothing that they do matters, this can ultimately develop into learned helplessness, provoking a fear of freedom. This is why Freire encourages against seeing oneself as a victim. When you start to believe that you have no control, you are relinquishing your own power, rendering oneself passive and impeding on one's ability to take control over areas that one does have control over. As Seligman (1990) identifies, if it is possible to learn helplessness, it is then possible to unlearn helplessness.

***Psychological emancipation.***

*“I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.”* Harriet Tubman

Bellamy (2008) states that citizenship involves participation in the community, which is more than voting or governance, but contributing to the the socio-economic health and vitality as well. Yet, what allows people to be psychologically ready to participate and what is society’s responsibility in cultivating conditions that lead to participation?

Psychological emancipation is to be set free from psychological restrictions on how one perceives self or society's negative perceptions of them that they’ve internalized. Freire (1990) would call this an awakening of radical self-awareness or conscientization. Conscientization is when historically marginalized people within a society awaken to having been oppressed by a dominate force (Freire, 1990). Fromm (1965) has a similar concept to conscientization. He describes this as “freedom from” and “freedom to”, both the external forces of oppression and the internal psychological conditions that come with “class exploitation, gender domination and, and ethnic discrimination” (Prilleltensky, 2008, p.128). The internalization of oppression is a threat to emancipation and reinforces the United States’ underlying individualistic belief that a person’s circumstances are the result of their own actions, rather than an unjust system (Prilleltensky, 2008).

Positive citizenship requires engagement and full participation. Individuals’ political consciousness can be provoked through various modes, such as therapy, readings or involvement in a social movement (Prilleltensky, 2008). Often, one must have an experience that incites “conscientization” (Freire, 1990). What if the work of cultivating positive citizenship was for community based organizations to support physiological emancipation, to be set free from

psychological restrictions on how you perceive yourself or society's negative perceptions of you that you've internalized?

There are various tools from the field positive psychology, specifically resiliency skills, that can be utilized. In an article for *Jezebel* Chadburn (2015) criticized non-profits for perpetuating poverty through stating that their constituents in low income and historically oppressed neighborhoods had lost their resilience. Her analysis was that instead of putting blame on the individual for their lack of resilience as they navigate a broken system that we should address the conditions that create poverty, trauma and economic inequality (Chadburn, 2015). Chadburn described her own experience working for a non-profit where they believed that it was their role to restore the resiliency in the people they were serving. Rightly so, Chadburn (2015) vehemently disagreed with this perspective, and discovered that, in fact, these individuals were some of the most resilient people.

Some concepts from positive psychology have turned into buzzwords as soon as they enter the mainstream and have been co-opted by the rugged individual nature of our culture. Resiliency is an example of that. Chadburn (2015) writes of her experience working for an organization that assumed that the individuals they served did not possess resilience and that it was their role to foster resilience within its constituents. Everyone, not just those who are low income or come from marginalized communities, can benefit from resiliency skills so that they can produce better outcomes for themselves by identifying where they have control and agency. Teaching resiliency skills is not implying that individuals do not already have resilience. In fact, it is stating that people are, in fact, resilient, and that they are capable of learning how to be more effective at allocating their reservoir of resilience. Most people are not consciously competent when dealing with adversity. Instead, they are getting by the best way they know how. This, in

the short term might work for survival, but might not lead to sustainability or enhancing one's ability to thrive.

Community based organizations would benefit from teaching people resiliency skills so that they can move from being unconsciously competent to being consciously competent. Teaching resiliency skills is an effective way to build self-efficacy as it equips individuals with tools to solve problems and meet the challenges in their life (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). There are so many elements in a person's life, especially if they are living their life in a broken system, that they don't have control over. It is very possible that often individuals exert control in ways that have negative consequences, because that is one area in which they feel that they do have control. When correctly implemented, these tools can advance psychological emancipation and foster agency in one's life, which is a psychological need of individuals.

If individuals are unable to make changes in their lives or have control, that contributes to learned helplessness causing individuals to become passive in their lives and submissive to their circumstances. If anything, it is a threat to "conscientization", or psychological liberation. The philosophical concept of meliorism is that through human effort, one can make a difference in the world. This concept is reflected in Prilleltensky's (2014) work around mattering. Being able to contribute and have an impact on one's environment is significant for individual's psychological wellbeing.

There must be a distinction in our language, particularly when discussing the conditions that marginalized citizens face, that acknowledges an unjust system, without the danger of individuals seeing themselves as victims. There is often disagreement between liberals and conservatives when it comes to the concept of victim blaming. As Friere (1990) recognizes, in order to experience conscientization one must awaken to the dominant forces of oppression,

while not seeing oneself as a victim. There is psychological reasoning that allows us to see that, even with the best of intentions, this can actually cause harm by taking away people's autonomy and competence. This is not to say that disenfranchised and historically oppressed peoples are not being victimized, but we must intentionally place the onerous on the systems and conditions themselves, which can be altered and changed by our own effort. We face the risk when we label people as victims, that they see they see themselves as helpless and incompetent, that something is inherently wrong with them (Ryan, 1976). This can enable a fixed mindset, where people view their circumstances as unmalleable and can get in the way of our ability to make change (Dweck, 2006). In order to alter conditions, we must embrace a growth mindset, which prioritizes the idea that our talents and skills can be developed by our own effort.

When individuals transform, society transforms. We must incite and construct opportunities for psychological emancipation to create conditions that allow for complete, embodied liberation for all citizens.

### **Wellbeing**

In his 2011 book *Flourish*, Seligman distinguishes between happiness and wellbeing. Much critique of positive psychology initiates from the word "happiness," which during the origination of positive psychology was synonymous with the field. Seligman (2011) states that he used to think that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, but now it is "wellbeing". Philosophers and religious texts have been contemplating and mulling over the concept of happiness, meaning, and purpose since the earliest documentation of thought. Tiberius (2013) writes that there are two meanings of happiness. The first can be a state of being, feeling a positive psychological sense of happiness. She clarifies that when she mentions happiness she is referring to a sense of well-being and that, due to its double meaning, it is imperative to

differentiate between the two (Tiberius, 2013). Well-being and how to increase flourishing is not just of interest to philosophers and psychologists, but to everyday people, which is why it is significant that we ask the right questions and remain attentive to its moral implications (Tiberius, 2013).

The philosophical method is one where philosophers ask, what can be studied? They generate these questions through observations. These questions are then constructed into a theory or theories (Tiberius, 2013). Philosophers offer questions that can be answered through the scientific methods of empirical psychology (Tiberius, 2013). There can be conflicting theories and Tiberius (2013) concludes that there might not be a single theory that is relevant to all interests and purposes for studying well-being. Wellbeing is a construct and various psychologists have theories on what contributes to wellbeing and how wellbeing can be supported and cultivated (Seligman, 2011). Below are three wellbeing concepts proposed by prominent psychologists, Seligman (2011), Ryff (1989), and Prilleltensky, Dietz, Prilleltensky, Myers, Rubenstein, Jin, & McMahon (2015), that conceptualize what contributes to flourishing and overall wellbeing. There are three components of existential wellbeing outlined as well, including mattering, self-determination theory and purpose that will be examined.

### **PERMA**

Concerned that the intention of positive psychology would be undermined by its association with the word happiness, Seligman (2011) has proposed his own wellbeing theory known as PERMA, which is commonly utilized in positive psychology and by practitioners of positive psychology. There are five measurable elements that PERMA stands for which are positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievements (Seligman, 2011).

These elements can be measured both subjectively, by self reporting, and objectively (Seligman, 2011).

There is not one element in Seligman's theory that contributes to wellbeing in isolation of the other elements. In fact, the elements of wellbeing are not only interconnected but, also, complementary.

### **The Six Factors**

This is also the case in the Ryff Scales created by Carol Ryff, which is a six-factor model personality assessment (Ryff & Singer, 2006). The six factors, like Seligman's (2011) five elements of PERMA, are reinforcing. Ryff's impetus for creating a scale was to converge a range of theory-based frameworks of wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) to answer the question "what constitutes essential features of wellbeing?" (Ryff, 2013,p.11).

Ryff drew from developmental psychology, including Erikson's psychological stages, Buhler's basic life tendencies, and Neugarten's executive processes of personality (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). She also examined how clinical psychologists described wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). She incorporated Maslow's self-actualization, Allport's formulation of maturity, Roger's description of a fully functioning person, and Jung's individuation (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Also included were Jahoda's aspects of mental health literature, particularly what constitutes positive health (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

These concepts laid a theoretical foundation for Ryff's multidimensional wellbeing construct, which consists of six components of psychological wellness. Ryff described these as 1) purpose in life- the extent to which people feel their lives had meaning, purpose and direction, 2) autonomy-whether an individual views themselves to be living in accord with their own personal convictions, 3) personal growth-the extent to which one is making use of their personal

talents and potential, 4) environmental mastery-how well one manages their life situations, 5)personal relationships- the depth of connection one has in ties with their significant others, and 6) self-acceptance- the knowledge and acceptance one has of the themselves, including awareness of personal limitations (Ryff, 2013).

In both of these theories of wellbeing, wellness consists of multiple constructs. There is not one single measure that defines wellbeing, rather there are various interrelated elements that contribute to fostering wellbeing (Seligman, 2011).

### **I COPPE**

The attainment of wellbeing has become a desired outcome as positive psychology gains visibility in mainstream society. There are a variety of other constructs created by credible psychologists and influential contributors to the field. For the sake of this paper the last wellbeing construct that will be examined is I COPPE. I COPPE is a combination of different models, facets and measurements into one tool that measures multidimensional wellbeing ((Prilleltensky et al, 2015). I COPPE consists of six domains; Interpersonal, Community, Occupational, Physical, Psychological and Economic. The I COPPE tool was created with the intention to be utilized in a wide range of settings including clinics, educational settings, in organizations and communities (Prilleltensky et al, 2015). I COPPE is concerned with both individual and community wellbeing.

There are commonalities between these models, particularly interpersonal relationships, which is a consistent element in all three. However, Prilleltensky et al. (2015) is the only model that measures the impact of community, occupational, physical and economic domains of wellbeing, which are omitted in other constructs.



In this paper when I discuss wellbeing the concept I am referencing is the I COPPE framework of wellbeing. Prilleltensky defines wellness as fairness. His (2011) definition of wellness and wellbeing differs from his colleagues because he argues that there is an explicit link between justice and wellbeing.

Where his colleagues would argue that flourishing can occur by tending to the elements of their wellbeing models, Prilleltensky (2011) would argue that thriving can only occur when there are optimal conditions of systemic justice. One major differentiator between Prilleltensky's (2011) work compared to other psychologists is his attention to the environmental conditions of justice and injustice and their influence on behavior and psychological wellbeing. Other psychologists focus purely on the individual's role to change and control their circumstances and disregard the environmental factors that contribute to their ability to do so. The Protestant ethic undergirding American life teaches that hard work and a desire to achieve is a contributing factor to our individualistic culture. It most values pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps (Fredrickson, 2009).

Yet, this individualistic focus would disregard the extent to which our environment influences human behavior. As Shinn and Toohey (2003) identify we tend to neglect the impact that neighborhoods and communities have on human behavior. This is referred to as "context minimization error" (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). They recommend that psychologists should be more concerned with context, rather than solely focused on one individual at a time (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). Although policies and social programs may be well intentioned, failure to recognize the large influence that social contexts have on individuals may be the biggest error of all. When not taking social context into consideration, instead of eliminating social problems they may end up perpetuating them (Shinn & Toohey, 2003; Caughy, O'Campo, Brodsky, 1999).

Ultimately, if positive psychologists continue to ignore the context that influence wellbeing not only will it be a missed opportunity to create effective macro level interventions, but will continue to perpetuate elitism, inequity and conditions that threaten wellbeing.

### **Existential Wellbeing: Other People Matter**

Chris Peterson, one of the founding fathers of positive psychology stated that positive psychology could be summed up in three words, “other people matter” (McCarthy, 2012). What is mattering and how is it different from belonging? Hagerty and Williams (1999) found the strongest predictor of depression was sense of belonging. Seligman (2011) describes positive relationships, one element of his wellbeing or PERMA theory as, “There are people in my life who really care about me” (p.27). In the various theories of wellbeing, relationships is a domain that they all have in common. Many psychologists are in agreement that relationships are a core human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Taylor and Turner, 2001). There have been several studies that indicate that human relationships are imperative to wellbeing and their findings contribute to understanding of mattering (Taylor & Turner, 2001). This paper specifically focuses on Deci and Ryan’s (1991) concept of relatedness, which they identify as one of the three psychological needs that need to be met in order for humans to be self determining.

Not to diminish the significance that relationships contribute to our wellbeing, but the concept of mattering moves beyond individual relationships. Belonging connotes acceptance, where the psychological construct of mattering is both a perception, of feeling seen and valued and that “I matter” (Prilleltensky, 2014, p.151), and being able to have an impact and make a difference in the world, feeling like people depend on us and that if we were not there our contributions would be missed. Often times, interpersonal relationships have the connotation of receiving social support, particularly in a time of need (Taylor & Turner, 2001). This is primarily

where the concept of mattering differs, everyone needs mattering all the time, not just at their lowest and or when they need help. This information should be taken into consideration in the context of social service organizations, whose work is often serving people when they are at their most vulnerable leaving them in a one sided relationship as the recipient of help. Other research has emphasized reciprocity in relationships, as giver and recipient, but it is a concept that is broader than interpersonal relationships, it is about what allows us to be active participants in the conditions that impact our lives (Taylor & Turner, 2001). Mattering is both a perception of self and of others, seeing the inherent dignity in each citizen, and a practice. Mattering is fundamental to our wellbeing.

**Self-determination theory.** Deci and Ryan's (2001) theory of human motivation, known as theory of self-determination (SDT) can be used to create the conditions for people to feel that they do matter. Similar to mattering and positive psychology, in general, self-determination theory is orientated around strengths and the idea that it is human nature to pursue goals in order to achieve outcomes they desire for themselves (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This differs from other theories that examine humans as in need of motivation and think that only incentives will cause action or without it humans would remain passive (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Although SDT is a theory of understanding human motivation it is a theory comprised of five correlated mini-theories (Gagne & Vansteenkiste, 2013). SDT is an empirically sound body of work that has been researched and expanded on for five decades and provides insight on how to construct conditions that lead to psychological outcomes, such as mattering and eudaimonic wellbeing (Gagne & Vansteenkiste, 2013). The primary outcome in SDT is optimal functioning, the ability to be self -regulating and engage in activities and behavior that aligns with one's intrinsic motivation, therefore an individual approaches activities with energy and enthusiasm (Gagne &

Vansteenkiste, 2013, p.63). This differs from other concepts of wellbeing, which are concentrated on hedonic wellbeing and the absence of negative affect (Gagne & Vansteenkiste, 2013).

Deci and Ryan (2000) state that all individuals have three basic psychological needs, as described above those are autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy is feeling like one has a choice, that they are acting out of free will, are engaged in decision making process and that their choices and actions are in alignment with their personal values and interests. In order to experience autonomy one must be internally driven and not doing something out of a sense of obligation. To feel autonomous, one must perceive that they have agency in their lives (Gagne & Vansteenkiste, 2013). Gagne and Vansteenkiste (2013) describe autonomy as a sense of “psychological freedom” (p.64). This theory is consistent with Freire’s (1990) concept of “conscientization” or awakening of one’s critical consciousness. As Gagne and Vansteenkiste (2013) write a threat to psychological freedom is feeling like a “pawn” (p.64). Freire (1990) would talk about this in terms of being not just physically free from the climate of oppression, but freedom of thought, of action and to see oneself as a subject, who is fully human, rather than an object or a thing. Ryan and Deci (year) would state that to be controlled, which is the function of oppression, thwarts the need for autonomy. Freire (1990) put forth that to deny man the ability to make decisions turned them into objects and was a violation of man’s humanity and act of violence (p.73).

Competence is feeling capable of meeting new challenges in one’s environment and the ability to do so, allows an individual to progress and develop new skills and proficiency. These feelings of competency fuel intrinsic motivation, leading to taking more action and making progress towards goals. It can be argued that in order for an individual to feel that they matter,

and can contribute to their environment, they must perceive that they are competent to do so. Although competence and self-efficacy have nuances in their definition, it is possible to see competence as comparable to Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which is the belief that what an individual believes and thinks about their capability influences the execution of behaviors and control that produce a desired outcome. What self-efficacy and competence have in common is the experience and perception that one can influence their environment through their actions. Individuals need self-efficacy to not only believe that they have control, but the opportunity to apply and feel validated in their capability. Without self-efficacy and competence one will not feel like they matter and learned helplessness can be an outcome (Seligman, 1975).

Lastly, relatedness is about group identity and feeling cared for and having meaningful connection with others (Gagne & Vansteenkiste, 2013). Where mattering differs is if there is a mutuality in mattering that is codependent. We need to matter to others, to feel that others depend on us and expect things from us, while we must also feel competent enough to make a difference and contribute to the world, which requires not only feelings of competence, but permits us to choose how to apply our competence that aligns with one's values (Taylor & Turner, 2001). Gagne and Vansteenkiste (2013) posit that although SDT is grounded in the principle that humans are proactive in shaping, rather than reacting to their environment, it is critical that social environments nurture individual's three basic psychological needs.

Self-determination theory, and its basic psychological needs mini-theory, supports the conditions needed to promote positive citizenship. Psychological emancipation is comparable to self-regulated autonomous motivation in that one must harness where they have control in their life and self-govern in order to be truly liberated psychologically. Societal responsibility reflects the need for social environments, or society, to support an individual's basic psychological needs

in order to maintain the conditions that enable that person to participate and be proactive in their life, community and world. These are not siloed concepts, rather they work in tandem, making them reciprocal and reinforcing elements that are needed to sustain wellbeing and promote human thriving.

By focusing on psychological wellbeing a new form of social citizenship can emerge. As Fraser and Gordon (1992) suggest, it is our ideological conceptions that interfere with our ability to re-imagine social rights. Mattering is an outcome of an autonomy supportive environment. It requires transforming an environment so that it fosters and meets the psychological needs of citizens. Attending to the psychological needs of citizens allows people to experience mattering.

**Purpose.** What if the role of society was to nurture citizen's ability to pursue their highest purpose or calling in the interest of the greater good? How can the practice of citizenship embody liberation and thriving? If positive citizenship is a concept that allows people to be fully liberated by creating the conditions to pursue their ontological vocation, their own search for meaning and purpose as to why they exist, the constructs of self-determination theory is to allow citizens to live the best life they can because it contributes to optimal functioning and eudaimonic wellbeing. Mattering is not only an outcome of meeting the psychological needs of citizens, but emphasizes that in order to truly experience wellbeing one must use autonomy and competence to make a difference in the world and the lives of others. This corresponds with the research done on purpose, that individuals need not only a sense of purpose, but a psychological purpose, which Keyes (2011) defines as direction and goals that adds value to society and other people.

Since the beginning of time philosophers and scholars have been contemplating the meaning of life. Questions that are often asked and explored in the context of religious or

educational institutions such as, “Why am I here?”, “What is my place?”, and “What should I do?” seem to be a universal dilemma and human need to discover, but is often concentrated in particular spaces (Keyes, 2011, p. 282). What if it was the role of society to equip people to discover their purpose and a citizen’s role was to live a life of purpose that contributes to the good of society?

People find their purpose or embark on the journey and process from a place of being intrinsically motivated to do so, which connects back to self-determination theory, human motivation and self-regulating behavior as citizens set forth into the world with intention (Ryff, 1989). Keyes (2011) states that a sense of purpose for one’s life awakens a sense of aliveness in oneself and people discover how they matter to the world (p.284). Keyes (2011) differentiates his theory of authentic purpose from Ryff’s theory of purpose in life. As a sociologist, Keyes (2011) views humans as engaging in behavior that adds value to others, that is socially useful, rather than pursuing their positive purpose for solely personal fulfillment as proposed by psychologist Ryff (1989). Keyes (2011) sees purpose for individual benefit as meeting individual psychological needs and increasing subjective wellbeing for that person, but as useless as it does not make a contribution to society in a way that matters.

The concept of authentic purpose supports Freire’s (1990) belief that we need ontological vocation to experience being fully human. Keyes (2001) describes vocation as “finding a purpose for one’s life that employs one’s gifts, brings a deep sense of worth or value, and provides significant contribution for the common good” (p.286). According to Freire (1990) man’s historical vocation is to have a sense of perceived control in order to direct their efforts towards a humanity of solidarity, in pursuit of humanization. Freire (1990) speaks to man’s need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In an article by Ryan, Huta and Deci (2008) they said, “Studies indicate that people high in eudaimonic living tend to behave in more prosocial ways, thus benefiting the collective as well as themselves” (p.139). This insight raises the question, if positive citizenship comes from experiencing eudaimonia would there be less commoditization of people, would there be more caring, would there be more participation in civic and social life? Ultimately, the benefits of positive citizenship is that it is not just good for oneself, but good for our neighbors and fellow citizens. Could a country that prioritizes psychological wellbeing result in a more caring and compassionate society where everyone regardless of religion, race, creed, class and gender and sexual orientation feel like they matter? As Freire (1990) knew, when there is an intentional focus on existential wellbeing, or one’s ontological vocation, the result is transformative. Citizens can create a new world through our actions and efforts.

### **The Practice of Social Citizenship**

The practice of citizenship is about pursuing what is in the best interest for the public, rather than the self (Bellamy, 2008). This concept is central to preserving civic health and maintaining the integrity of our society. Citizenship as a collective practice, to enhance the lives of all, is not typically emphasized within our capitalist system. Similarly, positive psychology, which has been misconstrued with the emphasis on the individual was originally founded upon the principle that “other people matter” (Peterson, 2006). Vella-Brodrick (2014) critiques the field of positive psychology and its practitioners for not instituting a scientific and ethical framework to guide the application of positive psychology. Similarly, Pawelski (2016) recently wrote a paper defining the positive in positive psychology and urging the field to clarify core concepts to direct future practice and research.



It is advisable to establish policies, practices and norms to maintain the integrity and ethical behavior conducive to constructing conditions for civil society to flourish. Vella-Brodrick (2014) states the importance of establishing principles and standards to serve as a moral compass for individuals for virtuous and honest decision making. These standards allow society to quantify whether or not the executed practices are impacting people positively and efficiently (Vella-Brodrick, 2014).

### **Dismantling Contract-vs-Charity**

Although policies can serve as a moral compass, it is imperative to examine what shaped and contributed to these standards to make sure integrity and intention of the intervention is intact and preserved. One might consider Fraser and Gordon's (1992) critique of the absence of "social citizenship" in U.S. political culture. They argue that there are two contrasting concepts of our understanding of "civil citizenship" that have influenced human relationships (Fraser & Gordon, 1992). These two opposing notions, are what they refer to as contract-versus-charity (Fraser & Gordon, 1992). They are particularly significant philosophies that influence the design of government public assistance programs (Fraser & Gordon, 1992).

The federal social security program is seen as a contributory government program. The discourse for this type of program is that you "get back what you put in", an example of a contract (Fraser & Gordon, 1992, p.47). Welfare is considered charity, which is often seen as a program where people receive something for doing nothing (Fraser & Gordon, 1992). I will not be able to delve deeply into the implications of this line of thinking, nor explore the policies, economic inequities, wage gap, and sentiments that the general public has towards people living in poverty that often creates a catch 22 for many individuals who live within the system and have to rely on welfare for basic survival. Rather, what I hope to communicate is that this all or

nothing dichotomy between charity and contract is harmful, both in discourse and design. This concept of charity denies citizens of their ability to contribute and offer something. It merely reiterates that all they can do is receive. As Fraser and Gordon (1992) note, the connotations associated with the term welfare are negative and degrading.

Fraser and Gordon (1992) argue that these opposing concepts of contract and charity have had harmful and influential implications to this day. First, the donor is seen as having no obligation to the recipient in their altruistic giving. If we think of how this might apply to philanthropic organizations, it can erode a sense of engagement and high quality connections between the two parties (Dutton, 2003). It can also stigmatize the beneficiary as having nothing to give (Prilleltensky, 2014), diminishing their sense of autonomy, competence and also relatedness. Meanwhile, the actions of the donor illuminate them as a do-gooder, a savior, or a Good Samaritan. Further, when these labels are associated with acts of charitable giving, a question arises as to whether they are actually contributing in a way that is for the good of all, or simply for their own self-interest and sense of entitlement?

Although this might be a generalization of people who give, we can look at the impact that the amount of money that has been spent to eliminate lingering problems such as poverty and hunger have had on the recipients' lives. Those who are dedicated to truly eradicating these issues are not surprised in disappointing results, because the allocation of funding is often dictated by donors and often serves as a band aid that does not yield transformative results.

Analogous to what Fraser and Gordon (1992) were proposing, positive citizenship is about eliminating these opposing concepts of contract versus charity, which stifle our ability to relate to each other. To truly embody and embrace what citizenship is all about requires a collective, reciprocal community that functions by making decisions that benefit the whole of

society, rather than a few (Bellamy, 2008). The concept of positive citizenship supports this notion, that each individual has their own unique gift or purpose to contribute to impact the greater good of the community. The actual practice of citizenship and participation in civil society supports elements of wellbeing because it promotes mattering.

While humans might err on the side of making responsible choices and acting morally, even with the best of intentions people are imperfect and have limited knowledge (Bellamy, 2008). For this reason, in order to ensure that wellbeing is a right and to make sure that society is serving as a felicitor, or steward of wellbeing<sup>1</sup>, the only way to implement and sustain that is through laws, policies and practices that uphold psychological freedom and conditions that support wellbeing.

### **Community Based Organizations as Intermediaries for Positive Citizenship**

State agencies and policies enforce guidelines and regulations that often strip people of their psychological and existential needs. Community organizations also see their efforts and outcomes driven more by funder constraints and the institutionalized nature of the nonprofit sector than benefit to their clients.

The intention of community based organizations (CBOs), often times referred to as non-profits, non-governmental organizations (NGO), or human services organizations (HSO), is to promote and support the social wellbeing of individuals, neighborhoods and communities (Evans, Prilleltensky, McKenzie, Prilleltensky, Noguera, Huggins & Mescia, 2011).

**Civil Society.** Suleiman (2012) states that the role of non-governmental agencies is often to represent civil society. The conceptualization of civil society is a philosophical idea that can

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<sup>1</sup> A “felicitor” is a term that means “producer of happiness”. (Ahuvia, Biswas-Diener, Frey, Haybrob, 2011, p.193). In a special issues of the *International Journal of Wellbeing* various scholars wrote pieces that illustrated people and institutions, whom were identified as “felicitors”, as their practices and ideas had universal influence and applicability to improve wellbeing on a large scale.

be traced back to ancient thinkers. There are still debates among scholars as to what constitutes and defines a systemic theory of civil society (Suleiman, 2012). In this paper, civil society is defined as groups within a social space that share common morals and values (Suleiman, 2012). Social spaces and groups within these communities should embody and practice the values of virtuous governance, in which the key tenet is the freedom of citizens. In turn citizens have a responsibility to participate in the governance of the state or the community. This reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship is imperative to the civic health of the space and its citizens, one that is held together by concern for all citizens rather than individual economic prosperity (Suleiman, 2012).

There are various reasons that nonprofit, community based organizations exist. Due to the capitalist structure of the United States, there is not as much money put towards welfare, or social citizenship, as in Nordic countries. Therefore, the United States has a higher proliferation of nonprofits in order to satisfy the needs for social services that the state is inadequately providing for its citizens (Suleiman, 2012).

In each country the function and role of nonprofits depends on the historical context of society. Nonprofit organizations deeply reflect the society in which they are founded. They not only provide services for citizens, but they inherit the social, political and economic conditions depending on where they are situated (Salamon & Anheier, 1998)

**The disconnect between purpose and practice.** Many community-based organizations' philosophical purpose, to serve and increase individuals and communal wellbeing, in practice, I would argue, not only comes up short, but the actual design of services impedes on psychological wellbeing. Parallels can be drawn between the original aspiration of the field of psychology and community based organizations. Both of these fields exist to care for and help

people live more fulfilling lives, but have turned into an intervention oriented, pathology focused, reactionary service models, rather than preventative, transformational facilitators, or producers, of wellbeing (Seligman, 1999; Ahuvia, Biswas-Diener, Frey, & Haybron, 2011; Evans, et al., 2011; Prilleltensky, 2014).

There are many traditional community-based organizations that view the people they serve as objects, problems, recipients of services, risks to be reduced, patients and raw material to be shaped (Evans, NPLS presentation, 2014). There is a high concentration of service organizations established in large cities, specifically focused on communities where America's underclass resides (Wilson, 1994). It is critical to be cognizant of the language service providers use to describe the population they are working with. The language typically represents not only a transactional relationship, but establishes hierarchical dominance, reminiscent of the language and policies that were used to control enslaved African-Americans. Viewing people as objects, rather than citizens, evokes sentiments reminiscent of viewing black people as things and not human beings.

According to Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation" considering people as objects encourages non participation and is manipulative. Arnstein (1969) advocates that community engagement and the role of community based organizations should foster citizen power and control, where citizens are agents of change in their community.

Community-based organizations often have a social change oriented mission. According to Evans, et al. (2011), community-based organizations can best serve people and communities by promoting strengths, prevention, empowerment and community change. Similar to my critique of positive psychology, social services need to shift from reactionary, individual intervention level approaches to reorienting around macro level, societal changes. This is a

preventative approach, which requires modifications to practice and application, with a concentration on cultural and institutional norms, and fundamental shifts in perspective.

CBOs too often don't provide places for citizens to feel like they matter and are able to contribute in a way that is meaningful to them, nor do they provide them with the agency needed to determine their own future. These same organizations often see people in need of services, instead of in need of conditions that enable them to fulfill their purpose. This is a squandered chance for CBOs. Although certain services and resources are fundamental to obtain a certain quality of life and baseline of wellbeing, they fall short of what the literature tells us about humans' psychological needs.

**The responsibility of community based organizations.** This is a missed opportunity for both communities and individuals. Engaging people in ways that are meaningful, viewing and treating people as though they matter and being seen as people who have something to contribute to solutions that affect their communities is critical. This is more than seeing residents as assets, this is about seeing people as having a purpose that is larger than themselves and unique to them.

Community based organizations are often at the juncture of civil society, participation, wellness and fairness making them the ideal space to implement positive citizenship. Prilleltensky (2014) states that wellness, without fairness, is ameliorative work designed to maintain the current system, rather than transformative, which would re-design the system in a more permanent fashion to alleviate oppressive conditions. Part of the work of fairness is seeing people differently, paying attention to using descriptive language that humanizes and dignifies people and communities, as well creating conditions for people to contribute.

As Daminger, Hayes, Barrows and Wright (2015) boldly asserted in their report, *Poverty Interrupted; Applying Behavioral Science to the Context of Chronic Scarcity*, "We contend that

the burden of change rests primarily with the individuals and organizations who have the power to design programs and systems in ways that take universal human tendencies into account” (p.8).

### **Conclusion: What Does This Mean for Positive Psychologists?**

#### **The Role of Justice in Wellbeing in Today’s Society**

Prilleltensky (2011) has criticized the field of psychology for not paying adequate attention to how justice, or lack thereof, influences an individual's wellbeing. One of the aims of positive psychology as described by the field’s founders is “Improving organizations and society by discovering conditions that enhance trust, communication and altruism between person” and “Improving the moral character of society...” (Pawelski, 2016a, p. 11). If the goal of positive psychology is human flourishing (Pawelski, 2016b), then why do so many in the field seem apathetic and indifferent to current injustices in society that thwart the ability to thrive and flourish?

#### **Sustainability of the Positive Across Effects**

Perhaps the inability to address justice and fairness stems from lack of clarity amongst scholars and practitioners regarding the definition of the positive. Pawelski (2016a,b) recently released a series of articles proposing that there must be a standard definition of the positive in positive psychology, as right now it is a term that is used differently and has a variety of meanings to researchers and practitioners.

Pawelski (2016a) offers a thorough examination of the six meanings of the positive including 1) orientation, 2) topography, 3) target population, 4) process and 5) the ultimate goal. He states that using positive as a qualifier is not sufficient. Ultimately, he concludes that we must define the positive in terms of preference (Pawelski, 2016a, p. 16). The preference can be

directly or indirectly positive. For example, the presence of the preferred directly would be a positive pregnancy test for a couple who wants a child. Or, the absence of the dispreferred, indirectly positive, testing negative for cancer (Pawelski, 2016a, p. 16).

Pawelski's (2016b) normative definition of the positive in positive psychology takes into account, both the micro and macro implications. Expanding on this concept of preference he also states there must also be sustainability across time, persons, effects and structures. Pawelski's (2016b) definition of the positive moves us away simply from the focus on whether something remains positive for an individual, to if it remains positive for that individual when taken to scale and in any organization or in a cultural context (Pawelski, 2016b, p.7). Pawelski's (2016b) definition of the positive, referred to as relatively preferred, encompasses its ability to maintain positive as the frame of reference broadens. The criteria Pawelski (2016b) outlines, time, persons, effect and structure, and the ability to sustain relative preference, serve as a guide to the limitations and qualifications of whether something is positive. Pawelski (2016b) offers an example through the prism, and in the context, of time. These criteria can be used to assess whether the actions and choices we are making are the preferred choices. For example, if education is a positive thing, than he posits more education and lifelong learning is even more positive (Pawelski, 2016b).

"If something is good for just one person, it is a positive thing...the more people for whom it is good, the more positive it is" (Pawelski, 2016b, p. 16). If one family has access to safe and affordable housing, than policies that ensure and provide more people safe and affordable housing is even more positive (Pawelski, 2016b). The next example is sustainability across effects. The perception that something is positive, our subjective experience, can prohibit us from seeing the objective reality. For example, in a poll by Gallup (2015), police officers were



ranked in the top five as professionals who were seen as honest and ethical. Many people perceive the police as positive, but does the idea of the police as a positive unit sustainable across effects? Does our subjective experience limit our ability to see the negative effects? If it is considered positive across effects, then positive for whom? K.L. Williams has trained thousands of police officers in the United States on the use of force (Hudson, 2016). Williams theorizes that, “On any given day, in any police department in the nation, fifteen percent of officers will do the right thing no matter what is happening. Fifteen percent of officers will abuse their authority at every opportunity. The remaining 70 percent could go either way depending on whom they are working with” (Hudson, 2016). In an article written by a former black police officer in St. Louis, Reddit Hudson, describes witnessing Williams theory in action (Hudson, 2016). Hudson (2016) explains that the remaining 70 percent are influenced by the culture of their department. Depending on who is in a position of leadership, any department in the nation can become part of the problem. The 70 percent of officers are malleable, but there has not been a systemic push to change, which Hudson (2016) describes as a major problem, because it is often the bad officers who corrupt the impressionable 70 percent.

Examining systemic issues, such as police brutality, utilizing Pawelski’s (2016b) criterion on what is the positive, might offer a different perspective if the question is posed as to whether policing remains positive across effects? In July 2016 within one week and two consecutive days, two black men were caught on videotape being murdered by the police. Their names were Alton Sterling and Philandro Castile. Already in 2016, halfway through the year, more than 500 citizens have been fatally shot by on duty police officers (NPR, 2016). The Washington Post has been tracking the data on police shootings over the last few years since the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO (NPR, 2016). So far, in 2016, the data shows that police involved

murders of civilians is on the rise and that black citizens are two and half times more likely to be killed by officers than whites (NPR, 2016).

Lastly, Pawelski (2016b) states that the final criterion is sustainability across structures. He writes, “Things which are good for individual or local social structures are positive, but things that are scalable and transferable across organizational and cultural contexts are even more positive” (p.18). When considering how to sustain and implement positive citizenship, this is key. Those who are stewards of positive institutions must remain keenly aware to first understand sustainability across effects. When instituting policies and procedures it must take into consideration whether they remain positive across effects. Then, particularly for positive psychologists who focus intensely on individuals, we must determine how we can influence public policy and institutional change for all people. If positive psychology continues to focus on the individual and their own subjective experience it can potentially be a threat to wellbeing for all because it so often leaves out the experience of the marginalized and oppressed.

**Eradicating second class citizenship through positive citizenship.** The deceased rapper Tupac said in an interview with Esquire, “Until we get a world where I feel like a first class citizen, I can’t have a child” (Scott, 1997, p. 131). Alton Sterling’s 15-year-old son was shown crying out, sobbing for his daddy as his mother read a statement that was streamed on national news outlets after the news of Sterling’s death (Tinsley, 2016). The next day the four-year-old daughter of Philandro Castile’s girlfriend, who was in the car, had witnessed Castile’s brutal murder by police officers as he got shot four times and died in front of her (Tinsley, 2016). The four-year-old reassured her mother “It’s okay mommy. I am here with you” (Tinsley, 2016). The media outlets portrayed the heartbreaking reality of the lives of children who are left to deal with the repercussions when we have an underclass of citizens.

The Black Lives Matter movement has been a symbolic outcry from the Black community. It represents a whole group of people who have experienced second class citizenship in the United States. The media has helped to bring light the reality of the country's citizens who have been rendered invisible. They feel that not only do they not belong, but that they do not matter to their fellow citizens, their neighbors, or those obliged to protect their lives under the law.

One pillar of positive psychology is positive institutions, which, according to Seligman (2002) includes democracy. Yet, positive psychologists have yet to use the science to address these social issues that threaten our collective wellbeing. If the goal of positive psychology is human flourishing (Pawelski, 2016b) what does that mean for us as practitioners? Can we continue to turn a blind eye to the consequences and implications when we have a whole group of citizens who not only feel like they do not, matter, but whose pain and reality has been rendered invisible?

Possibly, Pawelski's (2016b) definition of the positive, in conjunction with Prilleltensky's (2011) definition of justice, would allow positive psychology scholars and practitioners to develop and sustain positive institutions, therefore allowing the field to have more of an impact. Similar to Pawelski's (2016b) continuum of criterion, Prilleltensky (2011) defines justice as having a progression and interconnection that begins with the individual. He writes, "Intrapersonal injustice operates at the personal level, whereas distributive, procedural, relational, and developmental justice impact well-being. At the organizational level, distributive, procedural, relational and informational justice influence well-being. Finally, at the community level, distributive, procedural, retributive, and cultural justice support community wellness" (Prilleltensky, 2011, p.1).

A possible area of study would be to look at both the criterion of the positive and definitions of justice to understand further how they interplay and interconnect. Prilleltensky (2011) states that there is an explicit link between justice and wellbeing.

Our country is in need of healing, reconciliation and transformation. We need to ask ourselves, what side of history do we want to be on? Do positive psychology scholars and practitioners want to live out a life that exemplifies and embodies the virtues of courage, humanity and justice in order to demonstrate that other people matter? Or will we look back at our underuse of wisdom, our overuse of prudence as we, unaffected, ignore our fellow citizens? We sit in the proverbial ivory tower of academia, helping those who come from a place of privilege, as we do, and we remain comfortable. How long can we maintain that these issues do not affect us as we scroll through social media and hear our fellow citizens ask us if their lives matter? Not one more day.

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