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ARTICLE

Suggested metatheory for positive psychology: The organismic systems theory

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Abstract: Positive psychology has been criticized among other things for its lack of a metatheory that would explicate its underlying philosophical assumptions and epistemology as well as give direction for methodology and the forming of constructs, models and theories. This article sets out to suggest a metatheory for positive psychology, combining the systems approach (systems-informed positive psychology, Kern et al., 2019) together with the organismic theory inherent in philosophy of science, biology, neurology and psychology. The suggested metatheory is called organismic systems theory (OST), explicating the following assumptions for PP: 1) active individual (actualizing tendency), 2) functional tendency, 3) integration, 4) emergence, 5) dynamism, 6) self-organization, 7) interconnectedness, 8) holism, 9) subjectivity, 10) boundaries, and 11) adaptation. The systems approach is considered compatible with the organismic approach with their combination suggested to provide the field with a good theory that combines psychological-level inquiry with more general systems-level inquiry. The epistemology and implications of this metatheory for positive psychology are discussed.

Keywords: metatheory; positive psychology; organismic theory; organismic valuing process; systems theory; humanistic psychology

1. Introduction

One of the major criticisms when it comes to positive psychology is the lack of a coherent metatheory in the field (van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022; Donaldson et al., 2022; Friedman & Brown, 2018). A metatheory refers to basic assumptions at the heart of the research discipline that are taken as 'true' – assumptions, which may be used to develop theories and generate specific research questions (Finkel, 2014). Theories can be used to derive falsifiable hypotheses, but metatheories, by contrast, are commonly assumed as foundational to the discipline in question (Finkel, 2014). However, even with the unfalsifiable core of a metatheory, the further theories and hypotheses that are derived from them can, and should, be subject to falsification (Finkel, 2014).

The definition of metatheory is rather unclear with Wallis (2010) suggesting that there exists at least twenty different definitions of it in the research literature. Wallis (2010), in combining these different definitions, suggests that metatheory can be defined as follows: ''Metatheory is primarily the study of theory, including the development of overarching combinations of theory, as well as the development and application of theorems for analysis that reveal underlying assumptions about theory and theorizing.'' The APA Dictionary of Psychology (2022) defines metatheory as:

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> Higher order theory about theories, allowing one to analyze, compare, and evaluate competing bodies of ideas. The concept of a metatheory suggests that theories derive from other theories, so that there are always prior theoretical assumptions and commitments behind any theoretical formulation. It follows that these prior assumptions and commitments are worthy of study in their own right, and an understanding of them is essential to a full understanding of derivative theories.

Furthermore, Friedman and Brown (2018) consider metatheory to provide the field with an underlying philosophy that can inform the field how psychological phenomena could be approached and studied. Therefore, a metatheory is an overarching theory underpinning other theories derived from it. It defines the basic assumptions of the field.

Lack of a metatheory induces multiple problems for a field, such as lack of clarity to how different concepts should be defined (see van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022). Furthermore, Donaldson et al. (2022) suggest that the lack of a metatheory will lead towards ''componential thinking whereby the focus is on understanding specific state-, trait- or behavior outside of its context and in isolation of other factors.'' Therefore, a lack of a metatheory can reduce the field to a collection of differentiated pieces of knowledge, componential thinking, in which the interconnectedness of concepts during the process of, for instance, well-being and personal growth are not understood. According to Wallis (2010) metatheory can help us in more effectively applying theories for the betterment of the human condition and alleviating human ills, and they give scholars the ability to integrate theories even between different disciplines.

The lack of a metatheory also leads to a lack in understanding what the basic assumptions of the field are – such as the assumptions of human nature (Wood et al., 2021). Wood et al. (2021) suggest that positive psychology should clarify its fundamental assumptions so that advances in both theory and practice can be made. Currently positive psychology does not explicitly know its own assumptions, which can seriously harm its ability to develop as a field. Therefore, a question to be tackled for the field to advance (particularly in its practical applications), according to Wood et al. (2021) is to clarify the basic assumptions (i.e. metatheoretical viewpoints), which this article has set out to accomplish. In line with the current article's suggestion, Wood et al. (2021) suggest that a metatheoretical viewpoint for positive psychology could be the organismic theory inherent in person-centred psychology and Carl Rogers' (1961) pioneering work (discussed further ahead).

Considering the whole field of psychology, some metatheories have been suggested. Zagaria et al. (2020) criticized psychology for the lack of consensus for its foundational concepts such as the mind, behavior or psychology. They suggested that evolutionary psychology could serve as a viable metatheory for psychology and gave multiple justifications for this. For example, the authors argue that evolutionary psychology could give an answer to many of the fundamental questions and debates in psychology such as the nature-nurture problem, the role of culture in development and give an evolutionary explanation to different psychological phenomena. Furthermore, Zagaria et al. (2020) emphasize that the evolutionary theory is at its heart biological and gives a more 'hard'-science focus to psychology. However, Mascolo (2021) criticized this suggestion as a metatheory arguing that evolutionary psychology fails as a unifying metatheory in three main ways: 1) evolutionary psychology fails to provide explanations on the psychological level of analysis; 2) evolutionary psychology fails to provide psychology with a shared lexicon of psychological concepts; and 3) evolutionary psychology is based on some assumptions that are contestable. According to Mascolo (2021) a unified metatheory for psychology would need to be able to provide explanation at the psychological level of inquiry rather than reducing phenomena down to just biology, or alternatively generalising upwards to

culture. Mascolo (2021) suggests three things that a good metatheory should provide: 1) a shared psychological language, 2) a methodology spanning first-, second-, and third-person inquiries, and 3) develop a process model explaining psychological functioning on biological, psychological and social levels. Therefore, Mascolo (2021) suggests that a relational systems approach could serve as more viable options as metatheories for psychology. Relational metatheory would explicate all psychological phenomena as comprised of shared understandings, intersubjectivity. Furthermore, a systems approach would look into phenomena as embedded in multiple systems, therefore introducing multiple levels of inquiry, rather than merely the individual perspective (Mascolo, 2021).

Currently, the field of positive psychology lacks one overarching metatheory, although some suggestions have been made for this (van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022). For instance, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in their seminal paper suggested that positive psychology is the science of positive experiences, positive traits, and positive institutions aimed at improving well-being. However, as argued by van Zyl and Rothmann (2022) and Donaldson et al. (2022) this definition does not suffice to provide the field with a metatheory given that there was a lack of criteria for evaluating what ''positive'' is in relation to theories, a lack of methodological clarification, and a lack of general guidelines for theory building and evaluation. Furthermore, van Zyl and Rothmann (2022) discussed another potential metatheory, Fredrickson's (2004) broaden-and-build theory. Although a foundational theory in positive psychology, it cannot serve as a metatheory (see van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022) due to having at its basis only one basic assumption: positive emotions are growth-enhancing, and negative emotions are not (see this argument in van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022). This, rather than a metatheory, serves the function of a falsifiable theory.

With these shortcomings in mind, this article sets out to suggest a viable metatheory for positive psychology, the organismic systems theory (OST) which would incorporate and integrate together the systems sciences (systems informed positive psychology, SIPP perspective, Kern et al. 2019) and the organismic theory inherent in philosophy (Overton, 1984) biology (e.g. Moreno & Mossio, 2015; Desmond & Huneman, 2020), neurology (Goldstein, 1934/2000), and psychotherapy (person-centred theory; Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1964; Wilkins, 2016; Maurer & Daukantaité, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2018). The organismic theory is already the basis of some other theories in the field, such as the self-determination theory (SDT: Ryan & Deci, 2018; Deci et al., 2013; Joseph & Murphy, 2013), post-traumatic growth theory by Joseph and Linley (2005), authentic personality theory by Wood et al. (2008), self-concordance theory by Sheldon (2014; Sheldon et al., 2003), and the Transformative self theory by Bauer (2021). Furthermore, it is at the basis of other psychological theories such as Freudian theory of personality (see Ryan & Deci, 2018), Piaget's theory of cognitive and social development (Overton, 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2018), Chomsky's, Werner's and Allport's theories (Overton, 1984), as the basis of Bowlby's attachment theory and Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Overton, 1984) and at the basis for some humanistic theories (e.g. Rogers, 1961; see Wilkins, 2016). It is furthermore at the core of some educational approaches such as the Montessori-education (Montessori, 2015; Gustafsson, 2018), Rogers' idea of education (Rogers et al., 2013; Rogers, 1980), and Dewey's progressive education (see Ryan & Deci, 2018). All these theories and pedagogies see the individual as inherently active in shaping their lives and point towards the importance of the social environment in this process.

This suggested metatheory organismic systems theory (OST) is derived from systems theory (complex systems, e.g. Ladyman & Wiesner, 2021; and systems informed positive psychology [SIPP], Kern et al., 2019) and from the metatheoretical perspectives of the self-determination theory called organismic integration theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018; Deci et al., 2013), the organismic

valuing process theory by Rogers (1959, 1961, 1964, 1980: Maurer & Daukantaité, 2020) and the organismic theory inherent in biology (Goldstein, 1939). It is suggested that the organismic theory and the systems approach within positive psychology could harmoniously co-occur as an overarching metatheoretical perspective. Furthermore, it is suggested that the organismic theory and related organismic valuing process theory (see Maurer & Daukantaité, 2020) is a comprehensive theory that can encapsulate many of the major and minor theories and concepts within positive psychology as was discussed by Maurer and Daukantaité (2020). This article sets out to be a continuation of the article by Maurer and Daukantaité (2020) in further explicating and clarifying the organismic systems theory (OST) as a viable metatheory for positive psychology.

The next sections will first introduce the systems approach, organism as a complex system and the systems-informed positive psychology, SIPP (Kern et al. 2019). Then I will turn towards discussing the organismic theory as it is inherent in philosophy, biology and neurology (Overton, 1984; Goldstein, 1939), then going through the organismic valuing process theory (Maurer & Daukantaité, 2020) that derived from the organismic theory, the personal growth process model with organismic metatheory (Maurer et al., 2023), briefly introducing the organismic integrative approach as the metatheory behind the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018), and finally going through the principles and assumptions inherent in the organismic theory, and the integration of SIPP with the organismic theory, forming the organismic systems theory (OST). Finally, some implications will be considered.

2. An organism as a complex system

Implicit in the organismic approaches is the view of the organism (i.e. the individual) as a complex system (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2018). Complex systems, fundamentally, consist of interdependencies and complex relationships both within their own system as well as with the outside environment (Mitchell & Newman, 2002; Ladyman et al., 2013; Ladyman & Wiesner, 2020). Complex systems are made out of elements (individual parts, 'components'; Mitchell & Newman, 2002) that interact, and this leads to behaviors that often cannot be traced back to the basic elements themselves, i.e. these behaviors have emergent properties (Ladyman et al., 2013; Ladyman & Wiesner, 2020). An example of emergence in biological systems is metabolism, or the behavior of foraging, as well as the collective behaviors of beehives and ant colonies (Ladyman & Wiesner, 2020). These behaviors are emergent since ''[c]oordinated behaviour does not require an overall controller'' (Ladyman & Wiesner, 2020, p. 4), meaning that order emerges out of potential chaos spontaneously. Giving an example from recent theories within positive psychology, Sheldon and Martela (2021) suggested that human free will could be considered as an emergent phenomenon, and therefore 'real'. List (2019) and Sheldon and Martela (2021) discuss that there are levels of a system in which the most basic fundamental levels, such as the biological level of cells and molecules may behave very deterministically, and yet on a higher level of the system, such as the level of the mind, free will may emerge. Sheldon and Martela (2021) discuss how Thermodynamics have laws in which the higher level systems may have emergent properties (or behavior), which are not reducible to the basic elements making up the system. Similar logic is also related to the discussion of free will – it could be considered as an emergent property of the self-organizing system, the human mind (Sheldon & Martela, 2021). Although this idea may be debated, it is a nice example of what a psychological emergent property could be in the complex system of the organism.

The conditions for complexity to arise are the assumptions of 1) numerosity – there are multiple interactions between multiple elements (such as cells, nervous system, brain, other

organs etc. in the human body), 2) disorder and diversity – there is no central controlling system coordinating the interactions of components, 3) feedback – there is a feedback from previous interactions helping the emergent properties, 4) non-equilibrium – complex systems are open systems (open to their environmental influences) and driven by something external (Ladyman & Wiesner, 2020). Other assumptions are the results of complexity, and perhaps more relevant for our discussion of positive psychology metatheory: 1) self-organization (spontaneous order) – order emerges from the interactions of the elements of the complex system, 2) nonlinear dynamics – processes happen in a non-linear more dynamic fashion, 3) robustness – there is stability in the structure and function of the complex system, 4) nested structure and modularity – there are specializations of function and multiple levels of structure in complex systems, 5) history and memory – complex systems store information about history, 6) adaptation – complex systems can exhibit adaptive behaviors in response to their environments (Ladyman & Wiesner, 2020).

The assumptions most relevant for positive psychology, according to Kern et al. (2019) are many of the ones related to the outcomes of complexity, and some adapted from systems sciences more generally, delineated in their theory of SIPP, discussed next.

2.1 Systems informed positive psychology (SIPP; Kern et al., 2019)

A potential metatheory for positive psychology could be the systems approach (Kern et al., 2019). Kern et al. (2019) suggest SIPP, in which the science of positive psychology would incorporate in it the principles of systems sciences. According to Kern et al. (2019) both positive psychology and systems approaches share a similar goal to enhance the wellness of individuals and their social systems, therefore their incorporation together would be fruitful. Systems sciences look into systems, i.e. sets of elements with interactions and a shared purpose (Meadows, 2008). Systems are functional, exhibit adaptive, goal-seeking, dynamic behavior and have the qualities of self-organization, self-repair over perturbations, and maintenance (Meadows, 2008), among other things. A living organism is a system, and so are its internal functions, such as the digestive system. A living organism, itself a system, is embedded in multiple other systems such as a family, an organization, a culture and the world (Meadows, 2008). Therefore, systems exist in multiple hierarchies.

Principles inherent in the systems sciences that Kern et al. (2019) considered particularly relevant for positive psychology are as follows. First is *interconnectedness*, which refers to how elements within a system are in a complex, inter-dependent relationship – it is important for positive psychology to take into consideration not only the individual as if separated from its environment, but understanding the complex interrelationships in that environment (this might reduce the 'individual bias'; see Marecek & Christopher, 2018). Second is *dynamics*, which means that change occurs in non-linear and dynamic ways, therefore we need non-linear models for understanding phenomena. This is important in understanding how complex well-being processes are, in that they ebb and flow rather than develop in a linear trajectory. Third, *boundaries* refers to our delineation of a system, determining who and what is included and excluded. This is crucial for understanding interventions – to see who is targeted, who benefits, who might be excluded and/or disregarded and who may instead suffer (by understanding the boundaries we might lessen bias in research, such as an overreliance on the WEIRD context; see Henrich et al., 2010). Fourth is *perspectives*, or acknowledging how different stakeholders within a system hold different perspectives. This principle may need to be considered more widely anyways, including subjectivity in research (qualitative accounts) but also understanding the role of stakeholders in applied intervention research. The fifth relevant principle is *adaptation and emergence*, or how complex systems adapt over time and sometimes lead to the emergence of alternate states of

elements within that system (or the system adopts these alternate states at a more complex stage). This means that positive psychology needs to better understand emergent behavior and complex phenomena. Last is *self-organization*, or how systems come together in an organized manner creating coherence, including in complex, non-linear ways – again pointing out the positive psychology should better understand and model complex trajectories of phenomena; Kern et al., 2019).

The SIPP perspective sits very well with the development of positive psychology as a field. The call for the ''third wave'' for positive psychology (Lomas et al., 2021) is a call for further sophistication of the field with more systems-informed perspectives, more inclusion of different cultural perspectives, integration of disciplines and theories, and inclusion of various ways of knowing (methodologies). The SIPP approach is attractive, and could serve as a metatheory, but it lacks, I argue, a more directly psychological level of analysis in it, which would be supplemented by the organismic theory.

3. The organismic theory

The organismic theory (OT) is a metatheoretical viewpoint that can be contrasted to the mechanistic metatheory (Overton, 1984; Overton, 2007; Bauer, 2021). Whereas the mechanistic approach uses the basic metaphor of individuals as machines made out of component parts, the organismic metatheory approaches the metaphor of the living organism and their development (Overton, 1984; Overton, 2007; Bauer, 2021). The organismic metatheory has multiple historical influences from Aristotle to different philosophers of science and biology (Ryan & Deci, 2018; Moreno & Mossio, 2015). In developmental psychology some of its prominent proponents are Piaget, Werner and Baldwin (Bauer, 2021). In the organismic theory, the living organism is seen as an active agent behaving for its own benefit to counteract disintegration and maintain and enhance itself (Moreno & Mossio, 2015). Therefore, the organism is seen as a self-organizing system that can influence its own development (Bauer, 2021). Furthermore, the organismic metatheory is based on assumptions such as holism, non-additive and non-linear organization and change, whereas the mechanistic metatheory assumes stasis, reductionism, additive and linear organization (Overton, 2007). Therefore, these two metatheoretical viewpoints can be seen as different 'worldviews' that endorse different epistemologies and methodologies (Overton, 2007), in simple terms it can be seen as a battle between reductionism and complexity.

Kant (1790/1987; in Moreno & Mossio, 2015) advocated the organismic approach in suggesting that organisms are not like machines, since their parts are not just additive and separate from each other, but fundamentally integrated to function as a unity. Furthermore, Kant believed in an underlying purposiveness of living organisms in which there is an intrinsic purpose in the organization of an organism whereby the parts generate the whole, whilst the whole maintains the parts, in a holistic manner. Also, organisms self-organize in purposive ways to serve their own functionality. Kant therefore advocated for a circular causality, rather than a linear one (Van de Vijver et al., 2003) – the intricate interdependence between the parts and the whole. Therefore, the organismic approach is concerned with the holistic nature of the individual, taking into account their biochemical, physiological, cognitive, perceptual, emotional, social, interpersonal, and cultural aspects (Wilkins, 2016). The Kantian view has seen a resurgence in biological thinking, particularly in the area of systems biology (Kitano, 2002; Van de Vijver et al., 2003; Moreno & Mossio, 2015).

A historical example of the Kantian view of organization in living organisms is Goethe's ''genetic method'' (1790/2009; In Wagoner, 2021) of describing the developmental stages of a living organism such as the plant as going from an undifferentiated state (a seed) to a greater

order, hierarchy, and differentiation of function (a fully grown plant with stem, leaves, petals etc.). Likewise, the transformation of the acorn becoming the oak tree is inherent in the notion of the teleology of the progress of the acorn (Bauer, 2021), following the organismic growth principles. According to Bauer (2021) a similar notion of teleology of progress are foundational to the eudaimonic well-being tradition. In other words, eudaimonia can be seen as progress towards humanistic and organismic values: growth, wisdom, self-actualization, authenticity etc. (Bauer, 2021). That would suggest that the organismic growth principles would be naturally a foundation to the study of well-being (especially eudaimonia).

Furthermore, Overton (1984) discusses how the historical origins of the organismic perspective stems from the philosophy of *becoming* (from Enaximander, Heraclites, Kant, Hegel and others), which means that the basic nature of elements as basically active and changing (Overton, 1984). Another basic assumption of the organismic approach is that change is ''necessary'' (following Aristotle's ideas of necessary and accidental change) – i.e. natural – to the organism (such as a seed ultimately necessarily developing into a plant). This is contrasted to the mechanistic approach in which *being* is the underlying philosophy – meaning that entities are fixed and stable. Also, change is accidental, rather than the focus of the scientific inquiry (Overton, 1984).

To delineate between the organismic and mechanistic view, complex systems in organismic theory are to be understood not merely as ''complicated'' systems. The distinction between these is that a complicated system, such as an aircraft (Van de Vijver et al., 2003) can be clearly externally determined, each of their parts can be located and measured – they are mechanical systems. A living organism, a complex system, then again necessarily has some internal components that cannot directly be controlled and measured – external descriptions do not perfectly capture their behavior (Van de Vijver et al., 2003). Therefore, their subjective perspectives, their self, is important in improving this understanding (Van de Vijver et al., 2003). Furthermore, complex systems, like a living organism, is not merely a chaotic system, rather they exist between order and chaos, and again this leads to the conclusion that their behavior can best be understood as referring to their internal organization and to their 'self' (Van de Vijver et al., 2003).

An example of the organismic vs. mechanistic view can be seen in the history of systems biology (Trewavas, 2006). Systems biology can be contrasted to reductionist or mechanical biology, which were historically antecedent to it. René Descartes (1596–1650) was the pioneer of the reductionist views suggesting that all phenomena could be better understood by breaking it down to its fundamental component parts, investigating each part in separation, and then understanding the whole by putting the pieces back together (Trewavas, 2006). One of the pioneering voices of mechanistic biology was Loeb (1912; in Trewavas, 2006) who suggested that all biological behavior of a species could be identical and predetermined, therefore his view was that organisms are complex machines. However, such views were much opposed by, for example, Jan Smuts (1870–1950) who suggested that systems (such as an organism) could not be simply understood from its component parts put together, but that there was a holism in systems, and emergent properties were seen at higher levels of a system not reducible to the component parts (Trewavas, 2006). Therefore, systems biology, rather than breaking systems down to their components, attempts to use mathematical and computation approaches to understand the complex interactions within larger biological systems (Trewavas, 2006).

Within the 20th Century the organismic theory can be traced back to Kurt Goldstein, a prominent neurologist and psychiatrist who suggested a holistic metatheoretical view for the fields of human sciences. In his book ''The Organism'', the English translation dating from 1939,

Goldstein criticizes localized understanding of illness and injury and suggests that the whole organism responds when there is a stimulus from the outside. Goldstein (1939) understood symptoms as the organism's way to respond to illness and injury by forming a solution after being altered by the damage it endured. Therefore, Goldstein (1939) saw the organism as proactively and holistically looking for solutions to illnesses and injury. While disease requires a revision of the self and world, one can come to an altered state of being as a solution. He pioneered the holistic approach to biology, helping to formulate the field of phenomenological psychiatry in which the subjective experiences of the patients are core (Morley, 2002). Goldstein also was the originator of the term ''self-actualization'' also referred to as the ''formative tendency'', whereby the organism is motivated to actualize its full capacities in any given moment in contact with its environment (Goldstein, 1939). Therefore, self-actualization is originally a biological, rather than psychological concept.

In biology, the metatheory of the organism as an agent with agency (autonomy) is prevalent (Moreno & Mossio, 2015; Desmond & Huneman, 2020). Autonomy comes in the forms of 1) *constitutive* autonomy – i.e. the maintenance of living functionality within its system, and 2) *interactive* autonomy – i.e. the way in which the organism interacts with its environment in enhancing ways (Moreno & Mossio, 2015). Desmond and Huneman (2020) discuss the concept of autonomy in biology from the Kantian perspective and suggests that it is not to be taken as ontologically literally, rather as an indispensable phenomenon of our own rationality – we cannot avoid seeing agency in organisms. Living organisms, such as a cell, are seen to have high internal organization enabling it to function in 'goal-oriented' ways – i.e. multiple biochemical reactions maintain the cell's functions, gets rid of thermodynamic waste and enables the cell to interact with its environment to get the nutrients it needs (Moreno & Mossio, 2015). The same is true on the larger level, considering the whole organism. Moreno and Mossio (2015) also argue that such organization and function is a precursor for evolutionary processes: ''This is because the internal organisation of organisms secures the reproducibility of functionality which permits the inheritable traits, including those for mutant genomes, on which evolutionary selection operates.'' (Moreno & Mossio, 2015). Therefore, at the heart of evolution is the organization of the organism and its ability to function as a highly complex system, adapt and propagate (Moreno & Mossio, 2015). This would imply that even the theory of evolution is based on the organismic metatheory.

3.1 A few examples of organismic theories within psychology

3.1.1 The organismic valuing process theory

The organismic valuing process theory (OVP) originates from the person-centered tradition within humanistic psychology and Carl Rogers as its pioneering figure. The OVP is at the heart of the person-centred theory and psychotherapy (Wilkins, 2016). It is also the basis for the theory of personality change and personal growth (Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1963, 1964; Maurer & Daukantaité, 2020). At the heart of the OVP theory is the assumption that organisms are naturally geared towards growth when their social environments are favorable to such growth. Therefore, the social environments need to be supportive of this process to take root. According to Rogers (1959, 1961) the basic needs of a growth-supporting environment are genuineness, empathy and unconditional positive regard. The arena in which Rogers (1961) discussed these needs was mainly within psychotherapy between the client and the therapist. However, he also believed that these needs would be required for any growth-enhancing interpersonal relationship. The organismic valuing process theory explicates that the actualizing tendency can be released from a supportive environment and that this leads towards the reconnection of the individual with

their own valuing process, and ultimately to the growth towards becoming a 'fully-functioning' person (Rogers, 1961, 1963, 1964). A valuing process means that the individual is naturally knowledgeable about the sources of physical and psychological nourishment for them in any given moment – they can, therefore, learn to trust their 'gut feeling'. Often the connection to one's valuing process is tampered throughout life since the individual learns to internalize various conditions of worth from external sources into their own valuing system (Rogers, 1964). That means that the person learns to internalize demands, pressures and conditions for their acceptance as parts of their own internal models dwarfing their cognition and behavior. Only when the person is capable of engaging with their own personal growth process and reconnect with the valuing process can they learn to differentiate pressures from outside sources from their own values and desires. This is a core aspect of the growth process (Rogers, 1961, 1964).

According to Rogers (1961; Wilkins, 2016) the ''steps'' of the personal growth process are as follows: 1) the individual does not want to change and behaves defensively; 2) defensiveness lessens to a degree and the individual talks about external phenomena; 3) the individual begins to talk about the self but from a distance, as if as an object; 4) the individual loosens up a little and talks about feelings; 5) the individual gradually exhibits signs of taking personal responsibility; 6) the individual enhances in congruence (matching of experience and behavior) and begins to accept other people; 7) the individual is becoming a fully-functioning person, who has empathy and unconditional positive regard towards others (Wilkins, 2016; Rogers, 1961, 1963). A fully functioning person is someone who 1) is open towards their experiencing, 2) has existential courage and 3) trusts their own organismic experience (Rogers, 1963).

3.1.2 The personal growth process model (PGP)

Based on the above Rogerian OVP theory, a recent model of personal growth is likewise based on the organismic metatheory, the personal growth process model (PGP; Maurer et al., 2023). The model suggests that the foundational need of the individual before their personal growth can unfold is the need for psychological safety – either as provided by one's social environment, or as built into an inner personal resource of the individual. Furthermore, the individual needs to want to change – without such motivation the personal growth process does not necessarily unfold (Maurer et al., 2023).

The process itself entails the enhancement in various psychosocial skills, starting with self-awareness. Self-awareness refers to the ability to hold in one's consciousness information regarding one's internal and external experiencing, such that one is simultaneously aware of their intra- and interpersonal realities. Therefore, one is aware not only of their internal experiences (thoughts, emotions, motives etc.) but also of how one's behavior may influence one's social surrounding (Maurer et al., 2023). Other changes in psychosocial skills happening dynamically (and not sequentially) are the enhancement of openness towards experiencing and change, meaning one does not easily judge experience but becomes more receptive and the need for closure diminishes (Maurer et al., 2023). Furthermore, one becomes higher in existential courage suggesting a bravery in facing life's ups and down head-on. Also, autonomy is a personal growth change, whereby the individual learns to gear towards things of their own volition rather than as pressured or demanded by others. One also becomes more responsible of both the self and others as well as higher in self-compassion, i.e. kindness and acceptance of the self. Ultimately one becomes more compassionate also towards others and the world, wishing for the well-being of all beings. The well-being that ensues entails authenticity, ability to be oneself and follow one's values, as well as higher harmony, the ability to be serene and at peace with the self and social world, and life-satisfaction, feeling happier about one's life overall (Maurer et al., 2023).

This model is firmly based on the organismic metatheory, with the foundational assumption being that individuals are geared towards growth and development naturally, and that such a tendency is proactive and functional, and enhances coherence (self-organization and integration) (Maurer et al., 2023).

3.1.3 Organismic integration as a metatheory of the self-determination theory

At the basis of the self-determination theory (SDT) there is a grand metatheoretical perspective Ryan and Deci (2018) name *organismic integration*. The main basic assumption is that the individuals are geared towards development in furthering their capacities and propensities and integrating functions. There is, therefore, a *natural growth tendency* in individuals. That means that the individual is naturally curious about the world, wanting to explore and expand their reach of the world by enhancing their skills. Furthermore, there can be a vital sense of self and integrity within the individual who behaves according to their experiences and values (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2018), a state which Rogers would call ''congruence'' (Rogers, 1961), and Wood et al. (2008) as well as Joseph (2016) ''authenticity''.

The organismic integration approach is furthermore based on the assumption that there is a ''functional unity'' (Ryan, 1993; Deci et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2018) within individuals. An organism is inherently a complex system that consists of elements that have both functional ''independence'' (organs) as well as fundamental interdependence (systems of organs) to function as a whole (the body). There exists in individuals a tendency for organization, which is similar to the tendency of living organisms generally discussed in biology – i.e. that the individual, when embedded in a supportive environment, moves towards differentiation and integration (i.e. growth). As Ryan and Deci (2018, p. 5) themselves put it: ''Simply stated, individual organisms are endowed with, and energized by, propensities to expand and elaborate themselves in the direction of organized complexity and integrated functioning.''

Ryan and Deci (2018) discuss how the sense of self and selfhood is inherently organismic and derives from the organizational tendencies of the individual. That means that the individual relates to their environment in an ordered way, which forms the basis of the organism's individuality (see Ryan & Deci, 2018; Deci et al., 2013). Ryan and Deci (2018) furthermore discuss how an organism who fails to behave in integrated, organized ways will face problems in its environment. For instance, an organism who has multiple conflicts in experience and conflicting goals will not find organization in their behavior and will suffer. Evolutionarily, therefore, the motivating force of the self is important for the organism's survival. The self is this regulatory center within the individual, and according to Ryan and Deci (2018) an evolved process.

The self-determination theory is concerned with how to social context of the individual can either facilitate or dwarf the individual's growth and well-being. The SDT furthermore looks at the individual's growth process: the infant, for instance, is intrinsically motivated to explore and understand their environment by manipulating, observing, and playing. Furthermore, the infant gradually learns to also integrate and internalize the social norms they learn from their social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2018). An individual capable of intrinsic action are furthermore likely to be able to satisfy their needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence. According to the SDT the social environment of the individual has to fulfil the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness in order to be growth- and well-being enhancing (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2018). Competence refers to the sense of being effective in interactions with one's environment and able to utilize one's capacities (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Relatedness refers to a sense of connection and care towards and from others (Ryan & Deci, 2002) and finally autonomy is the feeling of oneself being the origin of one's actions (Ryan & Deci, 2002). The satisfaction of these needs is

also the birthplace of intrinsic motivation – i.e. the desire to act out of pleasure and internal desire, rather than externally placed force or pressure. The SDT includes six minitheories within it explicating processes of motivation (externalization and internalization) among others (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2018).

3.2 The principles and assumptions of the organismic theory

Since the organismic theory (OT) is based on the complex systems approach, the assumptions are largely the same, with a few additions.

1) *Holistic approach:* One of the main assumptions of the OT is the holistic nature of the theory (Overton, 1984). That means that the theory attempts to take into account all aspects of the individual, both their internal, external, social and cultural influences. In this sense the OT is very much akin to the systems approach, seeing the interconnectedness and embeddedness of the individual within systems.

2) *Dynamism:* The development of the individual is a non-linear process. Rather the process ebbs, flows and fluctuates (Kern et al., 2019).

3) *Emergence:* Phenomena may take different forms on higher levels of inquiry that are not reducible to their parts. These phenomena, therefore, have emergent properties that cannot be traced back to the constituents of the phenomena (Ladyman & Wiesner, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2018).

4) *Interconnectedness – social environment's fundamental role:* The quality of the social environment (meaning the interpersonal relationships, social systems one belongs into as well as culture) has a fundamental role in the individual's well-being and growth. One has interdependence of others and other entities in their surroundings – therefore, a person cannot be fully understood in isolation from their environmental influences (Wilkins, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2018).

5) *Proactive individual (inherent growth tendency):* The individual according to OT is proactive (Rogers, 1961, 1964; Ryan & Deci, 2018) – that is, once placed in a favorable social environment, the individual is naturally prone to grow and develop. The term the OVP uses for this proactivity is the actualizing tendency – an organismic push towards development, both physically but also psychologically.

6) *Prosocial/Functional tendency:* The individual is seen as inherently trustworthy, i.e. able to gear towards growth autonomously when they are supported in it. Furthermore, the growth gears ultimately towards a prosocial one, meaning that the individual's growth process (when it is unfolding well) inherently includes tendencies to be inclusive and loving towards other beings (Roger, 1961, 1980). Since the individual is naturally geared towards growth and enhancement of its capacities for well-being, it would make sense that such a tendency leads more naturally towards prosocial directions in which collaboration rather than competition and sidelining of others prevails. The individual wishes to enhance and maintain the system in which it itself is fundamentally embedded (Rogers, 1961; Wilkins, 2016).

7) *Coherence/self-organization:* While the processes of growth and well-being are dynamic and non-linear processes, there still exists a coherence in their unfolding such that a complex process can result in certain definable characteristics. Therefore, the operationalization of complex processes to theories is possible (see Ryan & Deci, 2018).

8) *Differentiation and Integration (congruence):* The development of the individual is fundamentally a process of greater integration of differentiated parts to function in unity (Rogers, 1961; Ryan & Deci, 2018).

9) *Subjectivity:* The OT (and OVP) is based on the importance of the subjective perspectives of individuals and believes that individual's perspectives are important for consideration (Wilkins, 2016).

4. Incorporating the systems approach with the organismic theory

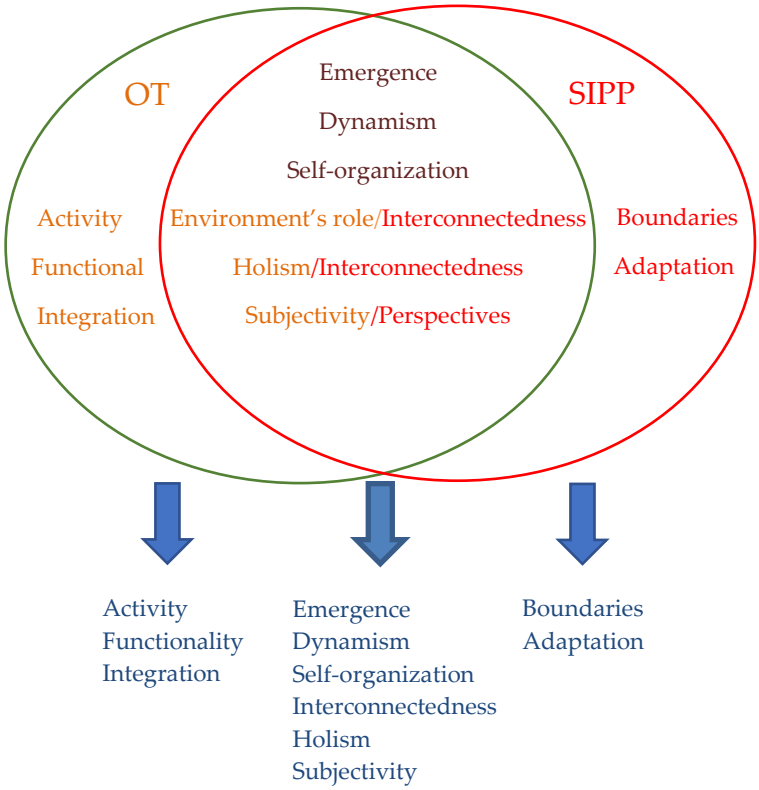
A connection between the organismic theory (OT) and systems approach is suggested – these are complimentary and could serve as a viable combination as an overarching organismic systems theory (OST) metatheory. As can be seen from Figure 1 OT is inherently a systems informed approach that begins with the assumptions of emergence, self-organization, dynamism and holism as inherently in it (see Ryan & Deci, 2018; Bauer, 2021).

Some of the principles are exactly the same in the two approaches, such as emergence, dynamism, and self-organization. Multiple others are likewise highly similar, just utilizing different terms. Such similar pairings are organismic theory's assumption *environment's role* with the SIPP assumption *interconnectedness* – fundamentally these both are related to the fundamental embeddedness of the individual in a system of environmental influences. The organismic theory's assumption of *holism* is likewise paired with the SIPP assumption *interconnectedness*, due to the fact that holism fundamentally entails the individual's embeddedness in systems on all levels of inquiry – physiological, biological, psychological, social, cultural. SIPP's interconnectedness entails that the individual is embedded in systems on all levels (Kern et al., 2019). Finally, *subjectivity* from OT and *perspectives* from SIPP are connected, as both emphasize the subjective experiences and different perspectives of individuals within different systems (Kern et al., 2019; Wilkins, 2016). A few of the assumptions are not paired and are given by each approach separately to the overarching OST metatheory. OT, for instance has the fundamental assumption of the proactivity of the individual – that there is an inherent growth tendency. Such an assumption is not clearly present in the SIPP approach. Other assumptions unique to the OT is the prosocial or functional tendency of the individual's growth process, and the tendency for integration/congruence within the individual. While integration is very closely linked to the idea of self-organization, it still explicates a somewhat different process whereby integration is the functional unity of separate parts, and self-organization is the *process* of underlying elements organizing into unities. Therefore, integration can be seen as the result of self-organization. For the SIPP approach *boundaries* and *adaptation* are not clearly found in the OT approach, and therefore they are added to form the basic assumptions inherent in the OST metatheory.

The reason that these two theories should be combined is that together they provide the field of positive psychology (and possibly beyond) a metatheoretical perspective that functions both on the level of the individual (OT) and the larger systems (SIPP). The OT, therefore, gives a more psychological perspective indicating that an individual has active, functional, and integrative tendencies, whereas the SIPP includes a larger systems perspective, which particularly brings in the assumptions of focusing on the boundaries of the system one is researching and understanding the adaptive qualities an individual or a system has when interacting within a larger system. The unique assumptions brought in by each theory are fundamental for a metatheory for PP given the individual (psychological) and systems perspectives (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Illustrates how the principles inherent in both systems-informed positive psychology (SIPP) and organismic theory (OT) can be interconnected, and which principles remain unique to each theory, all combined within the organismic systems theory (OST).

Figure 1. *Organismic systems theory (OST)*



4.1 The assumptions of the organismic systems theory (OST)

As seen in Figure 1 the OST combines the assumptions inherent in SIPP and OT, and therefore its assumptions are:

1) Active organism: the individual is seen actively geared towards growth of functionality, and such growth is a natural process. This is commonly referred to as the actualizing tendency.

2) Functional tendency: the direction of the successful growth process is a functional one, i.e. enhancing of the individual as well as their surroundings in which they are embedded.

3) Integration: the growth process towards functionality ends up in integration of differentiated elements to function in unity.

4) Emergence: on higher levels of inquiry there may be emergent properties in phenomena that are not reducible to their constituent parts, such as consciousness emerging from the brain (e.g. Feinberg & Mallatt, 2020), or ''free will'' emerging from human mind (Sheldon & Martela, 2021).

5) Dynamism: the processes of the individual, such as the growth towards greater functionality, is a dynamic rather than a linear (sequential) process.

6) Self-organization: the tendency of the processes of the individual are towards coherence, i.e. there is a tendency to find order in the process, such that theories of change or processes can be made.

7) Interconnectedness: the organism is fundamentally embedded in a system of interconnections and interdependencies within their environment, and these connections need to be understood to better understand the individual.

8) Holism: the individual is approached from all levels of inquiry in a holistic manner, taking into account their embeddedness in biological, psychological, social and cultural systems.

9) Subjectivity: different individuals have different perspectives, and the subjective perspective is important in inquiry.

10) Boundaries: it is important to define the boundaries of a system and phenomena by seeing what is included and excluded from it at each point in time.

11) Adaptation: organisms can behave in adaptive ways in their environments.

4.2 Ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in the OST

For a metatheory to be viable, it is crucial to explicate its ontological and epistemological stance to inform the basis of the field in which it is suggested to serve as the metatheory (van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022).

The basic epistemological viewpoint inherent in positive psychology (and psychology more in general) is empirical realism (see Guyon et al., 2018; Guyon & Nôus, 2021). This refers to aligning psychology with natural sciences such as physics to ensure rigorous scientific standards for operationalization of constructs and methodology. The assumption inherent in empirical realism is that psychological phenomena exist independently of the observer and can be observed with objectivity (without influencing the phenomena through our subjectivity). Therefore, empirical realism has a positivist ontology, utilizing reductionist methods of inquiry, whereby phenomena are reduced into their simplest parts and bigger phenomena can be seen as a sum of its individual parts (Staver, 2012; Guyon & Nôus, 2021; Kern et al., 2019). This leads naturally to quantitative methods, complex statistical modeling and emphasis on precise operationalizations of phenomena into quantifiable measures.

Considering the assumptions of the OST, three of them are holism, subjectivity and emergence. Emergence refers to phenomena which are not reducible to their parts – i.e. opposing reductionistic methods. Holism also would imply the need to take into consideration all levels of inquiry, and subjectivity implies the need to consider also the subjective experience of the individual. It seems therefore that a reductionistic, positivist approach is not adequate to capture phenomena with the OST as its metatheory. The opposite epistemological approach to empirical realism is that of interpretivism or constructionism in which reality is seen as socially constructed, and not existing out there without our subjective interpretations of it (Staver, 2012). This approach, while providing an alternative to reductionistic view (Staver, 2012), seems to go too far in the realm of subjectivity to serve as a viable epistemological viewpoint for positive psychology.

An approach that can sit nicely in between the empirical realist and constructionist perspectives is the pragmatist-realist approach suggested by Guyon et al. (2018). Pragmatism is a philosophical approach to science, which is not opposed to realism, in that the ontology can still be realist (i.e. real phenomena exist out there independent of us), yet there is an understanding that our practical quest for research is inherently subjective, and we may only get a subjective and biased view of these real phenomena through our theories, models, and research. Our knowledge is therefore the result of our practical act of research rather than a mirroring of the objective world as it is (Guyon et al., 2018; Guyon & Nôus, 2021). Pragmatism sees our ways

of knowing, such as language and research, as a tool to understand reality, but not mirror it in a direct way. Pragmatism also suggests that the best way to evaluate research endeavors is in their practical utility. The realist ontology, which so firmly sits within psychology, and positive psychology, can be retained when combining it with a pragmatic epistemology of the way in which we admit to the subjectivity of our research efforts (Guyon et al., 2018).

Another potential epistemological and ontological viewpoint suitable for positive psychology would be critical realism (see Allana & Clark, 2018). In critical realism the ontological assumptions are that reality is made out of three basic elements: the real, the actual and the empirical (Schiller, 2016). The real and the actual both refer to aspects of reality that exist and cause events outside of the human awareness, with the real being something people can perceive, but the actual being things not requiring human awareness. However, the empirical is the realm whereby individuals can study phenomena that exists in reality and actuality, yet their attempts at reaching reality and actuality without bias or fallibility is impossible (Allana & Clark, 2018). Therefore, the act of research is always somewhat fallible.

An epistemological viewpoint that embraces both realism and pragmatism/critical realism can embrace both quantitative reductionist methodologies as well as qualitative holistic methodologies. Therefore, this approach would embrace different ways of knowing as inherently important for the understanding of positive psychology, calling for mixed-method and qualitative research to be more emphasized than before.

5. Implications of OST for theory and practice in positive psychology

With the adoption of the organismic systems theory (OST) for the field of positive psychology, multiple theoretical and practical implications can be suggested as listed below.

First of all, the OST gives PP a clear direction. It clarifies its assumptions, ontology and epistemology and gives a direction for methodologies. It furthermore helps guide theory development and the integration of concepts within larger theories, given that it explicates the underlying assumptions about an individual's proneness towards well-being and personal growth. For instance, the assumptions of *active individual*, *functional tendency* and *interconnectedness* would imply that the individual is seen as both naturally geared towards well-being and growth, which is in fact a prosocial and functional tendency, once the individual is supported by the social environment. Therefore, this suggests that a supportive environment is necessary in helping people gear towards their natural tendency for enhancing their own wellness. Also, the assumptions of *adaptation* and *integration* show that the individual has a functional tendency for wellness in their environment and within their own system. The assumptions of *emergence*, *self-organization* and *dynamism*, then again, show that the different psychological phenomena can bring about something that is more than the sum of their parts in a dynamic and fluctuating way that would best be understood with methodologies that are not merely reductionistic and linear, but embrace also holism. However, at the same time, there is an ultimate coherence to phenomena so that their better understanding through models and theories is possible. Furthermore, the embeddedness of the individual in systems is essential for understanding the individual, given the assumptions of *holism* and *interconnectedness*.

Second, as a further clarification of the last point, an organismic systems approach in positive psychology would suggest that a reductionistic approach to phenomena is not sufficient on its own, rather one needs also to understand more complex aspects of larger higher-order systems and their emergent qualities. Therefore, while it is acceptable and encouraged to understand the details of a concept – say understanding how the concept of grit is made up of specific

subcomponents – to truly understand how grit influences an individual's life requires also consideration of the systems in which the individual is embedded.

Third, a specific example of the adoption of the organismic systems metatheory would be the implication that the nature-nurture debate in psychology is lacking. As discussed by Bauer (2021) the notion that human development and human personality are shaped merely either by the forces of nature (genetics) or nurture (social environment) lacks the potential third perspective in it: individuality. Individuality here means that also the individual is capable of agentic behavior and exerting influence in their own development on top of being rather deterministically shaped by external (or internal) influences. Bauer (2021) emphasizes the shortcoming of the nature-nurture debate and argues that the third 'force' individuality would be naturally included in this notion when psychology (or in this case positive psychology) adopts the organismic view. Therefore, the organismic systems metatheory inherently implies the active, agentic nature of the individual, not replacing external influences (nature and nurture), but supplementing them (see Bauer, 2021).

Fourth, one important implication that follows from the OST is that PP would be able to avoid individualistic explanations. For instance, an individual's shortcoming in being able to attain well-being or personal growth would not be caused by a shortcoming in their person, rather it might reflect on the quality of the systems they are embedded in. Therefore, better understanding the fundamental interconnections of the individual in their systems of different levels and the boundaries of those systems in different situations would help us reduce the individualistic bias that may be prominent in PP (e.g. Marecek & Christopher, 2018).

Fifth, the OST could help integrate different ideas, concepts, models and theories within the field of PP into bigger theories of well-being. This implies greater unity, coherence and scientific advancement in the field. Basing theories on the OST can be influential, considering how, for example, the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018) based on an organismic metatheory is a vast theoretical framework including within it six mini-theories of human motivation, growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Therefore, the self-determination theory has a lot of explanatory power and is seen as a grand theory of motivation in the field, for example as an organizing framework for personality research (see Ryan et al., 2019). In case the OST is a metatheoretical perspective also for other to-be theories and models within positive psychology, more integration within the field is expected.

Sixth, as suggested by Kern et al. (2019) with SIPP, taking an OST perspective requires one to better understand the systems that the individual in inherently embedded in. This requires greater awareness of the perspective of various levels of inquiry, as well as being knowledgeable about the boundaries of those systems – who and what is included and excluded. As discussed by Kern et al. (2019) this is relevant particularly for when one considers the impact of interventions – what are its boundaries, who is included and excluded, and for whom a certain intervention works under what specific circumstances? There needs to be more awareness of the boundaries of interventions to better understand the actual effects seen or not seen (Lomas et al., 2021). This enhances our awareness of the complexities of practical situations and the more realistic reach of the scientific finding (avoiding overstating the impact of one's findings: Kern et al., 2019).

Seventh, understanding the organism through the OST perspective also implies a greater adoption of different ways of knowing and interdisciplinary work – we need to embrace more qualitative and mixed-method approaches, as well as integrate knowledge, theories, and perspectives from other fields of inquiry in order to expand the reach of our understanding of well-being holistically.

Eighth, adopting the OST perspective can naturally move the field of positive psychology towards its ''third wave'' (Lomas et al., 2021) with its emphasis on different ways of knowing, reaching beyond the individual level of inquiry, different perspectives, interdisciplinary work and reaching beyond the western cultural bias (the WEIRD context: Henrich et al., 2010).

Finally, understanding the organism as inherently prone towards positive development given that the environment in which it is embedded, and the complex system surrounding it support it, gives us a social responsibility mandate to improve upon all levels of the system to support the well-being of the individual. There needs to be greater focus on the context in which individuals are embedded in order to improve upon their well-being moving beyond the merely individualistic perspective of well-being to a collective one.

6. Conclusion

The field of Positive Psychology largely lacks an overarching metatheory that would help in combining theories and concepts, give direction to new theory and concept development, inform practice and give the field a set of basic assumptions that can form the philosophical basis of the field. This lack has been considered one of the major challenges facing positive psychology (van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022), and this article set out to offer a potential remedy for this problem. The organismic systems theory (OST) is a viable theory originating both from systems science as well as biology, psychiatry and psychotherapy traditions (Kern et al., 2019; Overton, 1984; Goldstein, 1939; Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1964, 1980; Maurer & Daukantaité, 2020; Moreno & Mossio, 2015). As a metatheory it expands from its original context from systems sciences or philosophy and psychotherapy to serve as a theory that can serve to combine and integrate various aspects inherent in the field of positive psychology and beyond. This article explicated the assumptions, epistemology, ontology and implications of this metatheory for positive psychology, suggesting it could bring forward cohesion and theoretical advancements for the field.

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