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Ikigai and Existential Positive Psychology: Recurrence of Meaning for Wellbeing

Yasuhiro Kotera¹

¹University of Derby, Derby, United Kingdom

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The importance of existential positive psychology has further grown during the COVID-19 (Wong, 2020, 2021). People in many places of the world are faced with challenges, leading to high stress and anxiety (Fancourt, Steptoe & Bu, 2021; Pan et al., 2021; Varga et al., 2021). This can make it hard or sometimes impossible to feel well and happy as often emphasised in the traditional positive psychology framework. Acknowledging the difficulties and being aware of suffering are often more effective and appropriate to cope with mental distress (Ford et al., 2018). This is similar to why the World Health Organization's definition of mental health (2014)—a state of wellbeing helping an individual to realise their potential—was criticised, as their definition could indicate that mental health solely entails positive feelings and functioning. However, for example, a worker, who has just lost his job, and feels depressed in the low employing society, should not be considered mentally ill (Galderisi, Heinz, Kastrup, Beezhold & Sartorius, 2015). Healthy human lives do recognise the existence of negative emotions.

An additional element to the recognition of difficulties and suffering in existential positive psychology is a sense of meaning (Wong, 2011). As motivation research reports, engaging with intrinsic experience such as meaning is associated with better wellbeing than being obsessed with extrinsic instruments such as money and fame (Kotera, Van Laethem & Ohshima, 2020). Though modern science supports the importance of intrinsic meaning to our wellbeing, it is nothing new. Meaning was also a key difference between those who survived and who did not in the Nazi concentration camps, noted in the book "*Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*" (Frankl, 1946), which was originally entitled "*From Death-Camp to Existentialism*", suggesting high relevance to existential positive

psychology. In order to survive from the extreme difficulties, meaning was the essence to maintain their lives.

The emphasis of meaning is consistent with *ikigai*, a Japanese word roughly translated as a purpose of living, which is attracting increasing attention in wellbeing research (Fido, Kotera & Asano, 2019). *Ikigai* is an experiential, everyday life phenomena relating to a reason for your existence (Kamiya, 1966). *Ikigai* was also found in human difficulties, namely patients with leprosy—a fatal infectious disease damaging the nerves and other body parts. While treating leprosy patients, Dr Kamiya began to wonder why some people can stay positive despite being in a difficult situation (e.g., loss of vision, fingers), and others cannot. She came to a conclusion that it was a meaning for their existence that distinguished those two groups, and named this experiential sense ‘*ikigai*’ (Kamiya, 1966). About a half century later, today, wellbeing research reports the importance of *ikigai* (Bethune & Kell, 2020; Garcia & Miralles, 2017).

As the importance of mental health is increasingly recognised, the role that psychology plays has become even greater today. Existential positive psychology can help people in need by re-emphasising meaning for wellbeing. Further research and practice are needed for this new, but old, psychology.

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