

Flow the wu-wei way: A thematic analysis of charity runners' experience of wu-wei in enhancing wellbeing and flourishing

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Abstract: There is increasing interest and research into non-Western perspectives on wellbeing and ways of flourishing in different cultures. This study builds on this by investigating the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, translated from Chinese as 'non-action' or 'actionless action', through the experiences of ten runners (age 40 to 63; four identifying as male and six as female) who run for charitable causes and how this contributes towards their wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted then transcribed, and four core themes and eight subthemes identified using thematic analysis. Analysis showed that the four core themes for participants to achieve *wu-wei* were experience of suffering or adversity, being fully focused on the present (with an element of mindfulness), having a shared experience with the running community, and adopting a broader perspective on life (including in meaning or purpose). By accepting their experiences of suffering or adversity and pursuing pro-social activities, such as running for charitable causes, participants used mindfulness through running to develop a broader perspective on life and attain wellbeing. The findings indicate that the Taoist concept of *wu-wei* can be applied in positive psychology when manifested as a key facet of running as a positive psychology intervention suggesting its relevance to the wellbeing literature. This study highlights the importance of embracing cross-cultural approaches to wellbeing by looking at non-Western perspectives and their application to the global population.

Keywords: Taoism, wu-wei, cross-cultural psychology, wellbeing, flourishing, running, pro-social, charity

1. Introduction

The field of positive psychology sits between pure evidence-based science and the philosophy of wellbeing. As we enter its third decade, many circumstances (including the Covid-19 pandemic) have dictated we respond to the ever-changing needs of society in producing a model that is fit for purpose. In the current study, there are two compelling reasons for introducing the research. First, comprehensive findings emerged from an empirical review of studies with psychological and behavioural variables that questioned our reliance on studies based disproportionately on people from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). Critics have questioned whether this use of the Western gaze can adequately and/or legitimately serve all populations (Awaad & Reicherter, 2016; Henrich et al., 2010), and the current study thus offers an alternative perspective. Second, there is increasing awareness that materialistic and individualistic mindsets largely exhibited in Western societies are inversely related to achieving wellbeing (Dittmar et al., 2014; Eckersley, 2006; Górník-Durose, 2020; Roberts & Clement, 2007; Swinyard et al., 2001). Evidence suggests that: the Western culture

is detrimental to health (Eckersley, 2006); conflict exists between values highly valued in Western societies, such as capitalism, with values related to a broader mindset, such as relationships and caring beyond the self (Kasser et al., 2007); and, essential components of wellbeing, such as Csikszentmihalyi's flow (1990), are inhibited by the Western preoccupation with materialistic values (Isham et al., 2021). This suggests that something crucial may have been overlooked in the evidence-based science and positive psychology has not fully acknowledged the wealth of literature available (Lomas, 2015). In response, cross-cultural research is emerging introducing new concepts to the field of positive psychology that enriches and deepens our understanding and experience of wellbeing including Finland's *sisu* (Lahti, 2019) and Japan's *ikigai* (Kono & Walker, 2020).

1.1 The philosophy of Taoism

The current study qualitatively explores an alternative way of attaining wellbeing and flourishing by introducing an ancient philosophical concept from the East with many similarities to flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) called '*wu-wei*' which literally translates from Chinese as 'non-action' or 'actionless action'. *Wu-wei* is a Taoist concept that guides practitioners in how to live a natural life in the world (Chen, 2007). Written about extensively in religious and philosophical journals, Taoism offers guidance on "how to live a contented, serene life regardless of circumstances... [with the promise it] has much to offer psychologists in the West regarding the oriental wisdom of coping with stress" (Chen, 2007, p. 91) and seemingly offers relief to the current post-pandemic malaise.

In essence, Taoism and *wu-wei* focus on Aristotelian virtue ethics. The introduction of *wu-wei* to Western societies could counteract the inclination to a purely individualistic mindset as this philosophical perspective of virtue ethics, with focus beyond the self, could help in more deeply characterising a good life and overcoming the shortcomings of individualism (Richardson, 2012). The current study is based upon positive psychology 2.0 (PP2.0) (Held, 2004; Ivtzan et al., 2015), Wong's dualistic 'existential positive psychology' of everything existing in polarity, with successful flourishing achieved through a dynamic balance between opposites of suffering and happiness, (Wong, 2011; 2013; 2019; 2020). Through philosophical enquiry, qualitative exploration, and the gaze of universal relativism (Lomas, 2015), this study aims to add to the wellbeing literature, "the path to happiness even when things go bad" (Chen, 2007, p. 93): the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*.

1.2 The altruism of charity runners

The study draws from a sample of participants who classify themselves as charity runners for three reasons. First, by selecting participants from a pool whose primary motivation is to benefit others, the group's pro-social and altruistic mindset could be connected to their wellbeing (Kahana et al., 2013; Post, 2005). Second, the group's identities as 'runners' means they will have a strong sense of agency (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) in how to apply the accepted medical knowledge that exercise is medicine (Thompson et al., 2020). Third, the collective effort of the runners who run (a) for charities and (b) as part of a race community, means that there will be a perceived sense of humanistic collectivism and relatedness - a vital component to wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2011). Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi's theory of social capital (2015) suggests that "the resources available to individuals and groups through membership in social networks" (p. 62) will offer runners a means to achieve this through the running network.

By offering an alternative non-Western perspective on achieving wellbeing through *wu-wei*, the current study offers a valuable contribution to the growing cross-cultural wellbeing literature. The use of charity runners as participants highlights how running, in combination with an altruistic mindset, can serve as a meaningful positive psychology intervention and contribute towards individual wellbeing.

1.3 Cross-cultural conceptions of happiness

The contention that much of our understanding of psychology is Western-centric has persisted for some time (Henrich et al., 2010; Lomas, 2015; Wong, 2011; 2013; 2019; 2020). Held (2004) was the first to claim that the happiness angle in positive psychology literature has had a biased Western-centric perspective, with Ehrenreich (2009) suggesting, and Wong (2011; 2013; 2019; 2020) supporting, that this has resulted in a polarised rhetoric. Lomas (2015) has suggested a mediating approach of a new positive cross-cultural psychology, with Lopes et al. (2016) offering intercultural research to illustrate how interventions have varying impact on behaviour in different cultural settings. Progress has been made and Lomas et al. (2020) have suggested the inclusion of new items exploring non-Western perspectives on wellbeing in the Gallup World Poll, with Lomas (2021) suggesting the adoption of concepts such as ‘balance’ and ‘harmony’ in the wellbeing narrative.

There has been an emergence of studies exploring positive psychology interventions from non-Western countries (Hendriks et al., 2018) with the introduction of Finland’s *sisu* (2019) and Japan’s *ikigai* (2020), and the current study aims to add to this body of cross-cultural research by introducing Chinese Taoism’s *wu-wei*. Wong (2011; 2013; 2019; 2020) has consistently argued that individuals can flourish despite (and because of) enduring suffering or adversity, but the literature is limited in support (Hall et al., 2010; Wong, 2011; 2013; 2019; 2020), to the detriment of the field of positive psychology. This study contends that PP2.0 has the capacity to add “further nuance that serves to deepen the insights and impact made by the first wave” (Lomas et al., 2020, p. 7). In the infancy of positive psychology, Ryff and Singer (2003) highlighted that flourishing encompasses “inevitable dialectics between positive and negative aspects of living” (p. 272) and the current study aims to illustrate this.

1.4 Flowing East and West

Described as the psychology of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), flow theory has long been associated with the happiness literature offering the promise of a route to the good life, “characterized by complete absorption in what one does.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 239), while Seligman’s PERMA model (2011) states that flow is a natural outcome of the component relating to engagement. On the other hand, the flow experience has been criticised for its purported individualistic bias (Slingerland, 2015) with its emphasis on purely selfish and personal gain. Isham et al.’s work on flow illustrates that living well is more easily achieved with having less (2019), and that materialism can inhibit flow (Isham et al., 2021). Hence some critics have pointed to the failings of the happiness literature to acknowledge the nuances in cultural approaches to happiness (Joshanloo, 2014; Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009).

Joshanloo (2014) echoes Wong (2011; 2013; 2019; 2020) by suggesting this can be achieved by turning to Taoism, “by not favouring one pole (happiness) over the other (suffering), and by accepting the pattern of change...[because] these principles together with that of non-action are thought to lead to a sense of inner peace and contentment” (p. 480). Based upon the writings of Lao Tzu in the *Dao Te Ching* dating back to 600BC, *wu-wei* advocates spontaneity and naturalness in action: “The Dao never acts and yet is never inactive.” (Lao Tzu, Chapter 37).

Translated as ‘non-action’ or ‘actionless action’, *wu-wei* offers a framework for individuals to act within the true nature of things.

Wu-wei has varied but limited focus in the psychological literature, appearing as: a discussion on the ego and self (Moore, 1983); the interrelation with humanistic psychology (Chang & Page, 1991); a perspective to broaden personality and counselling theories (Lee, 2003); a way of healing from stress and coping (Chen, 2007); a discussion on conflict and peace (Sun, 2009); and, part of a wider discussion on cross-cultural or existential positive psychology (Wong, 2011; 2013; 2019; 2020). Transcendental in nature (Chen, 2007) with a spiritual characteristic, *wu-wei* has appeared in spiritual and philosophical journals (see Loy, 1985; Slingerland, 2000; Barrett, 2011; De Prycker, 2011) and nursing journals (Banner, 2018), with Singh acknowledging the evasiveness of its conceptual personality (2014). With its dialectical and paradoxical approach to psychological happiness (as explained by Wong, 2011; 2013; 2019; 2020), *wu-wei* could be of great value to the positive psychology wellbeing literature, as the Eastern relative to its more familiar Western counterpart, flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) by “balancing opposite elements into a whole” (Delle Fave et al., 2011, p. 199). In line with Lomas’s case for focus on a more balanced approach to wellbeing (2021), the current study seeks to redress these cultural biases that have so far influenced positive psychology.

1.5 Running and wellbeing

Running has clear benefits to individual wellbeing beyond just the physical. With a strong sense of agency (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) runners are well acquainted with how to apply accepted medical knowledge that exercise is medicine (Thompson et al., 2020). Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (1985; 2000) suggests that running fulfils the need for competence (mastering the art of running), connection (with a wider running community or identifying as ‘a runner’), and autonomy (through consistency over time), which feeds into psychological wellbeing. On a broader community-wide level, Festinger’s theory of social comparison (1954) offers further explanation, with Buunk and Dijkstra’s work (2017) highlighting how a social comparison model (either an upward or downward contrast) can feed into psychological wellbeing through a runner’s relative feelings of achievement within the running community. Participants whose primary motivation is to benefit others (charity runners), would be expected to exhibit an altruistic mindset that could contribute to wellbeing (Kahana et. al., 2013; Post, 2005) offering a glimpse into a sense of wider community reflecting the collectivist characteristic of *wu-wei*.

The aim of the current study was to perform a qualitative analysis of the data to investigate the concept of *wu-wei* in the context of running to achieve better understanding of how to attain wellbeing through a more balanced contribution of both happiness and suffering (Wong, 2011; 2013; 2019; 2020). The study aims to do this and introduce further evidence to the wellbeing literature in PP2.0, by straddling ‘the third wave’ of positive psychology (Lomas et al., 2020) through a further focus of enquiry by the application of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975). In bringing a critical realist approach to the qualitative data (Willig, 2013) and applying thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016) the current study aims to identify what sits in the gulf between what is essentially a philosophical construct (*wu-wei* as ‘non-action’ or ‘actionless action’) and psychology, and give it more concrete form by asking, “what is the manifestation of the Taoist concept of *wu-wei* in charity runners?”

2. Method

2.1 Design

The study employed a qualitative design to obtain a detailed account of how runners perceive their experiences as runners. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews to obtain as rich an account of their experiences as possible. Thematic analysis was employed with the data grounded in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975) and the findings interpreted as the interaction between the participant’s individual experience and perspective, and the researcher’s perspective (Trochim, 2006). The researcher engaged in ongoing reflections throughout the process to take a reflexive position and understand how the research may be impacted by individual perspective (Attia & Edge, 2017; Dodgson, 2019; Willig, 2013).

2.2 Participants

Ten participants aged between 40 and 63 (four identifying as male and six as female) were recruited via social media. Details on participant demographics were taken (Table 1). All runners were English speakers based in the UK who had raised money for charity through their running. They were experienced athletes having run three times or more a week for at least the past three years. The study coincided with the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, and any race events referred to had taken place prior to the start of March 2020.

Table 1. Participant demographics.¹

Name	Gender	Age	Geographical location	Occupation
Miles	M	47	England	Running coach & personal trainer
Darcy	F	55	Ireland	Academic Professor
Sean	M	42	England	Civil servant
Maeve	F	50	England	Editor
Leia	F	45	England	Running coach & personal trainer
Noah	M	63	England	Advertising executive
Stella	F	48	England	Healthcare administrator
Paul	M	54	Northern Ireland	Company manager
Scarlett	F	40	England	Accountant
Kylie	F	43	England	Business and life coach

2.3 Interview schedule

A single interview was conducted with each participant and all interviews took place over six weeks. Data were collected over 60-90 minute interviews conducted by video on Microsoft Teams. This included an introductory informal chat with each participant to offer an opportunity to address questions before the interview. The notion of *wu-wei* as a tangible construct is both difficult to explain and easily grasp, so the researcher introduced the concept during this informal chat by offering definitions of wellbeing, flourishing, and PP2.0. Interviews were semi-structured in nature posing open questions relating to the runners’ experiences. Appropriate prompts supported and encouraged the participants to discuss the topics which referred them

¹ Pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

back to the key definitions to help synthesise the concept of *wu-wei*. The interview schedule (including the definitions) is attached at Appendix B.

2.4 Procedure

Before each interview, the researcher sent information letters (Appendix A) and consent forms to participants and offered an opportunity to discuss the study in more detail and to ask any questions in a preliminary phone-call. Following receipt of signed consent forms, the researcher conducted interviews with each participant which were recorded on Microsoft Teams and the automated transcription facility in Streams. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by comparing them line-by-line against video recordings before being sent to participants for final approval. Interviews followed a semi-structured schedule using open-questions and appropriate prompts for the researcher to encourage participants to discuss their experiences and reference them to the definitions of wellbeing, flourishing, and PP2.0.

2.5 Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee. In the participant information letter the researcher emphasised both the participants' guarantees of confidentiality and right to withdraw at any time. Debriefing took place after each interview which included signposts for additional support.

2.6 Analysis

Thematic analysis was selected as the approach, which can be deductive and/or inductive, allows for flexibility when choosing the theoretical framework. Analysis was conducted from the epistemological perspective of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975) to enable each participant's unique individual sociocultural context to be interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Bhaskar's critical realism (1975) as a philosophical approach to describe the interaction between the natural and social worlds suits the analytical insights needed to draw out the themes. The three levels of critical realism ontology (empirical, actual, and real) neatly capture the experienced events (empirical), the observed and unobserved events (actual), and causal mechanisms that lead to events occurring empirically (real) (Fletcher, 2016).

The researcher transcribed the interviews and analysed the data using the six steps outlined in Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006): (1) familiarisation with data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. A rich description of the whole data-set was obtained to identify and analyse the patterns present. The analysis was conducted by the researcher familiarising themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts while listening to the audio from the video recordings. To actively engage with the transcripts, the researcher conducted a line-by-line descriptive analysis to generate a list of ideas about what was contained in the data. The list was given codes, semantically and then latently, for the themes to be identified, defined, and named. In determining what counted as a theme, the question of prevalence was addressed in both frequency and weighting (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which required an ongoing internal reflexive dialogue for the researcher.

3. Results

Four main themes and eight subthemes were identified from participants' descriptions of their running history, in the context of running for charity or others (Table 2). Each main theme is set

out with accompanying extracts from the transcripts which highlight the subthemes that emerged during analysis.²

Table 2. Themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
1. Experience of suffering or adversity	(a) Acceptance of the journey (b) Develop gratitude and growth from adversity
2. Fully focused on the present (having an element of mindfulness)	(a) Space to address life challenges or to lose yourself in the moment (b) Belief in existing in harmony with surroundings
3. A shared experience with others	(a) Offers a sense of community (b) Values contribution to society
4. A broader perspective on life (including in meaning or purpose)	(a) Shape self-identity (b) Offers feedback in assessing relationships

3.1 Overview of themes and subthemes

Four main themes relating to the participants' wellbeing as runners were identified through data analysis: experience of suffering or adversity, being fully focused on the present (having an element of mindfulness), a shared experience with others, and a broader perspective on life (including in meaning and purpose). The results are noted in relation to the research aim and existing literature, with the implications of findings, limitations, and suggestions for further research also discussed.

3.1.1 Experience of suffering or adversity

Analysis identified two sub-themes: (a) acceptance and (b) gratitude and growth, relating to the theme of experience of suffering or adversity.

Acceptance. Miles, a runner and running coach, described a pivotal moment shortly after the death of his wife when he had the choice to end it or accept the situation and continue with his life:

I was going to cross over the road, there was a lot of vehicles coming in my direction and it's basically, if I step out now, that's it, no more pain... in that split second, you go from thinking that to then thinking... that's really selfish... then my parents have got to deal with everything.

He described this acceptance as a necessary part of the process, "you've almost got to hit rock bottom to know how low you can get", which gave him an understanding of the boundaries of his new widowed existence, "... then you know that... you always have good days and bad days... we all have days where we're lower than others". Leia viewed this polarity of fortunes as a necessary part of the equation, "You gotta have bad times and good times... and you've got to draw something from that bad to make it positive, because in every single negative there has to be a positive because otherwise the world wouldn't turn around".

² Extracts are presented with ellipses where information has been omitted for clarity. Pseudonyms are used for anonymity.

As well as acceptance, running offered participants space in which to confront uncomfortable moments when running with self-compassion, “I can raise... deep dark issues without judgment I think as well” (Darcy), and to acknowledge any pain, “it's just (.) situations... your personal life, your... work life all gets... in the way, and it's... how it comes out and that's how you vent it” (Sean).

Gratitude and growth. The data suggested that acceptance of suffering or adversity was an opportunity for growth for some participants. This mindset was evident when participants spoke about dealing with discomfort in running, “it's embracing the discomfort... you have to be comfortable with uncomfortableness” which extended into a mindset for living, “you have to know that some things are going to be uncomfortable in life and that's the only way that you can change” (Miles). Sean credited running with helping him overcome challenges posed by divorce and mental health challenges, “I went through a marriage separation a couple of years ago and (.) suffered quite badly from depression... and anxiety... if it wasn't for the running, (.) I think I would be in a very different place now than... where I could have ended up”.

The two widowed participants were able to develop a sense of gratitude for the opportunity gifted due to the suffering, “it's using the positives and thinking of the good things... I don't think I would have run as many marathons or run at all if it wasn't for my first wife...” (Miles), “I'm lucky that I've learned a lot from my wife dying. I don't measure it as... Something (.) that was negative. It happened. Yes, I didn't enjoy it, but I've learned a lot...” (Paul).

3.1.2 Fully focused on the present

All participants described a sense of mindfulness where they were fully focused on the present, without any task or goal in mind, when running. Analysis generated two sub-themes: (a) space to address life challenges or to lose one-self in the moment, and (b) belief in existence in harmony with surroundings.

Space to address life challenges or to lose one-self. A common theme amongst participants was for running to offer space in which to engage with one-self in the moment when home life is stressful, “it's head space... my own space... the switching off... complete escapism” (Stella), and to escape from distractions, “a space away from demands on my attention... that kind of disconnect... from... noise and communication” (Darcy). Running also was a space in which to address life challenges, “I would find it... if I had a... problem... a difficulty... a dilemma to... talk it out in my head as I ran... that was immensely helpful. I often get ideas while I'm running” (Darcy).

Belief in existence with harmony with surroundings. Participants also described a sense of being in harmony with their surroundings through a sense of being fully focused. For Noah, who had Parkinson's disease, this seemed poignant: “you... take time out when you're running to take in your surroundings (.)... be at peace with it, and appreciate it for what it is”, which heightened the personal experience when running, “the way you do things automatically, you realise actually that you're missing out quite a lot”.

This belief in existing in harmony with surroundings was expressed by Paul in terms of moments being gifted, as if a lottery win, “You have to look for those little moments... those pockets of happiness, those fairies that are going to just drop some stuff in front of you. And sometimes they're not obvious... we have to pay attention”. His description of this sense of harmony reflected the dualist nature of Taoism when he talked about “what you receive and what you give back”:

I've much better self-awareness... of myself (.)...what I can do and what I can also learn from... different things... it's about... investing the effort... it's just like

anything... if you don't invest, you don't get anything... to receive, you've got to give.

3.1.3 Shared experience with others

Analysis identified a sense of running as a shared experience was a prevalent theme for all participants. Two sub-themes emerged: having a sense of community and valuing contributions to society.

A sense of community. All participants spoke about the interpersonal relatedness as part of a community, for Sean who was divorced, "when you're running... you understand (.) why people run and you've got that bond", and Maeve who had expressed how she had often felt the outsider in life, "that end of the race feeling and you're hugging people that you've never hugged before and they just want to kiss you and it's like, it's fine... it's such a lovely thing and I guess because you're sharing it as well". For Maeve, this camaraderie was especially powerful when racing with her team as part of a relay event, "it wasn't till I did it that I totally understood that sense of feeling part of something massive".

Miles regularly ran charity races in fancy dress to raise money for his late wife's charity and spoke about his connection with the supporters:

when you're wearing fancy dress and fairy wings and a tutu, and a wand, it's just a totally different level... [it] just gives you such a buzz... I'm somebody that certainly thrived off of the - the cheering.

As a running coach, this feeling of wellbeing from charitable running subsequently influenced his coaching style:

I know how much running has helped me both on the mental side of things, the charitable side of things with keeping Lucy's name alive as well and trying to impart that sort of knowledge on people... to get them to enjoy what they're doing and learn.

The community of runners of which he was a part also played an important role for him, "I'm proud of that little community... it's a really supportive, friendly community and people love each other".

This sense of being part of a wider collective with a distinct identity was articulated by Noah when he described the camaraderie of running with others in challenging weather:

My main running buddy... her partner's a high-powered barrister... He just doesn't get it. It's pouring with rain, freezing cold (.) Going on a 20-mile run, why on earth would you go running in weather like this? ... he just cannot understand and get why we do it. I have tried to explain to him, but (.) h-he still doesn't get it... I think we are a particularly (.) unusual breed of people.

Running as part of a collective community was vital for Kylie, who was caring for her mother with motor neurone disease and otherwise struggled to motivate herself to run:

... running was my only escape because I was juggling everything... Life was really, really hard... Nothing was for me apart from the running. And I had never ever until... that phase (.) felt that high from running that I got because I think the difference from the running I'd done before... I don't know if it was emotion, or passion, or drive, or whatever, but I was pushing myself. Whereas before, I was tootling along.

The group motivation factor was echoed by Sean, “it adds that motivation as well that... you're not just doing it for yourself... you're doing it for other people”. As well as empowering her, Kylie found a connection with others through running for charity:

I felt like I was so powerless, and yet by running, I was raising money for something that has no cure. I (.) felt like, by so many people feeling like they couldn't do anything for mum, by sponsoring me, they felt like they were doing something. I mean, those were the conversations I was having. So then I was doing it for them as well. So for me, I was doing it for me, I was doing it for mum, I was doing it for (.) the people that were sponsoring me, and it was huge for me the emotions behind it. The passion behind it.

Values contribution to society. The importance of contributing to society through running was articulated by several participants. First, as an external source of motivation when raising money for charity as explained by Leia, “by hook or by crook, a charity runner will do it because once they signed on that line, they then know it's not about them”, she elaborated, “you got the masses, who are the most unselfish runners in the world because they're never going to be about them... Most people would go for a charity and close to their heart. It becomes very personal”. Second, running was seen as imparting a sense of agency when raising money for charity, “I always feel if you [are] doing a big run (.) People do obviously get asked for sponsorship all the time... I just felt (.) What can I do for... this person? You know, the only thing I know how to do... is run... can I help by running? And it was the only thing that I felt that I could.” (Scarlett). Third, running was seen to offer support to those in need, “just really to support my friend who wants to do it as well... we run together a lot, she's worked relentlessly through all of Covid, and she actually ran the vaccination program at [name of NHS hospital trust]. And just to run with her every week, she's always like, ‘This makes my week’” (Scarlett). Fourth, another participant saw the value of human connection, “I saw an old guy walking towards me... We ended up chatting for 15 minutes... it made me feel good because I almost feel like I gave him some time and I really listened to him... without blowing my own trumpet, he almost went off with a spring in his step afterwards because he felt like someone really listened... It was almost you feel like giving something back to somebody else as well.” (Stella)

3.1.4 A broader perspective on life

A fourth theme emerged from the data where participants described how running offered them a broader perspective on life. Analysis uncovered two sub-themes: running helps to shape self-identity and offers feedback in assessing relationships.

Shapes self-identity. Participants described how running offers a way to reassess the inclination to strive to achieve goals, “I'm a very goal-oriented person and always have been. I've got better about it. I'm kind of less like that now... I'm better at stepping back and seeing goals in a different way” (Darcy), “I'm probably more proud of the fact that I am still running virtually every day and enjoying running and things like that instead of... a time” (Miles). Noah, who suffers from Parkinson's Disease, articulated this in terms of how he had stopped chasing material possessions, “it's not having stuff that matters anymore, it's the quality of life” and placed more worth on intrinsic values:

you're mentally feeling chilled and relaxed and at peace... you just feel (.) Better, happier... it's little things like that now (.) That are important to me... the days when I would be into things like... the Rolex watches, the designer label clothes,

and fancy cars... all these sorts of things. Now they don't really mean anything to me.

Another participant described how running improved her self-esteem and made her a better version of herself that she hoped would inspire her children, "I'd love to be their inspiration... Them watching me get a lot out of it is really important to me" (Kylie). She also spoke of how running for charity validated her self-perception as a runner:

"I couldn't label myself 'a runner' (.) for a long time because I didn't think I was good enough... by (.) running for a cause and running for something that meant something, I put in a lot of hours and therefore (.) That was enough justification then to call myself 'a runner'".

Darcy, who was in a same-sex marriage, also connected with her self-identity as a runner, "it is a really central part of my identity; as central as you know, my work or... my sexual identity... at this point in my life, it's probably more important than that", she continued, "a place where I'm allowed to be completely myself."

An observation for Paul, who was widowed, was that this shaping was an essential part of the dialectical and paradoxical process of *wu-wei*:

every day doesn't have to be an up day... Your best day can be a low day. And your next best day can be high. And you've got to realise there's good days, there's bad days, but your bad days are just another version of a good day. It just has to be dealt with in a different way... it's taken me 50 years to get here, so does it matter how long the journey is? I don't think so (.) If you don't (.) experience the experiences... you're not going to be the person that you are.

Offers feedback in assessing relationships. All participants described how running offered a tool in helping them to assess important relationships. Darcy explained, "there's moments of revelation because of that kind of... that step back, you kind of suddenly think, 'Gosh...all my life, my mother said' or did whatever, whatever it is, you know, some kind of structural realisations." Darcy was also able to use running to manage the challenges presented in her relationship with her autistic adolescent daughter:

I do use it as a sort of tool for... I wouldn't say self-improvement exactly, but you know self-care... self-improvement... sometimes I do have to give myself a stern talking to about certain things... it's like, you know, why am I... losing my shit with... a 12-year old who... has an autism diagnosis. Come on... get over yourself.

This ability for running to help put things in perspective in challenging relationships was echoed by Scarlett, "all these silly things that we get stressed about, it's just a really good sort of cathartic way of going, actually, it's not important, and letting it go. And I learned a lot--to let go on a run actually".

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of main themes

This study explored the manifestation of *wu-wei* in runners who run for charitable causes and the impact on wellbeing and flourishing. As such it examined the manifestation of *wu-wei* in charity runners, during or outside of running. Participants were experienced runners reflecting on their history of running for charities and what it meant to them in the context of suffering or adversity, being fully focused on the present (including having an element of mindfulness), having a shared experience with others, and developing a broader perspective on life (including

in meaning and purpose). The results are noted in relation to the research aim and existing literature, with the implications of findings, limitations, and suggestions for further research discussed.

4.2 Experience of suffering or adversity

Acknowledgement and acceptance of the suffering or adversity experienced by participants was a key factor described by all of them. Whether it was a life tragedy or difficult moment encountered during a run, acceptance of the situation was essential. Perceived as a part of the embodied whole of life experiences, turning into the negative emotions was viewed as essential according to Miles and Leia. Darcy and Sean used their runs as a space in which to confront and process those feelings, while Miles and Paul were able to view the suffering they had experienced with gratitude and an opportunity for growth.

The current study supports the seemingly paradoxical theory of PP2.0 that suffering is a key variable in finding wellbeing (Wong, 2011; 2013; 2019; 2020) and the dialectical realisation that existential positive psychology is inherently positive. Wong's belief in Viktor Frankl's brand of tragic optimism (Wong & McDonald, 2002; Wong, 2020) was clearly represented in the data with participants all acknowledging the value of accepting dark moments which enabled them to transcend their circumstances, find gratitude and experience growth. In this aspect, the current study further supported the assertion by Ryff and Singer that a key element of the formula for flourishing includes acknowledging the dialectics of positive and negative aspects of life (2003; p. 272).

4.3 Fully focused on the present

Accessing mindfulness through running, and developing a focus in the present moment, was an important element of attaining wellbeing for participants. Stella and Darcy explained how they used the space as an opportunity to escape from and to address life challenges. Running was described by Darcy as a tool for seeking wellbeing and a bridge to connect with their surroundings. The act of being focused on the present touched on the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in being fully present in the moment, without any sense of the passing of time, but also was described by Noah as being in perfect harmony with the moment highlighting the distinct characteristic of *wu-wei* as 'non-action' or 'actionless action' in running. Reflecting its paradoxical identity and challenging the engagement limb of Seligman's theory on PERMA (2011), the sense of flow through *wu-wei* described by participants contrasted with the contention by Seligman that mindful engagement is necessarily based on an enjoyable focus.

The various descriptions by participants of the simple joys experienced from running supported Isham et al.'s claim that living well can be achieved by having less (2019). But the contention that materialism *inhibited* flow (Isham et al., 2021) was not apparent from analysis which may have been attributable to the format of the questions in interview. Of the discomfort experienced, Paul spoke of the dialectical nature of his relationship with running which translated into his philosophy of life when he described his belief in receiving what you give. This supports the findings by Wong, (2011; 2013; 2019; 2020) of the dual nature of wellbeing, and the relevance of the Taoist principles of accepting this inevitable pattern of change and of balancing opposite elements (Joshnloo, 2014; Delle Fave et al., 2011).

4.4 A shared experience with others

A key theme described by participants was the feeling of sharing an identity or experience with others through running for charitable causes or within communities. The positive emotions elicited through the sense of being part of a larger group were clearly articulated by Maeve and Sean, supporting the claim that a pro-social mindset correlates to wellbeing (Kahana et al., 2013; Post; 2005). Fredrickson and Losada (2005) argued for the importance of positive affect in flourishing and the current study supports the notion that these emotions play a crucial role in wellbeing. The feeling of being part of a wider group supports the finding in Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (1985; 2000) that interpersonal relatedness is a crucial element of wellbeing, with connection being a strong theme of Taoist philosophy and Eastern collectivism. Participants also expressed the importance of contributing to society as runners, as part of a collective effort, which supports the claim of the importance of agency (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and relatedness (Seligman, 2011) in developing wellbeing. The timing of the study led to a rich data-set on participants' shared experiences due to the lockdown imposed over the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasising the sense of humanistic collectivism (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and importance of relationships and caring (Kasser et al., 2007) felt by the runners in achieving wellbeing through their activities despite the pandemic.

4.5 A broader perspective on life

Participants expressed how running offered them insight into different ways to perceive things. For Darcy, a self-confessed goal-seeker, it allowed her to access self-compassion in allowing her "to be completely herself" which supports the research by Neff (2011) on the importance of practising self-compassion in attaining wellbeing. Paul explained how running helped him to accept the dialectical approach of Wong's existential positive psychology (2011) to finding wellbeing through acceptance of suffering as an inevitable and unescapable aspect of normal human existence. Noah was explicit in no longer valuing material items, supporting the contention that materialism wasn't *his* route to happiness (Isham et al., 2021) and demonstrating the advice to "enjoy the plain and simple. Find that greatness in the small" (Lao Tzu, Chapter 63).

The capacity for all participants to thrive and find wellbeing through self-determination was apparent throughout analysis (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) as running offered them a route to actively engage with communities and develop valuable human bonds. Importantly, the data further illustrated the more nuanced approach offered by PP2.0 to the participants' interpersonal relatedness and how they contemplated these relationships and their self-identity, supporting Wong's claim of mature happiness (2019) being characterised by a sense of acceptance and contentment.

4.6 How does *wu-wei* manifest itself in how runners achieve wellbeing and flourishing?

The aim of the current study was to explore the experiences of runners who raise money for charity and how this enhances wellbeing and flourishing by applying the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*. Participants exhibited a clear sense of acceptance of suffering, with expressions of gratitude, in growing from adversity. Mindfulness was a key ingredient in allowing them to accept their present situation and running offered valuable space in which to do this. Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi's theory of social capital (2015) provided a sense of humanistic collectivism via the act of charity fundraising, existing as a member of the running community, or simply identifying as a runner, and together with relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2011)

enabled participants to achieve wellbeing despite living through a pandemic. Crucially, Wong's theory of existential positive psychology (2011; 2013; 2019; 2020) offered deeper insight into how, despite the most extraordinary unforeseeable, worldwide health pandemic, all the runners were able to achieve wellbeing and flourishing.

4.7 Implications of findings

Participants expressed a sense of being part of a community with a strong self-identity through their running which was often emphasised through charity fundraising. This tied into their wellbeing and flourishing in impactful and lasting ways. While it may not be practical for all who suffer from adversity to take up running, perhaps due to physical limitations, the data suggest that any activity, simple movement, and, importantly, having a sense of belonging as part of a wider community, has a powerful impact on helping people redefine themselves following suffering, and to flourish. This looping effect, so coined by Hacking (1995) due to the dynamic process, in "classifying people works on people, changes them" (p.369) and points to our very fluid nature in accordance with the Tao or the flow of nature (Lao Tzu). It therefore offers a widely accessible and powerful route to wellbeing, providing the infrastructure of a community is there. Crucially, the current study suggests that *wu-wei* in the context of a group activity or pursuit, can offer this access irrespective of circumstances and fortunes and could be implemented globally. Of *wu-wei*, Lao Tzu said that "few in the world can comprehend the teaching without words or understand the value of non-action" (Chapter 43) and while promoting suffering or adversity certainly requires a skilful marketing campaign, the implications for the wider social benefits using existing community frameworks through adopting this in policy-making are immense.

4.8 Reflection on research design

Participants demonstrated a willingness to communicate but due to the open nature of the interview, some deviated more than others. Semi-structured interviews were deemed necessary because the notion of *wu-wei* as a construct is difficult to explain, and conceptualisation of the theory in practice differed from participant to participant. While definitions of the various relevant concepts were offered, the questions may not have probed sufficiently into the construct which may have been reflected in the lengthy responses. It is impossible to fully account for the impact of the intersubjective relationship between researcher, participant, and topic, as the data was gathered over time. As an experienced runner and running coach, the researcher's gaze was not entirely objective and the ability to express difficult concepts naturally became more fluid with each interview which may have influenced the participant.

4.9 Limitations and further research

The results are limited by the small sample size drawn from a participant group of mostly middling and advancing age. As participants had been recruited via social media and word of mouth, there were varying degrees of pre-existing familiarity between researcher and participant. The reflexive intersubjectivity between researcher, participant and subject matter may also have been impacted by the sudden loss of a close family member of the researcher, in particular, given the existential nature of the research topic. Participants were educated to at least undergraduate level with considerable experience in the workplace which may have had some bearing on the outcome of the results. Details relating to ethnicity, family background, socio-economic status, experiences of living in other geographical locations with different cultural

practices, health (a mental or physical health diagnosis) were not specifically included but could have had a bearing on the outcome of the results. Due to the open-ended nature of the interview, some participants spoke for longer than others and this could have resulted in an imbalanced perspective. The study was cross-sectional in nature and a longitudinal approach may have allowed each participant to reflect more on their experiences of running and the topic of the interviews.

Future research could explore the experiences of participants from a younger generation with a broader educational range. The findings suggest the value of more research in relation to all other movement-based activities, inside and outside of sport, that require perseverance based within a wider community. Focus on more research could be given to specific cultural upbringing as this may have more bearing than current geographical location. Replicating this study with a larger sample of a broader age range, that includes details on ethnicity, family background, socio-economic status, experiences of living in other geographical locations with different cultural practices, and a detailed history on health, could offer more insight and deepen our understanding of wellbeing, offering *wu-wei* as a concept to achieving wellbeing which can be freely accessed by all.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the current study discovered that the manifestation of *wu-wei* is key to achieving wellbeing in making sense of human existence in the face of suffering or adversity. Wong's PP2.0, 'existential positive psychology' (2011; 2013; 2019; 2020) offers a route to achieve this existential wellbeing and this study identified how it presents in runners who adopt pro-social ways of incorporating running within the community. Accounts contributing to the conceptualisation of *wu-wei* by participants were grounded in dealing with suffering and adversity, providing the essential foundation to find wellbeing and flourishing. By facing into their challenges and accepting the journey with a mindset of gratitude, participants were able to grow and transcend their suffering, supporting the existential philosopher Nietzsche's well-known claim that "what doesn't kill me, makes me stronger". The activity of running offered a convenient route to attain mindfulness which allowed participants to embrace these challenges and develop a broader perspective on life. The powerful effect of embracing *wu-wei* during their training indicates that a programme of running that includes a focus on the four key themes (experience of suffering or adversity, being fully focused on the present, having both a shared experience with others and a broader perspective on life) as a core element of the regime, could help develop wellbeing in runners *in addition* to getting them race ready. Promisingly, the data did not indicate it was an exclusive preserve of the running community and the combined focus of bringing the four themes into any movement-based or sports training programme has the potential to make a group or charity-focused effort a powerful positive psychology intervention. The element of interpersonal relatedness in the shared experience provided a key powerful stimulus to enhance wellbeing and flourishing and *wu-wei* may be attainable as a route to wellbeing and flourishing via many other physical activities.

Finally, the research highlights a fundamental and unique virtue of adopting *wu-wei* as a route to wellbeing. In recognition of the fact our mental and physical health is, to a large extent, dependent on the wellness ecosystem that surrounds us, there has been a boom in the global wellness industry. A thriving market offers us a wide range of options to help individuals to achieve wellbeing and happiness. This commoditisation of wellbeing in the West has bestowed on it the aura of the Holy Grail but the current study illustrates that seeking physical and mental wellbeing does not depend on financial status or access to a wellbeing market, and those living

in developing nations all around the world are as able to achieve wellbeing by embracing *wu-wei* as the wealthy West. The physical and mental manifestation of *wu-wei* offers a route to wellbeing for all, proving that the Holy Grail is indeed within everyone's grasp.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author reported no conflicts of interest.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Participant invitation letter.

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree, it is important that you understand what your participation would involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Who am I?

I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of East London and am studying for a Masters in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology (MAPPCP). As part of my studies I am conducting the research you are being invited to participate in.

What is the research?

I am conducting research exploring the relationship between the Taoist concept of wu-wei and wellbeing and flourishing in charity runners. Taoism is an ancient Chinese philosophy that teaches us that all living things should exist in harmony with the universe. A guiding principle is that everything in our universe is connected by balancing forces, such as light and dark and morning and night. You may be familiar with the symbol of Yin and Yang that illustrates this. A key tenet of Taoism is wu-wei, also described as effortless action or action through inaction, which describes when we are in perfect harmony with what is natural at the moment. In contrast with the trend to strive to achieve and focus on positivity, wu-wei teaches us to be fully present accepting both the positives and negatives in life. In this way, it helps us to be more reflective. The study seeks to understand how this reflexive philosophical stance can help us to achieve wellbeing and flourish in our lives irrespective of what circumstances we are facing. I have chosen to focus this research on charity runners to explore the potential link between wu-wei and runners who align their running goals with a charitable purpose.

My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Why have you been asked to participate?

You have been invited to participate in my research as someone who fits the description of who I am looking for to help me explore my research topic. Specifically, I am looking to involve runners who fit the following criteria:

- Aged between 18-65
- For the current study you have been running consistently for at least a year in the past three years
- Run at least 3 times a week
- Race regularly (but not only) in aid of charities
- Able to run independently (without relying on others to guide or accompany you)
- Currently injury-free

I emphasise that I am not looking for ‘experts’ on the topic I am studying. You will not be judged or personally analysed in any way and you will be treated with respect. You are quite free to decide whether or not to participate and should not feel coerced.

What will your participation involve?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to:

- Attend an interview via Teams lasting 60-90 minutes.
- This will be recorded using the Teams transcription service Streams.
- The interview will be in the format of an informal chat, guided by broad questions which are selected to help me to understand your experience of the topics we will cover.
- The conversation will be recorded for later transcription and analysis.
- During analysis of the conversation, I will provide you with a pseudonym in order for you to maintain complete anonymity and all identifying details will be redacted or omitted from the written materials, including the transcript and write-up.
- Following transcription of the interview, I will arrange for you to see a copy to approve it as an accurate reflection of what you said.

The interview is voluntary and I will not be able to pay you for participating in my research. However, it is anticipated that the experience will be of benefit to the wider community in the research that emerges and, therefore, your participation would be very valuable in helping to develop knowledge and understanding of my research topic.

Your taking part will be safe and confidential.

Your privacy and safety will be respected at all times.

- The interviews will be recorded and transcribed entirely by me.
- Participants will not be identified in the data collection, on any written material arising from the data collection, or in any write-up of the research. This means that:
 - your name will not be noted anywhere, so that only I will know your identity.
 - I will discuss parts of the study with my supervisor, Dr Ertubey, but she will not know your name.
 - Dr Ertubey will be provided with a summary of my findings once the study comes to an end, but she will not have access to any of the recordings or transcriptions.
 - In the event the research is published, the data will be available to those with access to academic journals but will be in anonymised form using pseudonyms.
- You have the right to not answer any of the questions asked and can stop participation in the study at any time, this includes prior to the start of the interviews, once the interviews have begun, and up to three weeks after the interviews have been completed. You also have the right to request to see your data after the interview.

What will happen to the information that you provide?

What I will do with the material you provide will involve:

- Data will be stored on a password protected computer in a password protected document. Any hard copies of transcripts and notes will be securely locked in a fireproof cabinet to which only I will have the key.
- After the data is collected, I will provide pseudonyms for each participant. None of the participants will be able to be identified in any of the written transcripts or further write

ups for research purposes, nor in the final write-up of the study itself. The pseudonyms will be used at all times and the original transcripts will not have their names on them.

- Only I will have access to the data. My supervisor will be given access to select sections for discussion and this will be anonymised. Any further data, for example should the study be published, will be completely anonymised.
- After completion of the study, participants' contact details, the recordings, transcripts, notes and write-ups will be securely stored in a password protected environment (in the case of electronic data) or a securely locked fireproof cabinet (in the case of hard copies). In accordance with the rules, data will be stored for the period of time that is required by the journal that I plan to publish my findings in. This can vary depending on the journal and, if you are interested, I can let you know the outcome once or if my study has been accepted for publication.

What if you want to withdraw?

You are free to withdraw from the research study at any time without explanation, disadvantage or consequence. Separately, you may also request to withdraw your data even after you have participated data, provided that this request is made within three weeks of the data being collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible).

Contact Details

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact Wendy Roberts [contact removed].

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted please contact the research supervisor Dr Candan Ertubey [contact removed].

Appendix B. Survey questions.

In order to outline the research, participants were provided with the following definitions:

Wellbeing (noun): a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

Flourishing: “There are stringent criteria for flourishing. Their three core elements (positive emotion, engagement, and meaning) are taken from authentic happiness theory, but with the addition of the other elements – most important, positive relationships – they come close to the elements of well-being theory. I would suggest that accomplishment be added as an element so that being in the upper range of positive emotion, and engagement, and meaning, and positive relationships, and positive accomplishment would be my criteria for flourishing”, i.e. fulfilment in lives, accomplish meaningful/worthwhile tasks, connect with others on a deeper level (Seligman, p.238-239).

P = positive emotions

E = engagement

R = good relationships

M = meaning / purpose in life

A = achievement

Wong’s PP2.0 (Frankl’s tragic optimism): “To live a meaningful life, regardless of circumstances, is to have courage and responsibility to become what you were meant to be, to become your best self as a gift to others” (Wong, 2011).

Description of wu-wei as “action through inaction” or “effortless action” to achieve wellbeing and flourishing.

Participants were offered an explanation of the dual nature of Taoism which recognises for everything there is an opposite – this will be pertinent for runners familiar with the moments of suffering and adversity in training and racing.

Participants were provided with a definition for “wellbeing” and “flourishing” (see above). The purpose being to set the scene for the participant and frame the following questions.

1. *Can you give examples of wu-wei during your running? How do you think your charity involvement influences this?*
2. *Can you recall specific instances when running in which you:*
 - a. *Were fully focused on the present*
 - b. *Were without any task or goal in mind?*
 - c. *Felt in perfect harmony*
 - d. *Felt natural at that moment?*
3. *How did the experience begin?*
4. *When did it happen?*
5. *Where did it happen?*
6. *Who was involved?*
7. *What happened to induce such a state of wu-wei?*
8. *To what extent do you think running helps you develop wu-wei and wu-wei helps you develop your running?*